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SHORT NOVELS

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SCIENCE FICTION
AND EDITED BY
H. L. GOLD



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**SHORT
NOVELS**

Edited by
H. L. GOLD



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FIVE GALAXY SHORT NOVELS

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

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To
David, Sanford, Floyd and families

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TODAY'S TOMORROWS

OURS is the first era in history that can check in detail what it was predicted to be against what it really is. That, in effect, makes this a control era—we can see where the extrapolators went wrong and why, and correct the errors of method, and thus reasonably expect to be closer in our probes of the future.

Two breeds of men wrote most of early science fiction: Utopians whose vision was badly impaired by pink clouds, Pessimists rendered even more cockeyed by squinting into impenetrable gloom. Their social and economic predictions range from the laughable to the appalling. But what they saw in the way of gadgetry was remarkably right.

We, then, can hold the line on anticipations of inventions with no great difficulty; less, perhaps, because present-day writers of science fiction generally have better scientific backgrounds than their literary ancestors. Where we must close the gap is in sociological forms, motivations, and conflicts.

That sounds like a tough assignment, and it is. But the answer itself is simple: *let's not kid ourselves*. No future is all good—neither is it all bad. Aside from merely being so, that approach is giving at least the science fiction in *Galaxy* much of its freshness and vigor; the conflict between good and evil is societally much more the contest between advantage and disadvantage, and it is here that we find new problems to explore in dramatic fashion, and more and more as tomorrow becomes yesterday and other kinds of writers join the field.

For every era has its set of futures, limited only by its knowledge, and our age has more of that than any other: 90 per cent of all the scientists and other specialists who ever lived are alive and working today.

And limited, too, only by the kinds of people who speculate

on tomorrow: against the past's Utopians and Pessimists, we have every sort of highly trained professional extrapolator; they predict sales, inventories, illnesses, weather, economic and political and style trends, the direction and velocity or drag in everything from births to deaths and the waking and sleeping times between, and so wholly are they part of our civilization that it would be unthinkable—downright unworkable—without their immensely educated guesses.

How accurate are they? Very, in predicting natural forces like tides and eclipses and women's fashions. Not often in such responsive mutables as highway fatalities and capital investments, and for the funniest of reasons: the very act of extrapolation influences the outcome, as when alarmed motorists drive carefully and heartened industrialists expand operations.

So with science fiction. Because the stories in this collection have been written, we know something of the problems of interplanetary colonization, relative immortality, extra-sensory perception, rivalry between the stars, matter transmission—before they happen. *If* they ever happen? Well, sure, but conception is the first step, and they've been conceived of here.

—H. L. GOLD

FIVE GALAXY SHORT NOVELS

TANGLE HOLD

SOMEBODY was wrapping him in a sheet of ice and spice. Somebody was pulling it tight so that his toes ached and his fingers tingled. He still had fingers, and eyes too. He opened his eyes and they turned in opposite directions and couldn't focus on what they saw. He made an effort, but couldn't keep it up and had to let his eyes flutter shut again.

"Rest. You're all right." That's where he got the idea of ice and spice—from that voice.

"Mmmm," said Jadiver. He tried to raise his hand, but it wouldn't move. It was good advice—to rest; he couldn't do otherwise. "What happened?" he whispered.

"You had an accident. Remember?"

He didn't. It was his mind playing tricks, of course. It couldn't have been pleasant if his memory didn't have access to it.

"Mmmm," he evaded.

"Go to sleep. We'll talk later."

He thought he felt something shoved deep in his flesh, but he may have been wrong. In any event, the light that filtered through his closed eyelids faded away and the external world, of which there wasn't much in the first place, vanished completely.

Later, he awakened. How much later, he didn't know, but it may have been days. The oppressive languor had left him and he felt capable of movement. To prove it to himself, he turned his head. He was alone, and he thought he recognized where he was. He didn't like it.

There was an odor in the room, but this time it was the kind that lingers in all hospitals. He tried to sit up, but that was more than he could manage. He lay there a long time, looking through the heavily reinforced window; then someone came in.

"You'll live," said the voice behind him—the same voice.

"Think so?" He hadn't intended to turn around, but the spice was back and he wanted to see. It was only the fragrance she wore—there was none in her voice or demeanor. That was still ice.

When she sat down, he could see that her hair was a shade of copper and the uniform she wore a dark green. She was not a robot and therefore not a nurse or a guard. It was logical to assume she was a doctor, police variety—definitely the police.

Thadeus Jadiver sighed. "What am I in for?"

"You're not in for anything. Maybe you should be, but that's not my business," she said in a flat voice. That was the only thing about her that was flat; the rest curved nicely even under the uniform. "This is an emergency as well as a police hospital. We were close, so we took you in."

That was reassuring. Jadiver tried to smile as he lifted a curiously bandaged arm. "Thanks for this."

"I'll take only half the credit. That was a combo job."

He was going to have difficulty if she insisted on using technical slang. "What's a combo job?"

"Just what it sounds like. A combination robot-human surgeon. All hospitals use them. The robot is more precise and delicate, but it lacks the final margin of judgment that's supplied by the human. Two of us work together in critical cases."

He still couldn't remember what had happened, but it would come back in time. "I was critical?"

Her mouth was firm and her cheekbones a trifle too broad. Just the same, the total effect was pleasing, would have been more so with a little warmth stirred in. "To give you an idea, you'll notice that every square inch of your skin is now synthetic." She leaned over and took his hand, which was encased in a light spongy cocoon. Expertly, she peeled back the end and exposed the tips of his fingers.

Jadiver looked, then turned away. "Cellophane," he said. "A man can be born, live, die, and be shoveled away; begot and beget, completely untouched by human hands."

She looked blank at the mention of cellophane. Probably didn't know what it was, thought Jadiver. So few people did any more.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Your skin's transparent now, but in a few days it will be normal."

"That's nice," said Jadiver. "I suppose it would be educational, but I'd just as soon not be an anatomy model of the first layer of the human body."

She stood up and managed to work up a creditable imitation of interest. "We had to peel off the burned part, and when you were completely raw, we fitted the synthetic skin to your body. Over that we sprayed the bandage. New body cells form with this synthetic substance as the matrix. You'll gradually return to normal or better. Your new skin may be more resistant to corrosive chemicals and microbe invasions."

"Glad to hear it," said Jadiver. "Superman."

For the first time, she smiled. "Don't count on it. This stuff is too new for us to know how it reacts in all cases." She turned around at the door. "In a few days I'll take off the bandages and you can go home. Meanwhile, you know what to do if you need anything."

Jadiver lay there after she left, thinking. He hadn't asked what the accident was and she had assumed he remembered. He ought to, but he didn't. He frowned and tried to recall the last thing he had been doing.

They had removed his skin and replaced it with a synthetic substance. Why? Take it from there and work back.

He stirred uneasily. The last he remembered, he'd been in his apartment. That didn't help much; he was often there. He shook his head. He was in the apartment, preparing to leave. That meant he must have used the autobath. That was it. The picture came into focus:

He touched the door of the autobath and it swung open. He went inside. "Shave, massage, bath," he ordered.

The mechanism reached out of the wall to enfold him. He leaned back. It gripped him, not comfortably, as usual—but tightly. He squirmed, but when the grip didn't adjust, he relaxed.

The autobath rumbled familiarly and a jet of water spouted up from the floor. It was icy cold and Jadiver shivered.

"You didn't listen," he said firmly. "I asked for the bath last."

The autobath paid no attention. The top and side jets

turned on. The force was greater than he had ever experienced. It was difficult to breathe. The water got hotter rapidly, and then, seconds later, steam blew out of the nozzles.

Jadiver shouted and tried to struggle free. The autobath did not let go. Instead, it ground at his muscles with hard inflexible hands. Here and there his skin began parting from his flesh. The autobath kept on kneading him. It was when it reached for his face—Jadiver remembered very clearly—he lost consciousness.

He lay on the bed in the hospital, sweat soaking into the bandages. He could understand why he'd had a memory block—being boiled alive was frightful enough for his mind to repress.

It was not only the accident that was disturbing, but the manner in which it occurred. He knew robot machinery and the principles used in the construction of it. The autobath was one of the best—foolproof, if there was such a mechanism.

Someone had tampered with it—object: *to try to kill him.*

That was one possibility and he could face it with equanimity.

There was also another, but he didn't like to think about that.

He looked out over Venicity. From his apartment, the topography resembled that of a lunar crater. In the middle was a giant concrete plain, the rocketport. From the edges of the rocketport, the size of the buildings increased gradually; at a third of the distance from the center, they were at maximum height; thereafter, they decreased gradually until one and two story structures nibbled at the surrounding forest.

Five million people and in ten years there would undoubtedly be seven, a sizable metropolis even for Earth. That didn't mean that the population of Venus could compare with the home planet. Venus was settled differently. Newcomers started with the cities; only later did they venture out into the vast wild lands. Venus was civilized, after a fashion, but it wasn't a copy of Earth.

The screen glimmered at his back. "Thadeus Jadiver, consulting engineer?"

He turned. "That's right. Can I help you?"

The man on the screen closed one eye slowly and opened it again the same way. "This is Vicon Burlingame. I've been doing some experimenting and am now at the point where I can use some technical assistance."

"I'm not sure. I've been in the hospital until this morning. I think I need a checkup."

"I called while you were gone," said Burlingame. "I know about the hospital; however, I don't think my work will be strenuous. Perhaps you'd come over and we'll discuss it."

"I'll take the chance I can help you."

"Good." Vicon Burlingame gave him the address before fading out of the screen.

Jadiver dressed slowly. Weak, but better than he expected. Physically, his recovery was far advanced. It wasn't he who was taking a chance, of course; it was Burlingame. Jadiver had warned him and if Burlingame was willing to risk it, that was up to him.

Before he left, Jadiver checked his office. A few calls in the last week, but nothing important. It was a routine check and he gave the robot routine instructions.

A tiny thing, that office, located on the ground floor of a building fronting a principal thoroughfare. A space large enough for a client to sit down, if one should come, which wasn't often. Behind the desk was the upper half of a robot. Tiny though the office was, it was not inexpensive, and the business that passed through it was barely enough to pay the rent.

There were other advantages in maintaining it, though. As long as he had a business address, he was spared certain legal embarrassments.

Five minutes later, he was greeted by Vicon Burlingame. "Come in." Jadiver did so.

Burlingame silently studied Jadiver closely. "Maybe you're tired," he said at last. "A little sun would relax you."

"It might," agreed Jadiver. "This cloudy Venus."

"It's not so bad when you're home," said Burlingame. "But public places are bad for ultra-violet." He indicated the next room. "The lamp is in there."

Jadiver went in and began to remove his clothing. Before he finished, a little man came in, nodding silently at Jadiver. Without comment, Jadiver stood in front of the machine. While the little man methodically examined him, his clothing disappeared.

The little man looked up at the end of the intensive investigation. "You'll do," he said.

"Clear?" asked Jadiver.

"Clear as the atmosphere of the Moon. We were afraid they'd planted you while you were in the hospital, but we decided to take the chance."

For the first time since the accident, Jadiver felt relaxed. "Thanks, Cobber. I was hoping to contact someone to check it for me."

Cobber shrugged. "Who can you trust? If you go to a doctor good enough to find a gadget that small, what is he? A high-powered professional and he's got his problems. He sees something inside and smiles and says you're fine and charges you a fat fee. Even if he tells you that you've been planted, there's nothing you can do. No one's going to cut it out—not while the police can hear everything through it."

"Thanks for taking the chance."

Burlingame came in smiling confidently. "Now we can talk," he said. Behind him were three other men Jadiver had never seen.

"Where are my clothes?" Jadiver wanted to know.

"They'll be ready," promised Burlingame. "The police have got all kinds of cute tricks, only we don't fall for them. We're systematic."

They were that, decided Jadiver, and something more. They had to be to survive so long. Burlingame was good.

A gamin's face peered through the doorway and one hand thrust his clothing into the room and waved it. "Here. They didn't try to conceal anything." She sounded disappointed.

Jadiver dressed as Burlingame relayed the clothing to him. The gamin wrinkled her nose and disappeared. By the time Jadiver was completely dressed, she came back with refreshments.

They sat down at the table. "I want faces," said Burlingame, across from him—"five faces."

Jadiver looked around. There were six. "None of my business, except in a professional way, but who do I leave out?"

"Cobber. We have other plans for him."

It wasn't a good idea to pry. He had to know the human material on which he was expected to work, but it was safer not to know what they were planning.

He tapped his glass. "What kind of faces? Soft faces, hard faces, space faces? And do you want anything else?"

"Society faces," said Burlingame. "Emily wants to wear a lowcut gown. The rest of us just need faces."

"Real low," the gamin insisted, wriggling.

"Society," mused Jadiver. "I always did think it was better to rob the rich . . . like Robin Hood."

"Sure," Burlingame said.

Jadiver tilted the glass. "Especially since the poor don't have much money."

"That has something to do with it," Burlingame cheerfully agreed.

Cobber broke in. He was a little gnarled man, older than the others. "A point, Jadiver. The poor don't have much money, but there's so many more of them. You can actually be more successful robbing them. But you have to keep at it every day in the year, and then you don't call it robbery; you say you're governing them."

"Don't have that kind of stamina," said Burlingame.

"A good point, Cobber." Jadiver leaned on the table. "I don't want specific information, but how can you make robbery pay off these days?"

Burlingame looked at him astutely. "Considering it yourself?"

Jadiver shook his head. "Intellectual curiosity. I'm doing all right in my own line."

"It's a theory," said Burlingame. "You can't touch banks or financial institutions. Too many electronic safeguards, robots, and what have you. In order to get past that kind of equipment, you have to be a top-notch scientist—and one that can do better at a top-notch job."

"Now, who's got money? The rich, and they *want* to show it off wherever they go. Naturally they take precautions, too, but people are always involved and that's the weakness. You can build a machine that does one thing perfectly, but

people make mistakes—they get rattled. Teamwork can take advantage of it. A feint here, and a block there, and before anyone knows what's happening, we're through their defenses. With, of course, their money."

Jadiver looked at him, at his handsome, ruddy, respectable face. "You played football?"

Burlingame grinned. "Twenty-five years ago."

"It's changed. You wouldn't recognize it now."

"Perhaps not. But the principle is still the same, and it's the principle that pays off."

Jadiver stood up. "I'd better get started. Where do I work?"

"Here," said Burlingame. "We have the tools ready for you."

"Mind if I look at the setup?"

"Go ahead."

The gamin bounced up and took charge of Jadiver, leading him to a small workshop screened off in a corner of one of the larger rooms. The layout was authentic enough to justify the equipment—a few robot forms in the rough state, handbooks on design, several robot heads in various stages of completion, and an assortment of the specialized tools of the trade. It was standard for the tinkerer, for the would-be designer of robot bodies. Burlingame always covered himself in every detail.

Jadiver inspected it thoroughly, the gamin standing impatiently at his side.

"I'm first when you're ready," she said.

He eyed her amusedly. "What's the hurry?"

"There's more to do on me and you'll do your best work when you're not tired."

"I'll start soon. Let me see the plastic."

She opened a cabinet and there it was. Jadiver squatted and read the instructions on the containers. He shook his head in despair. Every amateur always did this.

He stood up. "You've got the worst kind," he said.

She shrugged. "They told me it was the best."

"That depends. There are two kinds, and this one does look more real than the other. In fact, for a time this actually becomes a part of your body, a pseudo-flesh. But it's quite dangerous."

"The other kind is just a cosmetic, isn't it?"

"That's right, but—"

"Then I'm not worried," she said, tossing her head. "The way I see it, it's dangerous not to use the best disguise we can get."

She might be right. At least he'd warned her, and as long as she had the facts straight, the decision was hers to make.

Jadiver peeled off his jacket and slid into a protective smock. "Ask Burlingame to come in. This is going to be delicate, you know."

The gamin grinned. "I've never been overly concerned about Vicon, and he knows I can take care of myself." She stepped behind a screen and presently came out again, nude. "Where do you want me to stand?"

"On the pedestal, under the light." He looked at her closely. He had thought she was a little girl, a tired little girl who hadn't slept much recently. It was the pert face that had fooled him, with the upturned nose, because she wasn't young. Forty, he would say, maybe more, nearly as old as Burlingame.

Her body was slight, but not much was wrong with it. Here and there were a few wrinkles, though in general her figure appeared youthful. It would require all his skill to make her as spectacular in a low-cut gown as she wanted to be. And her legs, though well shaped, were slightly bowed, a sure sign of Venusian rickets. Early settlers hadn't realized that the soil was deficient in some essential trace elements.

He would have to straighten her legs if she expected to mingle with society. It was beyond his power to change the bones, but he could add pseudo-flesh to give the same effect.

He slipped on the mask, attached the various containers, thrust his hand into the glovelike control valve, and began to work.

She winced involuntarily as the spray tingled against her body and adhered with constrictive force. He blocked out the areas he had to alter and then began to fill in and build up.

"I don't see it," said Emily. "I know you must be good. That's why Burlingame wanted you. But it seems to me this is out of your line."

He brought the spray up in a straight line along the edge

of her shin. "How good I am is a matter of opinion. Mine and the places I've worked."

"What places, for instance?"

"Mostly Earth."

"I've never been there," she said wistfully.

"You haven't missed much." He knew that, while he believed that with part of his mind, essentially he was wrong. As the spray was drying on her legs, he started filling out her breasts. "However, this isn't as much out of my line as you think. Engineers specialize, you know. Mine's industrial design. We don't usually monkey with the internal mechanism of a machine, though we're able to. Mostly we design housings for the machines, robots as a rule."

He proceeded to her face and changed the upturned nose to a straight one. "The ideal external appearance of a machine ought to establish the function of that machine, and do so with the most efficient distribution of space and material."

He stood back and eyed the total effect. She was coming along. "The human body is a good design—for a human. It doesn't belong on a robot. That, for most purposes, should be a squat container with three wheels or treads, with eye-stalks and tentacles on top. I designed one like that, but it was never built. Robots always look like beautiful girls or handsome men, and the mechanism is twice as clumsy as it should be, in order to fit in with that conception."

He squinted at the spray. "In other words, I design robot bodies and faces. Why should it be strange I can do the same with humans?"

The spray was neither a liquid nor a dustlike jet. She shivered under it. "Why don't you like robots? I don't see anything wrong with them. They're so beautiful."

He laughed. "I'll give you an idea. I got tired of the meaningless perfection of the bodies I was turning out. Why shouldn't the bodies be beautiful, considering how they're made? Anyway, I put a pimple on one model. Not on her face. Her shoulder."

She extended her hands and he took off the fine wrinkles with a sweeping motion of the spray. "What happened?"

"I had to start looking for another job. But somebody higher up began to think about what I'd done. Now, on

Earth, all robots that model clothing have some perceptible skin defects. More lifelike, they say."

"Is that why you came to Venus?"

"I'd been considering it for some time. It seemed to me that there ought to be a place for a good designer, even if I did have to work on robots." He smiled wryly. "A lot of other engineers had the same idea."

"Too much competition?"

"Sort of." He grimaced. "My first job here was designing female bodies for so-called social clubs."

"Oh, those," she said scornfully.

"It's legitimate on Venus. Anyway, I tried out that idea again. Customers didn't like it. Said they could get women with blemishes any time. When they got a robot, they wanted perfection."

"Don't blame them," Emily said practically. She looked at him with sudden suspicion. "Don't give *me* pimples."

"Not a one," he assured her. "You're flawless."

And she was—with only one item missing. He flexed his fingers in the control glove and sprayed on nipples. She was finished.

He shucked off the mask and laid aside the spray gun. "Look at yourself."

She went to the mirror and turned in front of it. She smoothed her hands across her face and smiled with pleasure. "It feels like flesh."

"It is, almost. Tomorrow you'll bleed there if you cut yourself."

She nodded. "Is that all?"

"Except for instructions, yes."

She looked at him with curious shyness and hurriedly slipped into her clothing. She hadn't minded nudity before, when she wasn't as lovely as she wanted to be. What she didn't know was that Jadiver liked her better as she had been.

Dressed, she came back to him. "What are those instructions?"

He tore off two envelopes attached to the container. He checked the spray gun to determine how much had been used.

"Pseudo-flesh is highly poisonous," he said, handing her

the envelopes. "The tablets in the white package neutralize the toxic effects. Take one every eight hours. And don't forget to take it, unless you want to end up in convulsions on the floor."

"I'll remember. When do I begin?"

"In three hours. And now for some advice I know you don't want. You can keep yourself as you are for two months. But you'll be healthier if you get rid of the pseudo-flesh as soon as you can."

She looked longingly at the face in the mirror. "How do I do that?"

"When you're ready, take the tablets in the green package, one every hour until the pseudo-flesh is absorbed. After it's gone, take three more at the same interval. The total time should be about thirteen hours." She was not paying attention. He eased between her and the mirror. "Get a complete checkup before you try this again. It takes years off your life."

"I know that. How many?"

"I can't say exactly. It's a body-pseudo-flesh weight ratio, plus some other factors that no one knows anything about. I'd estimate that you'll lose about three years for every two weeks you keep it."

"It's worth it," she said, gazing again into the mirror. She turned away in indecision. "I've always known Burlingame was mine, even if I wasn't pretty. Now I'm not so sure, after this."

It wasn't exactly Burlingame she was concerned with, thought Jadiver. For a while she was going to be beautiful beyond her expectations. The irony was that almost any robot outshone her temporary beauty. She was jealous of machines that had no awareness of how they looked.

Jadiver straightened up. He hadn't fully recovered from his accident and he was tired. And the artificial skin, no matter what they said, hadn't been completely integrated to his body. It itched.

"Send the rest of them in, one at a time," he said as she went out.

It wasn't going to take long, for which he was grateful. Now that he knew a spying device hadn't been surgieried

into him, there were certain aspects of the accident that demanded investigation.

Jadiver limped into the apartment. The chair unfolded and came to meet him as he entered. He relaxed in the depths of it and called out for food. Soon he had eaten, and shortly after that he dozed.

When he awakened, refreshed, he began the thinking he'd put off until now. The fee from Burlingame was welcome. It was dangerous business, so Jadiver had charged accordingly. Now his economic problem was solved for about a month.

In the hospital he had been sure of a motive for the accident. It had seemed simple enough: the police had planted a spying device in him. However, since he had been examined thoroughly at Burlingame's and nothing had been found, that theory broke down.

There was still another possibility—someone had tried to kill him and had failed. If so, that put the police in the clear and he would have to look elsewhere. He might as well start there.

He walked over to the autobath and began inspecting it. It wasn't the one he'd been injured in. That had been removed and replaced by the management. It would have helped if he had been able to go over the original one.

The new autobath was much like the old, a small unit that fitted decoratively into the scheme of the room, not much taller than an upright man, or longer than a man lying down. The mechanism itself, and there was plenty, was effectively sealed. Short of an atomic torch, there wasn't any way to get into it.

Jadiver pried and poked, but learned nothing. In response to the human voice, it automatically provided all the services necessary to human cleanliness, but there was no direct way to check on the involved mechanism.

He finally called the firm that made it. The usual beautiful robot answered: "Living Rooms, Incorporated. Can I help you?"

"Information," he said. "Autobath unit."

"Sales? New or replacement?"

"Service. I want to see about repairs."

"We have no repair department. Nothing ever wears out."

"Perhaps not, but it becomes defective and has to be replaced."

"Defective parts are a result of wear. Since nothing wears out, no repair is necessary. Occasionally an autobath is damaged, but then it doesn't work at all, even if the damage is slight. It has to be replaced."

That was what he thought, but it was better to be sure. "This is hypothetical," he said. "Suppose there was an accident in an autobath. Is there an alarm system which would indicate that something was wrong?"

The robot was smooth and positive. "Your question is basically misleading, according to our statistics. In eight hundred and forty-one million plus installations, on all the inhabited planets of the Solar System, there has never been one accident.

"The autobath is run by a small atomic motor and is not connected in any way to an outside power source. There are plumbing connections, but these are not suitable for the transmission of a signal. To answer your question specifically: There is no alarm system of any kind, local or general, nor is there any provision for someone else to attach one."

"Thanks," said Jadiver, and cut the screen.

He was nearly certain now. One check remained.

He flipped on a switch and walked out of the room to the hall and stood there listening. He could hear nothing. He came closer to the door and there was still no sound. He pressed his ear against the juncture of the door and jamb. Not the slightest noise.

He winced when he opened the door. The music he had switched on was deafening. He hurried inside and turned it off. He had known his apartment was soundproofed. Just how good that soundproofing was, he hadn't tested until now.

The so-called accident had happened in the autobath. The unit couldn't signal that anything was wrong. No one passing in the hall could hear his yells.

The evidence indicated that no accident could happen in the autobath—yet it had.

Logically, he should have died in that accident that couldn't happen—yet he hadn't.

What did they want? And was it the police? In the hospital he had been sure—certain, too, of what they were attempting. Now the facts wouldn't fit.

Tiredness came back, reinforced by doubt. His skin itched—probably from nervous tension. He finally fell into an uneasy sleep with the help of a sedative.

In the morning, the itch was still there. He looked curiously at his skin; it appeared normal. It was definitely not transparent, hadn't been even in the hospital when the bandages were removed. He'd had a glimpse of it in the original transparent stage only once, when the doctor had exposed the tips of his fingers.

Briefly he wondered about it. Did it really itch that bad, or was it an unconscious excuse to see the doctor? She was a sullen, indifferent creature, but without doubt worth seeing again. He didn't know her name, but he could find out easily enough.

As if in answer to the silent question, his whole body twitched violently. He raked his fingers across his forearm and the nails broke off. She was at least partly right in her predictions; his skin was considerably tougher than it had been, though nothing appeared different.

He didn't like communicating with the police, but he had little choice. He flipped on the screen and made a few inquiries.

The name he wanted was Doctor Doumya Filone. She was off duty at present. However, if it was an emergency—? His skin crawled and he decided it was just that and identified himself. There were a number of persons with whom he had contacts who wouldn't approve his doing this, but they didn't have to live in his skin.

He dialed her quickly. He couldn't place the number, but figured it was probably across town, in one of the newer districts. He didn't fully remember what she was like until she appeared on the screen. With that face to put on a robot, he might make a fortune. That is, if he could capture the expression as well as the features.

"How's the patient?" she asked. Behind her briskness he thought he could detect a flicker of concern.

"You can take back that skin you gave me," he said. "It itches."

She frowned. "I told you it was very new. We aren't able to anticipate all the reactions." She paused. "However, it shouldn't itch. By now it ought to be well integrated with your body and new cell growth should be occurring with the synthetic substance as the matrix."

"Thanks," he said dryly. "That doesn't explain how I feel."

Unperturbed, she looked down at a desk he could imagine, but could not see. She got up and walked out of the field of vision. She was gone for quite some time.

A disturbing thought formed in his mind. Was she calling elsewhere for instructions? There was no reason why she should, yet the thought persisted.

She came back. "Get a detergent. What kind doesn't matter. Put it in the autobath and take a hot bath, plenty of lather. Soak in it for at least fifteen minutes."

Her prescription was primitive in the extreme. Did she really expect it to be effective, or did she have something else in mind?

"Do you think I'm going to trust myself to that machine?" he said. "I've got myself a little enamel basin. Had to steal it out of a museum."

Nothing was outwardly changed, but she seemed slightly sympathetic. "I can understand how you feel, but you'll have to get over it or go pioneering in the wild lands. As long as you're in a city, you can't rent, buy or build accommodations that have no autobath. Besides, I've been assured that the odds are against that happening again."

That was an understatement, if his information was correct. Actually, he had wanted her reaction, but it didn't tell him a thing.

"Feel better already," he said.

She nodded. "Suggestion at work. Take your bath now and call me tomorrow if it doesn't work. Sooner, if you need to." She cut their connection before he could answer.

In addition to physical relief, he had hoped that she would let slip some information. She hadn't done so. Of course, she might not know anything more than the purely medical aspects of the police plan. If it was the police.

He left the screen and checked the autobath for supplies. Satisfactory for the present. He removed his clothing, stepped inside, and followed her instructions. A tub rose

out of the floor, filled with water, and the mechanism immersed him in it. Thick soapy suds billowed up and warm water laved his skin. The rubbery hands of the autobath were soft and massaged him gently and expertly.

He tried to relax. So far, he had suffered no irreparable harm. He tried to avoid the memory of his accident, but that was impossible. The one comfort was that his death was not the objective. He corrected himself—not the *immediate* objective.

Anyway, he'd been rescued and placed under good medical care. How the rescue had been effected was unknown, unless it had been included in the plan from the beginning. If so, he could assume that the autobath had been tampered with and fixed with a signal that would indicate when he was unconscious.

"Fifteen minutes and ten seconds," said the autobath. "Do you wish to remain longer?"

"That'll do," he said, "The rinse, please."

He lay back and curled up his legs, stretching his arms while clear water flowed soothingly over him. In spite of his skepticism, this primitive prescription of Doumya Filone seemed to work. The itch had stopped completely, although his skin was now mottled. No scars; the hospital and Doumya Filone had done a good job.

He scrutinized his skin carefully. The marks were not actually on his skin; they were beneath it. So faint as to be almost invisible, it was nevertheless a disturbing manifestation. The marks gradually became more distinct. It looked like a shadowy web thrown over and pressed deep into his body.

The autobath lifted him and he stood in front of the mirror. There was no mistake—a network spread over his body, arms, legs, face too; perhaps on his head as well, though he couldn't see that. His skin was not transparent—it was translucent for a certain depth.

Disfigurement didn't concern him. Even if the condition persisted, it wasn't noticeable enough to constitute a handicap. It was not the superficial nervous system showing through, nor the capillary blood vessels. The web effect was strikingly regular, almost mathematical in appearance.

As he looked, the translucence faded and his skin switched

to normal, the marks disappearing. That was the word, switched. He ought to be thankful for that, he supposed. Somehow he wasn't.

He was out of the autobath and half dressed before the realization came to him. He knew what the network was, the patterned marks beneath his skin.

A circuit.

A printed circuit, or, since it was imposed on flesh, possibly tattooed.

A circuit. What did anyone use a circuit for? To compute, to gather data, to broadcast, to control. How much of that applied to him, to the body it was concealed in? The first he could eliminate. Not to compute. As for the rest, he was not certain. It seemed possible that everything could be included in the function of the network beneath his skin. He hadn't been controlled up to now, but that didn't mean control wasn't there, quiescent, waiting for the proper time. However, it didn't seem likely. Human mentality was strong, and a reasonably intact mind was difficult to take over.

What else? To gather data and broadcast it. Of that he could be almost positive. The data came from his nervous system. He suspected where it was broadcast to—back to the police.

How the circuit on his body gathered data was unknown. The markings appeared to parallel his central nervous system. It seemed reasonable that it operated by induction.

That meant it involved chiefly tactile sensations, unless, of course, there were other factors he didn't know about. He felt his forehead carefully, his temples, and his skull around his ears. Nothing, but that didn't mean that infinitesimal holes hadn't been drilled through his skull and taps run to the optic and auditory nerves.

It could be done and he wouldn't know about it, couldn't feel it. The broadcasting circuits could then be spread over his head, or, for that matter, over any part of his body.

If his suppositions were correct, then he was a living, walking broadcasting station. Everything he felt, saw or heard was relayed to some central mechanism which could interpret the signals.

The police.

Cobber had been looking for a spy mechanism, a mechani-

cal device in Jadiver's body. He hadn't found it, but it was there, almost impossible to locate. A surgeon might find it by performing an autopsy, but even then he would have to know what to look for.

How Jadiver had been able to find it was a pure puzzle. Obviously, the police hadn't been as thorough as they had meant to be. Their mechanism had somehow gone awry at precisely the time Jadiver was most conscious of his skin. Without the itch, he would never have noticed it.

At least one thing was clear now—the purpose. He'd been boiled into unconsciousness, his skin removed, the circuit put in place, and then the synthetic substance carefully fitted over his body.

His tension increased, for he knew now that he had betrayed Burlingame without meaning to—but it was betrayal nonetheless. It wasn't only a question of professional ethics; it was how long he would remain alive. Burlingame's survivors, if there were any, would have an excellent idea of who was responsible.

This thing went with him wherever he went. Did it also sleep when he did? That wasn't important, really.

He had to try to warn Burlingame.

Even these thoughts might be a mistake. The police might know what he was thinking. This was one way to determine whether there was such a thing as mechanically induced telepathy, but he couldn't work up much enthusiasm for the experiment.

His own problem was essentially the same as if a mechanical spying device had been planted in him—with one difference. A mechanical part was a foreign object and could be cut out by any competent surgeon willing to risk police retaliation. But only those who had installed this complicated circuit would know how to take it out.

Burlingame didn't answer. It was probably useless trying to trace him—he very likely had arranged to drop out of sight. He was good at that. The police hadn't caught up with him in twenty years.

There was Cobber. He'd be elsewhere, setting up a rendezvous to which Burlingame and the rest could return and hide while their faces and figures were absorbed into their normal bodies. Cobber would be even tougher to locate.

The only place Burlingame could be found with any degree of certainty, Jadiver reasoned, would be at the scene of the robbery. Jadiver went to the screen and spent an intensive half hour in front of it. At the end of that time, he had narrowed it down to two society events, one of which would occur in a few hours. He made a decision to cover it and warn them, if he could. After that, it was up to Burlingame.

Jadiver rubbed his chin; the stubble had to come off. He went to the autobath, but it wouldn't open. A figure in bas-relief appeared on the door. The surface had been smooth an instant before.

"Sorry," said the voice of the lifelike, semi-nude girl, "the autobath is out of certain supplies. It won't function properly until these are replaced."

"Let's have the list," growled Jadiver. He was jumpy.

The bas-relief figure extended a hand with a slip in it. "If I may suggest, these can be placed on perpetual order to avoid future inconvenience."

What the future held was unknown. It wasn't likely to include a comfortable existence in a well-furnished apartment. "I'll think about it," he grunted.

"If there's any other way I can help you—"

"There isn't," said Jadiver.

The door shivered and the figure snapped back into the memory plastic from which it was made. The surface was smooth again.

He went to the screen and punched a code. The counter display flashed on and then was replaced by a handsome neuter face. That face studied him, ascertained his maximum susceptibility, and promptly faded.

The next face was that of a robot harem girl. Sex sells, that was always the axiom. "Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked huskily.

"Yes," said Jadiver. "You can get off the screen and let me see some merchandise."

"We're not allowed to do that."

Jadiver grumbled in defeat. "I want something for my whisk—"

"Just the thing," she said enthusiastically, reaching out of his field of vision. The hand came back with a package.

"Tear off a capsule, crush it, and apply to your face. It removes whiskers permanently for two days, and leaves your face as soft and smooth as Martian down."

Jadiver shuddered. "I'd rather be a man than a bird. Do you have anything that leaves a face feeling like skin?"

The robot harem girl stabbed out frantically, but nothing came to hand. She turned around and went off to search. Jadiver sighed with relief and started to scan the shelves. The robot returned before he could make a selection.

"We have nothing like that," she said, crestfallen. "Asteroid alabaster or hydroponic grapes and several other things, but no whiskoff that will leave your face feeling like skin."

"Then order something that will," said Jadiver. "Meanwhile I'll settle for a face of hydroponic grapes. Two weeks' supply will be enough."

The robot complied eagerly. "Anything else? Shampoo?"

Jadiver looked at the list and nodded.

"No need to open the bottle," she rushed on. "Just place in the autobath dispenser and let the machine do the rest. The bottle will dissolve, adding to the secret ingredients. Foams in micro-seconds as proven by actual test, and when you're through, only an expert can tell your hair from mink."

"Mink?" he repeated. "Don't think I'd like it. What about raccoon? I've always admired the legendary Daniel Boone, alone in the terrestrial wilderness with a single-shot rifle. Sure, make it raccoon."

"I know we have none of that." The clerk was positive.

"Then order it," he snapped. "You don't have to furnish the rifle, though."

She seemed confused. "There is a ten per cent extra charge for non-standard merchandise."

"All right. Just don't stand there arguing."

When the clerk left the screen to place the order, Jadiver hastily selected what he wanted. He validated the purchases and snapped off the screen. The merchandise arrived in a few minutes.

He loaded it into the autobath. This time the door opened and the bas-relief figure didn't appear on it. Within a half hour he was ready to leave.

The door was not a door. It was a mirror, three-dimensional. The difference to the eye was slight, but since he

knew what to expect, it was not difficult to detect. It was a legitimate piece of staging, but it cost plenty to maintain the illusion. A society event, he supposed, called for such precautions. There must be more inside.

He ignored the mirror and pressed a blank section of the wall directly opposite. The wall faded and a robot in an impressive black-and-white livery stared at him with the proper insolence.

"Your invitation, sir."

"What?" he said tipsily.

"Your invitation, sir." The voice was louder and the insolence increased. If he asked again, the robot would very likely shove him out and close the door. Delicately adjusted and unhumanly strong, it was a bit too invariable in the behavior department to be consistently efficient.

His knowledge of robots was more than fair. In a few seconds he sized up the model facing him. A thin slip fluttered from his hand to the floor. The robot bent over to pick it up. At that instant Jadiver thrust a long, thin, double-tined fork deep into the back of the robot's neck, probing for the right place. He found it. Time became static for the robot; it remained bent over and could not move.

Jadiver rifled the pockets, removed all the invitations, glanced at them, found one that would do, and thrust the rest back. Shadows of figures passed across the field behind the robot. Could they see what Jadiver was doing? Probably not; privacy was too highly regarded. Nevertheless, some people were coming down the corridor and *they* could see when and if they got close. Stepping back, he took away the double-tined fork and the robot straightened up.

"You dropped something, sir," said the robot, handing him the slip from the floor.

"It was nothing," said Jadiver, taking it. That was the best description of what he had dropped. He extended the invitation he had just filched.

The robot grasped the invitation and seemed unable to focus. It tried to examine the markings invisible to human eyes. It passed a trembling hand across a troubled forehead.

"Didn't you come in half an hour ago?" it asked in bewilderment.

Someone had—the person to whom the invitation had been issued. The robot, of course, had remembered.

“Nonsense,” said Jadiver sharply. “Do you feel right? Are you sure of your equilibrium?”

If it was sure, he had miscalculated badly. Robots were so much more or less than humans. It should be possible to design a perfect robot, one that would realize all the potentialities of a mechanical personality. It had never been done; anthropomorphic conceptions had always interfered.

“Must be mistaken,” mumbled the robot, and swayed. It would collapse in twenty minutes. The robot pressed a button and the field behind him flickered off. Jadiver passed through it and the field fell back in place.

Inside, he looked around. The usual swank, or maybe more so. Impressive, if he cared to be impressed by it. At the moment he didn't. He had to find Burlingame or Emily. He had created the faces of the other three as well, but he made them into handsome nonentities. Among so many others who resembled them, he doubted that he could recognize them.

For an instant he thought he saw Emily and made his way through the crowd. When he got there, he saw his mistake. This girl's flesh hadn't been put on with a spray gun.

Burlingame was after jewels, of course, to be carefully selected from two or three of the wealthier guests. He must also have currency in mind, something negotiable for immediate use. He'd need cash to drop out of sight for a while.

Time was growing short for a word with Burlingame, just one word, whispered or spelled out silently: “Police.” That was all Burlingame would need.

Jadiver was weaponless, and aside from warning Burlingame, he couldn't help. Until now he'd steered clear of violence and illegality. He'd known the use to which his disguises had been put, but that was the business of those who paid him.

Now it was different. The police had a line to him, direct. How much they knew was impossible to estimate. He could visualize a technician sitting in front of a screen, seeing everything that Jadiver saw. That, however, was a guess, for he didn't actually know how the circuit beneath his skin

functioned. Until he learned, he would have to continue guessing, and blunder accordingly.

He made his way to the balcony that encircled half the huge high room. He didn't know the entire layout or the habits of those who lived here, but it was reasonably certain that they kept a large amount of cash on hand and that it would be safeguarded in a room not accessible to all the guests. It might even be up here.

The few people on the balcony were at the far end. He looked down on the milling guests. Still no sign of Burlingame or any of his crew. Jadiver had done his work too well. They were indistinguishable from the others.

At that moment, the lights brightened glaringly. The guests looked less glamorous. Women bulged excessively, top-heavy, and the tanned faces of the men turned an unpleasant gray.

Magically, uniforms appeared at every exit.

"Attention," a harsh voice rang out. "Please line up. There are criminals among you and we can identify them."

Jadiver didn't listen to the rest. His eyes were on the uniformed men. Mercifully, they carried tangle guns. That much he was thankful for. Burlingame and his crew would be taken alive. They might not like what would happen later, but at least they would live.

The tangle gun was the most effective and least lethal weapon ever conceived. It would bring down a butterfly at two hundred yards and hold it there, without crumpling a wing or disturbing the dustlike scales. It would do the same with a Venusian saurian or a Martian windbeast, either of which outbulked an elephant and outsavaged a tiger.

It didn't have to hit the target. With proximity fuses—and it was usually furnished that way—it was sufficient for the bullet to pass near. Jadiver drew a deep breath. No one was going to get killed because of him. Nevertheless, his skin crawled.

He gazed down at the guests lining up. They, too, knew what tangle guns were.

Suddenly a man darted out of line and headed toward one of the exits. He collided with an officer and the policeman went down. A tangle gun snapped. The running man fell headlong. Three more times the tangle gun fired at the

man writhing on the floor—at his hands, at his face, and again at his legs.

The tangle gun propelled a plastic bullet, and that plastic was a paradox. It was the stickiest substance known and would adhere to a sphere of polished platinum, tearing away the solid metal if it were forcibly removed without first being neutralized. It also extruded itself into fine, wirelike strands on a moving object. The more anything moved, the tighter it wrapped around. The victim was better off to relax. He couldn't escape; no one ever had.

Jadiver watched the man threshing on the floor. One shot would have been enough. Someone on the Venicity force liked to see men squirm.

As nearly as Jadiver could determine, the man on the floor was not Burlingame. The leader hadn't been taken, but he didn't have long to enjoy his freedom. The theory he had about teamwork was tarnished now—a feint here and a block there—and they were all headed into the arms of the Venicity police. It couldn't work against superior force, and an ambush set unwittingly by Jadiver.

Then Jadiver saw them. They moved as a unit—Burlingame, Emily and two others. They smashed through the guests with a formation that had the flying wedge as a remote ancestor. Burlingame was leading it, tangle gun in hand. The guests were thrown back and a policeman went down.

It was hard to fire into the mob through which Burlingame and his crew were bulling. In that respect, the tangle gun was not selective. It seized on any motion.

They couldn't make it, but Jadiver hoped for them. They were at the edge of the crowd. Between them and freedom was a thin cordon of police. Beyond the police was a planted area where jungle vines and shrubs, considerably taller than a man, grew dense. Just past that area were two exits leading to the street.

From the balcony, Jadiver could see it clearly. If they could reach the exits, they had a chance for flight.

They broke through the cordon. They shouldn't have, for superior trained men were opposing them. But it was another kind of training that Burlingame was using and with it he split the police. The group lunged into the jungle shrubs and emerged on the other side. The police on the floor couldn't

see them; the planted area screened off the view. They were almost safe.

The exits opened before they could reach them—more police. Burlingame went down, a cloud around his face, weaving wire shapes that tightened on his throat. The other two stumbled as police fired at their feet.

Emily alone was not hit. She was close and moving too fast. She escaped the tangle guns, but ran directly into the arms of a burly officer. He laughed and grabbed her as if she were a robot. She bit him.

He swore at her and swiftly looked around. The guests couldn't see. He hit her solidly in the middle. She gasped for breath. He took out his tangle gun and fired into her mouth.

Jadiver sickly knew he had been wrong about the tangle gun; it could kill if the person who used it had sufficient experience and brutality.

Emily would never have to lose that beautiful face and figure. She could keep it until she died, which wouldn't be long. Nobody could stop the peristaltic motion of the digestive system, voluntarily or otherwise, or of the lungs in trying to breathe.

Burlingame wouldn't know. Policemen were cooperative, and it would be listed as an accident.

Jadiver closed his eyes. Emily was dying and no one could help her. Or himself, either, when they came to pick him up. They had to know exactly where he was. He waited, expecting a tap on the shoulder or the snap of the tangle gun.

The lights dimmed and the same harsh voice spoke. "The danger is over, thanks to the efficient work of the Venicity police force. You are now safe."

Nothing like advertising yourself, thought Jadiver.

No one came near him. Apparently the police didn't want him yet—they expected him to do more for them.

He went down the stairs and mingled with the excited guests. It had been a good show, unexpected entertainment, especially since it hadn't involved any real danger for them. He circulated through the chattering men and women until he came near the planted area. At an opportune moment, he slipped in.

It was a miniature jungle; he was safe from ordinary detection as long as he stayed there. He went quietly through

the vines and shrubs toward the other side. The broad back of a policeman loomed up in front of him.

Jadiver was an industrial engineer, a specialist in the design of robot bodies and faces, robots that had to look like humans. He knew anatomy, not in the way a doctor did, but it was nonetheless the knowledge of an expert. He reached out and the policeman toppled.

He dragged the unconscious man deeper into the little jungle and listened. No one had noticed. Physically a large man, the policeman might be the one who had shot Emily—and then again he might not be. He did have a tangle gun, which was the important thing. Jadiver took it and rifled the man's pockets for ammunition.

He knelt for a final check on the body. The chest rose and fell with slow regularity. For insurance, Jadiver again pressed the nerve. This man wouldn't trouble anyone for a few hours.

Jadiver looked out. When he was sure he wasn't observed, he walked out and joined the guests. He moved politely from one group to another and in several minutes stood beside the door. He left the way he came.

It was that simple. He had to assume that until events proved he was mistaken.

Outside, he walked briskly. It was not late and the city overflowed with men and women walking, flying, skimming. Roughly dressed men down from the north polar farms, explorers from the temperate jungles, government girls—the jumbled swarm that comes to a planet in the intermediate stages of exploitation. It was a background through which he could pass unnoticed.

The circuit, though—always the circuit. He couldn't escape that by walking away from it. But at least he'd proved that telepathy wasn't possible by means of it, or he wouldn't still be free.

Other than that, he didn't know how it operated. If it was purely electronic in nature, then it had a range. He might be able to get beyond that range, if he knew how far it extended.

A lot depended on the power source. He hadn't been able to check closely, hadn't really known what he was looking at when he'd seen it in the autobath. He remembered that the circuit seemed to be laid over his own nervous system.

Considering the power available, the range was apt to be quite limited.

That was pure supposition and might be wrong. There was nothing to preclude an external power source, say a closed field blanketing the city or even the entire planet. If so, it represented a technical achievement beyond anything he was familiar with. That didn't disprove it, of course. The circuit itself indicated a startling advance and he knew *it* existed.

There was still another possibility. The circuit might not be entirely electronic. It might operate with the same forces that existed inside a single nerve cell. If so, all bets were off; there was no way he could determine the range. It might be anything at all, micro-inches or light-years.

With unlimited equipment and all the time in the worlds, he could answer some of those questions floating around in his mind. He had neither, but there were solutions he could make use of. Limited solutions, but it was better than waiting to be caught.

Jadiver headed toward one such solution.

The robot clerk looked up, smiling and patient, as he entered. It could afford to be patient. There was no place it wanted to be other than where it was at the moment. "Can I help you?"

"Passage to Earth," said Jadiver.

The clerk consulted the schedule. That was pretense. The schedule and not much else had been built into its brain. "There's an orbit flight in two weeks."

In two weeks, Jadiver could be taken, tried, and converted ten times over. "Isn't there anything sooner?"

"There's an all-powered flight leaving tomorrow, but that's for Earth citizens only."

"Suits me. Book me for it."

"Be glad to," said the robot. "Passport, please."

It was going to cost more than just the fare, Jadiver knew. He would arrive on Earth with very little money and could expect to start all over. He was no longer fresh out of training, willing to start at the bottom. He was a mature man, experienced beyond the ordinary, and most organizations he could work for would be suspicious of that.

But it was worth it, aside from the escape. No future for

him there, jammed in on a crowded world, but it was his planet, always would be, and he wouldn't mind going back.

