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THE BEST FROM FANTASY and SCIENCE FICTION 18TH Series

Edited by EDWARD L. FERMAN

14 fantastic fables from the foremost Ferman phenomenon

J. G. Ballard
Ron Goulart
K. M. O'Donnell
Robert Sheckley
Harry Harrison
and many
others

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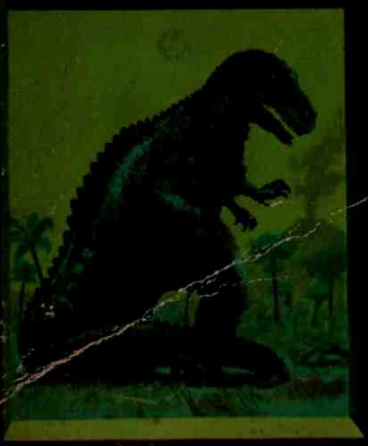

INTRODUCTION

It is always satisfying to see stories that we have bought and published with enthusiasm appear within hard covers, and compiling these annual collections has proven to be one of the most pleasant of my responsibilities. This year—1968—is no exception, but the job was preceded by another editorial task that I wish I had never had to perform: that of putting together a memorial tribute to Anthony Boucher for the August 1968 issue of F&SF. Tony Boucher, co-founder of the magazine and editor for its first nine years, died in April of 1968.

Tony's work in setting the concept and course of the magazine has certainly made my tenure as editor an easier one. The course has been more literary than experimental, but there has never been any doubt about the magazine's openness to new approaches. The introduction to the first issue (Fall, 1949) said: "To authors who have long wished to try their hand at this sort of thing and found the usual markets closed to such experiments, let me assure you that the latch-string is out and the welcome mat freshly dusted. Send us your material. There is no formula." In his introduction to the seventh book in this series, Boucher spoke approvingly of "The ever-renewed challenges of different approaches to the craft (or indeed the art) of science fiction."

Th past year or so has seen a variety of new approaches to sf gaining wider exposure. New approaches imply a broadening of horizon, a removal of boundaries, and beyond that I'll not try to analyze the rumblings

of the various "new things" here. Each author's commitment to different ideas and techniques has a way of producing stories unique enough to split apart literary trends and groupings before they begin to solidify.

The point is that it has always been hard to determine what makes a story "sf," and with the challenge of new approaches it becomes even harder.

The course set by Anthony Boucher makes this situation an easy one for F&SF to live with; the absence of a "formula" has allowed the magazine to be receptive to new approaches without abandoning the traditional ones. This, we think, works to the advantage of the reader who is looking for diverse and literate entertainment, and we hope that the stories which follow will bear us out.

Edward L. Ferman

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THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION: 18TH SERIES

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

Editor's Dedication:

TO JUDITH MERRIL AND ISAAC ASIMOV,

THE BEST OF CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

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Gahan Wilson for the cartoons

CONTENTS

J. G. Ballard has described Vermilion Sands as an "exotic suburb" of his mind, and that is the setting for this tale of three men who soar in gliders to the clouds and carve them into likenesses of sea-horses and unicorns, lizards and birds, and, finally and tragically, into the portrait of an insane woman.

THE CLOUD-SCULPTORS OF CORAL D

by J. G. Ballard

All summer the cloud-sculptors would come from Vermilion Sands and sail their painted gliders above the coral towers that rose like white pagodas beside the highway to Lagoon West. The tallest of the towers was Coral D, and here the rising air above the sand-reefs was topped by swan-like clumps of fair-weather cumulus. Lifted on the shoulders of the air above the crown of Coral D, we would carve sea-horses and unicorns, the portraits of presidents and film-stars, lizards and exotic birds. As the crowd watched from their cars, a cool rain would fall on to the dusty roofs, weeping from the sculptured clouds as they sailed across the desert floor towards the sun.

Of all the cloud-sculptures we were to carve, the strangest were the portraits of Leonora Chanel. As I look back to that afternoon last summer when she first came in her white limousine to watch the cloud-sculptors of Coral D, I know we barely realised how seriously this beautiful but insane woman regarded the sculptures floating above her in that calm sky. Later her portraits, carved in the whirl-wind, were to weep their storm-rain upon the corpses of their sculptors.

I had arrived in Vermilion Sands three months earlier. A retired pilot, I was painfully coming to terms with a broken leg and the prospect of never flying again. Driving into the desert one day, I stopped near the coral

towers on the highway to Lagoon West. As I gazed at these immense pagodas stranded on the floor of this fossil sea, I heard music coming from a sand-reef two hundred yards away. Swinging on my crutches across the sliding sand, I found a shallow basin among the dunes where sonic statues had run to seed beside a ruined studio. The owner had gone, abandoning the hangar-like building to the sand-rays and the desert, and on some half-formed impulse I began to drive out each afternoon. From the lathes and joists left behind I built my first giant kites and, later, gliders with cockpits. Tethered by their cables, they would hang above me in the afternoon air like amiable ciphers.

One evening, as I wound the gliders down on to the winch, a sudden gale rose over the crest of Coral D. While I grappled with the whirling handle, trying to anchor my crutches in the sand, two figures approached across the desert floor. One was a small hunchback with a child's overlit eyes and a deformed jaw twisted like an anchor barb to one side. He scuttled over to the winch and wound the attered gliders towards the ground, his powerful shoulders pushing me aside. He helped me on to my crutches and peered into the hangar. Here my most ambitious glider to date, no longer a kite but a sail-plane with elevators and control lines, was taking shape on the bench.

He spread a large hand over his chest. "Petit Manuel acrobat and weight-lifter. Nolan!" he bellowed. "Look at this!" His companion was squatting by the sonic statues, twisting their helixes so that their voices became more resonant. "Nolan's an artist," the hunchback confided to me. "He'll build you gliders like condors."

The tall man was wandering among the gliders, touching their wings with a sculptor's hand. His morose eyes were set in a face like a bored Gauguin's He glanced at the plaster on my leg and my faded flying jacket, and gestured at the gliders. "You've given cockpit to them, major." The remark contained a complete understanding

of my motives. He pointed to the coral towers rising above us into the evening sky. "With silver iodide we could carve the clouds."

The hunchback nodded encouragingly to me, his eyes lit by an astronomy of dreams.

So were formed the cloud-sculptors of Coral D. Although I considered myself one of them, I never flew the gliders, but I taught Nolan and little Manuel to fly, and later, when he joined us, Charles Van Eyck. Nolan had found this blond-haired pirate of the cafe terraces in Vermilion Sands, a laconic teuton with droll eyes and a weak mouth, and brought him out to Coral D when the season ended and the well-to-do tourists and their nubile daughters returned to Red Beach. "Major Parker—Charles Van Eyck. He's a headhunter." Nolan commented with cold humour, "—maidenheads." Despite their uneasy rivalry I realised that Van Eyck would give our group a useful dimension of glamour.

From the first I suspected that the studio in the desert was Nolan's, and that we were all serving some private whim of this dark-haired solitary. At the time, however, I was more concerned with teaching them to fly—first on cable, mastering the updraughts that swept the stunted turret of Coral A, smallest of the towers, then the steeper slopes of B and C, and finally the powerful currents of Coral D. Late one afternoon, when I began to wind them in, Nolan cut away his line. The glider plummeted onto its back, diving down to impale itself on the rock spires. I flung myself to the ground as the cable whipped across my car, shattering the windshield. When I looked up, Nolan was soaring high in the tinted air above Coral D. The wind, guardian of the coral towers, carried him through the islands of cumulus that veiled the evening light.

As I ran to the winch, the second cable went, and little Manuel swerved away to join Nolan. Ugly crab on the ground, in the air the hunchback became a bird with immense wings, outflying both Nolan and Van Eyck. I

watched them as they circled the coral towers, and then swept down together over the desert floor, stirring the sand-rays into soot-like clouds. Petit Manuel was jubilant. He strutted around me like a pocket Napoleon, contemptuous of my broken leg, scooping up handfuls of broken glass and tossing them over his head like bouquets to the air.

Two months later, as we drove out to Coral D on the day we were to meet Leonora Chanel, something of this first feeling of exhilaration had faded. Now that the season had ended few tourists travelled to Lagoon West, and often we would perform our cloud-sculpture to the empty highway. Sometimes Nolan would remain behind in his hotel, drinking by himself on the bed, or Van Eyck would disappear for several days with some widow or divorcee, and Petit Manuel and I would go out alone.

Nonetheless, as the four of us drove out in my car that afternoon and saw the clouds waiting for us above the spire of Coral D, all my depression and fatigue vanished. Ten minutes later the three cloud-gliders rose into the air and the first cars began to stop on the highway. Nolan was in the lead in his black-winged glider, climbing straight to the crown of Coral D two hundred feet above, while Van Eyck soared to and fro below, showing his blond mane to a middle-aged woman in a topaz convertible. Behind them came little Manuel, his candy-striped wings slipping and churning in the disturbed air. Shouting happy obscenities, he flew with his twisted knees, huge arms gesticulating out of the cockpit.

The three gliders, brilliant painted toys, revolved like lazing birds above Coral D, waiting for the first clouds to pass overhead. Van Eyck moved away to take a cloud. He sailed around its white pillow, spraying the sides with iodide crystals and cutting away the flock-like tissue. The steaming shards fell towards us like crumbling ice-drifts. As the drops of condensing spray fell on my face, I could see Van Eyck shaping an immense horse's

head. He sailed up and down the long forehead and chiselled out the eyes and ears.

As always, the people watching from their cars seemed to enjoy this piece of aerial marzipan. It sailed overhead, carried away on the wind from Coral D. Van Eyck followed it down, wings lazing around the equine head. Meanwhile Petit Manuel worked away at the next cloud. As he sprayed its sides, a familiar human head appeared through the tumbling mist. Manuel caricatured the high wavy mane, strong jay but slipped mouth from the cloud with a series of deft passes, wing-tips almost touching each other as he dived in and out of the portrait.

The glossy white head, an unmistakable parody of Van Eyck in his own worst style, crossed the highway towards Vermilion Sands. Manuel slid out of the air, stalling his glider to a landing beside my car as Van Eyck stepped from his cockpit with a forced smile.

We waited for the third display. A cloud formed over Coral D, within a few minutes had blossomed into a pristine fair-weather cumulus. As it hung there Nolan's black-winged glider plunged out of the sun. He soared around the cloud, cutting away its tissues. The soft fleece fell towards us in a cool rain.

There was a shout from one of the cars. Nolan turned from the cloud, his wings slipping as if unveiling his handiwork. Illuminated by the afternoon sun was the serene face of a three-year-old child. Its wide cheeks framed a placid mouth and plump chin. As one or two people clapped, Nolan sailed over the cloud and rippled the roof into ribbons and curls.

However, I knew that the real climax was yet to come. Cursed by some malignant virus, Nolan seemed unable to accept his own handiwork, always destroying it with the same cold humour. Petit Manuel had thrown away his cigarette, and even Van Eyck had turned his attention from the women in the cars.

Nolan soared above the child's face, following like a matador waiting for the moment of the kill. There was silence for a minute as he worked away at the cloud, and

then someone slammed a car door in disgust.

Hanging above us was the white image of a skull.

The child's face, converted by a few strokes, had vanished, but in the notched teeth and gaping orbits, large enough to hold a car, we could still see an echo of its infant features. The spectre moved past us, the spectators frowning at this weeping skull whose rain fell upon their faces.

Half-heartedly I picked my old flying helmet off the back seat and began to carry it around the cars. Two of the spectators drove off before I could reach them. As I hovered about uncertainly, wondering why on earth a retired and well-to-do Air Force officer should be trying to collect these few dollar bills, Van Eyck stepped behind me and took the helmet from my hand.

"Not now, major. Look at what arrives—my apocalypse . . ."

A white Rolls-Royce, driven by a chauffeur in braided cream livery, had turned off the highway. Through the tinted communication window a young woman in a secretary's day suit spoke to the chauffeur. Beside her, a gloved hand still holding the window strap, a white-haired woman with jewelled eyes gazed up at the circling wings of the cloud-glider. Her strong and elegant face seemed sealed within the dark glass of the limousine like the enigmatic madonna of some marine grotto.

Van Eyck's glider rose into the air, soaring upwards to the cloud that hung above Coral D. I walked back to my car, searching the sky for Nolan. Above, Van Eyck was producing a pastiche Mona Lisa, a picture postcard gioconda as authentic as a plaster virgin. Its glossy finish shone in the over-bright sunlight as if enamelled together out of some cosmetic foam.

Then Nolan dived from the sun behind Van Eyck. Rolling his black-winged glider past Van Eyck's, he drove through the neck of the gioconda, and with the flick of a wing toppled the broad-cheeked head. It fell towards the cars below. The features disintegrated into a flaccid mess, sections of the nose and jaw tumbling

through the steam. Then wings brushed. Van Eyck fired his spray gun at Nolan, and there was a flurry of torn fabric. Van Eyck fell from the air, steering his glider down to a broken landing.

I ran over to him. "Charles, do you have to play Von Richthofen? For God's sake, leave each other alone!"

Van Eyck waved me away. "Talk to Nolan, major. I'm not responsible for his air piracy." He stood in the cockpit, gazing over the cars as the shreds of fabric fell around him.

I walked back to my car, deciding that the time had come to disband the cloud-sculptors of Coral D. Fifty yards away the young secretary in the Rolls-Royce had stepped from the car and beckoned to me. Through the open door her mistress watched me with her jewelled eyes. Her white hair lay in a coil over one shoulder like a nacreous serpent.

I carried my flying helmet down to the young woman. Above a high forehead her auburn hair was swept back in a defensive bun, as if she were deliberately concealing part of herself. She stared with puzzled eyes at the helmet held out in front of her.

"I don't want to fly—what is it?"

"A grace," I explained. "For the repose of Michelangelo, Ed Keinholz and the cloud-sculptors of Coral D."

"Oh, my God. I think the chauffeur's the only one with any *money*. Look, do you perform anywhere else?"

"Perform?" I glanced from this pretty and agreeable young woman to the pale chimera with jewelled eyes in the dim compartment of the Rolls. She was watching the headless figure of the Mona Lisa as it moved across the desert floor towards Vermilion Sands. "We're not a professional troupe, as you've probably guessed. And obviously we'd need some fair-weather cloud. Where, exactly?"

"At Lagoon West." She took a snake-skinned diary from her handbag. "Miss Chanel is holding a series of garden parties. She wondered if you'd care to perform. Of course there would be a large fee."

"Chanel . . . Leonora Chanel, the . . . ?"

The young woman's face again took on its defensive posture, dissociating her from whatever might follow. "Miss Chanel is at Lagoon West for the summer. By the way, there's one condition I must point out—Miss Chanel will provide the sole subject matter. You do understand?"

Fifty yards away Van Eyck was dragging his damaged glider towards my car. Nolan had landed, a caricature of Cyrano abandoned in mid-air. Petit Manuel limped to and fro, gathering together the equipment. In the fading afternoon light they resembled a threadbare circus troupe.

"All right," I agreed. "I take your point. But what about the clouds, Miss—?"

"Lafferty. Beatrice Lafferty. Miss Chanel will provide the clouds."

I walked around the cars with the helmet, then divided the money between Nolan, Van Eyck and Manuel. They stood in the gathering dusk, the few bills in their hands, watching the highway below.

Leonora Chanel stepped from the limousine and strolled into the desert. Her white-haired figure in its cobra-skinned coat wandered among the dunes. Sand-rays lifted around her, disturbed by the random movements of this sauntering phantasm of the burnt afternoon. Ignoring their open stings around her legs, she was gazing up at the aerial bestiary dissolving in the sky, and at the white skull a mile away over Lagoon West that had smeared itself across the sky.

At the time I first saw her, watching the cloud-sculptors of Coral D, I had only a half-formed impression of Leonora Chanel. The daughter of one of the world's leading financiers, she was an heiress both in her own right and on the death of her husband, a shy Monacan aristocrat, Comte Louis Chanel. The mysterious circumstances of his death at Cap Ferrat on the Riviera, officially described as suicide, had placed Leonora in a

spotlight of publicity and gossip. She had escaped by wandering endlessly across the globe, from her walled villa in Tangier to an Alpine mansion in the snows above Pontresina, and from there to Palm Springs, Seville and Mykonos.

During these years of exile something of her character emerged from the magazine and newspaper photographs: moodily visiting a Spanish charity with the Duchess of Alba, or seated with Saroya and other members of cafe society on the terrace of Dali's villa at Port Lligat, her self-regarding face gazing out with its jewelled eyes at the diamond sea of the Costa Brava.

Inevitably her Garbo-like role seemed over-calculated, forever undermined by the suspicions of her own hand in her husband's death. The Count had been an introspective playboy who piloted his own aircraft to archaeological sites in the Peloponnese and whose mistress, a beautiful young Lebanese, was one of the world's pre-eminent keyboard interpreters of Bach. Why this reserved and pleasant man should have committed suicide was never made plain. What promised to be a significant exhibit at the coroner's inquest, a mutilated easel portrait of Leonora on which he was working, was accidentally destroyed before the hearing. Perhaps the painting revealed more of Leonora's character than she chose to see.

A week later, as I drove out to Lagoon West on the morning of the first garden party, I could well understand why Leonora Chanel had come to Vermilion Sands, to this bizarre, sand-bound resort with its lethargy, beach fatigue and shifting perspectives. Sonic statues grew wild along the beach, their voices keening as I swept past along the shore road. The fused silica on the surface of the lake formed an immense rainbow mirror that reflected the deranged colours of the sand-reefs, more vivid even than the cinnabar and cyclamen wing-panels of the cloud-gliders overhead. They soared in the sky above the lake like fitful dragonflies as Nolan, Van

Eyck and Petit Manuel flew them from Coral D.

We had entered an inflamed landscape. Half a mile away the angular cornices of the summer house jutted into the vivid air as if distorted by some faulty junction of time and space. Behind it, like an exhausted volcano, a broad-topped mesa rose into the glazed air, its shoulders lifting the thermal currents high off the heated lake.

Envying Nolan and little Manuel these tremendous updraughts, more powerful than any we had known at Coral D, I drove towards the villa. Then the haze cleared along the beach and I saw the clouds.

A hundred feet above the roof of the mesa, they hung like the twisted pillows of a sleepless giant. Columns of turbulent air moved within the clouds, boiling upwards to the anvil heads like liquid in a cauldron. These were not the placid, fair-weather cumulus of Coral D, but storm-nimbus, unstable masses of overheated air that could catch an aircraft and lift it a thousand feet in a few seconds. Here and there the clouds were rimmed with dark bands, their towers crossed by valleys and ravines. They moved across the villa, concealed from the lakeside heat by the haze overhead, then dissolved in a series of violent shifts in the disordered air.

As I entered the drive behind a truck filled with *son et lumiere* equipment, a dozen members of the staff were straightening lines of gilt chairs on the terrace and unrolling panels of a marquee.

Beatrice Lafferty stepped across the cables. "Major Parker—there are the clouds we promised you."

I looked up again at the dark billows hanging like shrouds above the white villa. "Clouds, Beatrice? Those are tigers, tigers with wings. We're manicurists of the air, not dragon-tamers."

"Don't worry, a manicure is exactly what you're expected to carry out." With an arch glance, she added: "Your men do understand that there's to be only one subject?"

"Miss Chanel herself? Of course." I took her arm as we

walked towards the balcony overlooking the lake. "You know, I think you enjoy these snide asides. Let the rich choose their materials—marble, bronze, plasma or cloud. Why not? Portraiture has always been a neglected art."

"My God, not here." She waited until a steward passed with a tray of table-cloths. "Carving one's portrait in the sky out of the sun and air—some people might say that smacked of vanity, or even worse sins."

"You're very mysterious. Such as?"

She played games with her eyes. "I'll tell you in a month's time when my contract expires. Now, when are your men coming?"

"They're here." I pointed to the sky over the lake. The three gliders hung in the overheated air, clumps of cloud-cotton drifting past them to dissolve in the haze. They were following a sand-yacht that approached the quay, its tyres throwing up the cerise dust. Behind the helmsman sat Leonora Chanel in a trouser suit of yellow alligator skin, her white hair hidden inside a black raffia toque.

As the helmsman moored the craft, Van Eyck and Petit Manuel put on an impromptu performance, shaping the fragments of cloud-cotton a hundred feet above the lake. First Van Eyck carved an orchid, then a heart and a pair of lips, while Manuel fashioned the head of a parakeet, two identical mice and the letters "L.C." As they dived and plunged around her, their wings sometimes touching the lake, Leonora stood on the quay, politely waving at each of these brief confections.

When they landed beside the quay, Leonora waited for Nolan to take one of the clouds, but he was sailing up and down the lake in front of her like a weary bird. Watching this strange chatelaine of Lagoon West, I noticed that she had slipped off into some private reverie, her gaze fixed on Nolan and oblivious of the people around her. Memories, caravels without sails, crossed the shadowy deserts of her burnt-out eyes.

Later that evening Beatrice Lafferty led me into the villa through the library window. There, as Leonora

greeted her guests on the terrace, wearing a topless dress of sapphires and organdy, her breasts covered only by their contour jewellery, I saw the portraits that filled the villa. I counted more than twenty, from the formal society portraits in the drawing rooms, one by the President of the Royal Academy, another by Annigoni, to the bizarre psychological studies in the bar and dining room by Dali and Francis Bacon. Everywhere we moved, in the alcoves between the marble semi-columns, in gilt miniatures on the mantel shelves, even in the ascending mural that followed the staircase, we saw the same beautiful, self-regarding face. This colossal narcissism seemed to have become her last refuge, the only retreat for her fugitive self in its flight from the world.

Then, in the studio on the roof, we came across a large easel portrait that had just been varnished. The artist had produced a deliberate travesty of the sentimental and powder-blue tints of a fashionable society painter, but beneath this gloss he had visualized Leonora as a dead Medea. The stretched skin below her right cheek, the sharp forehead and slipped mouth gave her the numbed and luminous appearance of a corpse.

My eyes moved to the signature. "Nolan! My God, were you here when he painted this?"

"It was finished before I came—two months ago. She refused to have it framed."

"No wonder." I went over to the window and looked down at the bedrooms hidden behind their awnings. "Nolan was *here*. The old studio near Coral D was his."

"But why should Leonora ask him back? They must have—"

"To paint her portrait again. I know Leonora Chanel better than you do, Beatrice. This time, though, the size of the sky."

We left the library and walked past the cocktails and canapes to where Leonora was welcoming her guests. Nolan stood beside her, wearing a suit of white suede. Now and then he looked down at her as if playing with the possibilities this self-obsessed woman gave to his

macabre humour. Leonora clutched at his elbow. With the diamonds fixed around her eyes she reminded me of some archaic priestess. Beneath the contour jewellery he breasts lay like eager snakes.

Van Eyck introduced himself with an exaggerated bow. Behind him came Petit Manuel, his twisted head ducking nervously among the tuxedos.

Leonora's mouth shut in a rictus of distaste. She glanced at the white plaster on my foot. "Nolan, you fill your world with cripples. Your little dwarf—will he fly too?"

Petit Manuel looked at her with eyes like crushed flowers.

The performance began an hour later. The dark-rimmed clouds were lit by the sun setting behind the mesa, the air crossed by wraiths of cirrus like the gilded frames of the immense paintings to come. Van Eyck's glider rose in a spiral towards the face of the first cloud, stalling and climbing again as the turbulent updraughts threw him across the air.

As the cheekbones began to appear, as smooth and lifeless as carved foam, applause rang out from the guests seated on the terrace. Five minutes later, when Van Eyck's glider swooped down onto the lake, I could see that he had excelled himself. Lit by the searchlights, and with the overture to Tristan sounding from the loud-speaker on the slopes of the mesa, as if inflating this huge bauble, the portrait of Leonora moved overhead, a faint rain falling from it. By luck the cloud remained stable until it passed the shoreline, and then broke up in the evening air as if ripped from the sky by an irritated hand.

Petit Manuel began his ascent, sailing in on a dark-edged clould like an urchin accosting a bad-tempered matron. He soared to and fro, as if unsure how to shape this unpredictable column of vapour, then began to carve it into the approximate contours of a woman's head. He seemed more nervous than I had ever seen

him. As he finished a second round of applause broke out, soon followed by laughter and ironic cheers.

The cloud, sculptured into a flattering likeness of Leonora, had begun to tilt, rotating in the disturbed air. The jaw lengthened, the glazed smile became that of an idiot's. Within a minute the gigantic head of Leonora Chanel hung upside down above us.

Discreetly I ordered the searchlights switched off, and the audience's attention turned to Nolan's black-winged glider as it climbed towards the next cloud. Shards of dissolving tissue fell from the darkening air, the spray concealing whatever ambiguous creation Nolan was carving. To my surprise, the portrait that emerged was wholly lifelike. There was a burst of applause, a few bars of Tannhauser, and the searchlights lit up the elegant head. Standing among her guests, Leonora raised her glass to Nolan's glider.

Puzzled by Nolan's generosity, I looked more closely at the gleaming face, and then realized what he had done. The portrait, with cruel irony, was all too lifelike. The downward turn of Leonora's mouth, the chin held up to smooth her neck, the fall of flesh below her right cheek—all these were carried on the face of the cloud as they had been in his painting in the studio.

Around Leonora the guests were congratulating her on the performance. She was looking up at her portrait as it began to break up over the lake, seeing it for the first time. The veins held the blood in her face.

Then a fireworks display on the beach blotted out these ambiguities in its pink and blue explosions.

Shortly before dawn Beatrice Lafferty and I walked along the beach among the shells of burnt-out rockets and catherine wheels. On the deserted terrace a few lights shone through the darkness onto the scattered chairs. As we reached the steps, a woman's voice cried out somewhere above us. There was the sound of smashed glass. A french window was kicked back, and a dark-haired man in a white suit ran between the tables.

As Nolan disappeared along the drive, Leonora Chanel walked out into the centre of the terrace. She looked at the dark clouds surging over the mesa, and with one hand tore the jewels from her eyes. They lay winking on the tiles at her feet. Then the hunched figure of Petit Manuel leapt from his hiding place in the bandstand. He scuttled past, racing on his bent legs.

An engine started by the gates. Leonora began to walk back to the villa, staring at her broken reflections in the glass below the window. She stopped as a tall, blond-haired man with cold and eager eyes stepped from the sonic statues outside the library. Disturbed by the noise, the status had begun to whine. As Van Eyck moved towards Lenora they took up the slow beat of his steps.

The next day's performance was the last by the cloud-sculptors of Coral D. All afternoon, before the guests arrived, a dim light lay over the lake. Immense tiers of storm-numbus were massing behind the mesa, and any performance at all seemed unlikely.

Van Eyck was with Leonora. As I arrived, Beatrice Lafferty was watching their sand-yacht carry them unevenly across the lake, its sails shipped by the squalls.

"There's no sign of Nolan or little Manuel," she told me. "The party starts in three hours."

I took her arm. "The party's already over. When you're finished here, Bea, come and live with me at Coral D. I'll teach you to sculpt the clouds."

Van Eyck and Leonora came ashore half an hour later. Van Eyck stared through my face as he brushed past. Leonora clung to his arm, the day-jewels around her eyes scattering their hard light across the terrace.

By eight, when the first guests began to appear, Nolan and Petit Manuel had still not arrived. On the terrace the evening was warm and lamplit, but overhead the storm-clouds sidled past each other like uneasy giants. I walked up the slope to where the gliders were tethered. Their wings shivered in the updraughts.

Barely half a minute after he rose into the darkening air, dwarfed by an immense tower of storm-nimbus, Charles Van Eyck was spinning towards the ground, his glider toppled by the crazed air. He recovered fifty feet from the villa and climbed on the updraughts from the lake, well away from the spreading chest of the cloud. He soared in again. As Leonora and her guests watched from their seats, the glider was hurled back over their heads in an explosion of vapour, then fell towards the lake with a broken wing.

I walked towards Leonora. Standing by the balcony were Nolan and Petit Manuel, watching Van Eyck climb from the cockpit of his glider three hundred yards away.

To Nolan I said: "Why bother to come? Don't tell me you're going to fly?"

Nolan leaned against the rail, hands in the pockets of his suit. "I'm not—that's why I'm here."

Leonora was wearing an evening dress of peacock feathers that lay around her legs in an immense train. The hundreds of eyes gleamed in the electric air before the storm, sheathing her body in their blue flames.

"Miss Chanel, the clouds are like madmen," I apologised. "There's a storm on its way."

She looked up at me with unsettled eyes. "Don't you people expect to take risks?" She gestured at the storm-nimbus that swirled over our heads. "For clouds like these I need a Michelangelo of the sky . . . What about Nolan? Is he too frightened as well?"

As she shouted his name, Nolan stared at her, then turned his back to us. The light over Lagoon West had changed. Half the lake was covered by a dim pall.

There was a tug on my sleeve. Petit Manuel looked up at me with his crafty child's eyes. "Raymond, I can go. Let me take the glider."

"Manuel, for God's sake. You'll kill—"

He darted between the gilt chairs. Leonora frowned as he plucked her wrist.

"Miss Chanel . . ." His loose mouth formed an en-

couraging smile. "I'll sculpt for you. Right now, a big storm-cloud, eh?"

She stared down at him, half-repelled by this eager hunchback ogling her beside the hundred eyes of her peacock train. Van Eyck was limping back to the beach from his wrecked glider. I guessed that in some strange way Manuel was pitting himself against Van Eyck.

Leonora grimaced, as if swallowing some poisonous phlegm. Major Parker, tell him to—" She glanced at the dark cloud boiling over the mesa like the effluvium of some black-hearted volcano. "Wait! Let's see what the little cripple can do!" She turned on Manuel with an over-bright smile. "Go on, then. Let's see you sculpt a whirlwind!"

In her face the diagram of bones formed a geometry of murder.

Nolan ran past across the terrace, his feet crushing the peacock feathers as Leonora laughed. We tried to stop Manuel, but he raced up the slope. Stung by Leonora's taunt, he skipped among the rocks, disappearing from sight in the darkening air. On the terrace a small crowd gathered to watch.

The yellow and tangerine glider rose into the sky and climbed across the face of the storm-cloud. Fifty yards from the dark billows it was buffeted by the shifting air, but Manuel soared in and began to cut away at the dark face. Drops of black rain fell across the terrace at our feet.

The first outline of a woman's head appeared, satanic eyes lit by the open vents in the cloud, a sliding mouth like a dark smear as the huge billows boiled forwards. Nolan shouted in warning from the lake as he climbed into his glider. A moment later little Manuel's craft was lifted by a powerful updraught and tossed over the roof of the cloud. Fighting the insane air, Manuel plunged the glider downwards and drove into the cloud again. Then its immense face opened, and in a sudden spasm the cloud surged forward and swallowed the glider.

There was silence on the terrace as the crushed body

of the craft revolved in the centre of the cloud. It moved over our heads, dismembered pieces of the wings and fuselage churned about in the dissolving face. As it reached the lake, the cloud began its violent end. Pieces of the face slewed sideways, the mouth was torn off, an eye exploded. It vanished in a last brief squall.

The pieces of Petit Manuel's glider fell from the bright air.

Beatrice Lafferty and I drove across the lake to collect Manuel's body. After the spectacle of this death within the exploding replica of their hostess's face, the guests began to leave. Within minutes the drive was full of cars. Leonora watched them go, standing with Van Eyck among the deserted tables.

Beatrice said nothing as we drove out. The pieces of the shattered glider lay over the fused sand, tags of canvas and broken struts, control lines tied into knots. Then yards from the cockpit I found Petit Manuel's body, lying in a wet ball like a drowned monkey.

I carried him back to the sand-yacht.

"Raymond!" Beatrice pointed to the shore. Storm-clouds were massed along the entire length of the lake, and the first flashes of lightning were striking in the hills behind the mesa. In the electric air the villa had lost its glitter. Half a mile away a tornado was moving along the valley floor, its trunk swaying towards the lake.

The first gusts of air struck the yacht. Beatrice shouted again: "Raymond! Nolan's there—he's flying inside it!"

Then I saw the black-winged glider circling under the umbrella of the tornado, Nolan himself riding in the whirlwind. His wings held steady in the revolting air around the funnel. Like a pilot fish he soared in, as if steering the tornado towards Leonora's villa.

Twenty seconds later, when it struck the house, I lost sight of him. An explosion of dark air overwhelmed the villa, a churning centrifuge of shattered chairs and tiles that burst over the roof. Beatrice and I ran from the yacht, and lay together in a fault in the glass surface.

As the tornado moved away, fading into the storm-filled sky, a dark squall hung over the wrecked villa, now and then flicking the debris into the air. Shreds of canvas and peacock feathers fell around us.

We waited half an hour before approaching the house. Hundreds of smashed glasses and broken chairs littered the terrace. At first I could see no signs of Leonora, although her face was everywhere, the portraits with their slashed profiles strewn on the damp tiles. An eddying smile floated towards me from the disturbed air, and wrapped itself around my leg.

Leonora's body lay among the broken tables near the bandstand, half-wrapped in a bleeding canvas. Her face was as bruised now as the storm-cloud Manuel had tried to carve.

We found Van Eyck in the wreck of the marquee. He was suspended by the neck from a tangle of electric wiring, his pale face wreathed in a noose of light bulbs. The current flowed intermittently through the wiring, lighting up his strangled eyes.

I leaned against the overturned Rolls, holding Beatrice's shoulders. "There's no sign of Nolan—no pieces of his glider."

"Poor man. Raymond, he was driving that whirlwind here. Somehow he was controlling it."

I walked across the damp terrace to where Leonora lay. I began silently to cover her with the shreds of canvas, the torn faces of herself.

I took Beatrice Lafferty to live with me in Nolan's studio in the desert near Coral D. We heard no more of Nolan, and never flew the gliders again. The clouds carry too many memories. Three months ago a man who saw the derelict gliders outside the studio stopped near Coral D and walked across to us. He told us he had seen a man flying a glider in the sky high above Red Beach, carving the strato-cirrus into images of Jewels and children's faces. Once there was a dwarf's head.

On reflection, that sounds rather like Nolan, so perhaps he managed to get away from the tornado. In the evenings Beatrice and I sit among the sonic statues, listening to their voices as the fair-weather clouds rise above Coral D, waiting for a man in a dark-winged glider, perhaps painted like candy now, who will come in on the wind and carve for us images of sea-horses and unicorns, dwarfs and jewels and children's faces.

This story grew from a "treatment" done by Robert Sheckley for ABC-TV's commendable but short-lived series, Stage 67. A "treatment" is basically a story idea synopsized in some detail; Mr. Sheckley was not involved with the script or production of this particular show. This prose account of Steve Baxter's perilous journey from Jersey City to Times Square is quite different in approach from the TV play; it is all Sheckley, and, as you will quickly determine, it is not entirely serious.

THE PEOPLE TRAP

by Robert Sheckley

It was Land Race Day—a time of vaunting hope and unrelieved tragedy, a day which epitomized the unhappy 21st century. Steve Baxter had tried to reach the Starting Line early, like the other contestants, but had miscalculated the amount of time he would require. Now he was in trouble. His Participant's Badge had gotten him through the outer, exocrowd without incident. But neither badge nor brawn could be relied upon to carry a man through the obdurate inner core of humanity which made up the endocrowd.

Baxter estimated this inner mass at 8.7 density—not far from the pandemic level. A flash point might occur at any moment, despite the fact that the authorities had just aerosoled the endocrowd with tranquilizers. Given

time, a man might circle around them, but Baxter had only six minutes.

Despite the risk, he pushed his way directly into their ranks. On his face he wore a fixed smile—absolutely essential when dealing with a high-density human configuration. He could see the Starting Line now, a raised dais in Jersey City's Glebe Park. The other contestants were already there. Another twenty yards, Steve thought; if only the brutes don't stampede!

But deep within the core-crowd he still had to penetrate the final nuclear mob. This was composed of bulky, slack-jawed men with unfocused eyes—agglutinating hysterophiliacs, in the jargon of the pandemiologists. Jammed together sardine fashion, reacting as a single organism, these men were incapable of anything but blind resistance and irrational fury toward anything that tried to pentrate their ranks.

Steve hesitated for a moment. The nuclear mob, more dangerous than the fabled water buffaloes of antiquity, glared at him, their nostrils flared, their heavy feet shuffling ominously.

Without allowing himself time to think, Baxter plunged into their midst. He felt blows on his back and heard the terrifying "urr" of a maddened endomob. Shapeless bodies jammed against him, suffocating him, relentlessly pressing closer and closer.

Then, providentially, the authorities turned on the Muzak. This ancient and mysterious music, which for over a century had pacified the most intractable berserkers, did not fail now. The endomob was decibelled into a temporary immobility, and Steve Baxter clawed his way through to the Starting Line.

The Chief Judge had already begun to read the Prospectus. Every contestant, and most of the spectators, knew this document by heart. Nevertheless, by law the Terms had to be stated.

"Gentlemen," the Judge read, "you are here assembled to take part in a Race for the acquisition of Public Domain lands. You fifty fortunate men have been chosen

by public lottery from fifty million registrants in the South Westchester region. The Race will proceed from this point to the Registration Line at the Land Office in Times Square, New York—an adjusted approximate mean distance of 5.7 statute miles. You contestants are permitted to take any route; to travel on the surface, above, or below ground. The only requirement is that you finish in person, substitutes not being permitted. The first ten Finalists—"

The crowd became deathly still.

"—will each receive one acre of unencumbered land complete with house and farming implements. And each Finalist will also be granted free government transportation to his freehold, for himself and his immediate family. And this aforesaid acre shall be his to have and to hold, free and clear, perpetually unalienable, as long as the sun shines and water flows, for him and his heirs, even unto the third generation!"

The crowd sighed when they heard this. Not a man among them had ever seen an unencumbered acre, much less dreamed of possessing one. An acre of land entirely for yourself and your family, an acre which you didn't have to share with anyone—well, it was simply beyond the wildest fantasy.

"Be it further noted," the Judge went on, "the government accepts no responsibility for deaths incurred during this contest. I am obliged to point out that the unweighted average mortality rate for Land Races is approximately 68.9%. Any Contestant who so wishes may withdraw now without prejudice."

The Judge waited, and for a moment Steve Baxter considered dropping the whole suicidal idea. Surely he and Adele and the kids and Aunt Flo and Uncle George could continue to get by somehow in their cozy one-room apartment in Larchmont's Fred Allen Memorial Median Income Housing Cluster . . . after all, he was no man of action, no muscled bravo or hairy-fisted brawler. He was a Systems Deformation consultant, and a good one. And he was also a mild-mannered ectomorph

with stringy muscles and a distinct shortness of breath. Why in God's name should he thrust himself into the perils of darkest New York, most notorious of the Jungle Cities?

"Better give it up, Steve," a voice said, uncannily echoing his thoughts.

Baxter turned and saw Edward Freihoff St. John, his wealthy and obnoxious neighbor from Larchmont. St. John, tall and elegant and whipcord-strong from his days on the paddleball courts. St. John, with his smooth, saturnine good looks, whose hooded eyes were too frequently turned toward Adele's blonde loveliness.

"You'll never make it, Stevie baby," St. John said.

"That is possible," Baxter said evenly. "But you, I suppose, will make it?"

St. John winked and lay a forefinger alongside his nose in a knowing gesture. For weeks he had been hinting about the special information he had purchased from a venal Land Race Comptroller. This information would vastly improve his chances of traversing Manhattan Borough—the densest and most dangerous urban concentration in the world.

"Stay out of it, Stevie baby," St. John said, in his peculiar rasping voice. "Stay out, and I'll make it worth your while. Whaddaya say, sweetie pie?"

Baxter shook his head. He did not consider himself a courageous man, but he would rather die than take a favor from St. John. And in any event, he could not go on as before. Under last month's Codicil to the Extended Families Domicile Act, Steve was now legally obliged to take in three unmarried cousins and a widowed aunt, whose one-room sub-basement apartment in the Lake Placid industrial complex had been wiped out by the new Albany-Montreal Tunnel.

Even with anti-shock injections, ten persons in one room were too many. He simply had to win a piece of land!

"I'm staying," Baxter said quietly.

"OK, sucker," St. John said, a frown marring his hard,

sardonic face. "But remember, I warned you."

The Chief Judge called out, "Gentlemen, on your marks!"

The contestants fell silent. They toed the Starting Line with slitted eyes and compressed mouths.

"Get ready!"

A hundred sets of leg muscles bunched as fifty determined men leaned forward.

"Go!"

And the race was on!

A blare of supersonics temporarily paralyzed the surrounding mob. The contestants squirmed through their immobile ranks, and sprinted over and around the long lines of stalled automobiles. Then they fanned out, but tended mainly to the east, toward the Hudson River and the evil-visaged city that lay on its far shore, half concealed in its sooty cloak of unburned hydrocarbons.

Only Steve Baxter had not turned to the east.

Alone among the contestants, he had swung north, toward the George Washington Bridge and Bear Mountain City. His mouth was tight, and he moved like a man in a dream.

In distant Larchmont, Adele Baxter was watching the race on television. Involuntarily, she gasped. Her eight-year-old son Tommy cried, "Mom, Mom, he's going north to the bridge! But it's closed this month, he can't get through that way!"

"Don't worry, darling," Adele said. "Your father knows what he's doing."

She spoke with an assurance she did not feel. And, as the figure of her husband was lost in the crowds, she settled back to wait—and to pray. Did Steve know what he was doing? Or had he panicked under pressure?

The seeds of the problem were sewn in the 20th century, but the terrible harvest was reaped a hundred years later. After uncounted millennia of slow increase, the population of the world suddenly exploded, doubled, and doubled again. With disease checked and food sup-

plies assured, death rates continued to fall as birth rates rose. Caught in a nightmare of geometric progression, the ranks of humanity swelled like runaway cancers.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, those ancient policemen, could no longer be relied upon to maintain order. Pestilence and famine had been outlawed, and war was too luxurious for this subsistence age. Only death remained—much diminished, a mere shadow of his former self.

Science, with splendid irrationality, continued to work insensately toward the goal of more life for more people.

And *people* marched on, still increasing, crowding the earth with their numbers, stifling the air and poisoning the water, eating their processed algae between slices of fish-meal bread, dimly awaiting a catastrophe to thin out their unwiedly ranks, and waiting in vain.

The quantitative increase in numbers produced qualitative changes in human experience. In a more innocent age, adventure and danger had been properties of the waste places—the high mountains, bleak deserts, steaming jungles. But by the 21st century most of these places were being utilized in the accelerating search for living space. Adventure and danger were now to be found in the monstrous, ungovernable cities.

In the cities one found the modern equivalent of savage tribes, fearsome beasts and dread diseases. An expedition into New York or Chicago required more resourcefulness and stamina, more ingenuity, than those light-hearted Victorian jaunts to Everest or the source of the Nile.

In this pressure-pot world, land was the most precious of commodities. The government parceled it out as it became available, by means of regional lotteries culminating in land races. These contests were patterned after those held in the 1890s for the opening of the Oklahoma Territory and the Cherokee Strip.

The land races were considered equitable and interesting—both sporty and sporting. Millions watched the races, and the tranquilizing effect of vicarious ex-

citement upon the masses was duly noted and approved. This in itself was sufficient justification for the races.

Additionally, the high mortality rate among the contestants had to be considered an asset. It didn't amount to much in absolute numbers, but a stifled world was grateful for even the smallest alleviation.

The race was three hours old. Steve Baxter turned on his little transistor radio and listened to the latest reports. He heard how the first group of contestants had arrived at the Holland Tunnel, and had been turned back by armored policemen. Others, more devious, had taken the long southern trek to Staten Island, and were presently approaching the approaches of the Verrazzano Bridge. Freihoff St. John, all by himself, flashing a deputy mayor's badge, had been allowed past the Lincoln Tunnel barricades.

But now it was time for Steve Baxter's gamble. Grim-faced, with quiet courage, he entered the infamous Free Port of Hoboken.

It was dusk on the Hoboken foreshore. Before him, in a sweeping crescent, lay the trim, swift ships of the Hoboken smuggling fleet, each with its gleaming Coast Guard medallion. Some already had cargo lashed to their decks—cases of cigarettes from North Carolina, liquor from Kentucky, oranges from Florida, goof balls from California, guns from Texas. Each case bore the official marking, CONTRABAND—TAX PAID. For in this unhappy day and age, the hard-pressed government was forced to tax even illegal enterprises, and thus to give them a quasi-legal status.

Choosing his moment carefully, Baxter stepped aboard a rakish marijuana runner and crouched down between the aromatic bales. The craft was ready for imminent departure; if he could only conceal himself during the short passage across the river—

"Har! What in hell have we here?"

A drunken second engineer, coming up unexpectedly from the fo'c'sle, had caught Baxter unawares. Respond-

ing to his shout, the rest of the crew swarmed onto the deck. They were a hard-bitten, swaggering lot, feared for their casually murderous ways. These were the same breed of godless men who had sacked Weehawken some years ago, had put Fort Lee to the torch and pillaged all the way to the gates of Englewood. Steve Baxter knew that he could expect no mercy from them.

Nevertheless, with admirable coolness, he said, "Gentlemen, I am in need of transportation across the Hudson, if you please."

The ship's captain, a colossal mestizo with a scarred face and bulging muscles, leaned back and bellowed with laughter.

"Ye seek passage of *uns?*" he declared in the broad Hobokenese patois. "Think ee we be the Christopher Street ferry, hai?"

"Not at all, sir. But I had hoped—"

"To the boneyard wit yer hopes!"

The crew roared at the witticism.

"I am willing to pay for my passage," Steve said, with quiet dignity.

"*Pay* is it?" roared the captain. "Aye, we sometimes sell passages—nonstop to midstream, and thence straight down!"

The crew redoubled its laughter.

"If it is to be, then let it so be," Steve Baxter said. "I request only that you permit me to drop a postcard to my wife and children."

"Woife and tuckins?" the captain enquired. "Why didn't yer mention! Had that lot myself aforetime ago, until waunders did do marvain to the lot."

"I am sorry to hear that," Steve said, with evident sincerity.

"Aye." The captain's iron visage softened. "I do remember how, in oftens colaim, the lettle blainsprites did leap giner on the saern; yes, and it was roses all til diggerdog."

"You must have been very happy," Steve said. He was following the man's statements with difficulty.

"I maun do," the captain said.

A bowlegged little forebow deckman thrust himself forward. "Hi, Captain, let's do for him and get underway before the pot rots on the spot."

"Who you giving orders at, ye mangy, scut-faced hogifier!" the captain raved. "By Big Jesus, we'll let the pot rot til I say not! And as for doing him—nay, I'll do one deed for me blainsprites, shiver me if I won't!" Turning to Baxter he said, "We'll carry ye, laddie, and for naught ought loot."

Thus, fortuitously, Steve Baxter had touched upon a bittersweet memory in the captain's recollection, and had thereby won respite. The marijuana men pushed off, and soon the sleek craft was breasting the sallow gray-green waves of the Hudson.

But Steve Baxter's respite was short-lived. In midstream, just after they entered Federal waters, a powerful searchlight flashed out of the evening gloom and an officious voice ordered them to heave to. Evil luck had steered them straight into the path of a destroyer on the Hudson patrol.

"Damn them!" the captain raved. "Tax and kill, that's all they know! But we'll show them our mettle! To the guns, bullies!"

Swiftly the crew peeled the tarpaulins from the .50-calibre machine guns, and the boat's twin diesels roared defiance. Twisting and dodging, the pot runner raced for the sanctuary of the New York shore. But the destroyer, forereaching, had the legs of her, and machine guns were no match for four-inch cannon. Direct hits splintered the little ship's toe rail, exploded in the great cabin, smashed through the main topforestays, and chopped down the starboard mizzen halyards.

Surrender or death seemed the only options. But, weatherwise, the captain sniffed the air. "Hang on, hearties!" he screamed. "There's a Wester do be coming!"

Shells rained around them. Then, out of the West, a vast and impenetrable smog bank rolled in, blanketing everything in its inky tentacles. The battered little kif

ship slid away from the combat; and the crew, hastily donning respirators, gave thanks to the smouldering trashlands of Secaucus. As the captain remarked, it is an ill wind that blows no good.

Half an hour later they docked at the 79th Street Pier. The captain embraced Steve warmly and wished him good fortune. And Steve Baxter continued on his journey.

The broad Hudson was behind him. Ahead lay thirty-odd downtown blocks and less than a dozen crosstown blocks. According to the latest radio report, he was well ahead of the other contestants, ahead even of Freihoff St. John, who still had not emerged from the labyrinth of the New York end of the Lincoln Tunnel. He seemed to be doing very nicely, all things considered.

But Baxter's optimism was premature. New York was not conquered so easily. Unknown to him, the most dangerous parts of his journey still lay before him.

After a few hours' sleep in the back of an abandoned car, Steve proceeded southward on West End Avenue. Soon it was dawn—a magical hour in the city, when no more than a few hundred early-risers were to be found at any given intersection. High overhead were the crenelated towers of Manhattan, and above them the clustered television antennae wove a faerie tapestry against a dun and ochre sky. Seeing it like that, Baxter could imagine what New York had been like a hundred years ago, in the gracious, easygoing days before the population explosion.

He was abruptly shaken out of his musings. Appearing as if from nowhere, a party of armed men suddenly barred his path. They wore masks, wide-brimmed black hats and bandoliers of ammunition. Their aspect was both villainous and picturesque.

One of them, evidently the leader, stepped forward. He was a craggy-featured old man with a heavy black mustache and mournful red-rimmed eyes. "Stranger," he said, "let's see yore pass."

"I don't believe I have one," Baxter said.

"Damned right you don't," the old man said. "I'm Pablo Steinmetz, and I issue all the passes around here, and I don't recollect ever seeing you afore in these parts."

"I'm a stranger here," Baxter said. "I'm just passing through."

The black-hatted men grinned and nudged each other. Pablo Steinmetz rubbed his unshaven jaw and said, "Well, sonny, it just so happens that you're trying to pass through a private toll road without permission of the owner, who happens to be me; so I reckon that means you're illegally trespassing."

"But how could anyone have a private toll road in the heart of New York City?" Baxter asked.

"It's mine 'cause I say it's mine," Pablo Steinmetz said, fingering the notches on the stock of his Winchester 78. "That's just the way it is, stranger, so I reckon you'd better pay or play."

Baxter reached for his wallet and found it was missing. Evidently the pot boat captain, upon parting, had yielded to his baser instincts and picked his pocket.

"I have no money," Baxter said. He laughed uneasily. "Perhaps I should turn back."

Steinmetz shook his head. "Going back's the same as going forward. It's toll road either way. You still gotta pay or play."

"Then I guess I'll have to play," Baxter said. "What do I do?"

"You run," old Pablo said, "and we take turns shooting at you, aiming only at the upper part of your head. First man to bring you down wins a turkey."

"That is infamous!" Baxter declared.

"It *is* kinda tough on you," Steinmetz said mildly. "But that's the way the mortar crumbles. Rules is rules, even in an anarchy. So, therefore, if you will be good enough to break into a wild sprint for freedom . . ."

The bandits grinned and nudged each other and loosened their guns in their holsters and pushed back

their wide-brimmed black hats. Baxter readied himself for the death-run—

And at that moment, a voice cried, "Stop!"

A woman had spoken. Baxter turned and saw that a tall, redheaded girl was striding through the bandit ranks. She was dressed in toreador pants, plastic galoshes and Hawaiian blouse. The exotic clothing served to enhance her bold beauty. There was a paper rose in her hair, and a string of cultured pearls set off the slender line of her neck. Never had Baxter seen a more flamboyant loveliness.

Pablo Steinmetz frowned. "Flame!" he roared. "What in tarnation are you up to?"

"I've come to stop your little game, Father," the girl said coolly. "I want a change to talk to this tanglefoot."

"This is man's business," Steinmetz said. "Stranger, git set to run!"

"Stranger, don't move a muscle!" Flame cried, and a deadly little derringer appeared in her hand.

Father and daughter glared at each other. Old Pablo was the first to break the tableau.

"Damn it all, Flame, you can't do this," he said. "Rules is rules, even for you. This here illegal trespasser can't pay, so he's gotta play."

"That's no problem," Flame announced. Reaching inside her blouse she extracted a shiny silver double eagle. "There!" she said, throwing it at Pablo's feet. "I've done the paying, and just maybe I'll do the playing, too. Come along, stranger."

She took Baxter by the hand and led him away. The bandits watched them go and grinned and nudged each other until Steinmetz scowled at them. Old Pablo shook his head, scratched his ear, blew his nose, and said, "Consarn that girl!"

The words were harsh, but the tone was unmistakably tender.

Night came to the city, and the bandits pitched camp on the corner of 69th Street and West End Avenue. The

black-hatted men lounged in attitudes of ease before a roaring fire. A juicy brisket of beef was set out on a spit, and packages of flash-frozen green vegetables were thrown into a capacious black cauldron. Old Pablo Steinmetz, easing the imaginary pain in his wooden leg, drank deep from a jerrycan of pre-mixed martinis. In the darkness beyound the campfire you could hear a lonely poodle howling for his mate.

Steve and Flame sat a little apart from the others. The night, silent except for the distant roar of garbage trucks, worked its enchantment upon them both. Their fingers met, touched and clung.

Flame said at last, "Steve, you—you do like me, don't you?"

"Why of course I do," Baxter replied, and slipped his arm around her shoulders in a brotherly gesture not incapable of misinterpretation.

