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The Outer Reaches

**FAVORITE SCIENCE-FICTION TALES
CHOSEN BY THEIR AUTHORS**

**Edited by
August Derleth**



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Co-Operate—or Else!

by A. E. Van Vogt

As the spaceship vanished into the steamy mists of Eristan II, Professor Jamieson drew his gun. He felt physically sick, battered, by the way he had been carried for so many long moments in the furious wind stream of the great ship. But the sense of danger held him tense there in the harness that was attached by metal cables to the now gently swaying anti-gravity plate above him. With narrowed eyes, he stared up at the ezwal which was peering cautiously down at him over the edge of the antigravity plate.

Its three-in-line eyes, gray as dully polished steel, gazed at him, unwinking; its massive blue head poised there alertly and—Jamieson knew—ready to jerk back the instant it read in his thoughts an intention of shooting.

“Well,” said Jamieson harshly, “here we are, both of us about a hundred thousand years from our respective home planets. And we’re falling down into a primitive jungle hell that you, with only your isolated life on Carson’s Planet to judge by, cannot begin to imagine despite your ability to read my thoughts. Even a six-thousand-pound ezwal hasn’t got a chance down there—alone!”

A great, long-fingered, claw-studded paw edged gingerly over the side of the raft, flicked down at one of the four metal cables that supported Jamieson’s harness.

There was a bright, steely *ping*. The cable parted like rotted twine from the impact of that one cutting blow.

Like a streak of blurred light, the enormous arm jerked back out of sight. And then there was only the great head and the calm, unwinking eyes peering down at him. Finally, a thought penetrated to Jamieson, a thought cool and unhurried:

"You and I, Professor Jamieson, understand each other very well. Of the hundred-odd men on your ship, only you remain alive. Out of all the human race, therefore, only you know that the *ezwals* of what you call Carson's Planet are not senseless beasts, but intelligent beings. I could have stayed on the ship, and so eventually reached home. But rather than take the slightest risk of your escaping the jungle dangers below, I took the desperate chance of jumping on top of this antigravity raft just as you were launching yourself out of the lock. What I cannot clearly understand is why you didn't escape while I was still battering down the control-room door. There is a blurred fear-picture in your mind, but—"

Jamieson was laughing, a jarring sound in his own ears, but there was genuine amusement in the grim thoughts that accompanied it. "You poor fool!" he choked at last. "You still don't realize what you're falling down to. While you were hammering away at this door, the ship was flying over the biggest ocean on this planet. All those glints of water down there are really continuation of the ocean, and every pool is swarming with malignant beasts. And, somewhere ahead of us, are the Demon Straits, a body of water about fifty miles wide that separates this ocean-jungle from the mainland beyond. Our ship will crash on that mainland, about a thousand miles from here, I should say. To reach it, we've got to cross that fifty miles of *thing-*

infested area. Now you know why I was waiting, and why you had a chance to jump onto that antigravity plate. I—”

His voice collapsed with an “ugh” of amazement as, with the speed of a striking snake, the ezwal twisted up, a rearing, monstrous blue shape of frightful fangs and claws that reached with hideous power at a gigantic bird. The bird was diving straight down at the shining surface of the antigravity raft.

It did not swoop aside. Jamieson had a brief, terrifying glimpse of its merciless, protruding, glassy eyes, and of the massive, hooked, pitchfork-long claws, tensing for the thrust at the ezwal; and then—

The crash set the raft tossing like a chip in stormy waters. Jamieson swung with dizzy speed from side to side. The roar of the wind from the smashing power of those mighty wings was like thunder that stunned his brain. With a gasp, he raised his gun. The red flame of it reached hungrily at one of those wings. The wing turned a streaky black, collapsed; and, simultaneously, the bird was literally flung from the raft by the raging strength of the ezwal.

It plunged down, down, became a blurred dot in the mist, and was lost against the dark background of the land mass below.

Above Jamieson, the ezwal, dangerously off balance, hung poised over the edge of the raft. Four of its combination leg-arms pawed the air uselessly; the remaining two fought with bitter effort at the metal bars on top of the raft—and won. The great body drew back, until, once again, only the massive blue head was visible. Jamieson lowered his gun in grim good humor.

“You see,” he said, “even a bird was almost too much for us—and I could have burned your belly open. I didn’t because maybe it’s beginning to penetrate your

head that we've got to postpone our private quarrel, and fight together if we ever hope to get out of the hell of jungle and swamp below."

The answering thought was as cold as the sleet-gray eyes that stared down at him so steadily.

"Professor Jamieson, what you *could* have done was unimportant to me who knew what you *would* do. As for your kind offer to ally yourself with me, I repeat that I am here to see you dead, not to protect your pitiful body. You will, therefore, refrain from further desperate appeals, and meet your fate with the dignity becoming a scientist."

Jamieson was silent. A thin, warm, wet wind breathed against his body, bringing the first faint, obscene odors from below. The raft was still at an immense height, but the steamy mists that clung with a limp, yet obscuring strength to this primeval land had yielded some of their opaqueness. Patches of jungle and sea that, a few minutes before, had been blurred by that all-pervading fog, showed clearer now, a terrible, patternless sprawl of dark trees alternating with water that shone and flashed in the probing sunlight.

Fantastic, incredible scene. As far as the eye could see into the remote mists to the north, there was steaming jungle and foggy, glittering ocean—the endless, deadly reality that was Eristan II. And, somewhere out there, somewhere in the dimness beyond the concealing weight of steam, those apparently interminable jungles ended abruptly in the dark, ugly swell of water that was the Demon Straits!

"So," said Jamieson at last, softly, "you think you're going to get through. All your long life, all the long generations of your ancestors, you and your kind have depended entirely on your magnificent bodies for survival. While men herded fearfully in their caves, dis-

covering fire as a partial protection, desperately creating weapons that had never before existed, always a bare jump ahead of violent death—all those millions of years, the ezwal of Carson's Planet roamed his great, fertile continents, unafraid, matchless in strength as in intellect, needing no homes, no fires, no clothing, no weapons, no—"

"You will agree," the ezwal interrupted coolly, "that adaptation to a difficult environment must be one of the goals of the superior being. Human beings have created what they call civilization, which is actually merely a material barrier between themselves and their environment, so vast and unwieldy that keeping it going occupies the entire existence of the race. Individually, man is a frivolous, fragile, inconsequential *slave*, who tugs his mite at the wheel, and dies wretchedly of some flaw in his disease-ridden body. Unfortunately, this monstrous, built-up weakling with his power lusts and murderous instincts is the greatest danger extant to the sane, healthy races of the Universe. He must be prevented from contaminating his betters."

Jamieson laughed curtly. "But you will agree, I hope, that there is something wonderful about an insignificant, fearful jetsam of life fighting successfully against all odds, aspiring to all knowledge, finally attaining the very stars!"

"Nonsense!" The answer held overtones of brittle impatience. "Man and his thoughts constitute a disease. As proof, during the past few minutes, you have been offering specious arguments, apparently unbiased, actually designed to lead once more to an appeal for my assistance, an intolerable form of dishonesty. As further evidence I need but anticipate intellectually the moment of our landing. Assuming that I make no attempt to harm you, nevertheless your pitiful body will be in-

stantly and, thereafter, continuously in deadly danger, while I—you must admit that, though there are beasts below physically stronger than I, the difference is not so great that my intelligence, even if it took the form of cunning flight, would more than balance the weakness. You will admit furthermore—”

“I admit nothing!” Jamieson snapped. “Except that you’re going to get the surprise of your life. And you’re going to regret beyond all your present capacity for emotionalism the lack of those very artificialities you despise in man. I do not mean material weapons, but—”

“What you mean is unimportant. I can see that you intend to persist in this useless, mendacious type of reasoning, and you have convinced me that you will never emerge alive from that island below. Therefore—”

The same, tremendous arm that a few minutes before had torn steel chain, flashed into sight and downward in a single coördinated gesture.

The two remaining cables attached to Jamieson’s harness parted like wet paper; and so great was the force of the blow that Jamieson was jerked a hundred feet parallel to the distant ground before his long, clenched body curved downward for its terrific fall.

A thought, cool with grim irony, struck after him:

“I notice that you are a very cautious man, professor, in that you have not only a packsack, but a parachute strapped to your back. This will enable you to reach ground safely, but your landing will be largely governed by chance. Your logical mind will doubtless enable you to visualize the situation. Goodbye and—bad luck!”

Jamieson strained at the thin, strong ropes of his parachute, his gaze narrowed on the scene below. Through the now almost transparent mist, and somewhat to the

north, was a green-brown blaze of jungle. If he could get there—

He tugged again at the ropes, and with icy speculation watched the effect, calculated the mathematical possibilities. He was falling slowly; that would be the effect of the heavy air of this planet: pressure eighteen pounds per square inch at sea level.

Sea level! He smiled wryly, without humor. Sea level was approximately where he would be in a very few minutes. There was, he saw, no sea immediately beneath him. A few splotches of water, yes, and a straggle of trees. The rest was a sort of clearing, except that it wasn't exactly. It had a strange, grayish, repellent appearance like—

The terrible shock of recognition drained the blood from his cheeks. His mind shrank as from an unthinkably lecherous thought. In panic he tore at the ropes, as if by sheer physical strength he would draw the tantalizingly near jungle to him. That jungle, that precious jungle! It might contain horrors, but at least they were of the future, while that hellish stuff directly below held no future, nothing but a gray, quagmire trap, thick mud choking—

Abruptly, he saw that the solid mass of trees was beyond his reach. The parachute was less than five hundred feet above that deadly, unclean spread of mud. The jungle itself—stinking, horrible jungle, blatantly exuding the sharp, evil odors of rotting vegetation, yet suddenly the most desirable of places—was about the same distance to the northwest.

To make it would require a forty-five-degree descent. Carefully, he manipulated the rope controls of the parachute. It caught the wind like a glider; the jungle drew closer, closer—

He landed triumphantly in a tiny straggle of trees, a

little island separated from the main bulk of forest by less than a hundred and fifty feet.

The island was ten feet long by eight wide; four trees, the longest about fifty feet tall, maintained a precarious existence on its soggy, wet, comparatively firm base.

Four trees, representing a total of about a hundred and eighty feet. Definitely enough length. But—his first glow of triumph began to fade—without a crane to manipulate three of those trees into place, the knowledge that they represented safety was utterly useless.

Jamieson sat down, conscious for the first time of the dull ache in his shoulders, the strained tenseness of his whole body, a sense of depressing heat. He could see the sun, a white blob barely visible through the white mists that formed the atmosphere of this deadly fantastic land.

The blur of sun seemed to fade into remoteness; a vague darkness formed in his mind; and then a sharp, conscious thought that he had been asleep.

He opened his eyes with a start. The sun was much lower in the eastern sky and—

His mind stopped from the sheer shock of discovery. Instantly, however, it came alive, steady, cool, despite the vast, first shock of his amazement.

What had happened was like some fantasy out of a fairy story. The four trees, with the tattered remains of his parachute still clinging to them, towered above him. But his plan for them had taken form while he slept.

A bridge of trees, thicker, more solid than any the little island could have produced, stretched straight and strong from the island to the mainland. There was no doubt, of course, as to who had performed that colossal feat: the ezwal was standing unconcernedly

on two of its six legs, leaning manlike against the thick trunk of a gigantic tree. Its thought came:

"You need have no fear, Professor Jamieson. I have come to your point of view. I am prepared to assist you to reach the mainland and to co-operate with you thereafter. I—"

Jamieson's deep, ungracious laughter cut off the thought. "You damned liar!" the scientist said finally. "What you mean is that you've run up against something you couldn't handle. Well, that's all right with me. So long as we understand each other, we'll get along."

The snake slid heavily out of the jungle, ten feet from the mainland end of the bridge of trees, thirty feet to the right of the ezwal. Jamieson, scraping cautiously toward the center of the bridge, saw the first violent swaying of the long, luscious jungle grass—and froze where he was as the vicious, fantastic head reared into sight, followed by the first twenty feet of that thick, menacing body.

Briefly, the great head, in its swaying movement, was turned directly at him. The little pig eyes seemed to glare straight into his own stunned, brown eyes. Shock held him, sheer, unadulterated shock at the incredibly bad luck that had allowed this deadly creature to find him in such an immeasurably helpless position.

His paralysis there, under those blazing eyes, was a living, agonizing thing. Tautness struck like fire into every muscle of his body. It was an instinctive straining for rigidity, unnatural and terrible—but it worked.

The fearsome head whipped aside, fixed in eager fascination on the ezwal, and took on a rigidity all its own.

Jamieson relaxed; his brief fear changed to brief, violent anger; he projected a scathing thought at the ezwal:

"I understood you could sense the approach of dangerous beasts by reading their minds."

No answering thought came into his brain. The giant snake flowed farther into the clearing; and before that towering, horned head rearing monstrosly from the long, titantically powerful body, the ezwal backed slowly, yielding with a grim reluctance to the obvious conviction that it was no match for this vast creature.

Cool again, Jamieson directed an ironic thought at the ezwal:

"It may interest you to know that as chief scientist of the Interstellar Military Commission, I reported Eristan II unusable as a military base for our fleet; and there were two main reasons; one of the damnedest flesh-eating plants you ever saw, and this pretty little baby. There's millions of both of them. Each snake breeds hundreds in its lifetime, so they can't be stamped out. They're bisexual, attain a length of about a hundred and fifty feet and a weight of ten tons."

The ezwal, now some fifty feet away from the snake, stopped and, without looking at Jamieson, sent him a tight, swift thought.

"Its appearance did surprise me, but the reason is that its mind held only a vague curiosity about some sounds it had heard, no clear, sharp thought such as an intention to murder. But that's unimportant. It's here; it's dangerous. It hasn't seen you yet, so act accordingly. It doesn't think it can get me, but it's considering the situation. In spite of its desire for me, the problem remains essentially yours; the danger is *all* yours."

The ezwal concluded almost indifferently: "I am willing to give you limited aid in any plan you might have, but please don't offer any more nonsense about our interdependence. So far there's been only one dependent. I think you know who it is."

Jamieson was grim. "Don't be too sure that you're not in danger. That fellow looks muscle-bound, but when he starts moving, he's like a steel spring for the first three or four hundred feet—and you haven't got that much space behind you."

"What do you mean? I can run four hundred feet in three seconds, Earth time."

Coldly, the scientist whipped out: "You could, *if you had four hundred feet in which to run*. But you haven't. I've just been forming a mental picture of this edge of jungle, as I saw it before I landed.

"There's about a hundred and fifty feet* of jungle, then a curving shore of mud plain, a continuation of this mud here. The curve swings back this way, and cuts you off neatly on this little outjutting of jungle. To get clear of the snake, you've got to dart past him. Roughly, your clearance is a hundred and fifty feet all around—and it isn't enough! Inter-dependent? You're damned right we are. Things like this will happen a thousand times a year on Eristan II."

There was startled silence; finally: "Why don't you turn your atomic gun on it—burn it?"

"And have it come out here, while I'm helpless? These big snakes are born in this mud, and live half their lives in it. It would take five minutes to burn off that tough head. By that time I'd be swallowed and digested."

The brief seconds that passed then were pregnant with reluctant desperation. But there could be no delay. Swiftly the grudging request came:

"Professor Jamieson, I am open to suggestions—and *hurry!*"

The depressing realization came to Jamieson that the ezwal was once more asking for his assistance, *knowing*

that it would be given; and yet it itself was giving no promise in return.

And there was no time for bargaining. Curtly, he projected:

"It's the purest case of our acting as a team. The snake has no real weakness—except possibly this: Before it attacks its head will start swaying. That's almost a universal snake method of hypnotizing victims into paralysis. Actually, the motion is also partially self-hypnotizing. At the earliest possible moment after it begins to sway, I'll burn its eyes out—and you get on its back, *and hang on*. Its brain is located just behind that great horn. Claw your way there, and eat in while I burn."

The thought scattered like a chaff, as the tremendous head began to move. With a trembling jerk, Jamieson snatched his gun—

It was not so much, then, that the snake put up a fight, as that it wouldn't die. Its smoking remains were still twisting half an hour later when Jamieson scrambled weakly from the bridge of trees and collapsed onto the ground.

When finally he climbed to his feet, the ezwal was sitting fifty feet away under a clump of trees, its middle legs also on the ground, its forelegs folded across its chest—and it was contemplating him.

It looked strangely sleek and beautiful in its blue coat and in the very massiveness of its form. And there was comfort for him in the knowledge that, for the time at least, the mighty muscles that rippled underneath that silk-smooth skin were on his side.

Jamieson returned the ezwal's stare steadily; finally he said:

"What happened to the antigravity raft?"

"I abandoned it thirty-five miles north of here."

Jamieson hesitated; then: "We'll have to go to it. I practically depowered my gun on that snake. It needs metal for recharging; and that raft is the only metal in bulk that I know of."

He was silent again; then softly: "One more thing. I want your word of honor that you won't even attempt to harm me until we are safely on the other side of the Demon Straits!"

"You'd accept my word?" The steel-gray, three-in-line eyes meditated on him curiously.

"Yes."

"Very well, I give it."

Jamieson shook his head, smiling darkly. "Oh, no, you don't, not as easily as that."

"I thought you said you'd accept my word." Peevishly.

"I will, but in the following phraseology." Jamieson stared with grim intentness at his mighty and deadly enemy. "I want you to swear by the sun that rises and by the green, fruitful earth, by the joys of the contemplative mind and the glory of immortal life—"

He paused. "Well?"

There was a gray fire in the ezwal's gaze, and its thought had a ferocious quality when finally it replied: "You are, Professor Jamieson, even more dangerous than I thought. It is clear there can be no compromise between us."

"But you'll make the limited promise I ask for?"

The gray eyes dulled strangely; long, thin lips parted in a snarl that showed great, dark fangs.

"No!" Curtly.

"I thought," said Jamieson softly, "I ought to get that clear."

No answer. The ezwal simply sat there, its gaze fixed on him.

"Another thing," Jamieson went on, "stop pretending you can read all my thoughts. You didn't know that I knew about your religion. I'll wager you can only catch my sharpest idea-forms, and those particularly when my mind is focused on speech."

"I made no pretenses," the ezwal replied coolly. "I shall continue to keep you as much in the dark as possible."

"The doubt will, of course, harass my mind," said Jamieson, "but not too much. Once I accept a theory, I act accordingly. If I should prove wrong, there remains the final arbiter of my atomic gun against your strength. I wouldn't bet on the victor."

"But now"—he hunched his long body, and strode forward—"let's get going. The swiftest method, I believe, would be for me to ride on your back. I could tie a rope from my parachute around your body just in front of your middle legs and by hanging onto the rope keep myself from falling off. My only qualification is that you must promise to let me off before making any hostile move. Agreeable?"

The ezwal hesitated, then nodded: "For the time being."

Jamieson was smiling, his long, spare, yet strong, face ironical.

"That leaves only one thing. What did you run up against that made you change your mind about killing me immediately? Could it have been something entirely beyond the isolated, static, aristocratic existence of the ezwal?"

"Get on my back!" came the snarling thought. "I desire no lectures, nor any further sounds from your rasping voice. I fear nothing on this planet. My reasons for coming back have no connection with any of your

pitiful ideas; and it would not take much to make me change my mind. Take warning!"

Jamieson was silent, startled. It had not been his intention to provoke the ezwal. He'd have to be more cautious in the future, or this great animal, bigger than eight lions, deadlier than a hundred, might turn on him long before it itself intended.

It was an hour later that the long, fish-shaped spaceship swung out of the steamy mists that patrolled the skies of Eristan II. It coasted along less than a thousand feet up, cruel looking as a swordfish with its finely pointed nose.

The explosive thought of the ezwal cut into Jamieson's brain: "Professor Jamieson, if you make so much as a single effort at signaling, you die—"

Jamieson was silent, his mind held stiff and blank, after one mental leap. As he watched, the great, half-mile-long ship sank visibly lower and, as it vanished beyond the rim of the jungle ahead, there was no doubt that it was going to land.

And then, the ezwal's thoughts came again, sly now, almost exultant: "It's no use trying to hide it—because now that the actuality is here, I remember that your dead companions had awareness of another spaceship in the back of their minds."

Jamieson swallowed the hard lump in his throat. There was a sickness in him, and vast rage at the incredibly bad luck of this ship coming here—now!

Miserably, he gave himself to the demanding rhythm of the ezwal's smooth gallop; and for a while there was only that odor-tainted wind, and the pad of six paws, a dull, flat flow of sound. Around him the dark jungle, the occasional, queer *lap, lap* of treacherous, unseen waters. And it was all there, the strangeness, the terribleness of this wild ride of a man on the back of a

blue-tinted, beastlike being that hated him—and knew about that ship.

At last, grudgingly, he yielded. He said snappishly, as if his words might yet snatch victory from defeat: "Now I know, anyway, that your thought-reading ability is a damned sketchy thing. You didn't begin to suspect why you were able to conquer my ship so easily."

"Why should I?" The ezwal was impatient. "I remember now there was a long period when I caught no thoughts, only an excess of energy tension, abnormally more than were customary from your engines. That must have been when you speeded up. Then I noticed the cage door was ajar—and forgot everything else."

The scientist nodded, gloom a sickish weight on him. "We received some awful buffeting, nothing palpable, of course, because the interstellars were full on. But, somewhere, there must have been a blow that knocked our innards out of alignment.

"Afterward, we watched for dangers from outside; and so you, on the inside, got your chance to kill a hundred men, most of them sleeping—"

He tensed his body ever so carefully, eyes vaguely as possible on the limb of the tree just ahead, concentrating with enormous casualness on the idea of ducking under it—Somehow, his real purpose leaked from his straining brain.

In a single convulsion of movement, like a bucking horse, the ezwal reared. Shattering violence of movement! Like a shot from a gun, Jamieson was flung forward *bang* against that steel-hard back. Stunned, dizzy, he fought for balance—and then it was over.

The great animal plunged aside into a thick pattern of jungle, completely away from the protruding limb that had momentarily offered such sweet promise of safety. It twisted skillfully between two giant trees, and

emerged a moment later onto the beach of a long, glittering bay of ocean.

Fleet as the wind, it raced along the deserted sands, and then on into the thickening jungles beyond. No thought came from it, not a tendril of triumph, no indication of the tremendous victory it had just won.

Jamieson said sickly: "I made that attempt because I know what you're going to do. I admit we had a running fight with that Rull cruiser. But you're crazy if you think they mean advantage for you. Rulls are different. They come from another galaxy. They're—"

"Professor!" The interrupting thought was like metal in the sheer, vibrating force of it. "Don't dare try to draw your gun to kill yourself. One false move, and I'll show you how violently and painfully a man can be disarmed."

"You promised," Jamieson also mumbled, "to make no hostile move—"

"And I'll keep that promise—to the letter, after man's own fashion, *in my own good time*. But now—I gathered from your mind that you think these creatures landed because they detected the minute energy discharge of the antigravity raft."

"Pure deduction." Curtly. "There must be some logical reason, and unless you shut off the power as I did on the spaceship—"

"I didn't. Therefore, that is why they landed. Their instruments probably also registered your use of the gun on the snake. Therefore they definitely know someone is here. My best bet, accordingly, is to head straight for them before they kill me accidentally. I have no doubt of the welcome I shall receive when they see my captive, and I tell them that I and my fellow ezvals are prepared to help drive man from Carson's Planet.

And you will have gotten off my back unharmed—thus my promise—”

The scientist licked dry lips. “That’s bestial,” he said finally. “You know damned well from reading my mind that Rulls eat human beings. Earth is one of the eight planets in this galaxy whose flesh is palatable to these hell-creatures—”

The ezwal said coldly: “I have seen men on Carson’s Planet eat ezwals with relish. Why shouldn’t men in turn be eaten by other beings?”

Jamieson was silent, a shocked silence at the hatred that was here. The flintlike thought of the other finished:

“You may not realize how important it is that no word of ezwal intelligence get back to Earth during the next few months, but we ezwals know. I want you dead!”

And still there was hope in him. He recognized it for what it was: That mad, senseless hope of a man still alive, refusing to acknowledge death till its gray chill lay cold on his bones.

A crash of brush roused him out of himself. Great branches of greater trees broke with wheezing unwillingness. A monstrous reptile head peered at them over a tall tree.

Jamieson had a spine-cooling glimpse of a scaly, glittering body; eyes as red as fire blazed at him—and then that lumbering nightmare was far behind, as the ezwal raced on, contemptuous, terrible in its unheeding strength.

And after a moment, then, in spite of hideous danger, in spite of his desperate conviction that he must convince the ezwal how wrong it was—admiration flared inside him, a wild, fascinated admiration.

“By God!” he exclaimed, “I wouldn’t be surprised if you really could evade the terrors of this world. In all my journeys through space, I’ve never seen such a

perfect combination of mind and magnificent muscle."

"Save your praise," sneered the ezwal.

Jamieson hardly heard. He was frowning in genuine thoughtfulness: "There's a saber-toothed, furred creature about your size and speed that might damage you, but I think you can outrun or outfight all the other furred animals. Then there are the malignant plants, particularly a horrible creeper affair—it's not the only intelligent plant in the galaxy, but it's the smartest. You'd need my gun if you got tangled up with one of those.

"You could evade them, of course, but that implies ability to recognize that one's in the vicinity. There are signposts of their presence but"—he held his mind as dim as possible, and smiled grimly—"I'll leave that subject before you read the details in my brain.

"That leaves the great reptiles; they can probably catch you only in the water. That's where the Demon Straits would be a mortal handicap."

"I can swim," the ezwal snapped, "fifty miles in three hours with you on my back."

"Go on!" The scientist's voice was scathing. "If you could do all these things—if you could cross oceans and a thousand miles of jungle, why did you return for me, knowing, as you must now know, that I could never reach my ship alone? Why?"

"It's dark where you're going," the ezwal said impatiently, "and knowledge is not a requirement for death. All these fears of yours are but proof that man will yield to unfriendly environment where he would be unflinching in the face of intelligent opposition.

"And that is why your people must not learn of ezwal intelligence. Literally, we have created on Carson's Planet a dumb, beastlike atmosphere where men would eventually feel that nature was too strong for them. The fact that you have refused to face the nature-environ-

ment of this jungle planet of Eristan II and that the psycho-friction on Carson's Planet is already at the factual of point 135 is proof that—

"Eh?" Jamieson stared at the gleaming, blue, rhythmically bobbing head. "You're crazy. Why 135 would mean—twenty-five—thirty million. The limit is point 38."

"Exactly," glowed the ezwal, "thirty million dead."

A gulf was opening before Jamieson's brain, a black realization of where this—monstrous—creature's thoughts were leading. He said violently:

"It's a damned lie. My reports show—"

"Thirty million!" repeated the ezwal with a deadly satisfaction. "And I know exactly what that means in your terms of psycho-friction: point 135 as compared to a maximum safety tension limit of point 38. That limit, of course, obtains when nature is the opponent. If your people discovered the cause of their agony was an intelligent race, the resistance would go up to point 184—and we'd lose. You didn't know we'd studied your psychology so thoroughly."

Whitely, shakily, Jamieson replied: "In five years, we'll have a billion population on Carson's Planet, and the few ezwals that will have escaped will be a small, scattered, demoralized—"

"In five *months*," interrupted the ezwal coldly, "man will figuratively explode from our planet. Revolution, a blind mob impulse to get into the interstellar transports at any cost, mad flight from intolerable dangers. And, added to everything, the sudden arrivals of the Rull warships to assist us. It will be the greatest disaster in the long, brutal history of conquering man."