"Sorry," said the clerk, flipping over the passport and studying it. "I can't book you. The flight's only for Earth citizens."

"I was born there," Jadiver impatiently said. "Can't you see?"

"You were?" asked the robot eagerly. "I was built there." It handed him back the passport. "However, it doesn't matter where you were born. You've been here three years without going back. Automatically, you became a citizen of Venus two and a half years ago."

Jadiver hadn't known that. He doubted that many did. It was logical enough. Earth was overflowing and the hidden citizenship clause was a good way of getting rid of the more restless part of the population and making sure they didn't come back.

"There's still the orbit flight," said the clerk, smiling and serene. "For that you need a visitor's visa, which takes time. Shall I make the arrangements?"

Aside from the time element, which was vital, he couldn't tip the police off that he intended to leave.

"Thanks," he said, taking the passport. "I'll call back when I make up my mind."

Down the street was another interplanetary flight office and he wandered into it. It might have been the same office he had just left, robot and all.

"Information on Mars," he said, his manner casual.

The clerk didn't bother to consult the schedule. There was a difference, after all. "There'll be an orbit flight in four months," it said pleasantly. "Rate, four-fifths of the standard fare to Earth."

Nothing was working out as expected. "What about the moons of Jupiter?" This was the last chance.

"Due to the position of the planets, for the next few months there are no direct flights anywhere beyond Mars. You have to go there and transfer."

That escape was closed. "I can't make plans so far in advance."

The robot beamed at him. "I can see that you're a gentleman who likes to travel." It grew confidential and leaned

over the counter. "I have a bargain here, truly the most sensational we've ever offered."

Jadiver drew away from that eagerness. "What is this bargain?"

"Did you notice the fare to Mars? Four-fifths of that to Earth, and yet it's farther away. Did you stop to think why?"

He had noticed and he thought he knew why. It was another side of the citizenship program. Get them away from Earth, the farther the better, and don't let them come back. If necessary, shuttle them between colonies, but don't let them come back.

"I hadn't," he said. "Why?"

The voice throbbed throatily and robot eyes grew round. "To induce people to travel. Travel is wonderful. I love to travel."

Pathetic thing. Someone had erred in building it, had implanted too much enthusiasm for the job. It loved to travel and would never get farther than a few feet from the counter. Jadiver dismissed that thought.

"What's this wonderful offer?" he asked.

"Just think of it," whispered the robot. "We have another destination, much farther than Jupiter, but only one-tenth the fare to Earth. If you don't have the full fare in cash, just give us verbal assurance that you'll pay when you get the money. No papers to sign. We have confidence in your personal integrity."

"Sounds intriguing," Jadiver said, backing away. It sounded more like a death sentence. Alpha Centauri or some such place—hard grubbing labor under a blazing or meager sun, it didn't matter which. Exile forever on planets that lagged and would always lag behind Earth. It took years to get there, even at speeds only a little below that of light, time in which the individual was out of touch.

"I hope you won't forget," said the robot. "It's hard to get people to understand. But I can see that you do."

He understood too well. He ducked out of the flight office. He'd stay and take it here if he had to, escape some way if he could. Nothing was worth that kind of sacrifice.

He went slowly back to the apartment. It was not so strange that the police hadn't arrested him. They knew that

he'd stay on the planet, that he had to. They'd had it figured out long before he did.

He fell into the bed without removing his clothing. The bed made no effort to induce him to sleep. It wasn't necessary.

In the morning, Jadiver awakened to the smell of food. The room he slept in was dark, but in the adjacent room he could hear the Kitch-Hen clucking away contentedly as it prepared breakfast.

He rolled over and sat up. He was not alone.

"Cobber?" he called.

"Yeah," said Cobber. He was very close, but Jadiver couldn't see him.

"The police got them," Jadiver said, reaching for the tangle gun. It was gone. He'd expected that.

"I heard. I was waiting for them and they didn't come." He was silent for a moment. "It had to be you, didn't it?"

"It was," Jadiver said. "When I found out, I tried to tell them. But it was too late."

"Glad you tried," said Cobber. At that instant, so was Jadiver. "I checked you myself. I couldn't find anything," Cobber added thoughtfully. "They must have something new."

"It is new," Jadiver wearily confirmed. "I can't get rid of it."

"Mind telling me? I figure I ought to know."

Hunched up in the darkness, Jadiver told him what he could. At present, he was defenseless. Cobber was a little man, but he was no stranger to violence and he had the weapons. Perhaps that was what the police counted on—that Cobber would save them an arrest.

"Bad," said Cobber after an interval. It sounded like a reprieve.

Jadiver waited.

"I liked Burlingame," continued Cobber. "Emily, too."

Burlingame was a decent fellow. Emily he had seen only once, twice if he counted last night. She deserved better than she got.

"I don't know who it was," Jadiver said. "Some big policeman."

"I know a lot of people—I'll find out," Cobber promised. "I liked Emily."

It wouldn't do any good, though Jadiver approved. For a while there'd be one less sadist on the force, and after that they'd hire another.

"You'd better leave while you can," said Jadiver.

Cobber laughed. "I'll get away. I know Venus and I don't have a spy inside." He got up, turned on the lights and tossed the tangle gun on the bed. "Here. You need this worse than I do."

Jadiver blinked gratefully and took it. Cobber believed him. If the police wanted to eliminate him, they'd have to come for him, after all.

He stood up. "Breakfast?"

"No breakfast," said Cobber. "I'm going to take your advice and get out of here." He went to the door, opened it a fraction and listened. Satisfied, he closed it and turned back to Jadiver. "Tell that cop I know a few tricks with a tangle gun he never heard of. I'll show him what they are."

"I won't see him, I hope."

"You don't have to. They're taking everything down. They'll tell him. That is, I hope they do."

He slipped out the door and was gone.

The Kitch-Hen tired of waiting for Jadiver to come out. It cackled disgustedly and sent a table into his room. Mechanically he sat down and began to eat.

Not only how far but also what kind of data did the circuit transmit? That was one unanswered problem. If he couldn't outrun it, he might outthink it.

First, the data was transmitted to the police with some degree of accuracy. They had been able to anticipate the robbery. Not completely, but they did know it was Burlingame and how many men he was using. They also knew the approximate date. From that, it was a matter of logic to determine what specific society event he was aiming at. Jadiver had been able to do the same.

Thoughts, visual and auditory impressions, tactile and other sensory data—that was the sum of what the circuit could transmit, theoretically.

He could almost positively rule out thoughts. It had never been proved that thoughts could be transferred from one

person to another, mechanically or otherwise. But that was not his reason for rejecting it. If they could read his thoughts, it was useless for him to plan anything. And he was going to plan ahead, whether it was useless or not.

Tactile sensations, temperature, roughness, and the like were unimportant except to a scientist. He doubted that police were that scientifically interested in him. He could forget about the sense of touch.

Sight and hearing. Neither of these could be eliminated at present. They could see what he saw, hear what he heard. As long as they could, escape was out of the question. It wouldn't take much to betray him—a street sign glimpsed through his eyes, for instance, and they knew where he was.

As long as they could see what he saw.

But there was such a thing as a shield. Any known kind of radiation could be shielded against.

He was working with intangibles. He didn't know the nature of the phenomenon he had to fight. He had to extrapolate in part, guess the rest. One thing was certain, though: If he was successful in setting up a shield against the circuit, the police would arrive soon after. Arrive here.

His value to them was obvious. Through him they could make an undetected contact with the shadowy world of illegality. If that contact was cut off or if he seemed about to escape, his usefulness came to an end and they would want one more arrest while they could get it.

Once he started to work on the shield, he would have to work fast.

Jadiver went to the screen. There could be no hesitation; the decision was ready-made.

The bank robot appeared on the screen and Jadiver spoke to him briefly, requesting that his account be cleared. He scribbled his signature and had it recorded.

While waiting, he began to pack, sorting what he wanted to take. It wasn't much, some special clothing. His equipment, except for a few small tools, he had to leave. No matter. With luck, he could replace it; without luck, he wouldn't need it.

In a few minutes he was ready, but the money hadn't arrived. He sat down and nervously scrawled on a scrap of paper. Presently the delivery chute clattered and the money

was in it, crisp new bills neatly wrapped, the total of his savings over the years. He stuffed the money in his pocket.

The scrap of paper was still in his hand. He started to throw it away, but his fingers were reluctant to let it go. He stared curiously at the crumpled wad and on impulse smoothed it out.

There were words on it, though he hadn't remembered writing any. The handwriting was shaky and stilted, as if he were afflicted with some nervous disease; nevertheless, it was unmistakably his own.

There was a message on it, from himself to himself. No, not from himself. But it was intended that he read it. The note said:

RUN, JADIVER. I'LL HELP.
YOUR FRIEND

He sat down. A picture rose involuntarily in his mind. The face was that of Doumya Filone.

He couldn't prove it, but it seemed certain that she was the one. She knew about the circuit, of course, had known long before he did. He remembered the incident when his skin had itched.

He had called her about it and she hadn't seemed surprised. She had left the screen for some time—for what purpose? To adjust the mechanism, or have someone else adjust it. The last, probably; the mechanism was almost certainly at the police end, and at the time he called she had been at home. In any event, the mechanism had originally been set too strong and she had ordered the setting to be reduced. That suggested one thing: the power to activate the circuit came from the mechanism—a radarlike device.

Then what? His skin had momentarily become translucent, allowing him to see the circuit. How she achieved that, he didn't know, but the reason was obvious. It had been her way of warning him and it had worked.

The message in his hand told him one thing. He had known about the danger, but he hadn't guessed that he didn't have to face it alone. Something else was evident: her control was limited—perhaps she could step in at a critical moment, but the greater part was up to him.

He moved quickly. He opened the delivery chute and put in the small bag that held his clothing, then punched a code that dispatched it to the transportation terminal. In return, he received a small plastic strip with the same code on it. The bag could be traced, but not without trouble, and he should be able to pick it up before then. At this stage he didn't want to be encumbered.

He took a last look around and stepped into the hall. He leaped back again.

A heavy-caliber slug crashed into the door.

That had been meant to kill. He was lucky it hadn't.

Who was it? Not the police. By law they were restricted to tangle guns, though they sometimes forgot. In this case, their memory should be good—they'd have difficulty explaining away the holes in his body. Not that they'd have to, really; if they wanted, they could toss him into an alley and claim they had found his body later.

Still, there was no particular reason why they should want to kill him outright when they could do it by degrees scientifically and with full legal protection. They didn't call it killing. There was another term: converting.

The converting process was not new; the principles had existed for centuries. The newness lay in the proper combination of old discoveries. Electric shock was one ingredient, a prolonged drastic application of it during the recreation of a situation that the victim had a weakness for. In the case of an adulterer, say, the scene was hypnotically arranged with the cooperation of a special robot that wouldn't be short-circuited. At the proper moment, electric shock was applied, repeatedly. Rigorous and somewhat rough on the criminal's wife, but the adulterer would be saddled all his life with an unconditional reflex.

That was only one ingredient. There were others, among them a pseudo-religious brotherhood, membership in which was compulsory. C. C.—Confirmed Converters. *They* kept tab on one another with apocalyptic fervor. Transgressions were rare. Death came sooner.

Jadiver stood there thinking. It wasn't the police, because they had converting with which to threaten him. It wasn't Cobber, either. He could have killed Jadiver earlier and hadn't.

Cobber might have talked, though. There were enough people who now regretted that Jadiver had once given them new faces. As far as they were concerned Jadiver was in the hands of the police.

The identity of the man outside didn't matter. He was not from the police, but he did want Jadiver dead.

Jadiver stood back and pushed the door open. Another slug crashed into it, tiny, but with incredible velocity.

He knelt, thrust his hand outside the door near the bottom and fired a random fusillade down the corridor. Then he took his finger off the trigger and listened. There wasn't a sound. The man had decided to be sensible.

Jadiver stepped out. The man was crouched in an inconspicuous corner and he was going to stay in that position for a long time. He couldn't help breathing, though, and his chest was a tangle of wires. There were some on his face too, where his eyelids flickered and his mouth twitched.

The gun was in his hand and it was aimed nearly right. There was nothing to prevent his squeezing the trigger—except the tangle extruded loosely over his hand. And he could move faster than it could. Once, at any rate.

"I wouldn't," said Jadiver. "You're going to have a hard time explaining that illegal firearm. And it'll look worse if I'm here with my head wrapped around a hole that just fits the slug."

The man reaffirmed his original decision to be sensible about it by remaining motionless. Jadiver didn't recognize him. Probably a hired assassin.

The man paled with the effort not to move. He teetered and the tangle stuff coiled fractionally tighter.

"Take care of yourself," Jadiver said, and left him there.

Jadiver headed toward the transportation terminal. The police could trace him that far. Let them; he intended that they should. It would confuse them more when he walked right off their instruments.

Once inside the underground structure, he lost himself in the traffic. That was just in case he had been followed physically as well as by radiation. People coming from Earth, fewer going back. They arrived in swarms from the surface, overhead from the concrete plain where rockets roared out on takeoff or hissed in for landing. Transportation

shunted the mob in one direction for interplanetary travel, in another for local air routes.

Jadiver reclaimed his bag, boarded the moving belts and hopped on and off several times, again just in case. The last time off, he had coins ready. He slipped around a corner and walked down a long quiet corridor. There were doors on either side, a double deck with a narrow balcony on the second story. At intervals, stairs led to the balcony.

He walked a third of the way down the corridor, inserted coins in the slot, and a door opened. He went inside the sleep locker and the door closed behind, locking automatically.

It was miserable accommodation if he intended to sleep, but he didn't. It was also a trap if the police were trailing him. He didn't think they were—they were too certain of him. Nevertheless, the sleep locker had one advantage: it was all metal. Considering the low power that probably went into the circuit, it should be a satisfactory temporary shield.

He changed into clothes that looked ordinary—out of style, in fact, though that was not noteworthy in a solarwide economy—but the material, following a local terrestrial fad of a few years back, contained a high proportion of metallic fiber. That solved only part of the problem, of course. His hands and his head were uncovered.

The pseudo-flesh that he had used on Emily was not for him. In a way, it was the best disguise, but he was playing this one to live, as much as he could, all the way. A standard semidurable cosmetic would do; that is, it would when he finished altering it to suit his purpose.

The chief addition was a flaky metallic powder, lead. However the signal worked, radar or not, that should be effective in dampening the signal. He squeezed the mixture into a tube and attached the tube to a small gun which he plugged into a wall socket. Standing in front of the tiny mirror, with everything else cramped in the sleep locker, he went over his face and hands. He had trouble getting it on his scalp and under his hair, but it went on.

He looked himself over. He now appeared older, respectable, but not successful, which fitted neatly into the greatest category on Venus—or anywhere, for that matter. He stuffed

the clothing he'd worn back into the bag and walked out. He'd been in the sleep locker half an hour.

He was operating blind, but it was all he could do. He had to assume that the metallic fiber in his clothing and the lead flakes in the cosmetic would scramble the circuit signal. If they didn't, then he was completely without protection.

He'd soon know how correctly he had analyzed the problem.

He walked out of the transportation terminal and hailed an air cab which took him over the city and left him at the edge of a less reputable section.

It was not an old slum—Venicity hadn't endured long enough to have inherited slums; it built them quickly out of shoddy material and then tore them down again as the need for living space expanded outward.

He checked in at a hotel neither more nor less disreputable than the rest. The structure made up in number of rooms what it lacked in size and appearance.

This was the test period and he had to wait it out. If he passed, he was on an equal footing with any other person wanted by the police. He'd take his chances on that, his wits against their organization; he could disappear if he didn't carry a beacon around with him. This was the best place to spend the interim period, crowded together with people coming and going to and from the wild lands of Venus.

But if he didn't pass the test—

He refused to think about it.

He walked aimlessly in the grayness of the Venusian day. Different people from those in the bright new sections of Venicity, quieter, grimmer, more bewildered. Tough, but not the hardness of the criminal element. These people had no interest in either making or breaking the law.

After nightfall, he loitered on the streets for a few hours, watching faces. When policemen began appearing in greater numbers, he checked into his room.

It was a grimy, unpleasant place. Considering the comfort it offered, the rate was exorbitant. Safety, however, it did afford, and that was beyond price. He lay down, but couldn't sleep. The room, apparently, was designed on the acoustical principle of an echo chamber or a drum.

The adjacent room on one side was occupied by a man

and woman. The woman, though, was not a woman. There was a certain pitch to the laughter that could come only from a robot. The management obviously offered attractions other than sleep.

The room on the other side was quieter. Somebody coughed twice, somebody sniffled once. Two of them, decided Jadiver, a man and a woman, both human. They weren't talking loud or much. He couldn't hear the words, but the sounds weren't gay.

In the hall, other voices intruded. Jadiver lay still. He could recognize the way of walking, the tone of voice. Cops. His test period wasn't lasting as long as he'd hoped.

"What good is it?" grumbled one, down the hall, but Jadiver could hear distinctly. "We had him dead center and now we've lost him. If I had my way, we'd have taken him sooner."

Jadiver's reasoning was not so good if the police were this close. He got up and crept noiselessly toward the door, fully dressed, as he had to be at all times if he expected to scramble the circuit signal.

The companion of the first policeman was more cheerful. "He's not lost. We've just mislaid him. We know the direction he's in. Follow the line and there he is at the end of it."

"Sounds good, but have we got him?"

"We will."

That was the fallacy. He'd scrambled the signal, but he hadn't eliminated it. He still showed up on the police instrument as a direction. He could imagine a technician sitting in front of a crazily wavering screen. The instrument could no longer pick up what he saw through his eyes, but it hadn't lost him altogether.

Jadiver clutched the tangle gun.

"Better check where we are," said the first officer.

"Going to," answered the second. Jadiver couldn't see, but he could visualize the pocket instrument. "This is Lieutenant Parder. How close are we?"

The voice came back, almost inaudible. What he could hear, though, was disturbing. It sounded like someone he knew, but not Doumya Filone. "You're off a hundred yards to your left," said the voice. "Also, he's a mile farther out. Either that or a hundred and fifty miles."

"He's really moving," said the lieutenant. "A hundred and fifty miles is in the middle of the swamp."

"I know that," said the tantalizingly familiar voice. "I can't choose between outside and inside the city. If he's inside, I want him to move. That motion, extended a hundred and fifty miles, by simple mathematics will indicate a distance he couldn't possibly travel in the jungle." The voice paused. "We'll send a party to check the swamp. You go to the point a mile farther on. We want him tonight. If we don't get him, we'll probably have to wait until tomorrow night."

"I'll find him," said the lieutenant. "Report when I get there."

Jadiver could hear footsteps receding down the hall.

He breathed in relief. The makeshift shield hadn't been a total failure. They knew the direction, but not the distance from some central location. The scrambler had affected the strength of the signal and they couldn't be sure.

The impromptu visit told him this as well: there was only one instrument on him. With two, they could work a triangulation, regardless of the signal strength.

He could hazard a guess as to why they had to get him at night. During the day, there were radiological disturbances originating in the atmosphere that made reception of the signals difficult. That meant that the day was safest for him.

He went back to the bed and lay down, to puzzle over the familiar voice, to sleep if he could. Sleep didn't come easily. The man and the female robot had left, but the quiet couple on the other side had been awakened by the noise in the hall.

The woman sniffled. "I don't care, Henry. We're going back to Earth."

It was not an old voice, though he couldn't be sure, not seeing her. Thirty-five, say. Jadiver resented the intrusion at a time like this. He was trying to sleep, or think, he wasn't sure which.

"Now, hon, we can't," Henry whispered back. "We've bought the land and nobody's going to buy it back."

"We bought it when they told us there would be roses," said the woman, loud and bitter. "Great big roses, so big that most of the plant grew below ground, only the flower showing. So big, no stem could support them."

"Well, hon—"

"Don't hon me. There *are* roses, ten feet across, all over our land, just like they said." Her voice rose higher. "Mud roses, that's what they are. Stinking mud roses that collapse into a slimy hole in the ground."

She sniffled again. "Did you notice the pictures they showed us? People standing by the roses with their heads turned away. And you know why the pictures were like that? Because they didn't dare show us the expressions on those people's faces, that's why."

"It's not so bad," said the man soothingly. "Maybe we can do something about it."

"What can we do? The roses poison cattle and dogs run away from the smell. And we're humans. We're stronger, we're supposed to take it."

"I've been thinking," said Henry quietly. "I could take a long pipe and run it at an angle to the roots. I could force concrete through the pipe and seal it off below ground. When it collapsed, the roses wouldn't grow back."

The woman asked doubtfully, "Could you?"

"I think so. Of course I'd have to experiment to get the right kind of concrete."

"But what would we do with the hole it left?" There was a faint tremor of hope.

"We could haul away the slime," he said. "It would stop smelling after a while. We might even be able to use it for fertilizer."

"But there's still the hole."

"It would fill with water after the next rain. We could raise ducks in it."

"White ducks?"

"If you like."

The woman was silent. "If you think we can do it, then we'll try," she said. "We'll go back to our farm and forget about Earth."

Henry was silent, too. "They're kind of pretty, even if they do smell bad," he said after a long interval. "Maybe I could pump a different kind of cement, real thin, directly into the stem. It might travel up into the flower instead of down."

"And make them into stone roses," enthused the woman.

"Mud roses into stone. I'd like that—a few of them—to remind us of what our farm was like when we came to it." She wasn't sniffing.

They had their own problems, decided Jadiver, and their own solution, which, in their ignorance, might actually work. He'd been like that when he first came to Venus, expecting great things. With him it had been different. He was an engineer, not a farmer, and he didn't want to be a farmer. There was nothing on Venus for him.

He couldn't stay much longer on Venus in any capacity. Earth was out of the question. Mars? If he could escape capture in the months that followed and then manage to get passage on a ship. It wasn't hopeless, but his chances weren't high.

The puzzling thing was why the police wanted him so badly. He was an accessory to a crime—several of them, in fact. But even if they regarded him as a criminal, they couldn't consider him an important one.

And yet they were staging a manhunt. He hated to think of the number of policemen looking for him. There must be a reason for it.

He had a few days left, possibly less. In that time, he would have to get off the planet or shed the circuit. Without drastic extensive surgery, there was not much hope he could peel off the circuit.

Unless—

He had received a message from someone self-identified as a friend. And that friend knew about the circuit and claimed to be willing to help.

He kept seeing gray eyes and a strong, sad, indifferent face, even in his sleep.

He awakened later than he intended. Since daylight was safest for him, that was a serious error. He wasted no time in regret, but went immediately to the mirror. Under the makeup, his face was dirty and sweating. He didn't dare to remove the disguise for an instant, since to do so would be to expose himself to the instrument. He sprayed on a new face, altering the facial characteristics as best he could. His clothing, too, had to stay on. He roughed it up a bit, adding a year's wear to it.

For what it was worth, he didn't look quite the same as

yesterday. Seedier and older. It was a process he couldn't keep extending indefinitely. He would not have to, of course. One way or the other, it would be decided soon.

He shredded the bag and his extra clothing, tossing them into the disposal chute. No use giving the police something to paw over, to deduce from it what they could. The tiny spray gun he kept, and the tube of makeup. He might need them once more.

It was close to noon when he left the room. There were lots of people on the streets and only a few policemen. Again he had an advantage.

He found a pay screen and began the search. Doctor Doumya Filone wasn't listed with the police and that seemed strange. A moment's reflection showed that it wasn't. If she were officially connected, she might not show the sympathy she had.

Neither was she listed on the staff of the emergency hospital in which he'd been a patient. He had a number through which he could reach her, but he resisted an impulse to use it. It was certain the police wouldn't confine their efforts to the instrument check. They knew he had that number and they'd have someone on it, tracing everyone who called her.

Noon passed and his stomach called attention to it. He hadn't eaten since yesterday. He took a short break, ate hurriedly, and resumed the search.

Doumya Filone was difficult to find. It was getting late and he had ascertained she wasn't on the staff of any hospital, and she was not listed for private practice.

He finally located her almost by accident. She had an office with Medical Research Incorporated. That was the only thing registered under her name.

Evening came early to Venus, as it always did under the massive cloud formations. He got off the air cab a few blocks from his destination and walked the rest of the way.

Inside the building, he paused in the lobby and found her office. Luckily it was in a back wing. He wandered through the corridors, got lost once, and found the route again. The building was almost empty by this time.

Her name was on the door. Dr. Doumya Filone. Research Neurological Systems, whatever that meant. There was a

light in the office, a dim one. He eased the door open. It wasn't locked, which meant he hadn't tripped an alarm.

No one was inside. He looked around. There was another door in back. He walked over to it. It didn't lead to a laboratory, as he expected. Instead, there were living quarters. A peculiar way to conduct research.

The autobath was humming quietly. He sat down facing it and waited. She came out in a few minutes, hair disarranged, damp around her forehead. She didn't see him at first.

"Well," she said coolly, staring at him. There was no question that she recognized him through the disguise. She slipped quickly into a robe that, whatever it did for her modesty, subtracted nothing from the view. He wished he were less tired and could appreciate it.

She found a cigarette and lighted it. "You're pretty good, you know."

"Yeah." But not good enough, he thought.

"Why are you here?" she asked. She was nervous.

"You know," he said. She had promised him help once before. Now let her deliver. But she had to volunteer.

"I know." She looked down at her hands, long skilled hands. "I put in the circuit. But I didn't choose you."

He began to understand part of it. The "Medical Research" business was just a cover. The real work was done at the police emergency hospital. That was why she had no laboratory. And the raw material—

"Who did choose me?"

"The police. I have to take what they give me."

There were certain implications in that statement he didn't like. "Have there been others?"

"Two before you."

"What happened to them?"

"They died."

He didn't like where this was taking him. His hand slid toward the tangle gun in his pocket. "Maybe I should die, too."

She nodded. "That would be one solution." She added harshly: "They shouldn't have taken you. Legally speaking, you're not a criminal. But I couldn't investigate you personally before I put the circuit in."

Why not? Was she an automaton that reacted in response to a button? In a way she was, but the button was psychological.

"That doesn't help me," he said tiredly. "The police wanted to catch Burlingame through me. That's right, isn't it?"

She indicated that it was.

"I did, without knowing what I was doing," he went on. "Now I want out. Even if I cooperated with the cops, which I'm not going to do, I'm of no further value to them. Every criminal on Venus knows about me by now."

"That's part of it," she said. "But there's more. You've tied up the machine and neither I nor the police can use it."

Explanations were coming faster. It was no wonder the police wanted him badly. They had a perfect device to use against criminals, which was all they were concerned with, and they couldn't use it as long as the circuit was in him. It made sense, but that kind of logic was deadly—for him.

"I'll face it," he said. "I'll take whatever charge they hang on me. It shouldn't be more than a few years. You can use the time to take this damn thing out of me. Only I want a guarantee first."

She got up and stood with the light behind her. It was deliberately intended to distract him. Under other circumstances, it would have.

"If it were a small circuit, over just a fraction of your body, I could cut it out," she said. "But the way it is, I can't. It would kill you."

At least she was honest about it. And he still didn't know what she meant when she had written, with his hands in the apartment, that she would help him. He would have to find out.

"I can smash the machine," he said. "That's the other solution."

She leaned against the wall. "You can't. And neither can I, though it's technically my machine. It's in the police department with an armed guard around it at all times. Besides, the machine can defend itself."

He looked at her without understanding. It didn't sound right. He was sweating under the makeup and part of it was coming loose.

"Then what did you mean when you said you'd help?" he asked. "You promised, but what can you do?"

"I never promised to help." It was her turn not to understand. Her hand slipped down and so did the robe.

She was lying to him, had been lying all along. She never intended to help, though she said she would. The purpose? To lead him into a trap. She'd been successful enough. He looked up in anger, in time to see an object hurtling from her hand.

It struck him on the side of the head, hard. Some of the makeup chipped and fell off, but that was less important than yanking out the tangle gun. He fired twice, once at her feet and once at her shoulders. He had aimed at her head, but the shot went low.

Her face was still pretty, though no longer indifferent or so strong. "What do you want?" she screamed. "Why don't you leave me alone? I can't help you. Nobody can."

She was standing there rigid, not daring to move. The robe rippled in a breeze from the vent and the tangle stuff gripped it and the fabric tore. She'd stand there a few more hours and then topple over. They'd find her in the morning and remove the tangle with the special tongs.

As for himself, it was too late. He might have got off Venus at one time if he had concentrated on it. He hadn't tried harder because of Doumya Filone. He had *wanted* to believe her because—well, because.

"I told you I'd help, Jadiver. I will." The voice was distinct.

It wasn't Doumya Filone who'd said it. A tangle strand had worked up her throat and gripped her face. She couldn't speak if she tried. Her gray eyes weren't gray; they were the color of tears.

He looked around. It wasn't Doumya Filone—and there wasn't any other person in the room.

"I've kept the police away," said the familiar voice. "I can protect you for a while longer. There's still time to save yourself. But you have to guess right. You can't make any more mistakes."

Strictly speaking, it wasn't a voice. Doumya Filone didn't hear it; that was obvious. It was the circuit then. Someone

was making use of the machine to actuate the auditory nerve directly. That was what he seemed to hear.

Jadiver was tired and his body grimy, muscles twitching under the tension. But if his unknown friend—real, after all—could outwit a room full of police and tinker with the mechanism which was supposed to spot him, he couldn't do less.

He grinned. "I'll make it this time. I know what to do."

"The police haven't given up," said the voice. "I'm going to be busy with them. Don't expect further communication from me."

He didn't know who the person was, in spite of the haunting familiarity of the voice. And he wasn't going to find out soon. Probably never. It was enough, however, to know that he had a friend.

He left Doumya Filone standing there, which was a mistake, he realized as he reached the front office. He should have fired once more at her hands. The screen was crackling; her hands had been free and she'd managed to turn the screen on before the tangle strands interfered with her movement.

He'd made a grave error, but not necessarily fatal. It would be some time before anyone got there. By then he hoped to be safe.

He slipped through the corridors, went out the rear of the building and looked around for an air cab. The place was deserted at this hour and no cabs were in the nearby sky.

He had to walk and he didn't have that much time. He headed toward the nearest main thoroughfare. It was in the opposite direction to his destination, but he should be able to find an air cab there. He was walking too fast, for a light flashed down on him. He wasn't presentable and his haste was suspicious.

"Stop," said the amplified voice. It was probably just a routine check, but he couldn't risk even that.

He dodged into a space between two buildings and began to run. In the center of town, this would be a blind alley, but in this section it wasn't. There was a chance he could lose them. The buildings were just high enough so that they couldn't use the air car and they'd have to follow on foot.

The patrol car alighted almost instantly and one of the

policemen started after him. The man following him knew his business and was in good physical condition, better than Jadiver was after days of tension and little sleep.

Jadiver turned and snapped a half dozen shots at his pursuer. He was lucky, a couple were close enough. The policeman crashed to the ground and began to swear. His voice was choked off in seconds.

The other one got out of the patrol car and let it stand. It was the principle of the thing: nobody did that to a policeman. Jadiver had a substantial lead and it was dark, but he didn't know the route. Jadiver was enormously tired and this was the policeman's regular beat. The gap between them closed rapidly.

Out of breath and time and space to move around in, Jadiver took the wrong turn because the man was so close—and found himself boxed in.

Crouching, Jadiver fired at the oncoming man, a dark shape he sensed rather than saw. The tangle gun clicked futilely, out of ammunition. He fumbled hastily for a clip; before he could reload, the policeman squeezed the trigger and held it down.

The bullets didn't hit him, they were set to detonate a fraction of an inch away. He gave up and awaited the constricting violence of the tangle strands.

The bullets detonated and the strands flashed out, glowing slightly in the darkness. They never touched him; instead, they bent into strange shapes and flipped away. The stickiest substance known, and one of the strongest, from which there was no escape, yet it would not adhere to him—was, in fact, forcefully repelled!

It was that skin, of course, the synthetic substance they had put on him over the circuit. They should have tested it under these conditions. They might not have been so anxious to boil men alive.

He felt that he was almost invincible. It was an exhilarating feeling. He stopped trying to reload the tangle gun and stood up. He sprinted at the policeman, who stood his ground, firing frantically at a target he could not miss and yet did not hit. The tangle strands shattered all around the target.

Jadiver swung the gun with his remaining strength; the butt connected with the policeman's forehead.

Jadiver scooped up the discarded tangle gun and fired twice at close range, in case the man should decide to revive too soon, which was doubtful. He went back and entered the idling patrol car. He hadn't lost much time, after all.

He set the car down on top of a building near the edge of the rocketport, straightened his clothing and wiped the grime off his face. Some of the disguise went, too, but that no longer mattered much.

He stepped out of the elevator and walked casually along the street until he came to the interplanetary flight office. The same robot was there—would be there every hour, day and night, until the rocketport was expanded and the building torn down and rebuilt, or the robot itself wore out and had to be replaced.

The clerk looked up eagerly. "You're back. I knew I could count on you."

"I'm interested in that flight you were telling me about," said Jadiver.

"We've changed rates," the robot clerk replied, beaming. "It was a bargain before, but just listen to the revised offer. We pay you, on a per diem basis—subjective, of course. When you arrive, you actually have a bank account waiting for you."

Per diem, subjective—the time that *seemed* to elapse when the rocket was traveling near the speed of light. It wasn't as good as the robot made it sound.

"Never mind that," said Jadiver. "I'll take it if it's going far."

"Going far!" echoed the clerk.

A policeman sauntered by outside, just looking, but that was enough.

"I said I'd take it," Jadiver repeated in a loud voice.

The clerk deflated. "I wish I could go with you," it explained wistfully. It reached under the counter and pulled out a perforated tape. "This will get you on the ship, and it also constitutes the contract. Just present it at the other end and collect your money. You can send for your baggage after you're on board."

Jadiver opened his mouth and then closed it. His baggage was intangible, mostly experience, not much of it pleasant.

"I'll do that," he said.

The clerk came out from behind the counter and watched Jadiver leave. Lights from the rocketport glittered in its robot eyes.

Jadiver paced about the ship. It was not enough to be on it, for the police could still trace him. And if they did, they could get him off. It was not only himself, there was his unknown friend. They had ways to learn about that.

He passed a visionport on his way through the ship. It was night, but it didn't seem so on the vast, brightly lighted concrete plain. A strange vehicle streaked across the surface of the rocketport in defiance of all regulations and common sense.

It was coming his way. It dodged in and out of rockets landing and taking off, escaping blazing destruction with last-minute, intricate maneuvers. The driver had complete control of the vehicle and was fantastically skillful.

It was a strange machine. Jadiver had never seen anything quite like it. As far as he knew, it resembled nothing the police used.

It didn't halt outside the ship. The loading ramp was down and the machine came up without hesitation. The entrance was too narrow and the vehicle would never get through—that seemed evident. An instant later, he was not so sure. The ship quivered and groaned and vibrations ran throughout the structure.

He leaned over the railing and looked down. The machine was inside, dented and scraped.

"Captain," bellowed a voice from the vehicle. It was an authoritative voice and it puzzled Jadiver.

The captain came running, either in response to the command or to find out how much damage had been done in the crash and why.

"Take off, Captain," said the voice. "Take off at once."

The captain sputtered. "I give orders here. I'll take off when I get ready."

"You're ready when the ship reaches a certain mass. As soon as I came on board, you attained it. Check your mass gauges, Captain."

The captain hurried to the gauges and glanced at them. He stared back at the machine.

"Captain," purred the machine, "you have a little daughter. By the time you get back, she will be grown and will have children of her own. The sooner you leave, the sooner you will see her again. I will regard it as a personal favor if you see that we take off immediately."

The captain looked at the machine. Tentacles and eye-stalks rose up out of the tip as he watched. It was a big machine, well put together, and it appeared quite capable of handling a roomful of armed men. As a matter of fact, it just had.

The captain shrugged and gave the order to lift ship.

It was none too soon. Out of the visionport, Jadiver could see uniformed men edging up from the underground shelters. They backed out of sight when the rockets began to flame.

Faster the ship rose and higher. They were in the dense clouds and then through them, out in the clear black of space, away from Venus.

Jadiver looked down at the machine. It wasn't a vehicle. It was a robot, and it was familiar.

"It ought to be familiar," said the robot softly. That voice was for him alone, directly on the auditory nerve. "You designed most of it back on Earth, remember?"

He remembered. It was not a pretty imitation of a human—it was his perfect robot. And it was also his unknown friend, the one who had watched over him.

He walked slowly down the stairs and stood beside it.

The robot switched to the regular speaking voice. "They built your design, after all. They needed a big and powerful mobile robot, one that could house, in addition to the regular functions, an extensive and delicate mechanism."

That was the voice that had haunted him so long and in so many situations. It was not Jadiver's own voice, but it resembled his. A third person might not recognize the difference.

"That other mechanism," said Jadiver. "Is that the one that monitors the circuit in my body?"

"That *parallels* the circuit in your body." Tentacles were busy straightening out the dents. "When I was built, they gave me a good mind, better than your own in certain re-

spects. What I lacked was sensory perception. Eyes and ears, to be sure, good ones in a way, but without the delicate shadings a human has, particularly tactile interpretations. I didn't need better, they thought, because my function was to observe and report on the parallel circuit I mentioned.

"In the beginning, that circuit was a formless matrix and only faintly resembled your nervous system. As nerve data was exchanged back and forth, it began to resemble you more and more, especially your mind. Now, for practical purposes, it is you and I can look into it at will."

Jadiver stirred uneasily.

"Don't you understand?" asked the robot. "My mind isn't yours, and vice versa. But we do have one thing in common, a synthetic nervous system which, if you were killed, would begin to disintegrate slowly and painfully. And now that it's developed as much as it is, I would probably die, too, since that synthetic nervous system is an otherwise unused part of my brain."

"There were two other victims before me," said Jadiver.

"There were, but they were derelicts—dead, really, before the experiment got started. They lasted a few hours. I tried to help them, but it was too late. It was not pleasant for me."

Not only was it a friend; it had a vital interest in keeping him alive. He could trust it, had to. After what had happened, doubt wasn't called for.

Jadiver rubbed his weary eyes. "That shield I used," he said. "Did it work?"

The robot laughed—Jadiver's laughter. It had copied him in many ways. "It worked to your disadvantage. The circuit signals got through to me, but I couldn't send any back until Doumya Filone chipped off part of your disguise. Then I spoke to you. Before that, I had to misdirect the police. I built up a complete and false history for you and kept them looking where you weren't."

If he had thought, he would have known it had to be that way. The police were efficient; they could have taken him long ago without the aid of the circuit. But it had seemed so easy and they had trusted the robot—had to where the circuit was concerned. No man could sit in front of a screen and interpret the squiggles that meant his hand was touching an apple.

Jadiver sat down. The strain was over and he was safe, bound for some far-off place.

"The police used you, though not as much as you used them," he said. "Still, they didn't develop the theory."

"They didn't. There was a man on Earth, a top-notch scientist. He worked out the theory and set up the mechanism. He had a surgical assistant, a person who would never be more than that on Earth because she wasn't good on theory, though she was a whiz at surgery. She realized it and got his permission to build another machine and take it to Venus. Originally it was intended to accumulate data on the workings of the human nervous system.

"On Venus, things were different. Laws concerning the rights of individuals are not so strict. She got the idea of examining the whole nervous system at once, not realizing what it meant because it had never been done that way. She discussed it with officials from the police department who saw instantly what she didn't—that once an extensive circuit was in a human, there was no way to get it out, except by death. They had no objections and were quite willing to furnish her with specimens, for their own purposes and only incidentally hers. Once the first man died, they had her and wouldn't let her back out, though she wanted to."

"Specimen," repeated Jadiver. "Yeah, I was a specimen to her." His head was heavy. "Why didn't you tell me this in the beginning?"

"Would you have listened when I first contacted you?" asked the robot. "Later, perhaps. But once you put on the shield, I couldn't get in touch with you until you were with Doumya Filone."

Would Jadiver have listened? Not until it became a matter of raw survival. Even now he hated to leave Venus and what it meant for the unknown dangers and tedium of a planet circling an alien sun. It was more than that, of course. Just as he'd had a design for a perfect robot, he had in mind a perfect woman. He could recognize either when he saw it.

"Doumya Filone was the assistant?"

"She was." The robot was his now, Jadiver knew. Others had built it, but it belonged to him by virtue of a nervous system. It had as good a mind as his, but it wouldn't dispute his claim. "Like yourself," continued the robot, "in the Solar

System she would never have been more than second-rate, and she wanted to be first. Hardly anyone recognizes it, but the Solar System is not what it once was. It's like a nice neighborhood that decays so slowly that the people in it don't notice what it's become. There are some who can rise even in a slum, but they're the rare exceptions.

"Others need greater opportunity than slums offer. They have to leave if they expect to develop freely. But the hold of a whole culture is strong and it's hard to persuade them that they have to go." The robot paused. "Take a last look at a blighted area."

Outside, planets glimmered in the distance.

Jadiver was tired and his eyes were closing. Now he could sleep safely, but not in peace.

"Don't regret it," advised the robot. "Where you're going, you'll have real designs to work on. No more pretty robot faces."

"Where is it—Alpha Centauri?" Jadiver asked disinterestedly.

"That ship left yesterday. They got their quota and left within the hour, before any of the passengers could change their minds. We're going farther, to Sirius."

Sirius. A mighty sun, with planets to match. It was a place to be big. Big and lonely.

"I can't force you to do anything," said the robot. It sounded pleased. "But I have no inhibitions about others."

The robot flipped up its cowl. There was a storage space and a woman in it.

Except for her hands, she was bound tightly by tangle strands. "I don't think she likes you at the moment," said the robot. "She'll tell you that as soon as she's able to speak. She may relent later, when she realizes what it's really like on Sirius. You've got the whole voyage to convince her."

The eyestalks of the robot followed Jadiver interestedly. "Are you looking for the tongs? Remember that the tangle stuff is repelled by your skin."

Jadiver willingly used his hands and the tangle strands fell off.

As the robot had predicted, Doumya Filone was not silent—at first.

WORLD WITHOUT CHILDREN

I.

THE last diapers were in museums, along with teething rings, layettes, formula bottles, perambulators, rattles and teddy bears. Swings and trapezes, slides and jungle gyms had been broken up for scrap. The books, most of them, had been junked: *Baby and Child Care*, *Black Beauty*, *Obstetrics for the Millions*, *Tom Swift and His Rocket Glider*, *What Every Boy Should Know*, *What Every Girl Should Know*, *Diseases of Childhood*, *The Book of Knowledge*, *Manners for Teeners*, *One Hundred Things a Boy Can Make*.

The last recorded birth had been two hundred years ago.

That child—who had also been the last to wear a snowsuit, the last to cut his finger playing with knives, and the last to learn about women—had now reached the physiological age of twenty-five years, and looked even younger owing to his excellent condition. His name was George Miller; he had been a great curiosity in his day and a good many people still referred to him as The Child.

George did his best to live up to the name. Everything he did was essentially outré; everything he wore was outlandish; everything he said was outrageous. He got along better with most women than with most men. He said the sort of things to women that made them say, "Oh, George!" half wincing, half melting.

At the moment he was busy explaining to Lily Hoffman, head of the Human Conservation League, why he had never permanently given up drinking or smoking.

"Oh, George," said Lily.

"No, really," said George earnestly. "You say having fun will take ten per cent off my life. Well, but Art Levinson tells me that my present life expectancy is probably somewhere

around three thousand years. So if he's right, and you're right, my disgraceful habits won't catch up to me until 5062 A.D. and by that time I'll be glad enough to lie down."

Lily tilted her careful blonde curls forward to avoid a drink in the hand of a wandering guest. "That's an *average*, George," she said. "And of course it's only a *guess*, because nobody who's had the longevity treatments early in life has passed away from old age yet. Now I personally believe that it's possible to live for ten thousand years or more. And, George, just suppose you did pass away in 5062 from over-indulgence, and the *very next year* they found a way to extend the life-span even more!"

"Good Lord," said George, looking distressed. "That would be a laugh on me, wouldn't it?"

"*Really*, George, this is a serious—"

George put his hand on her arm. "You're right," he said, with fervor. "I might be throwing away the best centuries of my life. I'll stop this very minute." He took a beautifully chased silver cigarette case out of his breast pocket and emptied it into his hand. "If you'll excuse me," he said, rising, "I'll go and throw these in the fireplace so as not to be tempted."

She called after him, "George, *stick* to it. That's the important thing. You've quit before, you know."

"I know," said George humbly.

Carrying the cigarettes at arm's length, as if they were a clutch of poisonous serpents, he maneuvered his slender body among the standing, sitting and perambulating guests until he reached the fireplace.

"Hello, Luther," he said to a gray-haired, comfortably plump man wearing rimless spectacles. "I'm enjoying your party." He dropped the cigarettes ceremoniously behind a charred log.

"Again?" asked Luther Wheatley amiably.

"Lily talked me into it," George told him. "You ought to try virtue sometime, Luther. It gives you a sort of intense feeling, an I-am-the-master-of-my-fate kind of thing. Besides, it's an inexhaustible source of conversation. And then when you finally succumb, you have such a delightful sense of wickedness. I think everybody ought to abstain from everything once in a while, just to keep from taking it for granted."

"George," said Luther, frowning in concentration, "I believe that is the same discovery that you first announced to me when you were about twenty-three. How do you manage to—shall I say—keep your mind so fresh?"

"How do you manage to remember every damned thing I've said over the course of a hundred and fifty-odd years?" George countered irritably.

"You always say the same thing." One of Luther's cats wandered by, and Luther stooped to pick it up. It was a pretty thing, marked like a Siamese, but with long, light fur. It stared at Luther with offended dignity and made a noise in its throat.

"Haven't seen that one before, have I?" George asked.

"No. She's a distant descendant of Mimi, though—sixteen generations removed. You remember Mimi."

"I do, indeed. A great cat, Luther. You weren't worthy of her. Pity they're so short-lived, isn't it?"

"That's why I like them," Luther said, letting the cat drip from his hands like golden taffy. "People are so inconveniently permanent. . . . Art! Is that you? I thought you were in Pasadena for the season."

A stocky, owl-faced man with a shining bald pate put his hand on Wheatley's shoulder. "I flew in especially to see you, Luther," he said. "Hello, George. You, too." He shook hands with them in turn. "Can we go somewhere and talk? It's important. Is Morey here?"

Luther peered across the room. "He's around somewhere." He stopped a man carrying a tray of cocktail glasses and said, "Find Mr. Stiles for me, will you? Tell him I'd like to see him in my study." He took the owlish man's arm and gently propelled him toward the door, leaving George to trail along. "How are you, you dog-robber? How are the famous Levinson fruit-flies?"

"How are the cats?"

"Esthetically rewarding, which is more than I can say for your noxious pets."

Luther opened the study door and ushered them in. It was an almost fanatically tidy place, like the rest of Luther's apartment. There was a small window looking out on the roof-tops of Venice; the Rio Foscari was on the opposite side of the building. There were a desk, a work table, an easy

chair and two straight chairs. The walls were covered with shelves of books: mostly history and genetics, with the usual peppering of salty novels.

Two cats were in the easy chair, one in each of the straight chairs, and one asleep on the table.

"Dump them off," said Luther, setting an example and easing himself into the one comfortable chair. "You can sit on the table, George—you've got the youngest and most resilient ligaments."

A man with the long, cartilaginous face of an honest son of toil appeared in the doorway. His collar was too big and too stiff, his tie creased and askew, and his short iron-gray hair was fiercely rumpled like an eagle's nest. He looked as if he might bite, until he smiled; then he looked unexpectedly shy and friendly.

His voice was a subdued rumble: "Hello, Art. Glad to see you. What's the bad news?"

"It's bad, all right," said Levinson. His round face was serious as he bit off the end of a cigar with a quick, nervous gesture. "Shut the door, will you, Morey?"

He looked at the unlit cigar and put it down. "Listen," he said, "I could build up to this gradually and spare your nerves, but I haven't got the patience. I found out something last week that scared me to my toenails."