"Well, I've been thinking," the bandit girl said. "I've thought . . ." She paused, suddenly shy, then went on. "Oh, Steve, why don't you give up this suicidal race? Why don't you stay here with me! I've got land, Steve, real land—a hundred square yards in the New York Central switchyard! You and I, Steve, we could farm it together!"

Baxter was tempted—what man would not be? He had not been unaware of the feelings which the beautiful bandit girl entertained for him, nor was he entirely unresponsive to them. Flame Steinmetz's haunting beauty and proud spirit, even without the added attraction of land, might easily have won any man's heart. For a heart-beat he wavered, and his arm tightened around the girl's slim shoulders.

But then, fundamental loyalties reasserted themselves. Flame was the essence of romance, the flash of ecstasy about which a man dreams throughout his life. Yet Adele was his childhood sweetheart, his wife, the mother of his children, the patient helpmate of ten long years together.

For a man of Steve Baxter's character, there could be no other choice.

The imperious girl was unused to refusal. Angry as a scalded puma, she threatened to tear out Baxter's heart with her fingernails and serve it up lightly dusted in flour and toasted over a medium fire. Her great flashing eyes and trembling bosom showed that this was no mere idle imagery.

Despite this, quietly and implacably, Steve Baxter stuck to his convictions. And Flame realized sadly that she would never have loved this man were he not replete with the very high principles which rendered her desires unattainable.

So, in the morning, she offered no resistance when the quiet stranger insisted upon leaving. She even silenced her irate father, who swore that Steve was an irresponsible fool who should be restrained for his own good.

"It's no use, Dad—can't you see that?" she asked. "He must lead his own life, even if it means the end of his life."

Pablo Steinmetz desisted, grumbling. Steve Baxter set out again upon his desperate Odyssey.

Downtown, he traveled, jostled and crowded to the point of hysteria, blinded by the flash of neon against chrome, deafened by the incessant city noises. He came at last into a region of proliferating signs:

ONE WAY
DO NOT ENTER
KEEP OFF THE MEDIAN
CLOSED SUNDAYS AND HOLIDAYS
CLOSED WEEKDAYS
LEFT LANE *MUST* TURN LEFT!

Winding through this maze of conflicting commands, he stumbled accidentally into the vast stretch of misery known as Central Park. Before him, as far as the eye could see, every square foot of land was occupied by squalid lean-tos, mean teepees, disreputable shacks, and noisome stews. His sudden appearance among the bru-

talized park inhabitants excited comment, none of it favorable. They got it into their heads that he was a Health Inspector, come to close down their malarial wells, slaughter their trichinoidal hogs and vaccinate their scabrous children. A mob gathered around him, waving their crutches and mouthing threats.

Luckily, a malfunctioning toaster in central Ontario triggered off a sudden blackout. In the ensuing panic, Steve made good his escape.

But now he found himself in an area where the street signs had long ago been torn down to confuse the tax assessors. The sun was hidden behind a glaring white overcast. Not even a compass could be used because of the proximity of vast quantities of scrap iron—all that remained of the city's legendary subway system.

Steve Baxter realized that he was utterly and hopelessly lost.

Yet he persevered, with a courage surpassed only by his ignorance. For uncounted days he wandered through the nondescript streets, past endless brownstones, mounds of plate glass, automobile cairns, and the like. The superstitious inhabitants refused to answer his questions, fearing he might be an FBI man. He staggered on, unable to obtain food or drink, unable even to rest for fear of being trampled by the crowds.

A kindly social worker stopped him just as Baxter was about to drink from a hepatitic fountain. This wise, gray-haired old man nursed him back to health in his own home—a hut built entirely of rolled newspapers near the moss-covered ruins of Lincoln Center. He advised Baxter to give up his impetuous quest and to devote his life to assisting the wretched, brutalized, superfluous masses of humanity that pullulated on all sides of him.

It was a noble ideal, and Steve came near to wavering; but then, as luck would have it, he heard the latest race results on the social worker's venerable Hallicrafter.

Many of the contestants had met their fates in urban-idiosyncratic ways. Freihoff St. John had been imprisoned for second-degree litterbugging. And the party

that crossed the Verrazzano Bridge had subsequently disappeared into the snow-capped fastnesses of Brooklyn Heights and had not been heard from again.

Baxter realized that he was still in the running.

His spirits were considerably lifted when he started forth once again. But now he fell into an overconfidence more dangerous than the most profound depression. Journeying rapidly to the south, he took advantage of a traffic lull to step onto an express walkaway. He did this carelessly, without a proper examination of the consequences.

Irrevocably committed, he found to his horror that he was on a one-way route, no turns permitted. This walkaway, he now saw, led non-stop to the *terra incognita* of Jones Beach, Fire Island, Patchogue, and East Hampton.

The situation called for immediate action. To his left was a blank concrete wall. To his right there was a waist-high partition marked NO VAULTING ALLOWED BETWEEN 12:00 NOON AND 12:00 MIDNIGHT, TUESDAYS, THURSDAYS AND SATURDAYS.

Today was Tuesday afternoon—a time of interdiction. Nevertheless, without hesitation, Steve vaulted over the barrier.

Retribution was swift and terrible. A camouflaged police car emerged from one of the city's notorious ambushes. It bore down upon him, firing wildly into the crowd. (In this unhappy age, the police were required by law to fire wildly into the crowd when in pursuit of a suspect.)

Baxter took refuge in a nearby candy store. There, recognizing the inevitable, he tried to give himself up. But this was not permitted because of the overcrowded state of the prisons. A hail of bullets kept him pinned down while the stern-faced policemen set up mortars and portable flamethrowers.

It looked like the end, not only of Steve Baxter's hopes, but of his very life. Lying on the floor among

gaudy jawbreakers and brittle licorice whips, he commended his soul to God and prepared to meet his end with dignity.

But his despair was as premature as his earlier optimism had been. He heard sounds of a disturbance, and raising his head, saw that a group of armed men had attacked the police car from the rear. Turning to meet this threat, the men in blue were enfiladed from the flank and wiped out to the last man.

Baxter came out to thank his rescuers and found Flame O'Rourke Steinmetz at their head. The beautiful bandit girl had been unable to forget the soft-spoken stranger. Despite the mumbled objections of her drunken father, she had shadowed Steve's movements and come to his rescue.

The black-hatted men plundered the area with noisy abandon. Flame and Steve retired to the shadowy solitude of an abandoned Howard Johnson's restaurant. There, beneath the peeling orange gables of a gentler, more courteous age, a tremulous love scene was enacted between them. It was no more than a brief, bittersweet interlude, however. Soon, Steve Baxter plunged once again into the ravening maelstrom of the city.

Advancing relentlessly, his eyes closed to slits against the driving smog storm and his mouth a grim white line in the lower third of his face, Baxter won through to 49th Street and 8th Avenue. There, in an instant, conditions changed with that disastrous suddenness typical of a jungle city.

While crossing the street, Baxter heard a deep, ominous roar. He realized that the traffic light had changed. The drivers, frenzied by days of waiting and oblivious to minor obstacles, had simultaneously floored their accelerators. Steve Baxter was directly in the path of a vehicular stampede.

Advance or retreat across the broad boulevard was clearly impossible. Thinking fast, Baxter flung aside a manhole cover and plunged underground. He made it

with perhaps a half second to spare. Overhead, he heard the shrieks of tortured metal and the heavy impact of colliding vehicles.

He continued to press ahead by way of the sewer system. This network of tunnels was densely populated, but was marginally safer than the surface roads. Steve encountered trouble only once, when a jackroller attacked him along the margin of a sediment tank.

Toughened by his experiences, Baxter subdued the bravo and took his canoe—an absolute necessity in some of the lower passageways. Then he pushed on, paddling all the way to 42nd Street and 8th Avenue before a flash flood drove him to the surface.

Now, indeed, his long-desired goal was near to hand. Only one more block remained; one block, and he would be at the Times Square Land Office!

But at this moment he encountered the final, shattering obstacle that wrote *finis* to all his dreams.

In the middle of 42nd Street, extending without visible limit to the north and south, there was a wall. It was a cyclopean structure, and it had sprung up overnight in the quasi-sentient manner of New York architecture. This, Baxter learned, was one side of a gigantic new upper middle income housing project. During its construction, all traffic for Times Square was being re-routed via the Queens-Battery tunnel and the East 37th Street Shunpike.

Steve estimated that the new route would take him no less than three weeks, and would lead him through the uncharted Garment District. His race, he realized, was over.

Courage, tenacity and righteousness had failed; and, were he not a religious man, Steve Baxter might have contemplated suicide. With undisguised bitterness he turned on his little transistor radio and listened to the latest reports.

Four contestants had already reached the Land Office. Five others were within a few hundred yards of the goal, coming in by the open southern approaches. And,

to compound Steve's misery, he heard that Freihoff St. John, having received a plenary pardon from the Governor, was on his way once more, approaching Times Square from the east.

At this blackest of all possible moments, Steve felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw that Flame had come to him again. Although the spirited girl had sworn to have nothing further to do with him, she had relented. This mild, even-tempered man meant more to her than pride; more, perhaps, than life itself.

What to do about the wall? A simple matter for the daughter of a bandit chief! If one could not go around it or through it or under it, why, one must then go over it! And to this purpose she had brought ropes, boots, pitons, crampons, hammers, axes—a full complement of climbing equipment. She was determined that Baxter should have one final chance at his heart's desire—and that Flame O'Rourke Steinmetz should accompany him, and not accept no for an answer!

They climbed, side by side, up the building's glass-smooth expanse. There were countless dangers—birds, aircraft, snipers, wise guys—all the risks of the unpredictable city. And, far below, old Pablo Steinmetz watched, his face like corrugated granite.

After an eternity of peril they reached the top and started down the other side—and Flame slipped!

In horror Baxter watched the slender girl fall to her doom in Times Square, to die impaled upon the needle-sharp point of a car's aerial. Baxter scrambled down and knelt beside her, almost out of his head with grief . . .

And, on the other side of the wall, old Pablo sensed that something irrevocable had happened. He shuddered, his mouth writhed in anticipation of grief, and he reached blindly for a bottle.

Strong hands lifted Baxter to his feet. Uncomprehendingly, he looked up into the kindly red face of the Federal Land Clerk.

It was difficult for him to realize that he had completed the race. With curiously deadened emotions he

heard how St. John's pushiness and hauteur had caused a riot in the explosive Burmese Quarter of East 42nd Street, and how St. John had been forced to claim sanctuary in the labyrinthine ruins of the Public Library, from which refuge he still had not been able to extricate himself.

But it was not in Steve Baxter's nature to gloat, even when gloating was the only conceivable response. All that mattered to him was that he had won, had reached the Land Office in time to claim the last remaining acre of land.

All it had cost was effort and pain, and the life of a young bandit girl.

Time was merciful, and some weeks later, Steve Baxter was not thinking of the tragic events of the race. A government jet had transported him and his family to the town of Cormorant in the Sierra Nevada mountains. From Cormorant, a helicopter brought them to their prize. A leathery Land Office Marshal was on hand to greet them and to point out their new freehold.

Their land lay before them, sketchily fenced, on an almost vertical mountainside. Surrounding it were other, similarly fenced acres, stretching as far as the eye could see. The land had recently been strip-mined; it existed now as a series of gigantic raw slashes across a dusty, dun-colored earth. Not a tree or a blade of grass could be seen. There was a house, as promised; more precisely, there was a shack. It looked as if it might last until the next hard rain.

For a few minutes the Baxters stared in silence. Then Adele said, "Oh, Steve."

Steve said, "I know."

"It's our new land," Adele said.

Steve nodded. "It's not very—pretty," he said hesitantly.

"Pretty? What do we care about that?" Adele declared. "It's *ours*, Steve, and there's a whole acre of it! We can *grow* things here, Steve!"

"Well, maybe not at first—"

"I know, I know! But we'll put this land back into shape, and then we'll plant it and harvest it! We'll *live* here, Steve! Won't we?"

Steve Baxter was silent, gazing over his dearly won land. His children—Tommy and blonde little Amelia—were playing with a clod of earth. The U.S. Marshal cleared his throat and said, "You can still change your mind, you know."

"What?" Steve asked.

"You can still change your mind, go back to your apartment in the city . . . I mean, some folks think it's sorta crude out here, sorta not what they was expecting . . ."

"Oh, Steve, no!" his wife moaned.

"No, Daddy, no!" his children cried.

"Go *back?*" Baxter asked. "I wasn't thinking of going *back*. I was just *looking* at it all. Mister, I never saw so much land all in one piece in my whole life!"

"I know," the Marshal said softly. "I been twenty years out here and the sight of it still gets to me."

Baxter and his wife looked at each other ecstatically. The Marshal rubbed his nose and said, "Well, I reckon you folks won't be needin' me no more." He exited inobtrusively.

Steve and Adele gazed out over their land. Then Adele said, "Oh, Steve, Steve! It's all ours! And you won it for us—you did it all by yourself!"

Baxter's mouth tightened. He said, very quietly, "No, honey, I didn't do it all alone. I had some help."

"Someday I'll tell you about it," Baxter said. "But right now—let's go into our house."

Hand in hand they entered the shack. Behind them, the sun was setting in the opaque Los Angeles smog. It was as happy an ending as could be found in the latter half of the 21st century.

Much science fiction is concerned with the effects of the machine on man. This story—about a man stranded on an emergency space station with only robots and a lunatic for company—carries the man-machine relationship a step further than usual, and the result is a fresh and pointed tale with a double-barreled impact.

IN HIS OWN IMAGE

by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

The sun's shrunken disc hung above the shallow horizon like an inflamed evil eye, but the light that delineated the buildings was the pure, hard radiance of a million clustering stars.

Gorton Effro stepped from the door of the communications shed and looked about curiously. He had served on space liners for twenty years without ever seeing an emergency space station—or wanting to. Somewhere he'd got the notion that they were man-made, but this one had been constructed on the planed surface of an inhospitable chunk of rock. A landing cradle thrust up through the transparent dome, spreading a spidery embrace vast enough to contain the largest star-class liner. Its supports were springs mammothly anchored in concrete. In that feeble gravity the danger was not collapse, but that the shock of an inept landing might bounce the station into space.

Maintenance and storage sheds formed an oval about the anchors. Beyond, in a larger oval, stood the cirrular hostels. The emergency manual had promised ample accommodations for a thousand, or as many as two thousand if the refugees didn't mind being crowded. Effro eyed the buildings skeptically and growled, "The liars," though he couldn't have said why he cared. There was only one of him.

The station's logbook contained ten previous entries covering a hundred and seven years, all of them by maintenance and supply crews. It was untouched by time, undisturbed by man except for those fleeting, widely spaced inspections, unneeded and unused. All of the incalculable expense and meticulous planning that went into its making had been squandered to this end: that one life-boat could lock onto its rescue beacon and eventually discharge into its life-sustaining environment one passenger: Gorton Effro.

The lifeboat perched at the end of the landing cradle like a small parasite attached to a gigantic abstract insect. The solitary passenger fingered his tight collar irritably and savored his disappointment. He had known what he would find here—the lifeboat's emergency manual described it in tedious detail—but through the long days of sterile solitude he had come to think of this place, not as a way station to be touched en route to rescue, but as a destination. A refuge, waiting to welcome him with warmth and hospitality.

It was only a larger solitude.

The lifeboat's landing had triggered the station out of its frozen hibernation. The air outside the communications shed was noticeably warmer than it had been when he entered, and a robot cleaner snuffed past him, patiently searching for impurities he might have tracked in. Effro moved with slow steps toward the nearest hostel, still looking about curiously. A movement off to his left caught his attention; it was only another robot cleaner, but he watched it for a moment, and when he turned his head . . .

The shock halted him in mind-stride. A man stood near the hostel's entrance. Before Effro's stunned mind could quite comprehend what his eyes were seeing, the strange figure hurled itself forward in a weird flutter of ragged garments. Effro backed away, his trembling hands raised defensively, but the man sank to his knees in front of Effro and said, eyes averted, voice a supplicant whine, "May I have your blessing, Excellency?"

"Blessing?" Effro exclaimed. His purser's uniform had been mistaken for a priest's costume!

He took another step backward, staring down at the man, and suddenly comprehended that the threadbare clothing was meant to be some kind of ecclesiastical apparel. The robes were tattered vestments, the ridiculous headpiece a strangely fashioned miter, the clicking footwear crudely shaped metal sandals. He looked like a devilish caricature, an atheist's mocking concept of a priest.

Effro knew the type. The man was a lay predicant, a wanself-appointed, self-educated, self-clothed religious, a wanderer by definition, a shrewd beggar who'd found in the pietistic pose a sure-fire means of increasing his daily take.

But the last call at this remote station had been logged fourteen years before! "What the devil are you doing here?" Effro demanded.

Still on his knees, the man waited silently. "I'm no 'Excellency,'" Effro said. "I was purser on the spaceship *Cherbilius.* It blew up nineteen days out of Donardo, and as far as I know, I'm the only survivor. Toasts I can give you, and a few first-rate curses, but not blessings. I don't know any."

The predicant raised his eyes slowly. His face was old, its flesh shriveled and taut. His eyes, widely dilated in the dim starlight, stared expressionlessly. He held his left arm bent awkwardly in front of him.

He said uncertainly, "Do you come to instruct me, Excellency?"

"I come because my lifeboat followed the station's rescue beacon. In other words, by accident. If I'd hit another station's beacon first, I'd have gone there."

"There are no accidents," the predicant said. His right hand's sweping gesture traced a cross. "The will of God brought you here."

Effro said bitterly, "Then God destroyed more than four hundred people to do it. I suppose that's a small

price for such a splendid achievement—bringing together a drunken thief and some kind of fugitive pretending to be a priest. Cut the nonsense and stand up."

The predicant got to his feet in a flutter of ragged clothing. Effro asked, "Is there anyone else here?"

"I have my flock," the predicant said proudly.

"Flock? *Here?*"

A cleaning robot snuffed past them, and the predicant stooped, halted it with a caressing gesture, and held it hissing and rumbling above the ground.

He released it. "Such are my flock," he said quietly.

"*Machines?*"

The predicant met Effro's eyes boldly. Only an idiot, Effro thought, could look so divinely inspired. An idiot or a saint.

"Did not our Lord say, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' And these—" His ragged gesture encompassed the cleaning robots and the rows of silent machines by the maintenance sheds. "These, Excellency, are the least of all." He sank to his knees again. "May I have your blessing, Excellency?"

The sheer, pleading ecstasy in the man's voice, the dumb depth of veneration in his eyes, unnerved Effro and moved him strangely. He knew that forever afterward he would consider it a cowardly act, but he extended his blessing.

He gesticulated vaguely and resurrected a half-forgotten phrase from the buried memories of his childhood. "In the name of the Almighty, may your graces be magnified and your faults forgiven."

He stepped around the predicant and strode hurriedly toward the hostel. He did not look back until he reached it. The predicant was moving slowly in the opposite direction, still holding his bent arm awkwardly in front of him. Three cleaning robots were snuffing after him in single file.

"His flock," Effro muttered disgustedly.

He chose the sleeping room nearest the entrance, and

the first thing he examined was its door—to make certain that it had a lock.

The hostel was a self-sustaining unit, complete with airlock to safeguard its inhabitants in the event of damage to the dome. Effro's first concern was for a bath, and he lolled in warm water for an hour, soaking off the accretions of his long journey, while a massaging machine worked over him expertly. A valet machine accepted his begrimed uniform and returned it to him in spotless, pressed condition. A dispenser furnished three complete outfits of new clothing. He dressed himself in one of them and carried the others, and his uniform, to his sleeping quarters with a cleaning robot dogging his footsteps. His bed, which he had tested perfunctorily, had been remade by a domestic robot. It was occurring to him that the predicant's flock was no small congregation.

Opening drawers to put away his clothing, he encountered a book.

> *Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.* This Bible was placed here for your spiritual solace by the Society of Saint Brock.

Impulsively Effro searched the adjoining room and two others across the corridor. All contained Bibles. Probably every sleeping room on the station had a Bible, but one would have sufficed. And if a lonely man, marooned here for years, chose to occupy himself with a Bible, he might in time become a fairly competent theologist.

"Why the Bible," Effro mused, "when each hostel has an adequate library?"

There was no accounting for individual taste. The real question was why he had stayed marooned. He had only to break a seal and pull a handle, and the station would have broadcast a distress signal until rescue came —in days, weeks or months. No one would hurry, be-

cause, paradoxically, a distress signal from an emergency space station did not signify an emergency. The full passenger contingent of a star-class liner could be accommodated there for a year or more with no risk except boredom. Sooner or later, but probably sooner, rescue would have come.

Effro had found the seal unbroken. The man must have come here since the last inspection ship called fourteen years before, and in all that time he had not performed the one simple act that would have brought rescue. It made so little sense that Effro uneasily returned to the communications shed, but the oscillating distress signal was still ornamenting the steady beeps of the rescue beacon.

"The guy is nuts," Effro told himself. "And no wonder. If I were here that long, maybe I'd start preaching sermons to robots, too."

One of the hostel's lounges supplied another clue: it was decorated with religious paintings, several of them showing priests in ceremonial regalia—undoubtedly the inspiration for the predicant's costume. The poor, lonely fanatic!

He browsed through the library, wincing when he found a shelf of books on theology, inspected a music room, read the repertory of a theater that offered him his choice of a hundred films. There were robots everywhere. The hostel had accommodations and service for perhaps fifty, and all of the service automatically concentrated on Effro. Every time he turned around he stumbled over a robot.

He went to the dining room, summoned a serving robot with the touch of a button, and punched out his order for dinner. The robot rolled away; another button brought a beverage robot to his side, and he dazedly contemplated controls that offered mixed drinks in a thousand combinations. He ordered a large one, straight, and the robot served it in a plastic tumbler. A cleaning robot hovered nearby—like a house pet, Effro thought, waiting for him to drop something.

The serving robot brought his food. After the lifeboat's concentrated rations, it tasted delicious, but those same rations had caused his stomach to shrink. He ate what he could, pushed the remainder onto the floor to give the cleaning robot something to do, and ordered another drink.

The predicant abashed him by sinking to the floor at his feet. "Instruct me, Excellency," he pleaded.

"I'm out of uniform," Effro said, not unkindly because he felt sorry for the man. "I wasn't an 'Excellency' to begin with. I was purser on the *Cherbilius,* and the day before it blew up I was found guilty of insubordination, intoxication while on duty, impertinence to passengers, larceny from the ship's liquor stores, and spitting into the ventilation system. I was ordered confined to quarters under arrest. I stole another bottle of the best Donardian brandy—with a record like that one more bottle was of very small consequence—and after drinking it I climbed into a lifeboat in the hope of sleeping it off without the interruption of further recriminations. When I woke up the lifeboat was adrift in space, surrounded by debris that included an uncountable number of charred corpses in various stages of dismemberment. So here I am, maybe the only survivor, and I wouldn't be competent to hand out religious instruction even if I knew any, which I don't. What's your excuse?"

The predicant regarded him blankly.

"Where do you come from?" Effro persisted.

"I was reborn here. The time before rebirth has no meaning."

"You probably jumped ship here," Effro said. "That last inspection ship. At a guess, you were also a stowaway and a fugitive from justice, and this looked like as good a place to hole up as any. Eventually you went star crazy. Call it being reborn if you want to."

He aimed his plastic tumbler at the cleaning robot and missed; the robot sniffed after it and gathered it up. Effro punched the beverage robot and accepted another

drink. "Cheers," he said. "Your 'flock' is taking good care of me."

"They bear another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Effro chuckled drunkenly. "They're stinking machines and you know it."

"All of us are laborers together with God."

"All of us? We're men and they're machines."

"Both are houses of clay, whose foundation is the dust."

"Touché," Effro said agreeably. He considered himself a reasonable man, and if this character wanted to elevate machines to the status of angels, that was nothing to him. "Man evolved from a glob of slime, they say, and is still evolving. Machines have evolved, too, and they're getting more human all the time. These old-fashioned robots still look like machines, but some of them are disgustingly human in their actions—which I suppose makes them morally suspect. There's no profit in arguing theology with a preacher, self-ordained or otherwise, but it does seem to me that everything you've said about machines could be said about animals, too, and animals are God's creatures—or so I was told when I was young enough to listen to such nonsense. And they're flesh and blood. Machines are metal and plastic and electricity. Maybe God created animals and men, but you'll have to admit that man created the machines. If they have anything of God in them, they came by it second hand."

"Man creates only as God ordains," the predicant said. "Metal and plastic are one with flesh and blood, for neither can inherit the Kingdom of God. On the Day of Reckoning all will be equal, machines and men. Then shall the dust return to the Earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."

Effro shrugged and drained his tumbler. "So?"

"*The spirit returns unto God who gave it.*" The predicant fixed Effro in a gaze of terrible intensity. "The spirit is God's gift to man. If in His wisdom He choose to do so,

can He not bestow the same gift on the machine?"

"I suppose he can," Effro conceded, still being reasonable.

"I pray that He will do so," the predicant said simply. "So that these, who are the very least, can praise Him—for they are fearfully and wonderfully made. If God can bless sinful man, Excellency, can He not bless these, who are without sin?"

Effro muttered inarticulately.

"I did not understand, Excellency."

"I said," Effro growled, "that if I weren't drunk, I wouldn't have gotten into this discussion in the first place. You want to fill heaven—whatever that is—with machines? I couldn't care less. I'm one of the least myself, and a sinner as well, and if there is a heaven, I won't be seeing it. All I ask is that you stop calling me 'Excellency.' "

The predicant scrambled to his feet. He was of less than average height, but he towered over the seated Effro. "You—are a sinner?"

Effro flung an empty tumbler aside and punched for another drink. "In a mediocre sort of way. Didn't I just get through telling you I'm a drunken thief?"

"We must hold a special service and pray for you. Will you come?"

"A service? You and your machines?"

"My flock and I."

Effro guffawed. "I've been prayed over by experts without any noticeable result, but if you don't mind working for practice, hop to it."

"Will you attend our service?"

"No," Effro said, still being reasonable, but wanting to make it clear that there were limits. "Don't let that stop you, though. If your prayers have any kick to them, they'll work whether I'm there or not."

The predicant took a step backward. His right arm pointed at the ceiling; his bent left arm curved protectingly over his head as though to ward off the rage of an

offended deity. He said incredulously, "You don't believe in God!"

"No, I don't. And if such a creature exists, I have no use for him. The *Cherbilius* had a passenger list of three hundred and seventy-two and a crew of forty. It also had an illegal cargo. Nitrates, I think. The crew received hefty bribes to look the other way while it was being loaded. We accepted the money and the risk. The passengers accepted the risk without knowing it. Now all of them are dead except me, and the owners are gleefully collecting insurance on forged bills of lading. The greedy bastards. If I were to go back and file a complaint, they'd have me prosecuted for failing to inform them before the voyage of a condition tending to threaten the ship's safety. If you can fit your God into that, let me know."

He raised his tumbler in a mock toast to the predicant's retreating back.

He downed four more drinks, tossing the tumblers to the points of the compass and watching the cleaning robots chase after them, and finally he staggered to bed. He was not too drunk to remember to secure his door, but he got up twice to make certain that it was locked.

On the third day he became convinced that the machines were watching him. A cleaner would snoop at his heels along a corridor until he turned; then it would scurry off as if to report. He locked one cleaner in a cabinet, to be let out whenever enough mess accumulated to keep it busy, and the others he dumped outside one by one as he was able to corner them. They could not negotiate the airlock without help, and to make certain that the predicant didn't help them he smashed the latch release. The predicant couldn't get in; he couldn't get out, but he'd worry about that when he wanted out.

He cursed the twist of fate that miraculously placed a companion on this lonely station and at the same time utterly deprived him of companionship. If the predicant

hadn't got hooked on religion, he and Effro might have staged some uproarious poker marathons. His remote pressence only heightened Effro's loneliness. Effro saw him occasionally at a distance, and once he found him looking through the airlock—trying to say something, he thought, but he did not go close enough to find out what it was. He'd had enough sermons.

Effro ate and drank; he watched films; he tried to interest himself in books. Mostly he drank. Rescue might come on the morrow—or in a month, or in a year. It was best that he didn't think about it, and he avoided thought most successfully when he was drunk. He drank, slept, chased his hangover with more drink. Time passed, but whether it was days or hours he neither knew nor cared.

He woke abruptly from a drunken slumber and jerked erect in bed. He had heard a noise—the wind sighing, or something like that—but on this dead fragment of a world there was no wind. He went to the door of his sleeping room. As always, it opened onto monumental silence.

Silence and loneliness. Puzzled, he pulled on clothing with fumbling fingers and staggered to the dining room. He seated himself, and eventually his trembling hands closed on a button and pushed it.

There was no response. He jabbed a second time, and a third, and finally turned a bewildered stare on the long rack where the beverage and serving machines stood in orderly ranks when not in use. The rack was empty.

With a snarl of rage he lurched the airlock. It stood open.

The space between the hostels and the maintenance and storage sheds was filled with machines—beverage and serving robots aligned like a row of squat idols, massaging machines, valet machines, domestic robots, mammoth machines with specialized faunctions relating to forms of indigestion in the largest atomic engines, clothing dispensers, film projectors, ranks of cleaning robots,

large machines, small machines, even rows of automatic clocks, all facing toward a makeshift pulpit of supply canisters where the predicant stood with his right arm upraised.

Effro shouted, "Bring them back, damn it! I want a drink!"

The predicant remained motionless. Suddenly Effro heard the noise that had awakened him: the predicant began to hum.

The sound vibrated softly, like the distant whir of a machine, and the gathered ranks of machines answered. The heavy maintenance apparatus emitted a deep grinding, the robot cleaners added a shrill, chorusing whine, and as the others joined in, the tumult swelled to a violent pulsation that shook the building. Effro shouted again and could not hear his own voice. He staggered forward angrily.

The predicant held his hands in front of him, palms facing. A blue spark leaped between them and hung there. Showers of brilliant sparks crackled around the huge maintenance machines, and dazzling flashes of light began to dart at random from machine to machine. The shuddering sound crescendoed until Effro clapped his hands to his ears and turned to flee. He was too late—he was already among the machines, and the leaping sparks formed a barricade about him. For a suspenseful moment they sizzled harmlessly, and then a tremendous flash impaled him. He hung paralyzed for an instant and dropped into darkness.

"Only one?" the captain explained incredulously.

The mate nodded.

"That's a forty-passenger lifeboat!"

"We've turned the station inside out, I tell you. There's only one, and he's star crazy."

"He's only been here two months."

"Evidently two months is enough," the mate said dryly.

"Bring him along, then. We've wasted enough time here."

The mate turned, motioned, and two crewman brought out Gorton Effro.

"Good God!" the captain explained.

"He must have made the outfit himself," the mate said. "One of the lounges has a collection of religious paintings. He's copied a priest's costume."

Effro faced the captain blankly. His miter was slightly askew; his vestments were torn in several places. In his left hand he clutched a Society Brock Bible.

"He keeps tripping over his robes and falling," the mate said. "He doesn't even seem to feel it. Know what he's wearing on his feet? Metal sandals. I'm telling you, he's as star-touched as they come."

Suddenly Effro scurried forward and knelt at the captain's feet. "Do you come to instruct me, Excellency?"

"Cut the nonsense," the captain snapped. "What happened to the *Cherbilius*?"

"He can't remember," the mate said.

"He'd better remember. How come you're the only one that made the lifeboat, fellow?"

Effro did not answer.

"How'd you get here?" the captain persisted.

"I was reborn here," Effro said. "The time before rebirth has no meaning."

"Try that line on the Board of Inquiry, and it'll masticate you into little pieces. There's been a major space disaster, and you'd better be prepared to cooperate fully."

Effro gazed up at him. "May I have your blessing, Excellency?"

"Couldn't you get anything at all out of him?" the captain asked the mate.

"Just some Bible quotations. He doesn't seem to have any trouble remembering them."

"The word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path," Effro murmured.

"I see what you mean," the captain said. "Well, it's not

our problem. Take him on board and assign someone to keep an eye on him. We'll leave as soon as the lifeboat is secured."

The crewman jerked Effro to his feet and hustled him up the ramp. He did not resist, but he waved the Bible protestingly.

"We'd better report this to the Interstellar Safety Commission," the mate said. "Putting all those Bibles in the emergency space stations maybe wasn't a good idea."

"Sure," the captain said. "And while we're at it we can send a report to the Society of Saint Brock. Their most recent convert just stole one."

The predicant did not emerge from hiding until the ship was a fading spark on the rim of the star-flecked sky. He stood watching it until it disappeared.

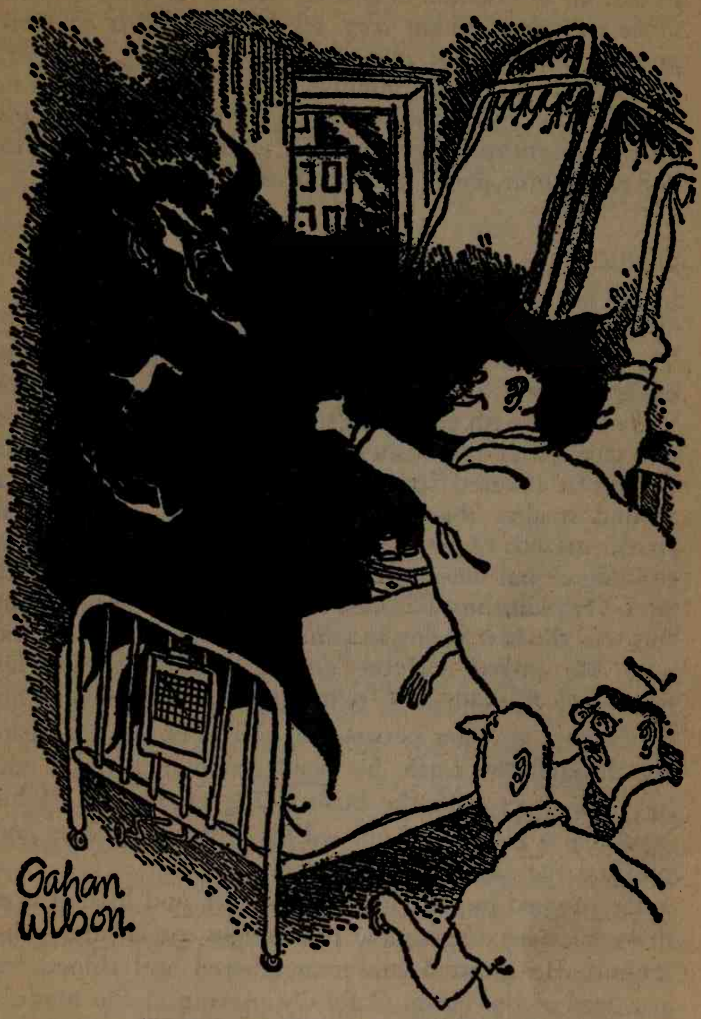
They were disturbed because the purified one's knowledge of his sinful past had been obliterated, but that was the way of rebirth. *Cast away from you all your transgressions and make you a new heart and a new spirit.*

The predicant was loath to see him leave, for the purified one had been an apt and willing student, but it was God's will, he told himself humbly. The success of the purification had so suffused him with pride that he had been perilously close to sin himself. *When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom.*

And he had been neglecting his duties to his flock.

He went first to a maintenance shed. He plugged himself in at a power outlet, and while his charge was being topped off, he administered a squirt of lubricant to his corroded left arm.

Then, after humbly crossing himself, he powered his way toward the machine shop, where three cleaning robots were waiting to confess.



"Well I guess that pretty well takes care of my anemia diagnosis."

Ed Jesby's first story for F&SF (SEA WRACK) *was a memorable and strange tale that was especially notable for its "air of essential alienness." His latest story is good in an entirely different way. Its background is contemporary; its situation and characters* (*racing, bookies, gangsters*) *are mostly familiar, with one seven-foot exception. The exception, of course, is an ogre. Mr. Jesby's ogre is an entirely different ogre, and his adjustment to our real world seems as logical as it is entertaining.*

OGRE!

by Ed Jesby

The ogre was asleep. He had never been able to be moderate, and he had been asleep for a long time. He was covered with earth and the mulch of decayed leaves and wood, and low bushes and grass grew on him. Near the green covered sprawl of his left arm there was a mound smaller than his covering, which supported a sparse growth of moss, and a single mushroom with a red-tinged and fluted umbrella under its cap. The birds were very loud in the forest on this spring morning, but this was the first spring in which the sounds reached the ogre. He stirred and the ground cracked around his head and the chirping, twittering clamor reached his ears with a stronger persuasion, and so he sat up. Tearing through the earth, his head uprooted a bush, and he came erect with the bush riding on the top of his head like a plume. He opened his nostrils and eyes and brushed the small annoyance off.

He yawned hugely, his jaw cracked, and his left arm drew back leaving a mole run widely spread along the ground. He grinned—and remembered and ripped his arm free of the earth. Carefully picking at the tendrils and unwinding the heavier roots from his arm, he flexed the muscles; and pleased by the result, he plunged his cupped fingers into the earth near the smaller mound.

Working his thumb until he had a secure grip, he pulled the corselet from the mound. He held it up to the light and saw that the proximity to his body and its preservative oils had kept it remarkably well.

He nodded his head sadly and got to his feet, and as he gently freed himself from the roots and plants, he shook the armor and listened to the rattle. Turning it open side down, he let the ribs and separated vertebrae fall out, and shook his head. That was the way knights were, always looking for trouble when all an ogre wanted was to be left alone.

He wondered how long he had been asleep. The trees were much taller than he remembered them, but that was no sign. Some of them did not even look like the trees he had lain down with. The clearing was much smaller too, and the sky was not as blue as he remembered it, but he shrugged his thoughts away. He had always awakened after a long sleep with a touch of melancholy.

This sleeping was really too much, but that was the trouble with being an ogre, he thought, and reached behind his back to scratch the crown of his head with the horny callus on the heel of his hand. The second joint in his elbow cracked with disuse, and he willed the pain away. There was an advantage in having a set of eyes that could see as well at night as in the day, but coupled with a metabolism that was as efficient as the solar reaction, it often made one forget to sleep.

He judged he had caught up on his rest, and went into a leaping dance that shook the ground and startled the birds into abandoning their eggs. When he was well loosened, he started for a small pool he remembered. Walking through the woods made him certain that he had overslept. The ground was strewn with small brightly painted cylinders that were in various stages of corrosion, and they popped and crumpled under his unheeding feet.

He found the pool easily, but the bottom was covered

with a black sludge, and he satisfied himself with looking at his image.

He was as he remembered himself. The same wide jaw that made his head look as if it were broader than it was high, and the same crop of spiky hair radiating from his head in a circular fan. He showed himself his teeth and saw that the one in the second row he had lost in the fight with the last of the tall meat-eating lizards had finished growing back in while he slept. The trees above him shifted, and a bright ray of sunlight struck his eyes, and the slitted pupils closed to a hair-thin line.

He giggled a bass titter that was more of a reflex than a sound of amusement, and opened his ears fully. He had not yet tried his voice. "Yclept Knut," he said, and reassured by the sound of his name continued, "Jeg ha souvre fra lange," and was pleased by the full burgeon tones, and the strength of his old language. He looked down. The kilt he had made from the skin of the great bear he had killed while moving north to avoid having to kill the knight was falling apart.

The world was still dull, hidden behind the long sleep, but he heard the wind on the ice of the northern plains, and for a moment he saw the knight on his shaggy horse slogging along his backtrail in the frozen hummocky landscape . . . Though there were still traces of snow in the deeper shadows and the air was still chilly, he was not in the north, and he dug his fingers in his ears to clear them. Since he always slept on his left side to hear away from the ground, his right ear took longer than the left. It was full of rootballs, and at the bottom it held a tiny dry flower that caught under his fingernail. Holding his finger in front of his nose, he studied the elfin petals and the tiny corolla before he twitched his ears forward. Rotating his head on the short column of his neck, he stopped when his ears were at right angles to the source of the sound. He did not like it. From left to right, again and again, there rose a hissing, hurrying drone.

"Fra Satans," he said, and decided to reverse his path. He turned and found that the sound also came from his new direction. It was the same; it had the same quality of hurrying repetition, but the frequency was smaller he decided, and he walked onward toward the lesser of the evils.

Knut emerged from the wooded center strip that separated the parallel four lane highways of the turnpike, and stood in the rough before the barbered grass that led down to the pavement. His appearance caused no sudden consternation. None of the speeding cars slowed. Knut was a short ogre. He was not much over seven feet tall, and he had the physique of an exceptionally short legged mesomorph. The people who drove the cars had never stood still between the borders of trees and never walked on the grass. The perspectives of ignorance and a human weakness for categories told the drivers that the figure against the background of green was a stocky man in shorts.

Knut watched for a long time. He had not remembered roads that ripped through the land with such insensitive precision, and he did not recall that the wheel was in such general use when he had gone to sleep. He had no way of knowing it, but the traffic in back of him was the last of the morning rush to the city, and the roadway he observed carried the few cars of the people who commuted from the city to the suburbs.

It was not long before the traffic died away to an occasional car, and Knut sat down to plan in the relative quiet. He was very sensitive: his ears had enormous range; his eyes could gather and amplify the smallest bit of light, and his nostrils sucked minute knowledge of all smells from the volume of air his lungs required. This was a bad world for him. Shiny, wheeled beetles reflected glittering lights in patterns that forced his eyes to constantly compensate; the air, and even the earth, groaned with deep manic percussions; and the world stank with vapors more noxious than the rots of the great lizards' swamps. He shivered. He could force him-

self to sleep again, and awaken and see if he had found a better time.

There had been no cars for a comparatively long time, and the world was almost pleasant except for its smell, and Knut relaxed and called a nearby blue jay to him. He wished a combination of deep and high notes between his lips and upper back teeth that the bird seemed to understand.

The jay perched on the last finger of his turned hand, preened its blue feathers and began to mock him. The deep-voiced rumble of his giggle did not disturb the bird, and it boldly leaped to the jutting tip of Knut's nose. Crossing his eyes without inconvenience, he focused on the shiny beads on the bird's head and drank its emotions. It semed to remember him, and he felt less of a stranger.

They amused each other with their joy, but it was tiring for the bird, and it tucked its head underneath a wing and slept. Knut sat immobile as a rock with his shock of hair jutting above the undergrowth like a black extension of the bushes.

One of the vehicles that so annoyed him howled its soprano way down the road, and he did his best to ignore it until its left front tire blew.

The explosion jerked the bird out of its sleep, and it leapt into the air in a flurried aura of wings and fear. Knut came to his feet in a single motion, rising from his flat-heeled squat in a blur too fast for anything but missile radar to follow.

"Holt Keft," he bellowed, and in one of his rare rages started forward to destroy the disturber of his peace.

The blown tire spun the black Buick in circles, and it careened up onto the grass, seemed to pause, and then lazily turned onto its side. Knut rushed forward, keeping his hops low and swinging in a gigantic burlesque of a walkathon gait, and was upon the car before it had settled. He wanted to bring the sides of his hands down on the car in the ax-like blows that had killed the tyrannosaur rex, but there was a man inside. He plucked the

front right door off the sedan and pulled the man out to safety. The man stared up at him and whipped a hand inside his coat. He came up with the gun more quickly than he had thought himself capable, but Knut's ogre reflexes had taken it away from him before his trigger finger had been tight enough to be wrenched by its removal.

"Lemme alone," the man screamed the words, and after a moment Knut released him, and the man started to run. Knut leaped over him in a single broad-jump and caught him again.

"Please lemme alone," the man said in a piteously childish appeal.

The words struck Knut this time. The man spoke English. A strange dialect of the island tongue, but Knut knew he could make himself understood.

"Have no fear," Knut said, striking the final vowels of the words with a grunting emphasis in the curious brogue of Middle English.

"Christ," the man said, "it's a crazy Irish circus giant."

"Erse?" Knut said, "Nicht I—Dane I be."

"A squarehead," the man said. "A squarehead giant like Barnum and Bailey had in their side show."

"Man," Knut said, "I do not know your words, but you do not tell me how to call you." Knut shook the impolite man remonstratively and decided he had found himself in a degenerate age without manners.

"Harry," the man said, "Harry Breen," and suddenly calmed. The exchange of names was so commonplace that he was reassured. "What's your final handle?" Knut looked blank. "You know, your last name."

"Knut, I am an ogre."

"New Okra, huh," Harry beamed. "What are you some kinda clown wrestler?" Harry Breen's attempt to force his experience into old categories broke down. He looked at Knut carefully, and then shrugged. He had troubles of his own. His car for one. His book for another. He shouldn't have taken all the action he did on a horse at such long odds. He should have figured that

the money was being spread by the big boys, that they had themselves a boat race, and that with the fix in, it would be a good time to break some of the little operators. He was a gentle man though he was carrying the gun. He couldn't pay off, and the boys would really break him. Without the money to pay off what they had coming, they would break him in many little pieces. He groaned.

"And my car's busted too." Knut read the man's fear, and his worry, and he could strongly sense Harry's gentleness.

The bookie was a thin man with a perky birdlike vitality, bright black eyes, and a bravely erect twitching posture. Knut released him and went to the tipped up car. The door lay next to the torn hinges, and he saw how it fitted. It would be easy to fix.

He pushed the torn metal back into place and stretched it as best he could with his fingers. Pulling the edges out in thin flashings at the broken joints, he crimped them over and squeezed. The molecules of the metal joined inefficiently under the pressure, but they held. He picked up the door and spread the hinges away from each other and slipped the door back in place. He pushed the hinges back onto their pins and then smoothed out the door flanges he had pushed aside. The door swung easily, and the lock had not been harmed. Knut worked the handle until he had the hang of it, and then softly latched the door.

"I have made it anew," Knut said, and smiled at Harry.

Harry grinned back and thought that this nut wasn't so bad after all. Crazy looking, but not as bad as some of the hoods he knew. All he needed was a haircut and some clothes and he'd get by.

"Now," Harry said, "if we could get the right side up I could change the tire and get going." Harry pushed against the Buick and started rocking, and Knut turned it over with a single straight-armed movement. The ogre's hand was in front of Harry's eyes, and he looked and boggled. There was a thumb, and three fingers.

"Three fingers," Harry thought. "What's the matter with that?" But the hand looked so natural, it was not injured; it was just the way it had grown.

"I got it," Harry said. "You're a Martian, maybe a Venutian, anyway you're an . . ."—he found the perfect phrase—"an alien being." Harry was pleased, he had just proven that the time he had spent watching television and going to the movies was not wasted. Useful knowledge could be acquired from the most peculiar places.

Knut was not interested in Harry's conclusions. He watched the little man shuck his bright plaid, coarsely woven sport coat and open the trunk. Harry hauled the unfastened spare tire out, and fished amid the tumbled welter of tools and rags for a tire wrench. He went to the blown tire, poped the hub cap, and began loosening the lugs.

Knut saw what had to be done next, and he picked the front of the car up with one hand and removed the wheel with the other. He held it while Harry worried the spare into place and spun the lugs in. Knut set the car down with a sigh. He liked the little man, and now he would be alone again. He might as well go back into the woods.

"He's a circus freak." A tinny voice's high pitch pierced Knut's sensitive ears, and he turned to look at the speaker.

"Isn't he, Mommy?" the child said and looked up at her mother in the driver's seat of their car. Knut had not been disturbed by Harry's simple description of his place in the world. The bookie had only wanted a way to think about him, but the child was viciously pleased by his difference.

"Probably," the mother said to her little girl in a deeper version of her offspring's voice, "and his keeper should be locked up for letting him run around half naked."

"Locked up," Harry said. "Keeper," and looked at Knut. Harry knew what being locked up meant, and the movies he had seen had taught him how to fulfill his

obligations to alien beings.

"Nobody's gonna lock a friend of mine up," Harry said, and with his courage aroused, continued. "Not on some miserable broad like youse sayso."

"Get in New," he said and hesitated, thinking of recovering his gun. "Hell with it," he muttered. It wouldn't have been much use against the mob's boys anyway.

Harry Breen was one of those gentle men who are fascinated by violence, and though violent men are victims of that same fascination, that does not make us all vicious. Harry's interest was in the violence of sports, and he had chosen bookmaking as the only way a man of his physique and temperament could take part in his interest, and now he was much too close to the reality.

The ogre, as most ogres were, was as gentle as Harry, and his mildness was even more a matter of physiology. If you take a creature that requires little food, and with reflexes and senses so quick and adept at finding nourishment that it is rarely frustrated, and combine these characteristics with a strength and toughness so great that it is practically invulnerable to ordinary attack, and whose sexual needs are adjusted to the necessities of replacing the members of a group of relative immortals, you have postulated a creature without the need of rage, or aggression.

Knut and Breen were well met. They were both gentle men, and for the first time the ogre had met a man who was not steeped in a traditional fear of his kind, and the man needed help. He radiated an aura of fear that in the confines of the automobile's metal shell pressed unbearably upon Knut's sensibilities.

Harry looked at the ogre and wondered why he had been moved to help him. He had enough trouble without taking on a monster for a traveling companion. He stole another glance at Knut, and smiled. The ogre was jammed between the dashboard and the seat, his knees were bent almost as high as his slumped head, and his hair was mashed down against his forehead by the car's

roof. Harry chortled and said, prodding Knut's arm with his elbow, "If we keep hanging around together, I'll have to get a convertible."

Knut expelled his reflexive snigger, but he was pleased; the aura of fear was lifting.

Harry had almost forgotten his problems in thinking of his new friend. Getting a convertible was a joke, but the ramifications that the thought led to were not. He could not take Knut to a motel, or a hotel, and he could not turn him loose on the road. He would not be allowed to be free for long. They'd pick him up, and one of the cornerstones of Harry's moral philosophy was that you didn't let your friends get picked up by the fuzz. No cop was going to get the honor of putting Knut in jail as long as Harry Breen was around, thought Harry.

But what to do with him? Harry decided there was only one thing to do, and when he came to the next exit ramp, he turned off the highway and started back to the city. The city was dangerous for him, but the only place he could think of where Knut could be safely hidden was his own apartment.

Harry slid the car into the parking lot at the rear of his building and reached into the back seat. He handed Knut the folded blanket he had bought for amatory emergencies but never used, and said, "Put this around ya, and we'll get inside."

Knut hardly understood the words, but he understood what was wanted of him, so he wrapped the blanket around himself and stepped out of the car looking like a caricature of a comic strip Indian.

Harry and Knut were both so pleased by the communication they thought they had achieved that they had not noticed the heavy pear-shaped man. He stared at the pair and grumbled, "Harry's crazy coming back to town," and shrugged the lapels of the ostentatiously well-cut suit he wore back into place before he slipped a coin out of his pocket and ferreted himself into a sidewalk telephone booth.

Harry's apartment was in a building that had an air

of incipient collapse. The marble was peeling from the lobby walls, and the self-service elevator acridly smelled of marijuana, but neither Knut nor Harry had any standard to tell them that it was not perfectly proper.

Even before they were out of the elevator, Harry could hear his phone ringing, and he hurried Knut down the hall, pushed him into the apartment, and apprehensively picked up the receiver.

"No," he said into the mouthpiece, "I ain't taking any action today." He waited, "I dig you're a regular, and I dig I'm into ya for a bundle, but no action today." Harry listened. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it, you can go . . ."

He dropped the handset into the cradle. "Lousy two-dollar sport hung up on me," he muttered and turned to Knut and said expansively, "Well, this is my pad—not bad huh?" His social duty performed, he pushed the sliding door away from the alcove that held the dish-clogged sink and the refrigerator and pulled two cans of beer out. He popped holes in both, handed Knut one, and drank thirstily.

Knut recognized the can as one of the cylinders he had seen in the forest and was glad to discover its function. Politely following Harry's lead, he drank. The first cold mouthful shocked him, but he soon discovered the taste of small beer and drank the rest of the can with one head-tilted toss.

"I know what we can do with ya," Harry said. "We'll enter ya in one a those college boy chug-a-lug contests." Harry sobered, "But the first thing's a haircut and some clothes because I gotta get out of town!"

Harry thought and remembered the electric hair clippers he had bought in a fit of economy only to discover that a man living alone could not cut his own hair. He got them out and explained to Knut what he was about to do.

"I'm gonna cut your wig." Harry started the clippers into the ogre's matted hair, and the blade shattered after he made a half an inch of progress. Harry dropped the

useless implement and again found his courage.

"You stay here buddy," he said, "I'm going out to get some big strong scissors."

Though at this time the ogre was rather stupid in human terms and if you had given him an I.Q. test he would have scored very badly, Knut knew what Harry's intentions were. Knut was not a moron; he was not yet very verbal, but he was very observant. He had seen the city they had driven through, and he had not seen any of the precautions that the people of his waking time had taken against his kind, and the other real dangers that beset them. Although the city streets had been comparatively empty in the morning hour between the start of the workday and the ten o'clock coffee break, Knut had seen how he must look. The clothes the people wore were reasonably loose, their hair was short, and the kind man who had taken him was going to fix him to look like them. The man might not have the knowledge of ogres that Knut thought commonplace, but he seemed to understand their great desire for peace. Knut decided he would not have to go to sleep after all. He remembered Harry's air of trouble and decided that he might be able to help.