With a terrible effort, Jamieson caught himself into a tight matter-of-factness: "Assuming all this, assuming that machines yield to muscles, what will you do with the Rulls after we're gone?"

"Just let them dare remain!"

Jamieson's brief, titanic effort at casualness collapsed into a wave of fury: "Why, you blasted fools, man beat the Rulls to Carson's Planet by less than two years. While you stupid idiots interfered with us on the ground, we fought long, delaying actions in the deeps of space, protecting you from the most murderous, ruthless, unreasonable things that the Universe ever spawned."

He stopped, fought for control, said finally with a grim effort at rational argument. "We've never been able to drive the Rull from any planet where he has established himself. And he drove us from three major bases before we realized the enormousness of danger, and stood firm everywhere regardless of military losses."

He stopped again, conscious of the blank, obstinate, contemptuous wall that was the mind of this ezwal.

"Thirty million!" he said almost softly, half to himself. "Wives, husbands, children, lovers—"

A black anger blotted out his conscious thought. With a single, lightning-swift jerk of his arm, he drew his atomic gun, pressed its muzzle hard against the great blue-ridged backbone.

"By Heaven, at least you're not going to get the Rulls in on anything that happens."

His finger closed hard on that yielding trigger; there was a white blaze of fire that—missed! Amazingly—it missed.

Instants passed before his brain grasped the startling fact that he was flying through the air, flung clear by one incredibly swift jerk of that vast, blue body.

He struck brush. Grasping fingers of sticky jungle vine wrenched at his clothes, ripped his hands, and tore at the gun, that precious, all-valuable gun.

His clothes shredded, blood came in red, ugly streaks—everything yielded to that desperate environment but

the one, all-important thing. With a bitter, enduring singleness of purpose, he clung to the gun.

He landed on his side, rolled over in a flash—and twisted up his gun, finger once more on the trigger. Three feet from that deadly muzzle, the ezwal drew up with a hideous snarl of its great, square face—jumped thirty feet to one side, and vanished, a streak of amazing blue, behind a thick bole of steel-hard jungle fungi.

Shaky, almost ill, Jamieson sat up and surveyed the extent of his defeat, the limits of his victory.

All around was a curious, treeless jungle. Giant, ugly, yellow fungi towered thirty, fifty, eighty feet against a red-brown-green sky line of tangled brown vines, green lichens, and bulbous, incredibly long, strong, reddish grass.

The ezwal had raged through other such dense matted wilderness with a solid, irresistible strength. For a man on foot, who dared not waste more than a fraction of the waning power of his gun, it was pathless, a major obstacle to the simplest progress—the last place in the world he would have chosen for a fight against anything. And yet—

In losing his temper he had hit on the only possible method of drawing his gun without giving the ezwal advance warning thoughts. At least, he was not being borne helpless along to a great warship loaded with slimy, white Rulls.

Rulls!

With a gasp, Jamieson leaped to his feet. There was a treacherous sagging of the ground under his feet, but instinctively he stepped onto a dead patch of fungi; and the harsh, urgent tones of his voice were loud in his ears, as he said swiftly:

“We’ve got to act fast. The discharge of my gun must

have registered on Rull instruments, and they'll be here in minutes. You've got to believe me when I tell you that your scheme of enlisting the Rulls as allies is madness.

"Listen to this: all the ships we sent into their galaxy report that every planet of a hundred they visited was inhabited by—Rulls. Nothing else, no other races. They must have destroyed every other living, intelligent creature.

"Man has forty-eight hundred and seventy-four non-human allies. I admit all have civilizations that are similar to man's own; and that's the devil of the type of historyless, buildingless, ezwal culture. Ezwals cannot defend themselves against energies and machines. And, frankly, man will not leave Carson's Planet till that important defense question has been satisfactorily mastered.

"You and your revolution. True, the simple people in their agony may flee in mad panic, but the military will remain, a disciplined, undefeatable organization, a hundred battleships, a thousand cruisers, ten thousand destroyers for that one base alone. The ezwal plan is clever only in its grasp of human psychology and because it may well succeed in causing destruction and death. But in that plan is no conception of the vastness of interstellar civilization, the responsibilities and the duties of its members.

"The reason I was taking you to Earth was to show you the complexities and honest problems of that civilization, to prove to you that we are not evil. I swear to you that man and his present grand civilization will solve the ezwal problem to ezwal satisfaction. What do you say?"

His last words boomed out eerily in the odd, deathly, late-afternoon hush that had settled over the jungle

world of Eristan II. He could see the blur of sun, a misty blob low in the eastern sky; and the hard realization came:

Even if he escaped the Rulls, in two hours at most the great fanged hunters and the reptilian flesh-eaters that haunted the slow nights of this remote, primeval planet would emerge ravenous from their stinking hideaways, and seek their terrible surcease.

He'd have to get away from this damned fungi, find a real tree with good, strong, high-growing branches and, somehow, stay there all night. Some kind of system of intertwining vines, properly rigged up, should warn him of any beast intruder—including ezvals.

He began to work forward, clinging carefully to the densest, most concealing brush. After fifty yards, the jungle seemed as impenetrable as ever, and his legs and arms ached from his effort. He stopped, and said:

"I tell you that man would never have gone into Carson's Planet the way he did, if he had known it was inhabited by intelligent beings. There are strict laws that govern even under military necessity."

Quite abruptly, answer came: "Cease these squalling, lying appeals. Man possesses no less than five thousand planets formerly occupied by intelligent races. No totality of prevarication can cover up or ever excuse five thousand cosmic crimes—"

The ezwal's thought broke off; then, almost casually: "Professor, I've just run across an animal that—"

Jamieson was saying: "Man's crimes are as black as his noble works are white and wonderful. You must understand those two facets of his character—"

"This animal," persisted the ezwal, "is floating above me now, watching me, but I am unable to catch a single vibration of its thought—"

"More than three thousand of those races now have

self-government. Man does not long deny to any basically good intelligence the liberty and freedom of action which he needs so much himself—”

“*Professor!*” The thought was like a knife piercing, utterly urgent. “This creature has a repellent, worm-shaped body, and it floats without wings. It has no brain that I can detect.”

Very carefully, very gently, Jamieson swung himself behind a pile of brush and raised his pistol. Then softly, swiftly, he said: “Act like a beast, snarl at it, and run like hell into the thickest underbrush if it reaches with one of those tiny, wormlike hands toward any one of the half a dozen notches on either side of its body.

“If you cannot contact its mind—we never could get in touch with it in any way—you’ll have to depend on its character, as follows: The Rull hears only sounds between five hundred thousand and eight hundred thousand vibrations a second. That is why I can talk out loud without danger. That, also, suggests that its thought moves on a vastly different vibration level; it must hate and fear everything else, which must be why it is so remorselessly impelled on its course of destruction.

“The Rull does not kill for pleasure. It exterminates. It possibly considers the entire Universe alien which, perhaps, is why it eliminates all important creatures on any planet it intends to occupy. There can be no intention of occupying this planet because our great base on Eristan I is only five thousand light-years or twenty-five hours away by warship. Therefore it will not harm you unless it has special suspicions. Therefore be all animal.”

He finished tensely: “What’s it doing now?”

There was no answer.

The minutes dragged; and it wasn’t so much that there was silence. Queer little noises came out of nearness and remoteness: the distant crack of wood under some

heavy foot, faint snortings of creatures that were not exactly near—but too near for comfort.

A memory came that was more terrible than the gathering night, a living flame of remembrance of the one time he had seen a Rull feeding off a human being.

First, the clothes were stripped from the still-living victim, whose nervous system was then paralyzed partially by a stinger that was part of the Rull's body. And then, the big, fat, white worm crawled onto the body, and lay there in that abnormal, obscene embrace while its cuplike mouths fed—

Jamieson recoiled mentally and physically. Abrupt, desperate, panicky fear sent him burrowing deeper into the tangle of brush. It was quiet there, not a breath of air touched him. And he noticed, after a moment, that he was soaked with perspiration.

Other minutes passed; and because, in his years, courage had never been long absent from him, he ventured into the hard, concentrated thought of attempted communication: "If you have any questions, for Heaven's sake don't waste time."

There must have been wind above his tight shelter of brush, for a fog heavily tainted with the smell of warm, slimy water drifted over him, blocking even the narrow view that remained.

Jamieson stirred uneasily. It was not fear; his mind was a clenched unit, like a fist ready to strike. It was that—suddenly—he felt without eyes in a world of terrible enemies. More urgently, he went on:

"Your very act of asking my assistance in identifying the Rull implied your recognition of our interdependence. Accordingly, I demand—"

"Very well!" The answering thought was dim and far away. "I admit my inability to get in touch with this

worm ends my plans of establishing an antihuman alliance."

There was a time, such a short time ago, Jamieson thought drearily, when such an admission would have brought genuine intellectual joy. The poor devils on Carson's Planet, at least, were not going to have to fight Rulls as well as their own madness—as well as ezwal.

He braced himself, vaguely amazed at the lowness of his morale. He said almost hopelessly: "What about us?"

"I have already repaid your initial assistance in that, at this moment, I am leading the creature directly away from you."

"It's still following you?"

"Yes! It seems to be studying me. Have you any suggestions?"

Weariness faded; Jamieson snapped: "Only on condition that you are willing to recognize that we are a unit, and that everything else, including what man and ezwal are going to do about Carson's Planet must be discussed later. Agreed?"

The ezwal's thought was scarcely more than a snarl: "You keep harping on that!"

Momentarily, the scientist felt all the exasperation, all the strain of the past hours a pressing, hurting force in his brain. Like a flame, it burst forth, a flare of raging thought:

"You damned scoundrel, you've forced every issue so far, and all of them were rooted in that problem. You make that promise—or just forget the whole thing."

The silence was a pregnant emotion, dark with bitter, formless thought. Around Jamieson, the mists were thinning, fading into the twilight of that thick jungle. Finally:

"I promise to help you safely across the Demon

Straits; and I'll be with you in minutes—if I don't lose this thing first."

Jamieson retorted grimly: "Agreement satisfactory—but don't expect to lose a Rull. They've got perfect anti-gravity, whereas that antigravity raft of ours was simply a superparachute. It would eventually have fallen under its own weight."

He paused tensely; then: "You've got everything clear? I'll burn the Rull that's following you, then we'll beat it as fast as your legs can carry us."

"Get ready!" The answer was a cold, deadly wave. "I'll be there in seconds."

There was no time for thought. Brush crashed. Through the mist, Jamieson caught one flashing glimpse of the ezwal with its six legs. At fifty feet, its slate-gray, three-in-line eyes were like pools of light. And then, as he pointed his gun in a desperate expectation—

"*For your life!*" came the ezwal's thought, "don't shoot, don't move. There are a dozen of them above me and—"

—Queerly, shatteringly, that strong flow of thought ended in a chaotic jumble as energy flared out there, a glaring, white fire that blinked on, and then instantly off.

The mist rolled thicker, white-gray, noxious stuff that hid what *must* be happening.

And hid him.

Jamieson lay stiff and cold—and waited. For a moment, so normal had mind-reading become in these hours, he forgot he could only catch thoughts at the will of the ezwal, and he strained to penetrate the blackout of mind vibrations.

He thought finally, a tight, personal thought: The Rulls must have worked a psychosis on the ezwal. Nothing else could explain that incoherent termination of thought in so powerful a mind. And yet—protective

psychosis was used mainly on animals and other uncivilized and primitive life forms, unaccustomed to that sudden interplay of dazzling lights.

He frowned bleakly. Actually, in spite of its potent brain, the ezwal was very much animal, very much uncivilized, and possibly extremely allergic to mechanical hypnosis.

Definitely, it was not death from a heavy mobile projector because there would have been sound from the weapon, and because there *wouldn't* have been that instantaneous distortion of thought, that twisting—

He felt a moment's sense of intense relief. It had been curiously unsettling to think of that mighty animal struck dead.

He caught his mind into a harder band: So the ezwal was captive not corpse. So—what now?

Relief drained. It wasn't, he thought blankly, as if he could do anything against a heavily armored, heavily manned cruiser.

Ten minutes passed; and then out of the deepening twilight came the thunderous roar of a solid bank of energy projectors. There was answering thunder on a smaller scale; and then, once again, though farther away now, the deep, unmistakable roar of a broadside of hundred-inch battleship projectors.

A battleship! A capital ship from the Eristan I base, either on patrol or investigating energy discharges. The Rulls would be lucky if they got away. As for himself—nothing!

Nothing but the night and its terrors. True, there would be no trouble now from the Rulls, but that was all. This wasn't rescue, not even the hope of rescue. For days and days, the two great ships would maneuver in space; and, by the time the battleship reported again to its base, there wouldn't be very much thought given

to the why of the Rull cruiser's presence on or near the ground.

Besides, the Rull would have detected its enemy before its own position would be accurately plotted. That first broadside had easily been fifty miles away.

The problem of ezwal and man, that had seemed such an intimate, soluble pattern when he and the great animal were alone, was losing its perspective. Against the immeasurably larger background of space, the design was twisting crazily.

It became a shapeless thing, utterly lost in the tangle of unseen obstacles that kept tripping him, as he plunged forward into the dimming reaches of jungle.

In half an hour it was pitch dark; and he hadn't penetrated more than a few hundred yards. He would have blundered on into the black night, except that suddenly his fingers touched thick, carboniferous bark.

A tree!

Great beasts stamped below, as he clung to that precarious perch. Eyes of fire glared at him. Seven times in the first hour by his watch, monstrous things clambered up the tree, mewling and slaving in feral desire. Seven times his weakening gun flashed a thinner beam of destroying energy—and great, scale-armored carnivore whose approach shook the earth came to feed on the odorous flesh—and passed on.

One hour gone!

A hundred nights like this one, to be spent without sleep, to be defended against a new, ferocious enemy every ten minutes, and no power in his gun.

The terrible thing was that the ezwal had just agreed to work with him against the Rulls. Victory so near, then instantly snatched afar—

Something, a horrible something, slobbered at the foot of the tree. Great claws rasped on bark, and then two

eyes, easily a foot apart, started with an astounding speed up toward him.

Jamieson snatched at his gun, hesitated, then began hastily to climb up into the thinner branches. Every second, as he scrambled higher, he had the awful feeling that a branch would break, and send him sliding down toward the thing; and there was the more dreadful conviction that great jaws were at his heels.

Actually, however, his determination to save his gun worked beyond his expectations. The beast was edging up into those thin branches after him when there was a hideous snarl below, and another great creature started up the tree.

The fighting of animal against animal that started then was absolutely continuous. The tree shook, as saber-toothed beasts that mewed fought vast, grunting, roaring shapes. And every little while there would be a piercing, triumphant scream as a gigantic dinosaur-thing raged into the fight—and literally ate the struggling mass of killers.

Toward dawn, the continuous bellowing and snarling from near and far diminished notably, as if stomach after eager stomach gorged itself, and retired in enormous content to some cesspool of a bed.

At dawn he was still alive, completely weary, his body drooping with sleep-desire, and in his mind only the will to live, but utterly no belief that he would survive the day.

If only, on the ship, he had not been cornered so swiftly in the control room by the ezwal, he could have taken antislleep pills, fuel capsules for his gun and—he laughed in sharp sardonicism as the futility of that line of reasoning penetrated—and a lifeboat which, of course, would by itself have enabled him to fly to safety.

At least there had been a few hundred food capsules in the control room—a month's supply.

He sucked at one that was chocolate flavored, and slowly climbed to the bloodstained ground.

There was a sameness about the day, a mind-wearing sameness! Jungle and sea, different only in the designs of land shape and in the way the water lapped a curving, twisting shore. Always the substance was unchanged.

Jungle and sea—

Everything fought him—and until mid-afternoon he fought back. He had covered, he estimated, about three miles when he saw the tree—there was a kind of crotch high up in its towering form, where he could sleep without falling, if he tied himself with vines.

Three miles a day. Twelve hundred miles, counting what he still had to cover of this jungle ocean, counting the Demon Straits—twelve hundred miles at three miles a day.

Four hundred days!

He woke up with the beasts of the Eristan night coughing their lust at the base of his tree. He woke up with the memory of a nightmare in which he was swimming the Demon waters, pursued by millions of worms, who kept shouting something about the importance of solving the ezwal problem.

"What," they asked accusingly, "is man going to do with civilizations intellectually so advanced, but without a single building or weapon or—anything?"

Jamieson shook himself awake; and then: "To hell with ezvals!" he roared into the black, pressing, deadly night.

For a while, then, he sat shocked at the things that were happening to his mind, once so stable.

Stable! But that, of course, was long ago.

The fourth day dawned, a misty, muggy replica of the

day before. And of the day before that. And before that. And—

“Stop it, you idiot!” said Professor Jamieson aloud, savagely.

He was struggling stubbornly toward what seemed a clearing when a gray mass of creepers to one side stirred as in a gentle wind, and started to grow toward him. Simultaneously, a queer, hesitant thought came into his mind from—outside!

“Get them all!” it said with a madly calm ferociousness. “Get this—two-legged thing—too. Send creepers through the ground.”

It was such an alien thought-form, so unsettlingly different, that his brain came up from the depths to which it had sunk, and poised with startled alertness, abruptly, almost normally fascinated.

“Why, ‘of course,” he thought quite sanely, “we’ve always wondered how the Rytt killer plant could have evolved its high intelligence. It’s like the ezwal. It communicates by mental telepathy.”

Excitement came, an intense, scientific absorption in all the terrifically important knowledge that he had accumulated—about ezwals, about Rulls, and the way he had caught the Rytt plant’s private vibrations. Beyond all doubt, the ezwal, in forcing its thoughts on him, had opened paths, and made it easier for him to receive all thoughts. Why, that could mean that he—

In a blaze of alertness, he cut the thought short; his gaze narrowed on the gray creepers edging toward him. He backed away, gun ready; it would be just like the Rytt to feint at him with a slow, open, apparently easily avoidable approach. Then strike like lightning from underground with its potent, needle-sharp root tendrils.

There was not the faintest intention in him to go

back, or evade any crisis this creature might force. Go back where?—to what?

He skirted the visible creepers, broke through a fifty-foot wilderness of giant green ferns; and, because his control of himself was complete now, it was his military mind, the mind that accepted facts as they were, that took in the scene that spread before him.

In the near distance rested a two-hundred-foot Rull lifeboat. Near it, a dozen wanly white Rulls lay stiff and dead, each tangled in its own special bed of gray creepers. The creepers extended on into the open door of the lifeboat; and there was no doubt that it had "got them all!"

The atmosphere of lifelessness that hung over the ship, with all its promise of escape, brought a soaring joy, that was all the sweeter because of the despair of those days of hell—a joy that ended as the cool, hard thought of the ezwal struck into his brain:

"I've been expecting you, professor. The controls of this lifeboat are beyond my abilities to operate; so here I am waiting for you—"

From utter despair to utter joy to utter despair in minutes—

Cold, almost desolate, Jamieson searched for his great and determined enemy. But there was nothing moving in the world of jungle, no glimpse of dark, gleaming blue, nothing but the scatter of dead, white worms and the creeper-grown lifeboat to show that there ever had been movement.

He was only dimly aware of the ezwal's thoughts continuing:

"This killer plant was here four days ago when I landed from the antigravity raft. It had moved farther up the island when these Rulls brought me back to this lifeboat. I had already thrown off the effects of the trick-

mirror hypnotism they used on me; and so I heard the human battleship and the Rull cruiser start their fight. These things seemed unaware of what was wrong—I suppose because they didn't hear the sounds—and so they laid themselves out on the wet, soggy ground.

“That was when I got into mental communication with the plant, and called it back this way—and so we had an example of the kind of co-operation which you've been stressing for so long with such passionate sincerity, only—”

The funny thing was that, in spite of all he had fought through, hope was finally dead. Every word the ezwal was projecting so matter-of-factly showed that, once again, this immensely capable being had proved its enormous capacity for taking care of itself.

Co-operation with a Rytt killer plant—the one thing on this primitive world that he had really counted on as a continuous threat to the ezwal.

No more; and if the two worked together against him—He held his gun poised but the black thought went on:

It was obvious that man would never really conquer the ezwal. Point 135 psycho-friction meant there would be a revolution on Carson's Planet, followed by a long, bloody, futile struggle and—He grew aware that the ezwal was sending thoughts again:

“—only one fault with your reasoning. I've had four days to think over the menace of the Rulls, and of how time and again I had to co-operate with you. Had to!

“And don't forget, in the Rytt intelligence, I've had a perfect example of all the worst characteristics of ezwals. It, too, has mental telepathy. It, too, must develop a machine civilization before it can hope to hold its planet. It's in an earlier stage of development, so it's even more stubborn, more stupid—”

Jamieson was frowning in genuine stark puzzlement, scarcely daring to let his hope gather. He said violently: "Don't try to kid me. You've won all along the line. And now, of your own free will, you're offering, in effect, to help me get back to Carson's Planet in time to prevent a revolution favorable to the ezvals. Like hell you are!"

"Not my own free will, professor," came the laconic thought. "Everything I've done since we came to this planet has been forced on me. You were right in thinking I had been compelled to return for your aid. When I landed from the raft, this creeping-thing was spread across the entire peninsula here, and it wouldn't let me pass, stubbornly refused to listen to reason.

"It's completely ungrateful for the feast of worms I helped it get; and at this moment it has me cornered in a room of this ship.

"Professor, take your gun, and teach this damned creature the importance of—co-operation!"

Good Night, Mr. James

by Clifford Simak

He became aware from non-remembering.

He came alive from nothing.

He smelled the earth and the night and heard the trees whispering on the embankment above him and the breeze that had set the trees to whispering came down to him and felt him over with soft and tender fingers, for all the world as if it were examining him for broken bones or contusions and abrasions.

He sat up and put both his hands down upon the ground beside him to help him sit erect and stared into the darkness.

His name was Henderson James and he was a human being and he was sitting somewhere on a planet that was called the Earth. He was thirty-six years old and he was, in his way, famous, and comfortably well off. He lived in an old ancestral home on Summit Avenue, which was a respectable address even if it had lost some of its smartness in the last twenty years or so.

On the road above the slope of the embankment a car went past with its tires whining on the pavement and for a moment its headlights lighted up the treetops. Far away, muted by the distance, a whistle sobbed. And somewhere else a dog was barking with a flat monotony.

His name was Henderson James and if that were true, why was he here? Why should Henderson James be sitting on the slope of an embankment, listening to the

wind in the trees and to a sobbing whistle and a barking dog? Something had gone wrong, some incident that, if he could but remember it, might answer all his questions.

There was a job to do.

He sat and stared into the night and found that he was shivering, although there was no reason that he should, for the night was warm. Beyond the embankment he heard the sounds of a city late at night, the distant whine of the speeding car and the far-off wind-broken screaming of a siren. Once a man walked along a street close by and James sat listening to his footsteps until they faded out of hearing.

Something had happened and there was a job to do, a job that he had been doing, a job that somehow had been strangely interrupted by the inexplicable incident which had left him lying here on this embankment.

He checked himself. Clothing . . . shorts and shirt, strong shoes, his wristwatch and the gun in the holster at his side.

A gun!

The job involved a gun.

He had been hunting something, hunting something with a gun.

Something that was prowling in the night and a thing that must be killed.

Then he knew the answer, but even as he knew it he sat for a moment wondering at the strange, methodical, step-by-step progression of reasoning that had brought him to the memory. First his name and the basic facts pertaining to himself, then the realization of where he was and the problem of why he happened to be there and finally the realization that he had a gun and that he meant to use it. It was a logical way to think, a primer schoolbook way to think.

I am a man.

I live in a house on Summit Avenue.

Am I in the house on Summit Avenue?

No, I am not in the house on Summit Avenue.

I am on an embankment somewhere.

Why am I on the embankment?

But it wasn't the way a man thought, at least not the normal way a normal man would think. Man thought in short cuts. He cut across the block and did not go all the way around.

It was a frightening thing, he told himself, this clear-around-the-block thinking. It wasn't normal and it wasn't right and it made no sense at all . . . no more sense than did the fact that he should find himself in a place with no memory of getting there.

He rose slowly to his feet and ran his hands up and down his body. He wasn't messed up. His clothes were neat, not rumpled. He hadn't been beaten up and he hadn't been thrown from a speeding car. There were no sore places on his body and his face was smooth and whole and he felt all right.

He hooked his fingers in the holster belt and shucked it up so it rode tightly on his hips. He pulled out the gun and checked it with expert and familiar fingers and the gun was O.K.

He walked up the embankment and reached the road, went across it with a swinging stride to reach the sidewalk that fronted the row of new bungalows. He heard a car coming and stepped off the sidewalk to crouch in a clump of evergreens that landscaped one corner of a lawn. The move was instinctive and he crouched there, feeling just a little foolish at the thing he'd done.

The car went past and no one saw him. They would not, he realized, have noticed him even if he had remained out on the sidewalk.

He was unsure of himself, that must be the reason. There was a blank spot in his life, some mysterious incident that he did not know and the unknowing of it had undermined the sure and solid foundation of his own existence, had wrecked the basis of his motive and had turned him, momentarily, into a furtive animal that darted and hid at the approach of his fellow men.

That and something that had happened to him that made him think clear around the block.

He remained crouching in the evergreens, watching the street and the stretch of sidewalk, conscious of the white-painted, ghostly bungalows setting back in their landscaped lots.

The *puudly* had escaped and that was why he was here, hiding on the front lawn of some unsuspecting and sleeping citizen, equipped with a gun and a determination to use it, ready to match his wits and the quickness of brain and muscle against the most bloodthirsty, hate-filled thing yet found in the galaxy.

Any *puudly* was dangerous. It was not a thing to harbor. In fact, there was a law against harboring not only a *puudly*, but certain other alien beasts much less lethal than a *puudly*. There was good reason for such a law, reason which no one, much less himself, would even think to question.

And now the *puudly* was loose and somewhere in the city.

James grew cold at the thought of it, his brain forming images of the things that might come to pass if he did not hunt down the alien beast and put an end to it. Although beast was not quite the word to use. The *puudly* was more than a beast . . . just how much more than a beast he once had hoped to learn. He had not learned a lot, he now admitted to himself, not nearly all there was to learn, but he had learned enough. Enough

to frighten him. For one thing, he had learned what hate could be and how shallow an emotion human hate turned out when measured against the depth and intensity and the ravening horror of the *puudly's* hate. Not unreasoning hate, for unreasoning and illogical hate defeats itself, but a rational, calculating, driving hate that motivated a clever and deadly killing machine which directed its rapacity and its cunning against every living thing that was not a *puudly*. For the beast had a mind and a personality that operated upon the basic law of self-preservation against all comers, whoever they might be, extending that law to the interpretation that safety lay in one direction only . . . the death of every other living being. No reason was needed for a *puudly's* killing. The fact that another thing lived and moved and was, thus posing a threat, no matter how remote, against a *puudly*, was sufficient reason in itself.

It was madness, of course, some illogic planted far back in time and deep in the racial consciousness, but no more illogical, perhaps, than many human tenets.

The *puudly* had been, and still was for that matter, an unique opportunity for a study in alien behaviorism. Given a permit, one could have studied them on their native planet. Refused a permit, one sometimes did a foolish thing.

And foolish acts backfire.

James put down a hand and patted the gun at his side, as if by doing so he might derive some assurance that he was equal to the task. There was no question in his mind as to the thing that must be done. He must find the *puudly* and kill it and he must do that before the break of dawn. Anything less than that would be abject and horrifying failure.