He stopped and glanced at each of them. They seemed impressed. George did, too, but grim seriousness always impressed him. It made him feel uncomfortable enough to want to drive it off with a facetious remark, but before he had a chance to think of one, Luther said to Levinson, "You really are upset, Art, and that's something you don't do easily." He looked just above George's head. "Are you sure we're the ones you want to tell?"

"Now look here," George said, beginning to get angry. "I may be the youngest of you, but I'm not a kid to be—"

"I wanted George here," Levinson interrupted. "He is younger, and because of that he's inclined to be less stodgy. Also, he has more of the adventurousness of youth, and that may be damned important."

George sat back, compressing his lips and giving one emphatic nod.

"What scared you, Art?" asked Stiles.

Levinson broke the cigar with bitter abruptness. "The human race," he said bluntly, "is nine-tenths sterile."

The others looked at him in shocked silence. George glanced around, saw that nobody else was ready to speak, and asked, "How did you find out?"

"Restocking my sperm and ova banks," said Levinson. "I've been keeping them for a good many years, you may remember. There are a lot of men and women living today who have never had children. Good stock—stock we'll need when and if the race starts breeding again, and yet any one of those people might get killed in an accident and we'd lose it. So I've been keeping up the banks, though I never thought I'd see them used for another couple of thousand years. But nine out of ten donors are now sterile."

"You checked?" asked Luther.

"Naturally. I've got samples from North and South America, from Europe, Asia, Africa. All the same. There it is—we're standing on top of the last slide down to hell."

Stiles looked puzzled. He said, "How do you know it's going to get worse, Art?"

"It's that kind of thing—a progressive change. Morphological deterioration. Sperm with two tails, three tails, no tail, or all but motionless. Ova that can't be fertilized. I've made some tentative charts. I haven't got enough data yet for accuracy, but the breakdown seems to begin in men who are physiologically at least forty and chronologically at least three hundred. In women, a little earlier. That includes damn near everybody. I'm not kidding, Morey. In five to ten years more, there won't be enough viable stock left to start the human race again."

"Have you got any idea what's causing it, Art?" George asked.

"Only the obvious one—it's just one more side effect of longevity. You know that in gross terms what the treatments do is to slow down your catabolic rate. In about fifty years, in other words, you age about as much as you would naturally in one year. At first it was thought that that was all the treatments did, but we know better now. We have the expected increase in 'diseases of the aged'—kidneys, heart, liver, arteriosclerosis, calcium deposits and so on—but we also have a rash of things nobody figured on. Cancer, for instance,

came close to wiping out the race until they licked it at the Gandhi Center about two hundred years ago. Then there's an unexpected drop in resistance to respiratory infections along about age-of-record 250. And now this."

"What have you done about it?" asked Stiles. "You talk to anybody in the government?"

"Sure." Levinson picked up a fresh cigar and bit into it savagely. "I talked to Van Dam, the Public Health Commissioner, after sitting around his office for three days, and he took it up with President Golightly. He brought me back Golightly's answer. Here it is."

He took a folded piece of paper out of his vest pocket.

"Thank you for your interesting report, which I am turning over to the appropriate department for further study. In reply to your question, resumption of wholesale breeding at this time would be prejudicial to world peace and security, and no such measure will be entertained until all other avenues have been exhausted."

He stuffed the note back into his pocket.

"What about those other avenues, Art?" asked Stiles.

"Nonexistent. There is no known cure for morphological sterility in men or women, and not even a promising line of research. We've got to start breeding, that's all. No way out of it. But that trained-seal department of Golightly's will kick the problem around for ten, twenty, fifty years. By that time we might as well start carving our own monuments. *Prejudicial to world peace and security*," he added bitterly.

Stiles scratched his ear, looking mournful. "It *would* kick up kind of a rumpus, Art," he said. "He's right there."

Levinson turned on him. "Try to see a little further than your own union for once, Morey. Would you let the whole blasted race die just to preserve the shortage of masons?"

"Tain't only that," said Stiles, unruffled. "We'd be ready for another war as soon as the population got big enough, for one thing."

"Let's have a couple of more voices here," said Levinson. "Luther, any comment?"

Luther sighed. "Shall I get out my checkbook now, Art, or do you want me to wait until I've liquidated some of my holdings?"

Levinson shrugged at him. "It's going to cost you, all

right," he agreed. "All three of you. We'll need about three hundred thousand credits to start. More later."

"Much more, Art?" Luther queried.

"Plenty. We've got to set up at least half a dozen birth centers, each equipped to handle upward of a thousand children and meet all their needs, if necessary, over a twenty-year period. We'll build the centers, or buy and adapt them. They've got to be in out-of-the-way places and adequately camouflaged to fool the Security Police. We've got to staff them, service them, arrange for protection—and we've got to do it *fast*." He looked at each of them in turn. "I know that all three of you are worth several million apiece. I may want all of it before we're through."

There was a short silence. Then Stiles coughed and looked apologetic. "Let's just clear up a few points, Art. One thing, it seems to me that this cloak-and-dagger stuff is unnecessary. Why not take it to the people? Force the Golightly gang to repeal the birth prohibition?"

Levinson said, "You've done some publicity, Morey. How long do you think it would take to put such a program over, on a world-wide scale?"

Stiles frowned. "A year, maybe . . ." He winced comically. "All right, all right, I know what you're going to say. It would take Golightly just about twenty-four hours to throw us all in the pokey. I was stalling on that one, I guess. But here's another thing, Art. As I get it, you're figuring on six thousand kids or more in the first generation. Why so many?"

"Simply because I'm afraid we won't be able to do much better. If we could manage a million, we still couldn't save all the useful strains that are still viable. It's like this, Morey: Suppose there are only five men and five women in the world. Each one has some quality that the others don't in his heredity. One has mechanical ingenuity, another one leadership, another one artistic imagination, and so on. If one of those couples fails to reproduce, there are two qualities gone forever. Multiply that by a billion and there's our problem."

He waved his cigar at Stiles's nose. "Don't forget, we're down to ten per cent of our stock already. The best we can hope to do is to patch together some kind of crude imitation

of the human race, and hope it will work. If we manage to save *homo sap* at all, we'll be damned lucky."

Stiles leaned forward, elbows on knees, and laced his big fingers together. "Art, I don't know—" he said slowly.

George, who was facing the door, saw it open a crack. He said quietly, "We have visitors."

As the others turned, the door swung open all the way. A woman with coppery hair piled around the merest sketch or suggestion of a hat was leaning into the room with her slender hand on the doorknob. George caught a glimpse of someone standing behind her, and then, smiling brilliantly, she was advancing toward them like a minor natural catastrophe.

"*There* you all are," she said happily. "Hiding! Did you think I wasn't coming, Luther? Art, when did you get into town? Why didn't you call me? Morey, you're looking as eatable as ever. George, *darling*," she finished, and patted him on the cheek.

The four of them were standing, even Luther, who normally made getting out of a chair a ceremony. George found his heart going at an unusual rate. Glancing at the others, he conjectured that they all felt the same symptoms as far as the state of their arteries would permit. Luther and Art were beaming, and Morey's grin was a little more shy than usual. Hilda Place affected men like that—all men, as far as George had been able to discover.

She had enormous brilliant eyes, with faint bluish shadows under them, the eyes of a mature and knowing woman; but her lips had the softness of youth. Her slender body was covered from throat to wrist and calf by her dark green dress. Hilda preferred not to expose herself in public; she had never worn the showcase gowns that were currently fashionable.

Accepting their greetings, she gave each of them a kiss on the cheek. All except George. While he was still telling himself that it was absurd for this to matter so much to him, she had turned and brought a stranger into the group.

"I want you all to meet Joseph Krueger," she said gaily. "He's the most fascinating man in the world, and I want everybody to remember that I discovered him. Gentlemen, this is the Man From the Past!"

The Man From the Past looked as young as George; he was well set up, but had a curious awkwardness about him, a coltish uncertainty. He had a large chin, mild eyes behind dark-rimmed spectacles, and an engaging smile. George, despite a stab of jealousy, decided that he liked him.

"I'm not a time traveler or anything," Krueger was saying. "That's only Miss Place's exaggeration. I'm an amnesiac, they tell me. I found myself standing on a street corner in Vienna two weeks ago, and the last thing I remember before that was having a drink in Wichita, Kansas, in December, 1953. So I'm amusingly ignorant, as Miss Place puts it."

"Astonishing," said Levinson.

"Isn't it?" said Hilda delightedly. Her parted lips were moist. "This is all new to him. He drinks it in like a man from Mars—about the world government, and what happened to New York, and G-string parties—"

"And people hundreds of years old," Krueger put in. "That, mostly."

Levinson was still pursuing his own thought. "You lived under amnesia for better than three centuries, then," he said. "That must be a record. You have no idea what you were doing all that time, I suppose?"

Krueger shook his head. "No, sir. I've made inquiries, of course, but there was nothing in my pockets that gave any clue, and apparently I didn't live in Vienna; I couldn't find anybody who knew me there. Actually, I don't mind very much—I feel like what Miss Place calls me, the Man From the Past. I'm having a time just trying to catch up."

"We've been to see the Peace Monument, and Chico's, and the Doges' Palace—"

"And the pretty girls on the Lido," added Krueger, widening his grin.

"—and we're still not half done. I'm exhausted," Hilda said. "And I've got to disappear for a few weeks on business, so I hope some of you will find time to show Joseph the sights. Not you, Luther. I know you never go out. And, Art, I suppose you're running back to your fruit-flies. But Morey? Or George?"

Krueger looked uncomfortable. "I don't want to be any bother."

"Not at all," said George sympathetically. "You're a nov-

elty, you know, and that's a rare thing after the first hundred years or so. Have you got any notion where you'd like to go next, or is it all too new?"

"Too new, I'm afraid. But any place I haven't seen yet would be fine with me, as long as I'm no trouble."

"I'll work out an itinerary and call you," said George. "Let me have your address and number."

Luther said, "Meanwhile, shall we go mingle with the populace? I've got to, anyway. Some of them would probably recognize me if they saw me and will be hurt if they don't." He offered his arm to Hilda and they started out. He turned at the door to ask Levinson, "You're staying the night at least, aren't you, Art? Good. We'll all get together again a little later."

George exchanged a few more words with Krueger, introduced him to three beautiful women, and wandered off looking for Hilda.

He found her in the middle of a tight group near the end of the room where dancing was being attempted to the strains of Luther's music-library outlet, and wormed his way in to her.

"Dance with me?" he asked hopefully.

"Of course, George," she said, and a reluctant lane opened for them. Then her lithe warm body was in his arms, and the ridiculous gilded feathers on her hat were tickling his ear.

"I rather like your Joe," he said.

"I'm glad. Isn't he delicious?" Her breath warmed the side of his neck.

"Haven't kissed him," said George. "I'll have to take your word for it."

Somehow, without seeming to withdraw deliberately, she no longer was quite so close to him.

"Sorry," he said. "That slipped."

"I didn't like it," she told him, "but I think I'll forgive you, because I like you so much. Actually, though, you're wrong. Joseph is one man I'm absolutely certain I shall never have an affair with."

"That's not much comfort," George said grumpily. "It seems to make two of us—Joseph and me."

She smiled up at him. "As if it matters, darling. There are so many women in the world."

"But it's you I want."

"For the moment."

He stared in astonishment at her softly laughing eyes. "Well, good Lord, you don't think it should be forever, do you? I mean monogamy was all very well for a short-lived human race, but—"

"Don't be silly, George. Nobody could stand one mate for what may be centuries or even more. It's a horrifying thought."

"Then what are you trying to tell me?" he challenged.

"I'm very fond of you; you know that. And I'm very pleased and flattered that you want me."

"Then why not—"

She seemed almost embarrassed. "I don't know just how to put it, darling. If it's just me you want, when there are so many other women, then it's an obsession and you ought to see an analyst."

"But I said it wasn't that. Really, Hilda, this is all very damaging to my self-esteem. I'm not sure I want to know your objection to me, but I'm afraid I must. What is it?"

She turned still pinker and looked away. "It's idiotic, George. You probably won't understand it; I don't think I do, myself." She turned her face up defiantly. "I feel—motherly toward you."

"*Motherly?*" he repeated, stunned. "But that's nonsense! You wouldn't know how a mother feels! None of us would—I mean women, of course—any more than I know what it's like to feel *fatherly*."

"But I'm so much older than you."

"Well, who isn't?"

"You see, I said you wouldn't understand," she answered sadly, then tugged his arm with sudden desperate gaiety toward the bar. "Let's forget all this sociological argument, George. I want a drink."

So did he, George realized.

II.

SUNLIGHT, divided by the prism high in the arched ceiling, struck full on the paintings that lined either side of the long,

curving gallery, and left the center, the moving strip with its divans, its café tables and chairs, in a soft, restful gloom.

"Here we come around again," said George. "Another of the same?"

Joe Krueger looked at his empty glass. "Yes, but this round's mine. You've been paying for everything."

"That will complicate things, though," objected George. "Tell you what. You can buy our tickets to the shadow plays tonight."

As they approached the checker in his little booth, George took the green disk with the tab that said TOM COLLINS and the orange and white one that said SCOTCH/SODA and stuck them into the clip on the table's center pole.

Around the center pole were four illuminated plastic cylinders which reeled off the names of the paintings as they passed. PICASSO, they were saying, MASK AND BONES, OIL ON CANVAS, 2073. TSCHULETCHEW, FLIGHT FORMS #6, INK AND CRAYON, 2105. SHAHN, INCUBATORS, OIL ON CANVAS.

"I'd like to see more of his," said Joe, looking at the Shahn. "His stuff seems more vital than most, somehow. More—" He hunted for a word, gave it up with his usual embarrassed shrug.

"He's younger," said George. "Picasso, Tscheletchew and all that bunch were old men when the longevity treatment came in. They're still turning out the same thing, pretty much, that they were doing three centuries ago. It does get tiresome, I admit, but who's interested in art when there are other things to do and see? We've gone a long way in more important directions, if you ask me."

"Oh, yes," said Joe emphatically.

"Besides, the Culture Commissioner tells them what to turn out. Works fine for everybody."

The serving station came around. The white-jacketed waiter stepped neatly aboard, smiled, deposited their drinks, and stepped off again. The cylinders announced, RENOIR, BAIGNEUSE, OIL ON CANVAS, 1888.

George stirred his drink moodily. Joe was now watching the paintings attentively, and he felt free to let his thoughts wander. After Hilda had gone home last night—not with George, worse luck!—the four of them had gathered in the study again for a council of war. This time it had been

Morey Stiles who had led the discussion. He had pointed out that the project couldn't possibly be managed on a small scale, that in spite of the danger they had to have an organization. He was right, of course; after all, they'd need an enormous staff who would have to know what was going on, not to mention the several thousands of women who would have to be persuaded to give birth.

Luther, warming to the problem, had been all for secret meetings in basements, and an elaborate organization based on the ancient Communist system. He had been voted down. The plan, as they finally evolved it, centered around doctors—specialists in women's complaints, for preference—who were to be recruited and sworn in by Levinson. It would be their job to test their patients for fertility, carefully sound out the pick of the lot, and recruit them in turn. Meanwhile Morey, as the team's best administrator, would be drawing up plans for the birth centers, inspecting locations, bribing officials, and so on. Luther, who had the widest acquaintance among moneyed men, would scout for more capital.

There had seemed to be nothing left for George to do but to pony up when required and to keep his mouth shut. Levinson had told him, however, that there would ultimately have to be a somewhat risky attempt to reach the public, and George, because of his youth and daring, would be very valuable in that phase of the conspiracy. When? Levinson didn't know.

And Hilda, who had only just got into town, was off again to some mysterious destination for an unspecified length of time.

Anyhow, he had Joe to feel superior to; he ought to be grateful for that. He felt mildly ashamed of himself when he glanced at the man and saw the eagerness in his face. Perhaps that was the answer to the question of ennui, he thought—get yourself knocked on the head, or have your memories surgically excised somehow, and start all over again.

That wasn't such a foolish idea as it might seem, he told himself. After all, nobody knew yet what real longevity was like; nobody was older than three or four centuries. What would happen when they were all three thousand or more?

There was plenty of time to worry about it, at least.

He said, "I'm sorry, I wasn't listening."

Joe repeated, "I've been reading histories like mad, but I can't seem to take it all in. Things are so much the same, in some ways, and yet so different." He shook his head. "I suppose I'm trying to get it too fast."

"Well, there isn't exactly any rush," said George cheerfully. "Anything in particular bothering you?"

"No children, chiefly, I guess. It's hard for me to understand how that could possibly be enforced. In my day, population was always increasing to meet the available food supply; it was supposed to be some kind of natural law. And now you've stopped it cold."

"Had to," said George. "You see, the fellows who perfected the longevity techniques published their work, and the newspapers took it up, and the thing got completely out of control in the next fifty years. Normal birth rate—higher, as a matter of fact—and the death rate way down. That was the time of the big blowup—famines, riots, and the Last War on top of it. When we came out of that, we had three things: longevity, a strong world government, and a greatly improved birth control technique. Those pills, you know, that everybody has to take.

"Well, what else was there to do? They had to cut down the birth rate, at least, or in a century or so we would have been standing on each other's shoulders. And *that* would have been unenforceable, you know—restricted breeding. You can't tell anybody that he's not as fit as the next man to have children. So they stopped it altogether, made childbirth a capital crime. As a result, the total population has shrunk a good deal in the last three hundred years, but we're still over what's regarded as the optimum figure. Or so they say."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, restricted breeding is an awfully hot potato. We'll have to come to it eventually, but I don't think anybody in the government is happy about the prospect. If we started reproducing in any quantity, the whole economic balance would be upset. Tremendously complicated problem. I don't know enough about it to explain to you properly."

"I should think it would be particularly hard on the women," said Joe thoughtfully.

"Well, there were a lot of people, men and women both,

who couldn't adjust to longevity itself, let alone the other problems. In the first century after the war, I understand suicide accounted for something like fifteen per cent of the death rate. Looking at it from one angle, that was a good thing for the race. I mean to say, if a person has any fundamental instability, it's going to come out in two centuries or less. And people for whom there simply wasn't any room in the society. Without children consuming and not producing, you know, our production rate is enormously higher. There was a lot of unemployment, too, in that first century. Some starvation, I'm afraid. And crime waves. But that's all settled down now, and as you see we have a very stable setup, and a high living standard. That's why it's going to be so difficult to change when we have to."

"Umm," said Joe, seriously.

It occurred to George that he had been talking rather seriously himself, not exactly the best line to take for a man with knowledge he was supposed to conceal. He smiled cheerfully and said, "But I don't think anybody should work up an ulcer over it just yet. You can generally lick a problem if you have a few thousand years to mull it over."

Joe nodded enthusiastically. "That's one of the things that awes me, whenever I think about it. In the old days—I mean, in my day—" He shook his head. "I keep getting my terms of reference mixed up. Anyhow, it used to be that a man could learn enough to do what he wanted to do by the time he was thirty, and then his life was half done. Now—" He looked baffled. "It's hard to take in. Tell me, Miss Place said something about rocket flights to the stars—?"

"Oh, yes. They got to the Moon in 1964. That must have been a year or two after you blanked out. Mars in 1971, I think it was, and Venus the year after. Moons of Jupiter in 1979. All uninhabitable, of course."

"Yes, but I meant *interstellar* flights?"

"Just one. Alpha Centauri, along about the turn of the century. The trip took something like six years each way, I understand. They found a very Earthlike planet, and I believe there's some talk of putting a small colony there."

"Lord!" said Joe Krueger. "But—all this time, and they haven't done anything more about it?"

"Well, it's really a hobbyist's kind of thing," said George

thoughtfully. "A good many people, with more time and more capital to play with, have turned to space-flight who wouldn't have been much involved with it before. But it hasn't any economic base, you see. No really urgent reason for anyone to tackle it."

"That's what I don't get," said Joe, creasing his brow into an anxious frown. "Wouldn't it solve the problem we were just talking about?"

"It might, at that," said George, trying valiantly to see the question from the other man's viewpoint. "But it hasn't come to that yet, and probably won't for a good long time. As things stand, human life is a very precious thing, much more than it was even in the Western countries in your day. That's understandable, isn't it? It's like betting at roulette—if you haven't got much to lose, you may as well risk it all; but if you've got a lot, you're a fool to gamble it away. So that's one reason we don't have war—another argument against breeding that I forgot to mention—and we play a good deal of tennis and squash and so on, but no football; and we're not anxious to risk our necks on exploring expeditions. You had something in mind like the colonization of the Amazon basin and so on, didn't you?"

Joe nodded. "All habitable areas."

"Not the same thing, though—we have no population pressure, no economic pressure. Things are good here for everybody. Why should anybody want to leave? There's more room in the Americas, but I like Europe and who needs more room just for himself?"

Joe grinned wryly. "I see it—in theory, anyhow. But I'm damned if I feel that way about it. Me, I'd like to go."

"I'll see if I can wangle an introduction to Clarke, the Rocket Society high lama. Luther knows him, I think."

Joe was saying, "That would be wonderful," when George's wrist phone buzzed. He said, "Excuse me," and swiveled the disk into his palm so that the receiver covered his ear and the transmitter pickup touched his throat, making eavesdropping impossible.

"George Miller," he said.

"George, this is Art Levinson," said the tiny voice rapidly. "I'm about to be arrested by the Security Police. I tried to reach the others, but they're both out of phone range."

"The Security—that's impossible," George protested. "We haven't done a thing. They *couldn't* know!"

"I told you I spoke to Van Dam, the Public Health Commissioner," said the voice impatiently. "He must have figured I'd do something about the sterility situation, so he evidently had my rooms wired and put a detail of police on my trail. Everything we said in our conference must be on official tapes."

"Good God!" George exclaimed. "Then we're all in danger!"

"Of course. Don't tell me you haven't got anybody trailing you."

George glanced around apprehensively. Everybody suddenly looked suspicious, but there was no one he could specifically identify as a Security Policeman.

"I don't know," he said. "Where are you?"

"In Luther's bedroom. I locked myself in. They're trying to break the door down. Good-by, George. Just pass the word along. That's all you can—"

"Hold on! How long can you keep them out of there?"

"Another few minutes, if that. Don't try to do anything foolish, George. There's another of them in a 'copter outside the bedroom window. Just tell—"

"Wait!" said George excitedly. "Hold them off as long as you can. Throw a fit. Do anything." He broke the contact and said to Joe's astonished face, "Something urgent. Pay the check for me, will you? I'll call you later."

He fumbled a bill out of his wallet, stood up and leaped off the moving strip, dashing past indignant patrons of the arts to the roof exit.

Thoughts blurred in his head. He didn't know what he could do, but he intended to do something. He couldn't let Levinson stand off the police by himself. The excitement was somehow pleasant—the adrenalin squirting through his veins, his chest filling massively with air, his shoulders knotting with the expectation of a fight. It was astonishing. He couldn't think of anyone who wouldn't avoid danger at absolutely any cost; with his conditioning, it was hard to believe that he was being so foolhardy.

Yet George felt rather proud of himself. He'd wondered why Levinson had included him in the original tiny group

of conspirators, had resignedly assumed it was actually because of his money. Now he knew at least part of the reason and respected Levinson's shrewdness.

He was, he thought quickly, about two minutes away from Luther's apartment by air—if he could get a cab.

The roof was crowded with private 'copters, and for a moment George debated the idea of stealing one. Impossible. They were all stowed in parking clips, and he couldn't get one out past the attendant anyhow, even if some fool had left his keys in the dashboard console. He ran on, reaching the cab section just in time to see a red-and-green 'copter lifting away. He thought it was empty, but he couldn't be sure.

He shouted futilely, then swung his wrist-radio out, dialed it to "Directional" and sighted carefully at the rising 'copter. After a long moment the instrument clicked and said, "Signor?" The cab steadied and hovered.

"Down here," said George. "Where you just came from—the Modern Museum." Apparently he had lost the contact, for the 'copter hung annoyingly where it was. Then he could see the tiny dot that was the driver's head. He waved madly, and in a moment the cab settled back to the landing stage.

George piled in and said, "Get up—*quick*." As the 'copter lifted again, the driver's mustachioed face turned to regard him quizzically. He said, "The Penaldo Building on the Rio S. Polo. You know the place I mean?"

"Surely, signor."

"Then hurry, will you?" George waved a hundred-lira note, on second thought added another. The driver's eyebrows went up the merest trifle; philosophically, he headed the machine into the northbound traffic level and fed power to the rotors.

George looked anxiously at his phone. He didn't have Art's call number, worse luck. But if they had already broken down the door when he got there, he'd know soon enough. He forced himself to relax, then exploded into motion the next instant as the cab settled on the Penaldo Building's roof. He thrust the money at the driver, shouted, "Good work, thanks!" and ran across the roof to the canal-side parapet.

He looked back once to make sure that the cab had taken

off, then peered cautiously over the parapet. There was the police 'copter, sure enough, hovering outside the window of Luther's top-floor bedroom. Underneath, five stories down, a white gondola was rocking in the surge of a small power boat. The gondolier's ancient automatic curses drifted faintly up to him.

Now what? He had had a vague notion that if he could eliminate the 'copter somehow, he could get Art out through the window before the other Security men broke in. But eliminating the 'copter looked tough now, if not impossible.

He risked another look. There was only one man in the 'copter; that was a point in his favor, though he wasn't sure how. But just to begin with, he couldn't attract the man's attention by shouting; he'd never be heard over the noise of the 'copter's rotors. And he couldn't very well show himself. As for the phone—

Wait a minute! The police would almost certainly be talking to each other by phone; in fact, he was positive of it. And these small transmitters didn't reproduce intonations very well. It could work. Anyway—

George aimed the phone carefully at the man in the 'copter and said briskly, "On the roof! Quick!" Then he ducked out of the man's visual range and watched the rotor blades. When they began to rise, he leaped away from the parapet and got behind the stairway entrance.

The door was open, and George could hear muffled banging sounds down the corridor. Good for Art, he thought abstractedly; he must have piled furniture against the door.

He looked around the corner of the entrance and saw the 'copter's tail level with the parapet. Instantly he faced the other way, put his palm against the door frame and shoved himself violently backward.

He toppled out into view, legs going furiously to try to keep his balance; then he let himself go and landed with a bone-crushing thump on the hard roof. He scrambled to his feet again, drew an imaginary knife from his jacket, and lunged back behind the entrance.

There was a thump as the 'copter landed on the roof, and then footsteps pounded toward him. George ducked around the opposite side of the entrance and ran silently, on the balls of his feet, completely around to the blind side again.

The policeman, a depressingly burly young man in pearl-gray jacket and shorts, was leaning half into the doorway, listening to the sounds from down the hall. Without hesitation, George launched himself at his back.

They tottered a moment. Then the policeman's grip was torn away and they plunged together down the stairs. They landed with a jar that shook George from skull to knees. He sorted himself out and saw that the young policeman was also getting up, with a dazed expression on his face. George hit him on the point of the jaw, as hard as he could. The policeman collapsed and slid down another four steps.

Panting, George slid down beside him and took his gun. He could still hear the pounding down the hall. Evidently the others hadn't heard the crash when they came down the stairs, though it had sounded loud enough to wake a regiment.

George hit the recumbent policeman thoughtfully behind the ear with the butt of his gun. He would have liked to get him out of the way, but strongly doubted his own ability to lug that steak-fed hulk any distance. He went back up the stairs, past the idling 'copter, to the parapet again.

It was a good fifteen feet down to the window and no way to get there. He couldn't take the 'copter down and simply invite Art to climb in; the rotor blades wouldn't have enough clearance.

Swearing to himself, George ran back to the 'copter and rummaged inside it. In a locker just forward of the door, he found a rope ladder. But it took him what seemed like five anguished minutes to locate the hooks—diabolically hidden over the door inside the cab—which were designed to support it.

He climbed in and took the 'copter up, past the parapet and over, dangerously close, letting the ladder dangle against the window. For another agonizing interval, nothing happened. George was about to haul the ladder up again and tie a wrench to it, when the window suddenly swung open and Art's red, wild-eyed face appeared.

George leaned out and gestured wildly. Art nodded, grasped the ladder, and swung precariously out into space.

George hovered carefully until Art was halfway in. Then

he took the 'copter up and away in a wild swoop that nearly made Art fall out again.

Art closed the door and jack-knifed himself into the tiny space to the right of the pilot's seat. When he got his breath back, he said, "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," said George. "Did they want you very badly, Art?"

"Afraid so. Didn't give them a chance to tell me. Ducked into the bedroom and locked the door when I saw them." He took a deep breath and smiled. "Where to now?"

George felt an unexpected glow of satisfaction. Imagine anyone asking *him* what to do next!

"I'm looking for an empty landing stage," he said. "We'll ditch the 'copter there, and then get ourselves as thoroughly lost as we can."

III.

THEY LEFT the 'copter on the roof of a theater building and stopped at the nearest public phone booth to try to reach Luther and Morey. Both were still out of range. Then they went looking for a suitable hiding place for Art.

In Venice—in any modern city—there were a million places to get very thoroughly lost. There were discreet apartment houses, residence hotels, 'copter courts—and there were the vice houses. George, knowing Art's staid habits, chose one of the latter. The police would also know Art and might not look there.

For the benefit of those with scruples or reputations, entrance to the house was by way of a series of little cubicles lining one side of an arcade. The other side was rented to a group of second-rate but bona fide shops. Having inspected the merchandise displayed there and assured himself that no acquaintances were lurking in the corridor, a prospective client could simply step across into the nearest vacant cubicle and shut the door. Inside, a polite voice from a wall speaker asked to be allowed to learn your wishes, registered you under any name you chose to give, and allotted you a room, a suite, a wing or a floor according to your wishes and your pocketbook.

George, speaking German with a thick and slightly drunken Münchener accent, affected hesitation and asked for a résumé of the house's attractions. The invisible clerk immediately switched to impeccable Low German and suggested, "The Herren would possibly like to inspect the ladies in one of the private salons before making a choice? Or perhaps one of the theaters first? Or if the Herren require any stimulation—?" He proceeded to describe some of the entertainments now being offered in the theaters, and to name the various species of stimulants that were available to clients.

"No," said George fuzzily. "Later, later. We are already too drunk. Give us just a room—no, a suite. The best."

"Certainly. Sixty lira, please." George put the notes into the slot in the counter. A receipt and two door keys popped out, and the right wall of the cubicle rolled back to reveal a tiny self-service elevator. "Suite C 35," said the clerk. "Turn right when you leave the elevator."

The suite was eminently comfortable: three bedrooms, two baths, living room, game room, and even a tiny gymnasium; but Art grumbled. "Dammit, George, I suppose I shouldn't complain when you've just saved my neck, but I can't see your sense of humor. Anyway, what are these people going to think when I keep staying here but don't have any women up?"

"Probably think we're queer," George suggested. Then, as Art seemed about to explode, he added hastily, "It'll be good for you, Art—teach you humility and not condemning your fellow man and so forth. Anyhow, you've got to admit it's safe."

"All right," said Art, brushing the subject aside. "Listen, do you have any idea where Luther and Morey might be, or when they're due back?"

"Not the faintest," George admitted. "Luther has his cat farm up near Turino—he might have gone there—but he might just as easily have run over to Praha or even Wembley for a couple of days. Morey might have gone back to North America—I hope so—but in any case I don't see how we can risk a 'gram without giving the whole show away."

"No," agreed Art. He scowled and bit his lip. "Just the same, we've got to locate them. I have a hunch the S. P. is just as anxious to find them as we are."

George lifted one eyebrow. "You think they're clairvoyant?"

"No. I think that up till an hour ago, Golightly's crowd took me just seriously enough to want me out of the way. But since you've pulled that television-serial act with the 'copter, I'm willing to bet that they're seriously alarmed. I told you they must have our meeting on tape, so they'll know Luther and Morey are involved. You, too, of course."

George sat down on the edge of a large, circular divan, upholstered in aphrodisia red. He said thoughtfully, "Well, what do we do? If we all run, then we'll just be advertising our whereabouts, won't we?"

Art nodded grimly. "But if the S. P. gets hold of any of the four of us, I wouldn't give much for our chances of seeing daylight again."

George stared at him. "I suppose I'm naive, but it seems to me that you're implying they'll use illegal methods—truth serum and so on."

"I think they will," Art said positively. "George, you were born into this society, so I wouldn't expect you to realize, emotionally, just how unstable it really is. You've read about the series of religious wars that followed the big blowup, and the Asian massacres, but I suppose it's never occurred to you that that kind of thing could happen again. It could, and nobody knows it better than Golightly. By education and technology and, let's face it, by the execution of everybody who really objected, this planet has been forced to keep its birth rate at zero. But the urge to reproduce, next to the survival instinct, is one of the strongest forces in nature. Tilt the balance of control just enough, and Golightly's government would go over like a house of cards. And just incidentally, Golightly is about as paranoid as you can get without being locked up. I know the man. He'll do *anything* to keep himself in the driver's seat."

George felt himself going a trifle pale. He said, "In that case, I suppose I'd better get busy. I'll call every place they could possibly be. You stay here, Art. I'll come back and report as soon as I can."

He found a public booth in the concourse nearby, and spent an expensive twenty minutes trying to locate Morey at

his headquarters in Des Moines, and Luther at Turino, Praha, Wembley and points in between.

Gloomily, he called Art at the vice house, using the name he had given in registering. "No luck so far," he said in German. "See here, have you looked at the fax or the video newscasts?"

"Yes. Nothing of interest there."

"Do you think they may have been found already?"

"It's possible," said Art's earnest voice, "but I think it's unlikely. Anyone like those two is terribly hard to track down at a moment's notice, as you are finding out. If we can get them within the next few hours, I think we'll be in time. Keep trying."

George rang off and sat thinking for a moment. Actually, the possible number of places where either Luther or Morey might be at this moment included everything within a day's flight from Venice, meaning the major part of Earth's surface. If he kept on calling relay stations at random, it might easily take him days to hit the right one. There had to be a quicker way.

How about the agony columns in the Telefax papers? George considered the probable cost briefly, and whistled softly to himself. Another difficulty was that it would mean showing his hand; the S. P. would almost certainly see the messages, whether Luther and Morey did or not. But he could think of no other answer.

He plucked a doodle-sheet from the pad fixed to the wall of the booth, and set down a rough draft of the message. Dissatisfied, he scratched it out and tried again. After six attempts, he had:

WORLD FATHERS OF VERMONT AND LOUISIANA: Serious charges have been leveled against revered Father Owl of California. Abandon your worldly identities immediately and fly to consult with your brethren. The meeting will assemble in the place of the Drowned Insect.

It sounded silly enough, he hoped, to pass as an ordinary notice intended for one of the innumerable crackpot sects which had sprung up after the power of the organized churches had been crushed. He couldn't make it more spe-

cific, but he hoped "Vermont and Louisiana" would serve to attract Luther's and Morey's attention—the name of a man's home state will usually stand out from a page of type almost as well as his own name—and "World Fathers" and "Father Owl of California" would make the identification certain.

The last line was a long shot. He had to indicate a meeting place without naming it; "the place of the Drowned Insect" was a restaurant in Venice where the three of them, a few years before, had been served a tureen of soup with a dead cockroach floating in the center of it. Also, he had to tell them to assume false names, and if possible to get across the idea that they were to disguise themselves. Here again, he couldn't be too explicit; "abandon your worldly identities" was the best he could think of.

When he read it over, it seemed like a forlorn hope either that the two men would see the notice or that they would read it correctly. But he took the slidewalk down to the nearest fax agency and fed the message into a machine, adding the code numbers for all the local papers served by the Mediterranean Agency, which covered southern and eastern Europe, part of what had once been the Soviet Union and most of North Africa.

The cost was approximately two hundred times the amount of cash he was carrying, and this worried him until he reflected that he was undoubtedly on the S. P. list, if Art was right; there was no point in trying to conceal his tracks. He wrote a check and fed it into the machine.

While he waited for its acknowledgment, he set up the same message on another machine and coded it for the Pan-American Syndicate. He went through the same procedure twice more, once for the North Atlantic Agency and once for the All-Asia Syndicate.

When he was finished his Venetian bank account was in a state of near collapse.

The bank itself was only a few blocks away, near the Rialto bridge. As an afterthought, he went there and closed out his account, pocketing the cash. It had occurred to him that, again supposing that Art was right, the government would very likely impound their property. He wished he had included a suggestion of this kind in the message to Luther and Morey, but it was too late to worry about it.

He went back to the vice house, conferred with Art, and then took himself to "the Place of the Drowned Insect."

The restaurant was an old-fashioned one, catering to those who liked human service well enough to pay the almost astronomical prices imposed by the waiters' salaries. At that, George noticed, the place was understaffed. In another century or so, he supposed, nobody would be able to hire any kind of servant for less than a division chief's pay.

He found an inconspicuous table at the rear, ordered minestrone and spaghetti marinara, and waited. When the spaghetti gave out, he ordered a half bottle of claret. He made the wine last as long as he could, then bought a newspaper at the fax machine across the room and ordered another half bottle.

He checked to make sure his ad had been entered properly, read the paper through, and then, through sheer boredom, read it completely through again. He was beginning to feel awash with wine, and the waiter was glancing at him with obvious irritation each time he passed. George caught his eye and ordered a pastry and coffee. When that was gone, he ordered more coffee. Then he went back to wine.

Eventually it became impossible to think of taking another sip of the stuff. George sat and stared glassily at the half-empty bottle, wondering why he had not had the God-given sense to make the meeting place a library, or an opium den, or anything at all except a restaurant.

"Came as soon as I could," said Luther's voice. "What's up?"

George looked around with enormous relief to see the little man easing into the chair opposite.

"Luther!" he said. "I couldn't be gladder to see you!" He smothered a belch. "You haven't gone back to your apartment, have you?"

"No, of course not. Why?"

"Don't. According to Art, we're all about two jumps away from jail. Where were you, and how did you come back?"

"In Milano. I wanted to see a man there who claimed he had a new strain of Abyssinians. Came back by plane, the same way I went up. *Why?*"

"Good Lord," said George. "You were lucky they didn't nab you at the airport. All right, the next thing is, give me

checks for any funds you've got in Venetian banks. Wait a minute. First, do you have any idea where Morey might be?"

"Marseilles, I think. Now why—"

George stood up somewhat unsteadily. "I'll try to call him there while you're writing the checks. Don't order anything till I get back."

He returned in a moment. "No luck. Either he's on the way back, or you were mistaken. Got the checks?"

"Yes. Here. But listen, George, take pity on my ignorance, will you? *What's* happened to Art? *Why* do you want all my money? I feel as if I'd come in at the second act."

"I'll explain it all to you later or Art will. Oh, damn!" He looked at his watch. "The banks are closed, aren't they?" He tore up the three slips of paper Luther had handed him and stuffed the fragments in his pocket. "Well, look. Art is in the Hotel Scato on the Ruza Vecchia, Suite C 35. Speak German and ask for Herr Bauernfeind—that's the name I gave when I registered. You go on up there as fast as you can, but use the slidewalks; don't take a 'copter. I'll stay here—" George looked unhappily at the wine bottle—"and wait till Morey shows up, or the place closes."

Luther stood up. "All right. Look, though, if Morey is on the way here, and if he started about when I did, he might be within phone range by now. Why don't you try calling him again?"

George clutched at the idea. "I will. Wait for me." He went to the booth again and dialed Morey's number.

A voice said, "This is Stiles."

George sighed happily. He said, "George, Morey. How long will it take you to get here? . . . You saw the ad? . . . Good. I'll meet you outside."

An hour later they were all together in Art's suite, listening to a video newscaster announce, "The following persons are wanted by the Security Police for questioning in connection with a conspiracy against the peace. Please memorize these names and pictures. If you see one of these persons, communicate immediately with your local S. P. office. Arthur Benjamin Levinson, age 341; residence, Pasadena, California; profession, geneticist. Luther Wallace Wheatley, age 357; residences in Venice, Mexico City and Caulfield, Vermont; independently wealthy." Three more pictures and

descriptions of Luther's friends appeared, then George's. Morey was far down the list, which was a long one.

"They'll narrow it down," said Art Levinson. "In a couple of days, at the most, they'll have located all but the four of us. Then you'll really see a fox hunt."

Morey's long face was gloomy. "It don't look good, Art. If you want my opinion, we're licked."

"I didn't say the fox hunt would succeed," Levinson said. "We can slip the hounds and, as long as we're free, we have a chance to get our program across."

Morey shook his head. "Maybe you got some reason to be optimistic, but I don't see it. We've got to throw out all the plans we've made so far, ain't that right?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, will you tell me what in blazes we can *do*? How much money have we got between us?"

They counted up. George had a little over two thousand international credits, Art four hundred, Luther not quite a thousand, and Morey, surprisingly, five thousand.

"It's union money," he said glumly. "If we spend it, that's one more crime chalked up against us. Not that it'll matter. Anyhow, we got just short of eighty-three hundred credits. How far can we get with that?"

"Not very far—if we run," said Art. "If we run, they'll catch us. I think we can take that as a mathematical certainty. That disposes of one of the three alternatives we have, as I see it."

"The other two being?" asked Luther.

"We can give ourselves up," said Art. "Or we can fight. It may seem funny, but I honestly think the safest thing we can do—supposing for a minute that we're just interested in saving our necks—is to fight. Or let's say to resist. The other two ways are the next thing to suicide."

Art's round face was flushed with enthusiasm. Luther was smiling quietly, and there was a faint gleam even in Morey's pale eye. George felt a trifle left out. He had an absurd picture of the four of them behind a barricade, doing battle with an endless swarm of policemen.

"Somebody explain this to me, will you?" he asked plaintively.

"He's too young to remember," said Luther kindly. "Tell the boy, Art."

Art leaned forward earnestly, and unconsciously the three hitched themselves forward a little in their chairs.

"George, you probably haven't read much about the two so-called 'World Wars' that preceded the Last War, because in historical perspective they were only a sort of preliminary. But during the second one, when Germany had overrun most of Europe, there was a thing called the Resistance. An underground movement. Their situation was very much like ours—they didn't have enough of an organization to attack openly, or even defend themselves openly. But they did what they could—sabotage, espionage, propaganda, and some guerrilla warfare. In effect, they made themselves one hell of a nuisance to the Germans. We can do the same thing."

"There were more than four of them, though, weren't there?" George asked.

Art said, "An analogy is just an analogy, George, not an identity. As it happens, Golightly's government has one serious disadvantage that the Germans didn't have. The Germans were a frankly oppressive group to begin with, operating to the full extent of their power. Golightly's crowd *can't* fight even a small resistance group—and we'll grow, don't worry—without assuming the characteristics of a tyranny. And, George, this planet simply isn't weak enough or sick enough, economically and politically, to hold still for a tyrant.

"This present group has been continuously in power for more than two centuries, and there isn't one of the inner circle that wouldn't like to extend their power. But we've still got a democracy. Why? Because they haven't got a power concept behind them. They've kept office all this time because they're the best administrators and practical politicians on the planet, *and that's all*. If they stop acting in the people's interest—which they've already done—and if enough of the people find out about it—which they will—their goose is cooked."

"This is revolution you're talkin' about," said Morey gently. "A lot of people're going to get hurt."

"I know it," replied Art, looking grimly unhappy. "Show me another way, Morey, and I'll grab it."

"This is just for the record, so to speak," Morey said. "There's an election coming up in eighteen months. We might be able to hook up with Golightly's opposition and get them in."

Luther snorted. "Di Falco? That man is the eternal disappointed candidate."

"And," said Art, "we can't wait eighteen months. All right?"

"Grant the point," agreed Morey reluctantly.

"Okay. Here's a tentative list of tactics I've made up. You'll notice that I've tried to put the emphasis on things that will provoke the government into illegal and, if possible, violent acts. It's like ju-jitsu—we've got to make them use their own strength against themselves."

"Let's see that," said Morey, with such enthusiasm that the other three stared at him. "It's been a long time since a union man had to hit below the belt, but I remember a few tricks, can dig up more from the old books, and maybe invent some of my own."

IV.

THERE WAS an underworld, of course; no society, however perfect, had completely rehabilitated or absorbed the maladjusted who had either too much power drive or not enough, the bitter rebels and the passively defeated, those who wouldn't conform and those who couldn't. In ethical societies, the underworld had consisted of criminal and political malcontents, while harsh tyrannies had suppressed the honest.

George had been vaguely aware of the underworld, but he had never, as far as he knew, encountered any of its denizens. Now, guided by Morey and Levinson, who had maintained cautious contact with it, he found that he had unsuspectingly been quite friendly with a number of people on the Security Police's gray list.

The strange thing was that he had always previously considered these daring semi-criminals the worst bores he knew.

There was the Thanatopsis Club, for instance. Levinson

had arranged to have George address them in secret session, and George switched cabs, doubled back several times, skittered through alleys while looking fearfully over his shoulder—and ended in a dismal suburban house belonging to Elbert Maxwell, the ornithologist.

It was a very tense gathering in the living room. Carlotta Speranza was there, a small unattractive bibliographer with a sharp and peering face, who could talk your ear off about ancient literature; Kurt Lustgarten, the philosopher, whose flabbily intense features had backed George into more corners at parties than he liked to remember; Paavo Atterberg, the musicologist, whom George had been more successful at evading, generally because Atterberg could be easily maneuvered to a piano; and other similarly intense people, with eager, hungry eyes and nervous hands, who were unfamiliar to George.

Elbert Maxwell saw him look puzzledly at the TV screen, which was writhing with some frantic dance in full color, and the pair of drinks each person was holding grimly, and the flimsy costumes they wore.

"Camouflage," Maxwell explained, giving a shrill, anxious laugh. "If the police raid us—which has happened a couple of times; we're all suspected of dangerous cultural activities, you know—why, we're simply having an innocent vice party."

"I see," said George, confused. "When do I speak? I have several more addresses to make tonight."

Maxwell glanced at a card he was holding. "Well, we'll try to move you up on the agenda, but I'm afraid you picked a bad night—there's a great deal of business to be done at this meeting."

George took the two antagonistic drinks that were handed him and sat down to listen patiently until his turn came. He was aware of his own tension. He was pretty sure he'd thrown off any possible shadows, but he couldn't know whether the others present had been as clever. They certainly didn't look it. At any moment, the house might be stormed and this pathetic attempt to make a criminal underground meeting seem like a mere orgy wouldn't fool the police.

Maxwell, pretending to watch the TV screen, told the gathering that two more species of bird had become extinct

in the last decade, and at least six others were in danger, with the government, as usual, threatening any attempt to save them. The listeners showed every emotion from horror to rage. George tried to feel upset about the situation, but couldn't. It wasn't that he disliked birds; he just thought it was their problem, not his. Maxwell's motion to set up secret bird sanctuaries was carried, and George felt an emotional response for the first time—at the amount of money they agreed to raise for the project.

Carlotta Speranza, talking passionately about the decline of literature, didn't bother pretending to watch the TV show. She wanted an ambitious program begun *immediately*—undercover writing classes, printing plants and distribution channels. Lustgarten objected that the population had been educated away from reading. She added a hit-and-run public campaign to her program. Maxwell, clearly feeling that all this might cut down the funds for his secret aviaries, shrewdly tabled the resolution.

"You can't do this to me!" Carlotta shrieked. "Are your birds more important to civilization than *literature*?"

"Of course not," Maxwell said hurriedly. "Everything is important. But we can't do everything at the same time."

"Then put your program aside temporarily."

Maxwell was shocked. "And let these species vanish *forever*?"

"I think both should be considered by all our colleagues in the underworld," said Atterberg, "but the main thing is raising money to save music." And he tried to go into an excited explanation of the musical crisis, but Maxwell made him wait until his speech was scheduled.

Lustgarten spoke next. George tried manfully to listen to his statement on problems of philosophy in an indifferent world, but developed a headache that had to be massaged by a drink. One proved insufficient; he took the other and opposite drink, which acted like an explosive charge to the primer of the first one. He was silently rooting for one team of jet-skaters on TV by the time Lustgarten and Atterberg finished and it was his turn to talk.