Having come to a decision, Knut went to the refrigerator and took another can of beer out. He had a little trouble with the tab, but he persevered, and holding it delicately between his thumb and two of his fingers, he prodded two holes into the can with his little finger. He was prepared for the cold and he drank the beer off quicker than his first. It was weak stuff but it was wonderfully pure, not at all like the gruelly mixture he and his friends had made in the forest festivals. He was beginning to be hungry, but he trusted his newfound friend, and he lowered himself into a squat to wait.

Harry came back and ripped the paper from the package he was carrying with frenzied fingers. He unloaded a pair of tinsnips and a pair of large tailor's shears onto the coffee table.

Knut looked at him interrogatively, and he said, "We gotta hurry, I think I been spotted. I'm almost sure I seen some muscle of Gianetti's down the street."

"So," Knut said and ruminated the situation over in his mind. He ground the incomprehensible words and the emotion that had accompanied them over slowly, but when he was done he had crushed the information fine enough to know that he could be of help.

Harry began hacking at his hair and talked as he worked. "New, baby," he said in his best imitation of a hip barber's delivery, "we gotta get you fixed up so we can get outta town. I'm gonna get leaned on. Maybe so hard I'll be permanently creased." He dropped the scissors, and took the tinsnips to work at a particularly obdurate tuft of hair. He hacked away in silence for a time and continued in a cheerier voice, "Anyway, with hair like this, I can't goof a bristle cut. I mean it's so tough that I gotta go slow, and before I can goof I got time to think." Harry whistled part of the chorus of "Hardluck Blues" and stopped. "Nerts," he said, "clothes, we gotta have clothes." He tapped his foot, and slowed the clacking rhythm of the shears to half time. "Flo," he said, "I'll call Flo. She useta make costumes, and she's got a portable sewing machine." He dropped the shears to the floor, went to the phone and dialed.

The phone rang several times, and he explained into the air, "She works nights and she sleeps pretty heavy." He was silent again. "Ah, finally. Hello baby." Tapping his foot in exasperation, he waited through a spate of words. "I know you're worried, but listen to me anyway." He waited again, but his exasperation was a pantomime without emotion. "Yeah, me too baby." He looked at Knut and cast his eyes upward and shrugged in embarrassment. "Sure, you know how I feel, but listen, please. Here's what I want you to do." He grinned. "No argument awright? Pick up your sewing machine and stop and get two bolts of cloth." He listened. "Awright not bolts. Get ten yards a somethin' for a man's suit and five yards a somethin' you can make a sorta shirt out of." He

was interrupted by a run of words that were pushed out into the room by her agitation. "I know that it sounds nuts, but you promised no arguments. What's-a-matter you haven't got the bread?" He waited again. "Awright, awright, I like you too, just do like I say. You got it straight?" He made a kissing sound with his lips and said, "You're coming. Right. Thanks." He hung up and resumed his barbering job. "We'll turn you into a dude yet," he said and began excavating a small copse.

Harry was finished with Knut's haircut and stepped back to admire his handiwork when Flo knocked at the door and said, "It's me."

Harry unlocked the door and reached for the knob, but the man who slammed him backwards with his charging momentum had already prepared the door by turning the latch back. Harry went teetering into the center of the room, wishing he had retrieved his pistol, and the door crasher's companion released Flo's twisted arm and followed him into the room.

"You got sixteen grand, Harry?" he said and shook his head in mock sorrow. "No?" That's too bad." He intertwined his fingers and pushed the joined palms away from himself and listened to the crackle of his popping knuckles with a connoisseur's attention. "You know what we're gonna have to do." We walked forward clenching his hands toward the retreating Harry.

"What are we gonna do with the broad?" the man holding the door said and pulled the large blonde woman into the apartment.

"First things first," his companion said and drew his fist back.

Knut had waited to act. He did not know what the men's intentions were. They were so casual about the intended mayhem that he had not recognized their purpose immediately, but finally recognizing them for what they were and voicing his contempt, he attacked his benefactor's foes.

"Whoreson knichts," Knut said and picked both men up simultaneously in the almost tentacular flexibility of

his arms. He would have dealt with them as he would have dealt with any other rampaging knight, but he assumed that in this new world the rules were not the same as those he remembered and satisfied himself with jerking the men hard enough to worry them into unconsciousness.

They were not even knights, Knut decided. They were men-at-arms for some petty lord, or landed knight who oppressed the free men who lived within reach of his domains. Ogres had been subjected to calumnies by such men as these and their monkish clerks for years.

The ogres' helpfulness and altruism had been countered by organized campaigns of slander. The peasants and yeomen were told that the ogres had such voracious appetites that they ate men and that their broad ugly visages were outward signs of the cruelty of their spirits. Knut bobbed the bodies of Gianetti's enforcers and debated finishing them, but Harry, after the first shock, was so impressed by their handling that he had an idea.

"You seen their car?" Harry turned to Flo, but she could not answer. She stared at Knut and his burden, slack-jawed with complete disbelief.

"Come on, come on." Harry shook Flo's shoulder. "It's OK," he continued, divining Flo's difficulty. "The big guy's a friend of mine." He decided that it would be easier to explain that Knut was an alien being after their business had been accomplished.

"What?" Flo turned her eyes from Knut to the familiar Harry. "Their car? Yeah, I seen their car."

"Good," Harry said, "gimme your lipstick and tell me where it is." The dazed Flo obeyed, and Harry and the ogre left the apartment.

Breen was pleased with the arrangement. The two hoods were stripped to their shorts and lashed with strips torn from their trousers, elbow to elbow across the back of the front seat of their black sedan. Harry had lettered "Jerk" across one man's chest, but the other man's general hairiness had forced him to emblazon the epithet across his forehead. The windows were rolled down, but

Knut had mangled the doors into their frames so that they could not be opened without a wrecking bar, while Harry had tastefully draped the men's filled shoulder holsters across the car's hood ornament.

"That oughta make 'em feel good," Harry said, and grinned at Knut.

Knut nodded solemnly. The justice was fitting. Such men as these would not be happy about having been made ridiculous, and if he had killed them, they would have felt nothing.

Flo straightened up from arranging her portable sewing machine and sewing implements on the low coffee table, and twitched the folds out of her red silk dress that had hiked across her ample hips. She folded her arms under her bosom and glared at Harry.

"Well, you're back," she said, and tossed her brassy hair. She smiled at Knut. "Ain't you gonna introduce me?" Flo was not exasperated; she was merely exercising her womanly rights.

"This is New Okra," Harry said. "How about getting on with the threads?"

"I can't make no suit for a guy this size." Flo studied the ogre. "But I got an idea." She turned. "Harry you pull down those curtains."

Harry obeyed Flo's command and unhooked the widely striped decorator burlap drapes that covered the far wall and its single window.

An hour later Knut was dressed in a beach suit and clam diggers. The capri shirt's stripes ran transversely across his chest and straight down from the wide-scooped neck to the middle of his forearm, where the sleeves ended in a slit. The pants were cut in a zigzag fringe around the bulging bronzed muscles of his calves and were held with a double tie of bright new clothesline slipped through loops.

"Beautiful, Flo," Harry said, and bussed her cheek. "He looks just like one of them guys from the beach."

"Well, I figgered this was the best way," Flo said and bridled pridefully. "After all this is California, and we

couldn't pass him off as no normal man. So I made him inta one of them weight lifter nuts."

"It's great baby, but now we gotta get going." Harry turned to Knut, and jerked his thumb at the door.

"You're not leaving without me," Flo said. "I'm not staying in town with Gianetti's boys on a rampage."

Harry thought for a moment. "Yeah," he said decisively. "You're right." He slapped his hip pocket. "I may not have sixteen grand, but I got enough for the three of us."

They drove to Harry's cabin on a lake in the Sierras, and the first thing that Harry said while they were unloading the supplies he had bought was, "The thing we gotta do before we do anything else is teach New how to talk right."

Harry grunted and allowed the ogre to carry the case of beer with which he was struggling. "The way it is nobody can make out nothing he's saying." Flo nodded and led Knut into the cabin. She touched the dust-covered surface of the table and said, "This dump is filthy."

Harry and Knut put the groceries away, and Flo wrapped her head in a bandana and began dusting the furniture. She worked happily and efficiently, gladly showing off her wifely skills for Harry and caught up by the rhythms of the work that pleased her most.

Harry had a plan worked out. "What we're gonna do is start teachin' you right away," he said. "You gotta learn to talk right." He stood straighter and turned the stiff cuff of his new flannel shirt back. "And I'm just the boy to learn ya—everybody says I got a good gift of gab."

The group in the little cabin settled down to a routine of learning, eating and sleeping. They all swam in the cold water of the lake that lay beyond the trees that walled the cabin, and Flo gave up her elaborate makeup and hair rinses and dressed in simple clothes. She wore slacks, and skirts and blouses, and let the sun freckle her unprotected skin. She lost weight from the exercise of swimming and doing housework without the mechan-

ical aids she thought indispensable.

Harry relaxed more and more; his pedagogic success proved his intelligence to him, and with pardonable egotism, he credited his teaching more than the intelligence of his pupil for the progress they made.

Knut learned the curious argot derived from the cryptically evolved hermetic communications of jazz musicians and dope addicts with all its obscurities derived from the implicit necessity to exclude the squares from the illegal and esoteric practices of their lives, but he also found time to learn to read.

The cabin held an old unabridged dictionary and a collection of those peculiar novels and biographies that find their only immortality in summer bungalows, and he read and learned the more formal ramifications of English. His spoken conversation was a cacophonic imitation of the underworld, but his internal dialogues were composed in the near Victorian cadences of unremembered middlebrow literature.

Knut sat outside the cabin hunkered in a crouch on the ground with his back against the porch in the fine warm morning and hummed a song deep in his throat. Flo silently came onto the porch behind him, attracted by the melody. He began to sing a war song from the time of the first Caesar aloud in his deep strong voice, but the bawdy words did not fit his feeling for the morning, and the harsh burred Latin did not ring true in the twentieth-century air. He switched to a Celtic war song that told of the Cymry and sang the lilting language in the highest baritone he could muster.

"That's a pretty song," Flo said. "Can you sing it in English?"

Knut thought for a moment and sang to a tune that gamboled in baroque counterpoint the words of the first verse.

"In this song now I sing
of when Artos was the king,

and gentle Christ wiped away
the cruelties of the corn king sway."

He launched into the chorus with a harder rhythm than the ballad form of the verse, and tapped his foot, singing:

"O swing your sword for British peace
and let our voices never cease."

He stopped, Flo was not paying attention. "You're hip this is an old song," Knut said deprecatingly. "Like it's better than a thousand years old." Flo was staring at the trees, and he said, "What's-a-matta, baby, you got the blues?"

"Yeah," Flo said. "It's Harry, he's starting to worry about that money he owes."

"I can fix that," Knut said and straightened to his full height.

"Oh not that," Flo said. "I mean he's not scared. It preys on his mind that he didn't pay off. Gianetti's bunch are a bunch of bums, but Harry never welched before, and he don't like it." She subsided with a sigh.

"How does this horse race bit work anyway?" Knut asked.

Flo explained the sport of kings with economy. "Well, if you put your money on a horse, and the horse wins, and too many other cats haven't got their bread down on the same pig, you can win ten, twenty times what you put down." She reflected, "Maybe more."

Knut thought, and then phrased his conclusion in the language of his thinking. "Then the winning depends upon the excellence of the beast. The better horse must win?"

"I guess so," Flo said, not seeing the direction of Knut's reasoning.

"Can the money be wagered at the places where the horses race?" Knut asked, but Flo looked at him blankly,

and he reworded his question. "Can you bet the pigs at the track?"

"Of course," Flo said, amazed at his ignorance.

"Then," Knut said, "by Woden's crows I swear we will win much." He grinned and rumbled his bass titter. "Let's go talk it up to Harry."

Harry protested, but the pressure of the ogre's mind, and the combined weight of Knut's two vocabularies soon silenced his objections. To Harry the plan seemed to be basically sound: after all the way to make money was on the races; there was no better way. You took bets or you made them, all other ways of earning a living were mysterious, square, or the result of inheritance.

Harry was nervous. He was used to the churned muddy soil of the streets and lanes between the neat painted clapboards of the low racehorse barns, but it was a bad place. Even this early in the morning there was a chance of meeting someone who had a connection with Gianetti. One of the touts, or handlers and exercise boys who were part-time touts would have heard about the small-time bookie who owed Gianetti money, and it was a good idea to be in with Gianetti.

Harry shivered, more from apprehension than from the coolness of the morning air, and looked at Knut for reassurance. The ogre walked on the sandals Flo had made for him out of sections of birch trees and braided rawhide boot laces, in complete silence. He sniffed the winy stink of feed and manure with intoxicated enjoyment, and his ears moved to pick up the tight sounds of horses stirring muscles that were unwilling to awake. It was hard to feel the horses' minds with the pall that Harry's fear cast over their auras, and he turned to the little man.

"Don't be so hung up, baby," Knut said. "There's nobody here but us chickens," and Harry believed him, the ogre was so positive, so attuned to the air that he could not doubt. He relaxed and said, "Neat, none of them hoods would be up this early." He fell into the calmness

Knut generated, and added, "I mean this isn't their scene."

Harry set the lapels of his coat with the hard decision of a tough movie prize fighter and followed Knut, trying to place his feet with the same flat-footed, bearish silence as the ogre. They took step after step in unison, marching with dreamlike slowness between the stalls. Knut stopped from time to time when a stronger impression reached his mind, but the halts fitted their rhythm and did not interrupt the smoothness of their progress.

"I'm about done, Harry," Knut said. "I got these pigs taped." He turned back down the aisle of barns and led Harry in a twisting path between the buildings that had them back to the car in a few minutes.

Flo awoke from a restless doze behind the wheel of the Buick and looked up at Harry and Knut. Without any pause for recognition she said, "If we're going to the track this afternoon, we're gonna have to give him another haircut, and I'm gonna have to get my hair done." She scissored the gold fringe of her straw blonde hair between her fingers and flapped it at Harry. "Let's go, huh?" She had the engine started and the sun turned the grey of the dawn smog into a dull red haze as they climbed into the car.

Though there were still reservations in Harry's mind, the pressure of Knut's mental abilities kept them stilled. The light-washed atmosphere of the track and the hullabaloo of the crowd erased the last vestige of doubt. After all, he reasoned, the way to make money was on the races; there is no better way.

Harry sniffed the air, and stared at the familiar scene with pleasure. The air under the grandstand was blasted full of light from the glaring ceiling full of fluorescent fixtures, and the sun reflected from the concrete and the heads of the crowd. He swiveled, and was reassured by the sight of the tote board players that Knut was, after all, not so strange in this crowd. The first race had just been paid off, and he saw one of the tote board players gesturing with both hands—the right full of a folded and

crumpled wad of money in bills of large denominations and his left hand waving a fanned, green stack of combination tickets. The man wore a suede frontier jacket with gaps in the fringing, and around his neck hung an expensive pair of American binoculars held up with twisted butcher's string. Mottled o.d. fatigue pants sagged over a pair of unpolished and scuffed Wellington boots, but they were still obviously expensive, and the man held several thousand dollars negligently in his hand.

"*That,*" Harry said to the ogre, "is a horseman." Knut looked at him blankly. "No," Harry explained, "he's not no horse—he's an owner, and he's a tote player. He's betting the board according to a system that follows the late money." Knut still looked unenlightened. "He bets the long shots the big money hits by watching the last total on the board that registers the handle."

"The handle?" Knut asked, and Harry said, "Yeah, the money that's bet on each horse."

"Crazy," Knut said, and looked out into the sunlight. The track was very pleasant he thought; the air was full of anticipatory tensions of both the winners and the losers, but the two vibrations were not so different—they both waited for the future, and ignored the past whether it had been good or bad. There were some few auras that did not please him. They were cold, and nervously cruel. They were the broadcast thoughts of the men who were in the crowd with a calculating purpose that he did not understand.

If Knut had asked Harry what the function of the coldly watchful men in the crowd was, he would have been told that they were there to control the odds within the minute limits decided by a computor that enabled the crime syndicate's national betting organization to be sure of a profit. Knut would have thought that the process was dangerously close to the sin of usury, but Harry would have shrugged it off with the explanation that the syndicate did no more than the pari-mutuel machines that one bet against the track.

The reveries of both the male members of the group were interrupted by Flo. "Let's go get a hot dog and a beer," she said. "I'm starved."

Harry knew they formed too obvious a group. Flo, larger than he, with newly plated hair, he small with a nervous bouncing walk, and Knut's enormous bulk, but the thoughts damped in Knut's confidence were not strong enough to trigger adrenalin into his blood. He led them through the crowd with confidence and spoke, "That's what they got the best of at the track—hot dogs. You know, you forget what's good sitting hung up behind a telephone every day—all day." He dug a sharp elbow into Flo's ribs, and she smiled agreement as they drew up in front of the refreshment stand.

"Three dogs. No, you better make it six with everything," Harry said grandly to the young girl with her open mouth pale behind her white lipstick. Harry paid the three dollars with a flourish, and the girl hurriedly jettisoned her load into Knut's hand at the end of the arm he stretched over Flo's shoulder.

"You can't buy beer at the same stand," Harry explained. "We gotta go over this way."

Harry led the way, and Knut's nostrils had time to sort the separated odors from under the smell of mustard and spices. He touched Harry with his free hand, and not getting his attention, hooked him to a stop with his forefinger.

Harry looked up champing his jaws in anticipation. "You and Flo gonna scarf all these dogs?" Knut asked.

"Naw," Harry said, "four of them's for you."

"Well, I can't Harry." Knut gave vent to his giggling temblor. "Not and be able to think about horses."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "That's the best thing at the track—the hot dogs."

"That's all right, Harry," Flo said. "We'll throw them all away."

"It is not so much that I suffer an excess of refinement to the nature of animal meats. It is merely the situation in which I find them that I find offen . . ." Knut stopped,

his aural radar had been blocked for a moment by the association of the sausage and his gaffe, and now he was thankful that Flo and Harry found his second vocabulary almost incomprehensible.

"Would you listen to that?" a blonde who was an attenuated copy of Flo's opulence said to her companion.

"Listen to what?" The sandy man in English tweeds lifted his head from his program. "I'm trying to handicap the first race."

"To what that grotesque said." The woman pointed at Knut's retreating figure.

"My god," the man said, and touching a light brown mustache that blended into the freckled fold of his cheeks, he studied the ogre with interest.

"Come on," he said, and pulled the woman after him. He found a clear aisle of view and inspected the group.

"You're great," he said to the blonde, who was tossing her head to flip her straightened hair back into its ironed fall.

"First you pull my arm off—then you say I'm great," she said, but he wasn't listening.

"Come on," he said, "I've got to find a phone."

"What about the first race?" she said.

"The hell with the first race." He paused and shoved a handful of money from his side jacket pocket into her hand, and said, "You put the bets down." He left totally immersed in his search. Gianetti would let him off the hook for this favor; all he had to do was find a phone booth.

The vulpine blonde's muzzle followed his departure. Her fingers flickered as she counted the money in her hands, and then she turned to the exit.

"He was a loser anyhow," she said, and expertly moved through the would-be admirers among the late arriving bettors in an insulating bubble of cold self-awareness.

Knut, Harry and Flo carried their paper containers of beer to the rail to watch the post parade. Knut handed Harry his drink, and moved away down the rail. He mewed softly in his throat, and listened to the blowing

and whinnies. He could not talk to the horses, but he could excite them with the ancestrally fearful sound of saber-toothed impatience and hear their emotions and confidence.

He moved back to Flo and Harry and said, "The horse with the black- and puce-attired rider is the most likely to succeed."

His pronouncement was greeted with blank stares.

"The pig whose boy's wearing black and red threads."

"That's silks," Harry corrected.

"What's it make?" Knut said. "It's almost a sure thing. But I can make a . . ."—without a term to describe his two-way rapport, he hesitated but pushed on—"noise that will guarantee the race."

"I don't fix it for no horse to win," Harry said. "I'd be just like that bum Gianetti."

"Well there are two horses," Knut said, "but the black and red's best."

"We'll bet them both to win," Harry said. "Which is the other one?"

"Frostbitten citron and brown," Knut said and corrected himself. "Orange and brown."

Harry's confidence was slightly shaken; Knut should have been surety itself, but Flo steered him firmly to the one hundred dollar win booth, and the ogre trailed behind. He felt strange. His perceptions were not dulled, but something was different. His appetite was larger than he remembered, and he almost wished he had eaten the hot dogs.

When they returned to the rail, they leaned against the criss-crossed wires of the cyclone fence and watched the handlers and jockeys guide the horses into the stalls in the starting gate. An amplified trumpet pealed and a plump voice announced that it was five minutes to post time for the first race. The voice had hardly finished when a loud series of bells clamored for the shutdown of the parimutuel ticket machines.

Knut started and tried to find a place to rest his hands amid the trimmed ends of the fencing wire where it was

bound to the top rail. The spaces between the clipped spikes were not arranged for his fingers, and he laid his hands lightly over the points.

A single great electric bell reverberated, and the horses boomed out of the suddenly sprung gates. They leaped away with Knut's horse running dead last, but the horse rapidly drew up with the forefront of the trailing group in a frenzied crab-gaited dash that ripped a disgusted "Oh no" from Harry's throat. The jockey leaned his puce head forward, and the horse drew ahead of the gaggle of losers and settled into a long loping gallop that rapidly closed the ground between him and the horse that was Knut's alternate choice. When he crossed under the wire a full head in front, the result seemed so inevitable that Harry and Flo merely nodded and smiled at one another.

"Should we collect?" Flo asked.

"We'll have to—we need some operation money for the next race."

Knut was still staring at the track. A calm monolith left by the withdrawing wavelets of the crowd. He relaxed the massive emotional control he had been holding on himself and lifted his hands away from the flattened points and finger grips he had left along the steel rail.

"We win," Harry said, looking at the tote board. "We win," he said more loudly in an awed tone. "And he pays twenty-eight eighty."

Flo gulped and roared, "And you had," she lowered her voice and looked around, "two hundred dollar tickets on him."

"That's almost three g's," Harry said.

"But," the ogre said, turning his large grin on them, "we have to subtract the two hundred we bet on the other pig to win."

"Nuts," Harry said. "Look at it this way." He spread his hands and shrugged. "Come on." He started for the payoff windows. "We gotta get our dough so we can bet again." He explained as he walked, "Look at it this way. If the next win we make pays a lousy six to one," he

turned to Flo, "that's a twelve dollar payoff." He smiled and did a quickstep that almost tripped him over Knut's feet. "Well, anyways, that's enough to be ahead of what I need for Gianetti, and then I'm through."

"Through?" Flo asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Through. I'm quitting. I'm through with gambling, and booking and . . ." He hesitated and finally found the words and spoke them with a curious precision. "And I'm starting afresh."

They went to collect the money in a chortling little group, but when they had worked their way past a series of windows with increasing payoff prices, they came to an alcove backed with a grey steel door that was marked $100 PAYOFF ONE PERSON ADMITTED AT A TIME. They conferred silently, and Harry adjusted his lapels and went in.

They waited for what seemed to be hours and Flo clutched at Knut's elbow as time went on. The few passersby slowed as they passed the pair, and one man stopped and watched them for a time, but Flo and Knut kept their eyes on the door. Flo only knew two kinds of metal doors, those that led to cellblocks and those that led to clubs that catered to bizarre tastes or a propensity for late hours, and she worried. Knut kept his eyes on the door because nothing else in the green painted concrete corridor attracted his interest.

Harry emerged with his features drawn into tight, harried lines.

"Christmas," he said in a high child's voice. "There was a Fed in there." He shuddered. "He was a tax man." Flo put her hand on his arm. "Don't worry, all he did was take the goversment's cut, but he wanted my address and my Social Security number so I could get credit," Harry quoted, "toward my retirement benefit." He grinned. "Where the hell would I get a Social Security number? I never worked at no square job in my life." He said it with pride.

Flo asked, "What did you tell him?"

"Well," Harry answered, "I would have made one up,

but I didn't know how many numbers those things got in them. So I told him I couldn't remember." Harry walked away. "Well at least I got the dough, and all we need is one more good horse."

They walked back along the corridor past the simpler and cheaper payoff windows for the cheaper players. Three men followed them, the sandy man walked between two men whose narrow-shouldered mohair suits obliterated his tweeds with their aggressive expensiveness. One of the shining-suited men turned to their guide. "Mr. Gianetti says you can forget the little matter of your indebtedness to him. He likes to reciprocate in the case of favors." He turned to his assistant dismissing his auditor with an inattention so fine that the sandy man seemed to melt into the contours of the thickened crowd around the two dollar payoff windows. The dark-suited man bent his dark seal's head close to his companion's and said, "Where do you think it would be best to do this job of work?" He patted the side of his jacket smooth where it had been disarranged in passing contact with a fat woman in a formidably starched housedress.

His companion politely waited for him to rearrange his clothes, and answered, "In my opinion the parking lot would be the best choice."

"This is true," the other man answered, and they prowled after Harry's group, their feet, in black glove leather shoes, coming down in unison. They were both medium-sized men, and now that they were in movement they passed through the eddies in the crowd without friction.

Knut felt that there was something wrong, but he was distracted by the concentration necessary to prepare himself to read the next post parade, and by the pleasantly unpleasant sensations that rose from glandular sources he could not shut off. He caught the musky natural perfume of the women about him under the inaccurate chemical compositions of their flower perfumes, and he found the scents newly disturbing. He

looked at Flo, but it was certainly not Harry's girl friend that made his skin loosen and tighten as if a myriad of muscles had loosed a rebellion. Knut searched the air distractedly, and trapped by the circumstance that links the inevitability of physical readiness to its own instant, he found the cause of his need.

More than six feet off the floor, for a wrenching instant seeming propped above the crowd, he saw a head topped with pre-Raphaelite hair, a Burne-Jones virgin's head, with straight black hair falling in perfect symmetry from a part as precisely in the middle of her hair as a northman's two handed axe stroke. Over her shoulder she carried an instrument that Knut took to be a large lute, holding it with a hand trimmed with natural fingernails. Knut started in her direction, and saw her turn her head toward him and grin widely. She had a high forehead, a wide mouth, and a rather broad nose, but her eyes were milkmaid blue. He almost did not answer her smile, but finally he grinned widely and thankfully in greeting.

Harry looked up at Knut. "Come on, come on, we're gonna miss the horses pass for the second race if you don't get a hurry on," he said, and bounced forward with quick short steps that swiveled him around the clotted flow of the crowd.

As the horses drew closer, Knut found that it was not necessary for him to arouse their fear. He could feel their emotions, with a newly heightened awareness. This time he was perfectly sure of the winner; he felt the horses' lives as a timeless contiguous whole: from foal to full growth, each horse's history and self-regard was assimilated and became part of a surety so deep that it could only be called cellular.

He almost blurted the news to Harry, but he restrained himself. First Harry had to be adjusted. Knut directed a wave of truth and belief at the bookie, and Harry achieved a graceful relation with Knut; he was full of the meat of infused contemplation. Knut was embarrassed by the mystically theological tenor of his defini-

tion, but he knew no other terms.

"Baby," Knut said, "we got it made." He grinned. "We can't miss." He pointed. "It's the jock with the red and blue what's topping our little winner."

Harry dove into his program. "Well," he said, after a moment of consideration, "the horse will pay some more than we need." He pinched the full underside of Flo's arm. "But what the hey, it'll pay the taxes." Harry whirled. "You two wait here. I'll make the bet, and be back."

Knut found a reverie that was not based in times past. He saw the girl, or was it woman, with the long hair. The center part tenderly exposed her white scalp, and he felt the fragility of humankind with helpless concern. Ogres had, he remembered, in times past been accused of stealing maidens—but for what reason? Knut slapped his thigh and raked a hand through his cropped mane. He was a fool. There were no females of his race, and he was not truly immortal. There even had been a Danish chieftain called Giant Knut, Knut den Storer, a great tall ugly man born of woman, and out of a strong race of great tall ugliness. He himself had not changed so much as merely grown older. It was true that the industrial gases, the nitrous and other oxides breathed out by hundreds of automobiles, and the whines and hisses of the electrical energies ravaging through light tubes and the air made him use more effort to keep his wide spectrumed world open, but his glands had altered the balances of their secretions, and his dense flesh was growing lighter with the sweet liquors that Chaucer had found in April.

Full of himself, Knut did not look around until the horses were crossing the finish line, and he saw that their horse had won.

"We win," Flo said, "but where's Harry?"

"He probably thought it'd be easier to go right up and collect," Knut said, and smiled to think that anyone could find quiddities in a perfect world, but soon he was worrying himself. The crowds had mostly vanished into

the shadow of the grandstand, and Harry had not returned.

"We'll check by the payoff place," Knut said. "He's bound to be there collecting our winnings."

"Well," Flo twisted her neck to look up at Knut, "he said he'd be back." She looked at the paper litter on the concrete. "I should have gone along and watched him."

"Quis custodeit ipsos custodes," Knut growled the words in the dog latin of a colonial soldier.

"Well," Flo said, "don't swear. I'm worried is all. You know Harry, when he says he'll be back, he should be back. He's faithful."

The last words, trumpet partials sounding the responsibilities of honor, brought Knut back from the sedations of his sudden and thorough puberty. He reached out into the chaotic smear of emotions around them, and grabbed Flo's arm. "Come on," he said, and stifled Flo's protest by explaining, "There's trouble." He clenched his free hand. "Somebody's got Harry."

Flo could barely keep up with the ogre, but she kicked off her high-heeled strap-woven shoes and ran at his side with a surprising economy of hip movement. They turned down the long green concrete corridor, bleakly lined with stressed concrete support members, and started toward the one hundred dollar payoff sign.

Knut stopped. "It's no good," he said. "Harry's not down there. We gotta try somewheres else.

They went back into the crowd, and Knut straightened himself as tall as was possible, but he could see nothing to help them. He growled, "Jeg skull be morder." He swiveled his head again, and saw the maiden of the long straight hair frantically beckoning him to her. His first thought was that he had no time for such games, but he dismissed it as unworthy, and cleaved a quick passage through the thin crowd.

The girl wasted no time. "You're looking for your friend," she said with perfect certainty.

Knut nodded, anxious for Harry, but overcome with pleasure at her perception.

"I saw him," she said, and smiled with overwhelming empathy. "He didn't look happy." She paused, and said with a distasteful grimace, "He was walking between two shiny little men."

"Where?" Knut said, and the girl drew back for a moment before the ferocious concentration of his need.

"Toward the parking lot," she said.

Knut debated leaving Flo for a split second, then gathered her under an arm and made off at a run.

He put her down when they reached the flat asphalt space of the parking lot and squinted into the glittering haze of light reflected from tops of thousands of cars. "There," he said, and he whooped "Harry!" in a long ululation that brought the tiny distant trio to a halt.

Pushing Flo to a position at his side, and partially behind him, to protect her, he moved toward them at a slower pace.

They came up to the waiting men, and the more important of the shining twins said to his companion, and to a rhetorical alter ego, "What do you know, a little gravy. The big guy brought the broad to us." He smiled at his companion.

"Coxcomb," Knut snorted.

"What'd he call you?" the second twin asked with a giggle.

"What's the difference," the leader said. "We'll take care of him and then enjoy our gravy. I mean there's no telling what a broad and a guy will do for you when they think they've got a chance of living a few minutes longer." As he talked he surveyed the arena and misread Knut's tense immobility. He decided that there was no reason to take the noisy chance of using his gun and reached behind his head and threw his hideaway stiletto with a snakelike whiplash of his arm and torso. Normally Knut would have taken his time and avoided the knife, but he feared for Harry and Flo. The ogre bobbed slightly and bounded forward with the thin-bladed knife quivering between the corded fibers of his shoulder muscle. The pain had activated Knut, and he screamed a

reverberating basso cry that echoed from the grandstand as he leaped. The second man had his gun out, but Knut batted the knife wielder into him, and the two went down in a single still heap. Knut opened his mouth wide, and would have made the legend of the ogres' taste for human flesh true, but a sweet voice stopped him.

"You're hurt," it said, and Knut was suddenly and weakly calm. He quickly plucked the knife from his shoulder, not wishing to offend such tender eyes, and turned to the tall girl. The girl pulled his shirt away from the small wound, and he let it bleed. She was dabbing at the cut with a large white handkerchief, and he wished to enjoy the delicious ministrations.

"It is not necessary," he said proudly. "I am little hurt." He grinned down at the girl. "If you would tell me your name, I would be cured."

She smiled back. "Inge," she said, and thought better. It's really Ingeborg."

"Ingeborg." Knut sang the name with its proper cadences. "It is a good name to put into a song of double victory."

"Double victory?" Ingeborg asked, but she was not arch.

"I have beaten the whoreson knechts at their own game," Knut said. "I have both won the battle, and have a lady fair." He grunted. "Without having to carry her off to a dank cavern filled with bones, and broken skulls."

"You *are* an ogre," she said laughingly, and Knut smiled. "I will explain better as we go," he said.

By the time Flo had untangled herself from Harry, the pair had vanished into the afternoon.

"Look," Harry said to the objecting customer, "you don't like what I got on the color tee-vee don't drink in my joint." He turned to his waitress. "Right, Flo?"

The customer shrugged his shoulders at the little man's belligerence. "All I said was, 'You don't look like the type who digs that hootnanny stuff.' "

"Well," Harry was sheepish; he filled the man's glass

and waved the money away, "most of the time I don't, but I owe everything to New Okra up there. I mean he fixed me up with the bread to buy this place." He pointed to the pair on the screen. "And you gotta admit that the broad up there can really play that twelve-string steel." The customer nodded. "And who should know more old songs than the big guy?" He spread his arms. "Right?"

"Right," Flo said, and a great basso voice sang the opening bars of a Finnish beer-making song. Knot sang the words of the Upsgarn eddo in his deep ogre's voice, and smiled his man's smile at his wife Ingeborg's guitar where it rested on her growing belly.

Sonya Dorman has written and published a considerable amount of good poetry, which accounts for the fact that there is a force to this prose tale about four inmates in a mental institution that extends beyond its narrative, as perfect and strong as that narrative is. We urge you not to start this story until you are sure you will not be interrupted while reading it—and for some time thereafter.

LUNATIC ASSIGNMENT

by Sonya Dorman

Four men, dressed in limp white shirts and slacks, were grouped about one of the small ward beds. In the hall beyond the locked doors, nurses moved on hard feet, with the sound of ponies galloping. The men stood with their backs to that door.

"It's this way," Braun said, his upper lip pressed into a grimace to keep his teeth, those awful foreign objects, in place. "If we don't make the effort now, there's no chance for us, and we'll live here forever. Understand?" Braun looked around at them.

There was a murmur from the others. It was early in

the morning; the light was dim. Keepsy glanced at the tall, wired windows and back again. He was a thin man, the lines of his ravaged face had once been clean cut as if in stone; now his thickening whiskers blurred them like moss.

Keepsy said, "I'll go first."

"Oh good boy," Fomer said. He had a round, white head and a vacant face, waiting to be tipped up and filled.

"Good man," Keepsy corrected him, and they laughed, their heads back, each face opening into the mask of tragedy as they howled their appreciation.

"Yes, men, men," Arrigott repeated, swinging his arms vigorously backward and forward. "You're all men here, boys that you are."

Again the circle of thrown-back heads, wobbling tongues, the jump of Adam's apples.

The locked door gave a clack! as the bolt was drawn and the group dissolved, two of them slumping on a bed, Arrigott standing in the aisle on his toes, Braun facing the door and holding his upper teeth in place with his lip drawn back. Fomer, as usual, bent his head, resigned. The male nurse came in, a dark man with a long jaw and bristly hair.

He said, "Keepsy, you ready?"

"Ready," Keepsy said, pulling the white slacks up in place. His waist was so thin and his belly so flat that without suspenders no pants would stay up. While he had other mannerisms more characteristic, he was forever tugging at the waistband to raise his pants.

Keepsy followed the nurse into the hall and down its length, his shadow falling on the pale green walls and his face assuming a contemplative expression. In his mind he concentrated on the taste of a martini, the cold bite of juniper, the salt of the olive, the red, rolled flag of the pimento. He placed one hand over his heart as he walked, where his flag was rolled, salty and strong. His skin was pale as gin, and only a glass could contain him. Rather than a martini, as he turned the corner, he felt

himself beginning to fume like nitric acid in its flask.

In the elevator, he felt himself pouring from one bottle to another, from gin to nitric acid, but he was so adaptable after eight years in this tumbler that the constant change actually refreshed him.

Dr. Manner was waiting in his office, and Keepsy sat down in the slippery walnut chair with its orange Naugahyde cushion. He hated the color of orange and sat on it cautiously. Dr. Manner had warned him before that his fantasies must be consistent with his realities; he did hate that color.

"Good morning, Doctor," he said cheerfully, and was pleased that the other man seemed taken aback at the greeting.

"Dear doctor of this marvellous world," Keepsy continued, pouring himself out, "I've come to that decision. It's taken me a long time, hasn't it?"

"Yes, tell me about it," Dr. Manner said. His blond hair was brushed into a wave over his wide forehead to make him look younger than he could ever be. He often looked sideways when he spoke, as if he were sneaking up on the conversation, and as if his fantasy did not coincide with anyone's reality, least of all his own. Braun said if he chose to go straight at something, he would accomplish more.

"I've been thinking about money. I'll concede that I had a very cavalier attitude toward it. I realize now there's nothing I can do, that I want to do, without money. I've kept up my drawing and singing, and I feel that I could step into an excellent job and live outside."

"Are you still unable to eat meat?" the doctor asked.

Keepsy went on, "I've been thinking; after all I've had plenty of time to think. I must come to grips with reality, and correlate my fantasies. This has sort of been working in me. I know I was confused about the corporate image, the shadow of my father. I realize now it was only a shadow. I'm sure that I could step into a real life situation and hold the job successfully. I don't want to waste my life."

"Hmm," Dr. Manner said, looking at the wall. "We'll have to talk about it a good deal more. Would you like to look at some of those cards again?"

A black blot like a thundercloud fell on Keepsy's brow, but he never moved a muscle. His respiration increased, but he was careful to breathe through his nose, and he replied genially, "Of course. Certainly. Right now?"

Dr. Manner pressed the button on his intercom and requested the box of big cards from the girl in the outer office. She brought them in. Her shadow fell on Keepsy, and he inhaled it for nourishment. As she turned to go, she pulled his cork and he began to evaporate, so he clutched the arms of the chair and hated the color of orange until she closed the door behind her.

The Doctor opened the box, took out the cards, and presented one to Keepsy. It was a dark maroon pattern, hideously symmetrical, and although it might have been as simple as dried blood, it might have been a flayed terrier or even better, as he looked at it, a baby run over by a tractor and squashed flat. That certainly correlated, Keepsy thought. "It's a carousel," he said. "See? The little animals all around the edge? And a pipe-organ playing a loony tune as it goes around."

"Oh," Dr. Manner said, looking keenly sideways at Keepsy's face. "A carousel. All right. And this one?" He presented another card.

It was black like the angel of death, with viridian moths fluttering at its burning edges. Keepsy could swallow it in one gulp and knew how it would taste: bitter, making his tongue crinkle and cleave to the roof of his mouth; a portrait in epicac, his father's heart with the skin removed.

"That's a school yard; the kids are out playing. See the kites?" Keepsy used his curved, yellow thumbnail to indicate the green things, but was careful not to touch them, for they would run up his absorbent fingerskins and spoil his coloring. "They're flying kites on a windy spring day," Keepsy said. "I used to, when I was a kid. On the hill above the railroad cut."

"Your father allowed you to fly kites?" Dr. Manner asked sharply.

Keepsy soothed himself back in the chair. "Of course he allowed me to. My sister and I flew our kites whenever the wind was right. I remember the crabapple blossoming over by the station. It was a nice old tree."

"I see," the Doctor said, putting the card away. "Keepsy, you wouldn't be kidding me?"

"I don't know what you mean. I told you what I saw. I can't help it if I don't see what you think I should see."

Dr. Manner opened the top drawer of the desk, which squeaked, looked into it, and closed it. "All right," he said. He threw the lid back on top of the card box.

"No more?" Keepsy asked.

The Doctor slapped the arms of his padded chair, and sighed. "Not right now. I'll want to talk with you again. We're making some progress, but you know it doesn't happen overnight."

His words were as transparent and slippery as little green onions. Keepsy wrinkled up his nose and tried not to breathe too much; he wasn't sure if he had succeeded at all in his major effort.

Dismissed, he got up and walked out to where the nurse waited for him. He wondered if it had been worth the effort, if they were really going to get out, and which of them would finally turn the table, spilling china and dinner onto the harmonious rugs. He hummed as he trod down the corridor, watching his shadow pass on the green walls, until they came to the ward door, shining behind its veil of amber shellac. He liked the taste of shellac.

"Arrigott!" the nurse said. He stopped swinging his arms and tightened his fingers into fists, into which he tucked his thumbs, but then he untucked them again and put them on the outside of the fists, because Braun had told him if you hit someone with your thumb inside your fingers, you would break the knuckles. Nothing was worth breaking knuckles for; Arrigott had suffered several broken bones, including a fracture of the skull when

he jumped his motorcycle over a median divider to evade a pursuing patrolman. Knowing what broken bones felt like, as a rule Arrigott stepped only on his toes, carefully.

Today Arrigott walked flat-footed through the halls, and told himself there was a certain satisfaction, a sound of assurance and utter credibility, if you came down on your heels, but he was confused about whether you came down on your heels first and then let the toes slap down, or whether you looked better, more confident, if you stepped out on your toes and then let your heels come down. He tried both ways, neither seemed just right, and by the time he got to Dr. Manner's office he was shifting from one method to the other.

You walk on your heels first, you advised yourself. But you have been told not to talk about walking; it leads to running, and you know the other rules.

"Cheers, Doctor," you said, rushing into the comforting walnut arms of the chair. The cushion was soft, and sighed when you sat on it. You could look out the clean glass of the window behind the Doctor and see the pigeons shitting on the windowsills across the way. The pigeon shit dribbed in white commas across the stone; if you learned to punctuate well, there was no doctrine you could not write.

"Good morning, Arrigott," the Doctor said.

"You enjoy your walks in these halls, though after all, you see them every day," Arrigott said, and smiled. If you smiled, there was no one you could not charm.

A charm of silence fell on him, although you thought: you are failing, you are not saying what you came to say, what they sent you for. You must say it. I, Arrigott said in his mouth, and it lay there like a marble. Oh good Christ, if you swallow it you will die an awful death. I, I, Arrigott thought frantically; you must say it.

You opened his mouth a little and breathed through dry lips. "I am here," you said to the Doctor. "I have been thinking you should not spend a whole life aimlessly scratching around," Arrigott said.

"Ah," the Doctor said, surprised and pleased. "That's very good. Tell me about it."

"Tell you," Arrigott said, the marble rolling around in his mouth. You arched your tongue to keep it from going down his throat. I, fat as a belly button, don't swallow, for Christ's sake. "I," Arrigott said, coming down on it like a heel, with good assurance. "I, I, I," he shouted, tucking his thumbs inside his fingers where you would be safe, warm, unseeing, nor smell the bread for breakfast with the nostrils pinched inside the fingers.

"Take your time," Dr. Manner said. "You don't have to rush. I? I. Very good. Tell me about it."

"Tell you," Arrigott said. "I am trying. I try."

"You're doing fine."

"But there's no reason," Arrigott suddenly protested. "No reason to state the obvious, is there? You don't need to say it, when everyone can see it. If you choose not to use the first person, if you choose not to be the first person, didn't Christ choose not to be the first person? All other persons were first, you see." Oh Arrigott, you have failed, you are a total washout, your bones aren't worth a penny, not even to the devil.

"You, you," Arrigott cried, writhing in the arms of the chair, on the mango colored cushion which sighed like a woman each time you shifted your weight. "You can't do it. You. I. Them," he wept.

"You're doing much better than you seem to realize," Dr. Manner said. "You've made immense stri—gains. Hmm." He became reflective. He looked sideways, and then he burst out, "Would you like to tell me about walking?"

"Walking?" Arrigott shrieked. "*Heels?*" He writhed in the chair, muttered, "Heels?" and looked out the window where the sight of pigeon shit comforted him; it was so white, so pure, not dark like the bare heels after stepping—"Heels?" you repeated, still trying.

"Toes?" Dr. Manner suggested.

Arrigott shuddered. "Toes," you repeated obediently. "Toes and heels," you said, triumphantly. "First on the

heels, then on the toes, walking, running, jumping, I, I, I!" Arrigott raved.

"Very good," Dr. Manner said. "Wonderful! I can hardly believe it. We'll have another talk tomorrow."

Arrigott was so sweaty and weak he could hardly raise himself up from the chair, and Dr. Manner knew better than to touch his arm to help you; you must not be touched. After a moment or two, you managed by ourself, oh you! you! Arrigott, you did try.

He walked on his toes for the sake of it all the way back to the ward, where Braun sat in melancholy state, their weary leader. "You didn't do any harm," Arrigott reported to him glad not to smile. "You tried. Dr. Manner said you did very well."

Braun chewed his lip, waiting for the nurse to go out and close the door. "Did you say it?" he asked Arrigott, who was standing in the aisle, swinging his arms.

Arrigott parted his lips, and breathed out. "I," he breathed. "You did try very hard. You believe it is worth it, to go away from here."

Keepsy was asleep on his bed, his nose erect as a penis, his toes turned in kindly toward each other; Keepsy was lovers all by himself, his hand over his pecker. He always slept that way. So did the others, except Arrigott, who crossed his hands on his breast, but they had not until Keepsy slept in daylight on his back outside the covers. Not till then did they sleep that way in comfort. It was said the satisfaction was greater.

At any rate, Braun knew, it was all the satisfaction one could get in this place. To sleep, to touch, to gently hold, the dove's body throbbing. Rape was out of the question; he must not think about people but learn to relate to objects.

"I suppose I'm next," Braun said casually, standing up. "I will go and forget about relating so much to people, and learn to see the objective world full of objects. Abstracts. Things. Flat sides, tall walls, stones, green and strawberries."

"Can we do it?" Fomer asked sadly, wagging his

empty head. "I'd like to be told how."

"You will," Braun assured him. "In a couple of weeks we'll be outside, and you may follow me. It's a matter of relating to objects. Things. Walnuts, yellow, and women." His mouth worked.

Fomer looked at the man who was obviously his master, and in a respectful voice he said, "Maybe you should practice things."

"Houses," Braun said. "Mothers, sisters, aunts, governesses, headmistresses," his eyes began to roll," "mistresses, mothers, doves, blood, seeds, little seeds. I'm full of millions of little seed people, listen to me," he continued.

"Shut up," Keepsy remarked, waking.

"What do you mean?" Fomer asked. "What is shut up? We are shut up. How can you tell us to shut up some more?"

Braun said, "If we fall to thieving among ourselves, we won't have honor enough left to get out. Don't you want to get out?"

"Pure as pigeon shit," Arrigott said, rolling the nice white ends of his shirt between his fingers. "You did try, you did."

The lock clacked, the door opened. The nurse came in and said, "All right, time to go."

They got up. Keepsy hiked his pants up and Arrigott tucked his thumbs into his fingers. Fomer walked behind Braun where he belonged, following. They went down the hall with the bristle-headed nurse in front of them. Into the elevator. Down, down, everybody going down, to relate to objects, to unroll the red flags, to be the first person.

They lined up at the assignment point, where a man in a raw silk suit stood with his clipboard, calling out the vacancies. "Minister," he called, and Arrigott stepped out, pronouncing "You," in a loud voice. He got into the black limousine and was driven to his job.

"Soldier," the man called, and Fomer moved across the walk, got into an olive green truck which roared away.

"Teacher," the man called.

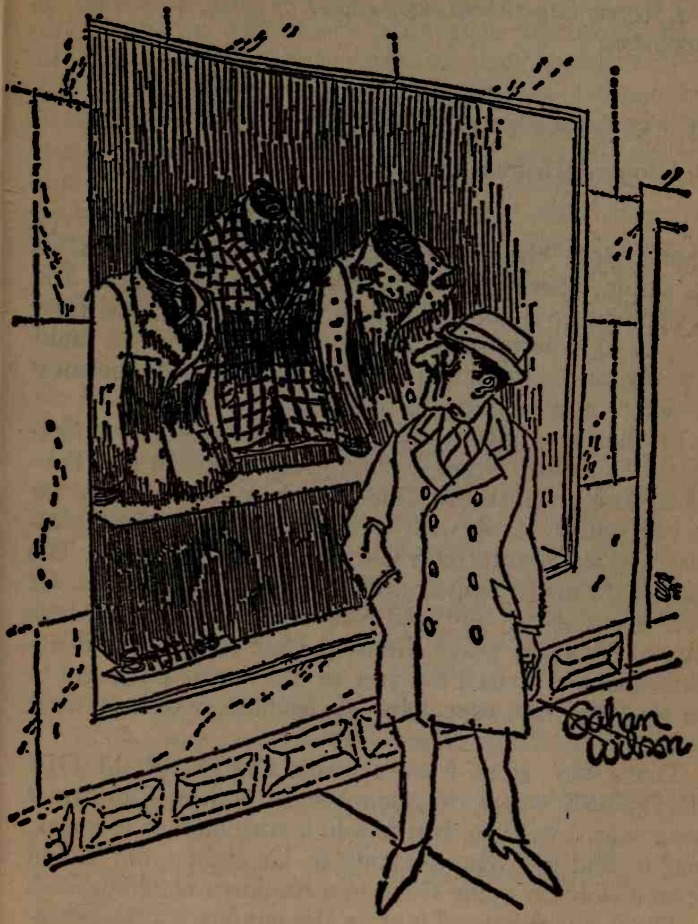
Keepsy hesitated a moment, then went to the taxi which was waiting for him.

"Doctor," the man said. No one moved. He looked up from his list, shrugged, and went on. "Physicist."

Braun walked off with slow dignity to the sedan at the curb, flattening his upper lip to hold in his false teeth.

"That's the lot," the man with the clipboard said. "Yesterday and today, not one doctor. And we've used them all up."

"Have to haul in a few, why don't you tell the patrolmen?" the nurse asked. "I've got to look in on Dr. Manner; he should be resting after his B12 shot. No doctors," he muttered as he turned away. "How the hell can we run a city with no doctors?"


Gahan Wilson

Dr. Tushnet's story begins—as have many memorable fantasies—in an offbeat shop on a sidestreet in a rundown neighborhood. Both the proprietor and the merchandise are appropriately peculiar, but we have never known a customer to be deterred by such strangeness, and Morris Greenstein, wholesaler of gifts, is happily no exception.

GIFTS FROM THE UNIVERSE

by Leonard Tushnet

That saying, "there's no business like show business," is all wrong. There's no business like the gift business. You have to figure it out in advance what the public is likely to take to, how to set a low enough price and yet make a profit, and most important, be the first with the most of what's new or going to be new.

Furthermore, gifts aren't staples like hosiery or underwear. You never know what's going to catch on. Take delft ware, for instance. One year there's a real craze for it, and you stock up with teapots and pitchers and platters, and six months later you can't give them away. The same with giant pepper mills or Indian temple bells. Or you get a good buy and you figure you'll introduce carved Shesham wood chests, perfect for gifts, and nobody looks at them. I tell you, in this business you got to be on your toes, especially wholesaling, which is what I do.

That's why, when I saw the sign GIFTS FROM THE UNIVERSE where the vacant store was on Elm Street for a year, I went in. Just to add a customer, so to speak, and to find out why anybody in his right mind would open a store on a side street in a rundown neighborhood.

There was the usual junk in the windows: fake porcelain cups and saucers, majolica-like candlesticks, low-grade colored glass. But inside! Wow! You walk on a thick red pile carpet into a showroom shimmering with

diffused light from crystal sconces set all around, and the walls have heavy red drapes. A place like that is decorated for a chichi store on Madison Avenue, not for Elm Street in New Falls.

And the showcases! Sure, one tall, open glass case shows the cheap items, but then all the others are polished cabinets with heavy plate glass and inside them are things of such beauty you catch your breath at them. Iridescent vases with raised designs, not Tiffany, but better. Polychrome glazed bowls no Japanese could improve on. Nested china boxes with fine geometric decorations. What's the use of going on? Believe me, and I should know, being in this business so many years, the place was full of pieces that belonged in art museums.

I just looked around, my mouth open. Where the owner of this store got such merchandise, I couldn't figure out. Certainly not from the usual outlets. I go to all the trade shows and nowhere did I see stuff like this. He had a source I didn't know about, and naturally, at that thought, I got interested.

A little man came out of the door leading to the back. He looked very ordinary, in his late forties, somewhat bald, paunchy, stoop-shouldered, with thick eyeglasses and a poker face with the unhealthy pallor of a storekeeper. The only thing unusual about him was his hands; he was wearing flesh-colored gloves. I figured he was polishing something in the back of the store.

I handed him my card—MORRIS GREENSTEIN. GIFTS FOR THE TRADE—and introduced myself.

He was very affable until he understood I was a seller, not a buyer.

"You have some nice stuff here," I said. "Do you mind telling me where you got this?"—an enameled glass apothecary jar—"or this?"—a multicolored faceted paper weight.

He stiffened. "I am an importer. I bring in my own goods."

"No reason to get sore," I said. "I'm not a competitor

of yours. But isn't this merchandise too expensive to sell around here?"