For the *puudly* would bud. It was long past its time for the reproductive act and there were bare hours left

to find it before it had loosed upon the Earth dozens of baby *puudlies*. They would not remain babies for long. A few hours after budding they would strike out on their own. To find one *puudly*, lost in the vastness of a sleeping city, seemed bad enough; to track down some dozens of them would be impossible.

So it was tonight or never.

Tonight there would be no killing on the *puudly's* part. Tonight the beast would be intent on one thing only, to find a place where it could rest in quiet, where it could give itself over wholeheartedly and with no interference, to the business of bringing other *puudlies* into being.

It was clever. It would have known where it was going before it had escaped. There would be, on its part, no time wasted in seeking or in doubling back. It would have known where it was going and long since it had gone there. Already it was there, already the buds would be rising on its body, bursting forth and growing.

There was one place, and one place only, in the entire city where an alien beast would be safe from prying eyes. A man could figure that one out and so could a *puudly*. The question was: Would the *puudly* know that a man could figure it out? Would the *puudly* underestimate a man? Or, knowing that the man would know it, too, find another place of hiding?

James rose from the evergreens and went down the sidewalk. The street marker at the corner, standing underneath a swinging street light, told him where he was and it was closer to the place where he was going than he might have hoped.

The zoo was quiet except for something that now and then set up a howl that raised one's hackles and made the blood run cold.

James, having scaled the fence, stood quietly at its foot, trying to identify the howling animal. But he was unable to place it. More than likely, he told himself, it was a new one. A person simply couldn't keep track of all the zoo's occupants. New ones were coming in all the time, strange, unheard of creatures from the distant stars.

Straight ahead lay the unoccupied moat cage that up until a day or two before had held an unbelievable monstrosity from the jungles of one of the Arctian worlds. James grimaced in the dark, remembering the thing. They had finally had to kill it.

And now the *puudly* was there . . . well, maybe not there, but one place that it could be, the one place in the entire city where it might be seen and arouse no comment, for the zoo was filled with animals that were seldom seen and another strange one would arouse only momentary wonder. One animal more would go unnoticed unless some zoo attendant should think to check the records. There, in that unoccupied cage area, the *puudly* would be undisturbed, could quietly go about its business of budding out more *puudlies*. No one would bother it, for things like *puudlies* were the normal occupants of this place set aside for the strangers brought to Earth to be stared at and studied by that ferocious race, the humans.

James stood quietly beside the fence.

Henderson James. Thirty-six. Unmarried. Alien psychologist. An official of this zoo. And an offender against the law for having secured and harbored an alien being that was barred from Earth.

Why, he asked himself, did he think of himself in this way? Why, standing here, did he catalogue himself? It was instinctive to know one's self . . . there was

no need, no sense of setting up a mental outline of one's self.

It had been foolish to go ahead with this *puudly* business. He recalled how he had spent days fighting it out with himself, reviewing all the disastrous possibilities which might arise from it. If the old renegade spaceman had not come to him and had not said, over a bottle of most delicious wine, that he could deliver, for a certain, rather staggering sum, one live *puudly*, in good condition, it never would have happened. He was sure that of himself he never would have thought of it. But the old space captain was a man he knew and admired from former dealings. He was a man who was not adverse to turning either an honest or a dishonest dollar, and yet he was a man, for all of that, that you could depend upon. He would do what you paid him for and keep his lip buttoned tight once the deed was done.

He had wanted a *puudly*, for it was a most engaging beast with certain little tricks that, once understood, might open up new avenues of speculation and approach, might write new chapters in the torturous study of alien minds and manners.

But for all of that, it had been a terrifying thing to do and now that the beast was loose, the terror was compounded. For it was not wholly beyond speculation that the descendants of this one brood the escaped *puudly* would spawn might wipe out the population of the Earth, or at the best, make the Earth untenable for its rightful dwellers. A place like the Earth, with its teeming millions, would provide a field day for the fangs of the *puudlies*, and the mind that drove the fangs. They would not hunt for hunger, nor for the sheer madness of the kill, but because of the compelling conviction that no *puudly* would be safe until Earth was wiped clean of life. They would be killing for survival, as a

cornered rat would kill . . . except that they would be cornered nowhere except in the illogic of their minds.

While posses scoured the Earth to hunt them down, they would strike in all directions. They would know the ways of guns and traps and poisons and there would be more and more of them as time went on, for each of them would accelerate their budding to replace with a dozen or a hundred the one that might be killed.

James moved quietly forward to the edge of the moat and let himself down into the mud that covered the bottom. When the monstrosity had been killed, the moat had been drained and should long since have been cleaned, but the press of work, James thought, must have prevented its getting done.

Slowly he waded out into the mud, feeling his way, his feet making sucking noises as he pulled them through the slime. Finally he reached the rocky incline that led out of the moat to the island cage.

He stood for a moment, his hands on the great, wet boulders, listening, trying to hold his breath so the sound of it would not interfere with hearing. The thing that howled had quieted and the night was deathly quiet. Or seemed, at first, to be. Then he heard the little insect noises that ran through the grass and bushes and the whisper of the leaves in the trees across the moat and the far-off thrumming that was the snoring of a sleeping city.

Now, for the first time, he felt fear. Felt it in the silence that was not a silence, in the mud beneath his feet, in the upthrust boulders that rose out of the moat.

The *puudly* was a dangerous thing, not only because it was strong and quick, but because it was intelligent. Just how intelligent, he did not know. It reasoned and it planned and schemed. It could talk, not as a human talks . . . probably better than a human talked. For it

not only could talk words, but it could talk emotions. It lured its victims to it by the thoughts it put into their minds, it held them entranced with dreams and illusions until it slit their throats. It could purr a man to sleep. It could lull you to inaction. It could drive you crazy with a single flicking thought, hurling a perception so foul and alien that the mind recoiled deep inside itself and stayed there, coiled tight, like a compressed steel spring that had gotten stuck.

It should have budded long ago, but it had fought off its budding, holding back against the day when it might escape, planning, now he knew, its revenge against the Earth, its conquest of the Earth. It had planned, and planned well, against this very moment, and it would stand upon no ceremony with anyone who interfered with it.

His hand went down and touched the gun and he felt the muscles in his jaw involuntarily tightening and suddenly there was at once a lightness and a hardness in him that had not been there before. He pulled himself up the boulder face, seeking cautious hand and toe holds, breathing shallowly, body pressed against the rock. Quickly . . . and surely, and no noise, for he must reach the top and be there before the *puudly* knew there was anyone around.

The *puudly* would be relaxed and intent upon its business, engrossed in the budding forth of that numerous family that in days to come would begin the grim and relentless crusade to make an alien planet safe for *puudlies* . . . and for *puudlies* alone.

That is, if the *puudly* were here.

If it was not here, it might be in any of a thousand other places.

His claw hand found grass and earth and he sank his

fingers deep into the soil, hauling his body up the last few feet of the rock face above the pit.

He lay flat upon the gently sloping ground, listening, tensed for any action. He studied the ground in front of him, probing every foot. Distant street lamps lighting the zoo walks threw back the total blackness that had engulfed him as he climbed out of the moat, but there still were areas of shadow that he had to study closely.

Inch by inch, he squirmed his way along, being sure of the terrain immediately ahead before he moved a muscle. He held the gun in a rock-hard fist, ready for instant action, watching for the faintest hint of motion, alert for any hump or irregularity that was not rock or bush or grass.

Minutes magnified themselves into hours, his eyes ached with staring and the lightness that had been in him drained away, leaving only the hardness, which was as tense as a drawn bowstring. A sense of failure began to seep into his mind and with it came the full-fledged, until now unadmitted, realization of what failure meant, not only for the world, but for the dignity and the pride that was Henderson James. Now, faced with the possibility, he admitted to himself the action he must take if the *puudly* were not here, if he did not find it here and kill it. He would have to notify the authorities, would have to attempt to alert the police, must plead with newspapers and radio to warn the citizenry, must reveal himself as a man who, through pride and self-conceit, had exposed the people of the Earth to this threat against their hold upon their native planet.

They would not believe him. They would laugh at him until the laughter died in their torn throats, choked off with their blood. He sweated, thinking of it, thinking of the price this city, and the world, would pay before it learned the truth.

The *puudly* rose in front of him, not more than six feet away, from its bed beside a bush. He jerked the pistol up and his finger tightened on the trigger.

"Don't," the *puudly* said inside his mind. "I'll go along with you."

His finger closed tight against the metal and the gun leaped in his hand, but even as it did he felt the whip-lash of terror slash at his brain, caught for just a second the terrible import, the mind-shattering obscenity that glanced off his mind and ricocheted away.

"Too late," he told the *puudly*. "You should have tried that first. You wasted precious seconds. You would have got me if you had done it first."

It had been easy, he told himself, much easier than he had thought. The *puudly* was dead or dying and the Earth and its millions of unsuspecting citizens were safe and, best of all, Henderson James was safe . . . safe from indignity, safe from being stripped naked of the little defenses he had built up through the years to shield him against the public stare. He felt relief flood over him and it left him slightly breathless and feeling clean, but weak.

"You fool," the dying *puudly* said, death clouding its words as they built up in his mind. "You fool, you half-thing, you duplicate. . . ."

It died then and he felt it die, felt the life go out of it and leave it empty.

He rose softly to his feet and his mind seemed stunned and at first he thought it was from knowing death, from having touched hands with death within the *puudly's* mind.

The *puudly* had tried to fool him. Faced with the pistol, it had tried to throw him off his balance to give it the second that it needed to hurl the mind-blasting thought that had caught at the edge of his brain. If he

had hesitated for a moment, he knew, it would have been all over with him, if his finger had slackened for a moment it would have been too late. The *puudly* must have known that he would think of the zoo as the first logical place to look and, even knowing that, it had held him in enough contempt to come here, had not even bothered to try to watch for him, had not tried to stalk him, had waited until he was almost on top of it before it moved.

And that was queer, for the *puudly* must have known, with its uncanny powers, every move that he had made. It must have maintained a casual contact with his mind every second of the time since it had escaped. He had known that and . . . wait a minute, he hadn't known it until this very moment, although knowing it now, it seemed as if he had always known it.

What is the matter with me? he thought. There's something wrong with me. I should have known I could not surprise the *puudly*, and yet I didn't know it. I must have surprised it, for otherwise it would have finished me off quite leisurely at any moment after I climbed out of the moat.

You fool, the *puudly* had said. You fool, you half-thing, you duplicate. . . .

You duplicate!

He felt the strength and the personality and the hard, unquestioned identity of himself as Henderson James, human being, drain out of him, as if someone had cut the puppet string and he, the puppet, had slumped supine upon the stage.

So that was why he had been able to surprise the *puudly!*

There were two Henderson Jameses. The *puudly* had been in contact with one of them, the original, the real Henderson James, had known every move he made, had

known that it was safe so far as that Henderson James might be concerned. It had not known of the second Henderson James that had stalked it through the night.

Henderson James, duplicate.

Henderson James, temporary.

Henderson James, here tonight, gone tomorrow.

For they would not let him live. The original Henderson James would not allow him to continue living, and even if he did, the world would not allow it. Duplicates were made only for very temporary and very special reasons and it was always understood that once their purpose was accomplished they would be done away with.

Done away with . . . those were the words exactly. Gotten out of the way. Swept out of sight and mind. Killed as unconcernedly as one chops off a chicken's head.

He walked forward and dropped on one knee beside the *puudly*, running his hand over its body in the darkness. Lumps stood out all over it, the swelling buds that now would never break to spew forth in a loathsome birth a brood of *puudly* pups.

He rose to his feet.

The job was done. The *puudly* had been killed and killed before it had given birth to a horde of horror.

The job was done and he could go home.

Home?

Of course that was the thing that had been planted in his mind, the thing they wanted him to do. To go home, to go back to the house on Summit Avenue, where his executioners would wait, to walk back deliberately and happily to the death that waited.

The job was done and his usefulness was over. He had been created to perform a certain task and the task was now performed and while an hour ago he had been

a factor in the plans of men, he was no longer wanted. He was an embarrassment and superfluous and he would be cancelled out, neatly and quietly and with a certain satisfaction that all had gone so well.

Now wait^r a minute, he told himself. You may not be a duplicate. You do not feel like one.

That was true. He felt like Henderson James. He was Henderson James. He lived on Summit Avenue and had illegally brought to Earth a beast known as a *puudly* in order that he might study it and talk to it and test its alien reactions, attempt to measure its intelligence and guess at the strength and depth and the direction of its non-humanity. He had been a fool, of course, to do it, and yet at the time it had seemed important because of many reasons.

I am human, he said, and that was right, but even then the fact meant nothing. Of course, he was human. Henderson James was human and his duplicate would be exactly as human as the original. For the duplicate, processed from the pattern that held every trait and characteristic of the man he was to become a copy of, would differ in not a single basic factor.

In not a single basic factor, perhaps, but in certain other things. For no matter how much the duplicate might be like his pattern, no matter how full-limbed he might spring from his creation, he still would be a new man. He would have the capacity for knowledge and for thought and in a little time he would have and know and be all the things that his original was . . . but it would take some time, some little time to come to a full realization of all he knew and was, some time to coördinate and recognize all the knowledge and experience that lay within his mind. At first he'd grope and search until he came upon the things that he must know. Until he became acquainted with himself, with the sort of

man he was, he could not reach out blindly in the dark and put his hand exactly and unerringly upon the thing he wished.

That had been exactly what he'd done. He had groped and searched. He had been compelled to think, at first, in simple basic truths and facts.

I am a man.

I am on a planet called Earth.

I am Henderson James.

I live on Summit Avenue.

There is a job to do.

It had been quite a while, he remembered now, before he had been able to dig out of his mind the nature of the job.

Even now he could not find in the hidden, still-veiled recesses of his mind the many valid reasons why a man should run so grave a risk to study a thing so vicious as a *puudly*. There were reasons, he knew there were, and in a little time he would know them quite specifically.

The point was that if he were Henderson James, original, he would know them now, know them as a part of himself and his life, without laboriously searching for them.

The *puudly* had known, of course. It had known, beyond any doubt of error, that there were two Henderson Jameses. It had been keeping tab on one when another one showed up. A mentality far less astute than the *puudly's* would have had no trouble in figuring that one out.

If the *puudly* had not talked, he told himself, I never would have known. If it had died at once and not had a chance to taunt me, I would not have known. I would even now be walking to the house on Summit Avenue.

He stood lonely and naked of soul in the wind that

swept across the moated island. There was a sour bitterness in his mouth.

He moved a foot and touched the dead *puudly*.

"I'm sorry," he told the stiffening body. "I'm sorry now I did it. If I had known, I never would have killed you."

Stiffly erect, he moved away.

He stopped at the street corner, keeping well in the shadow. Half way down the block, and on the other side, was the house. A light burned in one of the rooms upstairs and another on the post beside the gate that opened into the yard, lighting the walk up to the door.

Just as if, he told himself, the house were waiting for the master to come home. And that, of course, is exactly what it was doing. An old lady of a house, waiting, hands folded in its lap, rocking very gently in a squeaky chair . . . and with a gun hid beneath the folded shawl.

His lip lifted in half a snarl as he stood there, looking at the house. What do they take me for, he thought, putting out a trap in plain sight and one that's not even baited? Then he remembered. They would not know, of course, that he knew he was a duplicate. They would think that he would think that he was Henderson James, the one and only. They would expect him to come walking home, quite naturally, believing he belonged there. So far as they would know, there would be no possibility of his finding out the truth.

And now that he had? Now that he was here, across the street from the waiting house?

He had been brought into being, had been given life, to do a job that his original had not dared to do, or had not wanted to do. He had carried out a killing his

original didn't want to dirty his hands in doing, or risk his neck in doing.

Or had it not been that at all, but the necessity of two men working on the job, the original serving as a focus for the *puudly's* watching mind while the other man sneaked up to kill it while it watched.

No matter what, he had been created, at a good stiff price, from the pattern of the man that was Henderson James. The wizardry of man's knowledge, the magic of machines, a deep understanding of organic chemistry, of human physiology, of the mystery of life, had made a second Henderson James. It was legal, of course, under certain circumstances . . . for example, in the case of public policy, and his own creation, he knew, might have been validated under such a heading. But there were conditions and one of these was that a duplicate not be allowed to continue living once it had served the specific purpose for which it had been created.

Usually such a condition was a simple one to carry out, for the duplicate was not meant to know he was a duplicate. So far as he was concerned, he was the original. There was no suspicion in him, no foreknowledge of the doom that was spelled out for him, no reason for him to be on guard against the death that waited.

The duplicate knitted his brow, trying to puzzle it out.

There was a strange set of ethics here.

He was alive and he wanted to stay alive. Life, once it had been tasted, was too sweet, too good, to go back to the nothingness from which he had come . . . or would it be nothingness? Now that he had known life, now that he was alive, might he not hope for the same life after death as any other human being? Might not he, too, have the same human right as any other human to grasp at the shadowy and glorious promises and as-

surances held out by religion and by faith? He tried to marshal what he knew about those promises and assurances, but his knowledge was illusive. A little later, he would remember more about it. A little later, when the bookkeeper in his mind had been able to co-ordinate and activate the knowledge that he had inherited from the pattern, he would know.

He felt a trace of anger stir deep inside of him, anger at the unfairness of allotting him only a few short hours of life, of allowing him to learn how wonderful a thing life was only to snatch it from him. It was a cruelty that went beyond mere human cruelty, it was something that had been fashioned out of the distorted perspective of a machine society that measured existence only in terms of mechanical and physical worth, that discarded with a ruthless hand whatever part of that society which had no specific purpose.

The cruelty, he told himself, was in ever giving life, not in taking it away.

His original, of course, was the one to blame. He was the one who had obtained the *puudly* and allowed it to escape. It was his fumbling and his inability to correct his error without help which had created the necessity of fashioning a duplicate.

And yet, could he blame him?

Perhaps, rather, he owed him gratitude for a few hours of life at least, gratitude for the privilege of knowing what life was like. Although he could not quite decide whether or not it was something which called for gratitude.

He stood there, staring at the house. That light in the upstairs room was in the study off the master bedroom. Up there Henderson James, original, was waiting for the word that the duplicate had come home to death. It was an easy thing to sit there and wait, to sit and wait for the

word that was sure to come. An easy thing to sentence to death a man one had never seen, even if that man be the walking image of one's self.

It would be a harder decision to kill him if you stood face to face with him . . . harder to kill someone who would be, of necessity, closer than a brother, someone who would be, almost literally, flesh of your flesh, blood of your blood, brain of your brain.

There would be a practical side as well, a great advantage to be able to work with a man who thought as you did, who would be almost a second self. It would be almost as if there were two of you.

A thing like that could be arranged. Plastic surgery and a price for secrecy, could make your duplicate into an unrecognizable other person. A little red tape, some finagling . . . but it could be done.

The room with the light could be reached with a little luck, with strength and agility and determination. The brick expanse of a chimney, its base cloaked by shrubs, its length masked by a closely growing tree, ran up the wall. A man could climb its rough brick face, could reach out and swing himself through the open window into the lighted room.

And once Henderson James, original, stood face to face with Henderson James, duplicate . . . well, anything could happen. The duplicate then would no longer be an impersonal factor. He would be a man and one that was very close to his original.

There would be watchers, but they would be watching the front door. If one were quiet, if he could reach and climb the chimney without making any noise, he'd be in the room before anyone would notice.

He drew back deeper in the shadows and considered. It was either get into the room and face his original, gamble on being able to strike a compromise with him,

or simply to light out . . . to run and hide and wait, watching his chance to get completely away, perhaps to some far planet in some other part of the galaxy.

Both ways were a gamble, but one was quick, would either succeed or fail within the hour; the other might drag on for months with a man never knowing he was safe, never being sure.

Something nagged at him, a persistent little fact that skittered through his brain and eluded his efforts to pin it down. It might be important and then, again, it might be a random thing, simply a floating piece of information that was looking for its pigeonhole.

His mind shrugged it off.

The quick way or the long way?

He stood thinking for a moment and then moved swiftly down the street, seeking a place where he could cross in shadow.

He had chosen the short way.

The room was empty.

He stood beside the window, quietly, only his eyes moving, searching every corner, checking against a situation that couldn't seem quite true . . . that Henderson James was not here, waiting for the word.

Then he strode swiftly to the bedroom door and swung it open. His finger found the switch and the lights went on. The bedroom was empty and so was the bath. He went back into the study.

He stood with his back against the wall, facing the door that led into the hallway, but his eyes went over the room, foot by foot, orienting himself, feeling himself flow into shape and form, feeling familiarity creep in upon him and enfold him in its comfort of belonging.

Here were the books, the fireplace with its mantel loaded with mementos, the easy chairs, the liquor

cabinet . . . and all were a part of him, a background that was as much a part of Henderson James as his body and his inner thoughts were a part of him.

This, he thought, is what I would have missed, the experience I never would have had if the *puudly* had not taunted me. I would have died an empty and unrelated body that had no actual place in the universe.

The phone purred at him and he stood there startled by it, as if some intruder from the outside had pushed its way into the room, shattering the sense of belonging that had come to him.

The phone rang again and he went across the room and picked it up.

"James speaking," he said.

"That you, Mr. James?"

The voice was that of Anderson, the gardener.

"Why, yes," said the duplicate. "Who did you think it was?"

"We got a fellow here who says he's you."

Henderson James, duplicate, stiffened in his tracks and his hand, suddenly, was grasping the phone so hard that he found the time to wonder why it did not pulverize to bits beneath his fingers.

"He's dressed like you," the gardener said, "and I know you went out. Talked to you, remember. Told you that you shouldn't. Not with us waiting for that . . . that thing."

"Yes," said the duplicate, his voice so even that he could not believe it was he who spoke. "Yes, I remember talking with you."

"But, sir, how did you get back?"

"I came in the back way," the even voice said into the phone.

"But he's dressed like you."

"Naturally. Of course, he would be, Anderson."

And that, of course, didn't follow, but Anderson wasn't too bright to start with and the man was somewhat upset.

"You remember," the duplicate said, "that we talked about it."

"Yes, sir," said Anderson. "And you told me to tell you, to make sure you were in your study."

"You've called me," the duplicate said, "and I am here."

"Then it's him?"

"Of course," said the duplicate. "Who did you think it was?"

He put the phone back into the cradle and stood waiting. It came a moment after, the dull, throaty explosion of a coughing gun.

He walked to a chair and sank into it, spent with the knowledge of how events had so been ordered that now finally he was safe, safe beyond all question.

Soon he would have to change into other clothes, hide the gun and the clothes that he was wearing. The staff would ask no questions, of course, but it was best to let nothing arouse suspicion in their minds.

He felt his nerves quieting and he allowed himself to glance about the room, take in the books and furnishings, the soft and easy . . . and earned . . . comfort of a man established in the world.

He smiled softly.

"It will be nice," he said.

It had been easy. Now that it was over it seemed ridiculously easy. Easy because he had never seen the man who walked up to the door. It was easy to kill a man you have never seen.

With each passing hour he would slip deeper and deeper into the personality that was his by right of heritage. There would be no one to question, after a

time not even himself, that he was Henderson James.

The phone rang again and he got up to answer it.

A pleasant voice told him: "This is Allen, over at the duplication lab. We haven't had a report from you."

"Well," said James, "I . . ."

"I just called," said Allen, "to tell you not to worry. It slipped my mind before."

"I see," said James.

"We did this one a little differently," said Allen. "An experiment that we just worked out. Slow poison in his blood stream. Just another precaution. Probably not necessary. but we like to be sure. In case he fails to show up, you needn't worry any."

"I am sure he will," said James.

Allen chuckled. "Twenty-four hours," he said. "Like a time bomb. Like a fuse."

"It was good of you to let me know," said James.

"Glad to," said Allen. "Good night, Mr. James."

The Critters

by Frank Belknap Long

"Inertia is what saves us, young fellow," Traubel said. "Malignancy, human or otherwise, wilts under its own weight."

He was sitting on a jagged granite outcropping on the crest of his land, his sagging shoulders and straddle-legged posture giving him the aspect of a dejected steeplechase rider about to come a cropper. But suddenly as he spoke his shoulders straightened, and the rusty garden rake in his gnarled, blue-veined hands began to vibrate like a whip.

Morley watched a rapt possessiveness creep into the steel-gray eyes and found himself wondering how a man so gaunt and ill-colored could have turned the sloping mountainside into a garden plot so riotously ablaze with color that it dazzled his vision.

On the sloping acres below were russet patches, and emerald patches, and a solid acre of pumpkins gleaming in the sunlight opposite a field of waving corn.

And suddenly the old man was nodding, his eyes sweeping all of the wide green acres he'd refused to yield up to the alien hordes. His acres were green because he'd gone right on plowing and seeding and hoeing. Not all of Joel Traubel's neighbors had been as brave.

"Perhaps 'brave' isn't the right word," Morley thought aloud. "Perhaps 'foolhardy' would be a better word."

"Come again, young fellow?"

Morley took off the glasses he'd found by rummaging through the charred debris of an optical display case—he'd tried on sixty pairs—and his stare seemed to take on an added sharpness before he returned them to his nose.

He wasn't a "young fellow" but a lean, haggard-faced man of forty-two, with his years etched as indelibly into his face as the whorls on the shell of a mossback.

But then—Traubel was so old it was only natural he should think of a man with a pack on his back as a "young fellow." It wasn't difficult to compute the number of years Traubel had been on Earth. A man as virile as Traubel still would naturally lie a little about his age.

He'd lop off a few years as a sop to his vanity and a few out of sheer cussedness, but the way the old man's memory kept harking back to the closing years of the twentieth century was a dead giveaway.

The winding procession of armed Venusians in the blue-lit defile far below would have checked the loquacity of an ordinary man in midstream. But Traubel just kept talking about his young manhood, and his mental processes were not those of a hunted man, but of an imaginative lad with a well-ordered, well-regulated life looming ahead of him through the hazy mountain vista up which he'd been climbing for forty years.

"Didn't catch what you said, young fellow. Funny thing, no one thought it would be like this when the first spaceship landed on Venus, and Fleming and Pre-genzer were massacred. We just didn't realize we'd supplied the malignant critters with a blueprint. They couldn't build spaceships before they'd seen one, naturally. But when we plunked a ship down in the pea soup right before their nostril slits—"

"I wouldn't want the job," Morley said.

"Come again, young man?"

"Oh, I mean—the job of splitting the hair that separates an imitative from a constructive faculty."

Traubel nodded. "They built thousands of ships as alike as peas in a pod," he reminisced grimly. "And now there's a blight on the Earth and all the people have to look forward to is the time when they'll be buried together. If they're married, that is.

"Funny thing about that. The cities have been leveled and all the folks I see are just marking time. But it's the green fields turning black I feel the worst about. A city you can toss away without an awful lot of grief, but the earth of a man's own plowing under his feet, the smell of fresh-turned earth when it's been raining up and down the mountainside—"

"So you've stayed on," Morley said, jerking his bronze-haired head at the fertile acres beneath, "year after year, minding your own business, wresting a living from the land."

"That's right, young fellow. Up and down the Earth you young fellows go with your bellies pulled in, hiding in caves from dawn to dusk, picking up scraps of food like turkey buzzards."