George managed somehow to explain the problem. The others listened attentively until it was time to take a vote. Then a split developed. Lustgarten and Atterberg declared

that they were personally not involved; they didn't care much if humanity survived unless, as Atterberg put it, there was music in its soul, or philosophy and not brainless frivolity, in Lustgarten's words. A very tall woman with almost no hair on her head, quite a bit on her face and military shoulders stated that she would rather die than submit to breeding.

Maxwell was in favor, as long as the project did not interfere with saving birdlife. When Carlotta Speranza unexpectedly dropped her own program to support George's, and said, "Birds don't create literature, Elbert; *people* do, and we must keep the race going to that end," Maxwell suddenly changed his mind.

"If I have to choose between birds and humanity," he said bitterly, "I'll take birds every time. *They* never exterminated another race of animals! Whereas, what has been humanity's record? One species after another wiped off the planet! Because of viciousness? Greed? At one time, yes—the bison and the egret are two examples. But the motive today is pure lack of interest. We encroached on the habitats of our furred and feathered friends until they could no longer maintain existence, and so went into the limbo of extinct species."

"Wouldn't happen again," George argued fuzzily, realizing that he was neither articulate nor sober enough to overcome Maxwell's notorious literary style. "Everybody dies. New generation takes place. Not enough people to cover Earth. Birds multiply. Animals multiply. Educate new generation to take care of 'em. Teach 'em music and philosophy and literature—everything. Solves all problems same time."

"In how many centuries will the present population die off?" Maxwell demanded. "What happens to animal life in that time? Wiped out, sir—wiped out completely! No, I'll let humanity die out before I'll allow another species ever to become extinct!"

"But voting against the birth program won't hasten the end of mankind," Carlotta Speranza pointed out heatedly. "It will still take the same number of centuries before we all die."

"Abs'lutely right," George agreed.

It didn't change the vote, however. George acquired Car-

lotta and two other women and one man who looked singularly unfertile as members of the conspiracy.

He was told how to get to his next appointment, given a few more drinks for the road, and, though he remembered only a blurrily earnest face or two in indistinctly different living rooms, he had nearly two dozen signed applications to turn over to Levinson in the morning.

"You've done fine, George," Levinson said enthusiastically, while George shakily placed a hangover capsule on his fuzz-covered tongue. "The organization is under way!"

"It's awfully hard on the eardrums and the bladder," George complained. "Right now, I don't feel that saving humanity is worth the trouble."

"You'll learn not to listen," said Morey encouragingly. "Even to yourself, as a matter of fact. I know—I can make any number of union speeches without even hearing myself. Habit."

"And all the drinking I have to do?" George asked, pulling down his lower eyelids to see the engorged veins more clearly.

"It's free, isn't it? And you can carry alcohol-neutralizing tablets with you."

George turned around in horror. "Then where's the fun?"

V.

GEORGE'S BEARD ITCHED. He had had it for almost a month now, but it didn't appear that he was ever going to get used to it. Or to the wax Art Levinson had injected under the skin at the bridge of his nose, to give him a new profile. He kept compulsively scratching the area and it seemed to have set up some kind of local irritation. He had a plastiskin bandage over it now, which increased the hump and made the disguise better, though still more annoying, but at least it kept his fingernails away. After this weekend, when he'd meet the other three in Seville to compare notes, he'd have it attended to; meanwhile, there was nothing to do but bear it. There were doctors in Paris to whom it would be safe to go, but George didn't know them; that was Levinson's department. They had decided to work apart as much as possible, so that

the capture of one might hinder their activities, but wouldn't stop them altogether.

At the moment, ironically enough, both the itches, as well as the skin dye and new hairline, were entirely unnecessary. George, mingling as usual with the largest crowd he could find anywhere, was attending the annual Beaux Arts Ball as one of approximately three hundred robed, tinted and masked pseudo-African witch doctors—this costume being, for no discoverable reason, the season's favorite.

Aside from the itches, he was enjoying himself thoroughly. He danced with all the prettiest women, who, according to immemorial custom, concealed about as much of themselves as the male guests left uncovered. He flirted with them, kissed them if they seemed amenable, and, whenever a fold of bustle or headdress gave him the opportunity, concealed leaflets on their persons.

It was a safe method: most of the pamphlets probably would not be found until the costumes were removed. And although he observed that more of the ladies than he had counted on were dispensing with concealment at the ball itself, he was further protected by his costume and his excellent French. In case of extreme emergency, he had thoughtfully provided himself with a skin-tight Lucifer suit under the witch doctor's robes.

Temporarily without a partner, George made his way through the press of bodies to a pillar, where he steadied himself long enough to look at his watch. It was getting on toward the unmasking hour. He looked around, over the heads of the crowd, to make sure he knew where the nearest side exit was. He was expecting something of a rumpus when it came time to unmask; there might be arrests.

A masked man in S. P. uniform went by, closely clasped by a sumptuous dark girl at least a foot taller than himself. There were a good many S. P. costumes in the hall, and George suspected that the greater part of them were genuine.

He turned, and his elbow sank into something soft and warm. He heard a stifled "Ah!" and saw that he had knocked the wind out of a young woman with astonishing large eyes and an even more surprising bosom. He apologized, profusely.

"Large pig," she shouted in his ear. "I forgive you. Embrace me."

He did so, and felt her hands passing inquisitively over his flanks and chest, under the robe. She murmured, "Mmm," and kissed him a little harder.

He broke away gently, feeling that reconciliation had gone as far as it respectably could. She gave him an impish smile and disappeared into the crowd.

George put two fingers cautiously under his robe and discovered a tiny oblong of folded paper. He opened it and saw the familiar headline: *NAISSANCE OU MORT!* It was a copy of his own leaflet, printed on the same sort of home copier he used himself.

He put it away with the rest of his supply. The movement he had started was growing wonderfully well.

He went around the periphery of the crowd in the opposite direction to the one the girl had taken. Just ahead of him, near the bar, he saw a slender woman jostled by a passing man in a frog suit. Her glass slipped out of her fingers, and the liquor spread a dark stain over her flowing taffeta skirt.

George whipped out his handkerchief and moved forward to help. Then he paused. The woman's hair was coppery and abundant, and the mouth below her half-mask was of a particular perfection he had seen only once in his life. Hilda.

Caution told him to avoid her, but he had to be sure. He moved forward again, knelt beside her and dabbed at the stained skirt.

"Thank you so much," she said in French, "but I'm afraid it's a hopeless mess now."

It was her voice: George felt the customary tingling down his backbone. He had not seen Hilda since the night Art arrived in Venice, and had not hoped to see her for a long time to come. But it wasn't safe to let her recognize him. He stood up, bowed, and turned away without speaking.

She caught suddenly at his arm, turned him around again. "Georgel!" she said. "It is you. Where have you been hiding? I've looked everywhere. And Luther and Morey . . . What is all this nonsense?"

George felt a little relieved, in spite of himself. Of course, she would know him from his youth alone, just as he knew her by her mouth. He said, "Hello, Hilda. I've missed you."

"George." She put her lips close to his ear. "You won't hide from me any more, will you? We've got such a lot to tell each other—"

A shattering blare of trumpets from the center of the room interrupted her. A much-amplified voice cried, "*Mesdames et messieurs*, the hour of unmasking is at hand. Choose your partners!"

The babel of voices, which had subsided for a moment, rose again. George glanced at his watch, then at the rafters high above. He could just make out a tiny gray-blue dot there, hanging among the clustered lanterns. It was time, this minute, this second—

A new voice blared out, not as loud as the first, but clear and sharp. "Citizens of the world!" it cried. "The future of mankind is in your hands! The government tells you that there is no danger—that the human race is not becoming sterile. The government lies! Find out the truth for yourself! Go to your doctor, have him examine you. Only one in ten is now capable of having children. If you are that lucky one, do not throw away your priceless heritage. Have children! *Now*, before it is too late!"

Men were running toward the center of the room; George heard shouts and a few screams. The voice—George's own, recorded through a filter to make it unrecognizable—went on: "If the government is telling the truth, why is it afraid of open debate? Why are your newspapers censored? Why are you yourselves subject to illegal arrest and imprisonment without trial? Why—"

A flat explosion drowned the voice, then another. There was a new outburst of feminine screams, and a sudden violent movement away from the center. The S. P.s, George guessed, were shooting at the playback mechanism he had bribed a workman to set up among the lanterns. It was time to get away.

His recorded voice went on, but another drowned it out. "No one is to leave! Unmask, everyone, and stand where you are!"

The movement away from the center continued. In the press, Hilda was clinging to his arm, shouting something at him. He broke away and dived into the crowd, heading for the side exit he had spotted before.

He was a little too late. The crowd was in full motion now, as irresistible as a charging herd of cattle. Ahead of him, he saw an S. P. man vainly struggling to turn and halt those behind. He saw the flash of a revolver; then someone clubbed the man in the neck and he went down under the feet of the crowd.

George had a sudden, terrified thought: *What if that should happen to Hilda?* But he was caught in the tide of bodies; it was useless even to think of turning back.

The wide doors of the main entrance had been thrown open, but there was still a bottleneck. The pressure grew until George thought his ribs would crack; then he was out and running desperately to keep from being trampled.

An S. P. car was pulled up at the opposite curb and, as he watched, another joined it. S. P.s tumbled out, tried to form a line. The crowd overwhelmed them. There were shouts of "*À bas les flics!*" and roars of laughter scattered among the screams.

The crowd's temper was changing from fear to defiance. There would be broken windows and broken heads in Paris tonight.

George's devil costume was now as dangerous as the witch doctor's robes; anybody in carnival dress who was unlucky enough to meet a policeman would be arrested. He stopped in an alley to strip them both off—he wore a singlet and shorts underneath—and then put the noise of the rioting behind him before he crossed the Seine to his hotel.

On the sidewalk in front of the hotel a huge N/M! was chalked—the symbol of the Committee Against Human Extinction, N/M in French and Spanish, G/T in German, B/D in English: *Birth or Death!* They had begun it themselves, flying from city to city, one to a continent; the people had taken it up.

He thought again of Hilda, and looked at his wrist phone. They no longer used the personal phones to communicate among themselves, since it was possible that the S. P. was monitoring all such calls; but it would do no harm to call Hilda, especially if he kept the contact short. He pressed the buttons that coded her number.

"Yes?" said her warm voice. "This is Hilda Place."

"It's George," he told her. "Are you all right?"

"George, where *are* you? I must see you. Joe is here with me. Tell me where you are and we'll dash over."

"It wouldn't do," said George regretfully. "I only wanted to know if you got out all right."

"Yes, George, of course. But—"

"Good night, Hilda," he said, and broke the connection.

It was almost time for the hourly newscast, but George sat for a few moments staring at the dead vision set, thinking about Hilda. Then he began thinking about himself and Hilda, which was more complicated.

He hardly knew what it was he felt about Hilda, except that he wanted her. He knew that there was no basis for a settled relationship between them, but his mind rebelled at the knowledge.

Well, if they succeeded in this, things would be different. Everybody would have to revise his view of life. The family would revive; religion with it, probably. The changes would go deep into the social structure, as Art and Luther said: affecting manners, morals, ultimately every department of human life.

Not all at once, of course. For one thing, fewer than one person in ten would manage to become a parent before reaching the sterile age; and not all of those would be able, or want, to equate parenthood with marriage.

George's own part in the new world was still hazy to him. He tried valiantly once more to see himself happily married to Hilda, and once more failed. The picture was simply wrong, in every way. He didn't have the conjugal temperament, and neither, he was sure, did Hilda. What was going to become of them, who had been born into this childless world of cautious carelessness and sage superficiality, and knew no other?

That was rather good, George told himself. He was surprised and pleased; his wit was ordinarily of the evanescent variety, not worth using more than once. When he wrote his memoirs—

There was a knock on the door.

"*Entrez,*" said George, and the door, keyed to his voice, swung open. Two S. P. men stood there. They did not hesitate, but strode rapidly toward him.

With an effort, George relaxed his tensed muscles and

looked at the advancing officers with what he hoped was the right mixture of alarm and indignation.

"What is it? What's the matter?" he demanded.

The taller officer had a sheaf of photographs in his hand. He riffled them rapidly, selected one, and looked keenly from it to George's face several times. He said something in an undertone to the other man.

The short, stocky one drew his gun and stepped aside. "I shall have to request you to come with us, monsieur. A formality only. If you are innocent, you will be freed."

"But what is the charge?" asked George.

"You are wanted for questioning in connection with the riot at the Beaux Arts Ball, monsieur."

"I wasn't even there!" George protested.

The officer shrugged. "That may be, monsieur. It is believed that the instigator of the riot is not a native of Paris. Therefore, we are investigating all guests of hotels. Those whose appearances are similar to those on these photographs are to be brought in for questioning. You are not under formal arrest, monsieur, unless you insist."

George felt a hollowness at the pit of his stomach. Such an obvious move and they had not thought of it! He said, "Very well," and moved toward the door. The tall officer grasped his arm, the other fell in behind them.

At the doorway, George lunged forward. As the tall officer instinctively pulled back, George followed his motion, turning at the same time and putting the heel of his hand under the other man's chin. He shoved, hard, and the officer went reeling back into the room. George slammed the door in their faces and ran.

The elevator was not at this floor. He dived down the staircase, took the first flight four steps at a time, and doubled back on the floor below to the other staircase. He guessed that the S. P.s had come by car; for a house-to-house search, it would be more efficient than 'copters. If he was right, he had a fair chance of hailing a cab and getting away before they found him.

Back on his own floor, he peered cautiously around the corner before emerging from the stairway. His room door was open, but there was no one in the corridor. He heard nothing. He darted out and up the ascending staircase.

The roof was silent and deserted under the stars, glowing at his feet in a wash of light from the tubes that outlined the roof. Traffic went by inaudibly, high overhead in the dark sky.

He saw the yellow riding lights of an unoccupied cab, not directly above, but bearing a little to one side. He took out his flashlight and blinked at it, trying hard to get the aim right; it was a long distance and a difficult angle.

The 'copter did not turn. It kept its course and disappeared finally down toward the Eiffel Tower.

He heard a sound down the stairwell. It was an ambiguous, uncomfortable sort of sound. He listened, but it was not repeated.

He walked quietly behind the stair entrance and tried again. Another empty cab was approaching, no nearer than the first. He aimed the flashlight tube at it, blinked it rapidly on and off.

After a heart-stopping moment, the cab turned toward him. And then he heard stealthy sounds in the stairwell. He listened. Footsteps, coming up.

He glanced at the oncoming cab. Too late; too far away. He went quickly to the nearest parapet, and holding the tiny flashlight like a dagger, stabbed it at the glow tube. Glass tinkled and fell, and the light died along that edge of the roof. The corner was only a few steps away; he broke the next tube as well. Now the roof was lighted only on the two sides farthest from him, and the stair entrance cast a long, deep shadow.

He heard them step out onto the roof. They must have had a third man waiting in the car downstairs, George thought; when they learned that he had not appeared down there, they had turned back to search upstairs.

The cab had turned away, now that the signal had stopped and the edge-lights gone out. George watched its tiny lights dwindle.

The footsteps came toward him, slowly, one pair on either side of the entrance. Two beams of light shot out, illuminating all the roof except the rear wall of the entranceway where he stood.

"You had better surrender, monsieur," said a voice. "Otherwise we are obliged to shoot."

George pressed himself thin against the wall and tried to breathe quietly. The voice had come from the right; that was the spokesman, the stocky man with the gun. Therefore, he guessed, the other would step out first. He moved silently to the left, raised his arm and waited.

The tall man stepped suddenly into view, swinging his flash around. George brought the edge of his palm down with all his strength, aiming for the man's wrist, but hitting the flashlight instead. Pain rolled up his arm as the metal tube fell; then, blinded by the light that had shone in his eyes, he was struggling with the tall S. P. man. He struck out furiously, feeling a blow in return that numbed his side, and then the two of them toppled to the roof.

George struck the other man once more, felt the grip loosen, and scrambled desperately to his feet. As he started to turn, a crushing pain struck him at the base of his skull. He saw the roof's surface rising toward him, but felt nothing when it hit him.

VI.

HE WAS in a 'copter with a rope ladder dangling from it, hovering just over the bedroom window of Luther's apartment. Art was inside, but he wouldn't climb out onto the ladder. George was about to pull the ladder up and tie a wrench to it when Art's red, wild-eyed face appeared.

Hurry, hurry! Art was climbing up the ladder, and now the window next door opened and a man was leaning out, with a gun in his hand.

George was paralyzed with fear. He saw the man fire, and when he looked down, Art's face was white and a thin spray of blood was whipping away from his body in the wind of the rotors.

He's hit, George thought. He'll fall.

George tilted the 'copter downward, toward the canal, but he was too late. Art fell, and the blue water of the canal turned red . . .

No, that was silly. All that was over and done with; they had come out of that all right. It was the Beaux Arts Ball that he had to worry about. His voice was bellowing out

of the concealed playback machine, and everyone was turning to stare at him. He looked down, and saw that his witch doctor's robe was gone. He was standing there in the devil suit.

All the others were shouting, "There he is! He's the one!" He ran, but the crowd got in his way; he couldn't move fast enough. And just behind him was the stocky man with the gun. He couldn't get away, death was behind him, the gun-barrel rising, the finger tightening on the trigger—

Ugh!

He sat up, looking uncomprehendingly at the strange patterns of light and shadow around him. His head hurt, and he couldn't raise his hands. Someone flashed a light in his eyes. Dazzled, he said, "What—who are you? What are you doing?"

A voice said, "*Bien.*" Someone got up from beside his cot, and two men, one in a white jacket, left the room. He could see them briefly in the light of the corridor outside. Another man, in a guard's uniform, shut the barred door with a clang, and went away.

There was an interval long enough for him to come fully awake, and discover that his wrists were manacled to the sides of the cot. Then two guards appeared at the door, unlocked it and entered. One of them removed the manacles and helped him to his feet. He tried to throw off the man's arm, but found that he was too weak; too weak, in fact, to stand by himself.

They led him along the corridor and into a small, brightly lit room where there was a heavy chair, bolted to the floor. They sat him in it and strapped his wrists down.

A white-jacketed man at the side of the room was removing a hypodermic from a sterilizer. He turned, fitted the needle to the transparent shaft, depressed the plunger and thrust the needle through the covering membrane of a bottle. He stepped toward George.

George gripped the arms of the chair, remembering what Art had told him about truth serums. "They're not infallible. If you have a strong, balanced personality, and if you think up a good cover story and stick to it, truth serums won't make you tell the truth."

I was at the ball, he thought rapidly, *but I had nothing*

to do with the plot. I haven't seen Luther, Art or Morey since that party at Luther's. I don't know where they are. I don't know where they are. I ran from the police because I seduced a woman at the ball, and her boyfriend was angry with me. I was afraid he had made trouble for me with the police. That's not good, but it will have to do.

He felt the coolness of evaporating alcohol on his arm, then the cold stab of the needle. *I was at the ball, he told himself, but I had nothing to do with the plot. I haven't seen Luther, Art, or Morey . . . or Luther, or Morey . . .*

He was beginning to feel drowsy. The words tripped over each other in his head, became hopelessly jumbled.

There was a timeless, drowsy interval; then he became aware that a hot rubber sheath was being removed from his arm. His body was stiff, and his hands and feet were numb.

He opened his eyes. The white-jacketed man was stuffing something that clicked into an oblong box. He stowed the box away in a clip at the side of a massive instrument board on wheels, and an attendant pushed it out of the room.

The man looked at George, flexing the fingers of one hand in the palm of the other. "You gave us a hard time," he said. "But you talked."

George kept his mouth shut, even when the guards came back, unstrapped him and returned him to his cell.

Probably the man had been bluffing; they were hoping that he could be tricked into talking by making him believe that he already had.

But early the next morning, he was transferred to another, a larger cell. In it were Luther, Art and Morey.

Art said, "You knew where we were all going to be yesterday. If the truth drug didn't get it out of you, all they had to do was put a lie detector on you and show you a map—point out one area after another until you responded. It wasn't your fault, George."

That was the way it had been done, all right, but the knowledge didn't make him feel any better. He sat down on the empty cot, elbows on his knees.

"I shouldn't have got caught," he said.

"Could've happened to any of us," Morey assured him.

They were silent a while, and then George said, "Where are we, by the way?"

"S. P. headquarters on the Place de Concorde. They'll move us to Berne for the trials, I suppose." Art shrugged. "If they decide to have any trials."

The day dragged by, then another and another. On the fourth day, they were told they were going to be moved in the afternoon, but nothing happened. They had no news of the outside world; they could only speculate how the movement was going without them. All four of them had been up for interrogation several times, and they were afraid that at least one of them had given up names and addresses under the truth serum. There was no way of knowing. If the network they had carefully built up had been uncovered, there was no hope left. The conspiracy was too young to recover from such a blow.

By tacit consent, they did not talk about anything they had done before their arrest. But Art, one afternoon, began speculating about the future. He spoke of it as if it were a foregone conclusion, as if they were as good as dead.

He said, "It would be interesting to see it. After a few more centuries, I expect things will begin to go to pot in a small way. Things like new construction. The population's steadily declining, and you know there won't be any new generations, so why build? And after that, why repair? A little later on, I'd guess that suicide would begin to be a factor again. When they begin to *realize* that if there is any point to the whole bloody business, the human race will never have a chance to find it out . . . Not much room for altruism any more.

"We're here, and we're the last, and that's all. After that, nothing but the big dark and the big cold. Besides, it isn't going to be very pleasant later on, and people will begin to see that, too. There's a bottom limit to the size of population that can support an industrial economy. They'll pass it, going down. Then what? Back to the land? A mocked-up feudal system?

"But then the process will start to accelerate, I should think. Wars. Plagues. Natural catastrophes. Crop failures. Looters and bandits. Every man for himself. And at the end—"

He smiled bitterly. "None of us would be alive to see that, anyhow. Women's life-span is still longer than ours. It'll end

up as a world of women—women without men. Lord!” He shook his head. “That goes beyond my imagination. I can’t visualize it, and I don’t want to. The little that I can see scares me silly.”

He looked at them as if he had forgotten they were there. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to turn this into a wake.”

George thought a good deal about Golightly, and the rest of that stubborn, irrational, power-hungry crew. He found that he didn’t hate them, but it made him feel somehow betrayed to realize that these were the best rulers Earth had been able to produce. Good administrators, good practical politicians, as Art had said—but little men, jealous of their position, fearful of new ideas. If that was the best the human race could do, perhaps it deserved what it was getting.

He voiced something of this, and got the disagreement from Luther that he had hoped for.

“We can do better, George. We *have* done better. In a normal world, no matter how bad things get, at least they change. If we were bringing up a flock of children now, one of them would be a better candidate for World President than Golightly. But as it is, we’re stuck with just about three generations all told, and we have to make the best of it . . .” His voice trailed off; none of them wanted to pursue that thought.

On the morning of the eighth day, guards came to take them away.

George turned to Luther. “In case they separate us, and we don’t see each other again—”

Luther took his hand warmly. They gripped hands all around. There were tears in Art’s owlish eyes, and in Luther’s, and even a suspicious brightness in Morey’s. George found that his own vision was blurring a trifle.

The guards led them down the corridor to an outer office with a long desk and a bench. They were told to sit down, and then a printed document and a pen was placed in front of each of them.

George stared bewilderedly at his. It seemed to say:

In return for due consideration, I hereby waive all claim for damages resulting from my mistaken arrest and

detention by the Security Police, and further agree to waive my right of suit for false arrest against the Security Police and the United Nations of the World. In witness whereof I set my seal.

He looked at the others, then at the guard who was standing on the other side of the table.

"Sign," said the guard, "and you'll be released."

Art bent suddenly and began to scribble on his sheet. The others followed suit. Not daring to speak, they looked at each other as the signed papers were taken away. Then a guard led them off, each to a separate cubicle. In his, George found the clothes he had been wearing when he was arrested, and all the contents of his pockets neatly stacked. He put on the clothing, still dazed. The guard, not touching him now, led him out through another outer office, through a lobby, where the other three joined him, and then to the sunlight of the portico.

The sounds of traffic came up to them; 'copters droned past in the sky over their heads; they heard a strain of music from somewhere down the great avenue.

The guard reappeared and touched George's elbow. "I was asked to give you this, monsieur," he said, and put a slip of paper into George's hand. Then he bowed and went back inside.

George unfolded it slowly, read it twice.

It said:

Come and see me as soon as you can.

Hilda

There was an address below the signature.

George passed the note to Morey, and the other two looked over his shoulders.

"I don't get it," said George inadequately.

"No more do I," said Luther. "But—let's go!"

They found her on a terrace overlooking the Champs Elysées. Joe Krueger, grinning like a youngster, got up from the table and stood aside as they converged on Hilda.

She smiled up at them. "I'm so glad," she said. "Now kiss

me nicely, each of you, and then sit down . . . You there, Luther, in the easy chair, then Morey, Art and George."

They said hello to Joe. They took the coffee cups Hilda passed around. And they stared at her.

"Hilda," said Luther finally, "you consummate witch, what in the world did you do?"

She smiled at them happily. "Well," she said, "I managed to get to see Golightly. It wasn't easy to do, even though I know his granddaughter quite well. I had to convince *her* first, you see . . . No, you don't see. You will, in a minute, though. I told him that he couldn't stop people from having children by throwing you in jail. I told him that women had been breaking the birth prohibition for the last seventy years, to my own knowledge, and probably longer. And I proved it to him—I showed him a doctor's report that stated I had been a mother myself."

They stared at her. George felt as if the last prop of his own personal universe had been knocked out from under him.

"*You, Hilda?*" said Luther incredulously.

"Oh, yes." She looked back at them, not smiling now, and laid her hand on Joe Krueger's sleeve. "This is my son, gentlemen—my youngest son. I have three."

There was a shocked silence.

Joe said, "She brought me up in a private estate in the Berkshires, with some help from my brothers, but alone most of the time. She nursed me, took care of me when I was sick, and taught me everything she could. For twenty years . . . My twentieth birthday was two months ago."

Luther said, "Hilda, do I understand that you began this absolutely alone?"

She smiled, but it was a different smile from the one they knew. Her face had changed subtly, George thought; there was a calm patience and wisdom in it that had never been there before—or that she had never allowed them to see.

Her eyes softened, and she said, "I don't blame you, darlings, because you don't *know*—you can't know. Poor things, you run the world, but you don't understand what keeps it going.

"Anyhow, I told Golightly all that, and I presented a chem-

ical analysis of Joe's blood. He hasn't had the longevity treatment yet, you know; that showed in the test. And then I gave him some statistics Joe had dug up. You'd better tell that part, Joe."

"I was curious to know whether the incidence of amnesia had gone up since the Last War," said Joe. "I had an idea that other people besides Hilda had thought of that dodge. So I checked. It was up, way up. There was even an article about it in the North American Journal of Psychology, not so many years ago."

Art muttered something in an irritated voice.

"Art?" said Hilda.

"Nothing. I saw that article; I remember it now. It didn't make any impression on me."

"Or on anybody, apparently," said Joe "—luckily for us members of the younger generation." He grinned. "Then I looked up some population figures and drew curves. You couldn't prove anything that way, but it was significant if you knew the answer to begin with. After the War, the line went downward fairly sharply for about the first century, and then it began to level off just a little more than anyone had expected. *At a rough guess, there are several hundred million people alive today who were born after the birth prohibition!*"

Inside the apartment, a fax machine chuckled to itself and then sounded a clear note. Luther jumped, and George started to rise.

Hilda said, "You get it, will you, Joe?" The young man—it was astonishing how young he seemed, now—smiled and went inside. He came out a moment later and handed the fax sheet to George.

George read, "The birth prohibition has been rescinded, it was revealed at 10 A.M. Greenwich time today, by an extraordinary session of the Executive Council meeting in Berne. President Golightly released the following statement:

" "It has been proved to my satisfaction, and to the satisfaction of the highest medical authorities, that a clear danger of total sterility of the human race exists. Under these circumstances, grave though the decision is, I have no possible alternative but to revoke all penalties against giving birth.

“ “We stand today at the crossroads of human destiny. On one hand we see the total extinction of our kind; on the other, a new and more glorious fulfilment. The centuries to come will be hard ones for some of us; they will bring many profound changes in our society, and many grave problems. But given the boundless courage of our people, and their unflinching determination to succeed—” ’ ”

“Does he *say* anything else?” asked Art.

“No. But here’s something about us. ‘Arthur Levinson, M.D., George Miller, Morey Stiles and Luther Wheatley, ringleaders of the so-called Committee Against Human Extinction, were released early this morning by the Paris division of the Security Police. In a special statement, S. P. chief Paul Krzewski characterized their activities as “sincere but premature,” and indicated that no charges would be pressed against any member of their organization.’ ”

Morey lit a cigar. “That’s about as much thanks as we’ll ever get,” he said.

“You weren’t finished, were you, Hilda?” Art asked. “I don’t quite see Golightly listening to reason, even with all that evidence.”

“No,” she said. “All that first part was just the preliminary. Then I called in his granddaughter—she was waiting outside. That was why I had to persuade her before I could do anything.”

“I begin to see the light,” said Art softly. “She’s a mother, too.”

“Of course, I’ve known it for years. As a matter of fact—this is rather funny, and something I didn’t know before—she told Golightly that his private secretary is her daughter.”

Her face grew pinker. She leaned her forehead on her hand for a moment. Her shoulders were shaking. “You should have seen his *face!*” she said.

They were all roaring with laughter, the tension in them dissolving to leave them weak and wonderfully relieved. It was several moments before George glanced at Hilda and saw that Joe was standing over her in an attitude of concern, his hand on her shoulder. Her head was still bent into her palm. George realized abruptly that she was no longer laughing, but crying.

He stood up and went around to her, feeling awkward. "Anything I can do?" he asked.

Hilda dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and then looked up at them. "Just a touch of hysterics, I guess. I do feel like a fool. Only—I didn't realize how scared I'd been."

George squeezed her shoulder and went back to his place. Joe left the table again to bring in a bottle of Chablis and glasses; there was a pleasant interval of tinkling and gurgling, and when it was over, Hilda was her usual self again.

Luther raised his glass. "To Hilda."

"Hilda, my dear," said Art slowly, "would you mind telling me *why* you did it? I hope I don't sound ungrateful, but—it wasn't just to save our lives?"

Hilda hesitated a moment. "No, Art."

"I didn't think so," he said. "I've just now managed to picture you as a mother, and in that light I can see you doing almost anything else for us four, obtuse as you must have thought us—but not risking a hair of young Joe's head."

She smiled fondly at him. "I don't really think you're obtuse, Art. If I sounded that way, it was just feminist exaggeration. I suppose you're thinking now that all your trouble and danger were for nothing, because we women have been breeding right along . . . but I don't think that's true.

"I think that's the difference, the really fundamental difference, between men and women. We women endure—we plug along, doing the obvious things, keeping house and worrying about our men and bearing children and so on. And if we didn't, Lord knows what would become of us all. But left to ourselves, we're too conservative. Women *felt* this problem of children from the beginning, and solved it on their own level. But not completely, not satisfactorily. You four discovered the same problem intellectually only a few months ago, and look what you've done!"

She made little fists on the table for a moment. "I'll confess that it was very hard for me to risk Joe. And I didn't do it, finally, because of my fondness for you four. If it had been only that, I honestly don't know what I should have done.

"But—well, perhaps an example will show you best. My oldest son, Edwin, wants to be a doctor, wants it more than anything. He's fifty years old now—that's a long time to wait for the one thing you want most in the world. But there are no medical schools, only research seminars and a few brush-up courses. There's no place in the world now like the one where Art got his earliest training."

"There will be," promised Art.

"Of course. And a million other things . . . It isn't particularly good for a child to be brought up in hiding, as Joe was."

"No one could have done it any better than you, Hilda," said Joe.

"Sweet," she said; "but you all know I'm right."

"Of course you are," agreed Luther. "In fact, you're so right that I'm a little afraid of you. It was much nicer when I thought you were pretty much a featherbrain."

George said suddenly, "Joe, I never wangled you that introduction I promised you, did I?"

Joe's eyes brightened. "To Clarke, the rocket man?"

"That's the one. Luther, can you arrange it?"

"A pleasure. I didn't know you were interested, Joe."

"Yes," said Hilda, a little regretfully, "I wish he weren't."

Joe looked uncomfortable. Morey spoke up unexpectedly: "You'll have to face it, though, Hilda. This is one of the spheres where men take over."

"That's right," said Morey, "that's where they'll have to go, the overflow, the extra population that's had us all trembling in our socks the last three centuries. To the stars." He pushed his chair back and sat looking out over the sunlit street, and the 'copters flashing in the sky. "That will make Golightly and me happy, at least, for the next few hundred years." He smiled his unexpected, small-boy smile. "We can sit here and be as contrary and stubborn as we want. But we'll be just a backwater, Hilda. It's your Joe that's going to be the human race."

They drank to that, and afterward George found himself alone with Hilda for a moment before they left. She kissed him gently: there were no tingles up his spine. He felt warmly fond of her, and somehow at peace with himself.

The world was going to grow down to his size, he realized. He wouldn't be The Child any more, not to everybody. In fact, the first colony on that far-off planet of Alpha Centauri might need a few older men around—men with a few centuries of solid experience under their belts. Now *there* was an idea!

Happily, he went down into the long afternoon.

WHEREVER YOU MAY BE

MATT REFUSED to believe it. Vacant incredulity paralyzed him for a moment as he stared after the fleeing, bounding tire. Then, with a sudden release, he sprinted after it.

"Stop!" he yelled futilely. "Stop, damn it!"

With what seemed like sadistic glee, the tire bounced high in the air and landed, going faster than ever. Matt pounded down the hot dusty road for a hundred yards before he pulled up even with it. He knocked it over on its side. The tire lay there, spinning and frustrate, like a turtle on its back. Matt glared at it suspiciously. Sweat trickled down his neck.

A tinkling of little silver bells. Laughter? Matt looked up quickly, angrily. The woods were thin along the top of this Ozark ridge. Descending to the lake, sparkling cool and blue far below, they grew thicker, but the only one near was the young girl shuffling through the dust several hundred yards beyond the crippled car. And her head was bent down to watch her way.

Matt shrugged and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his shirt sleeve. A late June afternoon in southern Missouri was too hot for this kind of work, for any kind of work. Matt wondered if it had been a mistake.

In shimmering heat waves and a slowly settling haze of red dust, he righted the tire and began to roll it back toward the green Ford with one bare metal wheel drum pointing upward at a slight angle. The tire rolled easily, as if it repented its brief dash for freedom, but it was a dirty job and Matt's hands and clothes were soiled red when he reached the car.

With one hand clutching the tire, Matt studied the road for a moment. He could have sworn that he had stopped on one of the few level stretches in these hills, but the

tire had straightened up from the side of the car and started rolling as if the car were parked on a steep incline.

Matt reflected bitterly on the luck that had turned a slow leak into a flat only twenty-five miles from the cabin. It couldn't have happened on the highway, ten miles back, where he'd have been able to pull into a service station. No, it had to wait until he couldn't get out of this rutted cow track. The tire's escapade had been only the most recent of a series of annoyances and irritations to which bruised shins and scraped knuckles were painful affidavits.

He sighed. After all, he had wanted isolation. Guy's offer of a hunting cabin in which to finish his thesis had seemed like a godsend at the time, but now Matt wasn't so certain. If this was a fair sample, Matt was beginning to see how much of his time would be wasted just on the problems of existence.

Cautiously, Matt rolled the tire to the rear of the car, laid it carefully on its side, and completed pulling the spare from the trunk. Warily, he maneuvered the spare to the left rear wheel, knelt, lifted it, fitted it over the bolts, and stepped back. He sighed again, but this time with relief.

Kling-ng! Klang! Rattle!

Matt hastily looked down. His foot was at least two inches from the hub cap, but it was rocking now, empty. Matt saw the last nut roll under the car.

Matt's swearing was vigorous, systematic, and exhaustive. It concerned itself chiefly with the perversity of inanimate objects.

There was something about machines and the things they made which was basically alien to the human spirit. They might disguise themselves for a time as willing slaves, but eventually, inevitably, they turned against their masters. At the psychological moment, they rebelled.

Or perhaps it was the difference in people. For some people, things always went wrong—their cakes fell; their lumber split; their golf balls sliced into the rough. Others established a mysterious sympathy with their tools.

Luck? Skill? Coordination? Experience?

It was, he felt, something more conscious and malignant.

Matt remembered a near-disastrous brush with chemistry; he had barely passed qualitative analysis. For him the tests

had been worse than useless. Faithfully he had gone through every step of the endless ritual: precipitate, filter, dissolve, precipitate . . . And then he would take his painfully secured, neatly written results to—what was his name?—Wadsworth, and the little chemistry professor would study his analysis and look up, frowning.

“Didn’t you find any whatyoumaycallit oxide?” he would ask.

“Whatyoumaycallit oxide?” Startled. “Oh, there wasn’t any whatyoumaycallit oxide.”

And Wadsworth would make a simple test and, sure enough, there would be the whatyoumaycallit oxide.

There was the inexplicably misshapen gear Matt had made on the milling machine, the drafting pen that would not draw a smooth line no matter how much he sanded the point . . .

It had convinced Matt that his hands were too clumsy to belong to an engineer. He had transferred his ambitions to a field where tools were less tangible. Now he wondered.

Kobolds? Accident prone?

Some time he would have to write it up. It would make a good paper for the *Journal of*—

Laughter! This time there was no possible doubt. It came from right behind him.

Matt whirled. The girl stood there, hugging her ribs to keep the laughter in. She was a young little thing, not much over five feet tall, in a shapeless, faded blue dress. Her feet were small and bare and dirty. Her hair, in long braids, was mouse-colored. Her pale face was saved from plainness only by her large, blue eyes.

Matt flushed. “What the devil are you laughing at?”

“You!” she got out between chuckles. “Whyn’t you get a horse?”

“Did that remark just arrive here?”

He swallowed his irritation, turned, and got down on his hands and knees to peer under the car. One by one he gathered up the nuts, but the last one, inevitably, was out of reach. Sweating, he crawled all the way under.

When he came out, the girl was still there. “What are you waiting for?” he asked bitingly.

“Nothin’.” But she stood with her feet planted firmly in the red dust.

Kibitzers annoyed Matt, but he couldn't think of anything to do about it. He twirled the nuts onto the bolts and tightened them up, his neck itching. It might have been the effect of sweat and dust, but he was not going to give the girl the satisfaction of seeing him rub it. That annoyed him even more. He tapped the hub cap into place and stood up.

"Why don't you go home?" he asked sourly.

"Cain't," she said.

He went to the rear of the car and released the jack. "Why not?"

"I run away." Her voice was quietly tragic.

Matt turned to look at her. Her blue eyes were large and moist. As he watched, a single tear gathered and traced a muddy path down her cheek.

Matt hardened his heart. "Tough." He picked up the flat and stuffed it into the trunk and slammed the lid. The sun was getting lower, and on this forgotten lane to nowhere it might take him the better part of an hour to drive the twenty-five miles.

He slid into the driver's seat and punched the starter button. After one last look at the forlorn little figure in the middle of the road, he shook his head savagely and let in the clutch.

"Mister! Hey, mister!"

He slammed on the brakes and stuck his head out the window. "Now what do you want?"

"Nothin'," she said mournfully. "Only you forgot your jack."

Matt jammed the gear shift into reverse and backed up rapidly. Silently, he got out, picked up the jack, opened the trunk, tossed in the jack, slammed the lid. But as he brushed past her again, he hesitated. "Where are you going?"

"No place," she said.

"What do you mean 'no place'? Don't you have any relatives?" She shook her head. "Friends?" he asked hopefully. She shook her head again. "All right, then, go on home!"

He slid into the car and banged the door. She was not his concern. The car jerked into motion. No doubt she would go home when she got hungry enough. He shifted into second, grinding the gears. Even if she didn't, someone would take her in. After all, he was no welfare agency.

He grudgingly slowed, then angrily backed up and skidded to a stop beside the girl.

"Get in," he said.

Trying to keep the car out of the ruts was trouble enough, but the girl jumped up and down on the seat beside him, squealing happily.

"Careful of those notes," he said, indicating the bulging manila folders on the seat between them. "There's over a year's work in those."

Her eyes were wide as she watched him place the folders in the back seat on top of the portable typewriter that rested between the twenty-pound sack of flour and the case of eggs.

"A year's work?" she echoed wonderingly.

"Notes. For the thesis I'm going to write."

"You write stories?"

"A research paper I have to do to get my degree." He glanced at her blank expression and then looked back at the road. "It's called," he said with a nasty superior smile, "The Psychodynamics of Witchcraft, with Special Reference to the Salem Trials of 1692."

"Oh," she said wisely. "Witches." As if she knew all about witches.

Matt felt unreasonably annoyed. "All right, where do you live?"

She stopped bouncing and got very quiet. "I can't go home."

"Why not?" he demanded. "And don't tell me 'I run away,'" he imitated nasally.

"Paw'd beat me again. He'd purty nigh skin me alive, I guess."

"You mean he *hits* you?"

"He don't use his fists—not often. He uses his belt mostly. Look." She pulled up the hem of her dress and the leg of a pair of baggy drawers that appeared to be made from some kind of sacking.

Matt looked quickly and glanced away. Across the back of one thigh was an ugly dark bruise. But the leg seemed unusually well rounded for a girl so small and young. Matt frowned thoughtfully. Did girls in the hills *mature* that early?

He cleared his throat. "Why does he do that?"

"He's just mean."

"He must have some reason."

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "he beats me when he's drunk 'cause he's drunk, and he beats me when he's sober 'cause he ain't drunk. That covers it mostly."

"But what does he say?"

She glanced at him shyly. "Oh, I cain't repeat it."

"I mean what does he want you to do?"

"Oh, that!" She brooded over it. "He thinks I ought to get married. He wants me to catch some strong young feller who'll do the work when he moves in with us. A gal don't bring in no money, he says, leastwise not a good one. That kind only eats and wants things."

"Married?" Matt said. "But you're much too young to get married."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "I'm sixteen," she said. "Most girls my age got a couple of young 'uns. One, anyways."

Matt looked at her sharply. Sixteen? It seemed impossible. The dress was shapeless enough to hide almost anything—but sixteen! Then he remembered the thigh.

She frowned. "Get married, get married! You'd think I didn't want to get married. 'Tain't my fault no feller wants me."

"I can't understand that," Matt said sarcastically.

She smiled at him. "You're nice."

She looked almost pretty when she smiled. For a hill girl.

"What seems to be the trouble?" Matt asked hurriedly.

"Partly Paw," she said. "No one'd want to have him around. But mostly I guess I'm just unlucky." She sighed. "One feller I went with purty near a year. He busted his leg. Another nigh drowned when he fell in the lake. Don't seem right they should blame me, even if we did have words."

"Blame you?"

She nodded vigorously. "Them as don't hate me say it's courtin' disaster 'stead of a gal. The others weren't so nice. Fellers stopped comin'. One of 'em said he'd rather marry up with a catamount. You married, Mister—Mister—?"

"Matthew Wright. No, I'm not married."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Wright. Abigail Wright. That's purty."

"Abigail Wright?"

"Did I say that? Now, ain't that funny? My name's Jenkins."

Matt gulped. "You're going home," he said with unshakable conviction. "You can tell me how to get there or you can climb out of the car right now."

"But Paw—"

"Where the devil did you think I was taking you?"

"Wherever you're going," she said, wide-eyed.

"For God's sake, you can't go with me! It wouldn't be decent."

"Why not?" she asked innocently.

In silence, Matt began to apply the brakes.

"All right," she sighed. She wore an expression the early Christians must have worn before they were marched into the arena. "Turn right at the next crossroad."

Chickens scattered in front of the wheels, fluttering and squawking; pigs squealed in a pen beside the house. Matt stopped in front of the shanty, appalled. If the two rooms and sagging porch had ever known paint, they had enjoyed only a nodding acquaintance, and that a generation before.

A large brooding figure sat on the porch, rocking slowly in a rickety chair. He was dark, with a full black beard and a tall head of hair.

"That's Paw," Abigail whispered in fright.

Matt waited uneasily, but the broad figure of her father kept on rocking as if strangers brought back his daughter every day. *Maybe they do*, Matt thought with irritation.

"Well," he said nervously, "here you are."

"I cain't get out," Abigail said. "Not till I find out if Paw's goin' to whale me. Go talk to him. See if he's mad at me."

"Not me," Matt stated with certainty, glancing again at the big, black figure rocking slowly, ominously silent. "I've done my duty in bringing you home. Good-by. I won't say it's been a pleasure knowing you."

"You're nice and mighty handsome. I'd hate to tell Paw

you'd taken advantage of me. He's a terror when he's riled."

For one horrified moment, Matt stared at Abigail. Then, as she opened her mouth, he opened the door and stepped out. Slowly he walked up to the porch and put one foot on its uneven edge.

"Uh," he said. "I met your daughter on the road."

Jenkins kept on rocking.

"She'd run away," Matt went on.

Jenkins was silent. Matt studied the portion of Jenkins' face that wasn't covered with hair. There wasn't much of it, but what there was Matt didn't like.

"I brought her back," Matt finished desperately.

Jenkins rocked and said nothing. Matt spun around and walked quickly back to the car. He went around to the window where Abigail sat. He reached through the window, opened the glove compartment, and drew out a full pint bottle.

"Remind me," he said, "never to see you again." He marched back to the porch. "Care for a little drink?"

One large hand reached out, smothered the pint, and brought it close to faded blue overalls. The cap was twisted off by the other hand. The bottle was tilted toward the unpainted porch ceiling as soon as the neck disappeared into the matted whiskers. The bottle gurgled. When it was lowered, it was only half full.

"Weak," the beard said. But the hand that held the bottle held it tight.

"I brought your daughter back," Matt said, starting again.

"Why?" he asked.

"She had no place to go. I mean—after all, this is her home."

"She run away," the beard said. Matt found the experience extremely unnerving.

"Look, Mr. Jenkins, I realize that teen-age daughters can be a nuisance, and after meeting your daughter I think I can understand how you feel. Still in all, she is your daughter."

"Got my doubts."

Matt gulped and tried once more. "A happy family demands a lot of compromise, give-and-take on both sides.

Your daughter may have given you good cause to lose your temper, but beating a child is never sound psychology. Now if you—"

"Beat her?" Jenkins rose from his chair. It was an awesome thing, like Neptune rising out of the sea in all his majesty, gigantic, bearded, and powerful. Even subtracting the height of the porch, Jenkins loomed several inches over Matt's near six feet. "Never laid a hand to her. Dassn't."

My God, thought Matt, *the man is trembling!*

"Come in here," said Jenkins. He waved the pint toward the open door, a dark rectangle.

Uneasily, Matt walked into the room. Under his feet, things gritted and cracked.

Jenkins lit a kerosene lamp and turned it up. The room was a shambles. Broken dishes littered the floor. Wooden chairs were smashed and splintered. In the center of the room, a table on its back waved three rough legs helplessly in the air; the fourth leg sagged pitifully from its socket.

"She did this?" Matt asked weakly.

"This ain't nothin'." Jenkins' voice quavered; it was a terrible sound to come from that massive frame. "You should see the other room."

"But how? I mean *why*?"

"I ain't a-sayin' Ab done it," Jenkins said, shaking his head. His beard wobbled near Matt's nose. "But when she gets onhappy, things happen. And she was powerful onhappy when that Duncan boy tol' her he wan't comin' back. Them chairs come up from the floor and slam down. That table went dancin' round the room till it fell to pieces. Then dishes come a-flyin' through the air. Look!"

His voice was full of self-pity as he turned his head around and parted his long, matted hair. On the back of his head was a large, red swelling. "I hate to think what happened to that Duncan boy."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "Now, mister, I guess I got ever' right to lay my hand to that gal. Ain't I?" he demanded fiercely, but his voice broke.

Matt stared at him blankly.

"But whop her? Me? I sooner stick my hand in a nest of rattlers."

"You mean to say that those things happened all by themselves?"

"That's what I said. I guess it kinder sticks in your craw. Wouldn't have believe it myself, even seein' it and feelin' it—" he rubbed the back of his head—"if it ain't happen afore. Funny things happen around Ab, ever since she started fillin' out, five-six year ago."