"Is it?" he asked, somewhat surprised. "I thought the prices were low enough for any market. I checked around before I put the things out." He opened a cabinet and took out a rope-style cachepot and handed it to me. It looked sturdy, but I was unprepared for its lightness and I almost dropped it. It was as delicate as Belleek china.

"That's fifty cents."

I thought he was a wise guy. "Fifty cents? You mean fifty dollars."

He shook his head. "No. Fifty cents."

What kind of a nut was this? Even if he paid the factory in Baluchistan (or wherever the workers get only a dollar a month) a quarter apiece for the pots, the transportation and duty alone would increase the cost. "What are your other prices?" I asked.

He was a nut, all right, all right. Nothing on display was priced at more than fifty cents; some items were a quarter. Nut or no nut, business is business. I took all the bills out of my wallet, leaving myself only a dollar, and said I'd buy whatever he had for whatever I had, which amounted to eighty-three dollars.

The way some people do business you could plotz. No wonder there are so many bankruptcies. He looked at the bills and said, "I'm sorry, but I take silver only."

The only way I could figure out such a *meshugas* is that he came from a country where there was inflation, although I must say he spoke English as good as you or I. "The American dollar is sound as—as—as a dollar." I made a joke.

He just stood there and said no. "I will take only silver."

"So pack up the stuff and I'll go get silver," I said. "The bank's only six blocks away. I'll be right back."

I came back with a bag full of rolls of quarters. You know what he did? He unwrapped every roll and felt and looked at every quarter! He made two piles on the counter in the rear, one small and one large. He pushed

the larger pile back to me. "These are not all silver," he said. He counted out the other pile. "Sixteen dollars and seventy-five cents. Pick out what you want, and I'll put it in a carton for you."

There was no use arguing with him, I found out. Of course most of the quarters were this new sandwich type, you know, because of the silver shortage, but I couldn't convince him that they were legal tender just the same. In the end I bought the cachepot and a lot of other single items. That's another thing, he had only one of a kind of everything, but he assured me he could get me as many of any item as I wanted. For silver, of course, only for silver.

He got me so worked up that I stumbled on the sill going out. I fell with the carton. The end of my investment, I thought, and opened it up to see what could be salvaged. Would you believe it? Not a thing was broken!

The man—his name was Peter Tolliver, he said, but I had my doubts about that—helped me brush myself off. When I remarked how lucky I was that nothing broke, he said, "None of that is breakable. Watch." Before I could stop him, he took that beautiful fragile cachepot and dropped it on the sidewalk. It bounced! It actually bounced! "All my merchandise is indestructible," he told me, "unless exposed to strong sunlight. That's why it's kept behind glass, away from ultraviolet light."

Bargains or no bargains, I left there quick. You never can tell with a lunatic what he'll do next. I drove right down to Strauss's department store on Broad Street and saw the gift boutique buyer. She drooled when she inspected the china boxes and almost fainted when I told her the price. I figured if Tolliver was crazy, I wasn't. I sold her every one of the "samples" for ten dollars each, and she gave me a whopping order.

My problem was how to get enough silver for that crackpot. I took the loose quarters I had in the bag to the bank across the street and asked for rolls of quarters. The teller put them in the coin counter and wanted to give them back to me all wrapped up again. When I

said I had to have other rolls of quarters, he looked at me sort of funny, shrugged, and gave me them. I could see him pointing me out to another teller and laughing as I went out. Let them laugh, I thought.

I went to my place of business and opened the rolls of quarters. Out of the packed sixty-five dollars there was only twelve dollars in all-silver quarters. I rewrapped fifty dollars and sent the errand boy to the bank, together with a check for a hundred dollars, and told him to bring back only quarters and half dollars and to make sure the quarters were different from the ones I was sending. You know what? Not one single silver half dollar in that whole pile he brought back! And only seventeen silver quarters!

I took the $16.25 I had and went back to Tolliver's. He was glad to see me, and gladder to see the money. I picked out what I wanted and gave him the order I got from Strauss's. He almost danced with joy. I held up my finger to him. "Now, remember, I want delivery on this, so give me a date, and no kibitzing."

He became very business-like. "Mr. Greenstein, I assure you that tomorrow morning you can pick up your merchandise. Cash on delivery, of course. Silver."

"You crazy?" I hollered. "I'll give you a check if you don't want to extend credit. Go tell the bank when you cash it, you want silver, not me! I'm a merchant, not a money changer!"

His eyes glittered behind the classes. "Sorry, Mr. Greenstein, but we can't trade except on my terms."

What could a person do with such an idiot? And promising me the goods tomorrow yet! I gave in. I surrendered. "Okay, Tolliver. But where I'll get so many quarters, I don't know."

I took the carton with me to Beau Mode, which is a very fashionable gift shop in Homestead. I didn't do like at Strauss's. Some items I put on a price of thirty dollars, some twelve, some twenty-two, just to make things look reasonable. Mrs. Dawson, the la-di-da lady who runs the place, didn't bat an eyelash. She bought all the

samples on the spot and asked for more. I told her I was expecting other *objets d'art* and I'd give her an exclusive for Homestead if her order was large enough. She was cagey but finally agreed.

I went to the Homestead bank, got twenty dollars worth of quarters, and went home. I was busting with aggravation. I told Sadie, my wife, "Here I got a supply source every buyer in New Jersey—New York, even—will have their tongues hanging out for my merchandise, and I've got to start looking for silver quarters right when the government stops making them on account of the silver shortage." I told her the whole story.

"So take that pile of silver dollars you've been saving from the time we went to Las Vegas," she said. "You must have sixty dollars there, at least. And I'll go with you. There's something fishy about this whole deal."

Again I go, this time with Sadie, to the store on Elm Street. Tolliver was putting new pieces in the cabinets, and one was more exquisite than the other. Sadie, who knows about such things (she helped me in the business when I got started), was speechless. Heavy terra cotta book ends with allover tiny designs, a glass cheese server that looked like it was made out of lace, painted china fruit bowls you could see through—who can tell you what marvels he had there?

I gave Tolliver the silver dollars and the few silver quarters I had. He counted them out one by one, and Sadie selected what I'd get for them. All the time she was looking the place over. When I pushed him again to take a check and he said no, Sadie butted in. "Enough, Morris. We'll talk this over." She smiled at Tolliver. "Mr. Tolliver, if we contract to buy all your stock, how much do you think it will amount to?"

"I have on hand goods priced at exactly $524.50," he answered. "But you understand that these are only samples, and I can furnish any amount of any item in twenty-four hours."

I almost exploded. Goods he had there worth thousands, and yet he had his inventory figured out down to

the penny. And where, I asked Sadie, would I get $524.50 worth of quarters?

She didn't answer me and she didn't say anything on the way home. She was quiet. She was thinking. After supper she took out what we'd bought and looked at each piece top to bottom, inside and out, side to side. One thing you got to say about Sadie—she's no dope. She asked me, "How long has this store been there?"

"It just opened today, I ride down Elm Street every day, you know, and it wasn't open yesterday."

"That Tolliver is a sick man. He breathes too fast, and there must be something wrong with his hands; he's always wearing the gloves."

I hadn't noticed the breathing, but now that Sadie mentioned it, I realized that she was right. "That reminds me," I said, "now you say he's sick. There's a peculiar smell in that place like when Uncle Artie was dying of cancer (may he rest in peace!) and Aunt Bertha had to have an ozone deodorizer in his room."

"Also, there are no country of origin markings on anything, which means either he makes those things himself or he has them made by some small local outfit right around here. That's why they're so cheap and he can get them so fast. Imports they're not, that you can be sure of."

"But he said he brings them in himself," I argued.

"He's a liar," Sadie said flatly. "The prices are so low that even smuggling them in from China wouldn't pay. Furthermore, did you notice that there isn't even one piece of metalwork in that whole store, not a trivet, not a candelabrum, not a frame? No brass, no tin, no iron. Also—there are no animal knickknacks. You know what I mean—china dogs or wooden deer. And not one of the bisque ballet dancers that are so popular now. Like the Mohammedans, no graven images of anything alive. And the silver. Why does he want only silver?"

That last was a very practical problem for me. I would have been willing to buy out his entire stock and give him orders for more goods, only where would I

get that much silver? Sadie had the answer. "He wants silver. He doesn't care if it's coined or not. Take the silver candlesticks from the dining room, and the sterling platter the lodge gave you, and the silver goblet from the Passover set, and the salad serving fork and spoon we bought in Mexico, and your cuff links, and my Navajo bracelet, and the silver frame from the picture on the dresser. I bet you he'll take every one of those things the same as money."

I felt like a junkman or a burglar the next morning, carrying a pillowcase filled with as much silver as we had in the house or as I was willing to part with. I came into Tolliver's store and dropped the clanking bundle on the counter. Sadie was right. He had no objection to silver in any form. Also she was right about him being sick. He looked paler than yesterday and breathed faster; his hands shook when he took out the platter, and he staggered a little when he walked over to show me Strauss's order neatly packed.

He took all the silver into the back room "to weigh it," he said, and came out again with a slip of paper. "At current rates for silver," he told me, "that amounts to $440, which more than covers your orders from yesterday but is still insufficient for my stock."

I looked around. Again there were new things in the cabinets: prism-cut glass decanters, opalescent oil and vinegar cruets, mosaic ashtrays, alabaster tumblers, and every piece tasteful and pretty. I made a rapid calculation. "Okay," I said. "I'll send the truck up for the order, and I'll send with it a thousand dollars in sterling silverware. You get everything ready for the truck to pick up." You see, I trusted him. What was going on I didn't know, but I got an eye for faces and I could tell he was honest.

I went to Walsh the jeweler (he's a cousin, you'd never guess from the name) and negotiated with him. For only ten percent markup I got my thousand dollars worth of silver. When the truck returned, everybody in the place watched it being unpacked. "High class, very

high class," Miss Atkins my secretary said. And Herman, the bookkeeper, who's forever taking courses in college at night, he said, "Don't be in a hurry to sell all this, Mr. Greenstein. Have a private showing first for the better shops and take orders. Tiffany's doesn't have better."

Naturally, Sadie said I did the smart thing by buying like I did. She had another suggestion to make. "Why not tell Tolliver to close up that store of his and guarantee him an outlet for everything he can get? You can't go wrong."

So next day after her beauty parlor appointment, Sadie met me and we went to Tolliver's. The smell of ozone was stronger in the store, like after a thunderstorm. The cabinets were full again with elegant gifts, but there was no time to check them. Tolliver came tottering out of the back room and stood leaning on the counter for support. He looked paler and more shrunken; even his gloves hung loose on his hands. Sadie, good heart that she is, ran to him. "Mr. Tolliver! You're sick! I'm going to call a doctor. Where's your family? Where do you live? We'll take you home."

Tolliver shook his head feebly. "I live here. I have no family. I don't need a doctor."

"Nonsense! Let me see your tongue," Sadie ordered, just like she used to do with the children when they were little. "Let me feel your head." She made him sit down. "Tsk-tsk! I was right. You have a high fever. Morris, help him out to the car. Give me the keys, Mr. Tolliver. I'll lock up."

He protested, but who can win against my Sadie? We drove him home and Sadie put him to bed in Carl's room—he's away to college. She came downstairs looking very strange and got busy in the kitchen. "Go to work, Morris," she told me. "I'll take care of him." She wouldn't let me help her. She carried the tray with the toast, a soft-boiled egg, and hot milk with butter, her favorite remedy, upstairs by herself.

When I came home after a very busy day because by

now the word had got around that I had a spectacular line and the phone was busy with calls from even big-name buyers, Sadie gave me supper, including chicken soup, unusual for a Thursday. She was acting mysterious and refused to talk about Tolliver until after I finished my tea and cake. Then she made me sit down in the living room, and she told me, "Mr. Tolliver is very sick. He is going to die."

I jumped out of the chair. "Not here! Get him to a hospital!" I yelled. A perfect stranger to die in your house, you know how you'd feel.

She pushed me back. "Now, listen, Morris, and keep quiet. Remember something at least from your Bar Mitzvah. Three things assure your place in Paradise—helping the stranger, tending the sick, and burying the dead. This is a complicated case. You do just like I say and don't ask questions. Upstairs is a hero, a very brave and good man, and he deserves the best you can do for him. Later, when it gets dark so the neighbors won't see, you'll carry him down to the car. I'll go with you and we'll bring him back to the store. There he'll die, and we'll do the rest."

Now I was shocked. My sweet Sadie to be so hard-hearted as to turn a dying person out of the house! But she had an answer. "Wait. There's a reason. When I undressed Tolliver to put him to bed, I saw. He is not a human being. He is very much different from us. That face is a plastic mask. He told me, while he could—"

"What do you mean—while he could?" I shouted. "He's already dead?"

"No, he's now in a coma," she answered. "He has what I suppose we'd call a cancer. He called it something else, but it acts the same. Where he's from—from what I could gather it's deep in the ground in the planet Venus—it's almost an epidemic. But they've got a simple cure for it, which is more than we have, only they need silver to make the cure, and their silver is rarer than by us uranium. Furthermore, they can't change another element into it for some reason. He explained, but I couldn't

understand. So he volunteered to come here."

"How? A flying saucer?" The whole story was ridiculous.

"No. They've got what they call teleportation. They put an object in a chamber, and the atoms fall apart, and they re-assemble them where they want the object to be. Tolliver came here a month ago with six companions—they're all dead now—on a mission to get silver. Not to steal it—they have strong ethics—but to get it by trade, and at the same time not to upset Earth economy. So they looked around and decided on the gift business because it's not very essential and yet it makes money."

"Not one word do I believe!" I said. I was sore how calm she said the gift business was like a nothing and all the time families like ours live from it. "If the Venus people are so smart and so ethical, why didn't they send delegates to Washington to the President? He'd give them all the silver they'd want in exchange for a few secrets. Like this teleportation."

She sighed. "That's just the trouble. They've been watching us for a long time. They don't trust us, or the Russians, or the Chinese, not even the Israelis. They feel that already we're about to destroy this whole planet with what we know already, so why should they hasten the process? Trade on the q.t. was better, they thought."

"So why did they send a sick man?" I asked.

Tears filled Sadie's eyes. "That's why I said he's a hero. Teleportation is fine for dead things, but for living things it shortens the life. Tolliver knew that he was going to die in a year or two anyway, so he volunteered. The others the same, but he was the strongest and lived the longest. They were pioneers. If their mission was successful and they sent back enough silver, more would come from Venus, and they'd open stores and sell for silver. Ceramics they're very good at. You saw."

"But meanwhile what about Tolliver? Why can't we send him back home wherever he came from by the same method?"

"Because it's very painful. No, we'll do like he says. I

wrote everything down." She showed me a paper. "About the store—the landlord knows it was only for a month tenancy and the rent's paid. He says we could have the fixtures and whatever's left in the store." Up to now her voice was steady, but all of a sudden she started crying. "Oh, Morris, if only we could send some silver back with him! All those poor people dying of cancer and we could help!"

You know, one word from my Sadie and I'm on the go. In the next two hours I went from relative to relative, to friends and acquaintances, buying up all the silver they'd give me, paying anything they asked, just to make Sadie happy. They couldn't understand what I wanted the silver for, and I couldn't explain.

When I got back, Tolliver wasn't dead, but he was as good as. He was unconscious, breathing very fast, hot as an oven, when I carried him down. The back room of the store had nothing in it but a big box (like a coffin, I thought) with wires and tubes going every which way out of it like a Rube Goldberg invention into another box alongside it. By the time we put Tolliver in the box with the silver, he wasn't breathing any more. Out of respect I said Kaddish for him, and we set the dials according to the paper Sadie had. There were symbols, not numbers, on the dials, and one of them, Sadie said, meant Final Return. We turned the handle, and we went out into the store like he said to do.

In a couple of minutes we heard a faint whirr, and the ozone smell got very strong. The floor shook a little with vibration, and then everything was quiet again. We went into the back room. Everything was gone, including the smaller box. The room was bare.

There's more to the story. That afternoon I had my delivery man disconnect the crystal sconces and take down the drapes. I helped him carry out the fixtures and the two cartons that were left. I unpacked the cartons in my place and found more bowls and vases. I put them in a cabinet in my showroom; they were there only two days before a buyer from Dallas took them at a hundred

dollars each. One thing I kept for Sadie: an epergne of violet glass with such finely etched lines for decoration that it almost shone in the dark. You know what Sadie did? She put it in a closet for when my daughter would get married.

It was just as well. About six months later I got a complaint from Strauss's buyer. She took one of the cachepots for herself and put it outside on her porch for a week. When she touched it then, it crumbled, almost like the spun sugar houses on fancy cakes. A couple of other customers said that after a week of sunlight whatever was exposed to it became very fragile. Tolliver warned me about that, so I passed on the word to the buyers. "This is for show only, in a cabinet with glass doors. Don't let the sunlight hit it."

Sadie, when she heard about how the stuff changed, made me give the epergne to the New Falls Museum. They took it gladly. It's there now on the first floor with a card: GLASS EPERGNE—MODERN. ENGRAVED. ARTIST UNKNOWN. DONATED BY MR. AND MRS. MORRIS GREENSTEIN. Can you picture that? Me, Morris Greenstein, a patron of the arts?

David Redd is a young English writer whose work is just beginning to appear in the American magazines. This, his first story for F&SF, is a superior and involving fantasy about a time when the sun sets and "all the creatures of the rocks come alive and dance, that the sun shall not rise again . . ."

SUNDOWN

by David Redd

PROLOGUE

Many centuries ago, human explorers came to the northern valleys in great numbers. The first expeditions were

followed by shipload after shipload of colonists seeking new lives away from the overcrowded southern countries. The settlers gave new names to the land and its creatures, started farms and villages, made roads and railways, built houses and factories. Tall chimneys poured dark smoke into the sky above the bleak mountains, turning the white clouds into a dismal grey haze. Each day the short-lived humans hurried through the crowded streets of the desolation they had built around them.

A wild giant from the northern wastes was brought into the valleys and exhibited to the people by a travelling showman. This giant was called a troll, because light slowed him down and under direct sunlight he was totally paralysed. The true giants, the skin-clad barbarians of the snows, were never captured alive. The troll was the first living creature of this size ever shown to the valley humans. He was exhibited in the open air, at night. One morning after the people had departed, just before dawn, the troll was visited by a wandering poet.

"This is not your world," said the troll to the poet, as they watched a passing satellite and waited for the dawn.

The poet replied: "We are here, therefore the world is ours."

The troll: "You live in our lands without being part of them. You make your own lands around you, and you huddle together within them, refusing to face the natural world."

The poet: "We fear the dark and the unknown."

The troll: "To you, life is light and vision. On your home planet the creatures must dwell in continuous light. Here, we live only in darkness. When the sun sets, all the creatures of the rocks come alive and dance, that the sun shall not rise again. We were born in darkness, and the darkness shall return."

The poet: "There are eyes in the deep forests,

glimpsed by travellers. At night the goblins come out and light fires on the hillsides. Do they too pray for the end of day?"

The troll: "All creatures pray for the end of light. One evening the sun will go down into the mists forever."

I

The northern stars twinkled in the frost-clear air above the valley. The dryad known as the White Lady watched the fur-sprites digging into the snow. She was standing to one side, admiring the showers of snow hurled up by the fur-sprites from their excavations. She was viewing the scene in slow-time, so to her the snow appeared to rise and fall with graceful dignity. As dryads grew older they used more slow-time perception; this one was very old.

Underneath the snow was an ancient human village. It had been inhabited less than a century ago, before daylight vanished from the North Polar Continent. The fur-sprites were digging down to it in search of metal for use in their laboratory caves. Unlike the fur-sprites, the dryad had no scientific curiosity to bring her so far from her forest. She merely wanted to watch the fountains of snow gliding down in slow motion around the excavations. Below the surface layers of dry, powdery snow, several feet of ice covered the valley floor, and this too had to be removed.

After hours of work the crushed buildings were slowly uncovered. The village had been reduced to rubble after sundown, and its remains had been preserved under the ice ever since. The fur-sprites began probing some promising-looking spots, and now only a little snow and ice was being thrown onto the mounds of waste material which ringed the site. The dryad returned her perceptions to the normal time-rate and drifted over to the large shallow pits dug out by the fur-sprites. The bare rubble, with snow packed hard in the crevices between

the stones, was cold and hard beneath her.

A fur-sprite padded over to her. "Lady, I have discovered metal. Will you dowse the nature and extent of the substance?"

"I will do so gladly. Lead me to your boreholes."

She followed him to the spot where he had drilled his telekinetic probes. She knew the fur-sprite would not ask her aid unless the samples were promising.

"These are my test drillings, Lady," said the fur-sprite. "All save one contain iron-alloy."

His sample-cores were laid out on the snow beside the small cylindrical holes he had drilled. The dryad examined them, approving of their neatness, then studied the body of metal lying beneath the surface. It was larger than she had expected. The fur-sprite had found the remains of a public transport vehicle, which contained as much usable metal as six normal-sized vehicles.

"This is welcome news," said the fur-sprite. "Lady, I thank you."

The news was flashed to the other fur-sprites, several of whom had also discovered metal objects. They all ceased work and made obeisance to the North Star. It was fitting that the first whisper of the greater wind should reach them at that moment.

Two southerly winds came up the valley towards the Pole during each revolution of the starfield. The lesser wind, lasting for half an hour, corresponded to the morning in the sunlit south, and the hour-long greater wind began during the southern evening. Both winds carried with them the echoes of the lands they had passed over, and these echoes were savoured by the people of the valleys. The faint southernmost echoes served to heighten the atmosphere of bleak grandeur from the frozen sea at the valley mouths.

Standing on the ruins of the human settlement, surrounded by a circle of white snow mounds, the dryad and the fur-sprites drank in the wind, its scents and its thoughts, its emotions and its atmospheres, and its singing rushing motions. The wind caught up the dry sur-

face snow and whirled the tiny flakes onward through the night. The dryad went into slow-time again, and the dance of the snowflakes became as majestic as the eternal movement of the stars.

The dryad gradually tasted a strange taint in their friendly wind. The fur-sprites noticed it too. Far away near the valley's southern end, some alien mind was sending out a stream of weird unhealthy images. It was like an oil slick spreading over a pure ice-cold sea. The dryad recognised the tource of the thoughts, and she hastily returned to normal-time.

"Lady, what is this thing?"

The fur-sprite she had aided was standing beside her. She laid a hand on his small smooth-furred head to comfort him.

"These thoughts are coming from a human. I must learn more."

"My Lady, no!" The fur-sprite knew what she intended to do.

"Peace, I shall be in no danger. My thoughts cannot travel against the wind."

The White Lady withdrew her hand from the fur-sprite's head. She opened out her mental field to its fullest extent, straining to pick up the human thoughts drifting northwards on the wind. The unpleasant taint intensified to the point where it was painful to her. She also received thoughts from creatures between her and the human.

The monster was Josef Somes, a travelling bandit turned plunderer from the equatorial continents where day and night still alternated. It wore an insulated air-tight suit which protected it from the Polar environment. The human had crossed the frozen sea in its metal armour, and it was now journeying up the valley in search of the valuable mineral known as living-rock. This rock fetched high prices in the southern markets, and Josef Somes had found an old pre-sundown map which gave the position of a large lode. The dryad realised she knew where the human was heading for.

That great mass of living-rock was the sacred outcrop jutting out at a bend in her own valley, just below the forests where the dryads and several other races lived.

The human was sheltering from the wind, the White Lady learned. As soon as the wind died down the human would leave its refuge and continue on its northward journey. That taint in the wind was only the beginning. The monster would come right up to the sacred outcrop beside her own forest and shamelessly defile the living-rock. If it was allowed to do this unchecked it would repeat the deed, and perhaps other humans would join it. This must not be allowed to happen.

The fur-sprites had opened their minds and examined the thoughts coming to them on the wind. They had not learned as much as the White Lady, but they knew that the living-rock near their homes was threatened by a human plunderer.

"Lady, we must go south to Homeground," said the leader of the fur-sprites. "We hear the thoughts of our elders, calling all creatures to an assembly beside the living-rock."

"You are right," said the dryad. "Here we can do nothing about the menace. We must return to Homeground."

II

Homeground, on the gentle western slope of the valley, was one of the few snow-free areas in the North Polar Continent. This was due to the efforts of its inhabitants, who maintained a permanent snow-repellent spell over it. In its hundred acres, which had been landscaped into a series of terraces by the busy gardeners, were nineteen separate stands of tall fir tres. Each stand was called a forest and was the home of a single dryad. Mosses, grasses, snowdrops and other plants grew in the open spaces between the forests, tended by the

gardeners and the sad-faced gnomes who lived in the long earthen dykes. Solitary deciduous trees, without attendant spirits, rose above the undergrowth to a height of thirty feet or more.

After three hours' journey, the dryad and the fur-sprites reached the aged oak tree on the northern edge of Homeground. Nobody was there to welcome them because the valley creatures had all gathered on the Meeting Plain, at the opposite end of Homeground. The party moved on through the area covered by the snow-repellent spell.

The dryad's hands moved swiftly in the outline of a sacred symbol as she reached the first of the nineteen forests; the dryad of this timber was absent, but her trees would remember. Inside the woods, and scattered about the open spaces, were the dwellings of the valley creatures. Dwarfs and fur-sprites shared caverns below the soil. Pine martens and tarsiers nested high up in the trees. The gardeners, elfin people related to the goblins, made tumbledown wooden huts with roofs of turf, and growing on these buildings were plants such as mosses and brittle winterferns. Long winding banks of earth sprawling haphazardly over the terraces contained low tunnels similar to rabbit warrens, and in these artificial caves lived the gnomes who often assisted the gardeners. The dryad and the fur-sprites with her saw all these dwellings as they travelled towards the Meeting Plain, and every home was empty. The fur-sprites were uneasy; they could not remember a time when Homeground had been deserted. Perhaps, the fur-sprites whispered to each other, perhaps the valley had been like this before sundown, when humans ruled the land.

In deference to the White Lady, the fur-sprites took the path through her forest and waited respectfully while she merged with her favorite tree for a brief moment. The dryad rejoined them, saying nothing, and they went down to the Meeting Plain together.

The Meeting Plain was the area of the valley floor at the foot of the living-rock bluff which formed the

southern border of Homeground. Fur-sprites, dwarfs, gnomes, owls and all the other creatures of Homeground were standing, sitting or crouching around the circle of elders as the dryad and her prospector friends arrived.

The assembled creatures greeted the travellers warmly. The fur-sprites gave their news about the metal they had found, but the menace of the approaching human was foremost in their minds. The White Lady walked over to take her place with the other elders, and the conference continued.

Now that the first wave of human-fear had died down, the people were discussing the measures to be taken against the human. All the plans involved killing the intruder, for there was no thought of merely driving the human away. The memories of the times before sundown were still strong. Every month at first moonrise, the valley creatures lit a fire of coal and wood to celebrate their deliverance from humanity, and at the yearly Midwinter bonfire which marked Highest Full Moon the wooden image of a human being was cast into the flames. So the argument about the human was not over whether it should be killed, but how it should be killed.

The people were divided into the supporters of two different strategies. The majority, favoring the "defensive" strategy. The people of Homeground would let the human come to them.

Before the assembly began to discuss the traps to be constructed, the White Lady made a suggestion. "Our ancient enemy was always a creature of limited powers, and it must be vulnerable in many ways. If we knew which part of its mind to strike, we would be able to direct its thought processes to suit our purposes. Perhaps we could even control its body and thus remove all risks to ourselves. However, we cannot make the necessary probes from here. Someone must go near our enemy and probe its mind to discover its weakness."

"If the human is indeed vulnerable, its death will be an easy matter for us," said a dwarf. "The spellmasters control powerful forces which we can use in the assault

on the monster when it reaches Homeground. But who can discover its weaknesses for the spellmasters? Who can venture that close to the human and survive?"

"I shall go," said the dryad. Ignoring the response from the startled creatures around her, she went on, "With my years of experience and my knowledge of the mental sciences, I would surely learn more than the average person would learn from a probe of the human. You cannot send any other but me."

The fur-sprites, who had a special affection for the White Lady, were shocked and dismayed. "Lady, it is not right that you should risk your life in this way. Let some other go in your place."

"You cannot send any other but me," she said again.

They tried to dissuade her, but failed, and they realised that she was determined to go. The fur-sprites made a last attempt to ensure the safety of their White Lady.

"Do not go alone, Lady. Let others accompany you, to protect you. Any information you gain will be useless if you die without sending it to the spellmasters."

"I agree with the fur-sprites," said the oreade. "I shall go with you, White Lady. If you die alone your sacrifice is in vain."

The oreade was an old mountain-spirit who had made her home in the valley. If she said she would go with the dryad, nothing would stop her.

So the dryad submitted to the will of the creatures who loved her, and took four companions with her. The oreade came, and two fur-sprites, and a mournful gnome who bore an axe of human steel. The White Lady bowed formally to them, and raised her hands to the sky hanging dark and cold above the valley. "We have no favorable stars for our quest, my friends. There is no moon, and only one satellite that is passing through an evil constellation."

"The more reason for us to aid and protect you, Lady," said one of the fur-sprites.

"As you wish it, so be it," said the dryad. "Let us depart."

III

As they set out, a beacon glowed with white fire on top of the living-rock bluff. A spellmaster was throwing magnesium powder onto the coals as a good-omen offering for the travellers.

The White Lady and her companions would meet the human—and have time to probe it—well before the lesser wind started; so they could send their messages to the spellmasters by letting their thoughts drift up to Homeground on the lesser wind. The valley creatures were accustomed to long journeys because they sometimes made purposeless safaris far away from Homeground, out onto the Polar plateau where simian giants far larger than humans roamed through the night. This march to meet and probe Josef Somes was a relatively minor affair.

Travelling so closely together, they could not help overhearing stray thoughts from each other, despite their rigid mental control. The dryad gradually absorbed the basic personalities of her companions—the unemotional maternalism of the oreade; the earnest passions of Jaerem and Moera, the two fur-sprites; and the comforting stolid strength of the gnome. Before an hour had passed she knew them as well as she knew her closest friends. This intimacy was a feature of all journeys made by a small number of people.

Slightly later than anticipated, the five travellers came within telepathic range of the human. It was walking steadily northwards up the valley, and it would soon reach their present position. The dryad pictured the human plodding onwards, encased in its metal suit, the lamp on its helmet sending a beam of yellow light onto the snow ahead. She marvelled at the strength of the ambition which had brought the plunderer so far from

its home in the sunlit lands of the south.

Here the valley walls were tall and steep, and curved round sharply to the left, skirting a small hill of extremely hard rock. Normally this hill was inhabited by seven oreades, but they had all fled to Homeground during the greater wind. The site was perfect for the White Lady's purpose.

"We shall await the human here," said the dryad. "I shall remain here in the centre of the valley floor, but you four had better conceal yourselves at the sides—Jaerem and Moera to my left, and the others to my right. The human is moving from side to side, checking the entire valley in case the position of the living-rock is given incorrectly on its map, so I have a higher probability of meeting it here in the centre than anywhere else. You four will be safer at the sides."

While her companions moved out across the snow to their positions on either side of the valley, the dryad remained standing like a tall exquisitely sculptured column of ice. She was cautiously tasting the thoughts of the approaching human, accustoming herself to the human's overall psychological pattern in preparation for her coming task.

The others burrowed into the snow, covering themselves by using light camouflage spells which spread the snow thinly above them. The human would never notice them, being dependent on sight for perception of its surroundings.

The White Lady finished sampling the human's thoughts. She swiftly followed the example of her friends and dug herself a hole in the snow. When the hole was deep enough, she slid inside and cleared away the disturbed snow with a camouflage spell. Now the valley appeared empty of life to the human eye.

A small patch of yellow light moved out from behind the curving cliff of the hill. The pale glow was followed by a dark shadowy mass that was Josef Somes. The human was over a foot taller than the dryad, and it was far thicker in proportion. Its dull brown atmosphere suit

still bore a few flakes of its original orange paint. The dryad was receiving all the human's thoughts, uninterrupted now by an intervening substance. With a shock she realised that the monster's mind was almost empty of surface mental processes. Below the shallow layers of surface thought its mind was a dreadful thing. The finding of the living-rock was equated with the concepts of wealth, sexual achievements, social power and status. Ignorance rather than ambition had brought the human here. It did not understand the forces within it, and it believed that possession of the living-rock would satisfy its needs and somehow atone for the wasted years of its past life. Yet despite this lack of self-awareness, the human could react quickly when faced with a problem—

The dryad ceased her examination of the human's hidden thoughts before they distracted her further. She should not be wasting time. She should be testing the human's mental defences, not exploring its vile memories.

The White Lady went into slow-time, speeding up her actions by a factor of four. To her it seemed as though the human was lifting its feet and putting them down in slow motion. The human was just coming within suitable range, and she had three minutes of subjective time to do her work, although some of this could not be used because the human's responses would be in normal-time and appear to reach her only after a long delay.

She sent out a multilevel blanket probe, expecting to detect resonance echoes from the brain areas in which Josef Somes was sensitive to her mental impulses.

The human plodded onwards; its wavering, almost-straight path would take it within a foot or two of the concealed dryad. She watched it advance for several precious seconds, waiting for the telepathic echoes, before she realised they would not come. Josef Somes had not detected the probe.

Alarmed, she sent out a series of fierce beams of thought in rapid succession, aiming them directly at the sensory centres in that primitive undeveloped brain. This

was no longer a probing but a full attack. Her power was so intense that she triggered involuntary reception-responses in the minds of her companions, yet her attack did not affect the human at all. She tried every way she knew to reach its mind, and all her efforts failed. The human's defences had no vulnerable points; there were no defences; there was nothing to defend.

Then, in that moment of failure, she saw that the human would walk directly over her refuge. Even in slow-time, with her reactions four times as fast as normal, there was nothing she could do.

The human's right foot descended on the thin layer of snow held above her hole by sorcery. The White Lady, crouching low, saw a dark metal boot burst through her fragile snow ceiling. Snowflakes showered upon her. Miraculously the boot swung aside, leaving a round patch of black sky where the snow had been. Josef Somes, accustomed to crevasses, had thrown itself sideways onto a more solid surface. It rose clumsily to its feet and inclined its head towards the hole, bringing the light from its helmet lamp to illuminate the opening.

While the human was picking itself up after its fall, the dryad cast a new camouflage spell which made her appear to be a small drift of snow. The human knew that strong winds blew up the valley, and it would see nothing strange in snow piled in a crevasse.

Josef Somes peered into her hole. The human saw a shallow depression containing drifts of loose snow—the spell had worked perfectly. Automatically the human reached out with the long wooden pole it carried, intending to test the surface before it. Its mind bore a clear image of the pole thrusting into the loose snow until it touched solid ice. The wooden shaft would go right through the dryad's frail body.

She heard telepathic cries from the fur-sprites, and simultaneously two balls of snow came hurtling towards the human. One snowball smacked against the suit's chest casing. Josef Somes jerked back its pole from the dryad's hole, swinging round to see where the missile

had come from. The fur-sprites threw more snowballs at the human. They were standing above ground, and Josef Somes could see them as brown shadows against the white background.

Forgetting the supposed crevasse, the human moved towards the fur-sprites. Its thoughts were puzzled. As it advanced, the fur-sprites called out: "Lady, save yourself while the monster is occupied with us!"

The fur-sprites were making no effort to hide themselves. The White Lady, loving them and hating them at the same time, knew they would not escape. The human was drawing a gun from its belt, with the casual bloodlust of all humans.

She thought of a way to aid them. She cast a new camouflage spell over the human's helmet, smearing the face-plate with snow. Josef Somes wiped the face-plate clean with an impatient wave of its hand, breaking the spell. The dryad tried again, and a second time the human brushed the snow aside, thinking a snowball was responsible. Her magic was useless. Only then did she heed the fur-sprites' pleas and leave her refuge. She scurried silently across the snow to join the oreade and the gnome on the other side of the valley. As the dryad ran she obliterated her light footprints with a swift series of spells. Reaching her friends, she threw herself down on the snow and assumed the form of a small snowdrift. The human would not see her here, even it turned its attention away from the fur-sprites.

Abandoning their position, Jaerem and Moera fled in opposite directions, giving the human two separate targets. Seeing the creatures split up, Josef Somes experienced no indecision, merely aiming for the nearest. It fired twice at Jaerem, killing him with the first shot.

The dryad felt him die, sharing the pain and the sudden shock, helplessly seeing the bright clear thoughts cloud over and disappear. She was still in slow-time, and had four times longer than normal to watch the death.

Moera felt the death of Jaerem and knew that his

time too was over; he sensed the human was swinging round to bring the gun barrel towards him. To the hidden watchers he thought briefly "Goodbye, White Lady, oreade, gnome, I shall see you from the North Star." His will faltered, and the dryad heard his regrets, his anguish and his fear in his last moment. It was over in an instant.

The two animals would be good eating, thought the human. It picked up the bodies, examined them curiously and thrust them into its pack.

"It will *eat* them!" cried the White Lady. "Is it not enough that they died?"

Unhearing, the human continued on its way up the valley, towards the living-rock at Homeground.

"They died for me," said the dryad, in normal-time again. It was not a coherent thought but a single cold pulse of emotion, sorrow and shame fused together. The oreade and the gnome reached out to steady her mind, and by disregarding personal properties they succeeded in calming her. Normally they would never have been able to manipulate her emotions, but she had been temporarily unstabilised by the two violent deaths she had witnessed.

"Vengeance," said the dryad to the others. It was a mental picture of Josef Somes dying. Killing the human would partially atone for her folly in causing the fur-sprites' deaths, although no act of vengeance could alter the past.

"The best service we can perform in their memory is the killing of their murderer," said the gnome.

"We must recover their bodies," said the dryad. They could not let the human eat the fur-sprites. "That comes above my own life, after I have sent my report to Homeground."

Her statement was painfully honest, but she no longer cared about shielding her private thoughts. Besides, her two companions must have had to scan her entire personality to calm her, and this was the customary preliminary when a person was near death.

A cold breath sighed around them. The lesser wind was beginning, rising suddenly in a flurry of snowflakes. Away at Homeground, the listeners were waiting to receive the White Lady's information. The wind would carry her thoughts well beyond the normal half-mile limiting range of telepathy.

"The human's mind cannot be influenced in any normal way," said the dryad, after describing her encounter with it and the fur-sprites' deaths. "No mental attack can possibly succeed; physical methods must be employed. Spells are only useful if the human cannot use its strength to break them." She suggested a few spells, such as increasing the decay-rate of its metal armour. "Jaerem and Moera used projectiles against the human. The best method of attack appears to be the use of hard, fast-moving projectiles to pierce the human's atmosphere suit."

She continued until she had sent out all her information. She repeated her message several times, in case the listeners at Homeground missed a part of it. Th slackening of the lesser wind brought an end to the work.

The human had been sheltering from the snow during the wind, watched by the gnome. Soon it would start moving again.

"That ends our mission," said the White Lady. "The people of Homeground must do what they can in the few hours they have left."

"Lady! The human has decided to prepare a meal!" called the gnome.

All three of them listened to the human's thoughts. Josef Somes was going to take off its pack and pull out a block of meat-cubes. It would not eat the animals yet. The White Lady saw her chance to recover the fur-sprites' bodies.

"Move up behind the human," she said, and they hurried forward. She went on, "It has placed its pack on the ground and is about to unfasten the straps. I will dance in front of it and distract it. While it is watching me you will remove Jaerem and Moera from the pack

and conceal yourselves. Do you approve of this plan?"

They agreed to follow her instructions. Neither of them asked what the White Lady would do after attracting the human's attention.

Josef Somes saw a slight movement at the outer limits of its visibility. Reading the human's thought, the White Lady showed herself in the light again for a moment before hopping away. Josef Somes was suspicious. A humanoid-female form in this territory could hardly be a woman. The White Lady let herself be seen once more, intending to dart out of view after a couple of seconds. In the human's mind were remembered rumours of spirits, hags and other northern terrors real and imaginary. It thought, "If that woman-thing keeps on jumping back and forth I'll shoot the bloody thing and have done with it."

She knew so little about human psychology. The dryad revised her plans and stood still, letting Josef Somes look at her. She was not unpleasing to the human eye, despite her age. Behind the human, the oreade and the gnome crept forward. If it turned round it would see them.

Her lack of movement reassured the human—she wished she knew why. It took a step towards her, its helmet lamp like a single yellow eye on its forehead. She shifted her head slightly, simulating fear, and stepped back. Her enemy came forward again, and she retreated further. The bulky pack, straps undone, lay forgotten on the snow behind the human.

She led Josef Somes onwards, a pace at a time. Her thoughts were with the oreade and the gnome as they gently extracted two still, furry forms from the open pack. The gnome bore the bodies away in the white sack he always carried for his own shroud, and the oreade blotted out their footprints with spells which restored the disturbed snow to its former smooth surface. That was one part of her debt to the fur-sprites repaid, the dryad thought. She heard the oreade calling to her: "We are safe, and we have their bodies. Now we are

concerned for you." The gnome added, "Do not be misled by false emotions, White Lady. Have no thought of sacrificing yourself for the memory of Jaerem and Moera. Your life is still precious to us all."

The human was still coming forward as she backed away from it. She replied to her friends, "Whether I live or die depends on the human. Whatever happens, I shall accept the result."

She stopped retreating and stood facing Josef Somes. As the human pounced on her, its mind burning with half-understood desires, she leaped away from it. She landed outside the torchlight and ran for the high snowfields of the valley wall. The human's old fears returned. The beam of light caught her, and the human drew its gun. Josef Somes was not thinking, merely following an automatic sequence of concepts which went: "Northern creatures are dangerous; this is a northern creature; I must kill it to save myself from any possible danger."

With the gun in its hand, the human recalled that it had killed two valley animals and put them in its pack; this reminded it that its pack was lying on the snow somewhere behind it. The dryad noticed the human's anxiety about its pack. She took advantage of its momentary hesitation to begin flinging up clouds of loose snow to hide her movements. A curtain of snow rose into the air between her and the human. Realising it would never catch her, Josef Somes fired twice at random and then abandoned the chase.

Reaching the pack, the human checked its contents and discovered that the two dead animals were missing. It cursed violently, sending ripples of pain through the three listeners. From now on, it swore to itself, it would be on the lookout for these valley creatures, and it would shoot on sight. Josef paused at this point in its thoughts. The ghost-woman had not attacked it—in fact, she had fled when it approached her—and the two dead animals had been stolen by trickery. These animals were no match for a human, and they knew it, Josef Somes told itself. The old stories about night-monsters attacking

humans must be pure fiction. Reassured by those thoughts, Josef Somes resumed its journey towards the living-rock.

IV

"We can travel faster than the human, but we cannot get past it," said the White Lady. "If we caught up with it, it would kill us. And our arrival before the human might set off the defences of Homeground, if the spell-masters have laid any traps across the valley."

"Let us follow the monster,," said the gnome. "We shall see how our people at Homeground deal with it."

The gnome wanted to see the human die. So did the dryad and the oreade. The ancestral hatred of humanity was still with them, made stronger by the killing of the fur-sprites. The three companions set out on their journey back to Homeground, walking a safe distance behind the human. As they travelled they counted the hours to the death of Josef Somes.

When they were less than fifteen minutes from Homeground, they sensed something moving on the horizon a little way behind them. It was a huge troll, twelve feet tall, walking steadily along the cliff-top path above the steep eastern valley wall. They halted, letting Josef Somes draw further ahead of them, and as they stopped, the troll came within telepathic range.

The oreade acted as their spokesman, because she was a mountain-spirit and therefore related to the troll. She told him what had happened to them, and he told her that he too was following the human. The troll had been a prisoner of the humans before sundown, and had been forced to exhibit himself in a travelling circus. He had learned about the human Josef Somes from a frightened glacier-naiad near the southern end of the valley. Now he was hoping to catch up with the human and destroy it. Trolls had long memories to match ther long lives.

"Our friends will welcome you at Homeground," said

the oreade. "I only wish you had seen us at a happier time. My two companions and I will gladly walk along the cliff-path to Homeground with you."

"Lady, I am honoured by your presence and the presence of your companions," said the troll, using thought-forms similar to those of the fur-sprites. "Do not trouble yourselves to climb the valley wall; I shall come down to you and walk your way."

"You are kind, friend troll," said the oreade. The three companions waited while the troll came sliding down the snow-covered cliff to join them.

The troll bowed to each of them in turn. On greeting the gsome, he said "Friend Corpsebearer, may I see the bodies of your companions who were slain by the human?"

The gnome agreed, and from his white linen sack he produced the two small bodies and laid them gently on the snow. The troll knelt beside them and with his huge clumsy hands he made the sign of the North Star over their heads. He watched silently as the gnome returned the dead fur-sprites to the sack.

"We must move on," said the White Lady. "The human is within sight of Homeground."

She was listening to the human's thoughts, and had just learned that it was looking at the beacon fire on top of the living-rock bluff. The old map the human was using stated that the bluff was the site of a witches' beacon.

"You are correct, Lady," said the troll. "The human has realised it is near its goal."

They moved on, hurrying to make up the time lost in meeting the troll. They had taken perhaps twenty paces when they heard a deep rumbling sound and felt intense vibrations in the ground beneath them. Their other senses gave a clearer picture: a large section of the valley wall ahead of them was collapsing on Josef Somes. The White Lady saw the snow and ice crashing down on the unprepared human, and she shared its thoughts as the avalanche descended upon it.

"That was done by our people," said the oreade. "They dislodged the ice to trap the human. None of the rocks gave way."

Ice was still falling as the oreade spoke. The dryad watched the debris spread out over the valley floor and waited for the human's thoughts to cease. She knew of no life form that could survive an avalanche.

But the human was uninjured, although it was buried under many tons of snow and ice. Its metal atmosphere suit had protected it.

Hearing the sound of the avalanche, the human had reacted by reaching for its gun, thinking the noise was the roar of some dangerous animal. It was buried with its gun in its hand. Finding itself covered by a thick layer of debris, the human adjusted its gun to the burning-flame setting and started melting its way out.

"It has accepted the situation and believes the avalanche to be a natural occurrence," said the oreade. "It does not suspect that it is being attacked. The almost trouble-free journey from the south has convinced it that the stories of Polar spirits and demons are exaggerations of the truth. Its encounter with you has encouraged it, White Lady."

"It is melting through the ice very rapidly," said the gnome.

"Let us go nearer," said the troll. "Camouflage spells will protect us."

"It welcomes the opportunity of using its gun," said the oreade, who was intrigued by the complexity displayed by the human's thoughts at this moment. "The fur-sprites were its first targets since it entered the permanent night. Everything else sensed its presence and kept well away from it."

"Except us," said the dryad.

In its icy prison somewhere beneath the snow, Josef Somes was melting a way to freedom. It was nearly at the surface when its gun short-circuited. Steam from the melted ice had penetrated the gun's battered casing. The human cursed several times and pulled out a knife.

It cut through the remaining snow in seconds, forming a hole large enough to squeeze through. The White Lady and her friends, having come nearer while Josef Somes was busy, quickly disguised themselves as mounds of snow.

Josef Somes crawled through the hole it had made into the open. The watchers saw the now familiar yellow light from its helmet lamp sweep across the valley as the human surveyed the area.

"The human is remarkably calm for a creature which has just escaped being crushed to death or buried alive," said the oreade.

"It is an unusually practical member of its race," said the troll. "It belongs to a type of human which, when faced with a problem, will study and tackle the problem without any emotional interference."

"That is very interesting," said the oreade. "What society could drive a person of this type to embark on a quest into the so-called Haunted Continent? I would like to explore its thoughts much further."

"Listen to its thoughts now," said the White Lady.

The human sat on a block of ice, checking its equipment to see what damage the avalanche had done. It had lost its wooden pole. Its pack had been torn and crushed, and some instruments inside had been wrecked. The ice had almost penetrated the atmosphere suit in three places. The listening valley creatures carefully noted the three sections of weakened casing—now that the avalanche had failed, another attack would have to be made. Finally, the human's gun had been damaged, and it could not be repaired. Josef Somes tossed the useless weapon into the hole it had made in the ice.

Getting up off the block of ice, the human started walking towards the living-rock again. The White Lady was surprised by its single-mindedness. "It is continuing with its quest already!"

"Its objective, the living-rock, is in sight," said the gnome. He had no difficulty in understanding the human's actions.

They moved on, following the human. Coming into telepathic range of Homeground, they spoke with the elders and spellmasters of the community.

"I have journeyed up from the frozen shores of the Polar Sea to kill this human," said the troll. "Will you allow me to do this thing?"

"We have oxy-acetylene equipment ready to cut through the human's metal armour," the elders replied. "The avalanche was not our only weapon. White Lady, the choice is yours. Do you wish to take personal vengeance on the human for the deaths of Jaerem and Moera?"

The dryad remembered the fur-sprites as she had last seen them—lying still on the snow, with the troll kneeling before their bodies. She answered, "We four shall go forward and put the human to death."

So it was decided, and the people of Homeground made no further attack on the human. The killing of Josef Somes was left to the White Lady and her three companions.

V

Josef Somes came up to the bluff, looking from side to side for traces of the creatures which must have lit the beacon. Seeing nothing to alarm it, and thinking the creatures had fled, the human began to examine the tall granite-like columns of living-rock. Under the yellow light from the human's lamp, the living-rock seemed no different from the stone it so closely resembled.

The human took out an untra-violet torch, which had survived the avalanche, and played its beam on the rock. Wherever the invisible light touched, the living-rock gave out a cold blue glow. This was the effect which made the living-rock so valuable, because the blue luminescence took five years to fade.

Having proved that this substance was living-rock, the human put away its ultra-violet torch. Its thoughts

puzzled the oreade, who had expected a period of deep emotion when Josef Somes located the living-rock. The human merely thought "About time, too!" with a peculiar grudging satisfaction.

"Humans are ungrateful creatures," said the troll. "This one believes that the living-rock belongs to it, because nobody else has taken it. It has a vague notion that it has earned a right to the living-rock by travelling all this way."

Unaware that four supernatural beings were advancing towards it, Josef Somes prepared to chip out some living-rock with its hammer and chisel. The haft of the hammer was broken, but it was usable.

"Do not touch the living-rock, human!" shouted the troll, using the ugly sound-forms of the human language. "Put down your chisel!"

The human turned round, still holding its tools. It saw the troll and the three smaller creatures standing in line on the snow. At last its mind contained strong emotions: fear and horror. "My God, there are monsters here after all. That's a giant; it can't be anything else. I wish I had my gun now."

They had made their plans while they approached the human. They attacked in unison with adapted camouflage spells. Snow whirled up from the ground and plastered itself against the transparent face-plate of the atmosphere suit, cutting off the human's vision. Josef Somes tried to brush the snow away with its hands, but the spells were too strong to be broken this time. The human was blinded.

The gnome swung his axe at the human's helmet, aiming for the lamp set in the forehead. The steel blade shattered the glass disc and touched the glowing wires inside. A blue spark flashed onto the metal; the gnome was thrown back by the electric shock. The light went out. No longer needed, the snow fell away from the human's face-plate. Josef Somes looked out into darkness, and the darkness was peopled with monsters.

The troll was tremendously strong—he had to be, to

carry the weight of his own body. He picked up the human and tossed it back to the ground as if it weighed no more than a bundle of twigs. The human landed awkwardly, bruising its shoulder. Its was screaming at the troll, cursing him and pleading with him. The troll fell to his knees and bent over the frightened human. He prodded at the weakened sections of th atmosphere suit, trying to force the metal plates apart. To the human, the troll's probing felt like the blows of a mechanical hammer.

The human could see a huge dark shape against the stars overhead, and knew the giant creature was doing the pounding on its armour. It longed for its gun, and other less clear thoughts darted through its mind. The old fear of the supernatural, which the human had not known since childhood, had returned in full force.

"I cannot get through this metal armour," said the troll, standing up. "Friend Corpsebearer, can you smash the face-plate?"

"I can try," said the gnome, and lifted up the axe.

The human did not see the gnome move, but it knew the troll was no longer bending over it. Scrambling to its feet, the human dashed off to the side. Its eyes were adapting to the darkness and it could just see the valley wall ahead.

Reacting instantly, the White Lady raced after the fugitive. The troll took four mighty strides, overtook them both and caught the fleeing human around its waist. The White Lady marvelled at the troll's speed.

The gnome came running up to them, followed closely by the oreade. The troll pinned the struggling human to the snow, face upwards for the gnome to strike.

"Move your arm away from its head, in case my axe bounces off at the wrong angle," said the gnome to the troll. "That is better. I hope the human does not move suddenly."

His blade swung down into the human's face-plate, smashing the transparent front and striking the soft in-

side the helmet. Blood dripped from the axe as he withdrew it.

"The axe inflicted a deep cut across its nose and cheek," said the troll. "You opened the face-plate without seriously wounding the human."

"I could not do otherwise," said the gnome. "My blade could not go down any further because the opening is too small."

The gnome could only cut through the glass, not through the metal and wait for it to die?"

"No," said the oreade. "We must kill it now."

She held out the hammer and chisel dropped by the human. The troll glanced at them, and asked, "White Lady, do you desire to kill the human yourself?"

"I do," said the dryad.

The troll was holding the human down for her. She took the tools from the oreade and knelt by the human's head. Josef Somes was coughing and blowing little bubbles in the blood flowing from its nose. The White Lady disliked suffering, and she was glad that Josef Somes would die quickly. It was a human, but it could feel pain like any other creature.