The old man bent and scooped up a handful of dirt. "Scavenger beetles," he amended, his nostrils wrinkling as he picked out a fat white grub, and crushed it between his thumb and forefinger. "No offense, son, but that's what you are. There are a few cracked mirrors left. Did you ever try standing off and taking a long, sober look at yourself? I'll wager those black leather boots you're wearing came from—"

Traubel checked himself. "Oh, well, where they came from is no business of mine. But *I* wouldn't want to die with a dead man's boots on, son."

"I *have* died," Morley said. "I died yesterday; today and tomorrow I'll die again. A man is dead when he's caught like a fly in a web, and he's dead—and he dies. They kill swiftly, erratically, for no reason at all. They kill for the sheer pleasure of killing. It's like . . . well, you see a grub . . . no, a mosquito . . . and suddenly, there's a little red smudge on your thumb. You don't hate the mosquito—"

"No, they don't hate us," the old man agreed. "That's what I've been trying to make you see. You wouldn't go out of your way to kill a mosquito. You or I wouldn't and they're no different from us in that respect. My land's so high up on the mountain they just don't bother to turn aside and bother me."

"Not in forty years, old man?"

"Not more than four times in forty years," Traubel said. "And each time I made myself scarce. Just hiding in a cave for one day, even if it means crouching over a decaying carcass, doesn't harm a man when he knows he'll have his own land to come back to."

Traubel laughed harshly. "They set my fields ablaze, but a burning harvest now and then sweetens the labors of a man. You plow and you sow again, bringing a greenness out of the ash layer."

"It's like living on the edge of a volcano," Morley said.

"The law of averages is on my side," Traubel reminded him. "Four times in forty years is a pretty good batting average, as we used to say when we could move about freely enough to play games. Baseball—"

"You can flip a coin, and it comes heads fifty times," Morley reminded him. "Perhaps you've just been trading on your luck."

"Maybe so, young fellow, maybe so. But I just can't picture myself inviting a gift horse to kick me in the face."

Three thousand feet below red sunlight glinted on the hooked beaks of marching Venusians, glinted on their scaly bodies and tentacled limbs.

"And in the background of a man's mind there is always a vision of the little towns, driving him on, giving him the will to remain a man—"

"There are no more little towns," Morley reminded him.

"There *were* little towns," the old man said, raising his rake, and scraping rust from one of the prongs. "And I wouldn't want the job of splitting the hair that separates here and now from something I can still see and smell and touch just by stretching out a hand."

He nodded. The steely hardness had gone out of his eyes. His eyes looked now like a kid's on Christmas morning, sliding down the banisters with his head aureoled in a golden haze.

"A rake resting against a barn door, pigs—if you like pigs—all splashed with mud down one side, and pumpkins and woodsmoke in October. Even the swill trough smells sweet, and you and the missus, you put on your Sunday best and go chugging into town in a converted jeep roadster, and the missus says . . . shucks, it's all so close in my mind I just have to stretch out a hand.

"Come tomorrow, the missus will have been gone exactly fourteen years," he added, thoughtfully.

"I don't know whether I've been standing here a long time or a short time talking like an idiot," Morley heard himself saying. "Tell me, did you feel the same way when you and your wife were facing this together? Did you feel like a man who has gone out with his last penny and doesn't know whether to gamble it or not?"

Traubel turned and looked at him sharply. "You're not alone, young fellow? You weren't just passing by—alone?"

"No." Morley shook his head. "We . . . we passed your hut-house on the way up. We thought you mightn't mind if we put up with you for—" He hesitated. "I guess you'd call it a spell."

"Home burned down with the wheat," Traubel said, raking some dry leaves toward the outcropping. "Four times right down to the soil. The big trees had to be felled, and dragged up from the valley. My path almost crossed theirs."

He raked through the leaves, and uncovered a chestnut bur.

"If you saw a mosquito groaning beneath a log, would you crush it? They saw me, all right, following a winding trail up through the timber line. But shucks, crushing a mosquito carrying a log would take a kind of special double effort. Inertia—"

He wouldn't have thought of mosquitoes if I hadn't put the idea into his head, Morley thought. Aloud he said: "Is it all right, then—if we stay on for a spell? You know that queer old notion about a house? A house isn't a home until it's really been lived in. You give something to the house and the house gives something back to you. It's a sort of partnership, if you know what I mean—a symbiosis."

Traubel said: "Young man, I don't quite see—"

"She's going to have a baby," Morley said.

Traubel was silent for a full minute. Then he said: "Oh!" Then after a pause: "Hut's above the timber line, high enough up to be as safe as the rock we're sitting on. You'd better get back to her, son."

Morley reached out and gripped the old man's arm, a curious wetness glistening on his cheekbones.

"Thanks," he said.

"Don't mention it, son. If you don't mind I'll just sit here a moment longer where I can see all of my land

spread out beneath me like a chessboard. Sort of makes me feel good to know I can still move the pieces around. That wheat field down below reminds me of a queen with cornsilk hair arguing with a bishop decked out in cabbage leaves.

"You've played chess, son? The hut's my castle. You set out a lot of pawns to protect your rook or castle, and—"

Morley left him nodding in the gathering dusk, and went on down the mountainside, his trouser legs sticking out from the back of his boots.

Halfway down the mountain—exactly halfway as Morley's accurate eye measured the distance—he halted in his stride and his hand went under his coat to emerge with a small, flat object that caught and held the sunlight.

The object measured roughly four inches by seven and its general appearance was somewhat like that of the flattish, large-lensed cameras which had been so popular in the middle years of the twentieth century.

In all of the crumbling yellow optical catalogues which Morley had thumbed through such immense, metal-embedded "eyes" were euphemistically listed as "candid cameras"!

Did that mean that they caught men and women in their unguarded moments, and presented a more accurate picture of humanity's frailties than the more primitive visual recording instruments of an earlier period?

With fingers that trembled a little he loosened his shoulder pack, and a small metal tripod fell to the ground. He screwed the camera-like object on the tripod with a grim urgency in his stare.

Almost he wished that the object were a camera.

Perhaps his belief in himself was no more than a fantastic nightmare which had mushroomed in his brain.

No—he really didn't believe that. He had a natural bent for *improving* things, and the camera-like object had taken shape so inevitably that he could not doubt his ability to bring the invention to full fruition in another two years. Two years? God, he'd settle for seven months—six—

Morley wiped the sweat from his face. His hands were trembling so that they seemed all thumbs. He had all the needed, delicate parts now, but freedom from fear, freedom from strain, the opportunity to work unmolested in a small, hastily improvised laboratory might well spell the difference between success and failure.

A mountain laboratory? Well, he'd know in a moment whether he could achieve effective results by training the instrument straight down the mountain at a *marching* column.

Oh, it wasn't a vain hope, for he was the only man left on Earth with a surgical technique worth developing.

There was a brackish taste in Morley's mouth. Deep therapy was what it amounted to, but, if it couldn't be adapted to the peculiar structure of Venusian brains, humanity would do better to stick to hand-blasters. What he desperately needed now was more time—time to work on the skillful interlocking of high-frequency wave transmission with the destructive intracranial vibrations set up by the controlled use of subsonics.

In the last years of the twentieth century beam surgery could make babbling infants of men, but not even a cyclotron beam of alpha particles could destroy the brains of Venusians. Convulsive idiocy in humans, yes. The forebrain and cortex destroyed, nothing left but the

thalamus—all in the last six years of the twentieth century!

Morley had watched a few experiments go wrong. Himself a fifteen-year-old kid, his uncle a surgeon, and letting the beam get out of control because with all the great accumulation of knowledge and experience at his disposal that grand old man couldn't control the trembling of his hands.

Well, he, Morley, could control the trembling but—the transmitter just wasn't powerful enough. When he trained it on the Venusians there was a brief pause like the *petit mal* of human epilepsy. For the barest fraction of a second the beam worked, but—

For an instant there stirred within Morley a foreboding born of years of acute fear and blind sensation. Then—he heard something click beneath his fingers.

Instantly he slammed the dread in his mind back against a mental wall—held it there.

Two thousand feet below a moving shadow stopped. The sunlight seemed to deepen, and monstrously between walls of blueness there spread the penumbra of a beast with many beaked heads that *had ceased utterly to weave about*.

A dislodged stone rasped against Morley's heel and went bounding down the slope like a startled hare.

Bounding, zigzagging—

If a man didn't smoke, it could be because—he had no matches. If a man didn't breathe, it could be because the air about him had become thick, viscid.

Ten minutes later Morley was standing very still, a thin trickle of blood running down his chin.

Ten full minutes, he thought wildly. The whole blasted column went mindless. It halted and then—moved on *without remembering*. I've got them, I've got them—in

the palm of my hand! Give me seven months—a mountain laboratory—I'll settle for four!

"He asked me if I played chess," Morley said, when he'd scrubbed the dirt from his hands and dried them with a towel.

The woman on the bunk raised her face and stared at her husband across the rafter-hung hut, the hair above her brow a tumbled mass of gold.

For an instant she seemed almost pretty, despite her wind-coarsened skin and the harsh lines which hunger and deprivation had etched into her flesh.

"Do you really think he's just been lucky, Jim? Or is it something we—" she hesitated, as though visualizing the begrimed, misery-laden millions who trudged the waste places of the Earth—"is it some hidden power he has which we could use too, if he'd tell us about it?"

Morley sat down on the edge of his bunk, and leaned forward, hands on knees. "I don't know," he said. "It may be he's been caught up in what used to be called an infinity cycle of lucky runs."

"An infinity cycle?"

Morley nodded. "I told him a flipped coin can fall the same way fifty times in succession. But that's not remarkable. It happens so often it doesn't even do violence to the law of averages. What I didn't tell him—perhaps I didn't need to—was that a flipped coin can come heads fifty million times. In a cycle of luck which begins and ends in infinity—"

Morley rose and adjusted the wick on a grimy oil lamp, his hands trembling.

"The opponents of extrasensory perception used to claim that we're all at the receiving end of dozens of such cycles, where all the lucky runs just happen to come together in the little segment of space-time we've been

caught out in. For all we know Traubel may be at the receiving end of a cycle that has 'luck-with-Venusians' stamped all over it."

Arline Morley half-rose, her eyes bright with a dawning hope. "Then if that's true, Jim, he'll be *safe* here. Your son and mine!—safe in a green mountain land that's protected by something no power on Earth can break!"

Morley's face was grim. "No, I . . . I don't think so. The introduction of an extraneous factor would invalidate the probability factor. Just our being here would . . . well, we've jarred the hand that does the flipping. Our presence here may bring down the thunder!"

"But that's just a theory, isn't it? It can't be proved."

Morley said, "Just a wild guess, of course. I didn't mean to sound so dogmatic. There's probably no such thing as an infinity cycle of lucky runs anyway. Traubel claims it's just inertia which keeps the critters—he calls them critters—from climbing the mountain and laying waste to his hand. Just inertia."

"Maybe he's right," Arline said. "Remember how the others were all cut down? Then remember how it stopped, an instant before it reached us, and—went off down the road."

White-lipped, Morley nodded.

"The road was a shambles. We had to stumble over their bodies to get to the cave, the bodies of men and women cut in two by—"

"Stop that!" Morley's palms were sweating. "Stop it, you hear?"

"Twisted, crushed," Arline said tonelessly. "Limbs torn off—"

She began to sway from side to side, her nostrils quivering. "Our son will never know a safer world. We won't be his real parents. He'll be cradled in the lap of

terror and when he cries—Death will suckle him. If he doesn't cry, if he's born dry-eyed, so much the worse for him. Tears are a coward's refuge, but we have to be cowards or—go mad. He'll curse the day he was born!"

Morley started to move toward her across the hut.

Before he'd advanced a foot his scalp began to tingle, and he felt a coldness start up his spine.

For an instant he stood utterly motionless, staring at his wife. Then terror began to tug at his wrists, tug at his mouth. For perhaps a full minute it was an ambiguous sort of terror. He thought at first his wife's features were distorted because his own were.

He'd lost control over his features, especially his lips. He couldn't stop the twitching of his lips. But mercifully for a moment he was permitted to believe that the terror which he felt had simply communicated itself to his wife.

Then he saw that it was much more than that. She was feeling it, too. Her palms were pressed to her temples and she was staring past him at the slowly opening door of the hut.

The pattern never varied. It was always the same—a coldness, a fullness, a tightness, holding the muscles rigid, paralyzing the will to resist.

The nearness of a Venusian did something to the human brain that could not be explained by any of the known laws of nature. There were unknown laws, patterns dimly suspected to exist and laws which had almost been grasped and dragged out into the light.

But compared to that power, whatever it was, telepathy was like a tiny wax candle sputtering in the glow of a billion candle power light.

It was a power which could flatten a human body in a split second of time, flatten it as though by a blow from a gigantic mace. It was a power which no ordinary

human weapon could withstand, or ever hope to withstand. It could twist, maim, tear, rend, crush. It could move slantwise like a buzzsaw across a column of men; it could rip holes in the earth, it could pile up the dead in stiffening rows like cordwood—

Morley tried vainly to moisten his lips. The patient, his mind seemed to be saying, should be kept in a dark room and nutritent enemata administered. That, according to an old medical book he'd read once, was the prescribed treatment for—rabies. Never a recorded cure, in all the history of rabies, but the patient had to be fed, the agony had to be prolonged, in order to exhaust all the nonexistent possibilities of a cure.

The compact little energy weapon in Morley's clasp had never destroyed a Venusian. It never could destroy a Venusian. It was as useless as a "cure" for rabies.

But instinctively his hand had traveled under his begrimed oversuit, grasped the weapon, and drawn it forth. He knew he'd be caught up, mauled, twisted before he could blast. And if he were caught up with his work uncompleted, there could be no cure for a disease which had blotted out the sunlight for the entire human race. No cure—no cure—worse than rabies. *Slam!* An opening door closes, a leaf is torn from a book and perhaps there is a breath-taking instant when a man does what he can—

Goodbye, he thought. Goodbye darling, goodbye James Morley, Jr. Why did a man instinctively assume that his first-born would be a boy?

Morley suddenly saw that the door had swung so wide there was no longer a barrier between his straining eyes and the night without.

The form looming in the doorway conveyed an illusion of having laboriously impressed itself upon the sky. It was faintly rimmed with light, and the stafs which

glimmered on both sides of it seemed to be rushing together, as though its bulk had torn a rent in the warp-and-woof stuff of the physical universe.

Even in broad daylight the bulk of the Venusian would have blotted out the natural brilliant green of the mountainside up which it had come. Now it seemed to blot out more than the mountainside, seemed to catch at the starlight and distort the sky itself, so that the light-threaded firmament above and behind it reminded Morley of a collapsing shroud.

There was an awful instant when time seemed to miss a beat. Morley felt his fingers tighten on the blaster, felt his scalp tighten all over his head.

Then as in a dream from which he had been rudely awakened by something to which he could not give a name, he heard a ghostly faint fluttering behind him, and a voice said: "Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

Slowly Morley turned his head. As he did so the fluttering was resumed, and the door of the clock banged shut on a feathered mite!

Morley had noticed the clock hanging on the wall, but now he seemed to be staring at it through the wide, stationary eyes of a madman. A magical clock! Morley had heard of such things, gadgets which dated back to the middle years of the nineteenth century.

He had noticed this one in particular because weighted bellows under glass had always held a peculiar fascination for him. By the push of a wire given to the body of a bird it could be bent forward, the wings and tail raised, the beak opened.

The bulkiness in the doorway must have shared Morley's interest in the clock, for it crossed the hut so rapidly that a light-rimmed after-image appeared to hover in its wake.

There was a moment of silence while it stared at the clock, all of its malignancy humped together in a towering, overwhelming wave that could be felt in every part of the room.

Then, slowly, methodically, the Venusian began to dismantle the clock.

There was a metallic clatter, a ripping sound, and something that looked like the intestines of a robot gleamed for an instant between its scaly hands. Then the door behind which the cuckoo had taken refuge was torn from its hinges, and the pathetic mite was lifted out on a dangling filament, its neck distended, its white breast feathers flecked with grease.

The Venusian departed without uttering a sound. It simply swung about, recrossed the room, and went clumping out into the night, half the clock dangling from the amorphous limb-like structure which jutted from its breast.

After what seemed like an eternity the back door of the hut opened a crack and a familiar voice said: "I forgot to tell you, son, that I have a few solitary visitors. Now and again one of the critters will leave the line of march and come clumping up the mountainside. If you saw a mosquito across the room, and your thumb began to itch you'd cross the room on a sudden impulse, maybe, and smash it."

The door opened wider, and a rusty garden rake clattered against the jamb.

"But you wouldn't have to cross the room, son. You'd almost as soon as not, and if when you're raising your thumb a hand reaches out from the wall and says: 'Clasp me,' or the wallpaper turns from green to pink your interest shifts and there's time for inertia to set in. You become interested in the wallpaper, and the mosquito just doesn't get crushed."

The rake made a rasping sound on the floor. "Pawns. That clock was a pawn, and I've set other pawns out on the mountainside to protect my rook just in case one of the critters turns aside and starts up. I've been playing a game with them for more than thirty years now, son. It isn't often one of them gets as far as the hut."

A low chuckle came from the doorway. "Interested? You bet it was interested. A cuckoo clock is about the rarest mechanical gadget on Earth. Not many of 'em left, not one Venusian in fifty thousand has seen one—no, make that fifty million. And they do like to imitate things; they like to pull gadgets apart. There's just that little interval between impulse and inertia which has to be bridged."

"Good Lord!" Morley choked.

"It came in through the front door, didn't it? You came in through this door, I guess, or you'd have heard the birdie too. 'Cuckoo, cuckoo'—because just coming in through the front door activates the clock. You see, son, there's a photo-electric beam in the front door, and the poisonous critter brought the birdie out the instant it stepped into my parlor."

Morley wiped the sweat from his face. *He had all the needed, delicate parts, and freedom from fear, freedom from strain, the opportunity to work unmolested in a small, hastily improvised laboratory might well spell the difference between success and failure.*

Might? Would. And he wouldn't have to settle for four months now. He'd have all the time he needed to perfect the instrument.

The door made a rasping sound as it was thrown wide.

Traubel stumbled a little as he crossed the hut. He crossed to the washstand, poured out some water and started fumbling around for a cake of soap on the cluttered shelf where he kept his shaving kit, a few neces-

sary drugs, and a dog-eared calendar dating back to the late years of the twentieth century.

"I'm glad you and the missus are going to stay for a spell, son," he said. "You've no idea how lonely it gets up here when the crickets stop chirping, and the nights start getting longer. You see, son, I've been stone blind now going on eighteen years."

Death Sentence

by Isaac Asimov

Brand Gorla smiled uncomfortably, "These things exaggerate, you know."

"No, no, no!" The little man's albino-pink eyes snapped. "Dorlis was great when no human had ever entered the Vegan System. It was the capital of a Galactic Confederation greater than ours."

"Well, then, let's say that it was an ancient capital. I'll admit that and leave the rest to an archaeologist."

"Archaeologists are no use. What I've discovered needs a specialist in its own field. And you're on the Board."

Brand Gorla looked doubtful. He remembered Theor Realo in senior year—a little white misfit of a human who skulked somewhere in the background of his reminiscences. It had been a long time ago, but the albino had been queer. *That* was easy to remember. And he was still queer.

"I'll try to help," Brand said, "if you'll tell me what you want."

Theor watched intently, "I want you to place certain facts before the Board. Will you promise that?"

Brand hedged, "Even if I help you along, Theor, I'll have to remind you that I'm junior member of the Psychological Board. I haven't much influence."

"You must do your best. The facts will speak for themselves." The albino's hands were trembling.

"Go ahead." Brand resigned himself. The man was an old schoolfellow. You couldn't be *too* arbitrary about things.

Brand Gorla leaned back and relaxed. The light of Arcturus shone through the high ceiling windows, diffused and mellowed by the polarizing glass. Even this diluted version of sunlight was too much for the pink eyes of the other, and he shaded his eyes as he spoke.

"I've lived on Dorlis twenty-five years, Brand," he said; "I've poked into places no one today knew existed, and I've found things. Dorlis was the scientific and cultural capital of a civilization greater than ours. Yes it was, and particularly in psychology."

"Things in the past always seem greater." Brand condescended a smile. "There is a theorem to that effect which you'll find in any elementary text. Freshmen invariably call it the 'GOD theorem.' Stands for 'Good Old Days,' you know. But go on."

Theor frowned at the digression. He hid the beginning of a sneer. "You can always dismiss an uncomfortable fact by pinning a dowdy label to it. But tell me this. What do you know of Psychological Engineering?"

Brand shrugged, "No such thing. Anyway, not in the strict mathematical sense. All propaganda and advertising is a crude form of hit-and-miss Psych Engineering—and pretty effective sometimes. Maybe that's what you mean."

"Not at all. I mean actual experimentation, with masses of people, under controlled conditions, and over a period of years."

"Such things have been discussed. It's not feasible in practice. Our social structure couldn't stand much of it, and we don't know enough to set up effective controls."

Theor suppressed excitement. "But the ancients *did* know enough. And they *did* set up controls."

Brand considered phlegmatically. "Startling and interesting, but how do you know?"

"Because I found the documents relating to it." He paused breathlessly. "An entire planet, Brand. A complete world picked to suit, peopled with beings under strict control from every angle. Studied, and charted, and experimented upon. Don't you get the picture?"

Brand noted none of the usual stigmata of mental uncontrol. A closer investigation, perhaps—

He said evenly, "You must have been misled. It's thoroughly impossible. You can't control humans like that. Too many variables."

"And that's the point, Brand. They weren't humans."

"What?"

"They were robots, positronic robots. A whole world of them, Brand, with nothing to do but live and react and be observed by a set of psychologists that were *real* psychologists."

"That's mad!"

"I have proof—because that robot world still exists. The First Confederation went to pieces, but that robot world kept on going. It still exists."

"And how do you know?"

Theor Realo stood up, "Because I've been there these last five years!"

The Board Master threw his formal red-edged gown aside and reached into a pocket for a long, gnarled and decidedly unofficial cigar.

"Preposterous," he grunted, "and thoroughly insane."

"Exactly," said Brand, "and I can't spring it on the Board just like that. They wouldn't listen. I've got to get this across to you first, and then, if you can put your authority behind it—"

"Oh, nuts! I never heard anything as—Who is the fellow?"

Brand sighed, "A crank, I'll admit that. He was in my class at Arcturus U. and a crack-pot albino even then. Maladjusted as the devil, hipped on ancient history, and just the kind that gets an idea and goes through with it by plain, dumb digging. He's poked about in Dorlis for twenty-five years, he says. He's got the complete records of practically an entire civilization."

The Board Master puffed furiously. "Yeah, I know. In the telestat serials, the brilliant amateur always uncovers the great thing. The free lance. The lone wolf. Nuts! Have you consulted the Department of Archaeology?"

"Certainly. And the result was interesting. No one bothers with Dorlis. This isn't just ancient history, you see. It's a matter of fifteen thousand years. It's practically myth. Reputable archaeologists don't waste too much time with it. It's just the thing a book-struck layman with a single-track mind *would* uncover. After this, of course, if the business turns out right, Dorlis will become an archaeologists's paradise."

The Board Master screwed his homely face into an appalling grimace. "It's very unflattering to the ego. If there's any truth in all this, the so-called First Confederation must have had a grasp of psychology so far past ours as to make us out to be blithering imbeciles. Too, they'd have to build positronic robots that would be about seventy-five orders of magnitude above anything we've even blueprinted. Galaxy! Think of the mathematics involved."

"Look, sir. I've consulted just about everybody. I wouldn't bring this thing to you if I weren't certain that I had every angle checked. I went to Blak just about the first thing, and he's consultant mathematician to

United Robots. He says there's no limit to these things. Given the time, the money, and the *advance in psychology*—get that—robots like that could be built right now."

"What proof has he?"

"Who, Blak?"

"No, no! Your friend. The albino. You said he had papers."

"He has. I've got them here. He's got documents—and there's no denying their antiquity. I've had that checked every way from Sunday. I can't read them, of course. I don't know if anyone can, except Theor Realo."

"That's stacking the deck, isn't it? We have to take his say-so."

"Yes, in a way. But he doesn't claim to be able to decipher more than portions. He says it is related to ancient Centaurian, and I've put linguists to work on it. It can be cracked and if his translation isn't accurate, we'll know about it."

"All right. Let's see it."

Brand Gorla brought out the plastic-mounted documents. The Board Master tossed them aside and reached for the translation. Smoke billowed as he read.

"Humph," was his comment. "Further details are on Dorlis, I suppose."

"Theor claims that there are some hundred to two hundred tons of blueprints altogether, on the brain plan of the positronic robots alone. They're still there in the original vault. But that's the least of it. He's been on the robot world itself. He's got photocasts, teletype recordings, all sorts of details. They're not integrated, and obviously the work of a layman who knows next to nothing about psychology. Even so, he's managed to get enough data to prove pretty conclusively that the world he was on wasn't . . . uh . . . natural."

"You've got that with you, too."

"All of it. Most of its on microfilm, but I've brought the projector. Here are your eyepieces."

An hour later, the Board Master said, "I'll call a Board meeting tomorrow and push this through."

Brand Gorla grinned tightly, "We'll send a commission to Dorlis?"

"When," said the Board Master dryly, "and if we can get an appropriation out of the University for such an affair. Leave this material with me for the while, please. I want to study it a little more."

Theoretically, the Government Department of Science and Technology exercises administrative control over all scientific investigation. Actually, however, the pure research groups of the large universities are thoroughly autonomous bodies, and, as a general rule, the government does not care to dispute that. But a general rule is not necessarily a universal rule.

And so, although the Board Master scowled and fumed and swore, there was no way of refusing Wynne Murry an interview. To give Murry his complete title, he was under-secretary in charge of psychology, psychopathy and mental technology. And he was a pretty fair psychologist in his own right.

So the Board Master might glare, but that was all.

Secretary Murry ignored the glare cheerfully. He rubbed his long chin against the grain and said, "It amounts to a case of insufficient information. Shall we put it that way?"

The Board Master said frigidly, "I don't see what information you want. The government's say in university appropriations is purely advisory, and in this case, I might say, the advice is unwelcome."

Murry shrugged, "I have no quarrel with the ap-

propriation. But you're not going to leave the planet without government permit. That's where the insufficient information comes in."

"There is no information other than we've given you."

"But things have leaked out. All this is childish and rather unnecessary secrecy."

The old psychologist flushed. "Secrecy! If you don't know the academic way of life, I can't help you. Investigations, especially those of major importance, aren't and can't be, made public, until definite progress has been made. When we get back, we'll send you copies of whatever papers we publish."

Murry shook his head, "Uh-uh. Not enough. You're going to Dorlis, aren't you?"

"We've informed the Department of Science of that."

"Why?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because it's big, or the Board Master wouldn't go himself. What's this about an older civilization and a world of robots?"

"Well, then, you know."

"Only vague notions, we've been able to scabble up. I want the details."

"There are none that we know now. We won't know until we're on Dorlis."

"Then I'm going with you."

"What!"

"You see, I want the details, too."

"Why?"

"Ah," Murry unfolded his legs and stood up, "now *you're* asking the questions. It's no use, now. I know that the universities aren't keen on government supervision, and I know that I can expect no willing help from *any* academic source. But, by Arcturus, I'm going to get help this time, and I don't care how you fight it. Your

expedition is going nowhere, unless I go with you—representing the government.”

Dorlis, as a world, is not impressive. Its importance to Galactic economy is nil, its position far off the great trade routes, its natives backward and unenlightened, its history obscure. And yet somewhere in the heaps of rubble that clutter an ancient world, there is obscure evidence of an influx of flame and destruction that destroyed the Dorlis of an earlier day—the greater capital of a greater Federation.