"But she's only sixteen," Matt objected.

"Sixteen?" Jenkins glanced warily around the room and out the door toward the car. He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. "Don't let on I tol' you, but Ab allus was a fibber. She's past eighteen!"

From a shelf, a single unbroken dish crashed to the floor at Jenkins' feet. He jumped and began to shake.

"See?" he whispered plaintively.

"It fell," Matt said.

"She's witched." Jenkins took a feverish swallow from the bottle. "Maybe I ain't been a good Paw to her. Ever since her Maw died, she run wild and got all kinda queer notions. 'Tain't allus been bad. For years I ain't had to go fer water. That barrel by the porch is allus filled. But ever since she got to the courtin' age and started bein' disappointed in fellers round about, she been mighty hard to live with. No one'll come nigh the place. And things keep a-movin' and a-jumpin' around till a man cain't trust his own chair to set still under him. It gets you, son. A man kin only stand so much!"

To Matt's dismay, Jenkins' eyes began to fill with large tears. "Got no friend no more to offer me a drink now and again, sociable-like, or help me with the chores, times I got the misery in my back. I ain't a well man, son. Times it's more'n I kin do to get outa bed in the mornin'.

"Look, son," Jenkins said, turning to Matt pleadingly. "Yore a city feller. Yore right nice-lookin' with manners and edyacation. I reckon Ab likes you. Whyn't you take her with you?" Matt started retreating toward the door. "She's right purty when she fixes up and she kin cook right smart. You'd think a skillet was part of her hand, the way she kin handle one, and you don't even have to marry up with her."

Matt backed away, white-faced and incredulous. "You

must be mad. You can't give a girl away like that." He turned to make a dash for the door.

A heavy hand fell on Matt's shoulder and spun him around. "Son," Jenkins said, his voice heavy with menace, "any man that's alone with a gal more'n twenty minutes, it's thought proper they should get married up quick. Since yore a stranger, I ain't holdin' you to it. But when Ab left me, she stopped bein' my daughter. Nobody asked you to bring her back. That gal," he said woefully, "eats more'n I do."

Matt reached into his hip pocket. He pulled out his bill-fold and extracted a five-dollar bill.

"Here," he said, extending it toward Jenkins, "maybe this will make life a little more pleasant."

Jenkins looked at the money wistfully, started to reach for it, and jerked his hand away.

"I cain't do it," he moaned. "It ain't worth it. You brought her back. You kin take her away."

Matt glanced out the doorway toward the car and shuddered. He added another five to the one in his hand.

Jenkins sweated. His hand crept out. Finally, desperately, he crumpled the bills into his palm. "All right," he said hoarsely.

"Them's ten mighty powerful reasons."

Matt ran to the car as if he had escaped from bedlam. He opened the door and slipped in. "Get out," he said sharply. "You're home."

"But Paw—"

"From now on, he'll be a doting father." Matt reached across and opened the door for her. "Good-by."

Slowly Abigail got out. She rounded the car and walked up to the porch, dragging her feet. But when she reached the porch, she straightened up. Jenkins, who was standing in the doorway, shrank back from his five-foot-tall daughter as she approached.

"Dirty, nasty old man," Abigail hissed.

Jenkins flinched. After she had passed, he raised the bottle hastily to his beard. His hand must have slipped. By some unaccountable mischance, the bottle kept rising in the air, mouth downward. The bourbon gushed over his head.

Pathetically, looking more like Neptune than ever, Jenkins peered toward the car and shook his head.

Feverishly, Matt turned the car around and jumped it out of the yard. It had undoubtedly been an optical illusion. A bottle does not hang in the air without support.

Guy's cabin should not have been so difficult to find. Although the night was dark, the directions were explicit. But for two hours Matt bounced back and forth along the dirt roads of the hills. He got tired and hungry.

For the fourth time, he passed the cabin which fitted the directions in every way but one—it was occupied. Lights streamed from the windows into the night. Matt turned into the steep driveway. He could, at least, ask directions.

As he walked toward the door, the odor of frying ham drifted from the house to tantalize him. Matt knocked, his mouth watering. Perhaps he could even get an invitation to supper.

The door swung open. "Come on in. What kept you?"

Matt blinked. "Oh, no!" he cried. For a frantic moment, it was like the old vaudeville routine of the drunk in the hotel who keeps staggering back to knock on the same door. Each time he is more indignantly ejected until finally he complains, "My God, are you in *all* the rooms?"

"What are you doing here?" Matt asked faintly. "How did you— How *could* you—?"

Abigail pulled him into the cabin. It looked bright and cheerful and clean. The floor was newly swept; a broom leaned in the corner. The two lower bunks on opposite walls were neatly made up. Two places were laid at the table. Food was cooking on the wood stove.

"Paw changed his mind," she said.

"But he couldn't! I gave him—"

"Oh, that." She reached into a pocket of her dress. "Here."

She handed him the two crumpled five-dollar bills and a handful of silver and copper that Matt dazedly added up to one dollar and thirty-seven cents.

"Paw said he'd have sent more, but it was all he had. So he threw in some vittles."

He sat down in a chair heavily. "But you couldn't—I didn't know where the place was myself, exactly. I didn't tell you—"

"I always been good at finding things," she said. "Places, things that are lost. Like a cat, I guess."

"But—but—" Matt spluttered, "how did you get here?"

"I rode," she said. Instinctively, Matt's eyes switched to the broom in the corner. "Paw loaned me the mule. I let her go. She'll get home all right."

"But you can't stay here. It's impossible!"

"Now, Mr. Wright," Abigail said soothingly. "My Maw used to say a man should never make a decision on a empty stomach. You just sit there and relax. Supper's all ready. You must be nigh starved."

"There's no decision to be made!" Matt said, but he watched while she put things on the table—thick slices of fried ham with cream gravy, corn on the cob, fluffy biscuits, butter, homemade jelly, strong black coffee that was steaming and fragrant. Abigail's cheeks were flushed from the stove, and her face was peaceful. She looked almost pretty.

"I can't eat a bite," Matt told her.

"Nonsense." Abigail filled his plate.

Glumly, Matt sliced off a bite of ham and put it in his mouth. It was so tender, it almost melted. Before long he was eating as fast as he could shovel the food into his mouth. The food was delicious; everything was cooked just as he liked it. He had never been able to tell anyone how to fix it that way. But that was the way it was.

He pushed himself back from the table, teetering against the wall on the back legs of his chair, lit a cigarette and watched Abigail pour him a third cup of coffee. He was swept by a wave of contentment.

"If I'd had time I'd a made a peach pie. I make real good peach pie," Abigail said.

Matt nodded lazily. There would be compensations in having someone around to—

"No!" he said violently, thumping down on the two front legs of his chair. "It won't work. You can't stay here. What would people say?"

"Who'd care?—Paw don't. Anyways, I could say we was married."

"No!" Matt said hoarsely. "Please don't do that!"

"Please, Mr. Wright," she pleaded, "let me cook and clean

for you. I wouldn't be no trouble, Mr. Wright, honest I wouldn't."

"Look, Abbie!" He took her hand. It was soft and feminine. She stood beside his chair obediently, her eyes cast down. "You're a nice girl, and I like you. You can cook better than anyone I've ever known, and you'll make some man a good wife. But I think too much of you to let you ruin your name by staying here alone with me. You'll have to go back to your father."

The life seemed to flow out of her. "All right," she said, so low that it was difficult to hear her.

Dazed at his sudden success, Matt got up and walked toward the door. She followed him, and Matt could almost feel the tears welling in her eyes.

Matt opened the car door for her and helped her in. He circled the front of the car and slid into the driver's seat. Abbie huddled against the far door, small and forlorn.

Since Matt's speech, she hadn't said a word. Suddenly, Matt felt very sorry for her and ashamed, as if he had hit a child. *The poor little thing!* he thought. Then he caught himself. He shook his head. For a poor little thing, she had certainly managed to browbeat her father.

He thumbed the starter button, and the motor growled, but it didn't catch. Matt let it whine to a stop and pressed again. The motor moaned futilely. Matt checked the ignition. It was on. Again and again he pushed in the button. The moans got weaker. He tried to roll the car—but the brakes locked.

He glanced suspiciously at Abigail. *But that's absurd*, he thought. Since he had met Abbie, his thoughts had taken a definite paranoid tinge. It was foolish to blame everything that went wrong on the girl.

But the car wouldn't move. He gave up.

"All right," he sighed. "I can't put you out this far from home. You can sleep here tonight."

Silently, she followed him into the cabin. She helped him tack blankets to the upper bunks on each side of the cabin. They made an effective curtain around the lower beds. As they worked, Matt discovered that he was unusually sensitive to her nearness. There was a sweet, womanly smell to

her, and when she brushed against him the spot that was touched came to life—tingling awareness.

When they finished, Abbie reached down and grasped the hem of her dress to pull it off over her head.

"No, no," Matt said hurriedly. "Don't you have any modesty? Why do you think we tacked up those blankets?" He gestured to the bunk on the left-hand wall. "Dress and undress in there."

She let the hem of her dress fall, nodded meekly, and climbed into the bunk.

Matt stared after her for a moment and released his breath. He turned and climbed into his own bunk, undressed, and slipped under the blanket. Then he remembered that he had forgotten to turn out the lamps.

He rose on one elbow and heard a soft padding on the floor. The lamps went out, one by one, and the padding faded to the other side of the room. Rustling sounds. Darkness and silence.

"Good night, Mr. Wright." It was a little child's voice in the night.

"Good night, Abbie," he said softly. And then after a moment, firmly, "But don't forget—back you go first thing in the morning."

Before the silence wove a pattern of sleep, Matt heard a little sound from the other bunk. He couldn't quite identify it.

A sob? A snore? Or a muffled titter?

The odor of frying bacon and boiling coffee crept into Matt's nightmare of a terrifying pursuit by an implacable and invisible enemy. Matt opened his eyes. The bunk was bright with diffused sunlight; the dream faded. Matt sniffed hungrily and pushed aside the blanket to look out.

All the supplies from the car had been unloaded and neatly stowed away. On a little corner table by the window were his typewriter and precious manila folders, and a stack of blank white paper.

Matt dressed hurriedly in his cramped quarters. When he emerged from his cocoon, Abbie was humming happily as she set breakfast on the table. She wore a different dress this morning—a brown calico that did horrible things for her hair and coloring, but fitted better than the blue ging-

ham. The dress revealed a slim but unsuspectingly mature figure.

How would she look, he wondered briefly, in good clothes and nylons, shoes, and make-up?

The thought crumbled before a fresh onslaught to his senses of the odor and sight of breakfast. The eggs were cooked just right, sunny side up, the white firm but not hard. It was strange how Abbie anticipated his preferences. At first he thought that she had overestimated his appetite, but he stowed away three eggs while Abbie ate two, heartily.

He pushed back his plate with a sigh. "Well," he began. She got very quiet and stared at the floor. His heart melted. He felt too contented; a few hours more wouldn't make any difference. Tonight would be time enough for her to go back. "Well," he repeated, "I guess I'd better get to work."

Abbie sprang to clear the table. Matt walked to the corner where the typewriter was waiting. He sat down in the chair and rolled in a sheet of paper. The table was well arranged for light; it was the right height. Everything considered, it was just about perfect for working.

He stared at the blank sheet of paper. He leafed through his notes. He resisted an impulse to get up and walk around. He rested his fingers lightly on the keys and after a moment lifted them, crossed one leg over the other knee, put his right elbow on the raised leg, and began to finger his chin.

There was only one thing wrong: he didn't feel like working.

Finally he typed in the middle of the page:

THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF WITCHCRAFT

*With Special Reference to the
Salem Trials of 1692*

He double-spaced and stopped.

It wasn't that Abbie was noisy; she was too quiet, with a kind of purposeful restraint that is worse than chaos. With one ear Matt listened to the sounds of dishwashing and stacking. And then silence.

Matt stood it as long as he could and turned. Abbie was

seated at the table. She was sewing up a hole in the pocket of his other pair of pants. He could almost see the aura of bliss that surrounded her.

Like a child, Matt thought, *playing at domesticity*. But there was something mature about it, too; a mature and basic fulfillment. *If we could all be happy with so little. It's a pity, with so small an ambition, to have the real thing so elusive.*

As if she felt him looking at her, Abbie glanced around and beamed. Matt turned back to his typewriter. It still wouldn't come.

Witchcraft, he began hesitantly, *is the attempt of the primitive mind to bring order out of chaos. It is significant, therefore, that belief in witchcraft fades as an understanding of the natural workings of the physical universe grows more prevalent.*

He let his hands drop. It was all wrong, like an image seen in a distorted mirror. He swung around. "Who wrecked your father's house?"

"Libby," she said.

"Libby?" Matt echoed. "Who's Libby?"

"The other me," Abbie said calmly. "Mostly I keep her bottled up inside, but when I feel sad and unhappy I can't keep her in. Then she gets loose and just goes wild. I can't control her."

Good God! Matt thought, *Schizophrenia!* "Where did you get an idea like that?" he asked cautiously.

"When I was born," Abbie said, "I had a twin sister, only she died real quick. Maw said I was stronger and just crowded the life right out of her. When I was bad, Maw used to shake her head and say Libby'd never have been mean or cross or naughty. So when something happened, I started saying Libby done it. It didn't stop a licking, but it made me feel better."

What a thing to tell a child! Matt thought.

"Purty soon I got to believing it, that Libby done the bad things that I got licked for, that Libby was part of me that I had to push deep down so she couldn't get out and get me in trouble. After I"—she blushed—"got older and funny things started happening, Libby come in real handy."

"Can you see her?" Matt ventured.

"Course not," Abbie said reproachfully. "She ain't real."

"Isn't."

"Isn't real," Abbie said. "Things happen when I feel bad. I can't do anything about it. But you got to explain it somehow . . . I use Libby."

Matt sighed. Abbie wasn't so crazy—or stupid either. "You can't control it—ever?"

"Well, maybe a little. Like when I felt kind of mean about that liquor you gave Paw, and I thought how nice it would be if Paw had something wet on the outside for a change."

"How about a tire and a hub cap full of nuts?"

She laughed. Again that tinkling of little silver bells. "You did look funny."

Matt frowned. But slowly his expression cleared and he began to chuckle. "I guess I did."

He swung back to the typewriter before he realized that he was accepting the events of the last eighteen hours as physical facts and Abbie's explanation as theoretically possible. Did he actually believe that Abbie could—how was he going to express it?—move objects with some mysterious, intangible force? By wishing? Of course he didn't. He stared at the typewriter. Or did he?

He called up a picture of a pint bottle hanging unsupported in mid-air, emptying its contents over Jenkins' head. He remembered a dish that jumped from a shelf to shatter on the floor. He thought of a hub cap that dumped its contents into the dirt when his foot was two inches away. And he saw a tire straighten up and begin to roll down a level road.

You can't just dismiss things, he thought. In any comprehensive scheme of the universe, you must include all valid phenomena. If the accepted scheme of things cannot find a place for it, then the scheme must change.

Matt shivered. It was a disturbing thought.

The primitive mind believed that inanimate objects had spirits that must be propitiated. With a little sophistication came mythology and its personification—nymphs and sprites, Poseidon and Aeolus—and folklore, with its kobolds and poltergeists.

Sir James Frazer said something about the relationship between science and magic. Man, he said, associates ideas

by similarity and by contiguity in space or time. If the association is legitimate, it is science; if illegitimate, it is magic, science's bastard sister.

But if the associations of magic are legitimate, then those of science must be illegitimate, and the two reverse their roles and the modern world is standing on its head.

Matt felt a little dizzy.

Suppose the primitive mind is wiser than we are. Suppose you can insure good luck by the proper ritual or kill your enemy by sticking a pin in a wax doll. Suppose you can prove it.

You had to have some kind of explanation of unnatural events, the square pegs that do not fit into any of science's round holes. Even Abbie recognized that.

Matt knew what the scientific explanation would be: illusion, delusion, hypnosis, anything which demanded the least possible rearrangement of accepted theory, anything which, in effect, denied the existence of the phenomenon.

But how could you really explain it? How could you explain Abbie? Did you believe in the spirits of inanimate objects, directed by Abbie when she was in the proper mood? Did you believe in poltergeists which Abbie ordered about? Did you believe in Libby, the intangible projectable, manipulative external soul?

You had to explain Abbie or your cosmology was worthless.

That man at Duke—Rhine, the parapsychologist—he had a word for it. Telekinesis. That was one attempt to incorporate psychic phenomena into the body of science, or, perhaps, to alter the theoretical universe in order to fit those phenomena into it.

But it didn't explain anything.

Then Matt thought of electricity. *You don't have to explain something in order to use it. You don't have to understand it in order to control it. It helps, but it isn't essential. Understanding is a psychological necessity, not a physical one.*

Matt stared at the words he had written. The seventeenth century. Why was he wasting his time? Here was something immediate. He had stumbled on something that would set the whole world on its ear, or perhaps stand it on its feet

again. It would not molder away, as the thesis would in a university library.

Matt turned around. Abbie was sitting at the table, her mending finished, staring placidly out the open doorway. Matt stood up and walked toward her. She turned her head to look at him, smiling slowly. Matt turned his head, searching the room.

"Kin I get you something?" Abbie asked anxiously.

Matt looked down at her. "Herel!" he said. He plucked the needle from the spool of darning thread. He forced it lightly into the rough top of the table so that the needle stood upright. "Now," he said defiantly, "make it move."

Abbie stared at him. "Why?"

"I want to see you do it," Matt said firmly. "Isn't that enough?"

"But I don't want to," Abbie objected. "I never wanted to do it. It just happened."

"Try!"

"No, Mr. Wright," Abbie said firmly. "It never brung me nothing but misery. It scared away all my fellers and all Paw's friends. Folks don't like people who can do things like that. I don't ever want it to happen again."

"If you want to stay here," Matt said flatly, "you'll do as I say."

"Please, Mr. Wright," she begged. "Don't make me do it. It'll spoil everything. It's bad enough when you can't help it, but it's worse when you do it a-purpose—something terrible will come of it."

Matt glowered at her. Her pleading eyes dropped. She bit her lip. She stared at the needle. Her smooth, young forehead tightened.

Nothing happened. The needle remained upright.

Abbie took a deep breath. "I cain't, Mr. Wright," she wailed. "I just cain't do it."

"Why not?" Matt demanded fiercely. "Why can't you do it?"

"I don't know," Abbie said. Automatically her hands began to smooth the pants laid across her lap. She looked down and blushed. "I guess it's 'cause I'm happy."

After a morning of experimentation, Matt's only half-conscious need was still unsatisfied. He had offered Abbie an

innumerable assortment of objects: a spool of thread, a fountain pen cap, a dime, a typewriter eraser, a three-by-five note card, a piece of folded paper, a bottle . . . The last Matt considered a stroke of genius. But tip it as he would, the bottle, like all the rest of the objects, remained stolidly unaffected.

He even got the spare tire out of the trunk and leaned it against the side of the car. Fifteen minutes later, it was still leaning there.

Finally, frowning darkly, Matt took a cup from the shelf and put it down on the table. "Here," he said. "You're so good at smashing dishes, smash this."

Abbie stared at the cup hopelessly. Her face seemed old and haggard. After a moment, her body seemed to collapse all at once. "I cain't," she moaned. "I cain't."

"Can't!" Matt shouted. "Can't! Are you so stupid you can't say that? Not 'cain't'—can't!"

Her large blue eyes lifted to Matt's in mute appeal. They began to fill with tears. "I can't," she said. A sob broke from her throat. She put her head down on her arms. Her thin shoulders began to quiver.

Moodily, Matt stared at her back. Was everything that he had seen merely an illusion? Or did this phenomenon only evidence itself under very rigid conditions? Did she have to be unhappy?

It was not without a certain logic. Neurotic children had played a large part in the history of witchcraft. In one of the English trials, children had reportedly fallen into fits and vomited crooked pins. They could not pronounce such holy names as "Lord," "Jesus," or "Christ," but they could readily speak the names "Satan" or "Devil." Between the middle of the fifteenth century and the middle of the sixteenth, 100,000 persons had been put to death for witchcraft. How many had come to the rack, the stake, or the drowning pool, through the accusations of children? A child saw a hag at her door. The next moment she saw a hare run by and the woman had disappeared. On no more convincing evidence than that, the woman was accused of turning herself into a hare by witchcraft.

Why had the children done it? Suggestibility? A desire for attention?

Whatever the reason, it was tainted with abnormality.

In the field of psychic phenomena as well, the investigations of the Society of Psychical Research were full of instances in which neurotic children or neurotic young women played a distinct if inexplicable role.

Did Abbie have to be unhappy? Matt's lips twisted. *If it was true, it was hard on Abbie.*

"Get your things together," Matt said harshly. "You're going home to your father."

Abbie stiffened and looked up, her face tear-streaked but her eyes blazing. "I ain't."

"You are not," Matt corrected sharply.

"I are not," Abbie said fiercely. "I are not. I are not."

Suddenly the cup was sailing toward Matt's head. Instinctively, he put out his hand. The cup hit it and stuck. Matt looked at it dazedly and back at Abbie. Her hands were still in her lap.

"You did it!" Matt shouted. "It's true."

Abbie looked pleased. "Do I have to go back to Paw?"

Matt thought a moment. "No," he said. "Not if you'll help me."

Abbie's lips tightened. "Ain't—isn't once enough, Mr. Wright? You know I can do it. Won't you leave it alone now? It's unlucky. Something awful will happen. I got a feeling." She looked up at his implacable face. "But I'll do it, if you want."

"It's important," Matt said gently. "Now. What did you feel just before the cup moved toward me?"

"Mad."

"No, no. I mean what did you feel physically or mentally, not emotionally."

Abbie's eyebrows were thick. When she knit them, they made a straight line across the top of her nose. "Gosh, Mr. Wright, I cain't—" She looked at him quickly. "I can't find the words to tell about it. It's like I wanted to pick up the nearest thing and throw it at you, and then it was like I had thrown it. Kind of a push from all of me, instead of just my hand."

Matt frowned while he put the cup back on the table. "Try to feel exactly like that again."

Obediently, Abbie concentrated. Her face worked. Finally

she sagged back in her chair. "I cai—I can't. I just don't feel like it."

"You're going back to your father!" Matt snapped.

The cup rocked.

"There!" Matt said quickly. "Try it again before you forget!"

The cup spun around.

"Again!"

The cup rose an inch from the table and settled down.

Abbie sighed. "It *was* just a trick, wasn't it, Mr. Wright? You aren't really going to send me back?"

"No, but maybe you'll wish I had before we're through. You'll have to work and practice until you have full conscious control of whatever it is."

"All right," Abbie said submissively. "But it's terrible tiring work when you don't feel like it."

"Terribly," Matt corrected.

"Terribly," Abbie repeated.

"Now," Matt said. "Try it again."

Abbie practiced until noon. Her maximum effort was to raise the cup a foot from the table, but that she could do very well.

"Where does the energy come from?" Matt asked.

"I don't know," Abbie sighed, "but I'm powerful hungry."

"Very," Matt said.

"Very hungry," Abbie repeated. She got up and walked to the cupboard. "How many ham sandwiches do you want—two?"

Matt nodded absently. When the sandwiches came, he ate in thoughtful silence.

It was true, then. Abbie could do it, but she had to be unhappy to have full power and control.

"Try it on the mustard," he said.

"I'm so full," Abbie explained contentedly. She had eaten three sandwiches.

Matt stared at the yellow jar, unseeing. It was quite a problem. There was no sure way of determining just what Abbie's powers were, without getting some equipment. He had to find out just what it was she did, and what effect it had on her, before he could expect to fully evaluate any data.

But that wasn't the hardest part of it. He should be able

to pick up the things he needed in Springfield. It was what he was going to have to do to Abbie that troubled him.

All he had been able to find out about Abbie's phenomena was that they seemed to occur with the greatest frequency and strength when the girl was unhappy.

Matt stared out through the cabin window.

Gradually, he was forming a plan to make Abbie happier than she had ever been.

All afternoon Matt was very kind to Abbie. He helped her dry the dishes, although she protested vigorously. He talked to her about his life and about his studies at the University of Kansas. He told her about the thesis and how he had to write it to get his master's degree in psychology and what he wanted to do when he was graduated.

"Psychology," he said, "is only an infant science. It isn't really a science at all but a metaphysics. It's a lot of theorizing from insufficient data. The only way you can get data is by experimentation, and you can't experiment because psychology is people, living people. Science is a ruthless business of observation and setting up theories and then knocking them down in laboratories. Physicists can destroy everything from atoms to whole islands; biologists can destroy animals; anatomists can dissect cadavers. But psychologists have no true laboratories; they can't be ruthless because public opinion won't stand for it, and cadavers aren't much good. Psychology will never be a true science until it has its laboratories where it can be just as ruthless as the physical sciences. It has to come."

Matt stopped. Abbie was a good listener; he had forgotten he was talking to a hill girl.

"Tell me more about K.U.," she sighed.

He tried to answer her questions about what the coeds wore when they went to classes and when they had dates and when they went to dances. Her eyes grew large and round.

"Guess it would be romantic," Abbie sighed. "How far do they let a fellow go if they ain't—aren't serious?"

Matt thought Abbie's attempt to improve her English was touching—almost pathetic. He puzzled about her question for a moment. "I guess it depends on the girl."

Abbie nodded understandingly. "Why do they go to college?"

"To get married," Matt said. "Most of them."

Abbie shook her head. "All those pretty clothes. All those men. They must be awful—very slow not to get married quick. Can't they get married at home without waiting so long?"

Matt frowned perplexedly! Abbie had a talent for asking questions which reached down to basic social relationships. "The men they meet at college will make more money for them."

"Oh," Abbie said. She shrugged. "That's all right, I guess, if that's what you want."

So it went. Matt paid Abbie little compliments on her appearance, and she blushed and looked pleased. He told her he couldn't understand why she wasn't besieged by suitors and why she hadn't been married long ago. She blushed deeper. He dwelt expansively on the supper she cooked and swore that he had never tasted better.

Abbie couldn't have been happier. She hummed through her tasks. Everything worked well for her. The dishes were done almost as soon as they were started.

Matt walked out on the porch. He sat down on the edge. Abbie settled herself beside him, quietly, not touching him, her hands in her lap.

The cabin was built on the top of a ridge. It was night, but the moon had come up big and yellow, and they could look far out over the valley. Silvery, in a dark green setting of trees, the lake glimmered far below.

"Ain't—isn't it purty?" Abbie sighed, folding her hands.

"Pretty," Matt said absently.

"Pretty," Abbie sighed.

They sat in silence. Matt sensed her nearness in a way that was almost physical. It stirred him. There was something intensely feminine about Abbie that was very appealing at times, in spite of her plain face and shapeless clothes and bare feet and lack of education. Even her single-minded ambition was a striving to fulfill her true, her basic function. In a way it was more vital and understandable than all the confused sublimations of the girls he had known.

Abbie, at least, knew what she wanted and what she would

pay to get it. She would make someone a good wife. Her one goal would be to make her husband happy. She would cook and clean for him and bear his strong, healthy children with a great and thrilling joy. She would be silent when he was silent, unobtrusive when he was working, merry when he was gay, infinitely responsive when he was passionate. And the transcendent wonder of it was that she would be fulfilling her finest function in doing it; she would be serenely happy, blissfully content.

Matt lit a cigarette in an attempt to break the mood. He glanced at her face by the light of the match. "What is court-
ing like here in the hills?" he asked.

"Sometimes we walk," Abbie said dreamily, "and look at things together, and talk a little. Sometimes there's a dance at the school house. If a fellow has a boat, you can go out on the lake. There's huskin' bees an' church socials an' picnics. But mostly when the moon is a-shinin' an' the night is warm, we just sit on a porch an' hold hands and do whatever the girl's willin' to allow."

Matt reached out and took one of her hands and held it in his. It was cool and dry and strong. It clung to his hand.

She turned her face to him, her eyes searching for his face in the darkness. "Do you like me a little bit, Mr. Wright?" she asked softly. "Not marryin'-like, but friendly-like?"

"I think that you're the most feminine girl I've ever met," he said, and realized it was true.

Almost without volition on either part, they seemed to lean together, blending in the night. Matt's lips sought her pale little-girl lips and found them, and they weren't pale or little-girlish at all, but warm and soft and passionate. He broke away, breathing quickly.

Abbie half turned to nestle against his shoulder, his arm held tightly around her. She sighed contentedly. "I reckon I wouldn't be unwillin'," she said tremulously, "whatever you wanted to do."

"I can't understand why you didn't get married long ago," he said.

"I guess it was me," Abbie said reflectively. "I wasn't rightly satisfied with any of my fellows. I'd get mad at them for no reason at all, and then something bad would happen

to them and pretty soon no one would come courtin'. Maybe I expected them to be what they weren't. I guess I wasn't really in love with any of them. Anyways, I'm glad I didn't get married up." She sighed.

Matt felt the stirrings of something that felt oddly like compunction. *What a louse you are, Matthew Wright!*

"What happened to them—your fellows?" he asked. "Was it something you did?"

"Folks said it was," Abbie said. There was a trace of bitterness in her voice. "They said I had the evil eye. I don't see how. There isn't anything wrong with my eyes, is there?" She looked up at him; her eyes were large and dark blue, with little flecks of silvery moonlight in them.

"Not a thing," Matt said. "They're very beautiful."

"I don't see how it could have been any of my fault," Abbie said. "Of course, when Hank was late that evening, I told him he was so slow he might as well have a broken leg. Right after that he was nailing shingles on a roof, and he fell off and broke his leg. But I reckon he'd have broke it anyways. He was always right careless.

"And then Gene, he was so cold I told him he should fall in the lake and warm up. But a person who does a lot of fishin', I guess he falls in a lot anyways."

"I guess so," Matt said. He began to shiver.

"You're shivering, Mr. Wright," Abbie said solicitously. "Let me go get your jacket."

"Never mind," Matt said. "It's about time for bed anyway. You go in and get ready. Tomorrow—tomorrow we're going to drive to Springfield for some shopping."

"Really, Mr. Wright? I haven't never been to Springfield," Abbie said incredulously. She got up, her eyes shining. "Really?"

"Really," Matt said. "Go on in, now."

She went in. She was almost dancing.

Matt sat on the porch for a few minutes longer, thinking. It was funny what happened to the fellows that disappointed Abbie. When he lit a cigarette, his hand was shaking.

Abbie had a way of being many different persons. Already Matt had known four of them: the moody little girl with braids down her back shuffling along a dusty road or bouncing gleefully on a car seat; the happy, placid housewife with

cheeks rosy from the stove; the unhappy vessel of strange powers, tearful and reluctant; the girl with the passionate lips in the moon-streaked darkness. Which one was Abbie, the true Abbie?

The next morning Matt had a fifth Abbie to consider. Her face was scrubbed and shining until it almost rivaled her eyes. Her braided hair was wound in a coronet around her head. She was wearing a different dress made of a shiny blue quilted material with a red lining. Matt scanned his small knowledge of dress materials. Taffeta? The color did terrible things to her hair. The dress had a V-shape neck and back and fitted better than anything she had worn yet. On one hip was a large artificial rose. Her stockingless feet were enclosed in a pair of black, patent-leather sandals.

My God! Matt thought. Her Sunday best! I'll have to walk with that down the streets of Springfield. He shuddered, and resisted the impulse to tear off that horrible rose.

"Well," he said, "all ready?"

Abbie blushed excitedly. "Are we really going to Springfield, Mr. Wright?"

"We are if the car will start."

"Oh, it'll start," Abbie said confidently.

Matt gave her a thoughtful sidelong glance. That was another thing.

After the usual hearty breakfast, with fried potatoes on the side, they got into the car. The brakes released without hesitation.

The drive was more than fifty miles, half of it over dirt roads that were roller-coaster washboards, and they drove it in silence. Every few miles Matt would glance at Abbie out of the corner of his eye and shudder. As excited as she was, like a child, Abbie was contented to sit quietly and enjoy the ride, particularly when they swung off the dirt road onto Highway 665.

When they came to Springfield, Abbie's face was glowing. She stared at the buildings as if they had sprung magically into being especially for her. Then she began to inspect the people walking along the streets. Matt noticed that it was the women who received her closest attention.

Suddenly Matt noticed that Abbie was very quiet. He

glanced toward her. She was still, staring down at her hands resting in her lap.

"What's the matter?" Matt asked.

"I guess," she said, her voice a little unsteady, "I guess I look pretty funny. I guess you'll feel ashamed having me along. If it's all right with you, Mr. Wright, I'll just sit in the car."

"Nonsense," Matt said heartily. "You look fine." *The little devil*, he thought. *She has an uncanny talent for understanding things. She's either unusually perceptive or—What?* "Besides, I'll need you to try on some clothes."

"Clothes, Mr. Wright!" she exclaimed. She seemed to find it hard to speak. "You're going to buy some clothes."

Matt nodded. He parked the car in front of Springfield's biggest department store. He came around to Abbie's door and helped her out. For a moment Abbie's face was level with his; her blue eyes locked with his dark ones in a look that Matt refused to analyze. They walked into the store, Abbie clinging to his arm. He could feel her heart beating swiftly. Matt stopped a moment to study the directory.

"Second floor," he said.

Abbie held back as Matt started off. "Kin we—can we look around here—for just a second?" Abbie asked hesitantly.

Matt glanced at her and shrugged. "I suppose so."

Abbie started off determinedly toward some mysterious, unseen destination, leading Matt down innumerable aisles. All the way to the back of the store they went, and emerged miraculously into the kitchenware department. Abbie stopped on the threshold, gazing rapturously at the gleaming pots and pans, beaters, knives, and gadgets, as if they were jewels. She dismissed with a glance the stoves and electrical appliances, but the cooking utensils brought forth long sighs. After a moment she moved among them, staring at them, touching them with one timid finger. She made little crooning sounds deep in her throat.

Matt had to drag her away.

They were almost to the stairs when Matt noticed that she was holding something to her breast. He stopped. He stared aghast. She was hugging a tiny frying pan of shiny aluminum and dully gleaming copper.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"Back there," she said innocently. "They got so many. They'll never miss a little thing like this."

"But you can't do that!" Matt said. "That's stealing."

"'Tain't stealing when they got so much and I got so little," she explained.

"You've got to take it back!" Matt made a futile grab for the frying pan. Abbie hugged it to her breast with both arms.

"Don't take it away from me!" she wailed. "Please don't make me take it back!"

Matt glanced around nervously. So far no one seemed to be watching them. He turned back to Abbie. "Sh-h-h!" he said. "Be quiet now. Please be quiet." He looked at her pleadingly. She hugged the frying pan tighter. "All right," he sighed. "Stay here! Don't move! Don't say anything!"

Quickly he walked back to kitchenwares. He caught the attention of the clerk. "How much are those?" he said, pointing to the frying pans.

"Four-fifty, sir. Shall I wrap one up?"

"Four-fifty!"

"Yes, sir," the man said. "We have some cheaper ones in all aluminum—"

"Never mind," Matt said hurriedly. He pulled out his billfold. "Here. Give me a receipt and a sack."

The clerk picked up a frying pan.

"No, no," Matt said. "I don't want one. I just want a receipt and a sack."

"But, sir," the man said bewilderedly. "You said—"

"Don't argue with me," Matt said. "Just give me a receipt and a sack!"

The clerk rang up the sale, tore off the receipt, dropped it in a sack, and handed it to Matt with a very dazed expression on his face.

"Anything else, sir?" he asked automatically.

"I hope not," said Matt, and hurried away. When he looked back the clerk was still staring after him.

Abbie was standing by the stairs where he had left her. "Put the frying pan in here," he whispered.

She gave him a look of admiration. "Oh, that was real clever of you."

Matt mopped his forehead. "Yes, wasn't it?" He took her arm and hurried her up the stairs. At the top Matt came to

a halt and looked around. Abbie stared with big eyes at the racks upon racks of dresses.

"I never knew," she whispered, "there was so many dresses in the world."

Matt nodded absently. He had to get away long enough to find a laboratory from which to rent some testing apparatus.

He saw a saleswoman, and drew her aside.

"The girl over there," he said. "I want you to take her to the beauty parlor and give her the works. Haircut, shampoo, setting, facial, eyebrows thinned and shaped and a make-up job. Then get her a new outfit from the skin out. Can you do all that?"

The saleswoman looked quite pleased. "We'll be very happy to help you."

Matt took out his billfold and peered into it. Slowly he extracted one traveler's check for one hundred dollars and then another. It left him only three hundred dollars, and he still had to get the equipment and live for the rest of the summer. Matt sighed and countersigned the checks. "Try to keep it under this," he said heavily. "If you can."

"Yes, sir," said the saleswoman and hesitated, smiling. "Your fiancée?"

"Good God, no," Matt blurted out. "I mean—she's my—niece. It's her birthday."

He walked over to Abbie, breathing heavily. "Go with this woman, Abbie, and do what she tells you."

"Yes, Mr. Wright," Abbie said dazedly. And she walked away as if she were entering into fairyland.

Matt turned, biting his lip. He felt slightly sick.

He had one more thing to do before he could leave the store. Making sure Abbie was gone, he went into the lingerie department. He regretted it almost immediately. Once he had seen a woman come into a pool hall; he must, he thought, wear the same sheepish, out-of-place expression.

He swallowed his qualms—they were a hard lump in his throat—and walked up to the counter.

"Yes, sir," said the young woman brightly, "what can I do for you?"

Matt avoided looking at her. "I'd like to buy a negligee," he said in a low voice.

"What size?"

Matt began a motion with his hands and then dropped them hastily at his sides. "About five feet tall. Slim."

The woman led him along the counter. "Any particular color?"

"Uh—black," Matt said hoarsely.

The clerk brought out a garment that was very black, very lacy, very sheer. "This is thirty-nine ninety-eight."

Matt stared at it. "That's awfully black," he said.

"We have some others," the clerk began, folding the negligee.

"Never mind," Matt said quickly. "Wrap it up." Furtively, he slipped the money over the counter.

When he came out, the package under his arm, he was sweating freely.

He put the box in his car and looked at his watch. He had about two and a half hours, at least. He should be able to find everything he needed in that time.

He pulled a list of things out of his pocket, and found a telephone directory in a drugstore.

Springfield had a laboratory supply house. He called the number, asked for the equipment he'd need, was told they had it for rent, and drove over to pick it up. The rental didn't seem like much by the day, but it was, he discovered on figuring it out, a lot by the month—enough to break him fast if he didn't get something like a controlled series of tests, very fast.

Feeling like a child-slayer, he drove back to the department store and parked.

Only one hour had gone by. He went into the store and browsed about.

Two hours. He put another nickel in the parking meter. He sat down in a red leather chair and tried to look as if he were testing it for size and comfort.

Three hours. He fed the parking meter again, and began to feel hungry. He went back to the chair. From it, he could keep an eye on the stairs.

Women went up and came down. None of them was Abbie. He wondered, with a flash of fear, if she had been caught trying to make off with something else.

Matt tried not watching the stairs on the theory that a

watched pot never boils. Never again, he vowed, would he go shopping with a woman. Where the devil was Abbie?

"Mr. Wright." The voice was tremulous and low.

Matt looked up and leaped out of his chair. The girl standing beside him was blonde and breath-taking. The hair was short and fluffed out at the ends; it framed a beautiful face. A soft, simple black dress with a low neckline clung to a small but womanly figure. Slim, long legs in sheer stockings and small black shoes with towering heels.

"Good God, Abbie! What have they done to you?"

"Don't you like it?" Abbie asked. The lovely face clouded up.

"It's—it's marvelous," Matt spluttered. "But they bleached your hair!"

Abbie beamed. "The woman who worked on it called it a rinse. She said it was natural, but I should wash it every few days. Not with laundry soap, either." She sighed. "I didn't know there was so much a girl could do to her face. I've got so much to learn. Why, she—"

Abbie prattled on happily while Matt stared at her, incredulous. Had he been sleeping in the same cabin with this girl? Had she been cooking his meals and darning the holes in his pockets? Had he really kissed her and held her in his arms and heard her say, "I reckon I wouldn't be unwillin'—"

He wondered if he would act the same again.

Matt had expected a difference but not such a startling one. She wore her clothes with a becoming sureness. She walked on the high heels as if she had worn them all her life. She carried herself as if she was born to beauty. But then, things always worked well for Abbie.

Abbie opened a small black purse and took out five dollars and twenty-one cents. "The woman said I should give this back to you."

Matt took it and looked at it in his hand and back at Abbie. He shrugged and smiled. "The power of money. Have you got everything?"

Under her arm she carried a large package that contained, no doubt, the clothes and shoes she had worn. Matt took it from her. She refused to give up the package that held the frying pan.

"I couldn't wear this," she said. She reached into her purse

and pulled out something black and filmy. She held it up by one strap. "It was uncomfortable."

Matt shot nervous glances to the right and the left. "Put it away." He crammed it back into the purse and snapped the purse shut. "Are you hungry?"

"I could eat a hog," Abbie said.

Coming from this blonde creature, the incongruity set Matt to laughing. Abbie stared with wide eyes. "Did I say something wrong?" she asked plaintively.

"No." Matt got out and led her toward the door.

"You got to tell me," Abbie said appealingly. "There's so much I don't know."

Matt located the most expensive restaurant in town. It had a romantic atmosphere but he had chosen it because it specialized in sea food. He wanted to be sure that Abbie had things to eat she had never tasted before.

Matt ordered for both of them: shrimp cocktail, assorted relishes, chef's salad with Roquefort dressing, broiled lobster tails with drawn butter, french fried potatoes, broccoli with a cheese sauce, frozen éclair, coffee. The food was good, and Abbie ate everything with great wonderment, as if it were about to disappear into the mysterious place from which it came.

She stared wide-eyed at the room and its decorations and the other diners and the waiter, and seemed oblivious of the fact that other men were staring admiringly at her. The waiter puzzled her. "Is this all he does?" she asked timidly. Matt nodded. "He's very good at it," Abbie conceded.

"Try to move the coffee cup," Matt said when they finished.

Abbie stared at it for a moment. "I can't," she said softly. "I tried awful—very hard, but I can't. I'd do anything you wanted, Mr. Wright, but I can't do that."

Matt smiled. "That's all right. I just wanted to see if you could."

Matt found a place they could dance. He ordered a couple of drinks. Abbie sipped hers once, made a face, and wouldn't touch it again.

She danced lightly and gracefully in her high-heeled shoes. They brought the top of her head level with his lips. She rested her head blissfully against his shoulder and pressed

herself very close. For a moment Matt relaxed and let himself enjoy the pleasures of the aftermath of a good meal and a beautiful girl in his arms. But Abbie seemed to be in a private Eden of her own, as if she had entered a paradise and was afraid to speak for fear the spell would break.

During the long drive home, she spoke only once. "Do people live like that all the time?"

"No," Matt said. "Not always. Not unless they have a lot of money."

Abbie nodded. "That's the way it should be," she said softly. "It should only happen a long ways apart."

When they reached the cabin, Matt reached into the back seat for the package he had bought.

"What's that?" Abbie asked.

"Open it," Matt said.

She held it up a little, lacy and black in the moonlight. Then she turned to look at Matt, her face transparent, her eyes glowing. "Wait out here a minute, will you?" she asked breathlessly.

"All right." Matt lit a cigarette and stood on the porch looking out over the valley, hating himself.

After a few minutes, he heard a little whisper. "Come in, Mr. Wright."

He opened the door, started in and stopped, stunned. One kerosene lamp lit the room dimly. The new clothes were draped carefully over the edge of a chair. Abbie was wearing the negligee. That was all. Through its lacy blackness she gleamed pink and white, a lovely vision of seductiveness. She stood by the table, staring at the floor. When she looked up, her cheeks were flushed.

Suddenly she ran lightly across the floor and threw her arms around Matt's neck and kissed him hard on the lips. Her lips moved. She drew back a little, looking up at him.

"There's only one way a girl like me can thank a man for a day as wonderful as this," she whispered. "For the clothes and the trip and the dinner and the dancing. And for being so nice. I never thought anything like this would ever happen to me. I don't mind. I guess it isn't bad when you really like someone. I like you awful—very well. I'm glad they made me pretty. If I can make you happy—just for a moment—"

Gently, feeling sick, Matt took her hands from around his

neck. "You don't understand," he said coldly. "I've done a terrible thing. I don't know how you can ever forgive me. Somehow you misunderstood me. Those clothes, the negligee—they're for another girl—the girl I'm going to marry—my fiancée. You're about her size and I thought—I don't know how I could have misled . . ."

He stopped. It was enough. His plan had worked. Abbie had crumpled. Slowly, as he spoke, the life had drained out of her, the glow had fled from her face, and she seemed to shrink in upon herself, cold and broken. She was a little girl, slapped across the face in her most spiritual moment by the one person she had trusted most.

"That's all right," she said faintly. "Thanks for letting me think they was mine—that it was for me—only for a little. I'll never forget."

She turned and went to the bunk and let the blanket fall back around her.

It was the sobbing that kept Matt from going to sleep that night. Or maybe it was the way the sobs were so soft and muffled that he had to strain to hear them.

Breakfast was a miserable meal. There was something wrong with the food, although Matt couldn't quite pin down what it was. Everything was cooked just the same, but the flavor was gone. Matt cut and chewed mechanically and tried to avoid looking at Abbie. It wasn't difficult; she seemed very small today, and she kept her eyes on the floor.

She was dressed in the shapeless blue gingham once more. She toyed listlessly with her food. Her face was scrubbed free of make-up, and everything about her was dull. Even her newly blonde hair had faded.

Several times Matt opened his mouth to apologize again, and shut it without saying anything. Finally he cleared his throat and said, "Where's your new frying pan?"

She looked up for the first time. Her blue eyes were cloudy. "I put it away," she said lifelessly, "do you want it back?"

"No, no," Matt said hurriedly. "I was just asking."

Silence fell again, like a sodden blanket. Matt sat and chain-smoked while Abbie cleaned up the table and washed the dishes.

When she finished she turned around with her back to

the dishpan. "Do you want me to move things for you? I can do it real good today."

Matt saw the little pile of packages in the corner and noticed for the first time that the new clothes were gone. He steeled himself. "How do you know?"

"I got a feeling."

"Do you mind?"

"I don't mind. I don't mind anything." She came forward and sat down in the chair. "Look!"

The table between them lifted, twisted, tilted on one leg, and crashed on its side to the floor.

"How did you feel?" Matt said excitedly. "Can you control the power? Was the movement accidental?"

"It felt like it was kind of a part of me," Abbie said. "Like my hand. But I didn't know exactly what it was going to do."

"Wait a minute," Matt said. "I'm going to get some things out of the car. Maybe we can learn a little more about what makes you able to do things like this. You don't mind, do you?"

"What's the good of it?" she asked listlessly.

Matt dashed out to the car and pulled the two cartons of equipment out of the trunk. He carried them into the shack and laid the apparatus out on the table. He went back to the car and brought in the bathroom scales he'd bought in the drugstore in Springfield.

"All right, Abbie. First, let's find out a few things about you before we try moving anything else."

Abbie complied automatically while he took her temperature and pulse, measured her blood pressure and weighed her. "I wish I could set up controls to measure your basal metabolism," he muttered as he worked, "but this will have to do. I wish this shack had a generator."

"I could get you electricity," Abbie said without much interest.

"Hmmm—you could at that, I guess. But that would make these tests meaningless, if you had to devote energy to keeping the equipment running."

He cursed the limited knowledge that was undoubtedly making him miss things that a man who had studied longer would have known more about.

But there wasn't anything he could do about that. Once

he'd reached some preliminary conclusions, more experienced researchers could take over the job.

Working carefully, he wrote down the results.

"Now, Abbie, would you please pick that chair up off the floor, and hold it up for a few minutes? No—I mean really go over and pick it up."

He let her hold it for exactly five minutes, then ran her through the same tests as before, noting the changes in temperature, blood pressure, pulse rate, respiration, and then he weighed her again.

"All right. Take a rest now. We'll have to wait until these readings drop down to what they were before we do anything else," Matt said.