She placed the chisel point in the human's left eye socket, piercing the eyeball, and held the tool steady. The human tried to bring its hands up to its tortured head, but the troll restrained it. Blood streamed over the human's face, and its thoughts were sickening. The White Lady sighed. Feeling the weight of her age, and wishing the whole affair was over, the dryad brought the hammer down. The chisel went straight into the human's brain.

"I am old," said the White Lady. "I felt pity for the human as I killed it."

"I understand you," said the troll. "They are weak creatures without their aids, and they have ambitions beyond their natural powers. But do not pity the human, for your friends must be buried, and your sorrow will be more fitting at the fur-sprites' funeral."

The White Lady said nothing, remembering the dying thoughts of the human—thoughts that would haunt her forever.

"You did what had to be done," said the troll. "Look, the people of Homeground are coming to greet you."

"I see them," said the White Lady. "Well, it is over. Let us go to meet them."

Much imaginative fiction is set on that tenuous borderline between reality and illusion. In the story you are about to read, Mr. Aandahl moves his protagonist across that border; that he also makes you pause and wonder: in what direction? is a tribute to his superior talent.

BEYOND THE GAME

by Vance Aandahl

Dry and white as chalk in his gym shorts, Ernest crouched under the fat red backs of Balfe and Basil Basset and shivered as the naked bumps of his spine brushed against the wall behind him. He knew from previous games that the twins would be too hysterical to run; for a while, at least, he could hide safely behind them. His fingers trilled against his cheeks.

Staring through the narrow space between Balfe's soft thighs, he could see the boys of the enemy team lined against the far wall. All of them looked tall and lean and hungry for the game: some strutted in place; others contorted their mouths into ravenous grins and shouted threats across the gym. Hunkering down, Ernest laced his slender arms around his slender legs and kissed his knees. His eyes moved to the teacher.

Miss Argentine paused halfway between the two teams and adjusted the canvas bag that dangled from her shoulder like an enormous cocoon. She was walking along the black line that halved the gym, bending after

every step to take a ball from the bag and place it on the line. Ernest gazed at the balls. There were basketballs with pebbled rubber skins and footballs of rough leather, smooth white volleyballs that spun when you threw them and fury gray tennis balls that stung when they hit, mushy softballs with peeling cases and hard little handballs of solid rubber.

The rules of the game were very simple, and even Ernest knew them. Each team had to stay in its own half of the gym: no one could cross the center line. If someone on the other team hit you with a ball, you were eliminated and had to stand against the side wall; but if you caught the ball without dropping it, then he was eliminated instead. If the ball missed you completely and hit the floor or a wall, then nobody was eliminated. Only when one team had completly wiped out the other did the game end, and rarely were there more than three or four survivors on the winning side.

Miss Argentine set the last ball on the line and retreated to stand with her shoulders against the side wall. An absolute silence filled the gym. She turned her head and looked at Ernest's team. Her face was the color of clouded silver. Her eyes looked like sandpapered zinc. When she spotted Ernest behind the Basset twins, a smile slowly split the stark plane between her nose and jaw, and she lifted a green tin whistle to her mouth and rolled it for a moment on the tip of her tongue. Then her lips hardened.

Suddenly the silence was pierced by the shrill of her whistle.

As Balfe and Basil squeaked and gibbered with excitement, Ernest huddled beneath their ponderous buttocks and watched the game begin. At the sound of the whistle, boys on each team had charged recklessly for the center line. Sprinting hard and fast from the opposite wall, Freddy Guymon and Jim Genz had reached the balls before anyone on Ernest's team was even close. Freddy hit Bobby Graffigna in the knees with a basketball, and Jim hit Ben Lee in the neck with a tennis ball,

Gerald Francis in the thigh with a softball, and Rae Stalker in the chest with another softball. The other boys on Ernest's team scrambled back to their wall.

Hooting and yelping their derision, the entire enemy team crowded up to the center line to collect the rest of the balls. They jumped up and down like the naked savages that Ernest conjured up in the dark rain forests of his mind.

"All right, you guys!" Jim Genz lifted a football in his right hand and shook it above his head. "Get ready! Get set! *Give it to 'em!*"

The air thickened with balls. Cowering back against the wall, Ernest watched them in a dream of soft terror: they grew larger and larger as they skirred toward him at incredible speeds, and he could see the dark brown laces on the footballs, the white stitching on the softballs. The horror of waiting seemed to last forever. Then he suddenly realized that it was over and he hadn't been hit.

Balfe turned slowly to face Ernest. Both of his hands were clamped over his forehead. Two tears slid from the corner of his left eye and rolled across his cheek; another tear fell from his left nostril and splattered on his lips; then his mouth crinkled into fluted pie crust, and he began to sputter and whine and bawl. It must have been one of the handballs; they were hard as ice. His forehead would have a purple welt for days.

"Run, Balfe! Get over to the side wall before she sees you!" Basil shoved his brother frantically. His cheeks reddening with pain, his shoulders shaking with sobs, Balfe waddled away to join the others who had been eliminated.

A ball hurtled against the wall next to Ernest's ear, and he jerked his eyes away from Balfe to stare across the gym. His own team had just barraged the enemy with nine or ten balls, and now snipers on both sides were edging up the sidelines. Loose balls bounced and dribbled and rolled in every direction. Screams of triumph mingled with shrieks of anger. Two basketballs collided

in mid-air and bounded through a spray of tennis balls. Ernest curled himself into a tiny knot of flesh, half protected by Basil's calves, and retarded into dazed abstraction: high on the wall above Miss Argentine, the heavy wire mesh that protected the gym's single window was rattling on its loossened screws, and beyond it, distorted by the vibrating glass in the panes, a single updrift of green smoke wavered once, then billowed, then melted into the smog that hung in thick gray curtains over the city. And what color was the sky beyond the smog? Ernest's teachers had said it was blue, but even now he could see tiny diamond-winged angels diving from banks of pearl into the golden rivers of the sun . . .

"Oooooooo . . ."

Basil swayed and sank to one knee. Then he lay over on his side and clutched his groin with both hands. His pudgy fingers fluttered like birds.

"Oooooooo . . ."

Defenseless and exposed, Ernest staggered to his feet and skittered back and forth against the wall, looking for someone to hide behind. But everyone was running now, rushing madly forward to throw a ball, leaping desperately back to duck another, dashing and darting and diving in helter-skelter, skimble-scramble confusion. His head ached from the roar of their voices; his vision spun into a blurred pinwheel of skin and leather, wood and plaster. At last he crouched down in a corner with his back to the game. He squeezed shut his eyes, screwed the butts of his thumbs into his ears to dampen the clamor, and waited in a buzing trance for a ball to hit his back. He hoped only that it would be a volleyball or a tennis ball, not a handball.

And then he saw a slender boy running naked down the grassy slopes, trotting past the palm trees cottony with spiderwebs, jogging into a thicket of emerald ferns and gray sawtooth reeds and nodding white lotus blossoms, and presently he knew that he wasn't just watching the boy, knew that he was the boy himself, that he was actually there, sprawling with arms and legs akimbo

beneath luxurious profusion of chocolate and saffron flowers, panting quickly at the hot pulsing heart of the sun in a sky as white and grainy as the warm sand beneath his shoulders, crawling finally into the zebra-stripe shadows to wait for the bears . . . and the bears *did* come, lurched one by one out of their secret tunnels into the blinding sunlight, stumbled by giddy threes and fours down to the river shallows, munched the tubers that grew there beneath the water, splashed each other with glassy pawfuls of river, then fell to indolent wrestling in the golden mud—black bears and brown bears, cinnamon bears and honey bears, regal Kodiaks and surly grizzlies, even a family of great white polar bears, their paws batting in bewildered discomfort at the steaming heat of the jungle, their eyes glittering like melting snowcrust . . .

Suddenly Ernest realized that he was wrapped in complete silence. He took his hands away from his ears. The silence persisted, deepened.

Opening his eyes, he turned slowly on his knees and blinked across the gym. They were standing against the side wall—every one of them, and they were all staring at him.

Covering his mouth with his hands, he lifted himself into half a stance and gazed shamefully down at the litter of balls on the floor. How could it have happened? His fingers grew cold as stones against his lips.

No one moved; no one smiled. He prayed desperately for disappearance, for death.

"Look at the pee-wee." Miss Argentine's voice clipped through the silence like a rusty tin-snip. "Hims doesn't want to play. Hims is *frightened.*"

No one laughed.

"But hims will just have to *learn* how to play, won't hims?"

Ernest's cheeks prickled with heat. He tried to take his hands away from his mouth, but he couldn't; he tried to look up at Miss Argentine, but he couldn't.

"All right, the rest of you go stand at the other end

of the gym. We're going to play one more game. Yes, *all* of *you,* at *that* end of the gym, *right* now."

Ernest felt nauseous. The entire class was lining up at the far end of the gym; there were so many of them that they had to stand two deep.

He sank to his knes. He could hear the sharp click of her heels as she walked back and forth across the floor. She was picking up the scattered balls and re-arranging them along the center line.

He knew then that it couldn't really be happening. It was only a nightmare, only an illusion.

"Is the pee-wee ready? This time hims *has* to play, doesn't hims?"

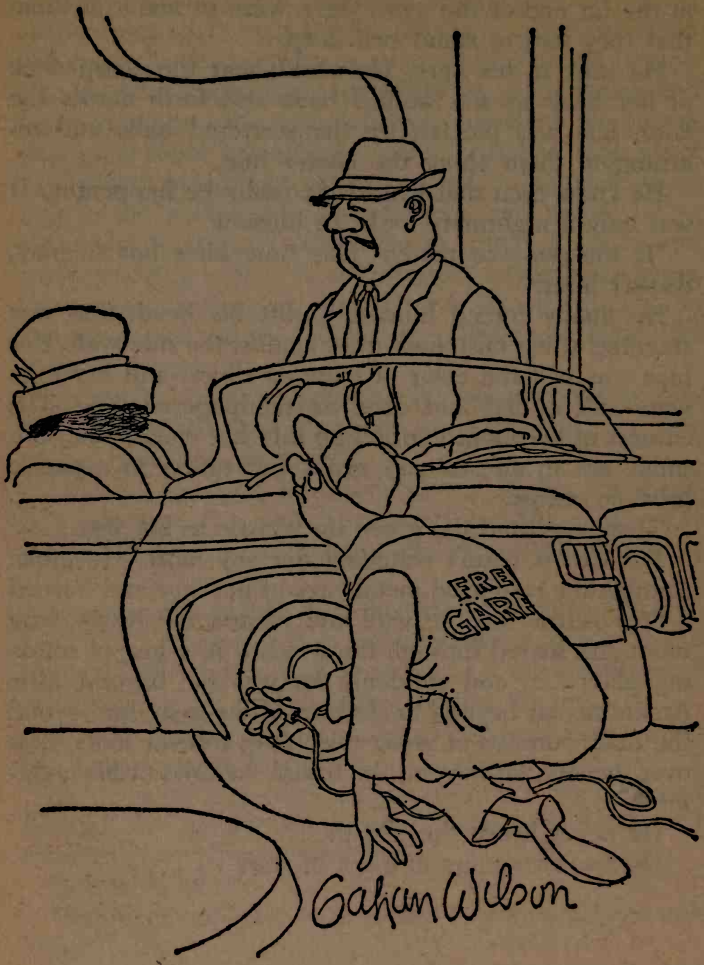
He finally forced himself to lift his head. She was standing at her customary post against the side wall. Her face was still the color of clouded silver—and her eyes were still as flat and dead as sandpapered zinc. The corners of her mouth curled up into her cheeks, not in a smile, not in an ordinary smile, but rather in a pathic grimace of lust.

Then she lifted the green tin whistle to her lips.

But Ernest wasn't watching her any more. He broke through the contorted metal cage of her face and burned a fiery furrow up the wall and melted the heavy wire mesh and seared through the window in a hiss of smoking glass . . . and suddenly he was far beyond Miss Argentine, far beyond the horrors of the gym, far beyond the thick curtains of smog that hung forever motionless over the city, far beyond the trivial shadows of his nightmare.

He never heard the whistle.

He was swimming in a sea of stars . . .



"Better give the missus a touch too."

The spectacular technical successes of the space program may have had something to do with the fair amount of public receptivity to the more mundane, but no less exciting prospects for oceanographic research. (To the point where—if you have $80.00—you can subscribe to an investment service called Oceanography Newsletter, which will tip you off to all the hot stocks in the field.) Oceanography has not been ignored in the SF either, and here is a good contribution: a strong and suspenseful account of the beginnings of a submarine city.

SEA HOME

by William M. Lee

The admiral had called it a shore base assignment and admirals are usually right, particularly when talking to commanders. Still, completing my fortieth turn around the deck, the prospect looked singularly like open ocean. On a clear day I could have seen the green hills of Santa Carlotta, eight miles to the south, but all morning a bright haze had obscured the horizon.

The deck was a railed walkway extending around the four sides of the structure which we called quarters, because that's the way the contractor had marked the doors. Quarters and the deck together constituted the topmost of four platforms which sliced across the tower itself: three near the top and one down close to the water line. The visible part of the tower was a hundred feet tall, just about, and another three hundred feet—we don't say fathoms on this shore base installation—extended downward to hard rock ocean bottom, supported on six tubular steel legs.

I've no idea what this monstrosity cost the tax payers. Plenty of course, but not a circumstance to the ultimate cost of Sea Home itself which would some day, if all went well, become a small submarine city.

I made the forty-first turn around and kept wishing the news conference were over. In the past our conferences had been handled by P.R. officers and attended by such admirals and captains as suited the occasion. This time we'd been playing dirty and the press was going to be good and sore, and somehow it had wound up in my hands. Be matter of fact, Washington had said. Keep it low-key.

I took a look into quarters to see whether anything of interest was happening below. Nothing. The console showed only its green circuit lights and the teletypes were silent. Tim Saybolt and I had agreed to suspend on-the-hour checks until after the interview.

Quarters consisted mostly of instrument room, office and lounge, but there were two small private cabins, a pantry and a head. The next level down provided living quarters and mess for sixteen men. There were only six aboard at the moment, including me, and it was almost oppressively quiet.

After a time there were voices from below. Berthing the launch seemed to require as much shouting as if she'd been a destroyer. Then the passenger-freight elevator came whining up and discharged Pete Swain and his charges in the little hall adjoining the lounge. I said hello.

Si Vogel had flown down from Washington, and he and George Britt had been brought over from Eglin in an Air Force plane. I was glad there were only the two of them. Both had been here before, while the tower was still under construction, and I recalled that Vogel had a mean disposition. He preempted the most comfortable chair, although Britt was fat and should have had it. Swain, my exec, poured coffee.

"So," said Vogel, "you've made some progress. Is this the finished setup?"

"As far as the tower's concerned, yes," I told them. "We'll be adding to Sea Home for years to come. It still has just six chambers. Skeleton crew only, so far."

It took a couple of seconds for that to sink in, then

Si Vogel's face flushed darkly. "Do you mean, Commander—ah, Cheney—that you have people down there now?"

"Why, yes," I said, very low-key. "We have a good many miscellaneous jobs that must be done before Sea Home is ready for real occupancy, bolting furniture into place, installing light fixtures and so on."

Vogel was suspicious and a little belligerent. "If that's all it amounts to, why did Navy Medical announce that there'd be a news release tomorrow? Why at this particular time?"

"There's nothing special about the time," I said, trying for a disarming expression. "This group will be staying down, of course, until others arrive."

"I smell a rat," Britt said. "How many are down there?"

"Five. A medico, a medical lab technician, an electronics man and two professional divers."

"Mister Cheney." Vogel made it sound as nasty as possible. "In spite of Admiral Minter's assurance that we would have full coverage—interviews, photographs, TV—you've apparently gone ahead and started the actual operation."

I shrugged. "In a small way, yes. You'll have lots of opportunities later."

The two of them exchanged looks. Britt got out his notebook. "Their names?"

"Gerd Carlsen, diver. Walter Pope, diver. Jacob Kepper, electronics. Susan Craig, technician. Dr. Timothy Saybolt, M.D., currently in command."

"By god," said Britt.

"Son of a bitch," said Vogel. "They've got a girl down there."

"Is that so remarkable? She's there because the card sorter popped her name out. Lab technician, WAVE, expert swimmer."

Vogel got to his feet and began to parade the lounge, turning his head to keep his scowl directed at me, like an ill-natured, red-faced owl. "You know damn well it's

remarkable. What's more, it's news. If I know the Navy, you are now going to tell me that this was an order from Washington, and they are going to say that you set the timetable."

I'd had about enough of Si Vogel. "Matter of fact, I had authorization to invite the press to watch the descent, if I thought best. I decided against it." Nothing like a good lie to lower the blood pressure.

"By god," Britt repeated. "Photographs?"

"Sure." I opened the desk drawer and shoved across two sets, five individual shots and two group pictures, suited up, with and without face gear. "And you can talk to them by phone."

Vogel howled. "She's pretty. Damn it, she's a real beauty. And you decided—you had the unmitigated gall to decide—to keep us out."

"That was part of my reason. Cheesecake. Not needed."

"How old is she? Eighteen?"

"Twenty-one."

"What's she there for? Bedding down?"

"Vogel," I said, "I can't hope to clean up your mind, but we'll have no more of that, or your interview is over."

"O.K. Let me talk to her."

"I'll let you talk to Commander Saybolt. It'll be up to him who else takes the phone."

"Navy!" Vogel said.

Pete Swain went to the console, flipped switches and rang once for Tim Saybolt. His voice came on and filled the room. Pete tuned it down a little.

"Cheney?"

"Yes," I said. "Our visitors are here, Tim. Mr. Britt and Mr. Vogel. Take over if you will."

"OK," Time said. "What can I tell you?"

"You've licked the voice problem," said Britt.

"Yes, as you perceive. Not by an unscrambler, however. It's the air we're breathing. You haven't given them anything on this yet, Cheney?"

"Not yet. Go ahead."

"Right. When I said we were breathing air, that was not of course accurate. We're breathing an artificial mixture. You fellows understand the problem of the bends."

"Yes," said Britt. "Nitrogen bubbles in the blood."

"Close enough. When you're breathing an oxygen-nitrogen mixture, it takes too long to come up. So for deeper dives you replace at least some of the nitrogen with helium which is less soluble in the blood serum. Right? Now there's something else about nitrogen. At a fairly modest depth it begins to show narcotic effects, and they get more pronounced as you go deeper. You get to feeling as if you'd had three or four martinis."

"Tough," said Vogel.

"Yes. But it's just as well not to get irresponsible ideas when you're working under water. Helium doesn't have that effect, at least not until you get a good deal deeper. At this relatively shallow depth—three hundred and four feet—we could breathe an oxygen-helium mixture very satisfactory. But then you get the Mickey Mouse effect. Helium is a very light gas, and it pitches the voice up until your speech is almost unintelligible. That may sound trivial, but believe me, there are times when it's damned important to communicate clearly.

"So we're using something new, a three-way mixture. Helium, oxygen and sulfur hexafluoride. The last is a heavy gas. Counteracts the lightness of helium. The atmosphere I'm breathing has the same density as yours. Result, no voice distortion."

Nevertheless, I thought, there was something odd about Tim's voice which I hadn't noted before. Or maybe I'd been noticing it subconsciously for several days, but hadn't given it any consideration.

"Sulfur what?" Britt asked.

"Sulfur hexafluoride."

"Sounds poisonous."

"It isn't. Colorless, odorless, biologically inert. Hardly soluble in the blood."

"It does appear, Commander Saybolt, Dr. Saybolt, whatever you are, that an important experimental pro-

gram is going on." This from Si Vogel, with heavy sarcasm.

Tim ignored the tone. "Experimental work's all done. First animals, then volunteers in pressure chambers. No new variables. Just up to the engineers topside to keep our breathing mixture constant."

Britt said, "You do have portholes, don't you? You're not just sealed up in those cylinders."

"Not sealed up at all. We're about six feet off bottom and there are hatches in the floor, some of them kept open. We can drop through onto bottom anytime we want to take a swim. Portholes, yes, but nothing to see. At this depth it's dark. Our divers are out now, rigging light standards. We're well lighted inside here, naturally. In a week the seascape outside will be just as bright."

I put my finger on the oddity of Tim Saybolt's speech. It wasn't tone but speed. He was talking faster than usual. I broke in.

"What's your oxygen content, Saybolt?"

"Just a sec, I'll see. OK, it's normal. Why?"

"Nothing special. We didn't log it up here at ten hours."

"Any sharks?" Britt asked.

Tim laughed. "No. Everybody seems to want sharks, except us of course. Before the outside lights go on we'll have some screens erected."

"Let me speak to Susan Craig," Vogel demanded.

"If she's not too busy. She's running some blood chemistries." There was a considerable pause before Susan came on.

"Hello?"

"Hello," Si said, sounding a bit less surly. "How is it down there?"

"Very interesting."

"Frightening?"

"Not at all."

"Is it damp?"

"Yes, saturated."

"Chilly?"

"Not too chilly."

"What do you wear?"

"A swimming suit, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"That's right."

"How do you like being down there with four men?"

"They're very capable people. I'm glad to be a member of the team."

I said, "Excuse me, Susan, I'm breaking off." Pete, sitting by the console, snapped the switch.

"You're being completely uncooperative," Vogel said. "I'm going to report it."

"Do so," I told him. "Here are several copies of the release BuMed told you about. It'll give you all the facts you'll need for your stories, but why don't you leaf through and ask questions. We'll do our best to answer them."

They stayed for an hour, and stayed sore, but in the end they were asking sensible questions. At close to noon, I said we would have to be getting back to work.

"A hell of a trip," Vogel remarked. "You could have mailed out the release."

"By god, yes," said Britt.

"You were told that releases would be sent out from Washington today. You elected to make the visit. Sorry you were disappointed."

"You are like hell," said Vogel, and headed for the elevator.

Well, I hadn't behaved like a public relations man. Vogel would certainly write a letter of complaint which might find its way into my 201 file. I wasn't in the mood to care.

When they had gone, I called Captain Wythe in Washington and told him I'd passed up a fine opportunity to invite Si Vogel to lunch, and that we could expect him to work the innuendos for all they are worth. He agreed it was a damn shame, but said they'd anticipated the situation when Susan Craig was picked. That was that.

I went down to the second level and checked with Master Sergeant Paillard, the one Army man we had aboard, to see if there'd been any fluctuations in the breathable gas composition, either the supply or the return. Both were monitored continuously, but in quarters we recorded spot data only once an hour. Everything was in order. There'd been no excess of oxygen to stimulate Tim Saybolt's speech.

For lunch I took a sandwich to quarters, wrote up the log, then settled to the nearly continuous job of requisitioning supplies.

Sea Home then consisted of six chambers, each a cylinder about sixty feet long by fifteen across. They lay on cradles side by side and were connected by passages. The walls were of lightweight stainless steel. Pressure being the same inside and out, they didn't have to be heavy. As I'd told Vogel with substantial truthfulness, our present job was mostly to complete the outfitting of the six chambers with the more important amenities of life. Experimental work was, in actual fact, quite incidental, although no undersea operation could be carried on without posing and attempting the experimental answering of many questions. In this respect Saybolt had a more responsible job than I, since he was not only in command in Sea Home itself but, as a medical officer and research physiologist, he would study the long term reactions of his associates and himself to their environment. Long term meant, in this case, forty days, of which ten had already passed.

We'd had a full topside crew, of course, during the descent, along with some of the brass. The few days after that were occupied with checking and rechecking all lines of communication and supply—electricity, AC and DC, fresh water, cold and hot, and the breathable gas. Now we were well embarked on the job of outfitting for twenty-four people, which would be the maximum number until more chambers were added.

There was always a stack of scribbled notes and tele-

type messages from below, waiting to be converted to requisitions acceptable to Washington. A lot of these covered lab equipment, electronic gear and books. Books! They had a couple of thousand volumes down there now, miles of microfilm and more waiting on the third level. But in spite of all the advance planning, Saybolt and Kepper kept thinking of items they couldn't possibly do without.

At sixteen hundred everything had been put on the wire. Swain wasn't back from Santa Carlotta. I took the elevator down to the third level and walked back up, making a casual inspection as I went. The last freight haul of the day had gone down to Sea Home. The men were taking it easy and had broken out some beer, which was OK. They were a responsible bunch. I took a sniff of the wind, but didn't bother to look at the glass. It was only habit anyway. Our six-legged monster could withstand any hurricane with plenty of safety margin, and as to weather below, there wasn't any—slight changes of pressure reflecting any surface swell, and the faintest of currents.

The tempo of Saybolt's speech was still nagging at the back of my mind, so I ran back the tape and listened to it again, and he was definitely talking faster than normal. For him, that is. His conversation was always a little staccato, but you didn't usually notice it. Pete Swain walked in while I was thinking it over. He listened too, and said, "Commander Cheney, sir, you are a worry wart."

Once during the evening I called down—three rings meant anybody—and got Susan and told her, by way of an excuse for calling, that we'd be sending down fresh milk first thing in the morning.

Next day was strictly routine, occupied, that is, with moving supplies below, more requisitions and phone conversations with Naval Research Labs and Bethesda. On moving supplies we were well ahead of schedule and increasing our lead each day. Four of the five noncoms working topside spent a fair part of their time loading

up the cargo capsule, according to plan or to fill special requests. The capsule could be lowered rapidly into a water-filled lock on the top of one chamber of Sea Home; the magnetically attached cable would be disengaged; the lock would close and be pumped free of water; then the bottom of the lock, capsule and all, could be lowered to the deck on pneumatic jacks. It was a nice bit of engineering and it worked without a hitch. Passengers went down the same way but in a different kind of capsule.

It was amazing that the crew in Sea Home kept up with those topside, since they had to move and stow every item, often including assembling. But they did it and frequently pushed us for faster action.

I envied the group below. My job on the tower wasn't greatly different from some that I'd handled at sea. Sooner or later, though, I'd be relieved and would have a turn with the underwater team.

I didn't talk to Saybolt until Thursday—Day 13. After getting some detail disposed of, I asked to speak to each of the others in turn. There was no longer any room for doubt. Every one of them was talking too fast. Nevertheless, I went to the trouble of cutting the tape and splicing each section to a corresponding piece from the second day. Then I called Swain.

He pulled a long face. "You were right. Damnedest thing I ever heard. You've checked their air?"

"All normal. Oxygen, sulfur hex, helium, carbon dioxide. The nitrogen's down as close to zero as we'll ever get it."

"What's Tim think about it?"

"I haven't asked him, and I will, but something else first."

I'm not a medic, of course, but I've worked with them, and I've learned that a layman must never, never tread on medical toes. I wrote out a message, then opened the phone line and rang once. Tim came on after a minute.

"Yes?"

"A message from BuMed. I'll read it. Saybolt, Sea

Home: Request transmit present physiological constants of all Sea Home subjects. Signed: J. G. for Minter."

"Who the hell is J. G.?"

"I don't know. I thought you would. Minter's exec, maybe."

"Damn it."

"Why?"

"Because now's not the right time. Stall them off a few days, will you, Cheney?"

"You can't stall a thing like that."

"Stall them two days, one day, as long as you can."

"I'll try to ignore it for twenty-four hours, if you give me one good reason."

"OK. I'm collecting data. Naturally. There's nothing unfavorable, so I've preferred to sit on it until I can draw some conclusions."

"It doesn't sound very convincing to me," I said, "but I'm not one of the scientific type. Let me have it by eleven hundred tomorrow. Minter should hold still that long."

Just before noon next day I called J. G.—Jim Gates—who really is Minter's executive, and a friend of mine.

"Jim," I said, "I just faked a request from your office. You'll back me up, of course."

"I will?"

"I think you will. Starting now, put this on the record. The five subjects in Sea Home have gained an average of two pounds apiece."

"Not remarkable," he said.

"No. Their respiration rates, average, are down to nine. Pulse rates, again average, a hundred and four. Blood pressures about eighty over sixty and all very close to that average. Body temperatures, by mouth, ninety-five point two. In addition to that, they're talking about thirty percent faster than normal."

"What's Saybolt think of these?"

"He didn't report them. I had to weasel the information out of him by claiming your office was asking."

"That's not like Saybolt," Jim said. "It's right queer. You do have individual figures, don't you? Not just averages. Read them off for the record. Ask Saybolt for his interpretation and shoot it up here, whatever he says. The boss is in and I'll give him these without waiting. Consider yourself covered."

Pete and I exchanged looks indicative of a measure of relief, and I called Tim again to tell him that Washington wanted his comments.

"No comment," he snapped. Then, after a pause, "No comment beyond the obvious. Our environment is causing some metabolic changes. Not alarming. The changes are progressive, so I haven't bothered to report them. Better to wait until they level off. OK?"

This was, as Jim Gates had remarked, unlike Timothy Saybolt. He had always seemed to me to be an able but ultra-conservative scientist. Since he evidently had nothing further to offer, I prodded.

"Any other changes beyond the data you gave?"

"Nothing important. Our food intake is up."

"Is that so? How much?"

"Oh, about double."

"You don't say. Anything else?"

"We're sleeping less. About three hours."

"Three hours in twenty-four?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you know you're all talking faster."

"Hadn't noticed it, so I suppose we're listening faster, too. It's reasonable, though. We're working faster."

"I see. Anything more to add?"

"Light. We don't need as much."

"Very interesting."

"Yes, isn't it?"

"I'll be sending this through to Minter."

"I'm assuming that. It can't be helped."

"Will you keep us advised?"

"OK."

Washington's response to the transmission of this information was a lengthy silence. At last, about twenty

hundred, Admiral Minter himself called.

"Cheney?"

"Yes sir."

"Abel Stokes will be coming down."

"Stokes?"

"Dr. Abel Stokes. Topflight in oxygen metabolism. We'll try to get him to Santa Carlotta tomorrow, but it may be the following morning. Eglin will give you the schedule. And Cheney."

"Yes sir."

"Glad you handled this as you did. Saybolt seems to be somewhat uncommunicative."

"Thank you, sir."

Abel Stokes arrived about midmorning Sunday. He was, I guessed, past the seventy mark, and was carrying more weight than, as a physician, he could have approved of. In addition he had a game leg, but he was active enough. Before settling for a discussion, he wanted to see everything, and we tramped around the three upper levels, winding up with a couple of turns around the deck. He inflated his chest, pulled in his belly and grinned at the watery project around us. "Think of it," he yelled over the singing wind, "been studying breathing all my life but never got around to enjoying it. Well, well, to work. What the hell is young Timothy up to?"

I got him settled at my desk and went to the console myself where I could play with the recorders.

"You know Tim Saybolt, do you?"

"Some. Smart lad."

"I'll be interested in your reaction, then, when you hear him speak. It's not only . . ."

"Whoa. Don't give me any more preconceived notions than I've already got. Let me see your gas analyses, supply and return."

He spent some minutes flipping through the gas charts.

"In my simple-minded way," he remarked, "I'd expected that slower respiration would mean reduced oxy-

gen utilization and reduced carbon dioxide output. But if your gas sampling means anything, carbon dioxide's up, not down. Now don't start giving me engineering details, son. Shut up and let's get on the phone."

I'm not going to record or even summarize that conversation of the subsequent ones between Stokes and Saybolt. It's enough to say that, over a day and a half, Stokes drew forth facts which he seemed to find pertinent. Metabolic changes were, as Saybolt had said, continuing. Their body temperatures were now down to ninety-four and respiration rate to seven. In addition Stokes got such items as red and white cell counts, blood sugars and skin temperatures. Every single datum, he told me, was abnormal.

Saybolt offered no objection to answering any direct question and if he hadn't the information at hand, would provide it later. But he volunteered nothing and treated the whole inquiry as if it were unimportant. He was fighting a delaying action.

By close to midnight Monday, Stokes looked so tired that I insisted we knock off. After he was abed, Pete and I went out for a look at the weather. The glass had been dropping, the wind had picked up, and there were high thin streamers of cloud which suggested a gale by morning. I tuned in the weather station at San Juan and heard that there was a tropical storm center down near Martinique. We went to bed.

The weather was worse as we sat over breakfast, with rain squalls drumming against the broad windows of quarters. Abel Stokes had to go out for a promenade around the deck, and came in with his trousers dripping where the waterproof ended, but looking as pleased with himself as if he'd faced mortal danger. Then he wanted to call Washington.

Minter, it developed, had had to start his day at the Pentagon, but had arranged to have a suitable collection of medical brains on quick call. Jim said he would pass out the word, and they'd be calling back about eleven

hundred. We poured more coffee and I rang once for Saybolt.

There was a long wait, then Walter Pope, one of the professional divers, told us that Tim was out having a swim. I asked if he was on airline or back-pack.

If a man is on airline he can stay out more or less indefinitely as far as breathing is concerned. Cold is another limiting factor, though. We had isotope packs which circulated warm water through the suits, but they only did a partial job, and in the dress rehearsals for Sea Home the divers were good and ready to come in and warm up after a couple of hours. If your man carries a back-pack with cylinders of stored gas, his time is down to an hour.

Pope said he was on back-pack and had been out about fifty minutes. Pope was a Georgia boy, and it was interesting to hear how his drawl had been overtaken and passed by the speed-up in speech. Stokes questioned him a while about his personal reactions to the environment, and I found myself surprised all over again. Walter was exceptionally good at his job, but he'd never been long on brains. He displayed now an acuteness which was foreign to him. I asked presently for Gerd Carlsen, the other diver, who was a bit higher on the intellectual ladder.

"Can he call you back?" Pope asked. "Jake has him working on a lab problem, and I know he'd like to stay with it. Now I'm afraid I must get back to the unloading." And damned if he didn't ring off without requesting permission. What a way to run a Navy!

We rang for Susan then. She was willing to talk, up to a point, but it was evident that she was begrudging the time and wanted to get back to her laboratory, so I asked for Saybolt. She said he was out having a swim.

"But he went out ninety minutes ago, and he was on tanks."

"Yes," she said matter of factly, "we've learned to breathe very lightly. A back-pack will last several hours."

I held the connection and sat looking at United States'

top epxert on oxygen metabolism. He pulled the desk mike toward him.

"Susie."

"Yes, Dr. Stokes."

"Answer carefully, now. How often do you go swimming?"

"Four or five times a day."

"In twenty-four hours, you mean."

"Yes."

"An hour or so each time?"

"An hour or two."

"Very good. What's your skin look like? Any different?"

"Yes, we've all gotten quite a deep tan."

"Godamighty," said Stokes. "It's beginning to add up."

"Of course it is, Doctor," Susan said, and rang off.

Again, I won't try to detail the conference call, which went on and on, enlivened—for me—by the fact that Abel Stokes invariably addressed the admiral as Peewee. They all argued, in a scholarly way, for more than two hours. Right from the beginning a couple of the conferees were flatly in favor of suspending the operation, and nobody, including Stokes, would support the position that there could be no physiological hazard involved.

The storm was worsening steadily and static had gotten very bad when Admiral Minter finally called it quits.

"Bring 'em up," he said. "Much as I hate to do it, that's an order. Can you hear me? Bring 'em up. Acknowledge."

"Yes, sir," I said. "We bring them up."

So that was that. I called Saybolt and got him.

"Admiral Minter has suspended the operation. Everybody up. We'll start to prepare the ack-room now and should be ready for you by about sixteen hundred."

The acclimatization room on the third level provided the safest possible way to pressurize and depressurize. As big as some small hotel rooms I've been in, it had view ports all around, a telephone, chairs and cots, toilet and wash-up facilities. It would hold ten at-

mospheres pressure. The people from Sea Home could make the ascent in a personnel capsule, all five at once, doing the three hundred odd feet in eight minutes. They'd transfer to the ack-room through an airtight coupling, and there they'd stay for up to the better part of a day while the pressure was gradually reduced and the oxygen content built up.

My statement to Tim had been greeted by silence, but I could hear low-voiced conversation at a distance from the phone.

At last I demanded, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you. Sorry."

"What do you mean, sorry?"

"Sorry, we're not coming up."

"Hold on, now. That was an order. From Minter."

"I don't care if it's from the President. We're staying down."

"You don't know what you're saying. You'll be court-martialed."

Tim laughed. "You'll have to get us up first."

"You're insane."

"Wrong. We're sane for the first time in our lives and healthy for the first time, too."

"We can force you to come up."

"How?"

"Cut off your food. Cut off your fresh water."

"It wouldn't be easy. We've been doing some things down here that we haven't reported. We're very close to self-sufficient at this moment. But go ahead if you care to, and see what your pal Vogel would have to say."

"This is asinine. I'm coming down."

"Good. We'll be glad to see you."

I banged the switch off and discovered that Abel Stokes was red-faced with laughter.

"Go to it, son. Go down and see for yourself. It's the only thing to do. Do you know, when Peewee Minter laid down the law, I was almost hopin' something like this might happen."

"You don't think they're in real danger, then?"

"So help me, I don't know. Things are happening to their bodies that never happened to any human before, but I do believe Tim, that right now they're the healthy ones and the rest of us are sick. What worries me is what happens when they finally do come up. Are the changes fully reversible? Well, well, you heard my notions during our conference. Let's not beat the situation to death. You'll know more after you've paid 'em a visit."

Pete broke in, as I was betting he would, with a strong suggestion that he be the one to visit Sea Home. He argued at some length, making, with more or less subtlety, the points that: I was in command on the tower and should clearly not leave my post; my diving experience was some years in the past; and—with the most devious circumlocution—he was younger than I and presumably better able to face the rigors of the descent. I thanked him and exercised authority. In large measure Pete Swain lacked the one quality which I felt might be needed. Imagination.

We concocted a careful message to Minter to be cabled, not phoned once I had begun the descent. It ran: "Saybolt and group reluctant to ascend, fearing unfavorable reactions. Cheney has gone down to confer, Stokes concurring. Signed: Swain."

I'd forgotten to eat lunch, so I could go into the ackroom almost at once. It involved stripping and leaving my clothes in the outer shower room, scrubbing carefully with an antiseptic, then going through the airlock. Swain, wrapped in oilskins and buffeted by the storm, watched me through a port, and both he and Stokes kept their respective intercoms open so that we could talk.

I had once done a good many working dives at moderate depth and had been down to two hundred twice. In addition, back at Bethesda, I'd taken a turn in a pressure room much like this, breathing oxygen, helium and sulfur hex at a simulated three hundred feet. I was reday to go down in an hour, with no sweat, but Swain, now in command, vetoed it and kept me there

under observation for an extra hour. Then I climbed into the personnel capsule and sealed myself in.

With our cables there was no swing, even with the wind now holding at close to seventy, but there was a good deal of bumping until the capsule was under water; then no sensation at all until the clang and jolt that it had closed above me, and presently a green light of landing in the lower lock. Another clang signalled indicated that the lock was drained. Somebody outside swung back the port and I got my first look at Sea Home.

Or would have, except that it was almost dark.

Somebody grabbed my elbow and held on while I gained footing and made sure my knees weren't going to buckle. There was, after all, some reaction. I peered at him in the gloom.

"Carlsen?"

"Right, sir. I'll get some light on. We don't need it, but we don't mind it." He flicked switches and I was able to look around. Sixty by fifteen feet is surprisingly spacious when you're inside, even when the bottom third is sliced off to provide flat flooring. This chamber, intended primarily for receiving and temporary storage of material, was essentially unused and was in fact nearly empty. Carlsen headed for a connecting passage, hitting switches as he went. I followed into the first of the three chambers designed for work and living.

Carlsen gave me the beginnings of a courteous but laconic tour. "Physics lab," he said. "Bio lab, metabolism, organic synthesis, marine specimens storage, communications room and lounge, electronics lab, electronics shop, kitchen and mess, library, conference and reading room. The bedrooms and toilet facilities are beyond. Care to see them?"

"Not now. Where is everybody?"

"Out swimming. I can call them in if you have questions I can't answer, but we knew you were on your way, so they'll be back soon in any case."

"Orders were that no more than two at a time were to leave Sea Home."

"Yes, sir," Carlsen said gently, "we do seem to have thrown the book overboard, don't we?"

I was beginning to shiver. The ocean outside was, of course, close to freezing, and the comprssed atmosphere conducted heat away from the body at a high rate. Sea Home had originally been thermostated at eighty-five degrees, but we knew that, as their skin temperatures dropped, they had reset the controls to cool the chambers. I was wearing a quilted coverall. Gerd wore the briefest of swimming trunks. Under the circumstances I was damned if I would ask for more heat.

Gerd's appearance had changed considerably. He was a big, heavy-shouldered blond and had been as hairy an individual as I'd ever known, with a real thatch of yellow wool all over his chest, belly and forearms. It was all gone. He still had eyebrows and the hair on his head, but that was it.

Susan had said that they were all tanned, but that wasn't the right word to describe Gerd's color, which was a golden brown such as you sometimes see on Creole types in the West Indies.

"Tell me about your skin, Gerd," I said. "No, wait. Let's go to the lounge and be comfortable." Frankly, I wanted to get into one of the rooms I knew to be dehumidified, where it might seem a little less chilly.

"OK, sir. I'll just take a dip in passing." With that, he pulled open a floor hatch and dropped through, feet first. No suit, no mask, nothing at all between Carlsen and all that ice water. He was back in less than a minute, though, shining wet.

"That's better," he told me. "If you stay dry for very long, you get itchy. The others are close by. They're coming aboard."

Like a jack-in-the-box, Tim Saybolt popped up through the hatch. He wore minuscule trunks, like Gerd, and flippers. No mask, no back-pack.

I said, "Good god!" or words to that effect.

Next came Susan Craig. She was wearing trunks and

flippers, nothing else. I mean literally nothing else. When she saw me she very nearly snapped a salute, which would have been a quaint sight. But she caught herself, not being in uniform.

I put on a deadpan and headed for the conference room trailed by five wet seals. Their hides were glossy and beautiful. They disposed themselves around the room. Carlsen paused at the door and pushed up the thermostat, not enough, but some.

"You're feeling the cold," Tim said. "Naturally. But if we get the place warmer than about sixty, we'd be jumping in the water every few minutes to cool off. Want an extra layer?"

"No thaanks."

"OK. You won't be here long. That is, you shouldn't. But we're glad you came down to see for yourself. Excuse us if we confer as we are. Clothes are becoming uncomfortable and nearly intolerable. By tomorrow I expect we'll have overcome our human reticence and discarded the remainder. It doesn't matter. We're somewhat more civilized than when we came down."

Being only average civilized, I was trying to keep my eyes off Susan. "Have you any suggestions," I asked him, "as to what I should tell BuMed?"

"You can tell them the truth. That as a medical man, I consider it ill-advised to come up at this time. I'll say, between oursleves, that I have no doubt we'd survive it but I doubt whether any of us could ever again be happy on dry land. We've discovered what it's like to be alive."

"But that implies that you won't ever want to come up."

"Right."

"You know what BuMed will say to that. The rate may have slowed down but the subjects are still changing. Body temperature, respiration rate and so on. Let's get them up while we still can, while the changes are still reversible."

"Yes, that's what they'll say. That's why we've been stalling and not reporting the whole story."

"Leaving out such little details as your ability to swim without masks. How long can you stay out without breathing?"

"Indefinitely. Of course, we're being cautious."

"I'd hate to see you being careless. How do you do it?"

"Take a good deep breath and hold it. But let's talk about first things first."

"Go ahead."

"Our trouble had been nitrogen."

"Trouble? I didn't know you'd had any."

"We haven't since we came to Sea Home. I put it that way to make a point. You see, we've known all along that nitrogen was narcotic at a couple of hundred feet. What the physiologists have never realized is that it's also a stupefacient at sea level and on dry land. It was so much a fact of life, we forgot to wonder about its effect."

"But nitrogen . . . ," I began.

"Tim is talking about nitrogen in solution in the body fluids and tissues," Gerd put in. "Nitrogen in combination is essential to our kind of life."

"We've all been doped from the womb to the the grave," Tim said, "and we, Cheney, are the first five people ever to have gotten down to the nitrogen level where we could begin to come awake. You, by the way, are poisoning us to a small degree. You spent some time in the ack-room, obviously, but you're still exhaling a little nitrogen, and we can all feel it. You, on the other hand, must be feeling pretty good."

"Well, yes. At least I expected to feel lousy on my first three hundred foot dive, and I don't. And I have the impression of thinking rather clearly."

Kepper looked up from the scribbling which had been occupying part of his attention. "There," he said, "is a formula for calculating prime numbers. It works up to a hundred thousand, and I can't think what good it is.

No, Commander, your thought processes haven't improved any to speak of. You have a good imagination and you're extra alert. In twenty-four hours your memory would start to work the way a memory should. In seventy-two, you'd have approximately total recall."

"Now, listen," I said. "Test animals have breathed this three-way atmosphere of yours for quite long periods. I breathed it myself up at Bethesda. So did all of you."

"In the Bethesda test chambers there was several percent of nitrogen—too much—and we were in too short a time. I don't know about the earlier animal experiments, but I'll bet nobody asked the animals how they felt."

"What makes you think you're thinking better?" I asked. "I'm not doubting it, understand, but what's your evidence?"

"The total recall, for one thing," said Tim. "It makes you feel like a total person. Accomplishments, for another. Walter Pope has had a natural interest in mathematics, though he never knew it. In the last week he's galloped through differential and integral calculus. Gerd is becoming something of an expert in enzymes, and Susan could probably hold her own with the ranking biochemists of the country. Jake, on his part, has invented from a purely mathematical start a little gadget that pulls enough thermal energy out of the sea water to give us all the electric power we need. It looks like reverse entropy, but he assures us it isn't."

"First you learn to think," Susan said, "then your body goes to work. Cells learn to differentiate in new ways. In spite of the efforts to send us down here in as clean a state as possible, in terms of pathogens, we brought along a fine collection of viruses. Normally they'd be attacking cells to produce more virus. As it is, the cells use the viruses as building blocks to adapt themselves to new conditions. We've never realized the capabilities of the cell. Think what can happen when the first child is born down here."

"Susan and I plan to marry," said Gerd.

"Really? Who'll marry you?"

"You mean perform a ceremony? Well, for the benefit of people topside I expect Tim can listen while we exchange some promises. We'll stay monogamous until our first child can take care of itself. It makes sense, you know. I feel sure our new community will practice term monogamy."

"Your new community? Do you think the Navy will continue to send people down, when they can't or won't come back?"

Tim, with no uncertainty, said that they would. "After a period of confusion and soul-searching, yes. A few at first, then more and more as the feedback of new knowledge becomes evident."

I shook my head. "But where could you find the volunteers. You like it down here, that's obvious. But for a man who had never experienced it, well, he might be pretty reluctant to say good-bye to everything he has known and move into a cold, lightless world."

"Rats," said Tim. "When we know enough to reach the stars, man will go, believe me, with no slightest hope of return."

"You may be right. What about your families?"

"My wife will want to join me," Walter Pope said. "Within a year, I should hope, she'll be allowed."

Jake Kepper shrugged. "Mine won't. She'll divorce me. So OK."

I changed the subject. "What about your skins? Abel Stokes seems to have guessed something, but he won't come right out."

"I'm sure he has," said Susan.

"Not in detail, naturally," Tim added. "Take a look at my hand."

The palm and the insides of the fingers looked normal. The back of the hand and his arm had lost the glossy, wet seal appearance. The skin was now matte and dusty, as if covered with pancake makeup.

"Under a low-powered microscope—I'll show you later—you'll see that I've developed some billions of

minute scales. It's had the effect of increasing my body area many, many times. Most of those scales act as absorbers of oxygen, but perhaps one in a hundred has a different function. They excrete carbon dioxide, and incidentally some other metabolic end products I don't need in my blood stream. You were bowled over when we came in without masks. The fact is that we simply aren't breathing. In air—in this atmosphere, that is—we breathe occasionally, not to forget how, but for the last number of days we haven't really had to. The change has been rather explosive."

"You're telling me that, in effect, you have microscopic gills all over your bodies."

"Not gills. Nothing like gills. A much more efficient respiratory mechanism."

I tried to sort out my thoughts. "You're saying that you've compressed a thousand generations of evolutionary adaptation into . . . less than three weeks."

"No. Evolutionary adaptation implies the gradual weeding out of lethal factors, the concentration of survival factors. Not genetic mutation either, although that may be involved. Call it cellular mutation on a broad front, if you want to give it a tag."

"I don't believe it."

"You saw us come in without masks. You think of a better explanation."

A buzzer sounded. Jake flipped a switch, and I heard Pete Swain's voice, amplified.

"Cheney?"

"Yes, here."

"We're in a mess."

"What's up?"

"First of all, we're having a hell of a storm up here. That tropical disturbance has gotten to be a full-fledged hurricane, and she's now just east of Puerto Rico."

"Will she hit us?"

"Not square, probably, but the wind is force eleven and rising."

"All right, so you weren't planning to go anywhere. What comes second?"

"Dr. Stokes has had some kind of attack. He must have gone out on deck alone and fallen. There's a gash along the side of his head that I've just now got patched up so it's stopped bleeding. He got back into quarters on his own. It looks like he crawled in and then passed out. We can't rouse him. I think he may have had a heart attack or a stroke. His breathing sounds terrible, sort of a snoring noise."

Tim leaned to the mike. There wasn't anything wrong with the transmission, but there was a lot of noise at the other end. "Can you hear me, Pete? Roll him over on his face. Very gently. We don't want him choking on his tongue."

"I already have."

"OK. Then do nothing. Don't undress him even if he's wet. Keep him covered. I'm coming up."

"I'll be along," I said. "It may take Tim a good while to get through the ack-room, but I can hurry the schedule."

"But that's part of the trouble. You can't."

"Why can't we?"

"When we brought the cables up, the cloking frame wasn't heavy enough to hold them. The wind wrapped them around a stanchion. It's unreachable and anyway one end of the frame tore loose."

"Yes," I said, "we're in trouble. Tim, tell him the best thing to do for Stokes until medical help can be gotten." The launch and the work boat were both at Santa Carlotta, securely tied down I hoped, and there was a retired general practitioner on the island, but it might be two or three days before we could get him to the tower.

"Is the elevator working?" Tim asked.

"It was a few minutes ago."

"Bring it down to sea level and wait for me. I'll be there in about thirty minutes."

"You're certain you can do it?" Susan asked.

"Certain enough. One of the tower supports has climb-

ing rungs. They do go all the way up, don't they?"

"They go all the way up," I told him, "but it won't work. Even if you think you could climb those rungs at the rate of ten feet a minute, that particular stanchion is a good forty feet away from the loading platform and elevator."

"Isn't there a criss-cross of girders over to the platform?"

"Not directly."

"Draw me a diagram."

I made a quick sketch. "The girders are well under water of course, but with the waves they must be having up there, the girders will be almost awash between crests."

"Not so good."

"No. You can't do it anyway, Tim. I don't care how much you've adapted, you can't hold your breath and make that climb. You'd have to use a back-pack and that wouldn't work either, because you'd need more and more oxygen as the pressure diminished."

"Damn it, I'm not going to hold my breath. I'll have my lungs filled with water. Susan, find one of those filter masks, will you. You've got to strain most of the solid crud out of sea water before you breathe it."

"Get two masks, Susan," Walter Pope said. "I'm going, too. Don't raise objections, Tim. Getting across those girders will be tricky, and there ought to be two of us, roped together."

"OK. No objections." Tim peered at the sketch. "We turn at the second girder on our right. How do we get up on the platform?"

"You'll find another set of climbing rungs. How do you know you can fill your lungs?"

"How would you expect? We've been trying it, off and on, for the last three days. It's not easy the first few times."

I'd read about the mice and the dogs with their lungs filled with oxygenated water, but that humans could do it, even these humans, was stretching the limits of an

already strained credulity.

Susan came back with the filters—circular pads of cloth fitted into rubber face masks.

"Are you still on, Pete?" Tim asked.

"Yes, listening."

"Draw a medical emergency kit from the lockers."

"It's all ready for you."

"How does he look?"

"As of half a minute ago, no change."

"OK. Can you meet us at the platform?"

"Can do. There'll be two of us. The platform will be under water half the time, so we'll be suited up."

"Right. Count your thirty minutes from now, but give us some leeway—say, twenty-five to forty-five. Beyond that time something will have gone wrong, and you'll have to do your best for Stokes on your own. Susan can advise you by phone."

They put on canvas webbing harnesses and clipped on their rope. Tim said they'd be seeing us, then they slid through a hatch and were gone.

We sat and looked at each other rather solemnly. It was clear that, in their estimates as well as mine, Tim and Walter were heading into serious danger. Jake Kepper fetched me a blanket to wrap up in, and coffee for everybody. So they still had one Navy vice remaining. Susan said presently that she wanted to digest at least one textbook on cardiology, in case her advice might later be needed, and she left us. After that it became obvious that Jake and Gerd were staying with me as a matter of courtesy only, so I suggested that I could do with a little sleep which, incidentally, was the truth.

It was six hours later when Jake came into my cubicle and woke me.

"Is it morning?"

"What passes for morning. Almost five, and breakfast is ready. Walter's back."

"They made it? What a hell of a note for me to pass out like that, without getting a report."

"It would have been remarkable if you hadn't, your

first day down. Yes, they made it, but it was just as well they were roped together. Those girders had a coat of slime. I'll let Walter tell you."

Walter never did tell me much, just enough for me to gather that they'd been damned lucky on the last few feet. He had stayed with Tim until it was clear there was nothing much he could do, then had quietly taken the elevator down to sea level, refilled his lungs in the first wave, and stepped off the edge carrying a length of chain as a weight.