And somewhere in that rubble, men of a newer world poked and probed and tried to understand.

The Board Master shook his head and then pushed back his grizzling hair. He hadn't shaved in a week.

“The trouble is,” he said, “that we have no point of reference. The language can be broken, I suppose, but nothing can be done with the notation.”

“I think a great deal has been done.”

“Stabs in the dark! Guessing games based on the translations of your albino friend. I won't base any hopes on that.”

Brand said, “Nuts! You spent two years on the Nimian Anomaly, and so far only two months on this, which happens to be a hundred thousand times the job. It's something else that's getting you.” He smiled grimly. “It doesn't take a psychologist to see that the government man is in your hair.”

The Board Master bit the end off a cigar and spat it four feet. He said slowly, “There are three things about that mule-headed idiot that make me sore. First, I don't like government interference. Second, I don't like a stranger sniffing about when we're on top of the biggest thing in the history of psychology. Third, what in the Galaxy does he want? *What is he after?*”

"I don't know."

"What *should* he be after? Have you thought of it at all?"

"No. Frankly, I don't care. I'd ignore him if I were you."

"You would," said the Board Master violently. "You would! You think the government's entrance into this affair need only be ignored. I suppose you know that this Murry calls himself a psychologist?"

"I know that."

"And I suppose you know he's been displaying a devouring interest in all that we've been doing."

"That, I should say, would be natural."

"Oh! And you know further—" His voice dropped with startling suddenness. "All right, Murry's at the door. Take it easy."

Wynne Murry grinned a greeting, but the Board Master nodded unsmilingly.

"Well, sir," said Murry bluffly, "do you know I've been on my feet for forty-eight hours? You've *got* something here. Something big."

"Thank you."

"No, no. I'm serious. The robot world exists."

"Did you think it didn't?"

The secretary shrugged amiably. "One has a certain natural skepticism. What are your future plans?"

"Why do you ask?" The Board Master grunted his words as if they were being squeezed out singly.

"To see if they jibe with my own."

"And what are your own?"

The secretary smiled. "No, no. You take precedence. How long do you intend staying here?"

"As long as it takes to make a fair beginning on the documents involved."

"That's no answer. What do you mean by a fair beginning?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. It might take years."

"Oh, damnation."

The Board Master raised his eyebrows and said nothing.

The secretary looked at his nails. "I take it you know the location of this robot world."

"Naturally. Theor Realo was there. His information up to now has proven very accurate."

"That's right. The albino. Well, why not go there?"

"Go there! Impossible."

"May I ask why?"

"Look," said the Board Master with restrained impatience, "you're not here by our invitation, and we're not asking you to dictate our course of action, but just to show you that I'm not looking for a fight, I'll give you a little metaphorical treatment of our case. Suppose we were presented with a huge and complicated machine, composed of principles and materials of which we knew next to nothing. It is so vast we can't even make out the relationship of the parts, let alone the purpose of the whole. Now, would you advise me to begin attacking the delicate mysterious moving parts of the machine with a detonating ray before I know what it's all about?"

"I see your point, of course, but you're becoming a mystic. The metaphor is far-fetched."

"Not at all. These positronic robots were constructed along lines we know nothing of as yet and were intended to follow lines with which we are entirely unacquainted. About the only thing we know is that the robots were put aside in complete isolation, to work out their destiny by themselves. To ruin that isolation would be to ruin the experiment. If we go there in a

body, introducing new unforeseen factors, inducing unintended reactions, everything is ruined. The littlest disturbance—”

“Poppycock! Theor Realo has already gone there.”

The Board Master lost his temper suddenly. “Don’t you suppose I know that? Do you suppose it would ever have happened if that cursed albino hadn’t been an ignorant fanatic without any knowledge of psychology at all? Galaxy knows what the idiot has done in the way of damage.”

There was a silence. The secretary clicked his teeth with a thoughtful fingernail. “I don’t know . . . I don’t know. But I’ve got to find out. And I can’t wait years.”

He left, and the Board Master turned seethingly to Brand, “And now what’s he getting at? And how are we going to stop him from going to the robot world if he wants to?”

“I don’t see how he can go if we don’t let him. *He doesn’t* head the expedition.”

“Oh, doesn’t he? *That’s* what I was about to tell you just before he came in. Ten ships of the fleet have landed on Dorlis since we arrived.”

“*What!*”

“Just that.”

“But what for?”

“That, my boy, is what I don’t understand, either.”

“Mind if I drop in?” said Wynne Murry, pleasantly, and Theor Realo looked up in sudden anxiety from the papers that lay in hopeless disarray on the desk before him.

“Come in. I’ll clear off a seat for you.” The albino hustled the mess off one of the two chairs in a state of twittering nerves.

Murry sat down and swung one long leg over the

other. "Are you assigned a job here, too?" He nodded at the desk.

Theor shook his head and smiled feebly. Almost automatically, he brushed the papers together in a heap and turned them face down.

In the months since he had returned to Dorlis with a hundred psychologists of various degrees of renown, he had felt himself pushed farther and farther from the center of things. There was room for him no longer. Except to answer questions on the actual state of things upon the robot world, which he alone had visited, he played no part. And even there, he detected, or seemed to detect, anger that *he* should have gone, and not a competent scientist.

It was a thing to be resented. Yet, somehow, it had always been like that.

"Pardon me." He had let Murry's next remark slip. The secretary repeated, "I say it's surprising you're *not* put to work then. You made the original discovery, didn't you?"

"Yes," the albino brightened. "But it went out of my hands. It got beyond me."

"You were on the robot world, though."

"That was a mistake, they tell me. I might have ruined everything."

Murry grimaced. "What really gets them, I guess, is that you've got a lot of first-hand dope that they didn't. Don't let their fancy titles fool you into thinking you're a nobody. A layman with common sense is better than a blind specialist. You and I—I'm a layman, too, you know—have to stand up for our rights. Here, have a cigarette."

"I don't sm— I'll take one, thank you." The albino felt himself warming to the long-bodied man opposite. He

turned the papers face upward again, and lit up, bravely but uncertainly.

"And you *were* on this robot world, that is the main point."

"Five years." Theor spoke carefully, skirting around urgent coughs.

"Would you answer a few questions about the world?"

"I suppose so. That's all they ever ask me about. But hadn't you better ask *them*? They've probably got it all worked out now." He blew the smoke as far from himself as possible.

Murry said, "Frankly, they haven't even begun and I want the information without benefit of confusing psychological translation. First of all, what kind of people—or things—are these robots? You haven't a photocast of one of them, have you?"

"Well, no. I didn't like to take 'casts of them. But they're not things. They're *people*!"

"No? Do they look like—people?"

"Yes—mostly. Outside, anyway. I brought some microscopic studies of the cellular structure that I got hold of. The Board Master has them. They're different inside, you know, greatly simplified. But you'd never know that. They're interesting—and nice."

"Are they simpler than the other life of the planet?"

"Oh, no. Its a very primitive planet. And . . . and," he was interrupted by a spasm of coughing and crushed the cigarette to death as unobtrusively as possible. "They've got a protoplasmic base, you know. I don't think they have the slightest idea they're robots."

"No. I don't suppose they would have. What about their science?"

"I don't know. I never got a chance to see. And everything was so different. I guess it would take an expert to understand."

"Did they have machines?"

The albino looked surprised. "Well, of course. A good many of all sorts."

"Large cities?"

"Yes!"

The secretary's eyes grew thoughtful. "And you like them. Why?"

Theor Realo was brought up sharply. "I don't know. They were just likeable. We got along. They didn't bother me so. It's nothing I can put my finger on. Maybe it's because I have it so hard getting along back home, and they weren't as difficult as real people."

"They were more friendly?"

"No-no. Can't say so. They never quite accepted me. I was a stranger, didn't know their language at first—all that. But"—he looked up with sudden brightness—"I understood them better. I could tell what they were thinking better. I—But I don't know why."

"Hm-m-m. Well—another cigarette? No? I've got to be walloping the pillow now. It's getting late. How about a twosome at golf tomorrow? I've worked up a little course. It'll do. Come on out. The exercise will put hair on your chest."

He grinned and left.

He mumbled one sentence to himself: "It looks like a death sentence"—and whistled thoughtfully as he passed along to his own quarters.

He repeated the phrase to himself when he faced the Board Master the next day, with the sash of office about his waist. He did not sit down.

"Again?" said the Board Master, wearily.

"Again!" assented the secretary. "But real business this time. I may have to take over direction of your expedition."

"What! Impossible, sir! I will listen to no such proposition."

"I have my authority." Wynne Murry presented the metalloid cylinder that snapped open at a flick of the thumb. "I have full powers and full discretion as to their use. It is signed, as you will observe, by the chairman of the Congress of the Federation."

"So—But why?" The Board Master, by an effort, breathed normally. "Short of arbitrary tyranny, is there a reason?"

"A very good one, sir. All along we have viewed this expedition from different angles. The Department of Science and Technology views the robot world not from the point of view of a scientific curiosity, but from the standpoint of its interference with the peace of the Federation. I don't think you've ever stopped to consider the danger inherent in this robot world."

"None that I can see. It is thoroughly isolated and thoroughly harmless."

"How can you know?"

"From the very nature of the experiment," shouted the Board Master angrily. "The original planners wanted as nearly a completely closed system as possible. Here they are, just as far off the trade routes as possible, in a thinly populated region of space. The whole idea was to have the robots develop free of interference."

Murry smiled. "I disagree with you there. Look, the whole trouble with you is that you're a theoretical man. You look at things the way they ought to be and I, a practical man, look at things as they are. No experiment can be set up and allowed to run indefinitely under its own power. It is taken for granted that somewhere there is at least an observer who watches and *modifies* as circumstances warrant."

"Well?" said the Board Master stolidly.

"Well, the observers in this experiment, the original psychologists of Dorlis, passed away with the First Confederation, and for fifteen thousand years the experiment has proceeded by itself. Little errors have added up and become big ones and introduced alien factors which induced still other errors. It's a geometric progression. And there's been no one to halt it."

"Pure hypothesis."

"Maybe. But you're interested only in the robot world, and I've got to think of the entire Federation."

"And just what possible danger can the robot world be to the Federation? I don't know *what* in Arcturus you're driving at, man."

Murry sighed. "I'll be simple, but don't blame me if I sound melodramatic. The Federation hasn't had any internal warfare for centuries. What will happen if we come into contact with these robots?"

"Are you afraid of one world?"

"Could be. What about their science? Robots can do funny things sometimes."

"What science can they have? They're not mental-electricity supermen. They're weak protoplasmic creatures, a poor imitation of actual humanity, built around a positronic brain adjusted to a set of simplified human psychological laws. If the word 'robot' is scaring you—"

"No, it isn't, but I've talked to Theor Realo. He's the only one who's seen them, you know."

The Board Master cursed silently and fluently. It came of letting a weak-minded freak of a layman get underfoot where he could babble and do harm.

He said, "We've got Realo's full story, and we've evaluated it fully and capably. I assure you no harm exists in them. The experiment is so thoroughly academic. I wouldn't spend two days on it, if it weren't for the broad scope of the thing. From what we see, the whole

idea was to build up a positronic brain containing modifications of one or two of the fundamental axioms. We haven't worked out the details, but they must be minor, as it was the first experiment of this nature ever tried, and even the great mythical psychologists of that day had to progress stepwise. Those robots, I tell you, are neither supermen nor beasts. I assure you—as a psychologist.”

“Sorry! I'm a psychologist, too. A little more rule-of-thumb, I'm afraid. That's all. But even little modifications! Take the general spirit of combativeness. That isn't the scientific term, but I've not patience for that. You know what I mean. We humans used to be combative. But it's being bred out of us. A stable political and economic system doesn't encourage the waste energy of combat. It's not a survival factor. But suppose the robots are combative. Suppose as the result of a wrong turn during the millennia they've been unwatched, they've become far more combative than ever their first makers intended. They'd be uncomfortable things to be with.”

“And suppose all the stars in the Galaxy became novae at the same time. Let's *really* start worrying.”

“And there's another point.” Murry ignored the other's heavy sarcasm. “Theor Realo liked those robots. He liked robots better than he likes real people. He felt that he fitted there, and we all know he's been a bad misfit in his own world.”

“And what,” asked the Board Master, “is the significance of that?”

“You don't see it?” Wynne Murry lifted his eyebrows. “Theor Realo likes those robots because he is *like* them, obviously. I'll guarantee right now that a complete psychic analysis of Theor Realo will show a modifica-

tion of several fundamental axioms, and the same ones as in the robots.

"And," the secretary drove on without a pause, "Theor Realo worked for a quarter of a century to prove a point, when all science would have laughed him to death if they had known about it. There's fanaticism there; good, honest, *inhuman* perseverance. *Those robots are probably like that!*"

"You're advancing no logic. You're arguing like a maniac, like a moon-struck idiot."

"I don't need strict mathematical proof. Reasonable doubt is sufficient. I've got to protect the Federation. Look, it is reasonable, you know. The psychologists of Dorlis weren't as super as all that. They have to advance stepwise, as you yourself pointed out. Their humanoids—let's not call them robots—were only imitations of human beings and they couldn't be good ones. Humans possess certain very, *very* complicated reaction systems—things like social consciousness, and a tendency toward the establishment of ethical systems; and more ordinary things like chivalry, generosity, fair play and so on, that simply can't possibly be duplicated. I don't think those humanoids can have them. But they *must* have perseverance, which practically implies stubbornness and combativeness, if my notion on Theor Realo holds good. Well, if their science is anywheres at all, then I don't want to have them running loose in the Galaxy, if our numbers are a thousand or million times theirs. And I don't intend to permit them to do so!"

The Board Master's face was rigid. "What are your immediate intentions?"

"As yet undecided. But I think I am going to organize a small-scale landing on the planet."

"Now wait." The old psychologist was up and around the desk. He seized the secretary's elbow. "Are you quite

certain you know what you're doing? The potentialities in this massive experiment are beyond any possible precalculation by you or me. You can't know what you're destroying."

"I know. Do you think I enjoy what I'm doing? This isn't a hero's job. I'm enough of a psychologist to want to know what's going on, but I've been sent here to protect the Federation and to the best of my ability I intend doing it—and a dirty job it is. But I can't help it."

"You can't have thought it out. What can you know of the insight it will give us into the basic ideas of psychology? This will amount to a fusion of two Galactic systems, that will send us to heights that will make up in knowledge and power a million times the amount of harm the robots could ever do, if they were metal-electricity supermen."

The secretary shrugged. "Now you're the one that is playing with faint possibilities."

"Listen, I'll make a deal. Blockade them. Isolate them with your ships. Mount guards. But don't touch them. Give us more time. Give us a chance. You must!"

"I've thought of that. But I would have to get Congress to agree to that. It would be expensive, you know."

The Board Master flung himself into his chair in wild impatience. "What kind of expense are you talking about? Do you realize the nature of the repayment if we succeed?"

Murry considered; then, with a half smile, "What if they develop interstellar travel?"

The Board Master said quickly, "Then I'll withdraw my objections."

The secretary rose, "I'll have it out with Congress."

Brand Gorla's face was carefully emotionless as he

watched the Board Master's stooped back. The cheerful pep talks to the available members of the expedition lacked meat, and he listened to them impatiently.

He said, "What are we going to do now?"

The Board Master's shoulders twitched and he didn't turn. "I've sent for Theor Realo. That little fool left for the Eastern Continent last week—"

"Why?"

The older man blazed at the interruption. "How can I understand anything that freak does? Don't you see that Murry's right? He's a psychic abnormality. We had no business leaving him unwatched. If I had ever thought of looking at him twice, I wouldn't have. He's coming back now, though, and he's going to stay back." His voice fell to a mumble. "Should have been back two hours ago."

"It's an impossible position, sir," said Brand, flatly.

"Think so?"

"Well—Do *you* think Congress will stand for an indefinite patrol off the robot world? It runs into money and average Galactic citizens aren't going to see it as worth the taxes. The psychological equations degenerate into the axioms of common sense. In fact, I don't see why Murry agreed to consult Congress."

"Don't you?" The Board Master finally faced his junior. "Well, the fool considers himself a psychologist, Galaxy help us, and that's his weak point. He flatters himself that he doesn't want to destroy the robot world in his heart, but that it's the good of the Federation that requires it. And he'll jump at any reasonable compromise. Congress won't agree to it indefinitely, you don't have to point that out for me." He was talking quietly, patiently. "But I will ask for ten years, two years, six months—as much as I can get. I'll get something. In that time, we'll learn new facts about the world. Somehow we'll

strengthen our case and renew the agreement when it expires. We'll save the project yet."

There was a short silence and the Board Master added slowly and bitterly, "And that's where Theor Realo plays a vital part."

Brand Gorla watched silently, and waited. The Board Master said, "On that one point Murry saw what we didn't. Realo is a psychological cripple, and is our real clue to the whole affair. If we study him, we'll have a rough picture of what the robot is like, distorted of course, since his environment has been a hostile, unfriendly one. But we can make allowance for that, estimate his nature in a—Ahh, I'm tired of the whole subject."

The signal box flashed, and the Board Master sighed. "Well, he's here. All right, Gorla, sit down, you make me nervous. Let's take a look at him."

Theor Realo came through the door like a comet and brought himself to a panting halt in the middle of the floor. He looked from one to the other with weak, peering eyes.

"How did all this happen?"

"All what?" said the Board Master coldly. "Sit down. I want to ask you some questions."

"No. You first answer *me*."

"*Sit down!*"

Realo sat. His eyes were brimming. "They're going to destroy the robot world."

"Don't worry about that."

"But you said they could if the robots discovered interstellar travel. You said so. You fool. Don't you see—" He was choking.

The Board Master frowned uneasily. "Will you calm down and talk sense?"

The albino gritted his teeth and forced the words out. "But they'll *have* interstellar travel before long."

And the two psychologists shot toward the little man. "What!"

"Well . . . well, what do you think?" Realo sprang upward with all the fury of desperation. "Did you think I landed in a desert or in the middle of an ocean and explored a world all by myself? Do you think life is a story book? I was captured as soon as I landed and taken to a big city. At least, I think it was a big city. It was different from our kind. It had—But I won't tell you."

"Never mind the city," shrieked the Board Master. "You were captured. Go ahead."

"They studied *me*. They studied my machine. And then, one night, I left, to tell the Federation. They didn't know I left. They didn't want to me to leave." His voice broke. "And I would have stayed as soon as not, but the Federation had to know."

"Did you tell them anything about your ship?"

"How could I? I'm no mechanic. I don't know the theory or construction. But I showed them how to work the controls and let them look at the motors. That's all."

Brand Gorla said, to himself mostly, "Then they'll never get it. That isn't enough."

The albino's voice raised itself in sudden shrieking triumph. "Oh, yes, they will. I know them. They're machines, you know. They'll work on that problem. And they'll work. And they'll work. And they'll never quit. And they'll get it. They got enough out of me. I'll *bet* they got enough."

The Board Master looked long, and turned away—wearily. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because you took my world away from me. I discovered it—by myself—all by myself. And after I had

done all the real work, and invited you in, you threw me out. All you had for me was complaints that I had landed on the world and might have ruined everything by interference. Why should I tell you? Find out for yourselves if you're so wise—that you could afford to kick me around."

The Board Master thought bitterly, "Misfit! Inferiority complex! Persecution mania! Nice! It all fits in now that we've bothered to take our eyes off the horizon and see what was under our nose. And now it's all ruined."

He said, "All right, Realo, we all lose. Go away."

Brand Gorla said tightly, "All over? Really all over?"

The Board Master answered, "Really all over. The original experiment as such is over. The distortions created by Realo's visit will easily be large enough to make the plans we are studying here a dead language. And besides—Murry is right. If they have interstellar travel, they're dangerous."

Realo was shouting, "But you're not going to destroy them. You can't destroy them. They haven't hurt anyone."

There was no answer, and he raved on, "I'm going back. I'll warn them. They'll be prepared. I'll warn them."

He was backing toward the door, his thin white hair bristling, his red-rimmed eyes bulging.

The Board Master did not move to stop him when he dashed out.

"Let him go. It was *his* lifetime. I don't care any more."

Theor Realo smashed toward the robot world at an acceleration that was half choking him.

Somewhere ahead was the dust-speck of an isolated world with artificial imitations of humanity, struggling along in an experiment that had died. Struggling blind-

ly toward a new goal of interstellar travel that was to be their death sentence.

He was heading toward that world, toward the same city in which he had been "studied" the first time. He remembered it well. Its name was the first words of their language he had learned.

New York!

This Is the Land

by Nelson Bond

I wonder what it feels like to be dead?

It is cold; that I know. Our father's flesh was cold when at the last we bore him, as he had enjoined, up the long winding ramps and lifting inclines; through the great caverns and the massive locks that, as we left them, wheezed asthmatic sighs into the wider corridors beyond; out past the tangled webs of flame-scorched steel and crumbled stone to the vast silence of the bleak outside.

There in the hollow of a cratered plain, where each unlevel thing etched shadows sharp and jet against the fierce white fury of the sands, we scratched for him a final resting place. And there, as he had bade, we buried him. Despite the searing sunlight, he was cold. His flesh was cold; so were those lips and eyes that ever had been warm with kindness.

We were four who bore our father on his last journey. The others all were younger than myself. With staring wonder and a speechless awe they gaped about them at the strange Outside. They felt, I think, a troubling sort of dread.

But I felt more, for I had read the books. And so I knew a sorrow and regret. For in the old writings I had voyaged here before, had seen this land as it had used to be. In my mind's roaming I had looked upon the fields of rippling grass, had seen the rainbow myriads of

flowers curtseying and dancing in the summer breeze, had glimpsed the swift, heart-stopping flight of birds curving like gaudy darts across the sky to light and sway, sure-footed, rich with song, upon the frothing boughs of green-gowned trees.

But now all this was gone. The earth was bare. No brooks ran purling through these bitter wastes. Here were no pastures, forests, meadowlands. Only the harsh, raw tegument of earth remained. Like gaunt, bleached skulls of stone, bare rocks upthrust from sterile dunes of sand. Dried beds of vanished streams carved meaningless deep symbols in the plain. And overhead, a huge, sky-quartering sun burned down in naked fury on a crust split with great scars, pockmarked with detritus, and seamed with scabs of metal molten, then congealed.

All, all was silence. No wind stirred the waste, no sound of nature whispered nature's dirge. And no bird sang.

*O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing . . .*

*If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power . . .*

*O wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?*

This was the sort of song they used to sing.

"It will not last forever, our imprisonment." Thus said my father once. "Now we are forced to dwell beneath the earth, a helpless race of new-world troglodytes. Here we must live because we have no choice. But in the

great, wise fullness of God's time, you will go forth again one day. One day again there will be green on earth. One day again, grant God, there will be life. . . ."

"It is finished?" asked the youngest of my brothers. The grave was dug, our father placed therein; the last slow shovelful of sifting sand had filled the fresh scar on oft-wounded earth. The mound already blended with the plain. I shook my head.

"Not yet," I said. "Not yet." I opened the volume I had brought Outside. The straight black lines of printing marched in bold relief against the clean bone-whiteness of the page. "We are to read the book, our father said. Within it, he has marked the passages."

My brothers bowed their heads, as had been taught. I read the words to them, and to the mound.

*By the waters of Babylon
There we sat down, yea, we wept,
When we remembered Zion.*

You will not easily believe these things (my father said), but they are true. They were written in the books for you to read. Men lie, but books do not. Men cheat, but pictures tell the truth. In the books you will find pictures of the world which we had built.

We had great cities, dotting all the earth. Cities with buildings reaching to the sky, spires of stone and glass and shining steel. They glowed with life by day and light by night; beneath the rooftops of their countless homes mankind laid plans for great accomplishments, or privately dreamed dreams of new success and happiness.

We were a race of moonstruck engineers, of work-ants who builded as we dreamed. Our wide, long high-

ways spanned the miles between our busiest hives; our bridges hurtled rivers; if there were mountains standing in our way we bored a die-straight passage through their hearts.

Giddy with knowledge, overwhelmed with pride, we had subjected nature to our needs. Our swift trains crossed wide continents on shining rails, our ocean-going vessels were man-made islands. The air was our domain. Nature herself had made no bird so powerful as those sky-giants in which we dared not just the clouds, but the thin air above the atmosphere.

There is too much to tell; I will not try. But if you can, imagine two billion restless souls bustling about in never-ending search for knowledge, greater luxury—always the newer, finer, larger thing. That will give you some idea of how we lived. The world itself was not enough for us. In my young manhood, eyes turned toward the stars. The first experimental rockets had been launched. It was believed by every thinking man that within twenty years, or more or less, Earth's children would set foot upon the moon.

All the old foes of man—save one—we had subdued. Famine and poverty we held in check. The elements were harnessed to our will: earth, fire, air and water bowed before our scientific cunning and our skill. In spotless halls of healing we conspired to restrain the ravages of plague and pestilence; in the last double decade of our greatness we had lengthened man's life-span more than thirty years. Thus we had checked all mankind's greatest foes. Save one. That was man himself.

We had probed nature's secrets. But one thing we had not learned. We had not learned humility. We had not learned to live together.

There were three wars, each greater than the last, each longer than the one preceding it. The first was fought in

the old-fashioned way: man against man, brute force against brute force. But there were innovations. At its end, for the first time we dipped into our new arsenal of scientific lore. We pitted steel against weak flesh and blood; the clash of sword on shield was drowned beneath the roar of long-range guns and rumbling tanks. We fought with gas and flame; into the air we hurled our early, awkward birds of prey. This was the last great battle of the brutes.

The second was a laboratory war. Each side had its armies, but the decisive battles were not waged in the field. The victories were won in tiny rooms where men drew diagrams and plotted formulae. Man-governed seacraft had no chance against robot-controlled projectiles of destruction. It was a war of rockets, radar, reason. The hand of death fell heaviest on those who bore no arms and wore no uniforms. Its prelude was a shrill, hysterical voice screaming wild threats around the world on unseen wires of electric force; its curtain was a greasy pall of smoke spreading a fungus canopy across the wreckage of a city. This was the last great battle of the people.

The third war was the strangest war of all, because most fighters in its ranks did not know that they had been conscripted. It was a war of minds and of ideas, of overtones and psychic influence. It was fought with phrases, spoken and implied, with arguments and coldly chosen words. It was a bloodless war—if that war can be called bloodless which leaves its wounds only upon the hearts and minds of men. It was the most deadly of the three great wars because it took its toll of all mankind: the rich, the poor, the humble and the proud; the old, the young, the weak ones and the strong; inexorably and indiscriminately, alike.

For years no man encountered sudden, brutal death

upon a battleground. But no man knew a complete happiness. Forever there were strife and bickering, troubling disquiet and a never ending fear. Uncertainty and doubt were the weapons of this war, furrowed brows its chevrons, sick hearts its wound-stripes. This was the last great battle of the minds.

The final act was not a war at all. Rather, it was the inevitable consequence of that dejection into which the third, the war of nerves, had plunged mankind. It was a last wild gesture of despair. It was race suicide impelled by years of dread, achieved in seconds of fury. Somewhere a finger pressed a button, a contact closed. And in an instant, earth and sky were a ball of flame. This was the last great battle of mankind. . . .