Still not displaying anything more than acquiescence, Abbie sat down in another chair and stared at the floor.

"Abbie, do you mind helping me?" Matt asked. "It's for your benefit, too. If you can control these powers all the time, maybe the fellows around here will stop breaking legs and falling into lakes."

Abbie's dull expression did not change. "I don't care," she said.

Matt sighed. For a moment, he considered dropping his experiments and just getting out of Abbie's life—packing his thesis notes and typewriter in the car and driving back to the university. But he couldn't stop now. He was too close to the beginnings of an answer.

He checked Abbie again, and found his readings coincided with the first set. The short rest had dropped her heart-beat and respiration back to normal.

"Let's try all over again," Matt said. "Lift that chair to the same height you were holding it, please."

The chair jerked upward, hesitantly. "Easy. Just a little more." It straightened, then moved more steadily. "Hold it there." The chair hovered motionless in the air, maintaining its position. Matt waited five minutes. "All right. Let it down easy. Slow." The chair settled gently to the floor, like a drifting feather.

Once more, he checked Abbie.

Her heartbeat was below what it had been. Her blood pressure was lower. Her respiration was shallow—her breast

was barely rising to each breath. Her temperature was low—dangerously so, for an ordinary human being.

"How do you feel?" he asked apprehensively. If this was what always happened, then Abbie was in real danger every time she used her powers.

"All right," she said with no more than her previous disinterest. Matt frowned, but she was showing no signs of discomfort.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "You want me to try some more?"

"If you're sure you're not in danger. But I want you to stop if you feel any pain or if you're uncomfortable. Now, lift the table just this far . . ."

They practiced with the table for an hour. At the end of that time, Abbie had it under perfect control. She could raise it a fraction of an inch or rocket it to the ceiling where it would remain, legs pointing stiffly toward the floor, until she lowered it. She balanced it on one leg and set it spinning like a top.

Distance did not seem to diminish Abbie's control or power. She could make the table perform equally well from any point in the room, from outside the cabin, or from a point to which she shuffled dispiritedly several hundred yards down the road.

"How do you know where it is and what it's doing?" Matt asked, frowning.

Abbie shrugged listlessly. "I just feel it."

"With what?" Matt asked. "Do you see it? Feel it? Sense it? If we could isolate the sense—"

"It's all of those," Abbie said.

Matt shook his head in frustration. "You look a little tired. You'd better lie down."

She lay in her bunk, not moving, her face turned to the wall, but Matt knew that she wasn't asleep. When she didn't get up to fix lunch, Matt opened a can of soup and tried to get her to eat some of it.

"No, thanks, Mr. Wright," Abbie said. "I ain't hungry."

"I'm not hungry," Matt corrected.

Abbie didn't respond. In the evening she got out of her bunk to fix supper, but she didn't eat more than a few

mouthfuls. After she washed the dishes, she went back into her bunk and pulled the blanket around it.

Matt sat up, trying to make sense out of his charts. Despite their readings, Abbie hadn't reacted dangerously to what should have been frightening physiological changes. He could be fairly safe in assuming that they always accompanied the appearance of her parapsychological powers—and she had certainly lived through those well enough.

But why was there such a difference in the way she reacted when she was happy and when she wasn't? The first morning, when she had barely been able to assume conscious control, she'd been ravenously hungry. Today, when she had performed feats that made the others insignificant she was neither hungry nor abnormally exhausted. She was tired, yes, but there *had* been a measurable, though slight, expenditure of energy with each action, which, accumulated through their numerous experiments, could be expected to equal that required for an afternoon's normal work.

What was different? Why, when she tried with what amounted to will-power alone, was it harder for her to move an object telekinetically than it would have been to do so physically? Why was the reverse true when she was unhappy?

Unless she was tapping a source of energy somewhere.

The thought sounded as though there might be something behind it. He reached for a blank sheet of paper and began jotting down ideas.

Disregarding the first morning's experiments, when she was obviously succeeding despite this hypothetical force, what source of energy could she be contacting?

Well, what physical laws was she violating? Gravity? Inertia?

When Abbie was unhappy, she could nullify gravity—no, not exactly gravity—mass. Once she had done that, a process that might not require much energy at all, the object rose by itself, and, having no mass, could be pushed around easily. Somehow, by some unconscious mechanism, she could restore measured amounts of mass and—there was an idea trying to come to the surface of his thinking—of course! The energy created by the moving or falling body when mass was restored and gravity reasserted itself was channeled into her

body. She stopped being a chemical engine sustained by food burned in the presence of oxygen, and became a receiver for the power generated by the moving bodies.

Writing quickly, he systematized what he had learned. Obviously, the energy restored when the manipulated objects fell or swooped back into place couldn't quite balance the energy required to move them. She did get tired—but nowhere near as tired as she should have been. If she empathized with her feelings at such times, she retained a bare margin of control even when happy, but she lost the delicate ability to tap the energy thus liberated, and had to draw on her own body for the power.

Matt grimaced. If that was true—and his charts and graph confirmed it, then she could never use her powers unless she was miserable.

And the key to that lay buried in the childhood of a little hill girl, who probably had been scolded and beaten, as hill children were when they were bad. In this case "bad" meaning a little girl who could move things without touching them, who had been confronted with the example of "Libby," the perfect little girl who would always have minded her mother, until she had come to associate the use of her powers only with unhappiness, with not being wanted, with rejection on the part of the people whom she loved.

Matt winced. *You louse, Wright!*

But it was too late to do anything about it now. He had to go on with what he was doing.

Abbie's appetite wasn't any better in the morning. She looked tired, too, as if she hadn't slept. Matt stared at her for a moment thoughtfully, then shrugged and put her to work.

In a few minutes, Abbie could duplicate her feats with the table of the day before with a control that was, if anything, even finer. Matt extended his experiment to her subjective reactions.

"Let's isolate the source," he said. "Relax. Try to do it with the mind alone. Will the table to move."

Matt jotted down notes. At the end of half an hour he had the following results:

Mind alone—negative.

Body alone—negative.

Emotions alone—negative.

It was crude and uncertain. It would take days or months of practice to be able to use the mind without a sympathetic tension of the body, or to stop thinking or to wall off an emotion. But Matt was fairly sure that the telekinetic ability was a complex of all three and perhaps some others that he had no way of knowing about, which Abbie couldn't describe. But if any of the primary three were inhibited, consciously or unconsciously, Abbie could not move a crumb of bread.

Two of them could be controlled. The third was a product of environment and circumstances. Abbie had to be unhappy.

A muscle twitched in Matt's jaw, and he told Abbie to try moving more than one object. He saw a cup of coffee rise in the air, turn a double somersault without spilling a drop, and sit down gently in the saucer that climbed to meet it. Matt stood up, picked the cup out of the air, drank the coffee, and put the cup back. The saucer did not wobble.

There were limits to Abbie's ability. The number of dissimilar objects she could manipulate seemed to be three, regardless of size; she could handle five similar objects with ease, and she had made six slices of bread do an intricate dance in the air. It was possible, of course, that she might improve with practice.

"My God!" Matt exclaimed. "You could make a fortune as a magician."

"Could I?" Abbie said without interest. She pleaded a headache and went to bed. Matt said nothing. They had worked for an hour and a half.

Matt lit a cigarette. The latent telekinetic power could explain a lot of things, poltergeist phenomena, for instance, and in a more conscious form, levitation and the Indian rope trick and the whole gamut of oriental mysticism.

He spent the rest of the day making careful notes of everything Abbie did, the date and time, the object and its approximate weight and its movements. When he finished, he would have a complete case history. Complete except for the vital parts which he did not dare put down on paper.

Several times he turned to stare at Abbie's still, small form. He was only beginning to realize the tremendous poten-

tialities locked up within her. His awareness had an edge of fear. What role was it he'd chosen for himself. He had been fairy godmother, but that no longer. Pygmalion? He felt a little like Pandora must have felt before she opened the box. Or, perhaps, he thought ruefully, he was more like Doctor Frankenstein.

Abbie did not get up at all that day, and she refused to eat anything Matt fixed. Next morning, when she climbed slowly from her bunk, his apprehension sharpened.

She was gaunt, and her face had a middle-aged, haggard look. Her blonde hair was dull and lifeless. Matt had already cooked breakfast, but she only went through the motions of eating. He urged her, but she put her fork down tiredly.

"It don't matter," she said.

"Maybe you're sick," Matt fretted. "We'll take you to a doctor."

Abbie looked at Matt levelly and shook her head. "What's wrong with me, a doctor won't fix."

That was the morning Matt saw a can of baking powder pass through his chest. Abbie had been tossing it to Matt at various speeds, gauging the strength of the push necessary. Matt would either catch it or Abbie would stop it short and bring it back to her. But this time it came too fast, bullet-like. Involuntarily, Matt looked down, tensing his body for the impact.

He saw the can go in . . .

Abbie's eyes were wide and frightened. Matt turned around dazedly, prodding his chest with trembling fingers. The can had shattered against the cabin wall behind him. It lay on the floor, battered, in a drift of powder.

"It went in," Matt said. "I saw it, but I didn't feel a thing. It passed right through me. What happened, Abbie?"

"I couldn't stop it," she whispered, "so I just sort of wished it wasn't there. For just a moment. And it wasn't."

That was how they found out that Abbie could teleport. It was as simple as telekinesis. She could project or pull objects through walls without hurting either one. Little things, big things. It made no difference. Distance made no difference either, apparently.

"What about living things?" Matt asked.

Abbie concentrated. Suddenly there was a mouse on the

table, a brown field mouse with twitching whiskers and large, startled black eyes. For a moment it crouched there, frozen, and then it scampered for the edge of the table, straight toward Abbie.

Abbie screamed and reacted. Twisting in the air, the mouse vanished. Matt looked up, his mouth hanging open. Abbie was three feet in the air, hovering like a hummingbird. Slowly she sank down to her chair.

"It works on people, too," Matt whispered. "Try it again. Try it on me."

Matt felt nauseated, as if he had suddenly stepped off the Earth. The room shifted around him. He looked down. He was floating in the air about two feet above the chair he had been sitting on. He was turning slowly, so that the room seemed to revolve around him.

He looked for Abbie, but she was behind him now. Slowly she drifted into view. "That's fine," he said. Abbie looked happier than she had looked for days. She almost smiled.

Matt began to turn more rapidly. In a moment he was spinning like a top; the room flashed into a kaleidoscope. He swallowed hard. "All right," he shouted, "that's enough."

Abruptly he stopped spinning and dropped. His stomach soared up into his throat. He thumped solidly into the chair and immediately hopped up with a howl of anguish. He rubbed himself with both hands.

"Ouch!" he shouted. And then accusingly, "You did that on purpose."

Abbie looked innocent. "I done what you said."

"All right, you did," Matt said bitterly. "From now on, I resign as a guinea pig."

Abbie folded her hands in her lap. "What shall I do?"

"Practice on yourself," Matt said.

"Yes, Mr. Wright." She rose steadily in the air. "This is wonderful." She stretched out as if she were lying in bed. She floated around the room. Matt was reminded of shows in which he had seen magicians producing the same illusion, passing hoops cleverly around their assistant's body to show that there were no wires. Only this wasn't magic; this wasn't illusion; this was real.

Abbie settled back into the chair. Her face was glowing. "I

feel like I could do anything," she said. "Now what shall I try?"

Matt thought for a moment. "Can you project yourself?"

"Where to?"

"Oh, anywhere," Matt said impatiently. "It doesn't matter."

"Anywhere?" she repeated. There was a distant and unreadable expression in her eyes.

And then she vanished.

Matt stared at the chair she had been in. She was gone, indisputably gone. He searched the room, a simple process. There was no sign of her. He went outside. The afternoon sun beat down, exposing everything in a harsh light.

"Abbie!" Matt shouted. "Abbie!" He waited. He heard only the echo drifting back from the hills across the lake. For five minutes he roamed about the cabin, shouting and calling, before he gave up.

He went back into the cabin. He sat down and stared moodily at the bunk where Abbie had slept. Where was she now? Was she trapped in some extra dimension, weird and inexplicable to the senses, within which her power could not work.

There had to be some such explanation for teleportation—a fourth-dimensional shortcut across our three. Why not—if she could nullify mass, she could adjust atoms so that they entered one of the other dimensions.

As he brooded, remorse came to him slowly, creeping in so stealthily that awareness of it was like a blow. The whole scheme had been madness. He could not understand now the insane ambition that had led to this tinkering with human lives and the structure of the Universe. He had justified it to himself with the name of science. But the word had no mystic power of absolution.

His motive had been something entirely different. It was only a sublimated lust for power, and thinly disguised at that. The power of knowledge. And for that lust, which she could never understand, an innocent, unsophisticated girl had suffered.

Was Abbie dead? Perhaps that was the most merciful thing.

Ends can never justify means, Matt realized now. They

are too inextricably intertwined ever to be separated. The means inevitably shape the ends. In the long view, there are neither means nor ends, for the means are only an infinite series of ends, and the ends are an infinite series of means . . .

And Abbie appeared. Like an Arabian genie, with gifts upon a tray, streaming a mouth-watering incense through the air. Full-formed, she sprang into being, her cheeks glowing, her eyes shining.

"Abbiel" Matt shouted joyfully. His heart gave a sharp bound, as if it had suddenly been released from an unbearable weight. "Where have you been?"

"Springfield."

"Springfield!" Matt gasped. "But that's over fifty miles."

Abbie lowered the tray to the table. She snapped her fingers. "Like that, I was there."

Matt's eyes fell to the tray. It was loaded with cooked food: shrimp cocktail, broiled lobster tails, french fried . . .

Abbie smiled. "I got hungry."

"But where—?" Matt began. "You went back to the restaurant," he said accusingly, "you took the food from there."

Abbie nodded happily. "I was hungry."

"But that's stealing," Matt moaned. And he realized for the first time the enormity of the thing he had done, what he had let loose upon the world. Nothing was safe. Neither money nor jewels nor deadly secrets. Nothing at all.

"They won't ever miss it," Abbie said, "and nobody saw me." She said it simply, as the ultimate justification.

Matt was swept by the staggering realization that where her basic drives were concerned Abbie was completely unmoral. There was only one small hope. If he could keep her from realizing her civilization-shattering potentialities! They might never occur to her.

"Sure," Matt said. "Sure."

Abbie ate heartily, but Matt had no appetite. He sat thoughtfully, watching her eat, and he experienced a brief thankfulness that at least she wasn't going to starve to death.

"Didn't you have any trouble?" he asked. "Getting the food without anyone seeing you?"

Abbie nodded. "I couldn't decide how to get into the kitchen. I could see that the cook was all alone . . ."

"You could see?"

"I was outside, but I could see into the kitchen, somehow. So finally, I called 'Albert!' And the cook went out and I went in and took the food that was sitting on the tray and came back here. It was really simple, because the cook was expecting someone to call him."

"How did you know that?"

"I thought it," Abbie said, frowning. "Like this."

She concentrated for a moment. He watched her, puzzled, and then knew what she meant. Panic caught him by the throat. There were things she shouldn't know. Because he was trying so hard to bury them deep, they scuttled across his consciousness.

Telepathy!

And as he watched her face, he knew that he was right. Her eyes grew wide and incredulous. Slowly, something hard and cruelly cold slipped over her face like a mask.

Oh, Abbie! My sweet, gentle Abbie!

"You—" she gasped. "You devill! There ain't nothin' too bad for anyone who'd do that!"

I'm a dead man, Matt thought.

"You with your kindness and your handsome face and your city manners," Abbie said pitifully. "How could you do it? You made me fall in love with you. It wasn't hard, was it? All you had to do was hold a little hill girl's hand in the moonlight an' kiss her once, an' she was ready to jump into bed with you. But you didn't want anything as natural as that. All the time you was laughing and scheming. Poor little hill girl!

"You make me think you like me so well you want me to look real purty in new clothes and new hair and a new face. But it's just a trick. All the time it's a trick. When I'm feeling happiest and most grateful, you take it all away. I'd sooner you hit me across the face. Poor little hill girl! Thinking you wanted her. Thinking maybe you were aiming to marry her. I wanted to die. Even Paw was never that mean. He never done anything a-purpose, like you."

White-faced, Matt watched her, his mind racing.

"You're thinking you can get around me somehow," Abbie said, "and I'll forget. You can make me think it was all a

mistake. 'Tain't no use. You can't, not ever, because I know what you're thinking."

What *had* he been thinking? Had he actually thought of marrying her? Just for a second? He shuddered. It would be hell. Imagine, if you can, a wife who is all-knowing, all-powerful, who can never be evaded, avoided, sighed to, lied to, shut out, shut up. Imagine a wife who can make a room a shambles in a second, who can throw dishes and chairs and tables with equal facility and deadly accuracy. Imagine a wife who can be any place, any time, in the flicker of a suspicion. Imagine a wife who can see through walls and read minds and maybe wish you a raging headache or a broken leg or aching joints.

It would be worse than hell. The torments of the damned would be pleasant compared to that.

Abbie's chin came up. "You don't need to worry. I'd as soon marry up with a rattlesnake. At least he gives you warning before he strikes."

"Kill me!" Matt said desperately. "Go ahead and kill me!"

Abbie smiled sweetly. "Killing's too good for you. I don't know anything that ain't too good for you. But don't worry, I'll think of something. Now, go away and leave me alone."

Thankfully, Matt started to turn. Before he could complete it, he found himself outside the cabin. He blinked in the light of the sinking sun. He began to shiver. After a little he sat down on the porch and lit a cigarette. There had to be some way out of this. There was always a way.

From inside the cabin came the sound of running water. *Running water!* Matt resisted an impulse to get up and investigate the mystery. "Leave me alone," Abbie had said, in a tone that Matt didn't care to challenge.

A few minutes later he heard the sound of splashing and Abbie's voice lifted in a sweet soprano. Although he couldn't understand the words, the tune sent chills down his back. And then a phrase came clear:

*Root-a-toot-toot
Three times she did shoot
Right through that hardwood door.
He was her man,
But he done her wrong. . . .*

Matt began to shake. He passed a trembling hand across his sweaty forehead and wondered if he had a fever. He tried to pull himself together, for he had to think clearly. The situation was obvious. He had done a fiendishly cruel thing—no matter what the excuse—and he had been caught and the power of revenge was in the hands of the one he had wronged, never more completely.

The only question was: What form would the revenge take? When he knew that, he might be able to figure out a way to evade it. There was no question in his mind about waiting meekly for justice to strike.

The insurmountable difficulty was that the moment he thought of a plan, it would be unworkable because Abbie would be forewarned. And she was already armed. He had to stop thinking.

How do you stop thinking? he thought miserably. *Stop thinking!* he told himself. *Stop thinking, damn you!*

He might be on the brink of the perfect solution. But if he thought of it, it would be worthless. And if he couldn't think of it, then—

The circle was complete. He was back where he started, staring at its perfect viciousness. There was only one possi—

Mary had a little lamb with fleece as white as snow and everywhere that Mary went (Relax) the lamb (Don't think!) was sure (Act on the spur of the moment) to go. Mary had a . . .

"Well, Mr. Wright, are you ready to go?"

Matt started. Beside him were a pair of black suede shoes filled with small feet. His gaze traveled up the lovely, nylon-sheathed legs, up the clinging black dress that swelled so provocatively, to the face with its blue eyes and red lips and blonde hair.

Even in his pressing predicament, Matt had to recognize the impact of her beauty. It was a pity that her other gifts were too terrible.

"I reckon your fiancée won't mind," Abbie said sweetly. "Being as you ain't got a fiancée. Are you ready?"

"Ready?" Matt looked down at his soiled work clothes. "For what?"

"You're ready," Abbie said.

A wave of dizziness swept him, followed by a wave of

nausea. Matt shut his eyes. They receded. When he opened his eyes again, he had a frightening sensation of disorientation. Then he recognized his surroundings. He was on the dance floor in Springfield.

Abbie came into his arms. "All right," she said, "dancel!"

Shocked, Matt began to dance, mechanically. He realized that people were staring at them as if they had dropped through a hole in the ceiling. Matt wasn't sure they hadn't. Only two other couples were on the small floor, but they had stopped dancing and were looking puzzled.

As Matt swung Abbie slowly around he saw that the sprinkling of customers at the bar had turned to stare, too. A waiter in a white jacket was coming toward them, frowning determinedly.

Abbie seemed as unconcerned about the commotion she had caused as the rainbow-hued juke box in the corner. It thumped away just below Matt's conscious level of recognition. Abbie danced lightly in his arms.

The waiter tapped Matt on the shoulder. Matt sighed with relief and stopped dancing. Immediately he found himself moving perkily around the floor like a puppet. Abbie, he gathered, did not care to stop.

The waiter followed doggedly. "Stop that!" he said bewilderedly. "I don't know where you came from or what you think you're doing, but you can't do it in here and you can't do it dressed like that."

"I—I c-can-n't s-st-stop-pl!" Matt said jerkily.

"Sure you can," the waiter said soothingly. He plodded along after them. "There's lots of things a man can't do, but he can always stop whatever you're doing. I should think you'd be glad to stop."

"W-w-would," Matt got out. "S-st-stop-pl!" he whispered to Abbie.

"Tell the man to go 'way," Abbie whispered back.

Matt decided to start dancing again. It was easier than being shaken to pieces. "I think you'd better go away," he said to the waiter.

"We don't like to use force," the waiter said, frowning, "but we have to keep up a standard for our patrons. Come along quietly"—he jerked on Matt's arm—"or—"

The grip on Matt's arm was suddenly gone. The waiter vanished. Matt looked around wildly.

The juke box had a new decoration. Dazed, opaque-eyed, the waiter squatted on top of the box, his white jacket and whiter face a dark fool's motley in the swirling lights.

Abbie pressed herself close. Matt shuddered and swung her slowly around the floor. On the next turn, he saw that the waiter had climbed down from his perch. He had recruited reinforcements. Grim-faced and silent, the waiter approached, followed by another waiter, a lantern-jawed bartender, and an ugly bulldog of a man in street clothes. The manager, Matt decided.

They formed a menacing ring around Matt and Abbie.

"Whatever your game is," growled the bulldog, "we don't want to play. If you don't leave damn quick, you're going to wish you had."

Matt, looking at him, believed it. He tried to stop. Again his limbs began to jerk uncontrollably.

"I-I c-can-n't," he said. "D-d-don't y-you th-think I-I w-would if I-I c-could?"

The manager stared at him with large, awed, bloodshot eyes. "Yeah," he said. "I guess you would." He shook himself. His jowls wobbled. "Okay, boys. Let's get rid of them."

"Watch yourself," said the first waiter uneasily. "One of them has a trick throw."

They closed in. Matt felt Abbie stiffen against him.

They vanished, one after the other, like candles being snuffed. Matt glanced unhappily at the juke box. There they were on top of the box, stacked in each other's laps like a totem pole. The pile teetered and collapsed in all directions. Dull thuds made themselves heard even above the juke box.

Matt saw them get up, puzzled and wary. The bartender was rubbing his nose. He doubled his fists and started to rush out on the floor. The manager, a wilier sort, grabbed his arm. The four of them went into consultation. Every few seconds one of them would raise his head and stare at Matt and Abbie. Finally the first waiter detached himself from the group and with an air of finality reached behind the juke box. Abruptly the music stopped; the colored lights went out. Silence fell. The four of them turned triumphantly toward the floor.

Just as abruptly, the lights went back on; the music boomed out again. They jumped.

Defiantly, the manager stepped to the wall and pulled the plug from the socket. He turned, still holding the cord. It stirred in his hand. The manager looked down at it incredulously. It wriggled. He dropped it hurriedly, with revulsion. The plug rose cobralike from its coils and began a slow, deadly, weaving dance. The manager stared, hypnotized with disbelief.

The cord struck. The manager leaped back. The bared, metal fangs bit into the floor. They retreated, all four of them, watching with wide eyes. Contemptuously, the cord turned its back on them, wriggled its way to the socket, and plugged itself in.

The music returned. Matt danced on with leaden legs. He could not stop. He would never stop. He thought of the fairy tale of the red shoes. Abbie seemed as fresh and determined as ever.

As the juke box came into sight again, Matt noticed some commotion around it. The bartender was approaching the manager with an axe, a glittering fire axe. For one whirling moment, Matt thought the whole world had gone mad. Then he saw the manager take the axe and approach the juke box cautiously, the axe poised in one hand ready to strike.

He brought it down smartly. The cord squirmed its coils out of the way. The manager wrenched the axe from the floor. Bravely he advanced closer. He looked down and screamed. The cord had a loop around one leg; the loop was tightening. Frantically the manager swung again and again. One stroke hit the cord squarely. It parted. The music stopped. The box went dark. The headless cord squirmed in dying agonies.

Abbie stopped dancing. Matt stood still, his legs trembling, sighing with relief.

"Let's go, Abbie," he pleaded. "Let's go quick."

She shook her head. "Let's sit." She led him to a table which, like the rest of the room, had been suddenly vacated of patrons. "I reckon you'd like a drink."

"I'd rather leave," Matt muttered.

They sat down. Imperiously, Abbie beckoned at the waiter.

He came toward the table cautiously. Abbie looked inquiringly at Matt.

"Bourbon," Matt said helplessly. "Straight."

In a moment the waiter was back with a bottle and two glasses on a tray. "The boss said to get the money first," he said timidly.

Matt searched his pockets futilely. He looked at the manager, standing against one wall, glowering, his arms folded across his chest. "I haven't got any money on me," Matt said.

"That's all right," Abbie said. "Just set the things down."

"No, ma'am," the waiter began, and his eyes rolled as the tray floated out of his hand and settled to the table. He stopped talking, shut his mouth, and backed away.

Abbie was brooding, her chin in one small hand. "I ain't been a good daughter," she said. "Paw would like it here."

"No, no," Matt said hurriedly. "Don't do that. We've got enough trouble—"

Jenkins was sitting in the third chair, blinking slowly, reeking of alcohol. Matt reached for the bottle and sloshed some into a glass. He raised it to his lips and tossed it off. The liquor burned his throat for a moment and then was gone. Matt waited expectantly as he lowered the glass to the table. He felt nothing, nothing at all. He looked suspiciously at the glass. It was still full.

Jenkins focused his eyes. "Ab!" he said. He seemed to cringe in his chair. "What you doin' here? You look different. All fixed up. Find a feller with money?"

Abbie ignored his questions. "If I asked you to do somethin', Paw, would you do it?"

"Sure, Ab," Jenkins said hurriedly. His eyes lit on the bottle of bourbon. "Anything." He raised the bottle to his lips. It gurgled pleasantly and went on gurgling.

Matt watched the level of amber liquid drop in the bottle, but when Jenkins put it down and wiped his bearded lips with one large hairy hand, the bottle was half empty and stayed that way. Jenkins sighed heavily.

Matt raised his glass again and tilted it to his lips. When he lowered it, the glass was still full and Matt was still empty. He stared moodily at the glass.

"If I asked you to hit Mr. Wright in the nose," Abbie went on, "I reckon you'd do it?"

Matt tensed himself.

"Sure, Ab, sure," Jenkins said. He turned his massive head slowly. He doubled his fist. The expression behind the beard was unreadable, but Matt decided that it was better that way. "Ain't you been treatin' mah little gal right?" Jenkins demanded. "Say, son," he said with concern, "you don't look so good." He looked back at Abbie. "Want I should hit him?"

"Not now," Abbie said. "But keep it in mind."

Matt relaxed and seized the opportunity to dash the glass to his mouth. Futilely. Not a drop of liquor reached his stomach. Hopelessly, Matt thought of Tantalus.

"Police!" Jenkins bellowed suddenly, rising up with the neck of the bottle in one huge hand.

Matt looked. The bartender was leading three policemen into the front of the room. The officers advanced stolidly, confident of their ultimate strength and authority. Matt turned quickly to Abbie.

"No tricks," he pleaded. "Not with the law."

Abbie yawned. "I'm tired. I reckon it's almost midnight."

Jenkins charged, bull-like, bellowing with rage. And the room vanished.

Matt blinked, sickened. They were back in the cabin. Abbie and he. "What about your father?" Matt asked.

"Next to liquor," Abbie said, "Paw likes a fight best. I'm going to bed now. I'm real tired."

She left her shoes on the floor, climbed into her bunk, and pulled the blanket around herself.

Matt walked slowly to his bunk, *Mary had a little lamb* . . . He sat down on it and pulled off his shoes, letting them thump to the floor . . . *with fleece as white as snow* . . . He pulled the blanket around his bunk and made rustling sounds, but he lay down without removing his clothes . . . *and everywhere that Mary went* . . . He lay stiffly, listening to the immediate sounds of deep breathing coming from the other bunk . . . *the lamb was sure to go* . . .

Two tortured hours crawled by. Matt sat up cautiously. He picked up his shoes from the floor. He straightened up. Slowly he tiptoed toward the door. Inch by inch, listening to Abbie's steady breathing, until he was at the door. He slipped

it open, only a foot. He squeezed through and drew it shut behind him.

A porch board creaked. Matt froze. He waited. There was no sound from inside. He crept over the pebbles of the driveway, suppressing exclamations of pain. But he did not dare stop to put on his shoes.

He was beside the car. He eased the door open and slipped into the seat. Blessing the steep driveway, he released the brake and pushed in the clutch. The car began to roll. Slowly at first, then picking up speed, the car turned out of the driveway into the road.

Ghostlike in the brilliant moon, it sped silent down the long hill. After one harrowing tree-darkened turn, Matt switched on the lights and gently clicked the door to its first catch.

When he was a mile away, he started the motor.

Escapel

Matt pulled up to the gas pump in the gray dawn that was already sticky with heat. Through the dusty, bug-splattered windshield the bloodshot sun peered at him and saw a dark young man in stained work clothes, his face stubbled blackly, his eyes burning wearily. But Matt breathed deep; he drew in the wine of freedom.

Was this Fair Play or Humansville? Matt was too tired and hungry to remember. Whichever it was, all was well.

It seemed a reasonable assumption that Abbie could not find him if she did not know where he was, that she could not teleport herself anywhere she had not already been. When she had disappeared the first time, she had gone to the places in Springfield she knew. She had brought her father from his two-room shanty. She had taken him back to the cabin.

The sleepy attendant approached, and with him came a wash of apprehension to knot his stomach. Money! He had no money. Hopelessly he began to search his pockets. Without money he was stuck here, and all his money was back in his cabin with his clothes and his typewriter and his manila folder of notes.

And then his hand touched something in his hip pocket. Wonderingly, he pulled it out. It was his billfold. He peered

at its contents. Four dollars in bills and three hundred in traveler's checks. "Fill it up," he said.

When had he picked up the billfold? Or had he had it all the time? He could have sworn that he had not had it when he was in the cocktail lounge in Springfield. He was almost sure that he had left it in his suit pants. The uncertainty made him vaguely uneasy. Or was it only hunger? He hadn't eaten since toying with Abbie's stolen delicacies yesterday afternoon.

"Where's a good place to eat?" he asked, as the attendant handed him change.

It was an old fellow in coveralls. He pointed a few hundred feet up the road. "See those trucks parked outside that diner?" Matt nodded. "Usual thing, when you see them outside, you can depend on good food inside. Here it don't mean a thing. Food's lousy. We got a landmark though. Truckers stop to see it." The old fellow cackled. "Name's Lola."

As Matt pulled away, the old man called after him. "Don't make no difference, anyway. No place else open."

Matt parked beside one of the large trailer trucks. Lola? He made a wry face as he got out of the car. He was through with women.

The diner, built in the shape of a railroad car, had a long counter running along one side, but it was filled with truckers in shirt sleeves, big men drinking coffee and smoking and teasing the waitress. Tiredly, Matt slipped into one of the empty booths.

The waitress detached herself from her admirers immediately and came to the booth with a glass of water in one hand, swinging her hips confidently. She had a smoldering, dark beauty, and she was well aware of it. Her black hair was cut short, and her brown eyes and tanned face were smiling. Her skirt and low-cut peasant blouse bulged generously in the right places. Some time—and not too many years in the future—she would be fat, but right now she was lush, ready to be picked by the right hand. Matt guessed that she would not be a waitress in a small town long. As she put the water on the table, she bent low to demonstrate just how lush she was.

The neckline drooped. Against his will, Matt's eyes drifted toward her.

"What'll you have?" the waitress said softly.

Matt swallowed. "A couple of—hotcakes," he said, "with sausages."

She straightened up slowly, smiling brightly at him. "Stack a pair," she yelled, "with links." She turned around and looked enticingly over her shoulder. "Coffee?"

Matt nodded. He smiled a little to show that he appreciated her attentions. There was no doubt about the fact that she was an attractive girl. In anyone's mind. Any other time . . .

"Ouch!" she said suddenly and straightened. She began to rub her rounded bottom vigorously and cast Matt a hurt, reproachful glance. Slowly her pained expression changed to a roguish smile. She wagged a coy finger at Matt. "Naughty, naughty!" the finger said. Matt stared at her as if she had lost her senses. He shook his head in bewilderment as she vanished behind the counter. And then he noticed that a couple of the truckers had turned around to glower at him, and Matt became absorbed in contemplating the glass of water.

It made him realize how thirsty he was. He drank the whole glassful, but it didn't seem to help much. He was just as thirsty, just as empty.

Lola wasted no time in bringing Matt's cup of coffee. She carried it casually and efficiently in one hand, not spilling a drop into the saucer. But as she neared Matt the inexplicable happened. She tripped over something invisible on the smooth floor. She stumbled. The coffee flew in a steaming arc and splashed on Matt's shirt with incredible accuracy, soaking in hotly.

Lola gasped, her hand to her mouth. Matt leaped up, pulling his shirt away from his chest, swearing. Lola grabbed a handful of paper napkins and began to dab at his shirt.

"Golly, honey, I'm sorry," she said warmly. "I can't understand how I came to trip."

She pressed herself close to him. Matt could smell the odor of gardenias.

"That's all right," he said, drawing back. "It was an accident."

She followed him, working at his shirt. Matt noticed that the truckers were all watching, some darkly, the rest enviously. He slipped back into the booth.

One of the truckers guffawed. "You don't have to spill coffee on me, Lola, to make me steam," he said. The rest of the truckers laughed with him.

"Oh, shut up!" Lola told them. She turned back to Matt. "You all right, honey?"

"Sure, sure," Matt said wearily. "Just bring me the hotcakes." The coffee had cooled now. His shirt felt clammy. Matt thought about accident proneness. It had to be an accident. He glanced uneasily around the diner. The only girl here was Lola.

The hotcakes were ready. She was bringing them toward the booth, but it was not a simple process. Matt had never seen slippery hotcakes before this. Lola was so busy that she forgot to swing her hips.

The hotcakes slithered from side to side on the plate. Lola juggled them, tilting the plate back and forth to keep them from sliding off. Her eyes were wide with astonishment; her mouth was a round, red "O"; her forehead was furrowed with concentration. She did an intricate, unconscious dance step to keep from losing the top hotcake.

As Matt watched, fascinated, the sausages, four of them linked together, started to slip from the plate. With something approaching sentience, they spilled off and disappeared down the low neck of Lola's blouse.

Lola shrieked. She started to wriggle, her shoulders hunched. While she tried to balance the hotcakes with one hand, the other dived into the blouse and hunted around frantically. Matt watched; the truckers watched. Lola hunted and wiggled. The hand that held the plate flew up. The hotcakes scattered.

One hit the nearest trucker in the face. He peeled it off, red and bellowing. "A joker!" He dived off the stool toward Matt.

Matt tried to get up, but the table caught him in his stomach. He climbed up on the seat. The hotcake the trucker had discarded had landed on the head of the man next to him. He stood up angrily.

Lola had finally located the elusive sausages. She drew

them out of their intimate hiding place with a shout of triumph. They whipped into the open mouth of the lunging trucker. He stopped, transfixed, strangling.

"Argh-gh-uggle!" he said.

A cup crashed against the wall, close to Matt's head. Matt ducked. If he could get over the back of this booth, he could reach the door. The place was filled with angry shouts and angrier faces and bulky shoulders approaching. Lola took one frightened look and grabbed Matt around the knees.

"Protect me!" she said wildly.

The air was filled with missiles. Matt reached down to disengage Lola's fear-strengthened arms. He glanced up to see the trucker spitting out the last of the sausages. With a maddened yell, the trucker threw a heavy fist at Matt. Hampered as he was, Matt threw himself back hopelessly. Something ripped. The fist breezed past and crashed through a window.

Matt hung over the back of the booth, head downward, unable to get back up, unable to shake Lola loose. Everywhere he looked he could see rage-inflamed faces. He closed his eyes and surrendered himself to his fate.

From somewhere, above the tumult, came the sound of laughter, like the tinkling of little silver bells.

Then Matt was outside with no idea of how he had got there. In his hand was a strip of thin fabric. Lola's blouse. *Poor Lola*, he thought, as he threw it away. What was his fatal fascination for girls?

Behind him the diner was alive with lights and the crash of dishes and the smacking of fists on flesh. Before long they would discover that he was gone.

Matt ran to his car. It started to life when he punched the button. He backed it up, screeched it to a stop, jerked into first, and barreled onto the driveway. Within twenty seconds, he was doing sixty.

He turned to look back at the diner and almost lost control of the car as he tried to absorb the implications of the contents on the back seat.

Resting neatly there were his typewriter, notes, and all his clothes.

When Matt pulled to a stop on the streets of Clinton, he was feeling easier mentally and much worse physically. The

dip in a secluded stream near the road, the change of clothes, and the shave—torturing as it had been in cold water—had refreshed him for a while. But that had worn off, and the lack of a night's sleep and twenty-four hours without food were catching up with him.

Better that, he thought grimly, than Abbie. He could endure anything for a time.

As for the typewriter and the notes and the clothes, there was probably some simple explanation. The one Matt liked best was that Abbie had had a change of heart; she had expected him to leave and she had made his way easy. She was, Matt thought, a kind-hearted child underneath it all.

The trouble with that explanation was that Matt didn't believe it.

He shrugged. There were more pressing things—money, for instance. Gas was getting low, and he needed to get something in his stomach if he was to keep up his strength for the long drive ahead. He had to cash one of his checks. That seemed simple enough. The bank was at the corner of this block. It was eleven o'clock. The bank would be open. Naturally they would cash a check.

But for some reason Matt felt uneasy.

Matt walked into the bank and went directly to a window. He countersigned one of the checks and presented it to the teller, a thin little man with a wispy mustache and a bald spot on top of his head. The teller compared the signatures and turned to the shelf at his side where bills stood in piles, some still wrapped. He counted out four twenties, a ten, a five, and five ones.

"Here you are, sir," he said politely.

Matt accepted it only because his hand was outstretched and the teller put the money in it. His eyes were fixed in horror upon a wrapped bundle of twenty-dollar bills which was slowing rising from the shelf. It climbed leisurely over the top of the cage.

"What's the matter, sir?" the teller asked in alarm. "Do you feel sick?"

Matt nodded once and then tore his eyes away and shook his head vigorously. "No," he gasped. "I'm all right." He took a step back from the window.

"Are you sure? You don't look well at all."

With a shrinking feeling, Matt felt something fumble its way into his right-hand coat pocket. He plunged his hand in after it. His empty stomach revolved in his abdomen. He could not mistake the touch of crisp paper. He stooped quickly beneath the teller's window. The teller leaned out. Matt straightened up, the package of bills in his hand.

"I guess you must have dropped this," he muttered.

The teller glanced at the shelf and back at the sheaf of twenties. "I don't see how— But thank you! That's the funniest—"

Matt pushed the bills under the grillwork. "Yes, isn't it," he agreed hurriedly. "Well, thank you."

"Thank you!"

Matt lifted his hand. The money lifted with it. The package stuck to his hand as if it had been attached with glue.

"Excuse me," he said feebly. "I can't seem to get rid of this money." He shook his hand. The money clung stubbornly. He shook his hand again, violently. The package of bills did not budge.

"Very funny," the teller said, but he was not smiling. From his tone of voice, Matt suspected that he thought money was a very serious business indeed. The teller reached under the bars and caught hold of one end of the package. "You can let go now," he said. "Let go!"

Matt tried to pull his hand away. "I can't!" he said, breathing heavily.

The teller tugged, Matt tugged. "I haven't time to play games," the teller panted. "Let go!"

"I don't want it," Matt said frantically. "But it seems to be stuck. Look!" He showed his hand, fingers spread wide.

The teller grabbed the bundle of bills with both hands and braced his feet against the front of his cubicle. "Let go!" he shouted.

Matt pulled hard. Suddenly the tension on his arm vanished. His arm whipped back. The teller disappeared into the bottom of the cubicle. Something clanged hollowly. Matt looked at his hand. The bills were gone.

Slowly the teller's head appeared from the concealed part of the cubicle. It came up, accompanied by groans, with a red swelling in the middle of the bald spot. After it came

the teller's hand, waving the package of twenties triumphantly. The other hand was rubbing his head.

"Are you still here?" he demanded, slamming the bills down at his side. "Get out of this bank. And if you ever come back I'll have you arrested for—for disturbing the peace."

"Don't worry," Matt said. "I won't be back." His face suddenly grew pale. "Stop," he said frantically, waving his arms. "Go back!"

The teller stared at him, fearfully, indecisively.

The bundle of twenties was rising over the top of the cage again. Instinctively, Matt grabbed them out of the air. His mind clicked rapidly. If he was to keep out of jail, there was only one thing to do. He advanced on the teller angrily, waving the bills in the air.

"What do you mean by throwing these at me!"

"Throwing money?" the teller said weakly. "Me?"

Matt shook the bills in front of the teller's nose. "What do you call this?"

The clerk glanced at the money and down at his side. "Oh, no!" he moaned.

"I have a good mind," Matt said violently, "to complain to the president of this bank." He slammed the bills down. He closed his eyes in a silent prayer. "Tellers throwing money around!"

He took his hand away. Blissfully, the money stayed where it was on the counter. The teller reached for it feebly. The package shifted. He reached again. The bills slid away. He stuck both hands through the slot and groped wildly. The money slipped between his arms into the cage.

Matt stood shifting his weight from foot to foot, paralyzed between flight and fascination. The bundle winged its way around in the cage like a drunken butterfly. Wide-eyed and frantic, the teller chased it from side to side. He made great diving swoops for it, his hands cupped into a net. He crept up on it and pounced, catlike, only to have it slip between his fingers at the last moment. Suddenly he stopped, frozen. His hands flew to his head.

"My God!" he screamed. "What am I doing? I'm mad!"

Matt backed toward the door. The other clerks and tellers were running toward the center of the disturbance. Matt

saw a dignified gentleman with a paunch stand up inside a railed-in office and hurdle the obstacle with fine show of athletic form.

Matt turned and ran, dodging the guard at the gate. "Get the doctor," he yelled.

From somewhere came the sound of a tinkling of little silver bells.

There was no doubt in Matt's mind as he gunned his car out of Clinton. Abbie was after him. He had not been free a moment. All the time she had known where to find him. He was the fleeing mouse, happy in his illusion of freedom—until the cat's paw comes down on his back. Matt thought of the Furies—awful Alecto, Tisiphone, Megaera—in their bloodstained robes and serpent hair pursuing him across the world with their terrible whips. But they all had Abbie's face.

Matt drove north toward Kansas City, thirsty, starving, half dead from fatigue, wondering hopelessly where it would end.

Darkening shades of violet were creeping up the eastern sky as Matt reached Lawrence, Kansas. He had not tried to stop in Kansas City. Something had drawn him on, some buried hope that still survived feebly, and when, five miles from Lawrence, he had seen Mount Oread rise against the sunset, the white spires and red tile roofs of the university gleaming like beacons, he had known what it was.

Here was a citadel of knowledge, a fortress of the world's truth against black waves of ignorance and superstition. Here, in this saner atmosphere of study and reflection, logic and cool consideration, here, if anywhere, he could shake off this dark conviction of doom that sapped his will. Here, surely, he could think more clearly, act more decisively, rid himself of this demon of vengeance that rode his shoulders. Here he could get help.

He drove down Massachusetts Street, his body leaden with fatigue, his eyes red-rimmed and shadowed, searching restlessly from side to side. His hunger was only a dull ache; he could almost forget it. But his thirst was a live thing. Somewhere—he could not remember where—he had eaten and drunk, but the meal had vanished from his throat as he swallowed.

Is there no end? he thought wildly. *Is there no way out?* There was, of course. There always is. *Always—Mary had a little lamb . . .*

Impulse swung his car into the diagonal parking space. First he was going to drink and eat, come what may. He walked into the restaurant. Summer students filled the room, young men in sport shirts and slacks, girls in gay cotton prints and saddle shoes, laughing, talking, eating . . .

Swaying in the doorway, Matt watched them, bleary-eyed. *Once I was like them*, he thought dully. *Young and alive and conscious that these were the best years I would ever know. Now I am old and used up, doomed . . .*

He slumped down at a table near the front, filled with a great surge of sorrow that all happiness was behind him. He was conscious that the waitress was beside him. "Soup," he mumbled. "Soup and milk." He did not look up.

"Yes, sir," she said. Her voice sounded vaguely familiar, but they are all the same, all the voices of youth. He had eaten here before. He did not look up.

Slowly he raised the glass of water to his lips. It went down his throat in dusty gulps. It spread out in his stomach in cool, blessed waves. Matt closed his eyes thankfully. The hunger pains began to return. For a moment Matt regretted the soup and wished he had ordered steak.

After the soup, he thought.

The soup came. Matt lifted a spoonful. He let it trickle down his throat.

"Feelin' better, Mr. Wright?" said the waitress.

Matt looked up. He strangled. It was Abbie! Abbie's face bending over him. Matt choked and spluttered. Students turned to stare. Matt gazed around the room wildly. The girls—they all looked like Abbie. He stood up, almost knocking over the table as he ran to the front door.

With his hand on the doorknob, he stopped, paralyzed. Staring in at him, through the glass, was a pair of bloodshot eyes set above an unruly black nest. Stooped, powerful shoulders loomed behind the face. As Matt stared back, the eyes lighted up as if they recognized him.

"Argh-gh!" Matt screamed.

He staggered back and turned on trembling legs. He tottered toward the back of the restaurant. The aisle seemed

full of feet put out to trip him. He stumbled to the swinging kitchen door and broke through into odors of frying and baking that no longer moved him.

The cook looked up, startled. Matt ran on through the kitchen and plunged through the back door. The alley was dark. Matt barked his shins on a box. He limped on, cursing. At one end of the alley a street light spread a pool of welcome. Matt ran toward it. He was panting. His heart beat fast. Then it almost stopped. A shadow lay along the mouth of the alley. A long shadow with huge shoulders and something that waved from the chin.

Matt spun. He ran frantically toward the other end of the alley. His mind raced like an engine that has broken its governor. Nightmarish terror streaked through his arms and legs; they seemed distant and leaden. But slowly he approached the other end. He came nearer. Nearer.

A shadow detached itself from the dark back walls. But it was no shadow. Matt slowed, stopped. The shadow came closer, towering tall above him. Matt cowered, unable to move. Closer. Two long arms reached out toward him. Matt quivered. He waited for the end. The arms wrapped around him. They drew him close.

"Son, son," Jenkins said weakly. "Yore the first familiar face I seen all day."

Matt's heart started beating again. He drew back, extracting his face from Jenkins' redolent beard.

"Cain't understand what's goin' on these days," Jenkins said, shaking his head sadly, "but I got a feelin' Ab's behint it. Just as that fight got goin' good, the whole shebang disappeared and here I was. Where am I, son?"

"Kansas," Matt said. "Lawrence, Kansas."

"Kansas?" Jenkins wobbled his beard. "Last I heard, Kansas was dry, but it cain't be half as dry as I am. I recollect hearin' Quantrill burned this town. Too bad it didn't stay burned. Here I was without a penny in my pocket and only what was left in the bottle I had in my hand to keep me from dyin' of thirst. Son," he said sorrowfully, "somethin's got to be done. It's Ab, ain't it?"

Matt nodded.

"Son," Jenkins went on, "I'm gettin' too old for this kind of life. I should be sittin' on my porch with a jug in my lap,

just a-rockin' slow. Somethin's got to be done about that gal."