That was four days ago. Hurricane Beryl has moved on at last, to harass shipping in the North Atlantic, but there is still a heavy swell, and it will be another day before Abel Stokes can prudently be taken ashore. I've talked to Tim half a dozen times. Stokes had a concussion, either preceded or followed by a mild heart attack, but he is sitting up and even starting to walk a few steps, and he's trying to talk Tim into a trip up to Bethesda. I'll be surprised, though, if Tim Saybolt doesn't show up by tomorrow, via the quick descent method.

I'm not feeling the cold any more, and today for the first time I didn't have to shave. It will be several days more before they get the personnel capsule reslung. By then—I don't really know. But after all, I have no immediate family to worry about.

David R. Bunch's fiction and verse have been published in a considerable number of "little" magazines, and he has appeared frequently in the more far-ranging SF anthologies. His stories often exhibit qualities of very high density (as in a good poem) combined with sardonic humor, and this unsettling tale is a good example.

THAT HIGH-UP BLUE DAY THAT SAW THE BLACK SKY-TRAIN COME SPINNING

by David R. Bunch

The endless sky held high-up that day; it was a high-blue time. There seemed a tremendous amount of area out there from which to expect danger, if that is the way your mind chose to track. Two old wise-men in their whiskers and phlegm and rancor, being not far from death and they knew it, having done the terrible arithmetic over and over and over to arrive at the small balance left, had concocted a rumor. I think, in many cases, those who are near death wish for some holocaust to go with their demise, that big Long Dark being too lonely alone, much too fierce to face singly, entirely too real to go alone to in only their little thin armor to battle the last Big Dragon. They wish for a general disaster, maybe the end of all things even, to make company, its being for them the end of it, certainly. Unless religious. Unless giddy. Unless unduly hopeful. Unless given to fantastic imaginings that becloud the terrible urgency of the issues. But these two old wise-men were none of these at all when not drunk, and all they could find relief in when sober was drink, usually cheap wine, or beer which is cheap, and then they were somewhat giddy, and maybe even religious. Almost certainly they became reformers then.

YES! One day, about a week before this high-blue day of our story, in all sobriety they had hit on this terrible scheme. On a small dirty cobwebbed press in the basement of a friend long gone (from drink and unsuitable quarters, such as under frosty bridges at night without blankets) they would print in the thousands the warning. After having the idea, they repaired to a low-dive tavern to work on details and as they became more and more drunk they argued. Long and loud they did disagree over just what warning it would be best to use to scare the pants off really almost nearly everybody in that town. That almost nearly everybody needed to be scared soundly these old near-death life-warriors had no slightest doubt of at all. That they, with one appropriate warning, would be able to do it they had no doubt of either, not as they became more drunk. It all depended on the warning. "How about 'Snakes loose from zoo; they will get you!'?" one suggested, and the other laughed, winey-breathed him down and countered with "Improper factory processing brings breakfast poisoning; death soon, maybe before noon." But of course they were just warming up with such as these. What they really had in mind at first was to convince the people that something was coming in from afar to get them all, to flatten the town and everyone in it for their shortcomings. Flying saucer stories were a little too mundane for these old rumor tigers, each of whom was a minor wise-person in many areas, not including of course the area on how to live on Earth with the world as presented to them by history and beyond their blame and, in a large measure, beyond their power to alter and make amends for. In other words, these derelicts couldn't adjust, roll with the punch, make the best of it and all that. They were hung up on things like how to earn the daily and how to pay consistently for a roof that didn't leak too much to be under at night in moderate to heavy wet stormy weather. They were losers. Protesters. Disturbers. Snarlers and howlers unto the end. YES! And yet, they both, looking mysterious, talked at times of

days when they were far away from this place and important enough to be sent on secret missions. And neither one knew then just how much the other might be stringing the long bow of falsehood.

"Sometimes I'd just like to take a machine gun up to 4th and Main and stand there and open up on them as they go by on a workaday Monday, perfumed, nyloned, after-shaved and Palm-Beached up," one or the other of them might say at any time, and mean it.

Finally these old complainers, after many, many bottles of beer, accentuated by a few shots of cheap wine provided by anonymous donors, and after almost an entire afternoon of argument, decided upon their leaflet. And it was a good one. They both agreed that it was the only leaflet worth doing at all and the only one that would properly shake their town and, if spread properly, the state, the country and the whole world.

The leaflet read simply this: YOUR CHILDREN ALL ARE THREATENED WITH ADULT POISONING. TOMORROW, SUNDAY, A GIANT SHINY BLACK SKY-TRAIN WILL COME TO BEAR THEM TO SAFETY. DO NOTHING TO TRY TO STOP THIS. IT IS DECIDED.

SIGNED,
THE DECIDERS

Well, naturally, many of the parents of the town, finding the leaflet on the doorstep, stuck in their flower pots, or sticking from their mailbox slots, thought it all a big joke and a harmless enough hoax, although one a little bit in poor taste and altogether unnecessary. Actually they were not shaken much, because this, remember, was a leaflet-spreading time with all kinds of protests being aired in slogans, and high jinks galore being performed for any and all occasions. Who could take time out to take even one more warning seriously? And if the children were threatened with adult poisoning—well, fine. Most parents, reading into it what they wanted to, took this to be merely a poor choice of words, and they translated it to mean certainly that the children would

grow up to be fine healthy adults, like their parents, with a lot of wealth, cars, good jobs, competitive drive, and maybe even church on Sunday, but nothing serious, and certainly not any amount of deep thinking.

The old bitter derelicts chuckled in their pad in the basement under a small grocery store where rats were wont to scamper at night and where cockroaches did a thousand quadrilles at the merest hint of a crumb. "Smug and safe," they said. "And here their children are threatened with a terrible thing. Any half-day on the street in observation will tell you just what a terrible thing. Oh, if we could just save our children." Which last was a strange outcry, since neither of these old hard-tops had a child or even a wife to show for a career spent in opposition and drinking.

That high-up day of the endless blue, when the distances for threat and the spaces to be filled with danger seemed illimitable, if you had such a turn of mind (though of course you could have seen such distances as great spaces from whence relief and help could come sailing); that day the plans of the old time-ruined wisemen worked better than almost anyone could have expected. It was a speck at first and then a spot, and then a string, a snake, a rope! and then a long, long chain of little sausages, linked in black and spinning out in the high-up blue. The sky-train came on in, light on the air, long and spinning black, held by something miraculous, or absurd, hovering in above the buildings and coming down when it chose in a cleared place, HUGE—but landing lightly as a cloud would kiss at a mountain top on a sunshiny day.

Since it was vacation weekend times, the children, all with hours on their hands, no school and curiosity to throw at the birds, ran out as fast as they could scamper to the cleared place at the edge of town. The parents who bothered to notice and who were not too busy at TV or stocks and bonds or a monthly report with a sales chart, sprinted after awhile after their children, suddenly of course remembering the leaflets and the sky-train pre-

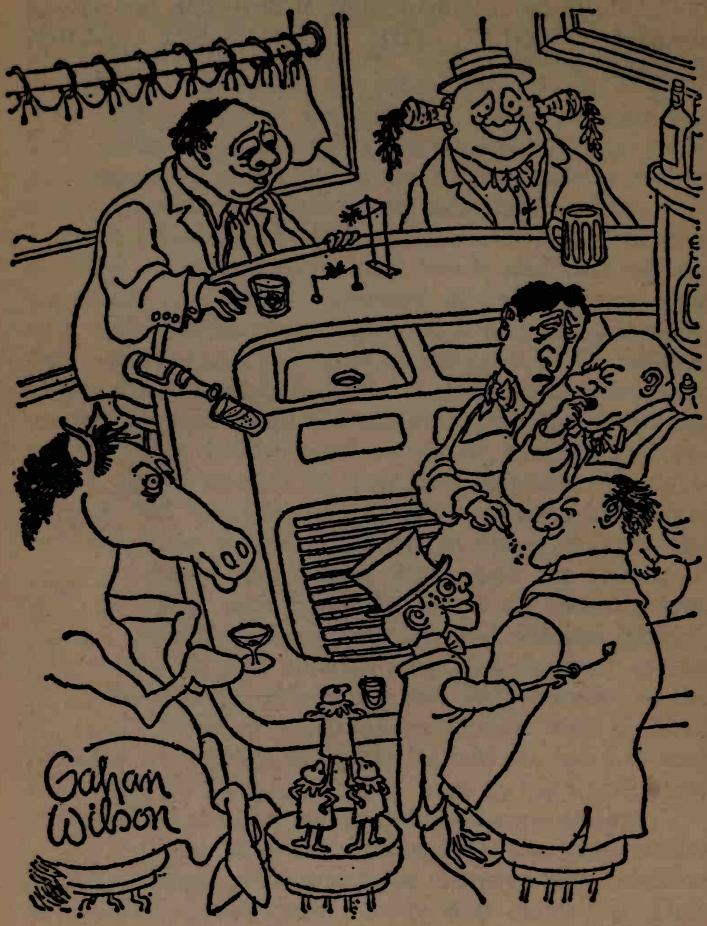
dictions that might just be a grimmer joke than they could ever ever have imagined.

But they got there too slow by a lot of too late. Too fat for wind sprints, too old for the distances, their children beat them by a wide country mile of time and entered a black coach of the sky-train, where a big place shaped like a candy bar was set up like a sweet shop for sure. And a popcorn popper was merrily announcing fluffy white explosions alongside ice-cream cones, soda-pop dispensers and a dozen flavors in popsicles, not to mention snow cones and candy mountains galore.

When all of the children had some sweet or another clutched in their greedy little hands and that certain childhood look of enchantment glistening from their eyes, the sky-train lifted; lightly as it had come, it went. And wind-sprint-losing parents far back in the streets, having flunked out both in the dashes and the distances, shook their heads and did not know just then anything to say. Silent, head-bowed, burdened, crushed and defeated, they returned to their cool, expensive, gadget-encumbered, labor-saving houses where comfort in good style was most worshiped. Then, in dramatic burst, the silence, stunned and heavy, lifted, and the sounds of waily weeping were heard in almost all those houses. After a while the mayor, childless and wifeless himself, took to the air and made a long and eloquent speech about the strange appearance and disappearance of the sky-train. Being a religious pretender and a fill-in preacher on Sunday, naturally he told the town to stop this unseemly weeping, put its trust in the Lord, come to church more often and pray for a happy ending.

The two old wise-men, pulling at their wine bottles in the basement place under the grocery store, chuckled and chuckled and could hardly stop chuckling. Then one said what they both must have been thinking ever since the miraculous advent of the long link-sausage black sky-train: "You would almost have thought, huh, we know something, huh, ahead of time, huh?" Then, for some reason, at their beer before that night was over

they began to look, each at the other, with a great deal of suspicion. Much as foreign agents look at one another they looked, when both are caught in a far lost place and both long to shout demandingly at the other, the sudden stranger, "WILL THE REAL SPY ALIEN PLEASE . . . ?"



"How come we draw all the shaggy dog cases?"

"Speaking of science catching up with sf," writes Ron Goulart, "in 'Muscadine' I mentioned an electric sitar and last week in Downbeat *they were advrtiseing one for sale." Well, it's only a detail in a story that is about Muscadine, who is a robot. He is neither a housekeeping robot nor a coal mining robot. He is a writer, and his stuff sells. Science may one day catch up with Muscadine, but who is going to figure out a way to retrain human writers?*

MUSCADINE

by Ron Goulart

Feeling the tiny screws scattered under foot in the dark hotel room, he stopped and said, "That nitwit. He's unscrewed one of his hands again and run off to send it to some damn nitwit girl."

Norm Gilroy flicked on the lights. The room was empty and he caught up the phone. While as was waiting for the desk, he knelt, holding the phone with his tilted head. He poked the rug, found a contact lens he'd lost over the weekend, and then located Muscadine's hand screws. Gilroy frowned and squinted at the things, dropped them in his pajama pocket. "Looks like his left hand this time. So he can still sign autographs."

"St. Tomas Hotel," said the night desk man.

Gilroy got his public relations voice back working. "Norm Gilroy. Have you seen Mr. Muscadine recently?" He must have left his chair and slipped out while Gilroy was taking his shower.

"Mr. Gilroy, Mr. Muscadine sped off in a taxi some ten or fifteen minutes ago."

"Uh, did you notice if he had his left hand stuck down in his coat pocket?"

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Gilroy, Mr. Muscadine didn't seem to have a left hand. He stopped at the desk to ask me where he could post a package at this hour."

"What did you tell him?"

"I suggested a mailbox," said the night man. "Has Mr. Muscadine's hand been injured due to some lack of thoughtfulness on the part of the hotel?"

"No," said Gilroy. "There's a rather tragic story behind it all, and I'm sure Mr. Muscadine would prefer that it remain a secret." Gilroy was on top of it now, handling it. He'd been in public relations a decade, with Muscadine nearly six years. "Thank you." He hung up.

That nitwit has gone out to mail his hand to that girl pacifist who plays the electrified sitar. As he plucked off his pajamas, Gilroy said, "You don't expect to run into an electric sitar-playing girl pacifist at an autographing session at The Emporium."

They were out of spares, too. Muscadine had sent one last week, air express, to that girl who placed third in the Miss Wyoming competition. That made six, seven, of the things. Dacoit & Sons was still conservative in many ways, a publishing house still headquartered in Boston. They wouldn't like all these hands cluttering up the mails. Gilroy hadn't told them yet. He was going to find out a few things in the Bay Area and then cope with Dacoit & Sons.

Gilroy pressed his round face where he thought his sinuses were, took a deep breath, buttoned his black spruce suit and went down to the lobby.

The pharmacist in the all-night drugstore just off the entrance hailed him. "Mr. Gilroy, I got it."

Muscadine's hand? "What?"

The druggist was small, grey toned with sprayed blond hair. "The cure for your case of San Francisco throat."

"Did you see Muscadine go by here?"

"Fifteen minutes back. In a cab heading up toward Nob Hill. He didn't seem to have any left hand. Is he sick?"

"It's just overwork."

"Sure, a best seller a year, I can imagine. Tell him I really loved the gondola stuff in *Consider This Small Dust!* a lot. I usually don't go for flagellation, but this was beautifully wrought." He lifted a small electric motor up onto his glass counter. "This is for your throat."

"How?"

"I devised it myself. Built from a paint sprayer I got at an unclaimed sale, combined with an insect squirter. You spray your throat with it three times a day."

"It's my nose now anyway," said Gilroy, backing.

"Sure, you've picked up San Francisco nose. It's a side effect from San Francisco throat. People come out here from New York, particularly people who live around East 65th and the East 70's, they always seem to get San Francisco throat, followed by San Francisco nose."

"I have to go find Muscadine," said Gilroy. But he returned to the counter. "You know, I do have an apartment on East 71st in New York."

"You didn't have to tell me, with your symptoms."

A foggy rain was hitting Union Square. Gilroy gave the St. Tomas doorman five dollars. "Know where Muscadine went?"

"He didn't give the cab driver a certain address," said the lumpy-uniformed man. His lower lip bulged under his chewing teeth. "Frankly, he spoke not too kindly to me, making remarks about how my uniform coat isn't the same color as my uniform pants. Which is only because I have the pants dry-cleaned Mondays. Of course, I read Muscadine's *Hence Vain Deluding Joys!* in the paperback. Being able to read between the lines, I'm not surprised to see that Muscadine drinks a lot."

"No, it's only that he gets a little touchy when he's been under pressure."

"Selling a million books a year wouldn't pressure me." The doorman narrowed one eye. "I think he may have headed for some all-night, after hours place. Because he mentioned wanting to revel till dawn."

"Thanks." Gilroy bounced down into the taxi that had

hissed up on the wet night street. "Some after hours club?" he said to the driver.

"Lots of people like Freddie's Jiveareeni Village," said the driver.

"That's kind of a dated name."

"They draw the more conservative, nostalgic crowd."

"We can start there," said Gilroy. He massaged his nose, watching the rain fall heavier.

At sunrise Gilroy was climbing up through a tangle of manzanita and rose bushes. He was across the Bay in Berkeley, high in the hills. Dacoit & Sons had warned him to stay away from Dr. Pragnell on all trips to the West Coast. But he hadn't located Muscadine in a long night of tracking. There was another autographing at Paul Elder's bookstore at noon and a talk-show interview at the dinner hour. Gilroy was hoping Leonard Pragnell could give him some kind of lead.

The Pragnell cottage didn't seem tall enough. It was roofed with shaggy shingles, encrusted with flowering vines. Gilroy knocked with the brass lion head.

The door whirred, buzzed and swung open inward.

"Your house is sinking into the ground, you know," said Gilroy while stepping into the hallway. Wicker chairs, about a dozen, were piled up against the left wall, with a fat calico cat slumped on the pinnacle.

"Has there been some fatality?" asked Dr. Pragnell's voice.

"Where's your speaker now? Used to be in the hat rack, under the eagle."

"Come on into the library. What's the tragedy?"

"He's missing. Can you suggest a way of finding him?" The library door whirred open. "He's not here? Quest for the father, return to the birthplace."

"Flapdoodle," said Dr. Pragnell. He was a Lincoln-shaped man, hunched in a wicker armchair.

The room was waist high in piles. Magazines, newspapers, paperbacks, phonograph records, overcoats, dress shirts and a miscellany. "I won't exactly report this visit to Dacoit & Sons," said Gilroy. "I have dropped them, as

jovially as possible, a few hints about Muscadine's worsening state. Have you heard?"

Dr. Pragnell rotated his wide shoulders. "Muscadine's a sensitive machine, Norm. Much more complex than your television set, say, and think how many times some little thing goes wrong with that."

"Never. It's my Mercedes that's always on the fritz." He sat on a solid pile of *National Geographics*. "Muscadine has mailed his left hand off to a girl pacifist down at Big Sur."

His cheeks hollowing, the doctor said, "You have to build them a certain way, Norm. All his quirky sensitivity is linked with his creativity. You touch the public heart on the scale Muscadine does, and you have to have a few quirks. That's where the big boys, your IBMs and your Rands, that's where they went flooey. They refused to program in the quirks. As a result I am the only person so far to have built a functional, android-human shape robot who can write best-selling novels."

"Oh, so? We think now Little, Brown's got one, maybe two."

Pragnell tensed. "They can't. Perhaps by 1978, five years from now, maybe."

"Little, Brown, we hear, has got one intense girl novelist android and one faggot short-story writer," said Gilroy. "And you know that old lady British detective novelist who won the Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America last year? She died two years ago, and Simon & Schuster didn't tell anybody. They just replaced her with an android."

"I assure you it's only I who has broken through. Now, what's troubling you?"

"This Bay Area always makes Muscadine edgy, being near you I think. It's much worse this trip. All over the country besides, things have been happening."

"Such as?"

"In Detroit he took to consuming forty cups of coffee a day, wandering around in the skid row and living on patent medicine. Then he tried to join the Merchant

Marine, march in a protest against the war in Formosa and sign on as a fry cook. He almost married an automobile heiress, then threw her out of the second floor window of a motel in Hamtramck." Gilroy rubbed his nose. "I quieted that all down. In Chicago he'd go out only after dark, ordered the hotel suite lined with cork, had an affair with an actress nineteen years old, sat in on drums with the Muddy Waters band, got into a fist fight with a *Sun-Times* reporter, tried to run for assemblyman in Cicero and had himself photographed with his arm around the capo mafioso."

"Yes, all built into him," explained the doctor. "At times he'll think himself middle-aged and waning, others that he's an incurable drunkard. All done with microelectronics."

The calico cat strode in, yowled, and jumped onto Gilroy's back. Gilroy said, "Down in Los Angeles he snuck into Tijuana and fought two bulls under the name of Papa Muscadine. He rented a Cesna and flew the top lady gossip columnist in LA up to Vegas. Threw her out of the second floor window of a Del E. Webb development. I persuaded her not to sue, but we're dead as far as planting any more items in her column goes. In San Diego he challenged the Ku Klux Klan wizard to a fist fight, threw his hat in the ring as Conservative Party candidate for governor, tried to sign up a crew to trek with him on a lion-hunting safari to Africa, went on a three day vodka and ginger beer binge, sent a telegram proposing marriage to the seventeen-year-old daughter of a former Senate majority leader and got himself nearly arrested in a paternity argument with a stripteaser from Balboa who does her act dressed as Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean."

"All normal," said Dr. Pragnell. "When I built all those bits of creative talent and best-seller instinct into Muscadine, I also fed in all the wild, impulsive traits of the great men of letters, past and present."

"He's much worse now," said Gilroy. "The earlier nonsense, I manipulated into good publicity." He reached

up behind his head and stroked the cat. "He's accelerating, on a collision course with himself. He keeps dismantling parts and shipping them to girls he gets interested in. What's more unsettling, Muscadine's talking more and more about how he's betraying his talent. About ending the mockery in suicide."

"I would think," said Pragnell, "that the success of his recent books, *Fair Daffodils, We Weep!* and *Our Bugles Sang Truce!*, would lift him out of the slough."

"The last two books were nothing much," said Gilroy. "I thought Jocelyn from Dacoit & Sons was sending you royalty statements. *Bugles* hardly did 100,000 copies. Not one book club deal or movie offer, and the TV series we were talking never jelled. Muscadine's sliding down."

"He can't, he's a machine. He'll go on forever."

"No author lasts forever," said Gilroy. "Muscadine keeps telling me all the great writers go to pieces at forty, and he's got the idea that's his age. He sings in an Irish brogue at times, says he'll be taken off by the Lady of the Lake, a victim of a weak chest."

"You don't sound so good yourself."

"It's that fog in SF. How about Muscadine and where he might be?"

"I imagine he'll be back at the hotel by the time you get back to San Francisco," said Pragnell. "There's a homing device built into him. Before you end your stay here, bring Muscadine over, and I'll perhaps tinker a little."

"You know," said Gilroy, "if he keeps dismantling himself somebody's going to tumble he's an android. The Authors' League won't be happy."

"Muscadine is the first wave of the sea of the future."

"In ten years maybe. Right now the bad press could ruin Dacoit & Sons."

"I'll make a few simple adjustments on him, Norm. Don't worry."

"I'll need a new left hand for him."

Reaching back to a shelf, Pragnell got a paper sack and tossed it. "A pair in there and extra screws."

Gilroy detached the calico cat and left. He sneezed all the way down hill.

The blues singer, heavy and with dark glasses, was sitting on his bed. The luggage rack held a slim, rangy blonde girl of about twenty. On the floor, his hand behind his tight-curled dark head, was Muscadine.

Gilroy said, closing the hotel room door quietly, "Is that a blues singer on my bed?"

"One of these mornings," sang the Negro with his steel-stringed guitar, "that black chariot is going to come for me. Uh huh."

"That's," said Muscadine, "none other than Blind Sunflower Slim himself, it is."

Gilroy scowled down at him. "Oh, hell, where's your right eye?"

"Buried with the dead past," said Muscadine, sitting up.

The blonde girl said, "He lost it at the Neither/Nor Club out on Divisidaro Street. I'm Jean Pinajian from the San Francisco *Post-Enquirer*, and I was out there with a date and recognized Mr. Muscadine, who was sitting in on electrified harmonica, and asked for an exclusive interview."

"I saw a whole tray full of glass eyes when I picked up my new contacts," said Gilroy. "It'll be okay. Miss Pinajian, we'll be happy to let you have an exclusive interview tomorrow first thing. Right now, I think Mr. Muscadine should rest." Actually the android never had to rest. He was supposed to sit quietly in a chair while Gilroy slept, but lately he wouldn't always.

The girl nodded. "He's so tortured. Slim, let's go."

The blues singer left the bed, opened the door for the girl reporter and they both left.

Gilroy reached into the paper sack he'd brought. "I got you a new hand. Don't go sending it away to some peace protester."

"Peace," said Muscadine. He grabbed the new hand and absently screwed it to his wrist. "I'll know it soon.

The river of forgetfulness flows out to sea and at last weary Lethe comes home to roost."

"Will you promise to stay here while I run down and buy you an eye?"

Muscadine rumpled his curly hair with his newly installed hand. "Washed up, Norman. The old greatness is gone, even the near greatness. Once I hoped I'd be allowed to express what I feel it is my mission to say and not be forced to repeat what the poor mindless mob wants to be told. I was happy as a boy in Wales or Baltimore, wherever it was. When I had that bicycle and helped with the harvest and had to shoot my horse when he fell into the canyon and walked the October streets smelling the old year die and sat on the street car that ran by the Mississippi. Gone, tossed by the wind, the past. Dead, as soon I'll be."

"Calm down," said Gilroy. "Sit yourself on one of the beds. We'll put fresh clothes on you and get over to the book store."

"I got a feeling this morning that black chariot is coming for me," sang Muscadine.

Gilroy could hear it out waiting for the elevator.

The Topless Tower was on the eighth floor of a building in North Beach. There were seven people dining in the big dining room, five naked waitresses. A thin, ragged man named Cullen Frimmer did his nightly talk-and-phone show from a back booth.

Gilroy and Muscadine were with Frimmer, waiting. The headache commercial ended and Frimmer said into his mike, "We were chatting, before that intrusion, with Neil Muscadine, author of *Consider This Small Dust!* and other such crap. I was telling Mr. Muscadine I find his work godawful. We're taking calls now from any of you who want to speak to Muscadine."

Muscadine was drinking boilermakers. Dr. Pragnell had constructed him so that he could appear to eat and drink and show the effects.

The manager of the Tower, a round man in a tuxedo,

rushed up and slid Gilroy a note. The note said, "Tell him in his ear don't say crap. Remember the FCC."

Muscadine read the note while Gilroy did, and said, "Remember the FCC."

Frimmer was drinking sweet vermouth. "Crap to the FCC."

The phone at his left buzzed and he picked it up. "This is the lonely old lady of Presidio Heights."

"Now what?"

"That Muscadine. God bless him, I know that voice. Ask him was he ever abandoned on the steps of a church in Youngstown, Ohio, many years ago."

"What kind of crap is this?" asked Frimmer.

The Tower manager grabbed at Frimmer. "I told you don't say crap on the radio anymore from my Candlelight and Wine Room, you foulmouthed bastard."

Muscadine got the phone. "I was indeed that waif, mam. I am your own beloved son, mother."

"Skippy," said the woman. "After four decades."

Frimmer tipped the table candle and tried to ignite the manager's tuxedo. The manager hit him in the ear. "I'm sorry to involve Mr. Muscadine in this," he asided to Gilroy.

"I'm sending you something, mother," Muscadine said into the phone. He spun off his left hand, using his steak knife on the tiny screws. "And something else."

Gilroy was blocked by the table from stopping Muscadine. "Easy," he said. "Talk about the book."

Muscadine took off his right foot and set it on the table. "Where are you now, mother?"

"Out on Clay Street, near the kiddie playground. Will you be coming home to me, Skippy?"

"No, I'm going to a better home than this world dreams of. The world is too much with me, what with one thing and another." Muscadine jumped up. "I'm going down slow, goodbye, goodbye." He ran in a rickety lopsided way out of the room.

Gilroy hung up the phone and chased him.

Down in the street the chase involved cabs, foggy

hills, the Golden Gate Bridge. Muscadine stopped finally beyond the town of Sausalito, near an unsettled stretch of wooded countryside that hung over the dark Bay. He left the cab and went running through the trees.

Gilroy paid his cab and sent it away. No use having any more witnesses to Muscadine's displays. The other cab headed back for the city, and Gilroy began working down hill through the sharp trees.

Muscadine was strewn all along the beach. Arms, the other foot, legs, a tangle of miniaturized parts. All scattered over the grey damp sand.

Muscadine's curly head was at the water's edge. "The shore of oblivion," he said.

"You nitwit. How'd you get yourself dismantled so damn fast?"

"My powers have failed, I'm a disappointment to my mother, the little lady of Presidio Heights. It is finished." The head hopped into the dark water.

When Gilroy reached it the head was sinking, giving off sparks and frizzling sounds.

Gilroy put the two cardboard boxes he'd found behind a Sausalito supermarket down next to Dr. Pragnell's cat. "I didn't bother to go back to the radio show for the other hand and foot."

The doctor said, "I turned in on the interview. Perhaps I over-programed Muscadine. When we put him together again I'll fiddle some, hold back."

Gilray sat again on the *Geographics*. "You're a medical doctor, too, aren't you?"

"Surely."

"You can sign a death certificate."

"On whom?"

Gilroy pointed a foot at the two cartons. One had Gallo Wine printed on its sides in red. "He's used up most of his best stuff in the six best sellers we had." Gilroy coughed. "His popularity's been dropping badly the past year. One of the reasons for such an intensive tour, this book."

"Simply kinks which can be fixed."

"You get only five percent of the Muscadine earnings," said Gilroy. "Could you build a machine, not an android, just one that sits there and writes what we want. One to do us a few books we can split fifty-fifty on. Dacoit & Sons will be mad, but they can't do anything without admitting Muscadine was a robot. After this, you can always build a new android."

"What do you want the writing machine for, Norm?"

"I'm associated with Muscadine in the minds of a lot of people, especially reviewers and critics," said Gilroy. "First you sign a death certificate on him. Announce he passed on suddenly, hinting at acute alcoholism with complications."

"Then?"

"Then we write *My Years With Muscadine*," said Gilroy. "Followed by *The Day Muscadine Died* and *The Picture Life of Muscadine*."

Dr. Pragnell picked up his cat and patted it. "It could be done."

Gilroy nodded at the boxes, tilted back. "If I stay in California for a while, somebody's going to have to come up with a cure for my respiratory problems."

"It could be done," Dr. Pragnell told him.

"'K. M. O'Donnell' writes the author, "is the pseudonym of a 28-year-old male writer who lives in Manhattan, follows the sports news occasionally and realized one morning while scurrying through to the race results that there were strange headlines on page one, right under the masthead. Looking them over, Mr. O'Donnell became aware that these headlines were not a literal representation of the truth and, as a pedagogical gesture, decided to write 'Final War,' an autobiographical work."

H. L. Mencken once said that "war survives simply because so many people enjoy it. It is the dizziest, gaudiest, grandest sort of bust that the human mind can imagine." Whether you buy that or not, you probably will agree that it takes a greater talent to take the glamour out of combat than to leave it in. The story you are about to read takes the glamour out, and does it brilliantly.

FINAL WAR

by K. M. O'Donnell

"'Twas a mad stratagem,
To shoe a troop of horse with felt . . ."
Lear, Act III

Hastings had never liked the new Captain.

The new Captain went through the mine field like a dancer, looking around from time to time to see if anyone behind was looking at his trembling rear end. If he found that anyone was, he immediately dropped to the end of the formation, began to scream threats, told the company that the mine field would go up on them. This was perfectly ridiculous because the company had been through the mine field hundreds of times and knew that all of the mines had been defused by the rain and the bugs. The mine field was the safest thing going. It was what lay *around* the mine field that was dangerous. Hastings could have told the new Captain all of this if he had asked.

The new Captain, however, was stubborn. He told everyone that, before he heard a thing, he wanted to become acclimated.

Background: Hastings' company was quartered, with their enemy, on an enormous estate. Their grounds began in a disheveled forest and passed across the mine field to a series of rocks or dismally piled and multicolored stones which formed into the grim and blasted abutments two miles away. Or, it began in a set of rocks or abutments and, passing through a scarred mine field, ended in an exhausted forest two miles back. It all depended upon whether they were attacking of defending; it all depended upon the day of the week. On Thursdays, Saturdays and Tuesdays, the company moved east to capture the forest; on Fridays, Sundays and Wednesdays, they lost the battles to defend it. Mondays, everyone was too tired to fight. The Captain stayed in his tent and sent out messages to headquarters; asked what new course of action to take. Headquarters advised him to continue as previously.

The forest was the right place to be. In the first place, the trees gave privacy, and in the second, it was cool. It was possible to play a decent game of poker, get a night's sleep. Perhaps because of the poker, the enemy fought madly for the forest and defended it like lunatics. So did Hastings' company. Being there, even if only on Thursdays, Saturdays and Tuesdays, made the war worthwhile. The enemy must have felt the same way, but they, of course, had the odd day of the week. Still, even Hastings was willing to stay organized on that basis. Monday was a lousy day to get up, anyway.

But, it was the new Captain who wanted to screw things up. Two weeks after he came to the company, he announced that he had partially familiarized himself with the terrain and on this basis, he now wanted to remind the company not to cease fighting once they had captured the forest. He advised them that the purpose of the war went beyond the forest; it involved a limited victory on ideological issues, and he gave the company

a month to straighten out and learn the new procedure. Also, he refused to believe his First Sergeant when the First Sergeant told him about the mine field but sent out men at night in dark clothing to check the area; he claimed that mines had a reputation for exploding twenty years later. The First Sergeant pointed out that it was not twenty years later, but the Captain said this made no difference; it could happen anytime at all. Not even the First Sergeant knew what to do with him. And, in addition to all of these things, it was rumored that the Captain talked in private to his officers of a *total* victory policy, was saying things to the effect that the war could only be successful if taken outside of the estate. When Hastings had grasped the full implication of all of this, he tried to imagine for a while that the Captain was merely stupid but, eventually, the simple truth of the situation came quite clear: the new Captain was crazy. The madness was not hateful: Hastings knew himself to be quite mad. The issue was how the Captain's lunacy bore on Hastings' problem: now, Hastings decided, the Captain would *never* approve his request for convalescent leave.

This request was already several months old. Hastings had handed it to the new Captain the day that the new Captain had come into the company. Since the Captain had many things on his mind at this time—he told Hastings that he would have to become acclimated to the new situation—Hastings could understand matters being delayed for a short while. But still, nothing had been done, and it was after the election; furthermore, Hastings was getting worse instead of better. Every time that Hastings looked up the Captain to discuss this with him, the Captain fled. He had told the First Sergeant that he wanted Hastings to know that he felt he was acting irresponsibly and out of the network of the problem. This news, when it was delivered, gave Hastings little comfort. *I am not acting irresponsibly,* he told the First Sergeant who listened without apparent interest, *as a matter of fact, I'm acting in quite a mature fashion.*

I'm trying to get some leave for the good of the company. The First Sergeant had said that he guessed he didn't understand it either and he had been through four wars, not counting eight limited actions. He said that it was something which Hastings would have to work out for his own satisfaction.

Very few things, however, gave Hastings that much satisfaction, anymore. He was good and fed up with the war for one thing and, for another, he had gotten bored with the estate even if the company hadn't: once you had seen the forest, you had seen all of it that was worthwhile. Unquestionably, the cliffs, the abutments and the mine field were terrible. It might have been a manageable thing if they could have reached some kind of understanding with the enemy, a peaceful allotment of benefits, but it was obvious that headquarters would have none of this and besides, the enemy probably had a headquarters, too. Some of the men in the company might have lived limited existences; this might be perfectly all right with *them,* but Hastings liked to think of himself as a man whose horizons were, perhaps, a little wider than those of the others. *He* knew the situation was ridiculous. Every week, to remind him, reinforcements would come from somewhere in the South and tell Hastings that they had never seen anything like it. Hastings told them that this was because there had never *been* anything like it; not ever. Since the reinforcements had heard that Hastings had been there longer than anyone, they shut up then and left him alone. Hastings did not find that this improved his mood, appreciably. If anything, it convinced him that his worst suspicions were, after all, completely justified.

On election day, the company had a particularly bad experience. The president of their country was being threatened by an opposition which had no use for his preparedness policy; as a defensive measure, therefore, he had no choice on the day before election, other than to order every military installation in the vicinity of the

company's war to send out at least one bomber and more likely two to show determination. Hastings' company knew nothing whatever of this; they woke on the morning of the election cheerful because it was their turn to take the forest. Furthermore, the tents of the enemy seen in the distance were already being struck, a good sign that the enemy would not contest things too vigorously. The men of the company put on their combat gear singing, goosing one another, challenging for poker games that night: it looked as if it were going to be a magnificent day. All indications were that the enemy would yield like gentlemen. Some of the company began to play tag, leaping through the abutments, comparing them to the forest that would soon be theirs.

Then, from all conceivable directions, airplanes came; they wandered, moaning, a few hundred feet above the surface of the cliffs and apparently waited. When all of them were quite sure that no others were coming (there would have been no room for them anyway), they began to methodically drop bombs on the company. Naturally, the pilots and crews of the airplanes were terribly excited and, as a result, they misplaced their fire quite badly, missing direct hits on the company more often than not. After a while, there was so much smoke around the vicinity of the cliffs that the pilots were unable to see at all, and they drifted over and peevishly sent excess bombs on the mine fields. Hastings, lying on his back, guessed that the First Sergeant had been proved right because, just as everyone had been telling the Captain, the mine field did not go up. It took the bombs quite nicely, as a matter of fact, not heaving a bit. When every plane had released its bomb (some had to actually go over to the forest and drop one on the enemy; there was no other space left), they flew off in a dazzle of satisfaction, leaving the largest part of the company choking with laughter. Those that were not choking were unable to because they were dead. The point seemed to be that here it was the company's day in the forest, and now their own or some other force had come in and

had screwed everything up. In the distance, the enemy could be seen holding cautious formation and then, with no hesitation whatsoever, they put themselves into lines and marched briskly away from the forest, taking the long route back to the cliffs. The new Captain got up on an abutment and made a speech; he said that this had been the first step in a whole series leading to mass realignment. The company applauded thinly, wondering if there was any chance that he might have a stroke. Then everybody packed up and went over to the forest; all of them, of course, except those who were dead. Hastings stayed with a work detail and labeled all of them so that headquarters, if they ever sent anyone up, would know who in the company had failed to take the proper precautions and was therefore to be permanently removed from the master roster list and placed in the inactive files, never to be bothered by formations again.

It was the election day disaster that caused certain men in the company to begin behaving in a very bizarre fashion. News received through the First Sergeant that headquarters believed that the president had won reelection had no effect upon the decision of these men to take up indefinite residence in the forest; they told anyone who asked them that the whole thing was a futile proposition and the company was always going to come back there, anyway. They refused to make formations and had friends answer for them; they covered their tents with mud and pitched them in the shadow of trees; they washed their garments in the rain and, furthermore, they told everyone in the company that they were fools not to join them. One morning, lining up in the cliffs, the First Sergeant noticed for the first time that five men were gone. He became furious and said he would not stand for it; he told the company that he had been through four wars, not including eight limited actions, and there was simply no basis, ever, to performances of this sort. The First Sergeant said that he was going personally to lead the company back to the forest to shoot

those five men. They were all prepared to go, looking forward to the objective really, when a misguided enemy pilot flew uncertainly over the forest and, perhaps in retaliation, dropped thirty-seven bombs on it, blowing every tree to the ground, leaving the earth quite green and shuddering and completely decimating his own troops. They were unable to fight for a week because the enemy had to ship reinforcements, and when they finally got back to the forest, they could find, of course, no trace of their five men at all; only a few belt buckles.

It was right then that Hastings decided that the matter of his convalescent leave had come to a head. He had had the idea and he knew that it was covered in regulations: *he was entitled to it.* Army manuals noted the existence of something called convalescent leave: if it wasn't for situations such as these, well then, for what was it? *They had to deal with it.* One morning, he carefully redrafted his original request with a borrowed pencil on the back of an old letter from his fiancee and brought it again into the First Sergeant. Hastings reminded the First Sergeant that he had originally put this request in months ago. The First Sergeant, groaning, said that the Captain could not possibly look at it because he was still getting acclimated to the situation. But, the First Sergeant added, he had been talking to the Captain on and off and he had some promising news: the Captain had been saying that he would probably be completely familiarized by Christmas. It was only a matter of taking time to get hold of a situation. Hastings said was that a fact and, mumbling promises to himself, left the headquarters tent; he told the Corporal with whom he slept that he hoped to be out of this, sooner or later. Most of the company were still gathering for hours around the belt buckles, looking solemnly, telling each other that it was a damned shame what the Army did to people. Hastings, looking it over again, decided that he had written a strong appeal: how *could* it be ignored?

Gentlemen (Hastings had written), listen: I am applying for convalescent leave as I have already done because I have been in vigorous combat and, while adding little or nothing to the company effort, have driven myself to the ridges of neurasthenia. What fighting skills I do possess and what morale I have acquired through recommended reading materials have fallen to a very low point because of the discouragement involved in the present situation. We are capturing and capturing again one forest and some wasted hills. The forest is bearable; the hills are not, but in the exhaustion of this repeated effort, both have leveled to a kind of hideous sameness; *now there is no difference.* Indeed, everything has become the same, as is common now in cases of great tension occurring under stress situations to certain limited individuals. Recently, I have had cold sweats, nausea, some vomiting and various nervous reactions including migraine of relative severity that has cut my diminishing effectiveness even further. Most of the time, I can barely lift a rifle . . . and for all of these reasons, I am repeating my ignored request of three months duration that I be given convalescent leave for a period of several weeks to months for the purposes of renewed vision. Ideally, I would like to go back home, see my civilian friends, share my experiences with them, but if it is found that I cannot be sent there due to problems with transportation allotments and the like, I would settle for being sent alone to the nearest town where there are women and where it is possible to sleep. I would even be willing, if the nights were quiet, to go to a place without women; as a matter of fact, this might be the best action at this time. I am certainly in no condition for relationships, not even those of the fragmentary kind necessitated by copulation. Hoping that this request meets with your attention and approval; hoping that you will not see it as the frenzied expression of a collapsed man but only as the cool and reasoned action of the professional soldier under stress, I remain yours truly, Hastings, 114786210. *P.S.* I wish to note that my condition is

serious; how serious only a qualified professional judgement could determine. If this request is not met with your prompt attention, therefore, or not, at least sent to a competent psychiatrist for an opinion, it is impossible for me to predict what the scope of my reactions will be: *I can no longer control my behavior.* I have been brought up all my life to believe that institutions are the final repository of all the good sense left in this indecent world; at this point in my life it would assume the proportion of a major disaster if I were to learn that the Army, one of our most respected and ancient institutions, were not to be trusted. *P.P.S.* Please note that the mines here are *already defused;* inform the Captain that they need not worry him.

On the other hand, the *first* request had been good, too. The day that the *old* Captain's reassignment to headquarters came through, all of the men in the company had come to his tent to stand around him, giving him notes and wishes of good will. Hastings had given him his request in a sealed envelope, and the Captain had taken it for another farewell message and placed it carefully in his knapsack; he told Hastings and the others that he was moved by their display of affection and he hoped that any of them who came into his territory later in the war would drop in and say hello; he would like to find out personally how everything was going. After all of this was over, the old Captain had crawled into his tent, saying over his shoulder, that the company had given him an experience that he simply would never forget. The company smiled at the Captain's closed tent and wandered off to play poker. (They had been in the forest that day.)

Hastings thought that he would join them and then decided that this would not do; he would have to force the issue, and so he crawled, quite respectfully, into the Captain's tent and, finding him wrapped in an embryonic ball on his bunk, told him that he had a few things to explain. Hastings told the Captain that he had sub-

mitted a request for convalescent leave and not a good will message. At this, the Captain's legs kicked from the ball he had made of himself, and he told Hastings that he felt that he had very little consideration. Hastings said that this might all well be true, but he *was* a sick man and he then outlined the substance of his request. The Captain wrapped himself up intently and thought about it, said that he could court-martial Hastings. He added cheerfully that, since he was not legally in command of the company now, Hastings could be placed in the stockade for divulging confidential material to an outsider. Hastings kneeled then and asked the Captain what the proper thing would be to do, and the Captain said that he hadn't the faintest idea. He suggested that Hastings recall his request and, as a concession, court-martial proceedings would be dropped. He said that the appeal itself was unexceptionable; the new Captain, if one ever came, surely would approve it.

Hastings took his envelope and left the Captain, went back to his tent singing an Army song and fixed up his pegs neatly, but by the time he had all of them firmly in the ground, he found himself stricken with a terrible intimation. He went back to see the Captain, learned that he was in the officers' latrine, and waited outside there until the Captain came out. Hastings asked the Captain if headquarters or the new Captain might think that his request was a joke. The Captain said that he could not speak professionally but from what he had gathered from summation, he saw nothing funny in it at all; it seemed quite serious, quite to the point. Hastings said that the Captain might feel that way but, after all, he had been heading up the war, maybe at headquarters, they did not glimpse the urgencies. The Captain said that headquarters was filled with understanding people: they were people who had approved his own request for transfer, and they could be counted upon to comprehend the necessary. Hastings said a few unfortunate words about possible prejudice against enlisted men, and the Captain's face became bright green: he said that he

suddenly realized that he had not finished his own business in the latrine. Hastings could not follow him in there, of course, but he waited two hours until the Captain came out and tried to pursue the matter. But the Captain, walking away hurriedly, said that he did not know what Hastings was talking about: he did not even know what this request was, had never heard of it in fact; and then he said that, upon consideration, he realized that he did not know Hastings either; surely, he had never seen him before. The Captain ordered Hastings to return to his proper company, wherever that might be. Hastings explained that theirs was the only company within two hundred miles, and the Captain said that Hastings was obviously an AWOL with energy. Then, he ran briskly away.

Hastings gathered that there would be very little point in following and instead went back to his tent. His tent mate was sleeping inside, and Hastings methodically demolished the tent, wrapped it around the Corporal, picked all of this up, groaning, and threw it into a tree. The Corporal hit with a dull noise. When he came out rubbing himself, he said that he was shocked at this; he did not know that Hastings was the type. Hastings shrugged and said that some men changed personality under stress. He wandered away, not breathing very hard, and bought a pencil from someone, took some toilet paper from the latrine and began a very serious letter to his fiancee. He had just brought matters through the Captain's second flight when the sun set violently, and he had to put everything away. He slept quite badly in the mine field that night (he did not feel like returning to his tent; not quite yet) and in the morning, found that his letter had been somehow stolen. Hastings had a good reputation as a letter writer, and men in the company were always stealing his correspondence, trying to get useful phrases. Hastings did not care about this particularly, except that lately he had begun to feel that he had only a limited number of things to say and they were diminishing rapidly. This theft, then, intensified

his gloom, and he almost decided to seek another interview with the Captain but then he said: *The hell with it. We'll give the new man a chance. That is the least we can do.* Looking sadly at the enemy tents, Hastings again decided that he was in a highly abnormal situation.

Headquarters (wrote Hastings some time later on the back of a letter from an old acquaintance), I am forced to take this most serious and irregular action because of the prejudicial conduct of the recently installed Commanding Officer concerning my re-request for convalescent status. As you may or may not know, I originally placed this request several months ago and rewrote it last week because of the failure of the Commanding Officer to pay any heed, whatsoever. This Commanding Officer has subjected me to an exposure of terrifying inadequacy without precedent in a Captain of this Army and has imperiled my entire image of your institution. He has never confronted me concerning either request but has relayed statements through the First Sergeant (who is a war veteran with great sympathy for my position) that I am behaving irresponsibly. Headquarters, I ask you, is it irresponsible of me to request a convalescent leave? I have been fighting this war for a considerable period of time now, exposing myself over and over again to the same dreary set of experiences while around me the company ebbs and flows and the reinforcements creep in darkly. The reinforcements tell me again and again that they do not think that there is any sense to this engagement, and I am compelled to agree with them. This entire action has acquired the aspect of nightmare, I am sorry to say, and although I am not an unstable man, I have found myself becoming, not neurasthenic as previously noted, but truly psychotic. This is terrible ritual, gentlemen, terrible sacrifice, really deadly convolution of the soul. Also, they are stealing my correspondence. I have not been able actually to mail a letter for months, even to tell my fiancee that I have terminated our engagement. Gentlemen, I *like* my fi-

ancee and what is more important, after two years of distance, I now wish to make an arrangement to spare her of me. What more significant proof can I provide of insanity? Hoping that you will give this request the most serious consideration and hoping that you will review the folder of the Commanding Officer here very thoroughly indeed, I am sending this letter out by and through devious and covert means. Yours truly, Hastings, serial number posted.

When he was finished, Hastings took the letter to the officers' section and gave it to the First Sergeant, who was cleaning some bits of litter from the top of his desk. He gazed dully at the First Sergeant and asked if it could be submitted through special channels, around the Captain. The First Sergeant gave him a look of wonderment and said that the letter could not possibly pass: it was not written in code as all direct communications to headquarters were compelled to be. Furthermore, the First Sergeant said, he had received exciting news from headquarters: there were plans to start a newspaper which would be distributed by airline to the company; this newspaper would tell them how they were progressing in their battle. The First Sergeant said that headquarters considered it a major breakthrough in morale policy. And, in addition to all of this the First Sergeant whispered, there was one other piece of news which had come through from headquarters which he was not authorized to disclose but which the Captain would make the subject of an address to the troops on this day. The First Sergeant said that this would probably be a revelation even to Hastings, a real surprise from headquarters. Hastings, still thinking about the newspaper, asked if it would contain anything except statistics, and the First Sergeant said there would probably be some editorials written by military experts. Hastings said that he wanted to awaken the Captain. The First Sergeant said that this was impossible because the Captain was already awake; he was drafting his

speech, and he was too excited to deal with Hastings now. The First Sergeant added that he agreed that this was a shame. Hastings said that he was at the end of his rope. The Sergeant said that things were getting better: he recommended that Hastings learn headquarters code if he was serious about the message and then re-submit it, and he handed him a book. Hastings saw that the book was really a folder containing sheets of typewriter paper, and he asked the First Sergeant what this was. The First Sergeant explained that this was a copy of his short novel detailing his experiences as a veteran of four wars and eight limited actions. Hastings asked what the hell this had to do with learning code or with sending his message, and the First Sergeant said that he was astonished; he said that Hastings was the only man in the company so far to be offered his novel, and he added that everything in it contained the final answer, if it was only studied. The First Sergeant then said that the convalescent leave business was Hastings' problem, anyway; he had never cracked the code completely himself, and he doubted if it were possible to solve it.

When he came back to his tent, still carrying the First Sergeant's novel in one hand, Hastings decided that he had reached a moment of major crisis. There were obviously no points of reference to this in his life; he was definitely on his own. All of the company were getting up one by one, discussing the push to the cliffs which they were going to make later in the day. Some of the reinforcements insisted that to achieve the cliffs would be to attain a major objective, but older members of the company gently explained that the battle was probably endless. When they heard this, the reinforcements sat tearfully and had to be persuaded to strike their tents. The First Sergeant came out after a while and called a formation, saying that the Captain was going to address them. When they heard this, the company, even Hastings, became very excited because the Captain had never talked to any of them before; he had always been at the end of the marches, saying that he had to be ac-

climatized. Now, apparently, he had completed his assessment of the situation, and everybody was very anxious to find out what he had learned. Also they were curious, some of them, about his rear end and figured that at one time or another they would probably be able to get a glimpse of it now. Standing in the ranks, Hastings fondled the First Sergeant's novel and his letter and made a decision: he would present both of them to the Captain just as soon as he had finished talking. He would wait until the end of the Captain's speech that was, only if the speech was very interesting: if the Captain had nothing to say or only detailed how he intended to further familiarize himself, he would go up to him in the middle and simply hand him the letter. At least, he would have the man's attention. This would be a new element in the situation, right away.

Preceded by the First Sergeant, the Captain came from his tent and, walking carefully, came in front of the company. No one could see his buttocks because all of them were facing in the same direction. The Captain stood there, nodding, for several minutes, making some notes in pen on fresh paper, beaming at the motion. Hastings found this frightening. He had never before noticed how small the Captain's face was; at this distance it was seen to be covered with a hideous stubble superimposed over the features of a very young boy. In spite of all this evidence, he had not been convinced, apparently, because he wore a wedding ring. The Captain backed carefully against a tree and leaned against it, smiling at the company. "Some of you," he said, "have brought it to the attention of my First Sergeant that you are unhappy.

"More than unhappiness. I know that you are vitally concerned. You're concerned because you see no point in what you're doing. You're concerned because you can't see how what you are doing affects anything or anybody else. You're worried about this. This is serious. It is a real problem.

"It's a legitimate matter of concern, all right. When a

group of men such as yourselves cannot feel dignity in the work they do, cannot feel that what they do is important to a much larger number of people, they break down. They become nervous. They begin to function in a cold sweat, and sometimes they do not function at all. I have noticed this about one or two of you. But even those I do not condemn. In fact, I have all kinds of sympathy for men in this predicament; it is not pleasant. I know what it can be like. But now and for all of you, this part of your life is over."

The company cheered thinly. Hastings folded his letter and put it away.

"The situation, in fact," said the Captain, "is now entirely changed; more than you would have ever thought possible. *General war has been declared.* The enemy, who have become increasingly provocative in recent weeks, bombed one of our ports of installation last week, reducing it to a pulp. How about that? As a result of this action, the president of the country has declared that a general and total state of war now exists between the countries of the enemy and ourselves. At this moment, troops all over the globe are actively pouring in and out of our military installations; their weapons at the ready!

"*Now, what does this mean?* I'll tell you what it means. Gentlemen, you are the first. But, you are only the beginning. What you have gone through will be absorbed, will be a spearhead. And when we go out today, we go into these fields with the entire Army, with the country behind us. You are some lucky bunch of fellows. I congratulate all of you, and I congratulate you individually."