*"I will utterly consume all things
From off the land," saith the Lord.
"I will consume man and beast;
I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the
fishes of the sea,
And the stumblingblocks with the wicked;
And I will cut off men from off the land,"
Saith the Lord.*

I will tell you how it was (my father said), that we were spared.

In that now long-gone day, I was a scientist. With a handful of my fellows I worked in these caverns carefully concealed beneath the surface of the earth. Ours was a very furtive enterprise—"top secret" was the phrase used in those days to describe the nature of our work. You have seen the machines; you know that which we studied. The atom, and its fearsome potentialities.

There were eight of us here on the Day of Death. Six were men, two women. I was the youngest; the others

have long since gone. Our laboratories were well-equipped, stocked with food supplies for indeterminate lengths of time, carefully calculated to be self-sustaining in such stores as water and the precious air of life. Because we worked so far beneath the surface, our air supply was artificial. Further, we had a series of buffering locks preventing leakage to the corridors.

It was this safety measure that spared us. To our great depth and isolation, to those shielding chambers of steel, we are indebted for our lives. For when the Fire came, and after it the great emptiness, our caverns shook and trembled—but endured.

You know what happened. It is not enough merely to say it was the hydrogen bomb. That is a specious explanation, and one which is, at best, guesswork. For all we know, the spark may have been created by the fission of some entirely different element. We have no way of knowing, now, with what forces our enemy experimented.

All we do know is that someone blundered. Someone failed to take into account the fact that earth's atmosphere, the breath of life itself, was one-fifth comprised of oxygen, the greatest supporter of combustion known. When that first spark unleashed its chain reaction—well, we do not know. But in the space of seconds everything that crept or walked or flew on the Outside was ended. The conquered and the conquerors alike, the dreamers and the clods too dull to dream, were motes in one brief flame that filled the sky an instant—until earth's envelope of atmosphere was gone, and the bleak cold of interstellar space moved in to claim the globe which it had spawned.

The rest I need not tell you; you have the records. In them we have set forth the history of our subterranean life. You know how through the creeping years we lived;

how we grew produce hydroponically to sustain life, how we continued our research, striving ever to find a way of restoring to earth its envelope of air, how here below the surface you came into being—pathetic offspring of a dwindling few who dared not think of earth without some hope without some semblance of its former self to carry on the work we had begun.

All this was years ago; now I am told. The others, one by one, have gone to rest. All, all are gone, and I am left alone, last of the elders, last of those futile few who walked unscathed from that celestial pyre. Soon I must go; like them, I would be borne to the Outside, there at the end to have my ashes mingle with the dust of that mankind of which I was a part.

But when I go, you must not grieve my loss. Particularly, you must not give up hope. It will not last forever, our imprisonment. Now we are forced to dwell beneath the earth, a helpless race of new-world troglodytes. Here we must live because we have no choice. But in the great, wise fullness of God's time, you will go forth again one day. One day again there will be green on earth. One day again, grant God, there will be life. This is the land—and you are its inheritors.

*I will praise thee, for I am fearfully and wonder-
fully made;
Marvellous are thy works;
And that my soul knoweth right well.
My substance was not hid from thee
When I was made in secret
And curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the
earth.*

I closed the book, my brothers raised their heads.
"It is finished?" asked the youngest. I nodded. We left

the mound. In the skies, where the sun was not, against the jet of space the stars burned with a tiny, diamond pain. Slowly we left the Outside, passed through the empty caverns and the sighing locks, down the long ramps and tortuous inclines, to the smug haven in the bowels of earth which is our lonely empire.

There I dispatched the others to their tasks. Our father said the efforts must go on. I am the oldest, it devolves on me henceforth to make the plans—and the decisions.

Some little while I sat in brooding thought. Then I arose and made my daily rounds. I saw once more the vats and crucibles, the laboratories where my brothers work. To the broadcasting room I went at last. This was a routine that must not be ignored. "Elsewhere on earth," my father oft had said, "there may be other caves. Within them other men may live and, like ourselves, strain to make contact with their own lost kind." I pulsed a signal to the silent world. The world, as always, gave back no reply.

So, at the last, I came back to this room. It was my father's room; here are the books in which he read, the books in which he wrote. Here in thin lines upon time-faded sheets he has inscribed the swan-song of mankind. And here, today, I have appended this—my tribute to his memory.

But those that wait upon the Lord, they shall inherit the earth.

So it is written; so the father told. But—is it worth it? Is it worth our while to seek and strive to gain new foothold on an earth sheared bare of loveliness and warmth? What if one day again the earth be green? Will it be home to us who were not born of it? What though we people earth once more, rebuild its cities, pick up

again the thwarted dreams of man and carry his ambitions to the stars? Will it have any meaning to us, any joy?

I think not. And I think my father erred in bidding we must carry on his work. Now he is gone, life holds for us no purpose. We who inherit hold as valueless the bequest that our dying father left.

Therefore some moments ago I touched the switch; the master switch that governs the controls that feed my robot brothers with false life. Now they stand silent at their silent posts, motionless tributes to man's last, great effort to perpetuate his kind. A race of metal images of man. It is too bad there were no children born of those sterile eight who outlived earth's last day.

Now, in a moment, I shall touch the switch upon my breast; the switch that gives me life. Then I, too, shall be silent with the rest.

I wonder what it feels like to be dead?

Ylla

by Ray Bradbury

They had a house of crystal pillars on the planet Mars by the edge of an empty sea, and every morning you could see Mrs. K eating the golden fruits that grew from the crystal walls, or cleaning the house with handfuls of magnetic dust which, taking all dirt with it, blew away on the hot wind. Afternoons, when the fossil sea was warm and motionless, and the wine trees stood stiff in the yard, and the little distant Martian bone-town was all enclosed, and no one drifted out their doors, you could see Mr. K himself in his room, reading from a metal book with raised hieroglyphs over which he brushed his hand, as one might play a harp. And from the book, as his fingers stroked, a voice sang, a soft, ancient voice, which told tales of when the sea was red steam on the shore and ancient man had carried clouds of metal insects and electric spiders into battle.

Mr. and Mrs. K had lived by the dead sea for twenty years, and their ancestors had lived in the same house, which turned and followed the sun, flower-like, for ten centuries.

Mr. and Mrs. K were not old. They had the fair, brownish skin of the true Martian, the yellow coin eyes, the soft musical voices. Once they had liked painting pictures with chemical fire, swimming in the canals in the seasons when the wine trees filled them with green liquors, and talking into the dawn together by the blue phosphorous portraits in the speaking room.

They were not happy now.

This morning Mrs. K stood between the pillars, listening to the desert sands heat, melt into yellow wax, and seemingly run on the horizon.

Something was going to happen.

She waited.

She watched the blue sky of Mars as if it might at any moment grip in on itself, contract, and expel a shining miracle down upon the sand.

Nothing happened.

Tired of waiting, she walked through the misting pillars. A gentle rain sprang from the fluted pillar tops, cooling the scorched air, falling gently on her. On hot days it was like walking in a creek. The floors of the house glittered with cool streams. In the distance she heard her husband playing his book steadily, his fingers never tired of the old songs. Quietly she wished he might one day again spend as much time holding and touching her like a little harp as he did his incredible books.

But no. She shook her head, an imperceptible, forgiving shrug. Her eyelids closed softly down upon her golden eyes. Marriage made people old and familiar, while still young.

She lay back in a chair that moved to take her shape even as she moved. She closed her eyes tightly and nervously.

The dream occurred.

Her brown fingers trembled, came up, grasped at the air. A moment later she sat up, startled, gasping.

She glanced about swiftly, as if expecting someone there before her. She seemed disappointed; the space between the pillars was empty.

Her husband appeared in a triangular door. "Did you call?" he asked irritably.

"No!" she cried.

"I thought I heard you cry out."

"Did I? I was almost asleep and had a dream!"

"In the daytime? You don't often do that."

She sat as if struck in the face by the dream. "How strange, how very strange," she murmured. "The dream."

"Oh?" He evidently wished to return to his book.

"I dreamed about a man."

"A man?"

"A tall man, six feet one inch tall."

"How absurd; a giant, a misshapen giant."

"Somehow"—she tried the words—"he looked all right. In spite of being tall. And he had—oh, I know you'll think it silly—he had *blue* eyes!"

"Blue eyes! Gods!" cried Mr. K. "What'll you dream next? I suppose he had *black* hair?"

"How did you *guess*?" She was excited.

"I picked the most unlikely color," he replied coldly.

"Well, black it was!" she cried. "And he had a very white skin; oh, he was *most* unusual! He was dressed in a strange uniform and he came down out of the sky and spoke pleasantly to me." She smiled.

"Out of the sky; what nonsense!"

"He came in a metal thing that glittered in the sun," she remembered. She closed her eyes to shape it again. "I dreamed there was the sky and something sparkled like a coin thrown into the air, and suddenly it grew large and fell down softly to land, a long silver craft, round and alien. And a door opened in the side of the silver object and this tall man stepped out."

"If you worked harder you wouldn't have these silly dreams."

"I rather enjoyed it," she replied, lying back. "I never suspected myself of such an imagination. Black

hair, blue eyes and white skin. What a strange man, and yet—quite handsome.”

“Wishful thinking.”

“You’re unkind. I didn’t think him up on purpose; he just came in my mind while I drowsed. It wasn’t like a dream. It was so unexpected and different. He looked at me and he said, ‘I’ve come from the third planet in my ship. My name is Nathaniel York—’ ”

“A stupid name, it’s no name at all,” objected the husband.

“Of course it’s stupid, because it’s a dream,” she explained softly. “And he said, ‘This is the first trip across space. There are only two of us in our ship, myself and my friend Bert.’ ”

“Another stupid name.”

“And he said, ‘We’re from a city on Earth; that’s the name of our planet,’ ” continued Mrs. K. “That’s what he said. ‘Earth’ was the name he spoke. And he used another language. Somehow I understood him. With my mind. Telepathy, I suppose.”

Mr. K. turned away. She stopped him with a word. “Yll?” she called quietly. “Do you ever wonder if—well, if there *are* people living on the third planet?”

“The third planet is incapable of supporting life,” stated the husband patiently. “Our scientists have said there’s far too much oxygen in their atmosphere.”

“But wouldn’t it be fascinating if there *were* people? And they traveled through space in some sort of ship?”

“Really, Ylla, you know how I hate this emotional wailing. Let’s get on with our work.”

It was late in the day when she began singing the song as she moved among the whispering pillars of rain. She sang it over and over again.

"What's that song?" snapped her husband at last, walking in to sit at the fire table.

"I don't know." She looked up, surprised at herself. She put her hand to her mouth, unbelieving. The sun was setting. The house was closing itself in, like a giant flower, with the passing of light. A wind blew among the pillars; the fire table bubbled its fierce pool of silver lava. The wind stirred her russet hair, crooning softly in her ears. She stood silently looking out in the great fallow distances of sea bottom, as if recalling something, her yellow eyes soft and moist. "‘Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I will pledge with mine,’" she sang, softly, quietly, slowly. "‘Or leave a kiss within the cup, and I’ll not ask for wine.’" She hummed now, moving her hands in the wind ever so lightly, her eyes shut. She finished the song.

It was very beautiful.

"Never heard that song before. Did you compose it?" he inquired, his eyes sharp.

"No. Yes. No, I don't know, really!" She hesitated wildly. "I don't even know what the words are; they're another language!"

"What language?"

She dropped portions of meat numbly into the simmering lava. "I don't know." She drew the meat forth a moment later, cooked, served on a plate for him. "It's just a crazy thing I made up, I guess. I don't know why."

He said nothing. He watched her drown meats in the hissing fire pool. The sun was gone. Slowly, slowly the night came in to fill the room, swallowing the pillars and both of them, like a dark wine poured to the ceiling. Only the silver lava's glow lit their faces.

She hummed the strange song again.

Instantly he leaped from his chair and stalked angrily from the room.

Later, in isolation, he finished supper.

When he arose he stretched, glanced at her, and suggested, yawning, "Let's take the flame birds to town tonight to see an entertainment."

"You don't *mean* it?" she said. "Are you feeling well?"

"What's so strange about that?"

"But we haven't gone for an entertainment in six months!"

"I think it's a good idea."

"Suddenly you're so solicitous," she said.

"Don't talk that way," he replied peevishly. "Do you or do you not want to go?"

She looked out at the pale desert. The twin white moons were rising. Cool water ran softly about her toes. She began to tremble just the least bit. She wanted very much to sit quietly here, soundless, not moving until this thing occurred, this thing expected all day, this thing that could not occur but might. A drift of song brushed through her mind.

"I—"

"Do you good," he urged. "Come along now."

"I'm tired," she said. "Some other night."

"Here's your scarf." He handed her a phial. "We haven't gone anywhere in months."

"Except you, twice a week to Xi City." She wouldn't look at him.

"Business," he said.

"Oh?" She whispered to herself.

From the phial a liquid poured, turned to blue mist, settled about her neck, quivering.

The flame birds waited, like a bed of coals, glowing on the cool smooth sands. The white canopy ballooned

on the night wind, flapping softly, tied by a thousand green ribbons to the birds.

Ylla laid herself back in the canopy and, at a word from her husband, the birds leaped, burning, toward the dark sky. The ribbons, tautened, the canopy lifted. The sand slid whining under; the blue hills drifted by, leaving their home behind, the raining pillars, the caged flowers, the singing books, the whispering floor creeks. She did not look at her husband. She heard him crying out to the birds as they rose higher, like ten thousand hot sparkles, so many red-yellow fireworks in the heavens, tugging the canopy like a flower petal, burning through the wind.

She didn't watch the dead, ancient bone-chess cities slide under, or the old canals filled with emptiness and dreams. Past dry rivers and dry lakes they flew, like a shadow of the moon, like a torch burning.

She watched only the sky.

The husband spoke.

She watched the sky.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"What?"

He exhaled. "You might pay attention."

"I was thinking."

"I never thought you were a nature lover, but you're certainly interested in the sky tonight," he said.

"It's very beautiful."

"I was figuring," said the husband slowly. "I thought I'd call Hulle tonight. I'd like to talk to him about us spending some time, oh, only a week or so, in the Blue Mountains. It's just an idea—"

"The Blue Mountains!" She held to the canopy rim with one hand, turning swiftly toward him.

"Oh, it's just a suggestion."

"When do you want to go?" she asked, trembling.

"I thought we might leave tomorrow morning. You know, an early start and all that," he said very casually.

"But we *never* go this early in the year!"

"Just this once, I thought—" He smiled. "Do us good to get away. Some peace and quiet. You know. You haven't anything *else* planned? We'll go, won't we?"

She took a breath, waited, and then replied, "No."

"What?" His cry startled the birds. The canopy jerked.

"No," she said firmly. "It's settled, I won't go."

He looked at her. They did not speak after that. She turned away.

The birds flew on, ten thousand firebrands down the wind.

In the dawn the sun, through the crystal pillars, melted the fog that supported Ylla as she slept. All night she had hung above the floor, buoyed by the soft carpeting of mist that poured from the walls when she lay down to rest. All night she had slept on this silent river, like a boat upon a soundless tide. Now the fog burned away, the mist level lowered until she was deposited upon the shore of wakening,

She opened her eyes.

Her husband stood over her. He looked as if he had stood there for hours, watching. She did not know why, but she could not look him in the face.

"You've been dreaming again!" he said. "You spoke out and kept me awake. I *really* think you should see a doctor."

"I'll be all right."

"You talked a lot in your sleep!"

"Did I?" She started up.

Dawn was cold in the room. A gray light filled her as she lay there.

"What was your dream?"

She had to think a moment to remember. "The ship. It came from the sky again, landed, and the tall man stepped out and talked with me, telling me little jokes, laughing, and it was pleasant."

Mr. K touched a pillar. Founts of warm water leaped up, steaming; the chill vanished from the room. Mr. K's face was impassive.

"And then," she said, "this man, who said his strange name was Nathaniel York, told me I was beautiful and—kissed me."

"Hal" cried the husband, turning violently away, his jaw working.

"It's only a dream." She was amused.

"Keep your silly, feminine dreams to yourself!"

"You're acting like a child." She lapsed back upon the few remaining remnants of chemical mist. After a moment she laughed softly. "I thought of some *more* of the dream," she confessed.

"Well, what is it, what is it?" he shouted.

"Yll, you're so bad-tempered."

"Tell me!" he demanded. "You can't keep secrets from me!" His face was dark and rigid as he stood over her.

"I've never seen you this way," she replied, half shocked, half entertained. "All that happened was this Nathaniel York person told me—well, he told me that he'd take me away into his ship, into the sky with him, and take me back to his planet with him. It's really quite ridiculous."

"Ridiculous, is it!" he almost screamed. "You should

have heard yourself, fawning on him, talking to him, singing with him, oh gods, all night; you should have *heard* yourself."

"Yll!"

"When's he landing? Where's he coming down with his damned ship?"

"Yll, lower your voice."

"Voice be damned!" He bent stiffly over her. "And *in* this dream"—he seized her wrist—"didn't the ship land over in Green Valley, *didn't* it? Answer me!"

"Why, yes—"

"And it landed this afternoon, didn't it?" he kept at her.

"Yes, yes, I think so, yes, but only in a dream!"

"Well"—he flung her hand away stiffly—"it's good you're truthfull I heard every word you said in your sleep. You mentioned the valley and the time." Breathing hard, he walked between the pillars like a man blinded by a lightning bolt. Slowly his breath returned. She watched him as if he were quite insane. She arose finally and went to him. "Yll," she whispered.

"I'm all right."

"You're sick."

"No." He forced a tired smile. "Just childish. Forgive me, darling." He gave her a rough pat. "Too much work lately. I'm sorry. I think I'll lie down awhile—"

"You were so excited."

"I'm all right now. Fine." He exhaled. "Let's forget it. Say, I heard a joke about Uel yesterday, I meant to tell you. What do you say you fix breakfast, I'll tell the joke, and let's not talk about all this."

"It was only a dreamr."

"Of course," He kissed her cheek mechanically. "Only a dream."

At noon the sun was high and hot and the hills shimmered in the light.

"Aren't you going to town?" asked Ylla.

"Town?" He raised his brows faintly.

"This is the day you *always* go." She adjusted a flower cage on its pedestal. The flowers stirred, opening their hungry yellow mouths.

He closed his book. "No. It's too hot, and it's late."

"Oh." She finished her task and moved toward the door. "Well, I'll be back soon."

"Wait a minute! Where are you going?"

She was in the door swiftly. "Over to Pao's. She invited me!"

"Today?"

"I haven't seen her in a long time. It's only a little way."

"Over in Green Valley, isn't it?"

"Yes, just a walk, not far, I thought I'd—" She hurried.

"I'm sorry, really sorry," he said, running to fetch her back, looking very concerned about his forgetfulness. "It slipped my mind. I invited Dr. Nlle out this afternoon."

"Dr. Nlle!" She edged toward the door.

He caught her elbow and drew her steadily in. "Yes."

"But Pao—"

"Pao can wait, Ylla. We must entertain Nlle."

"Just for a few minutes—"

"No, Ylla."

"No?"

He shook his head. "No. Besides, it's a terribly long walk to Pao's. All the way over through Green Valley and then past the big canal and down, isn't it? And it'll be very, very hot, and Dr. Nlle would be delighted to see you. Well?"

She did not answer. She wanted to break and run.

She wanted to cry out. But she only sat in the chair, turning her fingers over slowly, staring at them expressionlessly, trapped.

"Ylla?" he murmured. "You *will* be here, won't you?"

"Yes," she said after a long time. "I'll be here."

"All afternoon?"

Her voice was dull. "All afternoon."

Late in the day Dr. Nlle had not put in an appearance. Ylla's husband did not seem overly surprised. When it was quite late he murmured something, went to a closet, and drew forth an evil weapon, a long yellowish tube ending in a bellows and a trigger. He turned and upon his face was a mask, hammered from silver metal, expressionless, the mask that he always wore when he wished to hide his feelings, the mask which curved and hollowed so exquisitely to his thin cheeks and chin and brow. The mask glinted, and he held the evil weapon in his hand, considering it. It hummed constantly, an insect hum. From it hordes of golden bees could be flung out with a high shriek. Golden, horrid bees that stung, poisoned, and fell lifeless, like seeds on the sand.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"What?" He listened to the bellows, to the evil hum. "If Dr. Nlle is late, I'll be damned if I'll wait. I'm going out to hunt a bit. I'll be back. You be sure to stay right here now, won't you?" The silver mask glimmered.

"Yes."

"And tell Dr. Nlle I'll return. Just hunting."

The triangular door closed. His footsteps faded down the hill.

She watched him walking through the sunlight until he was gone. Then she resumed her tasks with the magnetic dusts and the new fruits to be plucked from

the crystal walls. She worked with energy and dispatch, but on occasion a numbness took hold of her and she caught herself singing that odd and memorable song and looking out beyond the crystal pillars at the sky.

She held her breath and stood very still, waiting.

It was coming nearer.

At any moment it might happen.

It was like those days when you heard a thunderstorm coming and there was the waiting silence and then the faintest pressure of the atmosphere as the climate blew over the land in shifts and shadows and vapors. And the change pressed at your ears and you were suspended in the waiting time of the coming storm. You began to tremble. The sky was stained and colored; the clouds were thickened; the mountains took on an iron taint. The caged flowers blew with faint sighs of warning. You felt your hair stir softly. Somewhere in the house the voice-clock sang. "Time, time, time, time . . ." ever so gently, no more than water tapping on velvet.

And then the storm. The electric illumination, the engulfments of dark wash and sounding black fell down, shutting in, forever.

That's how it was now. A storm gathered, yet the sky was clear. Lightning was expected, yet there was no cloud.

Ylla moved through the breathless summer house. Lightning would strike from the sky any instant; there would be a thunderclap, a ball of smoke, a silence, footsteps on the path, a rap on the crystalline door, and her *running* to answer. . . .

Crazy Ylla! she scoffed. Why think these wild things with your idle mind?

And then it happened.

There was a warmth as of a great fire passing in the

air. A whirling, rushing sound. A gleam in the sky, of metal.

Ylla cried out.

Running through the pillars, she flung wide a door. She faced the hills. But by this time there was nothing.

She was about to race down the hill when she stopped herself. She was supposed to stay here, go nowhere. The doctor was coming to visit, and her husband would be angry if she ran off.

She waited in the door, breathing rapidly, her hand out.

She strained to see over toward Green Valley, but saw nothing.

Silly woman. She went inside. You and your imagination, she thought. That was nothing but a bird, a leaf, the wind, or a fish in the canal. Sit down. Rest.

She sat down.

A shot sounded.

Very clearly, sharply, the sound of the evil insect weapon.

Her body jerked with it.

It came from a long way off. One shot. The swift humming distant bees. One shot. And then a second shot, precise and cold, and far away.

Her body winced again and for some reason she started up, screaming, and screaming, and never wanting to stop screaming. She ran violently through the house and once more threw wide the door.

The echoes were dying away, away.

Gone.

She waited in the yard, her face pale, for five minutes.

Finally, with slow steps, her head down, she wandered about the pillared rooms, laying her hand to things, her lips quivering until finally she sat alone in

the darkening wine room, waiting. She began to wipe an amber glass with the hem of her scarf.

And then, from far off, the sound of footsteps crunching on the thin, small rocks.

She rose up to stand in the center of the quiet room. The glass fell from her fingers, smashing to bits.

The footsteps hesitated outside the door.

Should she speak? Should she cry out, "Come in, oh, come in"?

She went forward a few paces.

The footsteps walked up the ramp. a hand twisted the door latch.

She smiled at the door.

The door opened. She stopped smiling.

It was her husband. His silver mask glowed dully.

He entered the room and looked at her for only a moment. Then he snapped the weapon bellows open, cracked out two dead bees, heard them spat on the floor as they fell, stepped on them, and placed the empty bellows gun in the corner of the room as Ylla bent down and tried, over and over, with no success, to pick up the pieces of the shattered glass. "What were you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said with his back turned. He removed the mask.

"But the gun—I heard you fire it. Twice."

"Just hunting. Once in a while you like to hunt. Did Dr. Nlle arrive?"

"No."

"Wait a minute." He snapped his fingers disgustedly. "Why, I remember now. He was supposed to visit us *tomorrow* afternoon. How stupid of me."

They sat down to eat. She looked at her food and did not move her hands. "What's wrong?" he asked,

not looking up from dipping his meat in the bubbling lava.

"I don't know. I'm not hungry," she said.

"Why not?"

"I don't know; I'm just not."

The wind was rising across the sky; the sun was going down. The room was small and suddenly cold.

"I've been trying to remember," she said in the silent room, across from her cold, erect, golden-eyed husband.

"Remember what?" He sipped his wine.

"That song, That fine and beautiful song." She closed her eyes and hummed, but it was not the song. "I've forgotten it. And, somehow, I don't want to forget it. It's something I want always to remember." She moved her hands as if the rhythm might help her to remember all of it. Then she lay back in her chair. "I can't remember." She began to cry.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

"I don't know, I don't know, but I can't help it. I'm sad and I don't know why, I cry and I don't know why, but I'm crying."

Her head was in her hands; her shoulders moved again and again.

"You'll be all right tomorrow," he said.

She did not look up at him; she looked only at the empty desert and the very bright stars coming out now on the black sky, and far away there was a sound of wind rising and canal waters stirring cold in the long canals. She shut her eyes, trembling.

"Yes," she said. "I'll be all right tomorrow."

The Green Cat

by Cleve Cartmill

The main reason that Brad Lawrence knew almost nothing about cats was that his wife Leta had an allergy to cat fur. She came out all over bumps whenever she got near a cat.

But there was one fact Brad knew about cats: they are not green.

So when he saw this cat on the university parking lot, he stopped to stare. It was a large animal, as cats go, and was mostly an apple green in color, striped geometrically with a darker green. This darker color, a kind of willow-tree green, was repeated on its feet, so that it seemed to be wearing perfectly fitted boots, and on its ears.

Since he knew so little about cats, he didn't feel a sense of shock at the appearance of the cat's ears. The fact that they were leaf-shaped didn't register. For all he knew, all cats had ears shaped somewhat like eucalyptus leaves.

His scrutiny lasted perhaps ten seconds. Then the cat, which had been staring idly at a new Cadillac, turned her head and saw Brad. She had yellow-green eyes, and she fixed them on Brad's with an intensity that would have struck him as peculiar if he had had more experience with cats.

Then she walked daintily over to him and he picked her up. With his books under one arm and the cat cradled in the other, he carried her to his car. He set her on the running board, and when he opened his car

door she leaped lightly inside and sat under the steering wheel.

Brad stood motionless for a few moments, vague confusion blurring his thoughts, and the cat put both front paws on the wheel.

"You'll have to move over," Brad said. The cat moved over.

Brad got in and drove out of the parking lot. The cat watched all his movements—pressing the starter button, shifting, turning the wheel—with rapt attention.

"It's sure funny," Brad remarked presently as he moved along in the center stream of traffic. "I wonder why I picked you up." He signaled a left turn. "I wonder why you let me." He made the turn; the cat watched. "I wonder what Leta will say. Sure is funny."

He stopped at a market to fill a grocery list that Leta had made for him in the morning, and was not surprised when the cat followed him inside. She stayed one pace behind and a little to one side as he cruised the aisles for baby food, flour, bread and so on.

He paused before a shelf of cat food, selected a brand with a liver base. Then he selected two more cans. "Better have plenty," he explained to the green cat, who watched him attentively with her chartreuse eyes.