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," Matt said.

"That's the trouble," Jenkins said mournfully. "Been too late for these six years. Son, yore an edycated man. What we gonna do?"

"I can't tell you, Jenkins," Matt said. "I can't even think about it." *Mary had a little lamb* . . . "If I did, it wouldn't work. But if you want to hit me, go ahead. I'm the man who's responsible."

Jenkins put a large hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about it, son. If it weren't you, it would've been some other man. When Ab gets a notion, you cain't beat it out of her. I learned that years ago."

Matt pulled out his billfold and handed Jenkins a five-dollar bill. "Here. Kansas isn't dry any more. Go get something and try to forget. Maybe when you're finished with that, things will have changed."

"Yore a good boy, son. Don't do nothin' rash."

Mary had a little lamb . . .

Jenkins turned, raising his hand in a parting salute. Matt watched the mountainous shadow dwindle, as if it was his last contact with the living. Then Jenkins rounded the corner and was out of sight.

Matt walked slowly back to Massachusetts Street. There was one more thing he had to do.

As he reached the car, Matt sensed Abbie's nearness. The awareness was so sharp that it was almost physical. He felt her all around, like dancing motes of dust that are only visible under certain conditions, half angel, half devil, half love, half hate. It was an unendurable mixture, an impossible combination to live with. The extremes were too great.

Matt sighed. It was not Abbie's fault. If it was anyone's fault, it was his. Inevitably, he would pay for it. The Universe has an immutable law of action and reaction.

It was dark as Matt drove along Seventh Street. The night was warm, and the infrequent street lights were only beacons for night-flying insects. Matt turned a corner and pulled up in front of a big old house surrounded by an ornamental iron fence. The house was a two-story stucco, painted yellow—or perhaps it had once been white—and the fence sagged in places.

Most of the houses in Lawrence are old. The finest and the newest are in the west, on the ridge overlooking the Wakarusa Valley, but university professors cannot afford such sites or such houses.

Matt rang the bell. In a moment the door opened. Blinking out of the light was Professor Franklin, his faculty adviser.

"Matt!" Franklin said. "I didn't recognize you for a second. What are you doing back so soon? I thought you were secluded in the Ozarks. Don't tell me you have your thesis finished already?"

"No, Dr. Franklin," Matt said wearily, "but I'd like to talk to you for a moment if you can spare the time."

"Come in, come in. I'm just grading some papers." Franklin grimaced. "Freshman papers."

Franklin led the way into his book-cluttered study off the living room. His glasses were resting on top of a pile of papers. He picked them up, slipped them on, and turned to Matt. He was a tall man, a little stooped now in his sixties, with gray, unruly hair.

"Matt!" he exclaimed. "You aren't looking well. Have you been sick?"

"In a way," Matt said, "you might call it that. How would you treat someone who believes in the reality of psychic phenomena?"

Franklin shrugged. "Lots of people believe in it and are still worthwhile, reliable members of society. Conan Doyle, for instance—"

"And could prove it," Matt added.

"Hallucinations? Then it becomes more serious. I suppose psychiatric treatment would be necessary. Remember, Matt, I'm a teacher, not a practitioner. But look here, you aren't suggesting that—?"

Matt nodded. "I can prove it, and I don't want to. Would it make the world any better, any happier?"

"The truth is always important—for itself if for nothing else. But you can't be serious—"

"Dead serious." Matt shivered. "Suppose I could prove that there were actually such things as levitation, teleportation, telepathy. There isn't any treatment, is there, Professor, when a man goes sane?"

"Matt! You are sick, aren't you?"

"Suppose," Matt went on relentlessly, "that your glasses should float over and come to rest on my nose. What would you say then?"

"I'd say you need to see a psychiatrist," Franklin said worriedly. "You do, Matt."

His glasses gently detached themselves and floated leisurely through the air and adjusted themselves on Matt's face. Franklin stared blindly.

"Matt!" he exclaimed, groping. "That isn't very funny."

Matt sighed and handed the glasses back. Franklin put them back on, frowning.

"Suppose," Matt said, "I should float in the air?" As he spoke, he felt himself lifting.

Franklin looked up. "Come down here!"

Matt came back into his chair.

"These tricks," Franklin said sternly, "aren't very seemly. Go to a doctor, Matt. Don't waste any time. And," he added, taking off his glasses and polishing them vigorously, "I think I'll see my oculist in the morning."

Matt sighed again. "I was afraid that was the way it would be. Abbie?"

Franklin stared.

"Yes, Mr. Wright." The words, soft and gentle, came out of mid-air.

Franklin's eyes searched the room frantically.

"Thanks," Matt said.

"Leave this house!" Franklin said, his voice trembling. "I've had enough of these pranks!"

Matt got up and went to the front door. "I'm afraid Dr. Franklin doesn't believe in you. But I do. Good-by, Dr. Franklin. I don't think a doctor would cure what I've got."

When he left, Franklin was searching the living room.

There was something strangely final about the drive through the campus. Along Oread Street on top of Mount Oread, overlooking the Kaw Valley on the north and the Wakarusa on the south, the university buildings stood dark and deserted. Only the Student Union was lighted and the library and an occasional bulletin board. The long arms of the administration building were gloomy, and the night surrounded the white arches of Hoch Auditorium . . .

He pulled into the parking area behind the apartment building and got out and walked slowly to the entrance. He hoped that Guy wouldn't be in.

Matt opened the door. The apartment was empty. He turned on a living room lamp. The room was in typical disarray. A sweater on the davenport, books in the chair.

In the dark, Matt went to the kitchen. He bumped into the stove and swore, and rubbed his hip. *Mary had a little lamb . . . Somewhere around here . . .*

Some hidden strength kept Matt from dropping in his tracks. He should have collapsed from exhaustion and hunger long ago. But soon there would be time to rest . . . *and everywhere that Mary went . . .* He stooped. There it was. The sugar. The sugar. He had always liked blue sugar.

He found a package of cereal and got the milk from the refrigerator. He found a sharp knife in the drawer and sliced the box in two. He dumped the contents into a bowl and poured the milk over it and sprinkled the sugar on top. The blue sugar . . . *with fleece as white as snow . . .* He was very sleepy.

He lifted a spoonful of the cereal to his mouth. He chewed it for a moment. He swallowed. . .

And it was gone.

He grabbed the knife and plunged it toward his chest.

And his hand was empty.

He was very sleepy. His head drooped. Suddenly it straightened up. The hissing had stopped. A long time ago. He turned on the light and saw that the burner was turned off, the one that never lighted from the pilot, the one he had stumbled against.

The blue insect poison had failed and the knife and the gas.

He felt a great wave of despair. It was no use. There was no way out.

He walked back to the living room, brushed the sweater off the davenport, and sat down. The last hope—beyond which there is no hope—was gone. And yet, in a way, he was glad that his tricks had not worked. Not that he was still alive but because it had been the coward's way. All along he had been trying to dodge the only solution that

faced him at every turn. He had refused to recognize it, but now there was no other choice.

It was the hard way, the bitter way. The way that was not a quick death but a slow one. But he owed it to the world to sacrifice himself on the altar he had raised, under the knife he had honed, wielded by the arm that he had given strength and skill and consciousness.

He looked up. "All right, Abbie," he sighed. "I'll marry you."

The words hung in the air. Matt waited, filled with a fear that was half hope.

Was it too late for anything but vengeance?

But Abbie filled his arms, cuddled against him in homely blue gingham, scarcely bigger than a child but with the warmth and softness of a woman. She was more beautiful than Matt had remembered. Her arms crept around his neck.

"Will you, Mr. Wright?" she whispered. "Will you?"

A vision built itself up in his mind. The omniscient, omnipotent wife, fearsome when her powers were sheathed, terrible in anger or disappointment. No man, he thought, was ever called upon for greater sacrifice. But he was the appointed lamb.

He sighed. "God help me," he said, "I will."

He kissed her. Her lips were sweet and passionate.

Matthew Wright was lucky, of course, far luckier than he deserved to be, than any man deserves to be.

The bride was beautiful. But more important and much more significant—

The bride was happy.

MIND ALONE

I.

IF SHE had been a man, they would have saved themselves a lot of trouble and killed her. Yet they had quite a few reasons for doing what they did.

First, the knowledge she had must be destroyed one way or another—there was no question of that. They couldn't afford to keep her prisoner anywhere on Murrane, so it was either death or this. Another reason was that they had a new technique and this was a chance to try it out. Another was that they liked the idea of being able to let her go, even return her to her own world, and nevertheless know that she was no danger to them. Another, perhaps, was that should it ever become necessary, they could reveal that they hadn't killed her after all.

But behind all this was the fact that they were Murriners. Women, on the frontiers of galactic exploration, were almost sacred. The whole attitude toward women was different from that on an overcrowded world with as many women as men. All this was irrelevant in this particular case; but, being Murriners, they still didn't want to kill a woman.

"You can't hide this," she told them vehemently. "Every human being, on Earth or Murrane or anywhere else, is bound to know the truth anyway in a few years. You should be trying to heal the differences between Earth and Murrane, not carry on this insane war!"

"That's a point of view," one of the Murriners admitted. "Another is that we've a much better chance of getting what we want, on our own terms, if Earth doesn't have the faintest idea what our motivation is."

"But your own people think—"

"When did any people," the Murriner said gently, "ever know truly, exactly, why they were fighting a war?"

So they systematically destroyed her knowledge. The first thing to go, of course, was that little piece of knowledge—the true motive for the war. But they didn't stop there. Only one thing, at this point, was missing out of a well-ordered, well-stocked brain, and she would therefore soon get it back by calculation, observation or guess. So the next thing to go was her entire personal experience. All her memories of every event in her life were cleared away like so much rubble. She didn't know who she was or anything she had ever done.

But she still knew language and how to read and write and walk and talk and think. She could still be identified in five minutes by these things. So they had to go, too.

All that she had learned in years of life and study was removed in a few hours. But there was a difference between what was done to her personal memories and what was done to her general knowledge, including language. The memories were erased completely; the knowledge was merely blotted out. Thus when they came to teach her English again, she learned very quickly but talked quite differently. They taught her to write again, and as if to help them she automatically wrote with her left hand though she had always written with her right. Her writing was completely different, of course.

"Where am I? Who am I?" she asked often.

At first, when she knew only a few words, they didn't answer. But when they saw she could understand, they told her, to quieten her, that she was Muriel Martin.

She repeated the name hesitantly: "Muriel Martin. Mur-iel Mar-tin. Martin. Muriel—" and then burst out suddenly: "But that's not my name!"

"All right," she was told. "Call yourself anything you like. Do you know any other name?"

She was silent. She didn't. They hadn't told her any other names.

After that, they changed her physically. First they altered her metabolism. It was a tiny change, but her rather dark skin became much lighter, she ate less, she began to like foods she had disliked and lose her taste for others, and she became more deliberate in her movements, far less restless.

An inch came off her hip measurement and two inches off her chest. Other changes were made merely for the sake of change. But since the people who worked on her were artists in their way, since they had to change in any case, since they were experimenting—they improved. They straightened the bones of her legs, corrected her stance and toughened the muscles of her neck and shoulders, so that she stood an inch and a half taller. It was enough. Big changes were completely unnecessary.

The process, however, wasn't done with kindness, consideration and loving care. Since there had to be pain, they used it for conditioning. To make sure the conditioning was effective, they did nothing about quite a lot of pain that could have been avoided.

She was conditioned against taking any interest in the Earth-Murrane war, on one side or the other. Most particularly she was conditioned against ever coming back to Murrane. The latter was selective, since they had so much effective pain to play about with—they could afford to condition her to mild respect for Murrane, and strongly against ever coming back to it. There was enough stimulus available to hammer home even a complicated lesson.

After all this, they removed the personal memories she had begun to build up again since the last rape of her mind, and left everything else alone. They tested her, and were pleased. Inside two weeks—it had had to be inside two weeks—they had destroyed one woman and put another, quite different, in her place. She would never remember her previous history, for it wasn't there to be remembered.

When the job was finished, they drugged her to insensibility and took her to a small ship, a two-man vessel that could not only make the journey from Murrane to the Solar System, but could land almost anywhere in reasonable safety, being so small and so obviously harmless.

The pilot of the ship, who would have to fly it without assistance farther than any such ship had ever been flown before, frowned and asked who the girl was to merit such consideration.

It would be better for him not to know now, he was told. But he could ask when he came back, if he wished.

He never came back. His ship, tiny as it was, was spotted by the Terran fleet out beyond Pluto and destroyed when it tried to run. It was ironic, for he wasn't entering the Solar System, but leaving it, having done his job. He was doing no harm.

But in war an enemy is an enemy, whether he's doing any harm or not.

II.

THOUGH there must have been days when she was near the threshold of awareness, it was on a definite day, almost at a definite second, that she was fully conscious and aware of being conscious.

She looked around her, but that was unnecessary. Before full consciousness there had been perception, and she knew her surroundings.

She was sitting in a garden—a warm, healthy, luxurious garden, obviously on Venus. She felt light, but on Mars she would be lighter still. Here she could hold out her arm straight from the shoulder and keep it there for half an hour without discomfort. It was breathing that was most different. On Earth, one was seldom completely unaware of it. It was a mild labor to breathe, raising chest and shoulders, expanding ribs. Here the air seemed to flow in and out of its own volition. There was no tendency to droop when exhaling. The chest didn't fall, it merely grew a little smaller. One didn't have to breathe fast and shallowly, as on Mars.

On Mars, too, it would be very much colder. She was wearing white shorts and blouse, nothing else. She wasn't heavy enough to have to wear shoes to protect her feet. And on Venus—a point of interest to most women who went there—it was usually quite unnecessary to wear a brassiere or a girdle. Even flabby pectoral and abdominal muscles could hold flesh firm against the mild gravitational pull of Venus, three-twentieths less than that of Earth.

Yes, she was on Venus, without a doubt. A hundred other things confirmed it—the low, heavy clouds, the heat, the perfectly diffused sunlight that made shadows almost non-existent, the lushness of the grass, the haze over the forests, the smell of the air . . .

All of which showed that she knew Venus, Earth and Mars, at least.

She was alone. But when she turned her head, she saw a white building through the trees. In the other direction, down the hill, she knew there was a tall wire fence. This, then, pleasant though it might be, was a prison of some kind. She fingered her blouse thoughtfully. Though clean and fine, it was very plain, a common pattern, the kind of garment that wouldn't generally be worn from choice.

She wasn't disturbed. She knew she was called Muriel Martin, and was pretty sure that wasn't her real name—but whoever she was, wherever she was, however she had got there, she was quite confident of her ability to handle the situation.

Trying to look into the past, even the recent past, was unpleasant. She gave up the effort as far as the distant past was concerned. There was nothing there, and a curious finality about the nothing. But she explored the recent past conscientiously, ignoring the disinclination to do so.

There were shadow-memories of testing and probing, people trying to make her do things she couldn't do. There was also the hurt of being treated as little better than an animal because she *was* little better than an animal, yet knowing that she was very nearly a sane, intelligent human being. But there was no maliciousness in that; the people were really trying to help her.

There was one spot of maliciousness, however. Something concerning a Security Officer. He had been vile. She didn't remember much about what had happened, but he had been thoroughly unpleasant, tearing with his questions and suspicion and anger and disbelief at the brain that was trying to heal. She classed him, on the little she could recall, as a petty, frustrated official, the kind of man who must always be a failure in handling people but who so often is permitted to try.

Before that there was—horror. She knew nothing about it and didn't want to. Though she probed for it grimly, she was rather glad when she was forced to the realization that it was quite unavailable to her.

She rose lightly. The apparent loss of even a small fraction of weight makes anyone feel an athlete. An athlete feels like

jumping over trees. She ran, not because she was in any hurry, but because she felt like running.

She stopped when she saw another girl, also alone and also wearing the same kind of blouse and shorts. This girl was pretty but there was something missing in her face. Muriel saw that even before she spoke.

Two minutes later Muriel turned away. The girl was only dimly aware that someone was talking to her. She made sounds in reply, agreeably, and there was clearly no harm in her. But her I.Q. couldn't be more than 60 and was probably much less.

In half an hour, Muriel had spoken to a dozen or so women in the grounds—and that was enough to show her that she was in some kind of home for subnormals.

Her confidence subsided a little. People didn't get into places like this without good reason. That blank spot of horror in the past—was it really horrible, or was it something a sane mind should have taken in its stride? Had it just been something she couldn't take, something she had scuttled from in fear instead of facing boldly? She was sane now, she believed—but perhaps that was something that didn't happen often. Perhaps she had brainstormed. Perhaps . . .

She put aside the anxious, frightened thoughts that rushed into her mind. If she wasn't often sane, the sooner she made good use of this lucid spell the better.

Anyway, the other women she had seen didn't seem to be insane. There might be psychotics here, too—but for the most part they had seemed merely subnormal.

She walked up to the house. Before crossing the hall, she took a pair of sandals from a cupboard just inside the door and put them on. That was automatic. She wondered how often she had been here . . . how often she had done that without really knowing what she was doing.

She hesitated before tapping on a door at the end of a white corridor. She had a clear enough picture of the man inside, though she didn't remember his name. She had no fear of him, certainly; he was old and kind, though sometimes rather fierce. What caused her hesitation was the sudden realization that she didn't know what she herself looked like . . . whether she was young or old . . .

Resolutely, she tapped at the door and went in.

The man was as she remembered him, and she knew at once she could trust him. He wore an ordinary lounge suit, which made him almost ludicrously overdressed on Venus. But a lot of older people dressed like that. It wasn't that they objected to scanty apparel, but only that they felt they couldn't behave with any authority if they were half naked.

"Hallo, Muriel," he said pleasantly. "Sit down." His eyes were keen, she saw, not missing much.

"I think you asked me questions before, doctor," she said briskly, "and couldn't get much out of me. Would you like to try again?"

The expression on his face became almost delighted. His eagerness, Muriel guessed, was the natural sympathy and interest of anyone who worked among handicapped people, the joy in any sign of improvement.

"You've recovered your memory?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid not. I still don't know a thing about myself. Not even how old I am or how I look."

The doctor showed no sign of disappointment. "Perhaps we should deal with that first," he said. "You want to know how you look?"

"Well, I'm naturally interested." She smiled. "Ever meet a woman who was more or less sane and didn't know whether she was tall or short, young or old, pretty or ugly?"

"Before you look at yourself," said the doctor, "do you think it's all right to do it? I mean, you haven't any fear of looking in a mirror?"

"No. Only an in—" She stumbled.

"What's the trouble?" asked the doctor sympathetically. She remembered now that his name was Johnston.

"Just words. I was going to say only a something curiosity, but I don't know the word. It means very strong."

"Intense?"

"That's it. Intense curiosity." She tried the words over once or twice, and found they came easily.

The doctor rose from behind his desk and opened a cupboard. "There's a full-length mirror inside the door."

Muriel got up and stood in front of the mirror. She had braced herself mentally, for she hoped she was young but knew she might have to bear the disappointment of seeing she was old. She wanted to be pretty, but the chance of that

seemed small—she had some shadowy awareness that she wasn't pretty.

What she saw wasn't anything like what she had expected.

She was young, clearly—not more than twenty-five at the most. And she was beautiful, astonishingly beautiful . . . but even that consideration was swept away for the moment by something she wouldn't have believed possible, even granting her almost complete loss of memory.

The girl facing her in the mirror was a complete stranger. She had never seen her before in her life.

Presently, Muriel was doing an intelligence test. She had told Dr. Johnston, unprompted, that she thought she could do a non-verbal test adequately, but as yet a verbal test would give a misleading result. He said nothing, merely gave her a book and a pencil.

He watched her as she worked; it didn't seem to bother her at all. He noticed that she tried the pencil in one hand, then the other, before beginning to write with her left, at first awkwardly, and then with more precision. He hadn't suggested that she should work at the desk, waiting to see what she would do. She'd crossed her legs and worked quite confidently with the book on her knee. Stenographer? he wondered.

She was apparently completely sane, but the type of amnesia was puzzling. It was oddly selective. It was curious that she should remember nothing whatever of her own life and yet have almost free access to the normal general knowledge and vocabulary of an educated person. He knew he wasn't handling her as the textbooks said such a case should be handled, but he felt certain without working it out that it was much better to give her mind a lot to do than too little. She hardly needed directions on how to do the intelligence test. She saw the form of it and became absorbed in it.

Muriel finished the test and handed it back to him. He put it aside.

"Aren't you going to check it and tell me how I've done?" she asked.

"It isn't normally done."

"I know. But it would help me, I think. I don't know

whether I'm above or below average. It will help me plan my life, when I'm ready to plan. I'd like to know what that shows, please."

Her confidence impressed him. From the moment she'd entered the room she had been completely at home, unperturbed by the situation.

He checked the test and referred to a list.

"This gives you an I.Q. of 130 plus," he told her.

"What does that mean?"

"That you're in the top two per cent of the population in intelligence. It doesn't show any more than that. The standard deviation in this test is fifteen . . . do you know what I'm talking about?"

"I think so. You mean fifteen points are arranged to cover about a third of all people. A third between 85 and 100, and another third between 100 and 115. And I'm 130."

"You're 130 plus. Anything over 130. That is, the test takes no responsibility for you. It's meant to grade normal and subnormal people to a certain extent that shouldn't be overestimated."

"Not absolute but—?"

"Empirical. Statistical."

"I see. What's the next move?"

Unexpectedly his face grew hard, even angry. But she knew the anger wasn't against her.

"Security," he said. "They've insisted on seeing you again, as soon as possible. I'm afraid it's possible now. I'm sorry, Miss Martin. Do you remember anything about the last time a Security Officer saw you?"

"Yes, a little—and I don't like what I remember. What is this Security? Why do they insist on seeing me?"

"They think you might be a Murriner spy," said the doctor derisively.

"Murrane," the girl mused. "I've never been there and I don't want to go there. I'm not interested in the war."

"You know about the war?" asked the doctor quickly.

"Only that there is one. Oh, well . . . if I have to see this man, doctor, it might as well be now."

Dr. Johnston stared at her for a few moments, then nodded. He picked up the phone on his desk.

NURSE BRAYNE was a chatterbox. The words poured out of her in a sort of verbal *perpetuum mobile*, a pleasant sound if one didn't pay too much attention to what she was saying.

"Yes, you're my size, as near as makes no difference," she said, surveying Muriel. "We'd better hurry, Miss Martin—shall I call you Muriel? Security said someone would be along about four, but it would be just like Security to say that and make it two hours earlier, to catch you on the hop. That's the way they work. Of course, it's all necessary and no doubt they do a valuable job, but sometimes one wonders why they have to be so tough about it. I'm so glad you're all right now—I always thought there was something different about you, you always looked so clever, even when you were . . . but that's all over, and I'm sure you'll be able to stand up to this officer and let him see he can't push you around—he can't really, you know, if you only remember you've nothing to be afraid of. They're hard and suspicious, and they work on people by making them nervous and jumpy, and if you refuse to be nervous they have to climb down and be civil. Dr. Johnston says it's a crime that they should be allowed to come here and—"

On it went, with Muriel half listening, because she knew so little that she could learn even from Nurse Brayne.

It was still only two hours since she had come to full consciousness in the garden. She knew now that six weeks ago she had wandered into a village fifty miles away, Norburn, dirty and disheveled and completely dazed. There had been a search for a crashed ship or plane in the vicinity, but nothing was found. At first it had been thought that she was suffering from ordinary shock, but it soon appeared to be more than that. She had been taken to the nursing home, not because that seemed the right permanent place for her, but because she had to be sent somewhere where she could be looked after.

"Dr. Johnston's quite right," said Nurse Brayne. "You'll feel so much more confident if you know you're looking your best."

"Will I?" asked Muriel. "I don't think it would make any difference to me, Helen."

"Don't you care about clothes?"

"No."

That almost made Nurse Brayne speechless for a while.

It had been Dr. Johnston's idea to freshen Muriel up before the Security Officer came, and in one respect, Muriel agreed, it was a good idea. People did judge you by your appearance. If you were well-groomed and immaculately dressed, people were a little more cautious with you, afraid of what you might think, feeling themselves at a disadvantage. But in the end, your manner mattered more.

Anyway, Helen Brayne had volunteered to take her away and make her more presentable. Muriel had showered and was now in the nurse's bedroom, waiting patiently for Nurse Brayne to decide what she should wear.

"Are you a max or a min?" the nurse asked.

"I'm afraid I don't follow that," said Muriel. "I can guess you mean maximum or minimum, but that doesn't help."

"You must have known, but forgotten," said Helen. "Everybody's a max or a min. You wear as much as you can for any occasion, or as little."

Muriel smiled. "No, that's new to me . . . but surely people are sometimes one thing, sometimes the other?"

"It's all right if you've got natural taste," said Helen cheerfully. "But how many girls have? If they follow a pattern—max-min, bright-somber, plain-frilly, and so on—they can be sure that they're dressed more or less right most of the time. It's quite sensible, really. If you're overdressed for a ball and underdressed for a garden party, you're not giving your personality a chance. Are you sure you never heard of max-min? You seem to know most things, and this has been going on for five years now."

Muriel found that interesting. "On Venus and Earth, you mean?"

"And Mars."

"Suppose I haven't been on Venus or Earth or Mars in the last five years?"

Helen ceased abruptly to be the gay chatterbox and became the surprisingly efficient nurse. "I see what you mean."

Or you could have lost your memory five years ago. But if you weren't here, you must have been on Murrane."

"Murrane? I've never been there. Isn't there anywhere else I could have been?"

"Not that I know of, unless you're an explorer. Well, what are you—max or min?"

"Max, I guess."

Helen looked surprised. "Oh, well, if you say so. People who look like you generally prove it, if you know what I mean. Say, Muriel"—she was serious again—"don't give the Security man any idea that you've been out of this System in the last five years. They're suspicious by vocation."

She turned back to the drawer whose contents she was investigating.

Muriel reflected that perhaps the Security men had to be hard and tough and suspicious, to counteract the openness and friendliness of people like Dr. Johnston and Nurse Brayne, who seemed to take it for granted that she couldn't possibly be a spy or saboteur or anything of the sort.

It was more than Muriel took for granted herself.

Nurse Brayne had been quite right. While she was brushing Muriel's hair, over two hours before the Security Officer was due, there came an imperious summons relayed by a rather scared nurse. Captain Clark was in Dr. Johnston's room and wanted to see Muriel Martin immediately.

Dr. Johnston met her in the hall and, probably against all the rules, told her fiercely that if that tough jumped-up cop said anything she didn't like, she could press the bell under the desk and he'd come running in to take him apart.

"Thanks, doctor," said Muriel warmly. "But I don't think it'll be necessary, now."

She had remembered a little more of the last occasion when a Security Officer had come to see her. She'd been able to say only a few words at the time, and couldn't understand what was going on. But she had felt the truculence of the man, his suspicion, his anger; his emotion had been like a physical attack on her. When he touched her roughly, though he hadn't really done anything much, she had felt terrified and utterly helpless. He had tried to force the truth out of her, when the only possible way to get anything out of her

at all, as Dr. Johnston must have told him, was to draw it out with infinite gentleness and patience.

Muriel opened the door of the doctor's room and went inside. It was very different from the last time she had entered it, only a short time ago. The man behind the desk this time was younger than she expected, not as hard-looking as she expected, but quite as grim and humorless. He wore some kind of uniform, blue and spruce. He looked up from some papers he held as she came in.

Muriel was glad, after all, that she was neatly and attractively dressed. For just a fraction of a second, Captain Clark's eyes widened and flickered over her, and she knew that he was human. It was worth it for that.

Then he was himself again. "Please disabuse your mind," he said coldly, "of anything you've heard about Security in this somewhat uncooperative establishment."

That was nasty. In typical Security fashion, even with a girl in a nursing home, he was starting off by trying to cow her, to undermine her confidence in herself.

"It's all right," said Muriel easily. "I'm disabused."

"I didn't say you could sit down," said Clark sharply, as she moved toward the other chair.

She sat down. "Captain Clark," she said, "I started off with the fixed determination of cooperating with you all I possibly could. Are you going to insist on making it hard for me to do that?"

"Yes," he said.

"Why?"

"I'm asking the questions."

"You haven't asked any yet."

"Why are you determined to cooperate? Because you have something to hide?"

Muriel laughed. "Could be. I'm hiding it very successfully from myself, and I could do with your help, or anyone else's to find out what it is."

"Do you realize I have the power of life and death over you?"

"No. I don't think you have."

"I give you my solemn word that if I thought you were a Murriner and had any chance of escaping, I'd shoot you here and now."

"Oh, no doubt. But that's hardly relevant, is it?"

She had realized some time ago that he was acting a part. The other Security Officer, whom she dimly remembered, had been either a different type of man or a much better actor—but the goal was the same. They both tried to push her, to annoy her, to frighten her. Only the first officer had succeeded. The second wasn't going to.

"How do you feel about the Earth-Murrane war?"

"I don't give a damn about the war."

"Why is that?" Clark rapped. "We're fighting for our System, our very lives, and you don't care?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Maybe I've had nothing to do with the war."

"Don't try to explain it. I can see what your answers mean. Do you think we should just surrender to the Mur-riners?"

"I don't know about that. Remember, I've only just waked up. What are you trying to do, put me back to sleep again?"

"Ah," said Clark softly, "I've touched a tender spot, have I?"

"No. That was an honest request for information."

Clark came out from behind the desk. "Sit closer to the desk," he said, standing over her.

"What for?" demanded Muriel warily.

"Sit closer!" he shouted.

She pulled her chair closer to the desk. She had an idea, by this time, that nothing very serious was going to happen. He took a small plastic case from his pocket, placed it on the desk in front of her and opened it. Inside was a Morse key, a small light and a buzzer.

"Hold that key down," he said. "When the light goes on and the buzzer sounds, let the key up as quickly as you can. Get that?"

"Yes." Muriel searched her mind for the term 'reaction time,' but though the idea was perfectly clear, she couldn't quite find the words.

Twenty times the buzzer sounded and the light flashed. Then Clark opened the back of the little case and took out a card.

"Point three six, point two nine, two seven, three two, three one—" he read.

"I don't believe you," said Muriel.

He grunted, but didn't let her see the card. He was a very bad actor, Muriel thought. It was quite obvious that he was no longer in the least suspicious of her, though he kept up the pretense of brusqueness. He was really rather nice, she thought, sensing the good nature behind his formidable front.

She found the term she was looking for. "Murriners have slower reaction times than we do, then?" she asked, interested.

"You didn't know that?"

"I believe I did. Is the hold-up at the synapses?"

He tried to snap back at her, but couldn't. "No, the transmission through the nerve fiber is slower."

"Of course. Range of about four to sixty meters a second, instead of five to a hundred—funny how I can remember figures. But that couldn't always be a conclusive test, then."

Clark simulated biting sarcasm. "Maybe you could find a better one?"

"I'm sure I could. A blood test, perhaps. Isn't there something in Murrane's air, soluble in the blood, that affects the endocrine glands—modifying the chemical reactions, changing some of the enzymes . . ."

"Sure," said Clark. "Only I can't carry around a laboratory. I can carry this. Say, aren't you supposed to have lost your memory?" he added, forgetting to be tough.

"I was surprised I remembered that," said Muriel, pleased. "Tell you what, let me test my own blood and I'll tell you whether I'm a Murriner or not."

It was too much for Captain Peter Clark. He stared at her for a moment, then laughed.

"All right," he said. "You win. Can I call you Muriel?"

IV.

WHEN Captain Peter Clark left the Veborn nursing home, he should have been beginning to forget that Muriel Martin even existed. His job in Security was counter-espionage, nothing else. Having satisfied himself that Muriel wasn't a Mur-

riners, he had done his job, and as far as he was concerned she should have ceased to exist.

But back on Murrane no allowance had been made for the fact that Peter Clark was younger than most Security Officers and had always liked intelligent brunettes who didn't lose their tempers. Murriners, naturally, had a different view of Security Officers, and certainly didn't regard them as human beings.

So instead of starting to forget Muriel, Clark was running over possible excuses to pursue the matter, and Muriel.

At the nursing home, Muriel was assuring Dr. Johnston and Nurse Brayne that Security Officers weren't as bad as they thought.

"He explained himself afterwards," she said. "I suppose I shouldn't pass it on to you, but I don't think it will do any harm. Murriners feel inferior—they can't help it. They deny it, of course, even boast that a Murriner is better than a Terran any day, but it's there. They're angry-defensive. And the best way to discover them is to be angry-offensive. I saw Clark was only trying to annoy me, and that what was said didn't really matter. So he didn't annoy me at all."

Dr. Johnston had been looking at her closely as she spoke. "You're quite normal, Miss Martin," he said. "In fact, I've rarely met anyone saner. You're almost aggressively sane."

Muriel laughed. "Yes. But tell me—what can I do now?"

"You can walk out of here any time you like, now that you've been passed by Security. But that doesn't help you much, since you haven't any job or relatives or money. I suggest that you work in the office here. It won't pay much, but at least you'll be independent and we'll be able to help you to get your bearings."

"Thanks, doctor," said Muriel warmly. "I'll do that for a while anyway. Am I really free?"

"Of course. It isn't a crime to have lost your memory. You were never certified, and this isn't an asylum."

Impulsively Nurse Brayne, an affectionate creature, put her arm around Muriel's shoulders. "We'll try to make you happy," she said.

Three days later Muriel had taken over the running of the office. No one there had any organizing ability, and everyone was glad to pass the reins over to her.

She didn't believe, however, that she had ever worked in an office before. She found she was much more at home in the pharmacy. Gradually things were being confirmed or denied. She was a chemist of sorts, but not a doctor. Yet a lot of biology was familiar to her, and when she discovered anthropology the subject was clearly not new to her. In mechanics she was completely blank; dynamics meant nothing to her. In fact, there were subjects on the technological side that she didn't even seem to have heard of. Chemistry was the best bet. She regained whole chunks of knowledge merely by picking up bottles and looking at the labels.

She was learning all the time, and enjoying the process. Often she would merely look at the name of a substance, and into her mind would come a picture of it and all the things it would do.

On the fourth day she had a visitor.

"Not Captain Clark," he protested. "Call me Peter. Can you take the afternoon off?"

"Easily," she said, "if I'm shown a good reason."

He frowned. "I don't know whether it's good or not," he admitted, "but I've been thinking it up ever since I saw you last."

She laughed, and gave herself the afternoon off.

They didn't have to stay in the grounds, but they didn't go far from them. One couldn't sit anywhere on Venus without being soaked, but Peter was prepared. He spread a thin plastic ground-sheet on the steaming grass. Muriel sat at one corner of it and motioned him to stay on the other.

"Not too close," she told him. "I may be married, you know, and I'd better stay faithful just in case."

Peter's eyes widened. "I never thought of that," he said. "Let's see your left hand . . . look, you never wore a ring!"

"Doesn't prove anything," she smiled. "Now, what about this reason you were going to show me?"

Peter became more serious. "Frankly, at first I was only looking for an excuse to see you again," he admitted. "And if I hadn't found one, I'd have come anyway. But I did find one, I think. What does your history, as far as you know it, suggest to you about how you lost your memory? Anything?"

She shook her head. "Does it suggest something to you?"

"Yes. You didn't lose your memory. You had it lost for you."

He put it bluntly, and Muriel not only understood at once, but also agreed with it.

"But how could that happen?" she asked. "You mean someone hit me over the head, or something?"

"No—not that kind of thing at all. If someone loses her memory by what you might call natural means, she's not normal and confident but without her personal history, like you. She's dazed and lost and doubtful, and she has quite a lot of her personal history, if she remembers as much as you do. Loss of identity is common, but—"

"I see what you mean," said Muriel slowly. "People would have language and knowledge—but not a single recollection of anything that ever happened to them. I don't remember any person I ever knew, or going to school, or what I used to look like—"

He was on that like a flash. For an hour or so, they carefully examined what she knew and what she didn't. Nothing very much emerged from it, but Peter's idea got some support. It was as if everything she had ever learned had been put either into a personal or a general memory bank, and then the personal bank had been taken away.

"Which doesn't happen by accident," he said. "Muriel, there's one psychiatrist on Venus who might be able to find out something more about this. Will you go and see him?"

"Of course. Who is he?"

"Dr. Waterson, at Finylake. I can fly you there any day you like."

They settled the details of that, and Peter heaved a sigh of relief. "That was all very well," he said, "but I came out with a girl, not a psychiatric case. Can I move a little closer, please?"

"How about my not-out-of-the-question husband?"

"You don't remember any husband, do you? Well, you haven't got one." He moved closer.

"Quite a lot of people would refuse to believe this of a Security Officer," Muriel observed brightly. "Aren't they all hard and tough and unsympathetic?"

"That's just a myth. Just give me a chance and I'll prove it." He moved closer still.

"Suppose I were to turn out to be a Murriner spy?"

"That's the core of the whole thing," said Peter with satisfaction. "This is bare-faced blackmail. If you don't let me kiss you, I'll tell Security you're a Murriner after all, and they'll take you out and shoot you. See?"

"I don't want to be shot," Muriel admitted. He took her in his arms and kissed her very thoroughly.

Dr. Waterson was one of the new electronic psychiatrists. He seemed to have grown a little electronic himself; he hummed like an electric motor as he worked, his little black eyes glittered like nuclei, and his black hair perpetually stood on end as if charged with electricity.

He ignored Muriel and Peter completely as he gathered data from his various machines. Though he used a lot of apparatus, his work was by no means all electronic. The word in any case was a misnomer; it had been applied to men like Dr. Waterson through wholesale confusion of psychiatry and cybernetics, encephalographs and electronic brains, electricity and electronics, and had been so generally used that it had stuck. Now Waterson himself called his profession electronic psychiatry—an example of the power of the uninformed layman.

Dr. Waterson's work wasn't all electric, then—he had put some pretty shrewd questions to Muriel while connecting her to this machine and that, and she was wondering, now that it was over, how much of his use of impressive apparatus was window-dressing.

At last he said, "I'm not going to charge you anything, Miss Martin. Which means, I'm afraid, that I can't produce any results."

"What we know now is tentative, doctor," Peter put in. "Can't you add anything, even if it's tentative too?"

"I can only say this. If any tampering with Miss Martin's brain was done—and I admit that this is a reasonable conclusion to reach—it was very well done. There is certainly an interesting problem here. It seems extremely unlikely that your loss of memory is due to any neurosis, Miss Martin. There is neurosis present, of course—"

"There is?" said Peter, startled.

The psychiatrist smiled faintly. "I should hardly mention

it, if it were significant. There are certain fixed patterns, or nearly fixed patterns, and fixation is neurosis. I didn't investigate those, because they seem to have nothing to do with the loss of memory. They seem to have been acquired afterward, possibly as a result . . . however, the loss of memory, if not neurotic, would certainly appear to be the result of some operation—"

"Surgical?" asked Peter.

Dr. Waterson shook his head. "There is no evidence of surgery. But there is also no evidence of anything else. I merely assume, from a fair knowledge of the human mind, that it is not surgical. I wish I could say more. I can only repeat—if anything has been done, it has been very well done. That simplifies the matter, if you wish to pursue it."

"Simplifies it?" Muriel exclaimed. "I should have thought it would be the other way round."

"Simplifies it," reported the psychiatrist patiently. "Have you a lot of money, Miss Martin?"

"No."

"A pity. If you had, I should advise you to go to Earth and consult some of the leading electronic psychiatrists there. You would soon find yourself on the right track. The quality of this hypothetical operation, you see, means that only a very few people could possibly have done it."

"I see," said Muriel.

As he was showing them out, he asked curiously, "*Do* you intend to proceed with this, Miss Martin?"

She hesitated. "I don't think so. It's not of tremendous importance to me, and anyway it'll be quite a while before I'll be able to afford to go to Earth."

"A pity. You would have to go there. All the men who might be able to help you are there. Or in Murrane."

If he hadn't added the last three words, principally to himself, the matter would probably have died there. But Peter heard them and whirled around.

"Murranel" he exclaimed.

"I didn't propose Miss Martin should go there," said the psychiatrist dryly.

"You mean there are people on Murrane who might have done this to Muriel?"

"If anything was done, yes. Murrane is probably well ahead

of us in electronic psychiatry. It's the only branch of psychiatry they have, I believe."

"Then something *will* be done about this," said Peter. "Security is taking it up. Come on, Muriel. You're going to Security HQ after all!"

V.

WHILE Peter's little plane was making the short hop from Finylake to Veborn, Muriel asked coolly, "Am I a prisoner, Peter?"

"That would be a very difficult question to answer," said Peter cheerfully. "Let's pretend you didn't ask it, shall we?"

"No. I don't like that attitude at all. I want to know where I stand."

"How can anyone possibly tell you where you stand? That's what we're trying to find out."

"What are we going to do?"

"First, you'll have a thorough medical examination. That'll show pretty definitely whether you could be a native Murriner or not. If that's negative, as I expect it will be, I'm going to take you to Earth to see those psychiatrists that Dr. Waterson mentioned."

"Why?"

"I don't know exactly why," Peter admitted. "You don't know anything about Security, Muriel, do you? Well, it's an important job. This war is being fought mainly by two strong fleets that are trying to destroy each other, not advance on other objectives. Our fleet, say, can't afford to go too far from this System while the Murriner fleet is still strong. It can't afford to attack Murrane, because that would allow the Murriners to attack Earth freely. Space is big, and the only thing that prevents either side blasting the other's base is the knowledge that the fleet that tried it would be a total loss. Do you get the idea? There's no split between defense and attack any more—it's just one fleet against another."

"Go on. I don't quite see how it must be like that, but I'll take your word for it."

"Our high command can't be with the fleet, because that's too mobile. The planning is probably done on Earth, but the

real base may be on Venus or Mars or even Pluto for all I know. Anyway, you can see that in a war like this, gains by either side can only be made by doing something slightly out of the ordinary. A raid on Murrane can be made and it can be effective, provided it's carefully planned and the enemy gets no hint of the plan.

"There's the rub. Our spies get little or nothing out of Murrane, and Murrane is obviously getting quite a lot out of us. In direct proportion to that, they're doing better than we are.

"So Earth, at the moment, is losing this war, despite greater potential—and the section that's failing is Security. Murrane is keeping this a battle of espionage and counter-espionage, and winning it. Do you see why we have to follow up any line that shows itself? If you were to turn out to be a Murriner spy, we'd be glad we'd found you, but it wouldn't mean very much. We've found plenty of Murriner spies. But if we found something that was *new*—"

He brought the plane down neatly at Veborn landing-field. Almost at once the door was opened and two Security Officers waited on either side of it for Muriel to come out.

"Then I *am* a prisoner?" she said.

"I wish you'd just take things as they come, Muriel," he said. "You've nothing to be afraid of."

"Yes, I have." Incredibly, Muriel burst into tears. "You're trying to make me go to Murranel!" she cried.

Amazed, Peter stared at her.

The examination put it beyond doubt that Muriel was a native Terran.

"Apart from her slightly above-normal reaction time," the doctor observed, "there are several small things which, taken in the aggregate, show that she was born and grew up on Earth. I can't, of course, tell you whether she has ever been on Murrane or not. There are indications that she has. But any trace there may be of the Murrane enzymes is negligible."

Peter visited Muriel in what he insisted on calling her room, not her cell.

"I've been talking to Dr. Johnston, Muriel," he said. "I told him you've been co-opted into Security."

Muriel was calm and at ease again. She had been as

amazed as Peter at her breakdown. She wanted to know what could have made her do that.

"And have I?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I have a theory," he said quietly, "that you were in it already."

Muriel started, but didn't speak.

"The doctor here added a few things to what we know about you," Peter went on. "Still nothing definite, but it's building up. Waterson said your brain might have been tampered with by a very good electronic psychiatrist. The doctor here says you may have spent a long time on Murrane."

"Does he? I thought he said—"

"I persuaded him to go a little further after you'd gone. You see, we have to give people the benefit of the doubt, and he was assuming that you were a suspect, that your life depended on what he said. So he stated, correctly, that the traces of Murrane enzymes in your blood were negligible. But when I told him the true circumstances and some of my own ideas, he admitted that while he wouldn't convict you on it, he was pretty certain that you had been on Murrane . . . possibly for some time. Unfortunately, while your mind was recovering, your body has been dissipating all traces of Murrane."

Muriel nodded. "That's so. Heavy tan, Vitamin D restored, reaction time accelerating again—if I was on Murrane, but only for a year or two, the journey here and a few weeks out in the open on Venus would cover up just about everything."

"The doctor also says," Peter went on, "that you've been physically changed in some way. There are things about you that don't match. But that, again, was well done. Though there have been surgical operations, the main thing was a metabolic change. He can't say what you were like before."

"Another thing," said Muriel quietly—and she told him how she and Nurse Brayne had first concluded that she might not have been on Earth during the last few years.

"It all fits," said Peter.

"With what?"

"It would all make sense," he said slowly, "if you were a Terran agent on Murrane, were found out, and for some

reason of their own they didn't kill you but sent you back here, altered."

Muriel tried that for size.

"It seems to make a certain limited amount of sense," she said cautiously.

"Despite the definite fact that you were never on Murrane?"

"I . . . I'm not sure. But I do know I'm never going there!"

"That," said Peter, "is the most significant part of all."

VI.

THE hop from Venus to Earth was almost all acceleration and deceleration, and most people stayed in their bunks. Muriel used the time to read up on Murrane and the war. She had to overcome a disinclination even to read about them, but it could be done. She became interested in what she was reading, and the disinclination to have anything whatever to do with Murrane lost some of its force.

But she remained quite determined that it was out of the question for her ever to go there.

She took it in three parts—Murrane itself, the war, and how either of these affected her or might possibly affect her. She had provided herself with half a dozen pocketbooks, which she scanned for the meat in them.

First, Murrane.

It was a cold world, but so suitable for colonization in other respects that the cold was accepted. There were no seasons; the inclination of the equator to the orbit was less than one degree, and its eccentricity was also extremely small. The year was 216 days and the day thirty-eight hours, making a period which wasn't a great deal different from Earth's year. The diameter was 7500 miles, less than that of Earth, less even than that of Venus, but the mass and density made up for that. Temperature was Murrane's one drawback. A top limit of 65 degrees F. had been recorded, but normal equatorial temperature range was from 0 to 50 degrees F. Naturally, all the Murriner towns and cities were in a thousand-mile belt around the equator.

Muriel found she knew all this as soon as she looked at it. She knew more, without going farther in the book. She knew that Murrane, surprisingly, was teeming with warm-blooded life, with no intelligent animals to prey on it until men came along. She knew that Murrane was rich in metals of all kinds. She knew that hydro-electric power was abundant. She knew how the Murriners dressed, in a one-piece snowsuit with a hood, over several layers of fine underclothing that trapped many blankets of air as insulation.

It was pretty obvious that she had been on Murrane, despite the insistence by one part of her mind that she had not.

She passed on to a brief review of the war. She didn't feel any need to read more about Murrane and its people and history.

She knew all about them.

It was a strange war. It had started out of mere suspicion, jealousy and differences, without warning. Earth had been careless, Murrane precipitate. Murrane was the attacker, but there were people on Earth who blamed Earth for the war. After all, there was such a historical record of colonies turning against the parent country that it didn't seem unfair to say Earth should have been more alert and never let a war like this happen.

From the first, it was a space war. There had been raids on Earth and Murrane, but they weren't worth the trouble. Each side insured that the other couldn't have a base near its own territory; any force raiding the enemy planet, therefore, had to start from home, evade the enemy fleet, advertise its presence by an attack against objectives which were in any case well guarded, and then try to get home again.

It couldn't be done. It was a plain matter of statistics. If ships made long detours, their offensive power was cut down by the necessity for so much fuel and provisions. Moreover, they were unavailable, useless, not paying their way, all the time they were on the two long journeys. And if they attempted quick, bold raids, they were poking their heads into a natural trap. If the Terran fleet did nothing until a Murriner force attacked Earth, it could then pick off the Murriners as and how it liked, where it liked, when it liked.