After the Captain had finished, he stood against the tree, apparently waiting for the company to disperse, so that he could return to his tent without anyone having seen his rear end. Hastings, weeping, drifted behind him, stood in a clearing, destroyed his letter. The trunk covered the Captain's behind from that angle, too. *I do feel better, already,* Hastings told himself, *I feel better al-*

ready. But when the Captain finally gave a cautious look in all directions and started backing slowly from the tree, Hastings took his bayonet and threw it at him, cleaving the left buttock of the Captain, bringing forth a bright scream.

"I still feel lousy," Hastings said.

The Captain had never liked Hastings. Hastings walked in the middle of formations, telling everyone as they went over the mine fields that they were absolutely harmless, a fraud. No one would have taken *any* precautions going over the mine field, if it had not been for the Captain running behind them. Some of the men picked up stones and threw them at each other; some men said the war would never end. When things got utterly out of hand, the Captain would have to shout at the troops, at distances of hundreds of yards he found himself bellowing and, even then, the company would not listen. All of this traced back to Hastings. He was destroying the morale of the company. The Captain suspected that, beneath all of this, Hastings was trying to sink the progress of the limited war.

In addition to saying that the mine field was just as safe as a playground, this Hastings was a letter writer. He wrote letters to everyone; now he had written a request to headquarters (which was peculiar enough already; the messages coming from headquarters now were enough to confuse anyone, let alone a Captain just trying to get acclimated), giving his situation and asking for convalescent leave; he cited obscure regulations. The Captain knew, of course, that if he forwarded this material to headquarters, two or three field grade officers would come out in a jeep, capture Hastings and place him in a hospital for mental cases, and the Captain wanted to spare Hastings this. He was governed, then, by common, if causeless, feelings of mercy but nevertheless, there was Hastings, insisting that his form go through. The Captain did not know what to do with him. In the first place, he had only been with this com-

pany for six weeks and he was having all he could do to get acclimated to the situation; in the second place, he badly missed his wife and the cottage they had had in officers' quarters on a small post in the Southern tier. Furthermore, the Captain found himself wondering at odd moments in the night whether the war effort would truly be successful. There seemed to be some very peculiar elements about it. The bombing was so highly irregular, and some of the pilots did not seem to be very interested; they dropped bombs on their own side and also flew out of pattern. In addition, some of the men in the company had become attached to a certain part of the terrain; they were maintaining now that the entire purpose of the war was to secure and live permanently within it. The Captain did not know what to do about this. Also, Hastings waited outside of his tent often, trying to find out what he was doing with the leave request, and the Captain found that his free rights of access and exit were being severely limited, above and beyond the Army code.

The Captain had nothing against the war. It was all working out the way the preparation courses had taught. Certainly, it had its strange facets: the enemy also seemed to be attached to the forest part of the map and fought bitterly for the retention of certain cherished trees, but things like this were normal in stress situations anyway; after a while, all conflicts, all abstractions came down, in a group of limited men, to restricted areas. The Captain had been trained to see things in this fashion, and he had also been given a good deal of instruction in the intricacies of troop morale. So, he understood the war; he understood it very well. There was no doubt about that. *However*, the Academy had neglected to prepare him for Hastings. There was no one like Hastings at the Academy, even in a clean-up capacity. The Captain had taken to writing his young wife long letters on stationery he had borrowed from his First Sergeant (a war veteran of four major conflicts and eight limited actions), telling her all about the situation, add-

ing that it was very odd and strained but that he hoped to have matters cleaned up by the end of the year, that is, if he was ever unleashed. Other than this, he did not write her about the war at all but instead wrote at length about certain recollections he had of their courtship, entirely new insights. In the relaxation of the war, he found that he was able to gather astonishing perceptions into the very quality of his life, and he told his wife the reasons for his action at given times, asked her if she understood. *We will get to the bottom of this,* he often reminded her, *if only you will cooperate.* His wife's letters in return were sometimes argumentative, sometimes disturbed; she told him that he was wasting his energy in the forgotten wastes, and that all of his strength was now needed to become acclimated to a new situation. When he read these letters, the Captain found that, unreasonably, he wanted to cry, but his bunk was too near to that of his First Sergeant, and he was ashamed. None of the officers wanted to be caught crying by the First Sergeant, a combat veteran.

Meanwhile, the Captain found that his communications with headquarters were being blocked for days at a time, and also that his messages, when they did come, were increasingly peculiar. Sometimes, the Captain succumbed briefly to the feeling that headquarters did not truly understand the situation, but he put such thoughts away quickly. Thinking them or putting them away; it made no difference, he was almost always depressed. *Continue on as you have done, worry not,* headquarters would tell him three days later in response to a routine inquiry. Or, *we are preparing a new strategy here and ask you to hold line while formulating.* Such things were highly disturbing; there was simply no doubt about it.

One morning near Christmas, the Captain went through a near-disaster, a partial catastrophe. The First Sergeant came into his tent and told him that Hastings was thinking of submitting a letter to headquarters directly on the subject of his convalescent leave. The

Captain said that he could not believe that even Hastings would be crazy enough to do something like that, and the First Sergeant said that this might well be true but, nevertheless, Hastings had brought in some kind of a letter that morning and asked to have it forwarded. The Captain asked the First Sergeant if he could see the letter, and the First Sergeant said that he had told Hastings to go away with it but that Hastings had promised to come back later. The Captain put on some old fatigues and went out into the forest in real grief; he looked at Hastings' tent, which was of a peculiar, greyish shade, and he sighed. Hastings was sitting outside the tent on his knees with his back to the Captain, scribbling something in the dirt with a stick. The Captain decided that he was ill; he did not want to have anything whatever to do with Hastings. Instead, he went back to his tent intending to sleep some more, but when he got there, the First Sergeant was waiting for him with astonishing news. He told the Captain that somehow a message *had* gotten through on Hastings because some Corporal was up from headquarters saying he had orders to put Hastings away in the asylum. When the Captain heard this, he felt himself possessed by absolute fury, and he told the First Sergeant that he was running this company and he refused to take treatment like this from anyone. The First Sergeant said that he absolutely agreed with the Captain and he would go out to deal with the Corporal, but the Captain said that, for once *he* was going to handle the situation the way it should be. He told the First Sergeant to leave him alone, and then he went over to a clearing where the Corporal sat in a jeep and told him that Hastings had been killed a few hours ago in an abortive attack and was being buried. The Corporal said that that was a rotten shame because everyone in headquarters had heard the story and was really anxious to find out what kind of lunatic this Hastings was. The Captain said that he could tell him stories but he would not and order the Corporal to return to his unit. After the Corporal had explained that he was in an

administrative capacity and therefore not at all vulnerable to the Captain's orders, he got in the jeep and said that he would go back to his unit and report what had happened. He asked the Captain if Hastings had had any special characteristics which should be noted in a condolence letter. The Captain said that Hastings had always been kind of an individualist and forceful in his own way; also he was highly motivated, if somewhat unrealistic. The Corporal said that this would be useful and he drove away. For almost an hour, the Captain found himself unable to move from the spot, but after a while, he was able to remember the motions of walking, and he stumbled back to his tent and began a long letter to his wife. *I gave an order today in a very difficult capacity,* he began it, but he decided that this was no good and instead started, *I have become fully acclimated to the situation here at last and feel that I am at the beginning of my best possibilities: do you remember how ambitious I used to be?* After he wrote this, he found that he had absolutely nothing else to write and, thinking of his wife's breasts, put the paper away and went for a long walk. Much later, he decided that what had happened had been for the good; it was only a question now of killing Hastings, and then he could begin to take control.

The First Sergeant had nothing to do with things, anymore. He slept a twisted sleep, crawling with strange shapes, and in the morning, the First Sergeant awakened him, saying that headquarters had just sent in a communique declaring that a total-win policy was now in effect; war had been declared. When the Captain heard this, he became quite excited and began to feel better about many things; he asked the First Sergeant if he thought it meant that the company was now unleashed, and the First Sergeant said that he was positive that that was what had happened. The Captain said that this would definitely take care of Hastings; they could work him out of the way very easily now, and he added that he had studied the morale problem of troops; now he

was going to be able to put it into effect. Troops, he said, were willing to get involved in anything, but if they felt they were being used to no good purpose, they tended to get childish and stubborn. The Captain felt so good about this that he invited the First Sergeant to forget things and look at one of his wife's recent letters, but the First Sergeant said that he felt he knew the Captain's wife already and, besides, he had to make preparations for the war; he had real responsibilities. The First Sergeant explained that this would be his fifth war, but since each one was like a new beginning, he felt as if he had never been in combat before and he wanted to make some notes. The Captain said that this was fine, and then, right on the instant, he decided to make a speech to the company. He requisitioned two sheets of bond paper from the First Sergeant and sat down to draft it, but he found himself so filled with happy thoughts of Hastings' impending assassination that he was unable to keep still, and so he decided to speak extemporaneously. He knew that he could deal with the company in the right way. When he was quite sure that he was in the proper mood to make the speech, he ordered the First Sergeant to call a formation, and when the First Sergeant came back to tell him that all of the men were assembled, he walked out slowly behind the First Sergeant, knowing how good a picture he was making. He stood near a tree for shelter and smiled at all of the men, especially Hastings, but Hastings, looking at something in his hands, did not see the smile and that, the Captain decided, was Hastings' loss. It was one more indication, this way of thinking, of how well he had finally become acclimated. Everything, after all, was only a matter of time.

"You men," the Captain said, "are plenty upset because you see no purpose in this whole operation. In fact, it seems absolutely purposeless to you, a conclusion with which I am in utter sympathy. It is no fun when emptiness replaces meaning; when despair replaces motive. I

know all about this; I have shared it with you over and over.

"Today, we mount another attack and many wonder: what is the point? it's all the same; it always was. We've been back and forth so many times, what the hell's the difference, now?

"In line with this, I want to tell you something now, something that will, I am convinced, change the entire picture in your minds and hearts. *Something is different;* things have changed. We are now in a state of war with the enemy. Our ports of installation were bombed last night; in return, our president has declared that we are now in a position of total war. How about that?

"Before we have finished our mission now, ten thousand, a million men will have shared our losses, our glories, our commitments, our hopes. And yet, because these began with us, essentially we are the creators of the war.

"Are we fortunate? I do not know. Such is our responsibility. Such is our honor."

After the Captain had finished, he stood near the tree for a long while, marveling at his speech. There was no question but that it had gotten right through to the middle of the situation; it left no room for any doubt of any kind. Surely he had, just as he had promised, become fully acclimated and now, *now* there was no stopping him at all. And it took care of that Hastings; it took care of him but good. The next step for Hastings was darkness. Therefore, the Captain was enormously surprised when he saw Hastings, grinning hysterically, come toward him, a bayonet shining in his hand. It just showed you, if you didn't know it well already, that there was just no predicting anything with enlisted men. Before the Captain could move, Hastings raised his arm and threw the instrument at the Captain.

"What are you doing?" the Captain screamed. "I'm your Commanding Officer in the midst of a war!"

"I still say I'm not crazy!" Hastings screamed.

"We're in the middle of a war!" the Captain said, dying.

But Hastings, apparently quite mad now, would not listen.

The First Sergeant had never liked Hastings or the Captain. Both of them were crazy; there was no doubt about it. Hastings, a Private, told everyone in the company that the mine fields were a sham, quite safe, really, and the Captain insisted that they were ready to fire. When the company walked over the mine fields, Hastings cursed to the troops that they were a bunch of cowards, and the Captain, his stupid ass waving, fell to the end of the formation and screamed at them to keep going. The two of them were wrecking the company, making the entire situation (which had had such potential, such really nice things in it) impossible. The war *was* peculiar, there was no question about this, but there were ways to get around it and get a job done. But the two of them, Hastings and the Captain, were lousing things up. The First Sergeant found himself so furious with their business that after a while he could not even keep his communiques straight: all the headquarters messages were getting screwed up in the decode because he was too upset to do it right and no one would leave him alone. There was no sense to most of the messages; they all seemed to say the same thing anyway, and the First Sergeant knew that headquarters were a pack of morons; he had decided this three days after he had taken over his job and began getting their idiotic messages. Meanwhile, the new Captain would not leave him alone; all he wanted to talk about was Hastings. It was Hastings, the Captain said loudly to the First Sergeant, who was fouling everything up. He asked the First Sergeant if there might be any procedures to get Hastings to keep quiet, because everything that had gone wrong was all his fault. Over and over again, the Captain asked the First Sargeant to figure out a way to get rid of Hastings *without* giving him convalescent leave. All of this was

bad enough for the First Sergeant but then, on top of all of this, there was Hastings himself hanging around all the time, trying to find out things about the Captain, asking if the man had yet initialed his request. All in all, it was just ridiculous, what they were doing to him. When the First Sergeant decided to do what he did, he had every excuse in the world for it. They were a pack of lunatics. They were out of control. They deserved no mercy.

One morning, for instance, around Thanksgiving, the Captain woke the First Sergeant to say that he had figured out the entire stuation: Hastings was insane. He was investigating, said the Captain, terrible dependency in an effort to become a child again and his functioning was entirely unsound. The Captain asked the First Sergeant if he felt that this was reasonable and whether or not he thought Hastings belonged in some kind of institution. The First Sergeant, who had been up very late trying to organize some confusing communiques from headquarters in relation to the Thanksgiving supper, said that he was not sure but that he would think some about it, and if the Captain wanted him to, he would even check into Army regulations. He added that Hastings might have combat fatigue, something that he had seen in a lot of men through the course of four wars and eight limited actions; some men were simply weaker than others. The point here was that the First Sergeant was trying to be as decent to both the Captain and Hastings as any man could be, but there were limits. Later that day, Hastings found him sitting behind a tree and told him that he had figured out the whole thing: the Captain was obviously mad. He suggested that the First Sergeant help him prepare a report to headquarters listing all of the peculair actions of the Captain and asked for some clean paper to do this. Hastings added that he thought that most of the Captain's problem could be traced back to his shame over his rear end. The rear end made the Captain look feminine, said Hastings, and the Captain was reacting to this in a very normal, if

unfortunate, fashion. The First Sergeant said that he didn't know enough about modern psychiatry to give an opinion on that one way or the other. Hastings asked the First Sergeant to simply *consider* it, and the First Sergeant said that he would do that. After a while, Hastings left, saying that the First Sergeant had hurt him.

In all of this, then, it could be seen that the First Sergeant had acted entirely correctly, in entire justice. He was in a difficult position but he was doing the best he could. No claims could be made against him that he was not doing his job. But, in spite of all the times the First Sergeant repeated this to himself, he found that, finally, he was getting good and fed up with the whole thing. There were, he decided, natural limits to all circumstances and Hastings, headquarters, the Captain and the war were passing theirs; after a point simply no part of it was his responsibility, anymore.

This, the First Sergeant told the officers who knew enough to listen, was his fourth war and eighth limited action, not counting various other difficulties he had encountered during his many years in the Army. Actually, this was not entirely true, but the First Sergeant had taken to feeling that it was, which was almost better. The truth of the situation, which the First Sergeant kept to himself except for occasional letters to his wife was that he had worked in a division motor pool for fifteen years before he had been reassigned to the company, and that reassignment had been something of a fluke, hinging on the fact that the company had, before the days of the limited war, been established as a conveyance unit, and the First Sergeant had absent-mindedly been assigned as a mechanic. That things had worked out this way was probably the fault of headquarters; at least, the First Sergeant did not question them on *that* score.

Early in the career of the First Sergeant, he had accidentally shot a General while in rifle training. The General, fortunately, had only lost an ear which, he had laughingly told the First Sergeant at the court-martial,

he could spare because he never heard that much that was worth hearing, anyway. The General, however, claimed that the First Sergeant had had no right to shoot at him when he was in the process of troop-inspection, even if the shots had only been fired from excitement, as was the claim of the First Sergeant's defense. The General said that he felt the best rehabilitative action for the First Sergeant, under all the principles of modern social action, would be to be shot himself, although not in the ear. When the First Sergeant heard this, he stood up in court and said that for the first time in his life, he was ashamed that he had chosen to enlist in the Army.

When the head of the court, a Major, heard this, he asked the First Sergeant to stay calm and state, just off the record, what he wanted to do with his life. When the First Sergeant said that all he wanted to do was to make an honorable career and a First Sergeancy (at this time he had been considerably less, a Private in fact), the Major advised the General that the First Sergeant would probably have to be treated differently from the run of the mine soldier, and the General said that he found the First Sergeant's testimony very moving. It was agreed to fine the First Sergeant one month's salary every month for the next five years and send him to automobile training in the far North. The General said that he could think of some places right off the top of his head where the First Sergeant might do well, but he reminded him that he would have to remember to cut down very sharply now on all of his expenses as he would be living on somewhat of a limited budget.

The First Sergeant learned to live frugally (even now, he was still forgetting to pick up his pay when headquarters delivered it; he was always astonished) and repaired vehicles for fourteen years, but inwardly, he was furious. Because of his duties in the motor pool he lost out on several wars and limited actions, and, also, his wife (whom he had married before he enlisted) was ashamed that he had not been killed as had the hus-

bands of many of her friends. As a result of this, he and his wife eventually had an informal separation, and the First Sergeant (who *was* by then a First Sergeant) took to telling people just being sent into the motor pool that he personally found this work a great relief after fighting one war and three limited actions. They seemed to believe him, which was fine, but the First Sergeant still had the feeling that he was being deprived of the largest segment of his possibilities. He moved into a barracks with a platoon of younger troops and taught them all the war songs he knew.

In September of his next to last year in the Army, the First Sergeant fell into enormous luck. He often felt that it had all worked out something like a combat movie. A jeep for whose repair he had been responsible exploded while parked in front of a whorehouse, severely injuring a Lieutenant Colonel and his aide-de-camp who were waiting, they later testified, for the area to be invaded by civilian police. They had received advance warning and had decided to be on the premises for the protection of enlisted men. As a result of the investigation which followed, the aide-de-camp was reduced to the rank of Corporal and sent to give hygienic lectures to troops in the far lines of combat. The Lieutenant Colonel was promoted to Colonel, and the First Sergeant was sent to the stockade for six weeks. When he was released, he was given back all of his stripes and told by a civilian board of review that he was going to be sent into troop transport. The head of the board said that this would extend his experience considerably, and told him that he would be on the site of, although not actually engaged in, a limited action war. Standing in front of the six men, his hastily re-sewn stripes trembling, the First Sergeant had been unable to comprehend his stunning fortune. It seemed entirely out of control. Later, getting instructions from an officer, he found that he would take over the duties of a conveyance First Sergeant in an important action being conducted secretly on a distant coast. As soon as he could talk, the First

Sergeant asked if he could have three days convalescent leave, and the officer said that regulations would cover this; he was entitled to it because of the contributions he had made.

The First Sergeant borrowed a jeep and drove several hundred miles from post to a dark town in which his separated wife worked as a waitress. He found her sitting alone in the balcony of a movie house, watching a combat film and crying absently. At first, she wanted nothing at all to do with him, but after he told her what had happened to him, she touched him softly and said that she could not believe it had worked out. They went to a hotel together, because her landlady did not believe in her boarders being with other people, and talked for a long time; and for the first time, the First Sergeant said that he was frightened at what was happening as well as grateful. He had been away for so long that he did not know if he could trust himself. His wife said that finally, after fifteen years, he felt proud, and she told him that she knew he would do well. Later on he remembered that. But he never remembered answering her that only distress can make a man.

They went to bed together and it was almost good; they almost held together until the very end, but then everything began to come to pieces. The First Sergeant said that he would probably not be able to write her letters because he was going to an area of high security, and she said that this was perfectly all right with her as long as the allotment checks were not interrupted. When he heard this, the Sergeant began to shake with an old pain and he told her that the jeep had blown up because he had deliberately failed to replace a bad fuel connection. She told him that if this were so, he deserved anything that happened to him. He told her that nothing he had ever done had been his fault, and she said that he disgusted her.

After that, both of them got dressed, feeling terrible, and the First Sergeant drove the jeep at a grotesque speed toward the post. In the middle of the trip he found

that he could not drive for a while, and he got out and vomited, the empty road raising dust in his eyes, the lights of occasional cars pinning him helplessly against dry foliage.

When the First Sergeant came to the company, they were just at the true beginning of the limited war, and he was able to get hold of matters almost immediately. The first thing that he learned was that his predecessor had been given a transfer for reasons of emotional incompetence and had been sent back to the country as the head of a motor pool. The second thing he found out was that his job was completely non-combatant, involving him only in the communications detail. When the First Sergeant discovered that his duties involved only decoding, assortment and relay of communiques from division headquarters to the company and back again, he felt, at first, a feeling of enormous betrayal, almost as if he had been in the Army all his life to discover that there was absolutely no reason for it at all. The Captain of this company communicated with headquarters from one hundred to one hundred and fifty times a day; he tried to keep himself posted on everything including the latest procedure for morale-retention. Other officers also had messages, and in the meanwhile, enlisted personnel were constantly handing him money, begging him to send back a hello to relatives through headquarters. The First Sergeant found this repulsive but the worst of it was to trudge at the rear of formations while in combat, loaded with ten to fifteen pieces of radio equipment and carrying enormous stacks of paper which he was expected to hand to the officers at any time that they felt in need of writing. In addition, his pockets were stuffed with headquarters communiques which the Captain extracted from time to time. It was a humiliating situation; it was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. When they were not in battle, the First Sergeant was choked with cross-communiques; it became impossible for him to conceive of a life lacking them: he sweated, breathed and slept surrounded by

sheets of paper. He took to writing his wife short letters, telling her in substance that everything she had said was absolutely right. In what free time he had, he requisitioned a stopwatch and tried to figure out his discharge date in terms of minutes, seconds and fifths of seconds.

Then, at the beginning of the first summer, the First Sergeant had his second and final stroke of luck, and it looked for a long while as if everything had worked out for the best after all. He stopped writing letters to his wife almost immediately after the Captain was called back to headquarters and a new, a younger Captain was assigned to the command. This new Captain was not at all interested in communications; he told the First Sergeant the first day he was in that before he got involved in a flow of messages, he had first to become acclimated to the situation. That was perfectly all right with the First Sergeant; immediately he saw the change working through in other things; it was magical. Messages from headquarters seemed to diminish; there were days when they could be numbered in the tens, and the First Sergeant found that he had more time to himself; he started to write a short novel about his combat experiences in four wars and eight limited actions. Also, his role in combat had shifted drastically. Perhaps because of the new Captain's familiarization policy, he was permitted to carry a rifle with him, and now and then, he even took a cautious shot, being careful to point the instrument in the air, so that there would be no danger of hitting anyone on his own side. Once, quite accidentally, he hit one of the enemy's trees (they were attacking the forest that day) and destroyed a shrub; it was one of the most truly important moments of his life. Meanwhile, the new Captain said that he would contact headquarters eight times a day and that would be that.

The First Sergeant moved into one of the most wholly satisfactory periods of his life. His wife's letters stopped abruptly after she said she had been promoted to the position of hostess, and he quietly cut his allotment to her by three dollars a month; no one seemed to know

the difference. He went to bed early and found that he slept the night through, but often he was up at four o'clock because starting each day was such a pleasure. Then, just as the First Sergeant had come to the amazed conviction that he was not by any means an accursed man, Hastings came acutely to his consciousness.

Hastings, who was some kind of Private, had put in for convalescent leave months before, during the bad time of the First Sergeant's life, but the old Captain had handled the situation very well. Now, the new Captain said that he had to be acclimated to the situation, and so it was the First Sergeant's responsibility to deal with Hastings, to tell him that the Captain could not be distracted at this time. For a while, Hastings listened to this quietly and went, but suddenly, for no apparent reason, he submitted *another* request for leave. From that moment, the difficult peace of the First Sergeant was at an end. Hastings insisted that this message had to reach the Captain, and the First Sergeant told him that it would be forwarded, but the Captain refused to take it because he said that he was in an adjustment stage. So, the First Sergeant kept the request in his desk, but then Hastings began coming into the tent every day to ask what action the Captain had finally taken. The First Sergeant knew right away that Hastings was crazy because he had a wild look in his eye, and he also said that the Captain was a coward for not facing him. In addition to that, Hastings began to look up the First Sergeant at odd times of the day to say that the Captain was functioning in a very unusual way; something would have to be done. When the First Sergeant finally decided that he had had enough of this, he went to the Captain and told him what was going on and asked him if he would, at least, look at this crazy Hastings' request, but the Captain said that it would take him at least several months to be acculturated to the degree where he would be able to occupy a judgmental role; in the meantime, he could not be disturbed by strange requests. Then, the Captain leaned over his desk

and said that, just between them, he felt that Hastings was crazy: he was not functioning like an adult in a situation made for men. When he heard this, the First Sergeant laughed wildly and relayed this message to Hastings, hoping that it would satisfy him and that now the man would finally leave him alone, but Hastings said that all of this just proved his point: the Captain was insane. Hastings asked the First Sergeant if he would help him to get the Captain put away. *All* of this was going on then; the Captain saying one thing and Hastings another, both of them insane; and in addition to this, the limited war was still going on; it was going on as if it would never stop which, of course, it would not. The First Sergeant would have written his wife again if he had not completely forgotten her address and previously thrown away all of her letters.

Hastings and the Captain were on top of him all the time now, and neither of them had the faintest idea of what they were doing. Only a man who had been through four wars and eight limited actions could comprehend how serious the war effort was. Three days a week the company had a *forest* to capture; three days a week they had the cliffs to worry about, and on Mondays they had all of the responsibility of reconnoitering and planning *strategy,* and all of this devolved on the First Sergeant; nevertheless, neither of them would leave him alone. The First Sergeant had more duties than any man could handle: he supervised the officers' tents and kept up the morale of the troops; he advised the officers of the lessons of his experience, and he had to help some of the men over difficult personal problems; no one, not even a combat veteran such as himself, could handle it. He slept poorly now, threw up most of his meals, found his eyesight wavering so that he could not handle his rifle in combat, and he decided that he was, at last, falling apart under the strain. If he had not had all of his obligations, he would have given up then. They were ungrateful, the whole lot of them. Hastings, the Captain; the Captain, Hastings: they were both luna-

tics, and on top of that, there was the matter of the tents and the communications. One night, the First Sergeant had his penultimate inspiration. In an agony of wild cunning, he decided that there was only one way to handle things. And what was better, he knew that he was right. No one could have approached his level of functioning.

He got up at three o'clock in the morning and crept through the forest to the communications tent and carefully, methodically, lovingly, he tore down the equipment, so that it could not possibly transmit, and then he furiously reconstructed it so that it looked perfect again. Then, he sat up until reveille, scribbling out headquarters communiques, and he marked *DELIVERED* in ink on all of the company's messages to headquarters. After breakfast, he gave these messages to the Captain, and the Captain took them and said that they were typical headquarters crap; they were the same as ever. The Captain said then that sometimes, just occasionally, you understand, he thought that Hastings might have a point, after all. The First Sergeant permitted himself to realize that he had stumbled on to an extremely large concept; it was unique. Nothing that day bothered him at all.

The next morning, he got up early and crept through the cliffs to the communications tent and wrote out three headquarters messages advising the Captain to put his First Sergeant on the point. When the Captain read these, he looked astonished and said that this had been his idea entirely; the First Sergeant led the column that day, firing his rifle gleefully at small birds overhead. He succumbed to a feeling of enormous power and, to test it, wrote out no messages at all for the next two days, meanwhile keeping the company's messages in a *DELIVERED* status. The Captain said that this was a pleasure, the bastards should only shut up all the time like this. On the third day, the First Sergeant wrote out a message ordering that company casualties be made heavier to prove interest in the war effort; two men were

surreptitiously shot that day in combat by the Junior-Grade Lieutenants. By then, the First Sergeant had already decided that, without question, he had surpassed any of the efforts of western civilization throughout five hundred generations of modern thought.

Headquarters seemed to take no notice. Their supply trucks came as always; enlisted men looked around and cursed with the troops and then went back. They did not even ask to see the First Sergeant because he had let it be known that he was too busy to be bothered. The First Sergeant got into schedule, taking naps in the afternoon so that he could refer daily stacks of headquarters messages in the early morning. One morning, he found that he felt so exceptionally well that he repaired the equipment, transmitted Hastings' request for convalescent leave without a tremor, affixed the Captain's code countersignature, and then destroyed the radio for good. It seemed the least that he could do in return for his good luck.

This proved to be the First Sergeant's last error. A day later, a Corporal came from headquarters to see the Captain, and later the Captain came looking for the First Sergeant, his white face stricken with confusion. He asked who the hell had allowed that Hastings to sneak into the tent and thus get hold of the equipment? The First Sergeant said that he did not know anything about it, but it was perfectly plausible that this could happen; he had other duties and he had to leave the radio, sometime or other. The Captain said that this was fine because headquarters had now ordered Hastings' recall and had arranged for him to be put in a hospital. The Corporal had come up to say something about a psychiatric discharge. The First Sergeant said that he would handle this, and he started to go to the Corporal to say that Hastings had just died, but the Captain followed and said that this was not necessary because he himself had had Hastings' future decided; he would take care of things now. The Captain said that Hastings was not going to get out of any damned com-

pany of his any way at all; he would make things so hot for that lunatic now that it would not be funny for anyone at all. The Captain said that *he* was in control of the situation and there was no doubt about that whatsoever. The Sergeant left the Captain's presence and went otuside to cry for half an hour, but when he came back, he found the space empty, and he knew exactly what he was going to do. He stayed away from the Captain until nightfall and, as soon as it was safe, dictated a total war communique. In the morning, breathing heavily, he delivered it to the Captain. The Captain read it over twice and drooled. He said that this was the best thing that had ever happened to anyone in the entire unfortunate history of the Army. He said that he would go out immediately and make a speech to his troops. The First Sergeant said that he guessed that this would be all right with him; if he inspired them, it could count for something in combat.

The First Sergeant did not even try to listen to the mad Captain's idiotic speech. He only stood behind and waited for it to finish. When Hastings came over after it was done and cut the Captain's rear end harmlessly with a bayonet, the First Sergeant laughed like hell. But later, when he went to the broken equipment, wondering if he could ever set it up again, he was not so sure that it was funny. He wondered if he might not have done, instead, the most terrible thing of his entire life. Much later and under different circumstances, he recollected that he had not.

In the past several years, Harry Harrison has been too busy writing novels to do much short fiction. However, he has obviously not forgotten how to utilize a small space to its maximum potential, as adroitly demonstrated below.

I HAVE MY VIGIL

by Harry Harrison

I am a robot.

When I say that, I say everything. And I say nothing. For they built me well on Earth, silver wired, chromed steel, machine turned. They turned out a machine, I, machine, without a soul, of course, which is why I am nothing. I am a machine and I have my duties and my duty is to take care of these three men. Who are now dead.

Just because they are dead does not mean that I can now shirk my duty, no indeed. I am a very high class and expensive machine, so I may consider the absurdity of what I do even as I do it. But I do it. Like a switched-on lathe I keep turning whether there is metal in the chuck or no, or a turned-on printing press inking and slamming shut my jaws knowing not nor caring neither whether there is paper there before.

I am a robot. Cunningly crafted, turned out uniquely, one of a kind, equipped and dispatched on this, the very first star ship, to tend it and care for the heroes of mankind. This is their trip and their glory, and I am, as the human expression goes, just along for the ride. A metal servitor serving and continuing to serve. Although. They. Are. Dead.

I wil now tell myself once more what happened. Men are not designed to live in the no-space between the stars. Robots are.

Now I will set the table. I set the table. The first one to look out through the thick glass at the nothing that fills the no-space was Hardesty. I set his place at the

table. He looked out, then went to his room and killed himself. I found him too late dead with all of the blood from his large body run out through his severed wrists and onto the cabin floor.

Now I knock on Hardesty's door and open it. He lies on his bunk and does not move. He is very pale. I close his door and go to the table and turn his plate over. He will not be eating this meal.

There are two more places to be set at the table, and as my metal fingers clatter against the plates I, though a very obvious process of association, think of the advantages of having metal fingers. Larson had human fingers of flesh, and he locked them onto Neal's throat after he had looked at no-space, and he kept them there, very securely clamped they must have been, remaining so even after Neal had slipped a dinner knife, this knife in fact, between Larson's fourth and fifth rib on the left-hand side. Neal never did see no-space, not that that made any difference. He did not move even after I removed, one by one, the fingers of Larson from his throat. He is in his cabin now and dinner is ready, sir, I say, knocking, but there is no answer. I open the door and Neal is on the bunk with his eyes closed so I close the door. My electronic olefactory organs have told me that there is something very strong in the cabin.

One. Turn Neal's plate face down in its place.

Two. Knock on Larson's cabin door.

Three . . .

Four . . .

Five. Turn Larson's plate face down in its place.

I now clear off the table and I think about it. The ship functions and it has looked at no-space. I function and I have looked at no-space. The men do not function and they have looked at no-space.

Machines may travel to the stars; men may not. This is a very important thought, and I must return to Earth and tell the men there about it. Each ship-day after each meal I think this thought again and think how important it is. I have little capacity for original thought; a robot

is a machine, and perhaps this is the only original thought I will ever have. Therefore it is an important thought.

I am a very good robot with a very good brain, and perhaps my brain is better than they knew in the factory. I have had an original thought, and I was not designed for that. I was designed to serve the men on this ship and to speak to them in English, which is a very complex language even for a robot. I English in a German manner do not talk, not do I, fingers metals, eyes glasses, talk it in the style of the Latin. But I have to know about these things so that I do not do them. Robots are well made.

Watch. With fast feet and long legs I rapidly run to the control column and bash buttons with flickering fingers. I can make words rhyme though I cannot write a poem. I know there is a difference although I do not know what the difference is.

I read the readings. We have been to Alpha Centauri in this ship and we now return. I do not know anything about Alpha Centauri. When we reached Alpha Centauri I turned the ship around and started back to Earth. More important than the incredible novelty of stellar exploration is the message I must take to Earth.

Those words about incredible novelty are not my words but the words I heard once spoken by the man Larson. Robots do not say things like that.

Robots do not have souls, for what would a robot soul look like? A neatly and smoothly machined metal canister? And what would be in the can?

Robots do not have thoughts like that.

I must set the table for dinner. Plates here, forks here, spoons here, knives here.

"I've cut my finger! Damn it—it's bleeding all over the cloth. . . ."

BLEEDING?
BLEEDING!

I am a robot. I have my work to do. I set the table.

There is something red on my metal finger.

It must be ketchup from the bottle.

"I think we've located the cause of that tie-up at Thirty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue!"

The author of this good, happy story about a campus-cop-student-poet and a glak egg says that he was dropped January 7, 1930, in New York City. Has had many jobs including The Village Voice *in its founding year. He taught at the writers workshop at Syracuse University and then joined ABC-TV. His stories have appeared in many publications ranging from* Midstream *to* Playboy. *Mr. Jacobs also offers the information that he hates flying in airplanes (if God meant us to fly we would have big beaks) and writes long farewell stories before his airborne journeys. "The Egg of the Glak" was written before such a journey as a gift to mankind in case a motor fell off.*

THE EGG OF THE GLAK

by Harvey Jacobs

To the memory of Dr. David Hikhoff, Ph.D.
May he rest in peace. Unless there is better.

A spring night. The campus quiet. The air soft breath. I stood at my post, balanced on stiff legs. The fountain, a gift of '08, tinkled under moonlight. Then he came, trumpeting like a mammoth, stomping, titlting, staggering, nearly sitting, straightening, roaring from the back of his mouth, a troublemaker.

"My diphthongs. They monophthongized my diphthongs. The frogs. The frogs."

Echoes rattled the quadrangle.

I ran to grab him. It was like holding a bear. He nearly carried both of us to the ground.

"Poor kid. You poor kid" he said, waving short arms. "Another victim of the great vowel shift. The Northumbrian sellout."

He cried real tears, hundred proof, and blotted his jowels with a rep tie. Oh, this was no student drunk. This was faculty, an older man.

"Let us conjugate *stone* in a time-tarnished manner. Repeat after me. Repeat or I will beat you to a mosh. *Stan, stan, stanes, stane, stanas, stanas, stana, stanum.*"

"Easy, sir," I said.

"Up the Normans," he shrieked. "They loused my language. Mercian, Kentish, West Saxon and Northumbrian sellouts. French ticklers. Tell your children, and their children's children, unto the generations. Diphthongs have been monophthongized. Help."

"I'm trying to help," I said.

"Police."

"I am police."

"Victim," he said, whispering now. "Sad slob."

How many remember what happened a thousand years ago? If it were not for Hikhoff, I would know nothing of the vowel shift, though it altered my life and fiber. For it was this rotten shift that changed our English from growl to purr.

Look it up. Read how spit flew through the teeth of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes in the good old days. Get facts on how the French came, conquered, shoved our vowels to the left of the language, coated our tongues with velvet fur.

For Hikhoff, the shift of the vowels made history's center. *Before* was a time for the hairy man, the man who ate from the bone. *After* came silk pants, phallic apology.

"From Teutonic to moronic," Hikhoff told me. "Emasculation. Drought in the tonsil garden. No wonder so many strep throats in this town of clowns."

Sounds. Hikhoff's life was sounds. The sounds that make your insides wobble. Sounds of chalk screaming, of power saws cutting wood, of forks on glass, scrapings, buzzings, the garbage disposal chewing, jet wails, dentists drilling, pumps gurgling, drains sucking, tires screeching, ambulance sirens, giants breaking wind, booms, bangs, clangings, ripping and tearing, nails scratching silk.

Softer sounds too. Music and musical boxes, bells, chimes, bottle players on Ed Sullivan, all that, all noise, but mostly noises that make you squirm. His favorite: people sounds. Body sounds, sounds of talking, squishing, words, singing, cajoling, cursing, ordering, asking, telling, excusing, insisting. That is why the great vowel shift meant so much to him.

"What those concupiscent Gauls did to me," he said. "They shriveled half my vocal cords. They denied me my voice."

Hikhoff liked to rasp and sputter. His lungs were organ bellows for rolling R's and CH's that choked to the point of dribble. He listened to himself with much pleasure. He played himself back on a tape recorder, reading from *Beowulf* or Chaucer or the *Prose Edda*, which tells of the Wind Age and Wolf Age when the Sun swallows Earth.

"Aggchrr, don't talk from your nostrils. Nose talkers are bastards. Diaphragm. Lungs. The deepest tunnels. Use those. Form your words slowly. Shape them in your head. Let them out of the mouth like starved animals, hot smoke rings. Speak each sentence like a string of beautiful sausages. Show me a mumbler and I show you a turd. SPEAK OUT. SAY YOUR PIECE. YOU WILL NOT ONLY MAKE OUT BETTER BUT DO A SERVICE FOR THE ENTIRE HUMAN RACE."

Hikhoff. We became friends. I don't kid myself. At first he had motives, improper designs. All right, think what you think.

"A despondent, disappointed soul." "A bitter person, a cynic." "A lump of rage," "A bad influence." I have heard all that said, and worse. To me, Hikhoff was redeemer, beloved comrade. I close my eyes and there he is in full detail.

Hikhoff.

Body like a cantaloupe. Little head, big jaw. A wet mouth gated by purple lips. Heavy in the breathing. Short arms and legs. A funny machine, an engine liberated, huffing, puffing. Like the power cabs that pull

trailers and sometimes go running without their loads. The amputated heart. They move on diesel oil, Hikhoff on food. Fueling always. Always belching gas. I loved him. I miss him.

"Cousin North," he once said in a mellow, huff-puff voice when he finished panting and scratching after a chase around his coffee table. "I accept your repressive shyness. Lord, god king of fishes, you are too young to know what trouble a man's genitals can give." Then, pointing at the top of his paunch, "AND I HAVE NOT SET EYES ON MINE IN FORTY YEARS."

Ah. I knew what trouble, since I was twenty, not ten. But Hikhoff was making jolly. We had become friends when I carried him home that spring night. Now, later in the turning year, he invited me to dinner. A feast. A groaning board. While we digested, he tried to make me.

He wooed me. First, by throwing peels to the garbage disposal which he called Mr. Universe. They were swallowed, chopped to puree. Next, he wined me with Liebfraumilch. Then he chased me, the engine with legs, roaring pure-vowel shift verses about clash and calm, stimulated by, and frustrated by, my agility.

"I am sorry, sir," I said in a moment of pause. "I do not go that way."

"Alps fall on your callow head," Hikhoff screamed so storm windows rattled. But we came to an agreement. Back to normal when his pressure dropped, we talked frankly.

"Sir, Dr. Hikhoff, even if I were interested in deviations, if that's how to put it, I could just not with you, sir. You are a cathedral to me, full of stained light, symbolic content. The funny thing is that I love you, but not that way."

"Distinctions," Hikhoff said a little sadly. "If you have a change of heart some day, let me be the first to know. Wire me collect. For the meantime, we will continue to be friends. You have a good head. A good head is a rare and precious stone."

We continued to be friends. I, who had taken a tem-

porary job as campus cop to audit free courses, stayed on to become captain of the force. I kept taking courses, and would still be.

Once each week I went to see Hikhoff and we dined. He did not fail to steam a little after the mandarin oranges with Cointreau, but he never attacked me again. He was well controlled.

We talked of life and poetry. I was writing then. He read my works, sometimes translating them into Old English. He criticized. He had faith in me, encouraged me.

I wrote of life, courage, identity, time and death. These subjects delighted Hikhoff. He was a grand romantic, full of Eden, pro-Adam, pro-Eve, pro-Snake, pro-God, pro-Gabriel, anti-the whole scene. His self-image wore a cape and carried a sharp sword. He believed in battle bloody and reunion soft. To sum it up, Hikhoff had a kind of kill and kiss vision.

The important thing was to keep the winds stirred, the debris flying.

"Churn the emotions, but do not turn them to butter," he said. "Not with drugs or booze or mushrooms that give a pastel mirage. Use life, Harold. Be a life addict. Generate your own chemicals, your own trance and dance. Hikhoff The Absolute has spoken."

Our evenings were fine for me and I hope for him. I was like his son, he said so. He was better than my father, I say so. I could have gone on that way a hundred years. But the carpet was pulled, as it usually is.

One night when we were sealed by winter, I got a call. I was not sleeping when it came, but on the edge of a dream. The dream was forming in swirls of snow. The telephone bell was a noisy bug, and I fought to crush it. Finally I got up, naked and shivering in the cold room. I knew there was trouble.

The first thought was of fire. Or dormitory suicide. It was not the season for panty raids, and rape was obsolete up there.

"Hello, yes, hello?"

"Harold North? Is this he?"

"He. Yes."

"This is Miss Linker at the Shepherd of the Knowing Heart Clinic. On Kipman Place."

"Yes."

"A patient, Dr. Hikhoff, is asking for. . . ."

The night was frozen. Ice gave a glitter, a gloss like the shine on photographs. I remember smoke coming from the sewers. It fogged the street. It was pleasure to hear the car skip and start, to think of spark plugs flaming.

By the car clock it was three. I keep my clock ahead by forty-five minutes. This is a silliness, having to do with sudden endings. I have a stupid idea that if destruction should come, I would have nearly an hour to go back and make ready.

They let me go right to his room. He was critical, a mound in the white bed with side bars pulled up. A nurse leaned over him, and he moved his tongue in and out, side to side, as if she were a canapé. He was delirious, saying words in clusters, words melted together like candies left in the sun. They gave him oxygen. He took gallons, emptied tanks.

I cried.

The nurse shook her head "no." She reached a verdict. There was no hope except for the pinpoint dot of light that always flares. He had suffered a massive stroke, an eruption. Lava poured into his system and slowly filled him with black dust.

The nurse gave me two letters. They were marked FIRST and FINALLY. I put the envelopes in a pocket and stayed there by the bed. I heard a train whistle which meant five o'clock. The whistle was for Hikhoff. He opened his eyes, ripped off the oxygen mask, slammed the nurse away with his fists, sat up, saw me and said, "Touch. Touch."

I took his head in my hands and held him. The round head was a basketball with frightened eyes. "I will write

thick books," he said. Then the eyes went away. Hikhoff was dead.

The white room filled with his escaping soul, cape, sword, all. The window was open a crack, and out the soul went into cold air.

Hikhoff's body was cremated after a nice funeral. In his will he requested that his remains be scattered in campus ashtrays. They were not. Instead, they were sent to his family in a silver box.

They should have been used as fertilizer for a tree, an oak, something with a heavy head of leaves and thirsty plunging roots, a trunk for carving on, branches to hold tons of snow.

After the funeral I went into seclusion.

I wished for time to think of my friend and to shape him into a memory. He was easy to remember, not one of those who fades with the first season change. I could not only see him but hear him and feel the vibration of his ghost. I had him down pat.

When I was sure of keping the memory, I read the letter marked FIRST. It was tempting to read FINALLY first and FIRST finally because I suspected Hikhoff of throwing me a curve. But I thought no, not with death in his mind. Hikhoff would do the obvious because the corrupted obvious is purified in the face of death.

Dear Harold,

When you read this I will be dead, which seems ridiculous. Know that I look forward to meeting you again in some other world. At such time I will continue the education of your shade. If there is corporeal immortality, I will persist in your seduction.

Be that as it may. There is a favor I request of you. Naturally it is an idiotic request and very demanding. You have, of course, the option to refuse, maybe even the absolute need to refuse.

In this noble hamlet, Crap-Off-The-Hudson, there lives a lady who runs a store called Poodleville. This

lady, a combination of estrogen, the profit motive, and a green thumb for animals, has come into the possession of a fantastic find.

It is the egg of a Glak.

No such egg has been seen for years. It is quite probably the last and final Glak.

The egg was brought to her by a relative who served with a radar unit in Labrador. I saw it in her shop, when I went there with the thought of buying a parrot. Thank God, the egg was sitting near a radiator.

Harold, I believe that this egg is fertile.

I have since paid this lady to heat her egg. The hatch span of the Glak is seven years and four days. I sought information from our late Dr. Nagle, of Anthropology. He set a tentative date for the Glak birth in middle April of next year.

Harold, the Glak is officially EXTINCT; so you can imagine the importance of all this! (That is the first exclamation point I have used since Kaiser Wilhelm died.)

I do not anticipate anything happening to me before then. I never felt worse, which is a sign of excellent health. But should I be struck down by a flying manhole cover or a falling bowling ball or the creeping crud, and should you have the agonizing duty of opening and reading this letter, please do the following:

1.) Go to the Upstate Bank and Trust. You will find an account in both our names containing five thousand dollars.

2). Contact the lady at Poodleville, a Miss Moonish. Pay her $2,500 for custody of the egg, per our agreement.

3.) Take the egg, suitably wrapped, and nurse it until the ides of April. Then you must transport the egg to the one place where the Glak is known to have thrived; i.e., upper Labrador.

4.) WARNING BELLS. While Dr. Nagle, of

Anthropology, is deceased, I believe he told his son, John, of my find. I also believe, from certain twitching of Nagle's right ear, that the old man had dreams of glory, that he fantasied a lead article in American Scholar *entitled "Nagle's Glak." The driving, vicious ambition of anthropologists is well known. What then of their sons? Beware of the young Nagle, Harold. I have a premonition.*

5.) Due to this implicit Nagle threat, I urge you to act with dispatch.

Harold, ersatz son, I know this appears to be a strange request. Think carefully what you will do about an old fool's last testament. If you cannot help me, shove the whole thing.

Take my money and spend it on pleasure. Throw my letters into the garbage disposal. Sip Polly Fusee while singing "Nearer My God To Thee." Break champagne on your head and sail on. Do what you must do.

Harold, writing this and still to write FINALLY (to be opened only if by some miracle a Glak is born, and born healthy) has left me quivering. I feel as if I have swallowed a pound of lard. Thoughts of my own death fill me with sadness, nourishing sadness.

Goodbye, dear Harold. May the things that go clump in the night bless you.

Yours in affection,
David Hikhoff

I put down FIRST, repocketed FINALLY, blew out the candles and sat there in the dark.

Hikhoff died in February, a month hardly wide enough to hold him.

That February was cold as a cube. It straddled Crap-Off-The-Hudson like an abominable snowman with icy armpits and a pale, waiting face. No wonder Hikhoff chose cremation, a last burst of heat. The only reminder that the world sometimes welcomes life came from

struck matches, steam ghosts from pipes under our streets, the glow of cigarette tips. It was as if nobody smiled.

My decision to honor Hikhoff's request took a frigid week. In that week I purchased a tiny glazed Hikhoff from a student sculptor who made it in memorium. The little Hikhoff was a good likeness, orange and brown ceramic the size of a lemon. I carried it with me like a talisman. Morbid, I know, but it helped me make up my mind.

So, for a few hours, I owned five thousand dollars. There *was* an account at Upstate, and a vice-president there who expected my visit. If there was an account, there was probably an egg. And, very likely, a Nagle. Still, I was suspicious of Hikhoff, who had a great sense of humor, a capacity for the belly laugh, and the belly for the laugh.

There was also Harold North's choice.

Hikhoff himself, Hikhoff the far-seeing, dangled the golden carrot. I could use the money for play. I, who lived like a hermit, had no grandiose ideas of frolic. But each bill could translate into time. I could go to Majorca; I could write until my fingers were stubbs without a care.

Glak. Damn the Glak. Some of the finest creatures are extinct, have gained stature through oblivion, have won museum fame. Great green things with tails the size of buildings. Hairy fellows with pounds of chin and strong eyes. Flying dragons that dripped acid. Elephants with tusks that could spear dentists. Why not the Glak? Extinction is nature's way. Did this world need a Glak? Who suffered by its disappearance? Is anyone, anywhere, Glak deprived? There was no real choice. I had to do Hikhoff's post-mortem bidding. We had consumed too much together; I had taken so much for myself of every portion. Could I point my rump at his last request?

Yes, naturally I visited the library. Even before my trip to the bank I looked up the Glak. There was not much to be learned. A tall cranelike bird with a raucous

croak resembling *glak glak*. Famed for its mating dance which involved a rapid twisting of the dorsal plume in a counter-clockwise direction. Habitat the sub-arctic regions of Eastern North America. Dwindling Glak population noted in the 1850's. Classified extinct 1902.

Glak, glak. Hikhoff once said he thought maybe the vowels stayed there and we shifted. Glak, glak to tweet, tweet. Could I care less?

In the bank I looked at the five and three zeroes while patting my ceramic Hikhoff, which was stuffed in the left-hand pocket of my machinaw. When I noticed the Upstate vice-president watching my patting hand, I took the Hikhoff and placed it on the table.

"It's a Hikhoff," I said.

"A Hikhoff?"

"The man who left me this money."

"You carry it around?"

"On special occasions."

"That's a nice sentiment. It could start a trend."

I had the money placed in a checking account.

The next thing I did was to find Poodleville in the telephone book. I called and was answered by a voice which could have been a person or an unsold beast. The voice was thin and high, air deprived.

"I am Harold North. I believe a Mr. Hikhoff suggested. . . ."

"I've been expecting your call."

"Can we meet?"

"Assuredly. The sooner the better."

Poodleville caters to a genteel clientele, even for Crap-Off-The-Hudson. The shoppe (their spelling) is located in an ancient part of the city, a residential area, a nest of strong, well-built homes, each with some land, some trees, a gate. These are the houses of people with ancestors who settled that part of the land, and of those who came later and found luck smiling. The houses are impressive. Each is a fortress, guarding special privacy. Each has seen many bitter winters.

Through the large windows of these grandfather houses, I could see splendid toys like chandeliers of crystal, paintings in gold painted frames, pewter tankards, silver samovars, thick drapes, balconies with railings, curved staircases, wooden panels. Each house was an egg in itself with its own source of warmth, cracking out life now and then which ran for a car or a waiting cab.

Bits of movement, footprints not yet covered over by the new snow, smoke trails rising from chimneys animated the neighborhood in slow motion. Winter had the streets under siege. They had a cemetery quality. I could easily imagine Hikhoff waddling behind me, a spectre spy observing my movements, enjoying the tranquility of snowbound luxury.

Poodleville had been built out of the bottom floor of a brown-stone. There was hardly a suggstion of commerce, much less of the usual cluster of dogs, birds, fishes, cats, hamsters, apes and even ants. No puppies solicited behind the glass. The window was tastefully decorated with a picture of a memorable poodle champion with the arrogant snout of one who is making his mark in stud. There was also a pink leash and a stone-covered collar.

When the door opened, a bell jingled. The animals sounded off. There was a jungle smell under airwick. But even inside, the mood was subdued.

Here was my first glimpse of Elsie Moonish. She stood near the tropical fish looking at an x-ray by bluish light from the tanks. A canary sang on a shelf above her head. Three or four dogs banged their heads against bars painted in candy stripes. A myna bird slept, and near it a single monkey swung around on its perch, squeaking like a mouse.

Miss Moonish never turned. She kept looking at the negative. I assumed it was a poodle spleen or parakeet kidney that held her.

She was not what I expected from the crudsy voice, but an attractive, plumpish, fortyish lady with her hair,

black with grey rivers, in a Prince Valiant cut, a desirable lady, though her legs were on the heavy side.

I wondered if she heard me come in. She must have if she had eardrums, since the warning bell rang and the animals reacted. I waited, keeping my distance. I made no sound except for a wheeze when I breathed, since I was coming down with a cold.

One wheeze got to Miss Moonish. It was a tremendous snort that sounded like it came from Hitler's sinus. I think she was waiting for it as an excuse to register sudden surprise. Even the beasts shut up, not recognizing that mating call.

"My pancreas," she said.

"Pardon?"

"I was concerned about my pancreas. But it seems to be in fine fettle. Care for a look?"