"What a beautiful cat!" the pretty clerk said as she cash-registered Brad's items. "Follows you just like a dog. Did you train him to do that?"

"She learned it herself," Brad said.

"I never saw a green cat before."

"Very rare," Brad said vaguely.

"Gee. Why don't you put her in the cat show next week? I bet she'd win a prize."

"Might do that," Brad said. "I didn't know about it. Where is it and when?"

She got the information from the local paper, and

Brad absently took the paper along. The green cat showed no interest now in Brad's driving. She looked at traffic, trees and people. She waited expectantly when he stopped in front of his home—a G.I.-loan bungalow—and gathered his parcels. She followed him to the pseudo-Spanish front door.

Brad looked down at her dubiously. "I don't know whether you better. . . ." He frowned. "What with the baby and all. . . . Oh, well, let's see what happens."

"That you?" his wife called from the baby's room.

"Yeah." Brad went into the tiled kitchen, trimmed in Spanish reds and smelling deliciously of the chili which bubbled on the electric range. The cat followed, examining everything.

Brad returned to the living room and sat in the big chair beside the television set. He looked at the cat, sitting at his feet, with a feeling of slight uneasiness. He felt as if there were something sinister in the situation, but couldn't put a name to it. He realized that he had acted with almost no volition of his own ever since he had seen the cat. It was as if she had assumed command, but he couldn't see how that was possible.

Leta came down the hallway leading their year-old daughter, Candy, who was blue-eyed and blonde like her parents. Leta stopped when she saw the cat, her eyes widening in what Brad took for frightened amazement.

The cat turned her yellow-green eyes on Leta's for an intense five seconds, and Leta's expression returned to normal.

"I didn't know cats were ever green," she said. "It's beautiful. But—" She looked around in confusion, as if trying to recall what she had been about to say. "Maybe it'll be nice for Candy," she said finally.

The cat now came over to Candy and examined her.

The cat's eyes were almost on a level with the child's. Candy pulled her pink fist out of her mother's hand and lurched against the cat. She put one arm around the cat's neck, and the two stared solemnly into each other's eyes.

"Boggle," Candy said. She went with the cat down the hallway to her playroom, and cat and child disappeared from view.

"Guess the cat has a name now," Brad said. "Boggle."

"I think it'll be nice," Leta said, "having someone to keep an eye on the baby. Where did you get her?"

Brad told about the encounter on the parking lot. "Sure is funny," he said.

"Gosh, Leta exclaimed. "No bumps. She exhibited her shapely arm, pulling the sleeve of her Spanish blouse up to her shoulder. "I always break out around cats."

Brad came over to look. "Sure is funny," he said. "Say, I wonder. . . . Suppose it's all right for the baby in there alone with Boggle?"

"Oh, sure," said his wife. "But we can take a look."

They tiptoed along the hallway and peeked into the playroom. Candy was just adding the final piece to a complex Ferris wheel made from her Tinker Toy set. The box was open in the middle of the floor, and the illustrated book of instructions was beside the Ferris wheel. Candy put in the last piece, regarded the book briefly, nodded to Boggle and spun the wheel. It turned easily, and Candy made a sound of pleasure.

"Say, how did that get there?" Leta cried. "It was on the top shelf of the cupboard."

The top shelf was some six feet from the floor. A chair stood in the open cupboard door. Brad put these facts together in his mind and shook his head.

"You must be mistaken," he said. "She couldn't reach it, even if she could climb up on the chair. You must

have got that set down and built that thing for her. She couldn't possibly build anything that complicated."

Candy turned at the sound of voices, gurgled, grinned and then begun to take the Ferris wheel apart and put the pieces in the box.

"I wish you could talk," Brad said to Candy. "This has got me worried."

"Pooh," Leta scoffed. "Let's go." She led the way.

Brad sat in the big chair again and scowled at the floor. He was now objective for the first time since he had seen the green cat. "Something's wrong," he said positively.

"How do you mean?"

"Nothing adds up. I bring a cat home. Cats are ruled out in the first place, on account of your allergy. But you don't have an allergy to this cat, which has a funny color, anyway. Then this cat—Candy—I don't know what I'm trying to say."

"Well, you're making no sense," Leta said. "Oh, the chili," she said, and went to the kitchen.

Brad continued to scowl, but didn't arrive at any conclusion. He only felt that something in the picture was out of focus.

How had Candy put that toy together? And why hadn't he investigated further? Why, for that matter, had he picked the cat up to begin with?

He got up. He went to the front door. He said: "Goodbye, darling. I'm going to the library."

Leta appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Dinner," Brad said, dismissing it. "Dinner." He went out to his car.

He found a book about cats. He learned that there were Abyssinian, Burmese, Persian, Siamese and alley

cats, ranging in color from red to blue-grey, but there wasn't a single, solitary green cat in the lot.

He went home. He found his wife unconscious on the living-room floor. He found his daughter and the—*his*—cat watching the wrestling matches on the television set.

He roused Leta. She prepared Candy for bed. She didn't say how she had become unconscious. They went to bed, leaving the green cat to roam the house.

The green cat left the house about midnight. She loped along side streets, dark streets, until she reached the hillside.

Her leaf-life ears were erect; her nostrils filled with the scents of night; eucalyptus, jacaranda and jasmine.

From one of her pouches that didn't show she took a small object shaped like a pencil. She pointed this at the hillside and moved it back and forth in a spraying motion.

Earth fell away, fell away from a long slim object, gleaming in the starlight. The green cat went inside through a port that fell open and crept into the nose of the ship.

On the floor was a green square. When the cat touched a button the square glowed. She took from one of her pouches the object shaped like a pencil and applied it to the glowing square.

She wrote diligently. She made several lines of queer marks. It was writing, but not as we know it. Then she added, in the written language of Southern California: "It's okay. Come on in."

Next, she went back outside. She pointed the pencil-like object at the little spaceship. It rose into the night, headed away from Earth, and the green cat began to kick dirt into the hole.

Pardon My Mistake

by Fletcher Pratt

As he slipped past the chute of Pit 3, Bob Waring could see through the steel spider web of Pit 4 to the porch where everyone was having a final cocktail and a final dance before going to the Q-room for the injections which would cushion them against the frightful shock of a rocket takeoff.

The windows were open to the summer night. Over the muted golden notes of the clarinet Alida's laughter rang high, and a trifle too sharp. She had taken one cocktail too many, as she usually did when excited. Waring remembered how she had done that at their engagement party—arrh! And now she was drinking one cocktail too many because she was off with Hugh Frazer on a honeymoon, really to the mountains of the moon.

He could make her out clearly through the steel tracery, wearing that same sea-blue dress she had had on the day she told him:

"It's no use, Bob, not any more. I wouldn't mind being poor with you, even if you turned out to be a financial failure every time. I wouldn't mind—oh, lots of things. But I just couldn't take a chance on my own life, knowing every day that you might find another opportunity you couldn't pass up, and—"

"But I put the money back. They never found out."

"I found out, Bob. I'm not talking about other people."

That was all she would say at the time, and now Hugh

Frazer's arm was around the sea-blue dress and they were dancing. She was letting Hugh lead. Bob Waring remembered that when she had danced with him, she had always taken the lead herself. He leaned a trifle forward, stumbled, and his foot caught a cinder to knock it clicking down the long pit, scarred by rocket blasts. A footstep sounded behind him.

"Who's there?" came the hard voice of the sentry.

Waring ducked and ran, bent double, his sneakered feet pushing the cinders. Left—he dodged behind a charge box.

"Stop or I shoot!" came the warning voice.

Right—Waring slipped into the passage between a pair of toolsheds, around behind one of them, and the scene was lighted by the electric-blue brilliance of a flash pistol. There was a fence straight ahead, fortunately a low one. In one plunge he was over.

The sentry's whistle sounded behind. Waring ran blindly along the fence, bent double, encountered a pile of rocket-charge cylinders, was around it, under a piece of hullform and against another.

It was an interior form, as his hands assured him. He heard the steps pad behind, the sentry's whistle, and then the plunk as he vaulted the fence. Waring remembered that the last place a searcher looks is just over his head, and gripping the rungs of the ladder on the section of hullform, climbed.

"What's up?" said a new voice, so near his hiding place he almost let go.

"Somebody, I think," said the voice of the first sentry. "Mebbe one of Nat Reardon's crowd."

"You and your big ideas. Probably just some poor dopey trying to chisel himself enough scopodiadine for a pipe dream. If Reardon was after that dough on the *Honeymoon Express*, boy, you'd know it. He wouldn't

be hiding out, he'd be after this place with everything in the book. Listen!"

The voices and crunching feet moved away, as Waring flattened himself against the hull section. About ten feet above the ground, he discovered as soon as he dared more, the rungs led to a port. Waring wriggled his way in and lay in the open airlock of the section, panting and feeling around his waist to make sure that the sharp edge of the fence had not broken his precious package.

For a few moments he lay there, rehearsing once more every detail of the plan. Everything had to be perfect—but it was. He had worked too long in the office at the rocket port not to have a thorough knowledge of the procedure.

Presently the lights on the terrace would go out, the passengers would file into the room where they received their scopodiadine injections, and from there would be taken aboard. Passengers to the right, crew to the left. Then would come the wait while the injections took effect, with all employees cleared from the rocket area, down in the steel-lined chambers below ground.

That was the moment. He would have perhaps as much as ten minutes before the remote controls were closed and the rocket dismissed into the ultimate depths of space with its earth-shaking roar.

The starboard rear lifecar. He would have to hurry to make it and get the injection into himself. But old Holtzmann was in the control room tonight. Old Holtzmann never took chances on sending a rocket away before all the passengers were surely under the scopodiadine. He would wait a good fifteen minutes instead of the legal ten before closing the circuit that automatically shut the airlocks and discharged the booster rockets.

Waring lifted his head and looked from his hiding place across the rocket port. As he did, the terrace lights

died and the place was illuminated only by the distant shine from the tip of the tower, all of two miles distant. He would have to hurry now, and in the dark, but thank goodness, the sentries would be out of here.

The cinders crunched under his feet. Let's see—had he made two turns around that pile of charge cylinders or only one? He felt the shape of them under his hand. Now the fence. Over it, to the left again—and the eye of the tower was blotted out by the immense form of a space rocket looming between him and the stars.

Waring felt his way to the chute, down it to where the big door stood open, flush with the ground. Passengers to the right—this was where the corridor divided. All dark, since even the Kozymanski lights could not stand the strain of a takeoff and would not be hooked in till they were beyond the stratosphere.

Twelve steps down the corridor, exactly twelve steps, as he knew from counting them so many times on other rockets, he found where he expected it to be, the handle of the lifecar lock. Down and to the right—open. He slipped in, closing it carefully to cushion the clang, thought probably by this time passengers and crew alike were deep under scopodiadine and could not possibly hear.

With the door open, he used his flash briefly. Standard lifecar, correct, with two passenger seats, and miniature drive at the rear. Quite sufficient to take two people through 90,000 miles of space. He let himself in and pulled out the injection kit, a smile playing around his face.

The operation was already a success. The two people who would use that lifecar were already chosen—Bob Waring and Alida Burnett. Not Hugh Frazer. He would drift forever with the wrecked ship around the sun, a new planetoid.

Oh, well, that is, she could have her choice. If she wanted to stay aboard with Hugh, be part of that planetoid with him, let her. He, Bob Waring, would start life over in a world without either of them.

But he had no doubt which Alida would choose. Back on Terra, Hugh Frazer might be a big shot and the boss of a lot of things while he, Bob Waring, was just a punk who had tried to get away with something and missed. But out in the space lanes he would have the only flash pistol aboard, and the booster bomb that would convert the ship's whole supply of atomic fuel to energy in one terrific explosion, like the inside of a star.

With a smile of self-satisfaction, Waring plunged the needle into his arm and lay back. Consciousness was not quite blotted out when the shock of the start came, tearing at his heart and lungs, but the sensation was smothered in the mounting effect of the injection. . . .

Waring threw back the cover of the lifecar. Through the permalux window he could make out, so far beneath that the identity of the continents was blurred, the spinning blue ball of Earth. Off at one side was the black sky with another planet among the stars, and the big ship was vibrating gently with the discharge of her diving rockets. The crew were on duty and directing her. He must have overslept, and they were already a long way out.

Hastily he adjusted the calculating telescope on the car—86,000 miles to Terra. He would have to work fast.

Waring felt for his flash pistol, leaped from the lifecar and flung open the door. Nobody in the corridor. Good. He stepped along it to the first cabin on the left. No. 58. That would be Alida's, he knew from the passenger list.

Knock, knock. No answer. She must still be partly under the injection.

Waring gripped the door handle and turned. It opened to show a nurse in a white uniform bending over something that looked like a child's bed. She exhibited a startled face, her eyes widening at the sight of the pistol.

"Oh!" she cried. "What do you want?"

"I want Miss Alida Burnett. Isn't this her cabin?" And then, as a dreadful thought struck him, "Isn't this the *Honeymoon Express* for the moon?"

"Of course not. This is the education ship *Montessori* on an eight years' tour of the planets with orphan children."

The Plutonian Drug

by Clark Ashton Smith

"It is remarkable," said Dr. Manners, "how the scope of our pharmacopoeia has been widened by interplanetary exploration. In the past thirty years, hundreds of hitherto unknown substances, employable as drugs or medical agents, have been found in the other worlds of our own system. It will be interesting to see what the Allan Farquar expedition will bring back from the planets of Alpha Centauri when—or if—it succeeds in reaching them and returning to Earth. I doubt, though, if anything more valuable than selenine will be discovered. Selenine, derived from a fossil lichen found by the first rocket expedition to the moon in 1975, has, as you know, practically wiped out the old-time curse of cancer. In solution, it forms the base of an infallible serum, equally useful for cure or prevention."

"I fear I haven't kept up on a lot of the new discoveries," said Rupert Balcoth the sculptor, Manners' guest, a little apologetically. "Of course, everyone has heard of selenine. And I've seen frequent mention, recently, of a mineral water from Ganymede whose effects are like those of the mythical Fountain of Youth."

"You mean *clithni*, as the stuff is called by the Ganymedians. It is a clear, emerald liquid, rising in lofty geysers from the craters of quiescent volcanoes. Scientists believe that the drinking of *clithni* is the secret of the almost fabulous longevity of the Ganymedians; and

they think that it may prove to be a similar elixir for humanity."

"Some of the extraplanetary drugs haven't been so beneficial to mankind, have they?" queried Balcoth. "I seem to have heard of a Martian poison that has greatly facilitated the gentle art of murder. And I am told that *mnophka*, the Venerian narcotic, is far worse, in its effects on the human system, than is any terrestrial alkaloid."

"Naturally," observed the doctor with philosophic calm, "many of these new chemical agents are capable of dire abuse. They share that liability with any number of our native drugs. Man, as ever, has the choice of good and evil. . . . I suppose that the Martian poison you speak of is *akpaloli*, the juice of a common russet-yellow weed that grows in the oases of Mars. It is colorless, and without taste or odor. It kills almost instantly, leaving no trace, and imitating closely the symptoms of heart disease. Undoubtedly many people have been made away with by means of a surreptitious drop of *akpaloli* in their food or medicine. But even *akpaloli*, if used in infinitesimal doses, is a very powerful stimulant, useful in cases of syncope, and serving, not infrequently, to reanimate victims of paralysis in a quite miraculous manner.

"Of course," he went on, there is an infinite lot still to be learned about many of these ultra-terrene substances. Their virtues have often been discovered quite by accident—and in some cases, the virtue is still to be discovered.

"For example, take *mnophka*, which you mentioned a little while ago. Though allied in a way, to the Earth narcotics, such as opium and hashish, it is of little use for anaesthetic or anodyne purposes. Its chief effects are an extraordinary acceleration of the time sense, and

a heightening and telescoping of all sensations, whether pleasurable or painful. The user seems to be living and moving at a furious whirlwind rate—even though he may in reality be lying quiescent on a couch. He exists in a headlong torrent of sense impressions, and seems, in a few minutes, to undergo the experience of years. The physical result is lamentable—a profound exhaustion and an actual aging of the tissues, such as would ordinarily require the period of real time which the addict has ‘lived’ through merely in his own illusion.

“There are some other drugs, comparatively little known, whose effects, if possible, are even more curious than those of *mnophka*. I don’t suppose you have ever heard of plutonium?”

“No, I haven’t,” admitted Balcoth. “Tell me about it.”

“I can do even better than that—I can show you some of the stuff, though it isn’t much to look at—merely a fine white powder.”

Dr. Manners rose from the pneumatic-cushioned chair in which he sat facing his guest, and went to a large cabinet of synthetic ebony, whose shelves were crowded with flasks, bottles, tubes, and cartons of various sizes and forms. Returning, he handed to Balcoth a squat and tiny vial, two-thirds filled with a starchy substance.

“Plutonium,” explained Manners, “as its name would indicate, comes from forlorn, frozen Pluto, which only one terrestrial expedition has so far visited—the expedition led by the Cornell brothers, John and Augustine, which started in 1990 and did not return to earth till 1996, when nearly everyone had given it up as lost. John, as you may have heard, died during the returning voyage, together with half the personnel of the expedition; and the others reached earth with only one reserve oxygen tank remaining.

"This vial contains about a tenth of the existing supply of plutonium. Augustine Cornell, who is an old school friend of mine, gave it to me three years ago, just before he embarked with the Allan Farquar crowd. I count myself pretty lucky to own anything so rare.

"The geologists of the party found the stuff when they began prying beneath the solidified gases that cover the surface of that dim, starlit planet, in an effort to learn a little about its composition and history. They couldn't do much under the circumstances, with limited time and equipment; but they made some curious discoveries—of which plutonium was far from being the least.

"Like selenine, the stuff is a by-product of vegetable fossilization. Doubtless it is many billion years old, and dates back to the time when Pluto possessed enough internal heat to make possible the development of certain rudimentary plant forms on its blind surface. It must have had an atmosphere then; though no evidence of former animal life was found by the Cornells.

"Plutonium, in addition to carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen, contains minute quantities of several unclassified elements. It was discovered in a crystalloid condition, but turned immediately to the fine powder that you see as soon as it was exposed to air in the rocketship. It is readily soluble in water, forming a permanent colloid, without the least sign of deposit, no matter how long it remains in suspension."

"You say it is a drug?" queried Balcoth. "What does it do to you?"

"I'll come to that in a minute—though the effect is pretty hard to describe. The properties of the stuff were discovered only by chance: on the return journey from Pluto, a member of the expedition, half delirious with space-fever, got hold of the unmarked jar contain-

ing it and took a small dose, imagining that it was bromide of potassium. It served to complicate his delirium for a while—since it gave him some brand-new ideas about space and time.

“Other people have experimented with it since then. The effects are quite brief (the influence never lasts more than half an hour) and they vary considerably with the individual. There is no bad aftermath, either neural, mental, or physical, as far as anyone has been able to determine. I’ve taken it myself, once or twice, and can testify to that.

“Just what it does to one, I am not sure. Perhaps it merely produces a derangement or metamorphosis of sensations, like hashish; only perhaps it serves to stimulate some rudimentary organ, some dormant sense of the human brain. At any rate there is, as clearly as I can put it, an altering of the perception of time—of actual duration—into a sort of space-perception. One sees the past, and also the future, in relation to one’s own physical self, like a landscape stretching away on either hand. You don’t see very far, it is true—merely the events of a few hours in each direction; but it’s a very curious experience; and it helps to give you a new slant on the mystery of time and space. It is altogether different from the delusions of *mnophka*.”

“It sounds very interesting,” admitted Balcoth. “However, I’ve never tampered much with narcotics myself; though I did experiment once or twice, in my young, romantic days with *cannabis Indica*. I had been reading Gautier and Baudelaire, I suppose. Anyway, the result was rather disappointing.”

“You didn’t take it long enough for your system to absorb a residuum of the drug, I imagine,” said Manners. “Thus the effects were negligible, from a visionary standpoint. But plutonium is altogether different—you

get a maximum result from the very first dose. I think it would interest you greatly, Balcoth, since you are a sculptor by profession: you would see some unusual plastic images, not easy to render in terms of Euclidean planes and angles. I'll gladly give you a pinch of it now, if you'd care to experiment."

"You're pretty generous, aren't you, since the stuff is so rare?"

"I'm not being generous at all. For years, I've planned to write a monograph on ultra-terrestrial narcotics; and you might give me some valuable data. With your type of brain and your highly developed artistic sense, the vision of plutonium should be uncommonly clear and significant. All I ask is, that you describe them to me as fully as you can afterwards."

"Very well," agreed Balcoth. "I'll try anything once." His curiosity was inveigled, his imagination seduced, by Manners' account of the remarkable drug.

Manners brought out an antique whisky glass, which he filled nearly to the rim with some golden-red liquid. Uncorking the vial of plutonium, he added to this fluid a small pinch of the fine white powder, which dissolved immediately and without effervescence.

"The liquid is a wine made from a sweet Martian tuber known as *ovura*," he explained. "It is light and harmless, and will counteract the bitter taste of the plutonium. Drink it quickly and then lean back in your chair."

Balcoth hesitated, eyeing the golden-red fluid.

"Are you quite sure the effects will wear off as promptly as you say?" he questioned. "It's a quarter past nine now, and I'll have to leave about ten to keep an appointment with one of my patrons at the Belvedere Club. It's the billionaire, Claud Wishhaven, who wants me to do a bas-relief in pseudojade and neo-jasper for

the hall of his country mansion. He wants something really advanced and futuristic. We're to talk it over tonight—decide on the motifs, etc.”

“That gives you forty-five minutes,” assured the doctor, “and in thirty, at the most, your brain and senses will be perfectly normal again. I’ve never known it to fail. You’ll have fifteen minutes to spare, in which to tell me all about your sensations.”

Balcoth emptied the little antique glass at a gulp and leaned back, as Manners had directed, on the deep pneumatic cushions of the chair. He seemed to be falling easily but endlessly into a mist that had gathered in the room with unexplainable rapidity; and through this mist he was dimly aware that Manners had taken the empty glass from his relaxing fingers. He saw the face of Manners far above him, small and blurred, as if in some tremendous perspective of alpine distance; and the doctor’s simple action seemed to be occurring in another world.

He continued to fall and float through eternal mist, in which all things were dissolved as in the primordial nebulae of chaos. After a timeless interval, the mist, which had been uniformly grey and hueless at first, took on a flowing iridescence, never the same for two successive moments; and the sense of gentle falling turned to a giddy revolution, as if he were caught in an ever-accelerating vortex.

Coincidentally with his movement in this whirlpool of prismatic splendor, he seemed to undergo an indescribable mutation of the senses. The whirling colors, by subtle, ceaseless gradations, became recognizable as solid forms. Emerging, as if by an act of creation, from the infinite chaos, they appeared to take their place in an equally infinite vista. The feeling of movement, through decrescent spirals, was resolved into absolute

immobility. Balcoth was no longer conscious of himself as a living organic body: he was an abstract eye, a discorporate center of visual awareness, stationed alone in space, and yet having an intimate relationship with the frozen prospect on which he peered from his ineffable vantage.

Without surprise, he found that he was gazing simultaneously in two directions. On either hand, for a vast distance that was wholly void of normal perspective, a weird and peculiar landscape stretched away, traversed by an unbroken frieze or bas-relief of human figures that ran like a straight undeviating wall.

For awhile, the frieze was incomprehensible to Balcoth, and he could make nothing of its glacial, flowing outlines with their background of repeated masses and complicated angles and sections of other human friezes that approached or departed, often in a very abrupt manner, from an unseen world beyond. Then the vision seemed to resolve and clarify itself, and he began to understand.

The bas-relief, he saw, was composed entirely of a repetition of his own figure, plainly distinct as the separate waves of a stream, and possessing stream-like unity. Immediately before him, and for some distance on either hand, the figure was seated in a chair—the chair itself being subject to the same billowy repetition. The background was composed of the reduplicated figure of Dr. Manners, in another chair; and behind this, the manifold images of a medicine cabinet and a section of wall panelling.

Following the vista on what, for lack of any better name, might be termed the left hand, Balcoth saw himself in the act of draining the antique glass, with Manners standing before him. Then, still further, he saw himself previous to this, with a background in which

Manners was presenting him the glass, was preparing the dose of plutonium, was going to the cabinet for the vial, was rising from his pneumatic chair. Every movement, every attitude of the doctor and himself during their past conversation, was visioned in a sort of reverse order, reaching away, unalterable as a wall of stone sculpture, into the weird, external landscape. There was no break in the continuity of his own figure; but Manners seemed to disappear at times, as if into a fourth dimension. These times, he remembered later, were the occasions when the doctor had not been in his line of vision. The perception was wholly visual; and though Balcoth saw his own lips and those of Manners parted in movements of speech, he could hear no word or other sound.

Perhaps the most singular feature of the vision was the utter absence of foreshortening. Though Balcoth seemed to behold it all from a fixed, immovable point, the landscape and the intersecting frieze presented themselves to him without diminution, maintaining a frontal fullness and distinctness to a distance that might have been many miles.

Continuing along the left-hand vista, he saw himself entering Manners' apartment, and then encountered his image standing in the elevator that had borne him to the ninth floor of the hundred-story hotel in which Manners lived. Then the frieze appeared to have an open street for background, with a confused, ever-changing multitude of other faces and forms, of vehicles and sections of buildings, all jumbled together as in some old-time futuristic painting. Some of these details were full and clear, and others were cryptically broken and blurred, so as to be scarcely recognizable. Everything, whatever its spatial position and relation, was

rearranged in the flowing frozen stream of this temporal pattern.

Balcoth retraced the three blocks from Manners' hotel to his own studio, seeing all his past movements, whatever their direction in tri-dimensional space, as a straight line in the time-dimension. At last he was in his studio; and there the frieze of his own figure receded into the eerie prospect of space-transmuted time among other friezes formed of actual sculptures. He beheld himself giving the final touches with his chisel to a symbolic statue at the afternoon's end, with a glare of ruddy sunset falling through an unseen window and flushing the pallid marble. Beyond this there was a reverse fading of the glow, a thickening and blurring of the half-chiselled features of the image, a female form to which he had given the tentative name of Oblivion. At length, among half-seen statuary, the left-hand vista became indistinct, and melted slowly in amorphous mist. He had seen his own life as a continuous glaciated stream, stretching for about five hours into the past.

Reaching away on the right hand, he saw the vista of the future. Here there was a continuation of his seated figure under the influence of the drug, opposite the continued bas-relief of Dr. Manners and the repeated cabinet and wall panels. After a considerable interval, he beheld himself in the act of raising from the chair. Standing erect, he seemed to be talking awhile, as in some silent antique film, to the listening doctor. After that, he was shaking hands with Manners, was leaving the apartment, was descending in the lift and following the open, brightly lighted street toward the Belvedere Club where he was to keep his appointment with Claud Wishhaven.

The Club was only three blocks away, on another street; and the shortest route, after the first block, was

along a narrow alley between an office building and a warehouse. Balcoth had meant to take this alley; and in his vision, he saw the bas-relief of his future figure passing along the straight pavement with a background of deserted doorways and dim walls that towered from sight against the extinguished stars.

He seemed to be alone: there were no passers—only the silent, glimmering endlessly repeated angles of arclit walls and windows that accompanied his repeated figure. He saw himself following the alley, like a stream in some profound canyon; and there, midway, the strange vision came to an abrupt, inexplicable end, without the gradual blurring into formless mist that had marked his retrospective view of the past.