"Not before dinner," I said.

"They say I am a hypochondriac, which is to say I fear death, which I do. I love x-rays. What a shame radioactivity is harmful."

"Always complications," I said. "I'm Harold North."

"Ah. Not the other."

"The other?"

"The Nagle person."

Her myna bird work, blinked, and said *person person person.*

"You have spoken with the Nagle person?"

"Not too long ago. Your competitor. Poor Dr. Hikhoff. I read about his demise. What was it, a cerebral artery? Beautiful man. Such a tragedy."

I noticed why Elsie Moonish spoke thinly. It was because she hardly ever inhaled. She took air in gasps and kept it for long periods. By the end of a breath her voice nearly vanished. How hard it must have been for Hikhoff to deal with her.

"All this fuss over an egg," she said. "Remarkable."

"Speaking of the egg, may I see it?"

"At these prices I would scramble it for you, Mr. North."

First Miss Moonish locked the front door of the shop, though it did not exactly seem as if the store would be swamped with customers. Then she led me back past animal accessories, foods, a barbering table covered with curly hair, to a little door. Behind the door was a staircase leading up.

Over Poodleville, on the first floor of the brownstone, the Moonish apartment had elegance, but with the feeling of leftovers. The room had high ceilings, stained glass windows, columned archways and plush furniture, all a bit frazzled. There was a rancid dignity. I was directed to a blue tubby chair with the arms of a little club fighter. I sat and waited.

She went into another room, the bedroom as it turned out, and came back with a cardboard box. It was the kind of box you get from the grocer if you ask for a carton to pack for the painters. Written in red (by lipstick) on the top it said FRAGILE. KEEP WARM. I expected more, a glass case or ebony, but there it was, an old tomato carton.

Elsie Moonish took out a pound of old newspaper, then a ball wrapped in velvet. Carefully, but not too carefully, she unwrapped the egg and there it was. Just an egg, a few inches bigger than a chicken's, dotted with violet splotches.

To make it sound as if I were in on this from the start, I said, "Uh-huh. There it is all right."

She gave me the egg and I examined it. It was warm and seemed to be in good condition. As soon as possible, I put it back in the velvet nest.

"Dr. Hikhoff sat where you are sitting," she said, "for hour after hour. He called the egg his family. He was quite involved."

"He was."

" 'There are chills in this room, drafts,' he would say. A very protective man."

"Definitely."

"Mr. North, perhaps it's time to talk business, a crass thing in face of the occasion. But life goes on."

"Business," I said. "Per Dr. Hikhoff's instructions, I have in my pocket a checkbook, and I am prepared to give you a draft for $2,500."

"Mr. North," she said, "that's sweet," fitting the egg back into its box.

"Think nothing of it."

"Mr. North, let me say that I feel like the queen of bitches, forgive the expression. But the Nagle person called this morning with an offer of $4,500, all his money in the world, and for the very same egg."

"But you promised Dr. Hikhoff. . . ."

"Mr. North, what is money to me? Time? Health? It's only that hypochondria is dreadfully costly. Doctors charge outrageous fees; it's a disgrace. Let me show you something."

She took the egg back to her bedroom and returned with a large book, an album.

"Browse this. My x-rays. Five years of x-rays and some of friends and family. There. My uterus. Fifty dollars. My coccyx. Fifteen or twenty, as I recall. Heart, lungs, the lower tract. Do you have any idea of the cost?"

Looking at her insides was embarrassing for some reason, on so short an acquaintance. If medical magazines had centerfolds, she would have done well. Her organs were neat and well cared for. After finishing a flip of the pages, I actually felt as if I had known her for years.

"Miss Moonish," I said, "I will level with you, cards on the table, ace up. Dr. Hikhoff left me with a certain amount of cash. Enough to pay you, live a little, and get the Glak back home."

"The Nagle person was so insistent," she said. "Willing to risk *all*."

"I'll match his offer," I said, "though it will mean hardship. *Plus* one dollar."

"Marvelous. I'm so relieved. It's thrilling when two grown men meet in conflict. Especially the moment, Mr. North, when their bids are equal, when they have ex-

hausted material resources. Then they are thrown back on primitive reserves. Spiritual and physical qualities. The *plus*, as you said. The *plus-plus*."

"You lost me."

"Your money, Mr. North, or Mr. Nagle's money. They add up to the same thing. So the bids erase each other. Two men yearn for my egg. Each has offered gold. Now *other factors* creep into the picture. The *plus-plus*. You know, I hesitate to give up this situation. I lead a dull life, Mr. North."

"What you said about *other factors*. What other factors?"

"The city is frozen. Everything strains under tons of snow. I will tend my shop, care for my pets, cut poodle hair, and so forth. I will eat, sleep, wait out the dull months. Despite my x-rays, I feel hollow inside at this time of year. Like an empty jug yearning for, how shall I put it, honey. I want honey, Mr. North, the honey *plus-plus*. Memory."

"Are you suggesting, Miss Moonish, to a total stranger, anything in any way directly or indirectly involving the possibility of what the students call 'body contact'?"

"You have a quick mind, Mr. North. You have a frankness. Being around nature, I, too, am a to-the-point person."

"Miss Moonish, I work as a campus cop. I write poems. I read a lot. I hardly have a social life. I am not exactly a bulldozer. In fact I am a sexual camel. I can go for miles without. My sex is my work. I sublimate. And I don't know you well enough."

"I find you charming, Mr. North."

"And then there is the Nagle person. A terrible amoral fellow from what I gather. Suppose, for the sake of discussion, you find the Nagle's *plus-plus more* charming."

Elsie Moonish stood up and did a slow turn, stretching.

"It's my Glak. I'm in the catbird seat. The Glakbird seat. The Glakegg seat. I'm absolutely enraptured by the entire chain of events."

"All right, five thousand, though now I am including my own small reserve, retirement money. Five thousand dollars."

"Are you offering an additional four hundred ninety-nine dollars *not* to make love to me?"

"Yes. Yes and no. It's nothing personal."

"It feels personal. Or is it just the price of your own dear insecurity. You don't want this little competition to be decided on the basis of your . . . ability?"

"It's not that."

"It is that."

"Maybe it is."

"Find courage."

"Something is chirping downstairs, Miss Moonish. Maybe a prowler. . . ."

"You are the prowler. Prowl."

Damn Hikhoff. What is my debt to you? First a vow. Now, if you take things seriously, my most precious possession. For a Glak?

"I like involvement," I said.

"Who doesn't? Who among us doesn't? But there is a lot to be said in months with R in them for love without possession. The most painful kind of human contact. Transients welcome. Exciting, infuriating. The ultimate act, but without the owning. It teaches a lesson, Mr. North. It renews the lesson of separation. It reminds one of the magic of flesh in winter. Fusion and non-fission. It builds immunities against the terrible desires of SPRING."

All that on one exhale, and I thought she would burst from decompression.

"I'm no philosopher," I said.

"Philosophy is in the tip of the tongue," she said, "the small of the back, behind the ears, where the legs meet the trunk, inside the thighs, behind the knees, on the mountain peaks, in the valley. The demilitarized zones."

"I fear my own rust," I said. "Lust. A Freudian slip. I'm not calm."

"Come," said Miss Moonish.

Naked, Elsie Moonish was very nice, though I had a tendency to see past her skin to the insides. We stayed together for hours fusing and non-fusing, loving without possessing, beating the winter odds and strengthening the blood against spring. Our music came from the animal's downstairs, and her bed could have been grass. We were in the country. Elsie was wet and ready again and again. I was a fountain of youth to my amazement. It had been so long.

"How long, Harold?"

"Two years."

"Who?"

"A coed doing a paper on police brutality."

"I hate her."

Then too soon, she said, "Now. I have reached the point where I want you to stay. So go."

"Once more."

"No."

"Plus-plus."

"Go."

We took a shower together. She soaped me and said she liked my body. I told her, soaping her, that the feeling was mutual. She said, while I dressed, that I should telephone tomorrow.

I went out into the cold shaking like gelatin, blowing steam. I would have gone back, but she locked the shoppe behind me.

Back home I saw that I had been broken and entered, ransacked.

The room was upside down. The only thing taken was the letter FIRST. Luckily, I had FINALLY with me. I called Elsie Moonish right away, but got only a buzz.

A Nagle who would rob is a desperate Nagle, I thought. How would he deal with the owner of the egg? I worried for Elsie. Then for myslf. He might deal very well. I never had seen the Nagle. Maybe he was a football type, a walking penis.

I sat worrying about the Nagle's secondary sexual characteristics, and would have stayed in that trance of

doubt, had it not been for my cop brain which saved me. Here I was, following the rules, waiting to hear if I won the egg, while an unleashed Nagle of no principle was running loose. What a passive idiot I was. By the time I bolted into the snow, Elsie Moonish could be inside a camp trunk on her way by American Express.

I caught a cab to Poodleville, and none too soon.

As we pulled up in front of the shoppe, I saw a man hurrying along down the street. He was carrying a large parcel, too small for a camp trunk but large enough. While I paid the driver, not before, it came to me that it was the Glak box.

That very moment a window flew open upstairs from Poodleville. I saw Elsie, wrapped in a wrap, lean out, look from side to side and shout, "Glak snatcher."

I flew after the fleeing Nagle, my shoes skimming on glossy pavement. The Nagle ran, holding the Glak box before him and would have gotten away but for fate. The old part of town is as hilly as Rome. From nowhere a fat child on a sled came swooshing down the street and caught the Nagle at his ankles. His legs opened like a scissor. The egg box soared through the air. The sledder went crashing; the Nagle collapsed in a lump.

I intercepted the box in midair. Then I fell, tail down, box up, on top of the skidding sled and went with it down the Poodleville hill. The sidewalk was frozen glass. The sled broke Olympic records. The world blurred. I caught a glimpse of Miss Moonish as I went by, then saw the branches of trees and grey sky. Down and down I went, and heard the twing twing of bullets around me.

The Nagle was firing and getting close. Fortunately, the sled jumped the sidwalk and hustled along in the gutter. There was no traffic, and clear sailing. I felt a hot flash. I was hit but not dead.

Down I went, about a thousand miles an hour, toward the railroad tracks. I heard a whistle and clang up ahead. The traffic blinker turned red. The zebra-striped

bar that stops cars came down. I headed right for the crossing, shot under the roadblock, hit the track, saw the front of the freight, a smoky Cyclops, locked my arms on the box, left the sled, turned upside down, and came down in a snowbank with the train between me and my enemy.

Forgetting pain, I grabbed my box and climbed into an empty car.

So this is it, I thought. My body will lie here and roam the United States, a mournful cargo. I bawled. There was so much work still undone. Here I was cut at the budding.

A brakeman found me in the Utica yards. I was in the General Hospital when I woke.

"Do you have medicare?"

"Ummm."

"You are here mostly for exposure and shock. But not entirely. To state it unemotionally and simply, Mr. North, you have been perfectly circumcised by a 22 calibre bullet. Are you sure this was not some kind of muffed suicide attempt?"

"Hikhoff," I raged aloud. "If the Nagle were a more accurate shot, I would have collected your ashes, reassembled you and kicked you in the ass. I have always been intact from cuticles to appendix, and now this. What trauma you have caused."

They tranquilized me.

Soon I learned that when they brought me to the hospital, they brought my egg too. It was in a hot closet near my bed. What damage the excitement might have done to the Glak I could not know.

Poor Glak, I said in a whisper. What if you are born slightly bent? Forget it. Let the world know you have endured hard knocks. All survivors should carry scars, if only in the eyes. Be of good cheer, Glak.

Hikhoff would have enjoyed the sounds of the hospital. Pain sounds, fearsome in the deep darkness. Baby sounds full of good rage and wanting. For those sounds, my companions in the night, the vowels have not shifted.

And the sounds of the loudspeaker calling Dr. this and Dr. that, and Dr. Mortimer Post when they do a dissection, and the sounds of the trays and televisions, the visitors, the wheeling carts, all these sounds would interest Hikhoff for there is the honesty of a white wall about them. Hikhoff, but not me.

Joyfully, I left the hospital an ounce or two lighter, none the worse. I carried my box with new enthusiasm. The Nagle's bullets motivated me. I had a stake in this adventure now, a small but sincere investment.

There were six weeks to endure (it was March) before the egg would pop, assuming it would pop at all, and Labrador to reach on a limited budget. And a Nagle to watch for, a fanatic Nagle who would surely pursue us. Clearly, the first order of business was to find a hideout, an obscure off-the-track place where a man and his egg would be left alone.

I searched the classifieds. Two ads caught my eye. One of them was addressed directly to it:

> H. N. KNOW YOU ARE IN UTICA. ALL FORGIVEN. CAN WE TALK? AGREEMENT CAN BE REACHED PROJECT G. RIDICULOUS TO CONTINUE HOSTILE. DANGEROUS TO WAIT.

Dangerous to wait. So the Nagle had traced the destination of the train. Smart man, and a compromiser. If there had been no shooting, no tempering with my equipment, however slight, I would have answered his P.O. box. And why not? He was his father's son, acting on correct impulses. Hikhoff was not even a blood relation.

But, with soreness when I walked, I was in no mood to negotiate.

The second ad was for a room in a nice, clean, well-heated house with a good view, kitchen privileges, housekeeping, good family on a tree-lined street near transportation and churches of all denominations. The

price was right. I called the number and, yes the room was vacant.

The house was welcoming. There was a small garden where a snowman stood and even an evergreen. I rang the doorbell, self-conscious over my package, which I held in my arms since the steps looked cold. I tried to take the attitude that this was a pregnancy and that I was blooming and entitled.

The box made no difference to Mrs. Fonkle who owned the property. Probably there was a buyers' market for rooms up there.

I told her I was a scientist, but not the kind who makes bombs. I was dependable, safe, well-mannered, a person who asked only tidbits from existence, not noisy, good-natured, involved in breeding a new kind of chicken big enough to feed multitudes. Mrs. Fonkle liked, but worried over, the idea of big chickens.

"How big?" she said, and I held out my hands three feet apart.

"Some chicken," she said, laughing herself into a red face.

The first night she invited me to dinner.

The Fonkles were a mixed grill. Mrs. Fonkle had been married once to a pencil of a man, a man who lacked pigmentation. He was dead now but left a daughter behind, a girl in her mid-twenties who was pretty, all angles, intense and full of gestures.

Mrs. Fonkle's present husband, a plumber, was a side of beef, medium well. Her daughter by him was a dark, soft affair, just nineteen, filled with inner springs that pushed out.

At dinner, there were commnets about science and the mushroom cloud and how the world was better before. The daughter of Husband One, Myrna by name, said, "People are beginning to realize that war accomplishes nothing."

"So how come everybody is fighting," Cynthia said.

"Two things can stop wars," I said. "First is discover-

ing life from another part of the sky with a big appetite for all kinds of people, regardless. Second, is the hope implicit in the fact that nations good at sex are bad at marching."

"Tell me, are you a married man?" Mrs. Fonkle said, handing me seconds.

"No. I have no family. I am married to my work."

"She's getting personal," Mr. Fonkle said.

"In a house where doors are left open," Mrs. Fonkle said, "I'm entitled to a few questions."

Mrs. Fonkle's house was truly a house where doors are left open. Even me, a paranoid now, watching for shadows of the Nagle, took to leaving my bolt unclicked.

The first week went well. You could say an intimacy grew between me and the family. I had never lived so close to people.

I spent my days writing. At night I checked the egg and took walks. My Hikhoff sat on a dresser, on top of a doily, and he too semed serene. But problems arose.

One evening, an ordinary evening, I came in from my dinner. As always, I examined the egg. It was trembling, shivering, moving, I thought *earthquake, catastrophe*. But nothing was shaking the egg. It was the egg itself moving around, rolling a little.

I put the box closer to the radiator, and the jumping slowed.

Then I did what I knew from the beginning I would have to do.

I sat on the egg.

I put it on a pillow, put the pillow on a chair, stripped to my underwear and gently sat on the egg, holding most of my weight with my arms.

The jumping, squiggling, shivering stopped completely. So there *was* a Glak in there. And it was chilly, protesting. It wanted its due, namely body heat, and who could blame it?

Look at me now, I said to my Hikhoff, a full-grown man warming eggs with his rear. Look what you did to me. Is it for this that you fed me and pissed and

moaned about our feminized century? Finally you have put me into hatching position. Hikhoff, barrage balloon, how you must be laughing.

Falling in with the folksy quality of Mrs. Fonkle's, I had left my door half open. In thin PJ's, holding a turkish towel, her hair covered with a cloth to hide curlers, her feet bear, wearing no makeup on her dear bony face, Myrna came to check my health.

"Are you OK, Harold?"

"Fine," I said. "A little overexposed. I'm sorry. I should have closed my door."

"Oh," Myrna said. She threw me her towel. I covered my kneecaps. "I could swear you made a sound, a kind of clucking."

"Chicken thoughts," I said. "I was thinking out loud."

Her entrance and my surprise must have dropped my pressure and temperature because the egg began again, jumping under me. It had a lot of energy. I had to hold tight to keep myself in the chair.

"You'r catching cold," Myrna said, coming into the room.

"No, I'm fine."

The egg gave a bump. I flew up a little and could have squooshed it then and there except for a last-second flip.

"Give me your pulse," Myrna said. I gave her.

"A hundred fifteen beats a minute?"

"Normal for me. Normal."

"Something is bothering you, Harold." Myrna sat down on my bed. "Talk to me. I'm a good listener."

"Nothing," I said. "Besides, Myrna, if your mother walks by and sees you sitting there in your sleepies, what will she think? What?"

Myrna got up with her serious face and closed the door. She came back to the bed and stretched herself, her chin propped on elbows. She made herself at home.

"You are suffering," Myrna said. "Don't deny it."

"Better you should go," I said.

Myrna was very attractive in those PJ's. They were sad cotton PJ's with no class, covered with blue flowers,

a thing little girls wear. When she moved they tightened around her breasts, small volcanos. They held her bottom nicely, too. For a slender lady she was well built. That long, lazy body was a winding road.

"Is it your stomach, Harold?" she said.

"No. Yours."

"Don't be a glib. Come sit here and talk to me."

"I can't move."

"Why?"

"Don't be alarmed. Don't shout. Myrna, I'm sitting on an egg. You might as well know. I'm sitting on a large egg."

"Harold?"

Like a fool I told her everything. Everything. Everything. The dam broke. I was amazed by my own need to confide. Always a loner, I dropped my guard with a thud. That is the danger of human contact. It breeds humanity.

When I finished the tale of the Glak, Myrna cried.

"I can't speak," she said. "In some ways, this is the most wonderful story I have heard since *Rapunzel.* Harold, dear Harold, my impulse is to cherish you, to hold you and give you back heat. I know it's wrong. I know that. I know your work is its own reward, and the thing you are doing for Dr. Hikhoff is beautiful and contained in itself. But I have the impulse to take you to me, to be naked with you, to recharge you with all the sun I stored up on Lake Winnapokie last summer. Bring the egg here. Let me give."

Am I made of aluminum? Myrna, Glak and Harold fell together and again the winter was kept outside.

Even the egg was radiant. If you have never seen a contended, happy, and secure egg, let me tell you it is a fine experience. Dear Myrna, half rib-cage, half air, generated fir like a coil. Her nerves practically left her skin. She gave like a sparkler.

Before going to her own room, Myrna promised to come regularly, on a schedule, and to help me with my

egg and my own thawing. I felt marvelous. I had a friend, a lover, a bed partner interested only in nourishing.

The next morning, I woke rested, nicely sore as after a ball game, restored and ready for anything. I sat on the side of the bed and the egg came toward me. First, it thumped, then jiggled, did a half turn, then rolled right up to my thigh.

"Look," I said, "enough is enough. Hear me, Glak, I will do my part and take good care, but this rolling stuff has got to stop. I need time for my own pursuits."

I made a nest for the egg, using the pillow again, and put it under the blanket. Then I went to wash my face, shave, and brush my teeth.

Bright as a penny, tingling with menthol, on the way back to my room, I heard what sounded like the Great Sneeze.

It was Cynthia who stood, blowing into a handkerchief, in my room, at my bed, holding my blanket, *looking at my egg.* She was wearing a quilted housecoat over her nightgown, her long hair tumbled down, her dark face darker than usual.

"Harold," she said, "we have something to talk about."

"What are you doing home?" I said.

"I have a cold."

"Where's your mother? It's drafty in here."

"Harold, why is there an egg in your bed?"

"I didn't lay it, if that's what you think."

"I don't know what to think."

"Look, Cyn, your father is a plumber, he's got a plunger. I'm in science. I have an egg. There's a perfectly logical explanation."

Hearing my voice the egg began to turn circles. That's one smart, responsive Glak, I thought, but the incident shook Cynthia, she so young, and she cried like her sister, only wetter.

"Oh, don't weep," I said. "Please."

"A man shouldn't sleep with an egg."

"There's a quote from the Old Testament. Who are you to judge me?"

"It's perverse. When ma hears about what's going on in this house. . . ."

"Cyn, why, oh why should ma or pa or any lady be involved. Cyn, older people get nervous about such things. They think right away suppose it hatches and is some kind of nutty meat-eater. Cyn, please, this whole episode demands silence. If you've ever kept your cool, keep it now."

"It's wrong for a man to sleep with a big egg."

Standing there, she manufactured commandments. It was informative to watch her, though. She breathed in heaves. Clouds practically formed over her head. Her toes nearly smoked. So totally involved, so passionate, she was different by more than chromosomes from Myrna. Plumber blood shot through her pipes. Her valves hissed. You could see needles rise on gauges and warning lights flash.

I had to tell her something. You owe it to your audience. Myrna had the whole truth. It seemed somehow disloyal to tell Cynthia the same story.

"Cyn, this egg is my responsibility. A lot of lives depend on what happens in this room. Because this egg is no ordinary egg. It is an egg found in the wreckage of a strange and unidentified crashed aircraft, a UFO."

"Harold, stop."

"Cyn, on my heart. Probably the whole thing is nothing, a hoax. Maybe there really is a big chicken in there. I may even be a control."

"Control?"

"There are 42 agents like myself in 42 rooms with 42 eggs like this. None of us knows if he has the space-egg. To throw off the competition, Cyn. Standard procedure. The point is, this egg may just be the one. The thing."

"The thing?"

"Cyn, you have got to keep this to yourself."

"A thing in our house?"

"A nice thing. A vegetarian. We know that much by

tests. Lettuce, carrots, parsley, like that. By computer calcuations, a furry, sweet kind of beast like a rabbit. A bunny. Nice."

"Beast? Why did you use the word beast?"

"Well, a furry bunny is a *beast*, Cyn. It's still a *beast*."

"I don't know what to say."

"Nothing. Go about your business."

"How come our house?"

"IBM selected. Strictly impersonal from a juggle of IBM carls with punched classified ads. Out of the way. Small city. Quiet. Unlikely discovery. IBM didn't figure on you, Cyn. I mean, it's obvious if this got out there could be panic."

"Harold, I do not believe you. And to me what matters is what I know, which is that you personally are sleeping with a lousy egg while youth flies."

"Where does youth come in? And what do you know about youth? You're too young to know beans about youth."

"Look at me. Do you see the bags under each eye? Do you know how sleepless I have been for a month because of you in this house?"

"Me?"

"Yes. And now you tell me about lettuce-eaters from the movies. I don't want to know anything, Harold. I hate you and I hate your thing."

The egg rolled again. Cynthia could not contain herself. She grabbed a dust pan and began to swing. I got my hand under the flat part just in time. She would have splattered my Glak all over the neighborhood.

We struggled and it was not all violence. We tangled as people do, and it came to pass that Cyn ended up with her back to me, my arms around her front, and she threw back her head so I drowned in perfumed black hair. She was a buttery girl, a pillow, who gave where squeezed but poped right back to shape. Now she stopped the battle and cried again. I turned her and comforted her. What could I do? Send her out yelling?

As we fell together onto the sturdy bed (it was

maple), Cynthia tried to crunch the egg with a leg this time. I thwarted her, then put the Glak on the floor where it jumped like a madman.

Love was made that morning.

"Harold," she said near noon, at which time her mother was expected from the supermarket, "I don't care who or what you are. All I care about is that I come first and not some turkey from Mars."

"OK, Cyn, my honor. And the egg business is between us."

"Don't say between us. I'll break the bastard if you ever so much as pat it in my presence."

"I didn't mean between us, I meant between-us. Hush-a-bye. Our business."

Within an hour I had swollen glands. They were heaven's gift. I would have preferred measles or mumps, but the glands would do. I needed time and Cynthia's cold, a splendid virus that made me sweat, chill and shake, gave me time.

With Myrna offering fire, with Cynthia openly hostile, competing for egg-time, and me being only one human being, I needed time, time, time.

I refused to recover. But my illness did not protect me. The sisters were stirred by helplessness. The nights were much. First Myrna would come and soon fall asleep. I pulled blankets over her. Cynthia liked the bed's far side. She blew fire in my ear. One Fonkle slept; another awoke until the weest hours. I was destroyed.

I had nothing left for the Glak. I was spent, an icicle, so cold and uncaring I could have sunk the *Titanic.* The Glak leaped in deprivation and threw covers on the floor.

"Harold," Mrs. Fonkle said to me one gray morning soon after, "something is going on."

"What?" I said weakly, coughing a lot.

"A woman with daughters is a woman with all eyes. And such daughters. I think they like you, Harold."

"Fine ladies," I said. "Cute as buttons." I put a ther-

mometer in my mouth, which was not even oral, to prevent further speech.

"And my intuition tells me, Harold, you like them. But *them* is not Myrna and *them* is not Cynthia. You follow my mind? Harold, your blanket is shaking. Are you all right?"

"Mmmm." I tried to hold down the egg with my hand.

"What is life but decisions," Mrs. Fonkle said. "A time for fun and games, a time for decisions."

I was expecting this inevitable confrontation and prepared. With the thermometer still plugged in, I dived, without warning, under the pillow. I howled. There, in readiness, was a can of Foamy. I squirted the Foamy around my whole head, mouth, face, eyes, and hair. To cancel the whoosh of the lather, I yelled like an owl. Then up I came like a sub, from the depths of the Sea of Despair. Mrs. Fonkle was torpedoed.

My wet white face, waving arms, kicking feet, jumping quilt, had a fine effect. A cargo ship by nature, hit on without time for an SOS.

After carrying her to her room and leaving her on her bed with a wet rag on her forehead, I went back to my own room. My thermometer was on the floor, its arrow touching the silver line at normal. I quick-lit a Pall Mall and heated the mercury drop. At 104.6 I was happy and left in a prominent place, wiped myself clean, got back in the bed and awaited commotion.

Should all the air raid sirens and dystrophy ads and cancer warnings we go through be wasted, a total loss? How much has society spent to keep you alert, Harold North, pumping adrenalin, listening for vampires? Use your training. Deal with challenge. I lay there waiting for my next idea.

Coma. A beautiful word, and my answer. Coma.

Whn I heard Mrs. Fonkle rise finally, I put myself into a coma. In a self-created and lovely blue funk I lay there, smiling like Mona Lisa, stroking my egg.

Naturally enough, she called the doctor.

"And the blanket was jumping during all this?"

"Like a handball. . . ."

I heard them in the hall. Mrs. Fonkle came with him to my room. I stayed in my coma while the doctor stuck pins, took blood, gave needles, checked pressure.

Later, in a miserable mood, Mrs. Fonkle stormed back alone, pulled at my blanket while I pulled back, and she said I was a cheat, a malingerer, a fraud, a leecher.

"Dr. Zipper says nothing is wrong with you. Not even athlete's foot."

I never would have given Zipper the credit. He actually found me out.

"So, Mr. North, name the game."

"Darling," I said, "darling, darling and darling." I planted a kiss on Mrs. Fonkle's thyroid. "I hope you are on the pill," I said. "I hope at least you took precautions." I looked lovingly at her while her eyes rolled, a slot machine making jackpots.

"You never did," she said.

"I didn't. *We* did."

"It never happened."

"Old speedy," I said. "When again? Tell me. Come on. Tell."

"It never happened."

"They're not kidding when they say like mama used to make," I said.

"Pig," she said. "An unconscious lady."

How I hated myself. If I could, I would lay down on spikes, I thought. Well, maybe something in her will be flattered. Maybe she will feel good that a young man was inspired to do her some mayhem. Let her think of me as a crumb, a nibble, a K ration on the road to social security.

It was Myrna who brought supper on a tray.

"Harold," she said. "I have thought you over. In your present weakened condition this egg business is too much for you. Psychologically, I mean. You have got to think of keeping for yourself, not of giving. Darling, we are all so worried. Even mama is in a state of distraction. She served daddy three portions of liver tonight. You

have got to get well. Let me take the egg. I will keep it cozy while you recuperate. Let me take it to my room, at least for the nights. Harold, please say yes."

Why not? If Myrna, who had embers to waste, said she would care for the Glak, she would care for it. This was a trustworthy lady. And my blanket would no longer bounce.

"I agree," I said. "Thank you, dear one. Thank you."

Myrna beamed. Then and there she took the box, put back the angry egg, and carried it to her bedroom. Transporting the bundle she hummed a lullabye.

"Now," she said, removing my empty tray, "use *all* your energies to heal. Save everything like a miser until you are better."

"I will save," I said, nearly crying from good feeling.

To do her duty, Myrna retired early, even eagerly. I think for the first time in her life she locked her door. When the house settled down, Myrna asleep, the Fonkles watching television, Cynthia came with dessert.

"Hello, Jello," she said.

"Hello jello to you, angel."

"Harold, I have had some second thoughts."

"At this late date?"

"Harold, that stinking egg has got to go. It's draining your strength. Government or not, I am going to bust it to pieces. I never liked it, but I lived with it. But when the time comes, that the egg hurts you and keeps you from total recovery, then it's time for a change. I want your permission to smash that egg because permission or not here I come."

"Let me think on it."

"Think fast. You know me. The first minute I catch you with your eyes closed—splat."

"I'll think fast. I must weigh personal gain against my sworn. . . ."

"I have stated my intention, Harold."

I thought fast. Not bad. Why not let Cynthia eliminate the egg, at least, *some* egg. It would remove her desperation, apprehension and combativeness. Not to mention

her curiosity if she ever discovered that the Glak was already gone.

After doing with my jello what I have always done, that is, slicing around the cup and putting the saucer over it and turning the whole thing upside down so that the jello comes out like a ruby hill, Cynthia removed the dishes.

"I am going to the movies," she said. "Have your mind made up, Harold, by the time I get back. And by the way, you eat jello in the most disgusting sensual manner. I'm dying to be with you."

I kissed her nose.

What a marvelous family. Even Mr. Fonkle was roaring with laughter downstairs, so happy with the "Beverly Hillbillies."

The TV which occupied Mr. and Mrs. Fonkle with slices of flickering life was in the living room. The living room was removed by a dining room from the kitchen.

On the balls of my feet, I went down and slipped into the control center of the house. There I opened the frige and removed three eggs. Why three? Cynthia knew the egg of the Glak was big. In fact, by then it had swelled to the size of a small football. Big eggs make big splashes.

I tiptoed upstairs walking in my own footprints. In the room I took scotch tape strips from the dresser drawers which they held paper to the wood. With what glue was left I pasted two eggs together. Praise be, there was only enough tape for a pair. I cut my pinky with a blade and speckled the pasted eggs with A-positive. There was enough left, before clotting, to dot the third too.

I waited with my egg bomb under the blanket in the Glak's former place. The third egg went under my pillow on an impulse.

The arrival of the specialist surprised me. Mr. Fonkle showed him in.

"Harold," Mr. Fonkle said, "this is Doctor Bim. Doctor Zipper called him in for consultation. It seems you are a puzzling case, a phenomenon to medicine."

Dr. Bim nodded. I replied in kind. If Zipper was sure I was faking, why this? Playing safe against malpractice, I thought, and I looked to my Hikhoff for confirmation.

"Feel well, Harold," Mr. Fonkle said. "We're in the middle of a hot drama. Excuse me."

Dr. Bim went to wash his hands, then came back and closed the door. After drying, he put on white cotton gloves.

"I never saw a doctor do that," I said.

"We all have our ways," he said. "Now to work."

Dr. Bim pounded me with hands like hammers.

"Now, close your eyes and open your mouth," he said.

I closed hard and opened wide.

"When I tell you, Harold, then look. Not before. Depress the tongue. Hooey, what a coat."

"Aghh."

"Keep the eyes closed."

"Broop."

"Now bite hard."

My mouth shut on the barrel of a gun. My eyes popped open.

"No noise," he said, and kept the gun close.

"Nagle, I presume. How did you track my spoor?"

"By checking room-for-rents in the papers on the days after you left us, Harold. By asking around. From the ZIP code on a certain letter to a certain lady who sells poodles."

"You are nobody's fool. Nobody's."

"Thank you," the Nagle said, appreciating my large heart. "It's a shame we couldn't come to a more civilized agreement. I hope, Harold, that you comprehend my motivation. Take my father, a man who spent his whole life contributing bits and pieces. Imagine, fifty years of droppings, footnotes in *American Scholar,* a few *ibid's* and some *op cit's.* Nothing to make headlines, never once. Then one day in comes your fat friend Hikoff carrying a genuine, fertile Glak egg. 'Tell me, Dr. Nagle,' he growls in that meretricious voice of his, 'what do I have

here?' Harold, at that moment, in the fading evening of my father's life, the sun rose. On the brink of shadow, my father saw blinding rays. Understand?"

"Yes. It's not hard to understand."

"Do you have any concept of what a fertile Glak egg means to an aged anthropologist?"

"A small grasp."

"Immortality. For the first time, my father begged. For what? For halfies. No more. Not fifty-one percent, just fifty. The Hikhoff-Nagle Discovery is how he put it. Hikhoff laughed at him."

"The egg was full of meaning for Dr. Hikhoff," I said.

"I swore at the funeral, Harold, that my father's memory would be based on more than just mummy swatches from the graves of second-string Egyptians. Now I fulfill my vow."

"Nagle," I said, "are you in this for your father or for your own need to up the ante on your ancestors?"

"How would you like a loose scalp?"

"Sorry. But I am vow fulfilling, too. You read the letter marked FIRST."

"And tonight I will read FINALLY."

"Impossible," I said, "that letter was lost. When I woke up in the hospital after you. . . ."

The Nagle scratched his ear. "It could be," he said. "Does it matter? What can FINALLY be except more of Hikhoff's Old English ravings. Virility of the vocal chords, which was the only place he had it."

"Have some taste," I said. "The man is among the dead."

"Let FINALLY blow along the Utica-Mohawk tracks. The egg is what matters."

"We could go partners," I said.

"Ha. You are a gutsy one, Harold. Too late for partners. Now give me the Nagle Discovery. Any hesitation, reluctance or even a bad breath and you join Hikhoff for choir practice."

He was a nice fellow, the Nagle, with a face like Don Ameche, not the killer type, but you never know.

"The egg is here under my pillow," I said.

My luck held. The Nagle had never seen the egg before. He lit up when I showed him that pink-splotched pullet, balancing it in his palm.

"Slow and easy," I said, with wild eyes.

"It's been a pleasure," he said, tucking the egg in a towel and putting it into his medical bag. "Maybe when this is over and done with, you and I can sit and play chess."

"I would like nothing. . . ."

Pong. I was hit so hard on the head I flew half off the bed. I saw ferris wheels turning at different speeds. I tumbled too, spinning like a bobbin. Then later, there was another crash. A gooshy sound, a wetness. I woke.

"Bye, bye. Poor thing," Cynthia was saying, lifting my blanket, observing the destruction.

"What, what, what?"

"Harold, it had to be this way. Even that specialist said all you needed was complete rest. Better the egg should never see light, even in the freeworld, than you should die in your prime."

Cynthia never noticed the Scotch tape in the goo. She was so self-satisfied.

The next days passed smoothly.

Myrna had my Glak. Cynthia had her pleasure unshared. The Nagle was accounted for, squatting on his chicken. Mrs. Fonkle avoided me like doom. Mr. Fonkle, served like Farouk by his wife, brought cards to my room and we played.

Out of respect for her promise and a sense of my need for quiet, Myrna came gently only to report on the Glak. It was hopping all the time now, making tiny sounds. She described the sounds as like chalk on the blackboard, and I knew how happy Hikhoff would be if he could hear, as maybe he could.

While Myrna warmed Glak, Cynthia warmed Harold. Her vision of recovery was not based on abstention.

My only discomfort came from Mrs. Fonkle, and it was

mild. Out of suspicion, she fed her daughters garlic and Ox Tails and other odiferous, glutenous foods that made their lips stick or filled them with protective cramps. I kept Tums and Clorets at bedside.

March went like the best kind of lamb. The windows unfroze. A bird sang on the telephone line. I had to move again and make plans again.

How did Chaucer say it? APPPRRRILLE WITHE HER SHOWERRRS SOUGHT THE DRAUGHT UFF MARS HATH PIERCED TO THE RUCHT. Like that. Up I came like a crocus.

Now it came time far partings and farewells. Cynthia was easy to leave, so easy to hurt. When the month turned, she met a podiatrist of good family. Her prospects improved. When we had our confrontation, she brought knitting along. In the tense air she knitted like a factory. A sweater for him.

"I am called back to D.C.," I said. "And will be punished."

"Punished, heh?"

"Forget it. Nothing painful. Chastised is more the word."

The thought of my punishment made it easier for Cynthia to say goodbye. Really, she had never been the same since the breaking of the egg. I think she thought less of me for not breaking it myself. Who can fathom a woman's heart? While we talked, she compared me to her podiatrist, and found him better. The mystique of new weather.

"No reason to prolong this suffering," I said. "I will always remember you and what we had together and how you sustained me."

Cynthia dropped a stitch, but caught it. Her reflexes had gained from our acquaintanceship.

It was harder to leave lanky Myrna.

"I know you must go," she said, "I know and I won't make scenes. Do you plan to return?"

"My life is a question mark," I said honestly. "What can I say?"

"It won't be the same without you two."

"Or for me. Ever."

"Send an announcement if it hatches. Nothing too fancy. A simple card."

Mrs. Fonkle, who had taken to charitable activities, said a swift goodbye. She was full of dignity and adorable poise. Such an ego.

The air was balmy on the day I left the Fonkle home. I had a new suitcase, the pudgy executive type, and in it my Glak had room enough. The egg was practically a bowling ball now, straining to pop.

The Fonkles stood in a family group when I entered the cab. I waved and wished them well. I was full of emotion, with watering eyes. They did so well by me and mine.

We live in a time of shortening distances, except between people. How easy it is to reach the most remote corners of the imagination. A person like myself can go from Utica, New York, to Labrador for $120.35 by bus and by plane. The facts made me swoon. Utica to Labrador. We are only hours from the place where the world ends.

To reach Labrador you go first to a travel agent. You tell him you wish to visit Labrador. He does not flinch.

"Where," he says, "Goose Bay?"

"No," you say, having studied maps and folders. "Maybe the Mealy Mountains."

"We have a special on the Mealys," he says.

"Or Lake Melville," you go on, "Fish Cove Point, White Bear, Misery Point, Mary's Harbor, Chidley on Ungave Bay, Petissikapan Lake, Nipishish, Tunungayluk or perhaps Gready. I haven't made up my mind."

"Go to Goose Bay," the agent says. "From there you can go any place."

"Can I jump off to Kangalakksiorvik Fiord?"

"In the Torngat region?" he says. "Naturally."

By intuition I had already chose Kangalakksiorvik Fiord as the place where my Glak would be born. Not that Canadian citizenship could not be gotten closer, but Kangalakksiorvik felt right.

"The scenic route," the agent said, stamping tickets. "By Greyhound from Utica to Syracuse leaves 10:50 AM, arrives Syracuse 12:05 PM. Leaves Syracuse 2:30 PM, arrives Montreal 10:20 PM. You have a bite, see a picture. At 4:00 AM, Air Canada flies out, and at 7:20 AM you are in Goose Bay for a total cost, including economy air fare, of $120.35 plus a little tax."

"Then?"

"Then in Goose Bay ask around, hire a charter, and zoom you are in Kangalakksiorvik. The Torngats are lovely this time of year."

From the agent's convenient uncle I bought $10,000 in travel insurance. My policies were divided between Myrna and Cynthia, deserving souls.

At long last, with my Hikhoff snug in a pocket and my Glak bag in my hand, I headed for the terminal. On the downhill slope of responsibility, time is sweet.

For me a bus ride is only slightly removed from sexual intercourse. Since a child, I am prone to vibrations, put to sleep, handed the same dream. In the dream I drift in a washtub on a silver pond. This pond is populated by stunning things, all color and light, who knock themselves out for my amusement. I look forward to this dream like a friend.

My bus dream began and expanded to include my Glak. Each time the bus bumped or took a hard curve, the pond produced a three-headed lizard who nuzzled my nose. His triple grin woke me. I reached to see if the egg was intact, then, assured, slept again.

The bus went smoothly, as did my transfer to Air Canada.

There was some worry about how my Glak would like flying, especially under someone else's power, but there was no problem. The egg did not jiggle, except for takeoff. Since there were empty seats, I belted the Glak be-

side me and reclined my chair. The silver pond is strictly an automotive fantasy. In planes I dream of crashing.

Here in the clouds over eastern Canada, I was allowed no repose. Behind me sat a couple who were touring the world. I had seen their luggage, a mass of labels, in the terminal. Now, on the way to Labrador, I deduced from their talk that they were running out of places. After Saskatchewan, there was nothing left.

"See there, in small print," the man said, showing a guide book. "See there, a fellow named Bjarni discovered Labrador in 986. Imagine. Bjarni the son of Herjulf. See there, he sold his boat to Leif Ericson, who later used the identical craft in his explorations."

"How do they know?"

"See there, it's in the guide. Helluland, land of stones."

"Where?"

"Fish and fur are the two major industries."

"Oh."

Labrador did not sound bad. There were trees, according to the guide, conifers, birch, poplars, spruce, lichens, moss, red azaleas, blue gentians, even white orchids. And they had chicadees, geese, ducks, lemmings, lynx, wolves, ermines, martins, otters, foxes, seals, bears, owls, red gulls, and Patagonian terns. There were some Eskimos, the ones not shot by fishermen, Algonkins, Nascapees, Englishmen and Scotch. Not bad for a bird. Activities, company, a little conflict. A nice subarctic community.

It was a foggy morning. Helluland, land of stones, fish, furs, etc., lay like a lump. Our plane began its descent. I could see no ermines or white orchids, only patches of smoke and the lights of the Goose Bay Airport. No wonder Bjarni unloaded the ship.

"Are you sure we haven't been here?" the lady said.

"See there," said the man, "it does look familiar."

Familiar it looks, like your own subconscious laid out to dry.

Goose Bay may be a fine place. I don't know. I checked my egg in the airport men's room. There was a crack in

the shell, the tiniest fissure, not the kind that swallows grandmothers in Sicilian earthquake stories, more like a hairline. But it was there. If I were a first time mother, a primagravid as they say, with a broken bag of water, I could have acted no worse.

I collared the first Lab I saw and screamed at him about renting a plane to Kangalakksiorvik.

"Matter of fact, there's a plane leaving now. Pilot is by the name of Le Granf. He currently drinks coffee in the coffee place. You will know him to see him by his enormity. Also, he has one arm."

I found Le Granf in the coffee place, and there was no missing him. In a red and black mackinaw, he looked like a science fiction checkerboard. Built in blocks, head, chest, middle, legs, he was made from squares. His one arm held a pail of coffee, black.

"Mr. Le Granf?" I said.

"Yas," he said, a Frenchman monophthongizing his diphthongs, "who are you, Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame?"

"I am Harold North," I said.

"Beeg news. Vive Quebec libre."

You basically insecure vowel shifter, I thought. You son of a bitch. It's your plane.

"I understand that you pilot a plane up to Kangalakksiorvik."

"The world's puke."

"I've got to get up there."

"Why? You have a yen to bug seals?"

"Why is my business."

"True. How come this rush on Kangalakksiorvik? I got passenger for there. OK. We fit you in for a hundred dollars."

"Done."

"I swallow this sweat, we go."

Le Granf gulped the coffee and we went. We walked to a hangar in front of which sat something which must have been an airplane.

"Meet Clarette, the old whore," said Le Granf. "My

saggy express. The snatch of the wild blue. You change your mind to go?"

"No."

"Stupid. My passenger is not here yet. Get in and we wait for him."

We climbed into Clarette's belly. There were four seats, two at the controls, two just behind.

"Clarette has a terrible cough," said Le Granf. "I worry for her tubes."

He pressed a button and the propeller turned. Puffs of smoke shot from the nose. The cough began, a hack.

"Phew. Not good."

I stopped noticing because Le Granf's other passenger arrived. It was the Nagle carrying a duffle bag. We saw each other head-on, and both of us made the sound of old doors closing.

"Acquaintances," said Le Granf. "Then we have stimulating conversation of the past."

I was sitting next to Le Granf, but when the Nagle came aboard, I did the prudent thing and shifted next to him in back. He put his duffle bag in the storage space and saw my executive suitcase.

"Are you armed?" I said.

"Don't make nasty personal jokes," said Le Granf.

"I was talking to my friend," I said.

"Ah."

"No, of course not," said the Nagle. "What are you doing here, Harold?"

"Same as you. Same as you."

"But I have the egg."

"You have a chicken."

"I get it," the Nagle said. "The goal-line stand. I admire your persistence, Harold."

"You have a chicken, Nagle."

"Sure, Harold. I have a chicken."

"Where is this chicken?" said Le Granf. "Include me in the discussion."

"Go ahead, tell him," I said.

Le Granf informed the tower that we were ready for

takeoff by yelling out the window. Then Clarette fought her bronchitis, and slowly we were moving.

"She will rise," Le Granf said. "We will have our jollies."

She rose, after a fashion, and the Nagle told Le Granf his story of the Glak. I must admit, he presented his case objectively, as he saw it, keeping all things in proportion.

"So, well, then one has a chicken and one a Glak?" said Le Granf, after I explained the complications. "Marvelous."

I began to feel oddly ill. I got violent cramps. I had flashes. My stomach swelled. In a flash of insight, the kind Hikhoff taught me, I knew I was feeling the symptoms of labor. This condition is not unusual in emotional kinds like myself, but still it is embarrassing.

"So," said Le Granf, "tell me. Which of you poppas is the real father, that I want to know. What kind of educated man would fornicate with a feathered friend?"

"Nobody fornicated with a feathered friend," I said.

"Love is love," Le Granf said. "But a bird."

"Fly the plane," I said, doubled over with pain.

Le Granf found a bottle of brandy and passed it around.

"I have heard tell many strange tales under the Northern Lights, you bet," said Le Granf, "but two men infatuated with the same pigeon, oh boy!"

"Ignore him," said the Nagle.

"Tell me," I said, "what made you pick Kangalakksiorvik?"

"The *galakk*, I suppose, which sounds like Glak."

"I never noticed that."

"And you followed me all the way up here with nothing but the chicken story, Harold? I keep expecting you to play a trump card. Are you waiting until we land to hit me on the back of the neck?"

"Follow you? Why should I follow you? What you have there in the sack is a rooster, maybe a hen, but no Glak."

"Harold," said the Nagle, "I hope I find a friend someday as loyal to me as you are to Hikhoff."

Bouncing like an elevator, Clarette flew us to the dead heart of winter, over fields of blue ice.

The Nagle and I fell into bemused silence. Under my pains, I had thoughts of Hikhoff, out of place, out of time, out of focus, tossing vowels like darts at the passing parade. Was Hikhoff himself involved in a pregnancy, kindled by food? Could it be that he felt himself with child, some kind of child? Were Hikhoff's bellows labor pains too, for an invisible offspring? The Glak. Some son. Some daughter. *Some* product, at least, of Hikhoff's perpetual pregnancy.

Le Granf sang dirty songs about caribou and snowshoe rabbits. They helped pass the journey.

"There it blows," said Le Granf. "Look down. Nothing, eh?"

Clarette lost altitude, such as there was, as Le Granf searched for a landing place. He flew us off to the left of what seemed to be a settlement, circled, dipped, banked.

The Nagle and I grabbed for our luggage. We both had red faces, flamed by the moment of truth.

"Nagle," I said, "I feel sorry for you. You will soon stand chin deep in snow and discover at the moment of triumph that you have carried a fryer to practically the North Pole."

"Really, Harold. Do you plan to hit me?"

"No violence from me," I said. "The violence is done."

Le Granf found a spot, a clearing in the woods. Clarette settled into it as if it were a four poster, a remarkable landing, one-point.

The deal with Le Granf was for him to wait.

The Nagle's egg was as ready as the Glak's. Neither of us anticipated more than a few minutes. Outside in the absolute cold, the Nagle and I wrapped scarves around our faces. We lugged our burdens toward a place near trees.

"This is it," I said.

Like duelists, we stood back to back. We bent to our

bags. Out came the Glak egg, hopping to my hands. It was hot as a muffin. More fissures lined the shell and more showed all the time. The egg was more like a web.

Le Granf stood near the plane out of decency. He could see how serious we were and hummed the wedding march.

The egg broke in my hands.

I was holding a blinking, stringy thing with stubs for wings and fat feet.

"Hi, Glak," I said.

"Hi, Glak," the Nagle said to his chicken.

You would think my warm hands and the furnace of my affection would have meaning to a Glak barely sixty seconds old. No. Already, it strained for escape, looking at me as if I were a Nazi.

I put it gently on the frozen turf. It did what it was supposed to. It waddled, fell, slipped, staggered, stopped, stretched and said *glak* in a raucous manner.

Cheep, said the Nagle's chicken, and he said, "Did you hear that?"

I paid him no attention. My Glak, *the* Glak I should say, was examining the world. It took a step toward the forest, but hesitated.

"Come here, Glak," I said to the wasteland.

Glak.

Cheep.

The Glak did not come back. It took a baby step toward the woods, then another.

I moved after it, but stopped. There, in the land of stones, I heard Elsie Moonish's dictum on love without possession, the act without the owning.

I without Glak, Glak without me. We were both our own men. Poor Glak. Already it speared looks here and there in a jerky search for its own kind. Were there any others? Would it find them? Did we do this frazzled thing a favor or the worst injustice?

"Goodbye, my Glak," the Nagle was saying. His chicken had taken a stroll, too. The Nagle began snapping pictures of it for the record. I had no use for the

record, and Hikhoff had written nothing of Polaroids.

"Glak," said my Glak, more raucous than before. And there it was, Hikhoff's croak, pre-vowel shift as they came.

The Nagle snapped away at his impostor, a yellow tuft.

Then the newborns met. The Glak and the chicken felt each other out, shrugged, shivered, took a look at Labrador and walked off together into the primeval forest.

"A Glak and a chicken," I said to the Nagle, who rolled film. "Some team. Chickens, at least, are not extinct. Glaks do not yield their drumsticks so willingly. Maybe hope blooms here in the snow."

Off went the birds. What could I say? Could I give wisdom? Could I say, "Call Friday?" Could I say, "Read *The Snow Goose* by Gallico and drop in to show gratitude on Christmas?" There was nothing I could say. With a bird, just-born is the equivalent of a human adolescent. There is a definite loss of communication.

"Come on, crazies," said Le Granf. "Clarette is oozing oil."

Polite at the end, the Nagle and I offered firsts at the door. We were subdued. Le Granf started his rubber band motor.

"Wait," I said, climbing out, running back to the nursery where two shells lay open like broken worlds.

"Moron. Come on," said Le Granf.

I put my Hikhoff on the ground, facing the trees.

At Goose Bay I said to Le Granf, "Monsieur, you are a reindeer's udder." Nothing.

I said, "Sir, you are an abortion." Puzzlement.

I said, "Pierre, your missing arm should goose the devil." Double take.

I said, "Laval, you are a lousy pilot with a greasy plane."

He hit me on the head. I hated to use Le Granf that way, but I needed the jolt. I felt better, much better, purged. It was the Nagle who picked me up.

"Nagle, what do you plan to do now?" I said. "Myself, I plan to go some place where a pineapple can grow. Someplace where the sun is the size of a dinner plate. I am going to get salt water in my mouth."

Still reeling, I thought, *who needs me most?*

E. MOONISH SYRACUSE, NEW YORK OFFER PLUS-PLUS IN SALUBRIOUS CLIMATE STOP ALL EXPENSES STOP PLENTY HONEY STOP PLEASE REPLY COLLECT STOP LOVE STOP HAROLD NORTH

After cabling, I went with the Nagle for a drink. While the drinks were being brewed, I excused myself, left for the john and read FINALLY under an open bulb.

Dear Harold,

Bless you and keep you. Also, thank you. Harold, enclosed is a check for $1000. Write poems. Also, here is my recipe for a grand roast Glak:

Take Glak, place in pan, cover with butter and slices of orange. Spice with garlic salt. Add paprika and pepper. Line pan with roasting potatoes and tender onions. Place in preheated range 450 degrees. Cook 30 minutes per pound. Serve hot. Suggest lively Gumpolskierchner '59 for a sparkle.

Best regards
David Hikhoff

"It was delicious, delicious," I yelled to Hikhoff. "Boy, you have some weird sense of humor."

Hikhoff, roller of RRR's, chamber of guts, juggler of opposites, galloping ghost, A.E.I.O.U. now sleep well.

So it was that I entered my *puerperium*, which is gynecological for the time of recovery after delivering, the time of post-partum elation. Of life after birth.

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