The sculpture-like frieze with its architectural ground appeared to terminate, broken off clean and sharp, in a gulf of immeasurable blackness and nullity. The last wave-like duplication of his own person, the vague doorway beyond it, the glimmering alley-pavement, all were seen as if shorn asunder by a falling sword of darkness, leaving a vertical line of cleavage beyond which there was—nothing.

Balcoth had a feeling of utter detachment from himself, an eloignement from the stream of time, from the shores of space, in some abstract dimension. The experience, in its full realization, might have lasted for an instant only—or for eternity. Without wonder, without curiosity or reflection, like a fourth-dimensional eye, he viewed simultaneously the unequal cross-sections of his own past and future.

After that timeless interval of complete perception, there began a reverse process of change. He, the all-seeing eye, aloof in super-space, was aware of movement, as if he were drawn back by some subtle thread of magnetism into the dungeon of time and space from

which he had momentarily departed. He seemed to be following the frieze of his own seated body toward the right, with a dimly felt rhythm or pulsation in his movement that corresponded to the merging duplications of the figure. With curious clearness, he realized that the time-unit, by which these duplications were determined, was the beating of his own heart.

Now with accelerative swiftness, the vision of petrific form and space was redissolving into a spiral swirl of multitudinous colors through which he was drawn upward. Presently he came to himself, seated in the penumatic chair, with Dr. Manners opposite. The room seemed to waver a little, as if with some lingering touch of the weird transmutation; and webs of spinning iris hung in the corners of his eyes. Apart from this, the effect of the drug had wholly vanished, leaving, however, a singularly clear and vivid memory of the almost ineffable experience.

Dr. Manners began to question him at once, and Balcoth described his visionary sensations as fully and graphically as he could.

"There is one thing I don't understand," said Manners at the end with a puzzled frown. "According to your account, you must have seen five or six hours of the past, running in a straight spatial line, as a sort of continuous landscape; but the vista of the future ended sharply after you had followed it for three-quarters of an hour, or less. I've never known the drug to act so unequally: the past and future perspectives have always been about the same in their extent for others who have used plutonium."

"Well," observed Balcoth, "the real marvel is that I could see into the future at all. In a way, I can understand the vision of the past. It was clearly composed of physical memories—of all my recent movements; and

the background was formed of all the impressions my optic nerves had received during that time. But how could I behold something that hasn't yet happened?"

"There's the mystery, of course," assented Manners. "I can think of only one explanation at all intelligible to our finite minds. This is, that all the events which compose the stream of time have already happened, are happening, and will continue to happen forever. In our ordinary state of consciousness, we perceive with the physical senses merely that moment which we call the present. Under the influence of plutonium, you were able to extend the moment of present cognition in both directions, and to behold simultaneously a certain portion of that which is normally beyond perception. Thus appeared the vision of yourself as a continuous, immobile body, extending through the time-vista."

Balcoth, who had been standing, now took his leave. "I must be going," he said, "or I'll be late for my appointment."

"I won't detain you any longer," said Manners. He appeared to hesitate, and then added: "I'm still at a loss to comprehend the abrupt cleavage and termination of your prospect of the future. The alley in which it seemed to end was Falman Alley, I suppose—your shortest route to the Belvedere Club. If I were you, Balcoth, I'd take another route, even if it requires a few minutes extra."

"That sounds rather sinister," laughed Balcoth. "Do you think that something may happen to me in Falman Alley?"

"I hope not—but I can't guarantee that it won't." Manners' tone was oddly dry and severe. "You'd better do as I suggest."

Balcoth felt the touch of a momentary shadow as he left the hotel—a premonition brief and light as the passing of some night-bird on noiseless wings. What

could it mean—that gulf of infinite blackness into which the weird frieze of his future had appeared to plunge, like a frozen cataract? Was there a menace of some sort that awaited him in a particular place, at a particular moment?

He had a curious feeling of repetition, of doing something that he had done before, as he followed the street. Reaching the entrance of Falman Alley, he took out his watch. By walking briskly and following the alley, he would reach the Belvedere Club punctually. But if he went on around the next block, he would be a little late. Balcoth knew that his prospective patron, Claud Wishhaven, was almost a martinet in demanding punctuality from himself and from others. So he took the alley.

The place appeared to be entirely deserted, as in his vision. Midway, Balcoth approached the half-seen door—a rear entrance of the huge warehouse—which had formed the termination of the time prospect. The door was his last visual impression, for something descended on his head at that moment, and his consciousness was blotted out by the supervening night he had provisioned. He had been sandbagged, very quietly and efficiently, by a twenty-first century thug. The blow was fatal; and time, as far as Balcoth was concerned, had come to an end.

Farewell to Eden

by Theodore Sturgeon

There was nothing in his mind but a warm blackness, or perhaps a very dark redness. There was a field of it in which he was lying, a sheet of it over him; the field reached from his back into infinity and the sheet was as thick as the universe. The darkness was in his eyes and in his lungs, in his bones. He was part of the darkness, inside and out, through and through.

He could never know how long it was that he stared at the spot of light before he realized that it was there. There was no way of telling how large it was—or how small—how near or how distant. It was vague; it had no discernible limits, no edges. It grew until it was an oval patch of clear yellow light in the surrounding darkness.

And at last it was more than a patch of light; it was a hole in the darkness through which he could see. He saw a mechanical elbow, a housing from the ends of which two metal arms extended down and into the impenetrable darkness beside him. The arms were moving rhythmically.

Something was fraying the edges of the oval hole. A translucent border ate away at the darkness, continuously feeding the patch of clear light, slowly pushing back the darkness.

And then he began to feel—a surge of sensation, a tickling, prickling wash of feeling. It had the rhythm

of the moving metal arms. It was pins-and-needles, "my foot's asleep," the seed of unconsciousness in the lungs of a man being gassed. It was comfort and agony; as it grew and as it faded he wanted to laugh, but when it was at its peak he wanted to scream.

When at last he could see everything around him he did not know when it was that the widening hole had become the real world, spreading to his horizons and beyond, having eaten and eaten at the dark until the last round speck of black had ceased to exist somewhere behind him, far, far out in infinity.

The housing above him with its pair of moving arms was only one of many, one of eight. The sixteen arms reached down to his body. At their ends were padded packages of something—something which pulsed and tingled—and the arms were making these packages massage his skin, back and forth, down and back, over and over, with the same firm pressure, the constant rhythm. This rhythm paralleled the washes of prickling agony, of tickling pleasure.

He was lying on his back, naked. His body was free. Either he could not move it or he did not think of trying. His head was clamped; he felt a padded band on each side. Suddenly this seemed an affront, an insult. He moved his head—and was rewarded by a stab of anguish which came, not from within him, a protest of disused muscles, but from outside, from the head-clamp.

He did not try to fight it. Lying quite still, he felt four thick needles being withdrawn from the back of his neck, easing a pressure he had not known was there. When they were gone he began to suffocate.

The light dimmed. The spot of red-blackness reappeared and grew, spreading fast—much faster than it had left him. Now it was his horizon—now its edges

were an oval before him—now they had enclosed the housing above his head. With the growth of the darkness a pressure that became a pain grew into a tearing agony, unbearable. All the pain and all the fear that had ever been, since the beginning of time, sat on his chest.

To move it, to get away from it, to stop that deadly agony, he breathed.

When he drew in the first breath the darkness stopped growing. When he breathed again the oval of light widened and the pain lessened. With yet another breath, the oval widened again and stopped, and the pain became even less. With each breath he drove back the darkness. So he breathed more deeply, a little faster. It became easier to do as the darkness and the pain fled away from him, to his horizons, back and around behind him somewhere, dwindled to a patch, a spot, a speck—and ceased to exist.

He laughed then, and moved his head confidently against the clamps. They broke and fell away—

The inside of his mouth, his tongue and his teeth, were ice-cold. The rest of his body was warm—too warm on the outside, around a core of cold. Having laughed and moved his head, he fell asleep, still on his back, but with his head turned sidewise and a smile on his lips. The arms, with their pulsing, tingling pads, kept working while he slept.

The veil of sleep had thinned about him and was easily torn by the breath of laughter which awoke him. He opened his eyes and lay looking, seeing nothing but the laughter—it was gone, but he could see it: a rushing of golden steps; veined gold, the veins full of wind-whispers, for it was not a completely voiced laugh, but partly an alive, joyful expulsion of unwanted pressure.

At first he thought it was the memory of his own laugh, but on looking, as it were, at the fingerprints of the laugh—on the particular sensory impression the sound had made he found them not in his throat, as if he himself had made it, but in his ears.

He sat up. Blood roared in his head. Blackness closed, filmed, and cleared away. He raised his head and saw that the metal arms were folded up out of the way now, motionless. He was on a complicated bed, over which was a great transparent hood. This had separated at his right and a second had slid downward—a section the full length of the bed. It was an invitation, and though he was conscious of no desire to move, he reacted to the fact of the open door. He swung his legs out and sat on the edge, and began to tremble with weakness. He looked around.

There were three lights, two of which he could see, the third one under a deep shade. One was over his head, one on the wall, the shaded one between him and the wall, flooding another bed like his with light. On it the eight pairs of metal arms were moving rhythmically, the pads at their ends pressing and caressing a woman. It seemed that the pressure of them went down into the body, coating itself like a paint on the bones, layer on layer, and he knew, somehow, that these layers were life and that when they were thick enough to include the skin the whole woman would be alive. It must be, he thought (in a way which was not thought at all) that a part of her must have been alive before the pads started moving, so that they would have something on which to lay their paint. She must have been—the alive part—only a wire woman, a line drawing of living threads, one for each arm, one for each leg, one for the torso, and a knot for the head.

She was naked. Her body was young and firm. It in-

terested him only as part of the moving unit, with its padded arms stroking and pressing. He slid off his bed to the floor, cushioning his fall with knees and hands. His elbows refused to hold him up and his chin went almost to the floor. He stayed there for a moment in an equilibrium like that of his first breath, when he had stopped the darkness but had not yet driven it back. Then, as he had done before, he threw off the discomfort and straightened his elbows, his back straining to help. He dragged himself across the floor and squatted back on his haunches to watch.

To watch, hé had to hold his head up higher than normal. It hurt to do this and he began to tremble again, but for a long, tense period—three minutes, four perhaps—he watched. The pads moved on her feet, pressing and stroking; at every third stroke one would sweep around and run up the sole of her foot, from heel to toe. Another pair tended her calves, one inside, one outside. The flesh beneath them swelled and hollowed, swelled and hollowed into complete quiescence while the inside pad made its special trip—one in every fifth movement—over her kneecap. There was a pair of pads for each thigh, running from the knee to the hollow of her groin, and a pair which danced around each other to alternate with them on the groin then to follow upward to the lower ribs and back. Another pair swept between her breasts and downward, around to the back and up to the ribs, where the others had finished; every twelfth stroke pressed downward from her collarbones to her solar plexus, ignoring the route around to her back.

He watched in wonder. After a short while his head sagged. He turned it, and fell asleep again, squatting his cheekbone on his knee and the top of his head against the side of the woman's bed.

It was another sound that awoke him the next time. Again he opened his eyes and looked for it, found it and examined it, though it was gone. Again he failed to find the imprint of it in him anywhere, and he understood, too, that it was not from the woman. The laugh—the second one—had been hers; he knew that. This new sound came from neither of them.

He raised his head and, doing so, swayed forward. He put out an arm to keep from falling, and the act further awakened him.

The woman was lying beside him, sprawled brokenly on the floor. She looked at him and away, looked around her—and back to him again. She lay as if she had done what he had done—as if she had left her bed and slid to the floor. But she had not crawled; she lay there beside him, taking in the room, his bed, herself, and him.

"Gowry."

That was the sound, coming again. It did a strange thing to him. He looked for the source of the sound. He could not find it, but inside he—recognized something: those syllables meant something of surpassing importance, but he could not determine what it was—

"Gowry!"

He looked for the source of sound and could not find it. He saw that the woman was looking at him.

"Gowry!"

He looked again—and saw it. It was a cone, its wide mouth pointing at him, its throat a smooth, bland disc of metal. He turned to the woman, and she was looking at him.

There was a silence. He thought, *When it says "Gowry" I look for the sound and she looks at me.*

"Gowry."

He looked at the cone quickly, and then at the girl.

The thing had spoken and he had looked at it, but she had looked at him.

He said, "Gowry." His mind reached out, comprehension close—

"Gowry—" the woman faltered.

He nodded. He understood now—he was Gowry.

"Gowry?"

His breath hissed out in response; he drew in more and tried again: "Yes-s-s," he said. "Yes." Then: "Yes, s-s-silf—Tilsa—Tilsa."

"Tilsa," said the woman.

They were quiet for a moment, looking at each other. The cone said, "*Tilsa!*"

She looked at the cone, and he looked at her. He understood immediately that she was Tilsa. She was Tilsa; he was Gowry.

He put out his hand, and she looked at it. He was not yet strong enough to hold it up; it fell to the floor beside her, and she stared at it. Then, swiftly, unexpectedly, sleep overcame her.

For a long while he squatted there, looking at her; then he slept too.

He awoke with an awareness of something within himself. He lay with his eyes closed, relaxed and receptive. He knew, somehow, that he was strong now, that if he moved he would not tremble—knew it so well that he did not have to try to move.

There was a skin full of knowledge within him—a thin skin, stretched tight by the knowledge it held. The knowledge swirled and swelled, stretching the skin tighter and more transparent every second. He saw things inside the skin—

A bearded face. A clutter of rusty, crumbled ruin. A flight of dart-shaped aircraft, with a sound to them like a blow-torch in a barrel. The sun shining on rolling

green lawns, and, repeatedly, black, star-spangled space in which a cloudy planet floated. The tones of a voice were there too, circling and weaving amid the swirling knowledge. The voice meant something to him. Suddenly he knew what it was; it was the voice which had said, "*Gowry!*" and "*Tilsa!*"—the voice from the cone. It was not his voice; it belonged to a thing—a person, someone who knew him, knew Tilsa, too—everything about them.

"Gowry—"

He opened his eyes. Tilsa was awake, still lying on the floor, looking at him and smiling. He was on his bed; he must have dragged himself back to it in the beginnings of sleep.

Suddenly, harshly, he said, "Be quiet." He hardly realized he had used the words. Her call had punctured the skin of knowledge within him; it burst and flooded his mind, a bewildering deluge. He shut Tilsa out with his voice and his eyelids, to be alone with the knowledge again.

The bearded face was—Alan. Alan was Tilsa's father. He was dead. The ruined cities were dead. The flights of dart-like aircraft had killed them. The rolling green lawns were outside his room—was it a room? Wasn't it more a machine, some kind of equipment?

The room, or machine, was by itself, away from all the world, carved out of a forest on the floor of a deep ravine in mesa country. The ravine was deep, wider at the bottom than at the top, most secret. He remembered sunlight on the lawns because they used to snatch at it, he and Tilsa, as it whisked by day after day, for their hurried half hour of basking as the stripe of sunlight swept finger-like over their hidden buildings.

The world was mad. The world was an insane worm, toothed and hating itself. It broke itself in two, in four, in eight, and each part was toothed and hating itself and

all the other parts. Each part fought, biting and tearing at itself and the parts of itself in a fury of immolation. The worm was man, a species destroying itself, a race destroying itself; a culture, a nation, a city—a single human being snapping and snarling at his internal selves.

"But you'll be saved," Alan had said; "The radioactive dusts will soon be filtering down to us, even out here. You can imagine what it must be in the cities. Most of them will die, most of those who don't will be sterile, and probably the few who can breed won't breed true. But you will, you and Tilsa; you'll do it—*there*."

"There" was the cloudy planet, afloat in space. Its clouds were not like the ones here; its atmosphere held different elements, poisonous to the animals of Earth. They would have been to Gowry and Tilsa too, then—before their long sleep, the longest sleep any humans had ever slept; before the tireless, meticulous workings of their bed-machines. Their bodies had "stopped" completely, through and through, and then the cells had been altered, each a little, to rest awhile, and then to be altered a little more.

Now they were—and were not—Gowry and Tilsa, even as any human, in seven years, has completely replaced every cell of his body and is—and is not—the same. But the replacement in Gowry and Tilsa was an adjustment to another environment, even to a slightly different gravity. They were aliens on Earth now, as a ship is an alien—a manufactured alien—when it lies completed and as yet dry in the launching ways.

Gowry sat up, swung his legs to the floor, and stood up, stretching. He felt the good muscles of his back and thighs. He flexed and watched his fingers. "I remember," he said simply.

Tilsa shaped her mouth around words: "I—remember—too."

"Alan, and—the ship, Tilsa—the ship!"

"Yes, it's up there." She pointed at the ceiling.

He laughed. "He did it—Alan did it!"

Tilsa rose, feeling air—the new kind of air—in her lungs, feeling the new way her body obeyed. "Wasn't there a—something we had to do first?"

"I don't remember," he said. "Where's the ship?"

He cast about him; there was a door with a great stainless-steel bar across it. He lifted against the bar, and immediately the flat-throated cone spoke:

"Have you read the book?"

"That was it—the thing I couldn't remember!" Tilsa cried.

The book was on a shelf under the wall light. They pounced on it. Its opening words were in very simple language, as if written for the benefit of young children: *You, man, are Gowry. You, woman, are Tilsa. Read this book. Do not go out of this room until you have read this book.*

There were tests to be made on themselves, and on the air. There were solutions to be mixed from the racks of stores they found. There was much to be learned, but they learned it with increasing ease; they had learned it all once before, prior to their long sleep. It was an engrossing study, and they slept twice before they finished it. And then they opened the door.

Outside was a corridor to another closed door. On the wall hung two heavy suits, with transparent spherical helmets. Eagerly they climbed into them, inspected each other's fastenings. Then they closed the door behind them and opened the one ahead.

The Earth's air swirled in. They could see the water vapor in it with their new eyes; the air seemed turgid, misty. It frightened them a little, for they knew it was choking poison to them now.

They crossed a narrow gully to a place where two low mounds, rounded and covered with brush, stood against a rock wall. They looked at the mounds, appalled.

"They were pylons," Gowry breathed. "Tall, square pylons—"

"How many years?" asked Tilsa, expecting no answer.

Shrugging off his sudden sadness, Gowry took a tool from his belt and pressed a stud on the side of it. Blue flame licked out and washed over the cliff between what was left of the pylons. The deposits of years crumbled away under the lash of flame, and suddenly a great square section cracked and toppled toward them. They jumped back as it crashed and broke. Gowry put away the tool.

Before them was still another door. Gowry pressed it with his gloved hands, kicked it once with a heavy boot, and it swung open, admitting them to a shaft. They switched on the lights built into their suits, their beams shooting forward and upward.

A stainless-steel ladder took them up perhaps fifty feet to a room built off the side of the shaft. At this point the shaft was roofed by the banked tubes of the ship, and the room gave access to the ship's side. The ship seemed to fit in the shaft like a piston in its cylinder.

They entered the open port and, by means of the controls inside, swung it shut. There was the distant hum of machinery as the air in the lock was replaced with the atmosphere they had been readied for. Gowry's gloved hand touched Tilsa's and, suddenly overawed, he grasped it. It was such a long way they had come—and yet the journey was only beginning—

A green light flashed on, and the inner door swung open. They stepped into the ship. "It's all right," said Gowry, nodding toward the green light, and began to remove his suit.

They hung the suits carefully on the clips which had been built for them. For a moment they clung together, trembling. Then they mounted to the control room in the ship's nose, and found another book, a thick one.

"Remember?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Fuel, food, water, air; jet tests, star sights, course computations—We are going to be busy."

Gowry looked around the compact control room with learning, re-learning eyes. "Let's get to it," he said.

Two days later they had learned their ship and themselves, and had tested themselves and their ship. With every small step of progress they felt an increasing awe of Alan, and of the thing he had built. They remembered his words: "*Mankind is accursed everywhere. It must start anew, in a place which it has not burned over and ruined.*"

His words awed them, but even more the nature of his work awed them, for he did it knowing that he would never see the result, for a purpose transcending the two lives he was saving—saving and re-creating. He had done it as an act of faith in a creature which had violated every faith ever put in it. . . .

A rock-fall had damaged the great winch designed to raise the ship up through its tunnel until it could break through the surface of the mesa above them. They worked shoulder to shoulder to repair it, and at last had their craft with its nose to the outer air. They took their star sights, and found that in just four days they could blast off, hurl themselves free of the Earth's gravity, and run out to intersect the orbit of their new world.

They used the time to examine a tired planet and its graves, and the horrors that were worse than graves—mankind's living dead. With a tight-beam scanner they ranged the surface, throwing on a screen pictures of places near them, and of places far away.

"It's a sunny place," Tilsa observed, watching the screen. It seemed they had seen so little of the sun; they had been very young when they first came to the mesa.

"Look!" tore from Gowry's throat.

They saw a cliff, cave openings. Creatures squatted around a fire at the foot of the cliff. They were short and broad, their torsos as long and thick as Gowry's, but their legs seeming to have no thighs—short, stiff, thick, ending in enormous, flat, toeless feet. Some of them moved about slowly, their feet in a grotesque, shuffling dance; one or two, approaching faster from a distance, vaulted along on their knuckles, making crutches of their arms.

Burning and sputtering on the coals of the fire was—one of their own. They tore off handfuls of the hot, half-raw meat, gnawing at it with yellow fangs.

Gowry's throat was thick with nausea. "Humanity's children," he whispered, and spun the control to blank the screen. "What the world must have gone through while we slept," he mused, "to have such things fit to survive here."

"Look some more," said Tilsa. Her face was rapt, half-hypnotized with revulsion. "We should know—we should find out everything we can—"

Reluctantly Gowry turned to the controls again, scanning the Earth. He stopped briefly here and there. A ruined, grave-quiet city. A road, beautiful in its narrowing course, but with its surface crumbled and overgrown. Quiet valleys, untouched and lovely. Deserts where crawling giant weeds had choked out all life, including their own. Then came the picture they were never to forget.

"Tilsa—a different kind!"

They saw a house, seemingly of metal, in rolling coun-

try near wooded mountains. It was hexagonal, quite low, with a shining, peaked roof. There were creatures near it—two of them.

They were tall, slender, blue-hued, with long heads and curved, muscular tails. They ran out into the sun in great, graceful leaps. They stopped, hand in hand, brought their free hands to touch too, and their tails curved up over their heads until they touched each other. They stood there in this curious contact for a long moment.

"Why—how beautiful" cried Tilsa.

Then, from the foot of the meadow in which they stood, like a spilling over of some foul container, came a mass of the short-legged humanoids. The crutch-like sweep of their long arms advanced them with terrifying speed as they crowded up the slope—

"Look out! Run!" Gowry shouted at the screen, uselessly.

The blue creatures stood, oblivious of their danger, until the leaders of the horde were on them. They did not appear to resist. There was a swirl of motion, a piling up of the ravening humanoids, and it was over. One by one, they crept away from the snarling mob, bearing grisly blue fragments which they tore to bits with their teeth—and spat out.

"No more," Tilsa said faintly. "No more—"

Gowry turned off the set and sank down beside her. "What for?" he said, as if to himself. "What did they do it for?"

"They saw a difference," she said, her eyes agonized. "Mankind has always pulled down and destroyed anything that is different. Even if the differences are slight, they will be sought out. Alan used to say that if there was just one human left on earth he would kill himself because of the differences he would find in his own thought."

"It won't be that way with us," he said quietly.

"No, it can't be—it can't."

Their time came. The automatic machinery clicked and hummed and purred about its many tasks. Gowry fed a punched card into the course integrator and switched it on; the ship would blast off at the precise instant for which it was set.

They strapped themselves into the acceleration chairs, side by side. Moving his hand spiderwise against the restraining fabric, Gowry edged it over until it touched Tilsa's. To his surprise, she pulled away.

"Don't," she said. "You make me think of those blue ones—"

The jets thundered and they hurtled away; the great shaft fell in on itself under the battering thrust of the flames.

They both blacked out. When Gowry came to he was aware first of his laboring heart and the great pressure which lay upon him. At seven gravities, his limbs weighed hundreds of pounds; his eyeballs ached and his heart all but groaned its protest. He forced his eyelids open and looked ahead, and his heart began to beat more strongly, exultantly—before him was the majesty of interstellar space, a bejeweled purple curtain.

Eight and a half hours later the acceleration cut down to a more comfortable two and a third gravities. Breathing was easier, and they could talk. But they said little, instead lying in the chairs, drinking in the wonder before them.

The days fled, marked only by the clock, by hunger and sleep. Once Tilsa spoke of the blue beings: "I wish I had never seen them. I wish I didn't know about the part of humanity, that kills for nothing."

"Think of this ship," he told her, "of that part of humanity that made Alan do this work."

"Waste," she murmured. "That's the sin of it—the

waste. Oh, the songs men have sung, the fine and beautiful things written and painted and built—all come to ruination—” She wept. “Oh, the waste—”

“Humanity’s trademark,” he said bitterly. “Stamped, sooner or later, on all of man’s works.”

She stroked the edge of the instrument panel. “Not all,” she pleaded; “not all—”

They made their planetfall with Gowry at the manual controls. Round and round the cloudy globe they went, the braking rockets roaring, until at last the outer skin of the ship trembled to a high screaming—atmosphere. They plunged through it and out again, letting it check their speed but not taking enough to burn them, meteor-like. He threw out blast after blast from the forward jets and they entered the atmosphere again, lost it, took it, held it—and began to spiral in.

He kicked in the six gyro-controlled supporting jets, which blasted down and outward. They settled, until they were in the white sea of cloud around the planet. Blinded by it, they turned on the scanner and coupled the supporting jets to the radar altimeter. They passed a mountain range, and another, and a long series of foothills, and a great sea. And at last, in the radarscope, they saw a coast.

Gowry slid the ship in toward it. He touched the water; the ship porpoised with a grinding wrench, settled and skipped again, rode the surface until it slowed enough to displace some of its weight. Huge sheets of spray whipped out, and the ship floated. Gowry kicked it forward with the jets, driving it confidently up onto the beach, where it stopped and rolled a little to the right, to lie still like some great sea animal.

“Beautifully done, darling!”

“Thanks,” he said proudly. “It wasn’t anything you could work up to—had to be done right the first time. Are you running the atmosphere tests?”

"All done, while you were piloting in." She held up a phial of purple fluid. "It reacts perfectly—and Alan's gravity, magnetic-density, and radio-active indices all check. Let's go out!" she caroled.

"The suits—"

"Damn the suits, darling—we're *home!*"

Laughing, they ran to the airlock, waited impatiently for the outside door to open. As it rolled back, Gowry caught her wrist.

"No, you don't," he said, checking her as she was about to leap. "We go into Our House like this," and he swept her into his arms and stepped through the port, dropping easily to the ground beneath.

"Put me down!" she commanded. "I want to run!"

He let her go and she was off like a deer, into the mist. Shouting delightedly, he sprinted after her. He caught her on a knoll, a little hummocky island of ground in the surrounding mist. He pressed her to him, captured her laughing mouth with his lips. . . .

There was something near them in the fog. He raised his head, holding her tight, and saw it settle down through the air a little way off—something big, angular, metallic—

A house—a hexagonal house, he wondered mutely; like the blue people's house—But this is a ship—and their house was a ship, then; and they—

Out of the hexagonal ship tumbled scores of them: blue people—but blue people dwarfed and transformed, with knotty little tails and shambling limbs, without the leaping grace, their beauty warped and gone—

It was over in seconds. One by one the blue mutants crawled away, spitting out the torn, bloody fragments.

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