Since the whole campaign was one of fleet maneuvers, anything that could be found out about those movements

was in itself a victory. And at this the Murriners were leading easily. After all, to even a fifth-generation Murriner—that was as far as it went yet—everything Terran was familiar, and Earth was a second home. All the books were about Earth, the language was the same, Murriner cities were copies of Terran cities. A Murriner, save for the small physical differences, was a natural spy to send secretly to Earth.

Terrans, on the other hand, could know little about Murrane. It was changing rapidly, while Earth stayed the same. Information was scanty instead of abundant. An untrained Terran on Murrane would betray himself in five minutes, while an untrained Murriner on Earth was safely mingling with the crowd and learning what he needed to know.

What had been forgotten, for the umpteenth time, was that from the moment a man went to a colony he was a colonist, not a Terran. The colony, wherever it was, was his home. To go there at all, he must have preferred the colony to Earth. He was a malcontent or a pioneer. Before any quarrel started, his side in it was fixed.

Another thing was that Earth couldn't help underestimating Murrane. That had happened, was happening, and would continue to happen. The Terran Command was getting over that error, but the people of Venus, Earth and Mars probably never would. They underestimated Murrane in many respects, but the main one was man-power. Knowing that Earth alone could swallow the whole population of Murrane in one country, they shrugged off the whole question of possible victory for the colony. They forgot that only a tiny proportion of Earth's potential could be used, and that for the most part Earth's billions considered that their duty in the matter ended with reading the newspapers.

Not much was made in the books of the physical differences between Terrans and the colonists, Muriel noticed. Probably unimportant. They certainly weren't the cause of the conflict.

When she came to the question of how all this concerned her, the answer was surprisingly simple.

It didn't.

Or didn't seem to.

At New York, Peter took Muriel straight to the Security building.

"This isn't my section at all, of course," he said, "but I'm going to see if I can get permission to follow this thing through to the end. Mind?"

She didn't answer that. She certainly didn't object to Peter's staying around, but what exactly to say to him, in the circumstances, was a puzzle she couldn't solve.

VII.

AFTER days of exhaustive tests, a nameless director at the Security building told Muriel: "I don't think you can possibly be an agent of ours sent to Murrane, Miss Martin."

"Allowing for all possible surgical and medical transformation?" asked Peter, who had been there most of the time. He had been given permission to continue the investigation of the strange case of Muriel Martin.

"Allowing for all possible change and about twenty per cent over the top, for luck. I'm not going to give the figures, even to you, Captain Clark, but you can imagine that the number of women agents we send to Murrane is small. And of the women who have been landed on Murrane, we can definitely account for a fair number. You are in some way or another disqualified from being any one of the remainder."

"Can you put some sort of percentage of probability on it?" Peter asked. "I mean, there are strong improbabilities already in Miss Martin's case. If we are ever to find out anything, we'll probably have to accept some improbability or other."

"I should say the chances against Miss Martin having been an agent of ours," said the director, "would be about five hundred to one."

Peter rose. "We'll have to see if we can find a better chance than that, Muriel," he said. "Thanks, director."

Something more definite was provided by the first electronic psychiatrist they visited. He was prepared to state definitely that electronic psychiatry had been used.

"Just taking the patterns of what you know and what you don't, Miss Martin," he said, "they're too neat and definite to be the result of any kind of mental illness. But . . ."

He stared thoughtfully at Muriel, then at Peter—who wasn't in uniform—and back to Muriel.

"This is certainly a criminal case," he said bluntly. "You would hardly have permitted anything of this sort, Miss Martin. I suggest you go to the police, for your own safety. Anyone who went to the trouble of—"

Peter showed him his badge. "If you feel you must report on this, doctor," he said, "please report to Security, not to the civil police."

"I see," said the psychiatrist. "I suggest you consult Dr. Hyneker. You understand, electronic psychiatry is a new branch. I'm a practitioner, not one of the founders of the science. Dr. Hyneker or Dr. Ball may be able to help you further, where I can't."

So they went to see Dr. Hyneker.

VIII.

DR. HYNEKER was curiously like the psychiatrist they had seen on Venus. He gave the same impression of being a machine himself, as if this new branch of science were actually turning men into quick, jerky, shrewd-eyed machines.

They told him as little as possible, to see what he could find out for himself. Rather surprisingly, the thing he picked out and concentrated on was Muriel's disinclination to go to Murrane.

"Before your own conclusions can be trusted, Miss Martin," he observed, arranging and rearranging papers on his desk, "you must remove this fixation."

"That's interesting, but how do I do it?" Muriel asked, smiling.

"Go to Murrane."

Muriel had got over trembling with fright or bursting into tears whenever the idea was mentioned. But she frowned, still not liking it.

Peter shot a glance at her, and spoke for her. "Quite so, doctor," he observed, "but how would you suggest she do it?"

The doctor took a sheaf of papers from the bottom of a

pile and began to deal them out on the desk like a pack of cards.

"I admit the suggestion, at the moment, is somewhat impracticable," he said. "However, often we psychiatrists must be impractical. Someone comes in and I examine him and find the only real solution to his problem is for him to become a great violinist. But perhaps he has no talent whatever. What do I do?"

He sighed. "Long ago I decided that where people appeared to be reasonably intelligent and stable, the thing to do was to tell them the answer, however impossible it seemed. Last year I told a man to go home and beat his wife. I was quite certain, I must admit, that he would never be able to do it. Apparently I was wrong. They're now very happy and contented together."

He collected together the papers he had dealt out and began to fan them out like a bridge hand. "I do this, for example, because I want to pile all these papers together and set fire to the lot. Impossible—by my own decision. So I relieve my feelings by controlling them, destroying their significance, then restoring it."

"But just a minute, doctor," said Muriel. "I haven't come here as a patient, not in the normal sense. I don't really want to be *cured* of anything, because I'm not aware of anything radically wrong. Except for my memory, and I'm told I can't have that back because there's nothing there. All I want is to find out what happened to me. To *know*."

Dr. Hyneker's eyes opened wide. "But obviously you can only find that on Murrane," he said chidingly, as if she should have known that.

"What!" exclaimed Peter.

"Of course." He still seemed astonished that what he said wasn't obvious. "Here we have a fairly neat removal of certain memories, and over all—very untidy—a threat, a positive prohibition against going to Murrane. The job as a whole is extremely amateurish—other things, like your conditioned disinterest in the Earth-Murrane war, make it clear that you were not supposed to know that Murrane was concerned at all. But obviously, from this artificial respect and fear and warning, this—this *untidy* blot over the good work that pre-

ceded it, Murrane is the key to the whole thing, and if you ever want to find an answer, you must go there."

He shuffled the papers in his hand. Muriel observed automatically that they were getting rather crumpled and dog-eared by this time.

"I'm sorry," he said in a different tone, "that it's impossible for you to go to Murrane, Miss Martin. Yours is a very interesting case. I should like to see it resolved in some way."

Peter was about to speak, but Muriel waved him silent. From the expression on his face, he didn't appear to have anything very helpful to say.

"You mean if I *were* to go to Murrane," she said slowly, "I'd know, just because of that, what this was all about?"

"Possibly. It may be more difficult than that. If I say more, I'm guessing . . . is that understood? Very well, then: After the treatment I and others, apparently, have given you, you may take it that merely by returning to Murrane—"

"*Returning!*" Peter shouted. "You're sure of that?"

Dr. Hyneker turned a pained countenance on him. "This isn't recognized behavior for a psychiatrist's consulting room, young man," he observed. "If you don't restrain yourself, I shall have to continue this discussion with Miss Martin alone.

"I took the fact that you have been there before for granted," he went on, to Muriel. "As I was saying, you may take it that merely by returning to Murrane you will probably, by this time, break down the fixation completely. You will then, as far as I can see, be wholly rational, in the loose way we generally use the term. Going to Murrane guarantees nothing else. But it would probably open up at once some knowledge of the world which would show you definitely that you had previously been there. And *that* knowledge might even make it clear to you where to look further.

"There wouldn't be so definite a prohibition *against* something, if disregarding the prohibition wasn't liable to *produce* something—"

"Of course," said Peter. He had himself in control now, and spoke quite calmly. "Muriel, all this makes sense."

"But I can't possibly—"

"Doctor," said Peter. "Suppose we merely landed her

on some quiet, unoccupied spot on Murrane and took her off again. Would that—?”

“We?” said the doctor.

Again Peter had to show his badge.

“I don’t know,” said Dr. Hyneker. “The only way to find out would be to try. I doubt it. Miss Martin would probably have to make closer contact with the life and conditions of Murrane than that before anything very remarkable would happen.”

Then, carelessly, he threw another small bombshell. “If you by any chance do go to Murrane, Miss Martin,” he said, “I’d advise you to be very careful about visiting a town called Rillan, and particularly a Dr. James Ball who lives there. Because, much as I hate to say it, I fear that whatever was done to you must have been done by him or under his direction.”

IX.

THEY asked him all he knew about James Ball, but he waved that aside. “I haven’t seen him for years,” he said. “He’s done most of his work on Murrane.”

“A Murriner?” asked Peter.

“Depends what you mean by a Murriner. He chooses to work there, on what he calls the fundamental problems of psychiatry. The removal of your personal memories might have been his work, Miss Martin. The rest is rather clumsy for a man of his skill. I should have doubted whether he’d turn against Earth—but then, he’s lived on Murrane for some time. If you want further information on Dr. Ball, I’m not the one to give it. There’s a daughter, I think, here in New York. Go and see her.”

So Muriel and Peter found themselves on the move again. Peter wanted to talk about what Dr. Hyneker had said, but Muriel made it clear that she didn’t. He bore it until they were within a block of the address Dr. Hyneker had given them. Then he caught Muriel’s arm and stopped her.

“Let’s try to work this out, Muriel,” he said. “If this Dr. Ball was the man who worked on your brain—”

“I think he must be,” said Muriel thoughtfully, “I remember Rillan. I’ve been there, I’m sure. But what harm can it

do to see Barbara Ball? She can't very well be in touch with Murrane."

"That's one thing to find out first. Wait here while I ring Security."

He disappeared into a drugstore. He was gone only a few minutes. He came back looking thoughtful.

"Security say they've been watching her for a long time. She was at school here when the war started—there isn't much schooling on Murrane, of course, and Barbara was only there for a year when she was fourteen. The rest of the time she's been on Earth. Since the war, it seems she's been moving heaven and earth to get herself into Security as an agent on Murrane. They have nothing against her, but refused her at first because she was too young, and now because she's probably more concerned about joining up with her father again than working for Earth.

"But," he went on, "it seems there's another daughter, Lorna, with Dr. Ball at Rillan. What do you think of that?"

"Should I think anything about that?" she asked, puzzled.

Peter didn't insist on the idea. "Oh, well, let's go and see Barbara."

Barbara was nineteen, very small, rather dark-skinned, and would have been called pretty only by someone determined to see the best in her. It would have been in order, however, to call her attractive—she had quite a neat figure, rather on the thin side, and thick dark hair with a luster which many a prettier girl would envy.

Peter showed her his card at once, knowing she would cooperate all she could with a Security Officer. She did. She invited them into a surprisingly expensive-looking lounge with every evidence of excitement.

"I don't want to disappoint you, Miss Ball," said Peter. "We're not here about your application to go to Murrane. That's not my department at all. We want to ask you some questions about your father and—Lorna."

She *was* disappointed; it was inevitable. Apparently she had set her mind on going to Murrane. She blinked and smiled brightly, but Muriel wasn't deceived. She patted Barbara's knee sympathetically.

"Pity you and I can't do a switch, Barbara," she said.

"You want to go to Murrane, and everybody's trying to make me go there, but I don't want to."

"Careful, Muriel," said Peter quietly. "No, it's not that we don't trust you, Miss Ball. But there may be something very important behind this . . ."

He put some questions about Dr. Ball and Lorna. Dr. Ball, it seemed, was about fifty, and had been a medical doctor for some time before he heard of electronic psychiatry. He'd moved into that branch right at the beginning, and soon, with Dr. Hyneker, was the leading authority on it. He went to Murrane because, he said, on Earth you couldn't see the trees for the forest. The environment of a psychiatrist's patients was so complicated that he could never see the effect of any one item. In a colony, life was so comparatively simple that it was possible to trace things, really cure things which on Earth could only be alleviated. He had started his own school there, experimenting and training electronic psychiatrists.

"You seem to know the background pretty well, Miss Ball," said Peter.

She shook her head impatiently. "I'm the dunce of the family," she said.

Lorna had also been at school in New York, but five years ago, when Barbara was fourteen, she had gone to Murrane. Barbara had been left in the general charge of an aunt—actually, on her own.

"Pop believes in people having to look after themselves early," said Barbara.

Lorna had been brilliant. At school and college she had done pretty well in everything, refusing to specialize. She did enough electronic psychiatry to know her way around the subject, but only from the psychological side. She kept off medicine and concentrated on chemistry.

Peter stopped Barbara when she was in the middle of her description of Lorna.

"Have you a picture?" he asked.

"Of Lorna? Sure, on the table beside you."

Peter looked at it closely. It was rather a shock, in two ways. He passed it on to Muriel, who merely glanced at it casually and put it back on the table.

Apparently Peter's idea wasn't going to strike Muriel at all.

"Miss Ball," he said slowly, "let's suppose that on Murrane for some reason Lorna was changed physically so that she became completely different—so that appearance was nothing to go by. Suppose all her personal memories were removed, so that she didn't know anything that had ever happened to her, anyone she had ever met. But suppose also that her general knowledge, the memories that had nothing to do with Lorna Ball personally, were carefully split off and only lightly covered up. Supposing all that—how would you know that Muriel here wasn't your sister Lorna?"

Muriel wasn't much affected by the idea Peter suggested one way or the other.

But Barbara jumped, went white and stared at Muriel.

"She *can't* be . . ." she murmured. "Lorna's no glamor girl. And she—"

She was troubled by the two things that Peter had noticed about the picture. Lorna wasn't ugly, but at best she was merely a pleasant-looking girl. One would say she looked intelligent, which was true, and avoid altogether the question of whether she was pretty or not.

The other thing was that Lorna and Muriel were so obviously different, beauty apart, that one didn't look for similarities. It was like comparing an orange and an apple. Girls much more like each other would still have been obviously different people.

Barbara, though she called herself the dunce of the family, wasn't stupid. And she had imagination. Her gifts seemed to lie all in that direction, in fact. She was an artist born to a scientist: the intelligence was there, but instead of being calculating intelligence it was talent, apparently. A volume of Beethoven sonatas lay on the piano, the watercolors hung on the walls were probably hers, and Peter wouldn't have been surprised to learn she wrote, too.

Barbara soon got over the plain difficulties of the matter and began to consider the question seriously.

She asked Muriel questions on subjects Lorna knew, and apparently threw in a few on subjects Lorna didn't know. Presently, her own knowledge being deficient, she armed herself with an encyclopedia. Muriel wasn't often sure; she usu-

ally answered hesitantly. Sometimes Barbara helped her, giving part of the answer to see if Muriel could supply the rest. As a rule she could.

Barbara naturally enough tried for other memories now and then—people Lorna had known, things she had done, places she had visited. Sometimes something came out about the places, but nothing on the other things.

"Have you a scar on your left thigh?" Barbara asked.

"I don't think so."

"Marks like that wouldn't be left," Peter put in. "There would be no point in the other changes, if Lorna could be identified by a simple thing like a scar."

Nevertheless, Muriel rolled down her stocking and Barbara looked closely at the skin. There was a very faint mark which might have been a scar.

"They didn't make it easy for us, did they?" asked Muriel, amused. She was still far less concerned about the whole affair than Peter and Barbara.

"Don't you care?" Barbara asked.

"Of course I care, but—well, after all, I must be someone. It doesn't seem to matter such a tremendous amount *who* I am, if you see what I mean. If I'm Lorna Ball, fine. If not, I won't be heartbroken."

Barbara looked at Muriel's teeth.

A back tooth was missing that Barbara didn't know about.

"Perhaps there was something unusual about it," suggested Peter.

"There was," Barbara said, with some evidence of excitement. "It was the only one that was filled. Either Lorna got it out since, or they took it out because it could be identified from dental photographs—"

"Then you're certain I'm Lorna?"

"No, not certain. Whoever did this made sure I couldn't be certain. There's nothing conclusive. You don't know things Lorna definitely did know. You do know things Lorna hadn't studied, to my knowledge. But allowing for all that—I think you're my sister."

Muriel said slowly, "Even if I wanted to go to Murrane I couldn't."

"Perhaps you could," said Peter quietly, watching her closely.

"How?"

"Through Security. The route Barbara has been trying to take."

Muriel looked at Barbara. "If they won't let her go, why should they let me!"

It was Barbara who answered that. "If you're Lorna," she said, "they'll let you go. Terran agents have to know Murrane and be able to act like Murriners. They don't think I can. They've tested me twice. I'm quiet, dreamy and even-tempered, and I should be reckless, hasty and extrovert, or able to act that way." She frowned, then admitted honestly: "I can't, I guess. But you're different. Try Security and see."

Muriel fought a sharp, silent battle with herself. She could be quite happy without ever knowing for sure who she was—and it would be dangerous to go to Murrane as a spy. She didn't think of it as more than that: dangerous. She was quite confident of being able to pass among Murriners as one of them—it seemed like the kind of thing she could do.

But why?

Why take such a risk when it didn't matter? She didn't really care much about what had been done to her. She didn't want revenge. And she still trembled inwardly at the thought of going to Murrane.

Yet what really mattered seemed to be this: she did want to know more. This was a way in which she might learn.

"Peter," she said abruptly, "am I free? Do you trust me? Do I have to go to Murrane?"

Peter took her hand and pressed it affectionately.

"Let's take them in order, baby," he said. "Are you free? Sure. You have always been. Perhaps Security should be as tough as it's supposed to be, and kill on suspicion. But it isn't. Maybe that's why we're losing the war. It gives the benefit of the doubt, and you know there's so much doubt that Security can't ever touch you. Do I trust you? That's not so easy. Trust has to be both ways. If you trust me, maybe you can see the answer to that."

Muriel returned the pressure warmly. "I like that," she said. "I always knew you were a nice guy, Peter, even when you were acting like a screen villain. Only a good guy would say a thing like that. But you didn't answer the last question."

"Do you have to go to Murrane? No . . . I didn't. Only you can answer that, Muriel."

X.

"GOOD LUCK, Muriel," said Peter. "And—come back, will you?"

Muriel had let him kiss her before, but this time she kissed him. Then she left the helicopter and struck out for the distant glow of the city.

She was a little light-headed. She was deliberately not thinking of her fear of going to Murrane, and the fact that she was now on it. There was also the danger that would be with her every second of the time she was on the world: the danger of being discovered as a Terran spy. And, curiously, the two fears seemed to cancel each other out.

The ship which had brought her would stay in the vicinity. She didn't know where—she hadn't been told, in case she should be discovered and interrogated. Peter and Barbara were aboard it, and every three days Peter would drop in the helicopter to the same spot to see if she was ready to go back yet or had anything to report.

The ship wouldn't be discovered. A single ship could seldom be detected in space, unless it was moving fast. Almost all the devices for detecting the presence of other spaceships were based on the increase of mass with velocity. The faster a ship went, the more chance it had of getting through a waiting fleet—and the more certain it was to be detected. The slower it went, the safer it was from detection of that kind; but if it should be spotted by eyes or radar it was a dead duck, with no acceleration built up.

No, Muriel's line of escape was safe enough; all the danger was on Murrane itself.

It was the beginning of the long night of Murrane, and she had been landed between Felter and Ederton. The answers she wanted were probably all to be found in Rillan, a hundred and fifty miles to the south, but she hadn't dared go there at once. For all she knew, perhaps everyone in Rillan would recognize her.

As she walked, she pondered about how familiar this world

was to her. She had had the normal training of any Terran who was sent to Murrane as a spy, yet she hadn't been thinking of that when she was careful not to touch the low branches of the Murriner pines. No, there was no doubt that she was familiar with Murrane. It had been obvious during her training by Security.

She didn't think anything had been said about Murriner pines at night in the training she had had from Security. Murrane had once been warmer; many of its plants spent their lives grasping for heat, from any source. Any animal or man who blundered into a pine, particularly, was liable to be clutched and held, if he wasn't strong and nimble, and drained of his body heat. He might be alive at morning, if he had enough vitality; but probably not. Certainly not if the morning was thirty-eight hours away.

She walked on through the hard snow, adjusting herself to the environment. Murrane's three moons, all of them risen at the moment, gave about the same illumination as a full moon on Earth.

She wore a black snowsuit, plain but neatly cut. It covered everything but her face, hands and feet. On her feet were fur-lined boots; long gloves covered her hands and the sleeves of her suit. Under the snowsuit she wore a similar but finer white coverall, and under that a thin sweater and pantaloons. All this would come off when she went inside. Below this was the indoor dress, creaseless slacks and a sweater. Any sins of the flesh committed on Murrane weren't caused by seeing too much of it.

She stopped as a call sounded behind her. She wasn't frightened; she was rather glad that her first meeting with a Murriner should be like this, alone, in the open, at night. Women on Murrane had nothing to fear from such encounters—the penalties for all kinds of sex crimes were too severe.

She couldn't see any more of the man who came up to her than he could of her—a few square inches of face above a bulky figure.

"Oh—a girl!" he exclaimed in some surprise. "You're late on this road, aren't you?"

Already there were slight physical changes; soon there would be a distinctive Murriner accent, then a dialect. There was no radio communication between Earth and Murrane, of

course, nor would there ever be. That meant that any change in pronunciation would be a divergence.

"Yes, I'm later than I meant to be," said Muriel, in the same accent. "I thought I'd make Felter an hour ago."

They walked on together.

"Looking for a job?" asked the Murriner.

Terran Intelligence, poor as it was, could at least be trusted to give its operatives a sound identity and purpose.

"Yes," said Muriel, "they need chemists at the factory."

"Where are you from?"

"Rillan," she told him.

"Why leave Rillan for a little place like this?"

"Rillan's gone all psychiatric and biological. This looks as if it's going to be the place for chemists."

"You're smart," said the Murriner, after considering that. "What's your name?"

Muriel gave him her third identity—Thelma Bittner.

"Glad to meet you. I'm Bill Seuter. Say, I used to work in Rillan. They still got that old ship in the square?"

Muriel turned her head to stare at him. "Ship? Square?"

"Sure, the museum piece. Used to pass it every day."

She hadn't remembered much about Rillan, but a few vague pictures came up as he spoke. More than enough for her to say: "Not in Rillan you didn't. No offense—you think I'm a Terran spy, perhaps?"

Seuter laughed. "We check on anyone who arrives in a place. That's enough. We don't make many mistakes."

"We?"

"I'm in counter-espionage."

"Oh. You check on people even before they get to Felter?"

"Sometimes. I don't follow any fixed routine," said Seuter complacently, "but I don't miss much. You're all right. When we get where it's warmer, remind me and I'll give you a CE pass for Felter."

Security didn't know anything about CE passes.

"Thanks," said Muriel. "But, say . . . how could you tell I'm all right? Just because I know there's no ship in the square at Rillan?"

"Nope," said Seuter, still complacent. "Fact is, Earth and Murrane are growing apart every minute. I don't need to

run lab tests on you, even if I knew how. Talking for five minutes is enough."

He would be right, too, Muriel thought—except with someone like her who had actually lived on Murrane.

"Find many?" she asked.

"Three a month. I spend a lot of time on roads outside towns and pick up people like you."

They had reached the town. No snow lay there; Murrane had only electric power, but there was any amount of that. It was because there was only electric power that people had to do so much walking between towns. Electric power wasn't much good for the heavy vehicles that would be needed to force their way through the drifts and ice, and instead, an electric railway system was being gradually extended. Muriel hadn't had to explain that she had gone by train from Rillan to Ederton and walked on to Felter—that would be taken for granted.

Seuter gave her a pass, saluted her with a wave of his hand and went back to patrol the roadway. Muriel looked after him thoughtfully. Because of him, three Terrans would be identified and shot in the next month or so. But he was only doing his job, and doing it well. She liked him. Sometimes one met someone for only a few minutes, said only a few words and then parted, but felt as if one had made a friend. It was like that with Seuter.

She hoped desperately that she would find what she was looking for, and that it would end this senseless war. Surely if it could only be stopped soon Earth would have the sense never to make the same mistakes again, whatever they were, and Murrane would know better than to fight a war for freedom that had never really been denied.

Suddenly she realized that she hadn't been afraid since she set foot on Murrane.

XI.

SHE got the job. On Murrane, so far, there was no system of qualifications and references. They tried you in a job, and if you did it well, you were in.

In the first few days she saw how easy it was for anyone

who knew Murrane well to pass as a Murriner, and how utterly impossible it was for anyone who didn't.

The physical differences were nothing—absolutely nothing. What mattered was whether you were a Murriner or not. Earth was flooding Murrane with operatives who weren't, and they stood out like sore thumbs. Muriel saw one of them. She couldn't do anything about him. He was obviously being left alone for the moment, carefully watched, no doubt, to see what he would do.

How could Security hope to train agents? What they needed wasn't the right knowledge, but the right attitude. That couldn't be learned in New York.

She met Seuter again a few days later at the factory. He was there checking on the other new chemists.

"Say!" he said when he saw her. "If I'd seen more of you that night I'd have stayed with you longer."

"I thought so too," she admitted frankly. "I'm not usually dropped as quickly as that."

"Why aren't you married?" he asked bluntly.

"Because I'm a chemist. There's no romance in chemistry."

"There's one chemist I could go for."

She held up her hand in protest. "No," she said, "not a CE man. Someone will shoot you some day. I'm not going to marry anyone who's going to be shot."

But that raised another problem. In frontier country there are always more men than women. The women on Murrane were very quickly married. At twenty-five, on Murrane, a healthy, pretty girl who was unmarried was an enigma to everyone. Muriel would have to do her job in a hurry, before anyone became puzzled enough to be suspicious.

Every three days, she knew, Peter was landing his little shell of a helicopter in the same spot to take her away if she was ready.

Ready! She hadn't even started.

Working on the basis that the secret she was looking for was psychiatric or anthropological, she studied the Murriners around her not individually but in the mass. Nothing suggested itself. They were different from Terrans, of course, but such differences as she saw were known or guessed on Earth.

They were aggressive-defensive, as Peter had once said.

They boasted of how much better they were than Terrans, and secretly believed the opposite. They were reckless, brave, with a fine disregard for male life. Women weren't allowed to be brave, however. They were too valuable for the young Murriners they could produce. Murriners in general were less intelligent than Terrans, more ready to take chances, more quarrelsome, more immature, more generous, more vital.

But all that was known. What was it that wasn't known?

She saw nothing of anyone who was actually engaged in fighting—no space-navymen, no ammunition dumps, no military depots, or, in fact, anything whatever that was connected with the war. She was very careful not to. That was bound to be a dangerous line of investigation. The regular Terran agents would be working on that problem, and succeeding moderately or failing completely, as usual.

She was pretty certain, moreover, that what she wanted wasn't to be found under the heading of normal military information.

Only when others introduced the subject did she even talk about the war. The usual attitude was about what she expected. Her fellow-workers had no very clear idea of what was going on, or why it was going on; but they were naturally, temperamentally in favor of a war against Earth. To most of them, the issue was plain—Murrane was teaching Earth a lesson. Earth was being shown that you couldn't push Murriners around. They knew, most of them, that there was more to it than that. But that was policy—none of their business.

After two weeks of merely being an ordinary Murriner chemist, Muriel decided that she would have to risk visiting Rillan. Dr. Hyneker was probably right. The secret would be there. It certainly didn't appear to be in Felter. She had seen nothing that seemed worthwhile even trying to follow up.

She told Seuter she was going back to pick up some things.

"Made up your mind to stay, baby?" he said. "Fine. I'm still hoping to change your mind about CE men."

"You might at that," said Muriel encouragingly. "I haven't known many. And maybe it'll be a long time before someone shoots you."

MURIEL was quite well aware that it was dangerous. Rather than scratch cautiously along the edges of the affair, however, she marched straight up to 17 Third Street, rang the bell and asked the woman who came to the door if Dr. James Ball lived there.

"Not now," said the woman, apparently unsuspecting. "I don't know where he went."

"Can you tell me anyone who might?"

The woman considered. "There's Joe Cruickshank at number 14," she said. "He used to be a friend of the doctor."

Muriel thanked her and crossed the street to number 14.

Joe Cruickshank was an oldish man with very heavy black brows. When Muriel mentioned Dr. Ball he drew them together in a dark frown, almost hiding his eyes.

"You a friend of his?" he demanded. "Or maybe a friend of his daughter?"

Despite the signs, Muriel thought the best answer was, "Yes."

"You want to know what happened to him?"

"And Lorna."

He hesitated; then said abruptly, "Come in," and turned away without waiting to see if she was following him.

There was nothing luxurious about the sitting-room into which he led her, but in a simple way it was very comfortable. An electric fire was set into one wall; otherwise it was like a sitting-room in a country cottage on Earth *circa* 1880. Cruickshank sat heavily on a rocking-chair and motioned Muriel to an armchair on the other side of the fire.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Muriel didn't want to give any of her three names. It was still not proven that she was Lorna Ball, and in any case she clearly couldn't give that name. If the theory she was working on was correct, she had been named Muriel Martin on Murrane, probably in Rillan, and that was equally undesirable as a name to give. And though Thelma Bittner had gone back to Rillan quite openly, she didn't want Thelma

Bittner to be known as having shown interest in James and Lorna Ball.

So she gave a fourth name, and a few brief details to satisfy Cruickshank. She had plenty of information that she could use to prove she had known Lorna well.

"And you don't know anything about what happened to them?" asked Cruickshank.

"No. Nothing."

"Neither does anyone else," said Cruickshank bitterly, apparently deciding to trust her. "I think they're both dead."

"Dead! Why?"

"When the war started, Jim wouldn't join CE. He wouldn't have anything to do with it, or the war. Well, you know what Jim Ball has done for Murrane. CE might want to shoot him or lock him up, but most of us here in Rillan had other ideas. CE didn't dare touch him. He went on working as usual, though both he and Lorna had to report to CE every second day. They weren't allowed to write or receive letters."

"*That's* why I never got any reply!" said Muriel adroitly.

"Jim told me one day he knew the real reason for the war—"

"Did he tell you what it was?"

"If he had, I wouldn't be here now. CE shot me full of drugs later, and only let me go when they were sure I didn't know anything. Anyway, the day after Jim told me that, he disappeared. So did Lorna."

He breathed hard. "Some of us got together. CE may be spying on us and telling us what to do, but CE isn't Murrane. We weren't afraid of CE. We went along to the office, a whole crowd of us, ready to tear the place apart. But they fobbed us off with some story—told us the doctor and Lorna would be back in two weeks. So we went away."

Cruickshank wasn't looking at her, but into the orange glow of the fire. "They came for me that night and made sure I didn't know anything. They were polite enough, and I didn't make an issue of it.

"Two weeks later we went back and they told us Jim and his daughter had been deported to Earth. We didn't believe them. We went all through the office, but there was no sign of either of them."

Cruickshank's voice rose. "They'd been shot, that's why! CE knew it couldn't keep them prisoner—we'd have had them out in no time. Jim Ball was never against Murrane. Everyone knew that. Whatever CE had against them, or thought it had, it couldn't bring them to trial. It couldn't keep them. The only thing it could do was kill them and hide their bodies so that no one would ever find them. Well, whoever harmed Jim Ball or his daughter was no true Murriner, and I don't care who hears me say so! They were good friends to all of us!"

He glared at Muriel as if she were CE itself.

"Maybe CE told the truth," said Muriel. "Maybe they were deported."

"Would CE give Earth a man like Jim Ball, for free?" said Cruickshank derisively. "No, CE wouldn't do that. CE shot them!"

There seemed to be very little more Cruickshank could tell her. Unless . . .

"How did Dr. Ball look when he told you he knew the real reason for the war?" she asked. "Happy? Sad? Disillusioned? Amused?"

"None of those. Just . . . surprised. Sort of 'Who'd have thought it?'"

That was something, she thought. She was practically certain now that she was Lorna Ball.

She got one thing more from Joe Cruickshank—a name and address. It was her only lead now.

If Cruickshank couldn't tell her any more, clearly the thing to do was to go to someone who could—whether he would or not. She didn't want the local CE Chief or second-in-command. They would be too important, too well-guarded perhaps. They might also be too clever or too fanatic. So she had asked for the name of the man who rated about third. He must know the secret, and there was a better chance that he would be easy to get to.

The man was Edward Voigt, 27 Seventh Street.

She advised Cruickshank, as she left, to forget that he had ever seen her; but he wasn't curious. He was sunk in his anger at what he believed had happened to Jim and Lorna Ball.

VOIGT seemed to have been a good choice. His home was no bigger than Cruickshank's, and Muriel was inside it, standing in the doorway of the kitchen, waiting. She had had to break a catch on a bedroom window, but it was already dark and she was sure no one had seen her.

She had planned carefully; no further planning would help much. Peter would land outside Felter that night—she had to catch the train in two hours' time if she didn't mean to wait three days more. She wasn't optimistic enough to expect to have the information she wanted when the ship picked her up, but she meant to take this chance of getting it—and if she failed she'd have to leave Murrane anyway.

Surely Voigt must come soon. He lived alone, apparently. Muriel had her gun in her hand, silenced. She stood in the dark, alert for the first sound of anyone entering.

At first she had been afraid he would come home too soon, for she couldn't leave Rillan until the train went, and it would be dangerous to wait anywhere. But as the time slowly passed, she began to fear that he wouldn't come home at all, or would be too late for her to do what she wanted to do and still catch the train.

She had wound her scarf round her face. Very likely Voigt had seen her before. He would know when he saw her that she was Muriel Martin, who had been Lorna Ball. And he would know many more things which Muriel herself didn't know. She probed her mind for anything she knew of Voigt, but there was nothing. There was still that curious division. Many things in Rillan were quite familiar to her, but she remembered nothing that had ever happened there. She must have known Joe Cruickshank once, but he was as much a stranger to her as she was to him.

At last, a key scraped in the lock. Muriel tensed. The next few minutes would not only mean success or failure, but perhaps, quite independent of that, life or death. She wasn't sorry she had chosen this way, however. At last she was going to be face to face with someone who had the information she wanted.

There was a step in the vestibule, then the light clicked on. Muriel stepped in from the kitchen as Voigt closed the other door, and he saw her at once.

"If you make a sound," said Muriel softly, "I'll shoot to kill."

Voigt gasped. Muriel had expected he would be a young man, ambitious, a future local CE Chief. But he was old, and had probably climbed as high in the organization as he would ever go. She rejoiced; that was better still.

"Do you want to live, Voigt?" she asked. "I want information. If you give it, no one need know I got it from you. If you don't, I kill you and get it from someone else."

"You're a Terran!" Voigt exclaimed.

She pulled aside her scarf.

"Do you know now why I'm here?" she asked quietly.

He went white. "Muriel Martin," he breathed, but she caught the note of interrogation he couldn't keep out of it.

"Lorna Ball," she said evenly.

"But you can't know! They told us—"

"As you see, I do know." She was trying to say as little as possible that might reveal the limitations of her knowledge. "Now, Voigt, do I get what I want, or do I shoot?"

Suddenly he stiffened. "Yes, get it over with. You'd never let me live."

That was unfortunate. She apparently had good reasons for killing him. Voigt knew them, and she didn't. "For what I once knew, I may," she said. "What was it that was so important you had to kill my father?"

"I didn't! You're only guessing."

"Keep your voice down," she murmured. From the frantic way he talked, how he had looked when he recognized her, and the way he had said "You'd never let me live," she was almost certain that her father was dead, and that Voigt was the man who had actually killed him. It was a piece of bad luck if Voigt was the killer. Having no recollection of her father she felt no urge to revenge, but Voigt would never believe that. Her threat was weakened because he believed he must die anyway.

"Listen," she said. "I give you my word that if you tell me, I'll tie you up and leave you unhurt. What did my father find out?"

He was frightened, and she was playing on that. A brave man would have laughed at her, and she would have been helpless.

"I don't know," Voigt said desperately. "I didn't understand it. It was too complicated."

Muriel shook her head. "Complicated things aren't that important. This is simple. You can tell me in one sentence."

She saw that he could. He was easy to read. She forced herself to be patient. She ought to be able to get what she wanted from a man as scared of death as Voigt was.

"I don't like the idea of torture," she said, "but maybe it's the only thing you understand. If I shot you two or three times in the stomach, you'd probably want me to finish you off. Would you rather be begging for life or begging for death?"

He clutched the back of a chair to hold himself up. "We let you go," he said piteously.

"You can hardly expect me to be grateful. Well, what's it to be?"

"It's mutation," he said, his nerve gone. The words came out cracked, almost unrecognizable. "Once we've mutated, we can't mutate again. We can only go back to Earth. We're prisoners here, we can't expand, we can't—"

By a strange quirk of emotion, he recovered his courage the instant it was too late. He flung himself at Muriel, his mouth opening to shout. She shot him in the shoulder, thinking it would stop him. Instead, it made him wild. He thought he was dying, apparently, and rushed forward to take Muriel with him. Muriel shot for his legs, but he was pitching forward to dive at her knees and took the little bullet full in the top of his head. He crumpled like an old suit.

Curiously, Muriel was appalled. It didn't seem to matter that he had killed her father and would have killed her if he'd reached her. She had talked grimly of shooting him in the stomach, yet she was horrified at the thought that she had killed him. She bent for a moment beside him in the futile hope that a man with a bullet through his brain could be merely stunned, not dead.

But then what he had said drove other considerations from her mind for the moment.

There must have been a weakness, after all, in the job CE

had done on her. For she knew at once that what Voigt had said was true—and her mind leaped the gap of forgetfulness to wide, far-sighted conclusions that it must have reached once before.

She needed no more. She understood. She had no proof, but she knew she could get it.

There was a limit to the powers of adaptation of those intensely adaptable creatures, human beings. They would go to a new world and make it their home, and in doing so they would change to meet the new conditions—a little or a lot, it didn't matter. They would always have to do that, for no world would ever be quite the same as Earth. And having changed, they lost some of the power to change again. They could go back—Earth itself would always be a refuge to them, a refuge from which, eventually, they could go out anew to other worlds, their power of adaptation restored.

But Murrane was the Murriners' prison. Cut off from Earth, they could never live freely, naturally, on any world but their own. And the Murriners, almost exclusively, were restless, unsatisfied, hot-blooded pioneers.

The very thought of encirclement restriction would be enough to make any Murriner fight his shadow, let alone the world that held the key to freedom.

It was as simple as that.

Her preoccupation with the fact that she had killed a man was almost her undoing at the station. She didn't even notice the CE man staring at her closely until he spoke to her.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

She brought her attention back with a jerk. It would be tragic to be discovered now.

"Ederton—for Felter," she said, and fumbled in her pocket. She gave him Seuter's pass.

"What have you been doing here?"

"I've been visiting a relative."

"Who?"

She couldn't give Joe Cruickshank's name. In a few hours, they would find out the whole story and shoot him as a traitor.

"Ed Voigt," she said boldly.

"Oh." His face relaxed. But he put one more question to make sure. "What kind of clock has he on the mantel?"

Muriel laughed. "There isn't a mantel. There's an alarm

clock on a little table. The floorcloth's green and white squares." And Voigt's lying on it, she thought. "The curtains are dark green and in one corner—"

"All right," said the CE man. "There's your train."

From the moment the train reached Ederton onwards, Muriel was really terrified, for the first time since she had landed on Murrane. Now that she was so near leaving the planet, all the anxiety and nervousness and fear she might have felt before, but hadn't, seemed to pile up in one tidal wave of terror. She was alternately cold and hot. Her legs seemed about to give way and pitch her forward in the snow. She saw no one on the road, but she was sure that if she looked behind she would see a mob at her heels.

When she reached the arranged spot and waited, she forgot all about the Murriner pines, and was pulled against the trunk of one before she even noticed the questing branch.

Other branches swung slowly towards her to trap her inextricably, and already she felt the chill of the trunk against her back. She fought wildly with the branches that closed tightly across her body, crushing her ribs. The only way out was under—she got both arms against a branch and forced herself down, straining to tear her snowsuit because it was firmly caught. Very slowly it gave, and branches rasped over her chest.

She slid to the ground, her arms still trapped above her head, and tried to dig her heels into the ground to drag herself clear. The snow gave no purchase.

She relaxed completely, and after a few long seconds the branches above her slackened very slightly. She waited, gathering her strength, then suddenly threw herself away from the tree with a heave of shoulders and legs. Her hands came free.

Muriel got to her feet and stood gulping for air, laughing weakly when she found that instead of having two or three ribs broken, as had seemed likely, she wasn't even scratched. Her heavy clothing had taken the brunt of the damage.

But she hoped Peter would hurry up, for she was wet through and the freezing air was getting inside her torn clothes. The numbness in her side wasn't a wound—it was the cold air of Murrane sucking warmth from her skin.

As a dark shape dropped from the slightly less dark sky, she fell on the snow in a faint.

XIV.

MURIEL awoke in bed aboard the ship, warm, dry and comfortable—and obviously safe. She remembered dimly saying, "Peter, I killed a man!" and Peter's cheerful, unexpected reply, "Good for you."

He was sitting on the bed now.

"You didn't put me to bed, did you?" she gasped.

He grinned and nodded across her. Muriel turned and saw Barbara, sitting and watching her.

"Hallo, Barbara," she said. "I *am* your sister."

"I know it."

"Dr. Ball"—it didn't seem natural to call him anything else—"Dr. Ball is dead."

Barbara nodded. "I guess I knew that too."

"I killed the man who did it, if that's any comfort. I didn't mean to do it."

There was a silence, and she knew they were waiting to hear whether she had succeeded or failed.

"Yes, I got what I was looking for," she said. She told them.

Peter, she saw, found it very difficult to understand. He couldn't quite see the process, or what it meant, or how it could be so important. Most particularly he couldn't see why this, known only to Murrane's CE organization, should make them goad their people on to fight Earth.

"Surely the effect would be just the opposite," he said. "Wouldn't they try to straighten out the differences with Earth that already existed, so that they could—"

Muriel had been watching Barbara. "You understand, Barbara, don't you?" she said.

"I think so," Barbara said slowly. "It's like this, Peter. Think of a man and woman crossing a tropical desert back on Earth. The man's stronger—he carries the water and supplies. And after long, scorching days of travel, the woman thinks, Suppose he goes on and leaves me while I'm asleep? She knows she'll die of thirst. She doesn't dare ask to carry

some of the water, for the man may refuse. She may put the idea of leaving her into his mind. So after days of this, out of fear, she takes the water from the man while he's asleep and goes on alone. Perhaps she kills him too, to make sure. Do you see?"

Muriel nodded. "That's it. CE is naturally suspicious, Peter—like some of Earth's Security Officers. It finds that Murrane is dependent on Earth. Murriners can't colonize for themselves, can't do anything but stay in their own hard, cold world, except with Earth's gracious permission—and colonists are the most independent human beings in the Galaxy. They won't ask for anything they think they might be able to take. So CE, knowing this, sets the Murriners, who are always ready for a fight, at Earth. Make Earth ask for terms, and demand a slice of Earth itself, where Murriners can—"

"Yes, I see that," said Peter, becoming excited. "But this means—"

"The end of the war, anyway. CE always knew that. I expect they guarded this secret in the hope that they'd get what they wanted before we found out what it was. And beyond that—"

Peter jumped up. "I'll get us to Security HQ on the double!"

He was gone.

Muriel smiled wryly, and Barbara, seeing her smile, grinned too. "I'm afraid he's forgotten about you, Lorna," she said teasingly. "He's become a Security man again."

"Don't call me Lorna," said Muriel. "I stopped being Lorna when they took away my memories."

"Couldn't you ever get them back?"

"No. You could tell me what happened, and I'd believe you. But I'd only be remembering what you told me, not what happened. I'm used to being Muriel Martin now—I'd rather stay that way."

Presently Barbara murmured. "Science is often like that—expecting something until something else proves to be true. Isn't evolution supposed to *increase* range of adaptability, not diminish it?"

"True—yet we can't extract enough oxygen from water with the lungs we have now, which our ancestors may have

done once. No, that's not the important thing about this, Barbara. Can't you see it?

"Nature often seems to have thought of situations that happen to us, long before they happen. When we're fighting and killing each other, more children are always born than at any other time. And nature even seems to have allowed for nuclear weapons. People exposed to hard radiation just don't have children, if they would be monsters. If children are born, they're all right. If we find out from the genes that they wouldn't be all right, we don't have to sterilize anybody, for they're sterilized already. Hard on the individual, sometimes, but excellent for the race.

"Now look at this. Human beings stretching out to the stars and adapting, necessarily, to survive in different conditions. No difficulty in that. They adapt easily and logically.

"But now it seems that the human race will always be tied to the world that produced them. Isn't that wise, too? There will be many worlds, many different peoples, some a lot more different from us than the Murriners. But it's still a unit, not a lot of units. The different peoples are all bound, not to each other, but to Earth. It's like the spokes of a wheel. No matter what quarrels there will be—and there will still be quarrels—nature keeps mankind in one unit."

She looked around for a wrap. "I'm all right. I want to get up."

People were rarely kept in bed to rest now, when they wanted to be active. The patient was at last accepted as the best authority on what was good for him—or her. Barbara produced a pink lace negligee.

"That will do nicely," she said, "if your Security man manages to get over one kind of excitement and comes looking for another."

Laughing, Muriel protested.

Barbara grinned at her. "You needn't be so restrained," she said. "I've talked with him often enough to know you're in no danger of losing his respect. For a Security Officer, he's all right. Nail him, Muriel."

"I still want a nice respectable dressing-gown."

Barbara sighed and produced one. Muriel got out of bed, steady enough despite a slight heaviness of head and a burning sensation where the pine branches had scraped her ribs.

She put on the wrap, and when she turned Barbara was gone.

Suppose, she thought, amused, that after all this I shouldn't want Peter? People were taking it pretty much for granted. But she certainly didn't mean to marry anyone until she felt a little more stable in her environment again, bolstered up by memories and friends and security. Not even Peter.

There was a knock on the door.

"Wait," she called peremptorily.

"I'm sorry, Muriel," came Peter's voice. "I know I forgot all about you for a moment."

Too many people rushed into marriage. If Peter did ask her, she would think it out very carefully, as a scientist should, taking her time. She would weigh all the advantages and disadvantages, and she would make very sure that she and Peter were right for each other before she would . . .

"You must admit," said Peter, "that I only neglected you for something pretty big. You told me so yourself."

She picked up the lace wrap to throw it out of sight. It wasn't that she thought there was anything wrong with it, she admitted to herself. She just didn't have the nerve to wear a thing like that.

"Please," said Peter.

She threw off her dressing-gown and slipped into the pink wrap. It settled on her like a cloud of perfumed mist.

"Come in, Peter," she said.

GRANNY WON'T KNIT

I.

FOR ROAN, there was a flicker of blackness, almost too brief to notice, and he had arrived at his destination. He stepped down from the transplat and took three preoccupied steps before he realized, shockingly, that he had not materialized in the offices of J. & D. Walsh at all, but in a small plat-court hung with heavy and barbarous drapes. There was a fresh and disturbing odor in the air which was too warm.

He cast about him worriedly, hunting for the dialpost that would send him to his father's office. It was not where it should be, at the corner of the court. Petals! He was late and lateness meant trouble.

"Well-I-I?" drawled a half singing, half whispering voice.

Roan spun, hitting the side of his foot painfully on the corner of the transplat. It made him hop. He had never felt so excruciatingly foolish in his entire thirty years.

"I'm sorry," he spluttered. "I must have dialed the wrong number." He located the source of the voice—a door across from him was open at its top panel and, in the small space, was framed a face . . .

The face!

If you dream about faces, you dream about them *after* you meet them, not before! The thought blazed at him, made him blink, and he blinked again at the cloud of golden hair and the laughing green eyes.

". . . the wrong, you see," he concluded lamely, "number."

"Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't," she said, in tones which could have been scored on a musical staff. Her hand appeared, to press back the side of the golden cloud.

A bare hand.

Tingling with shock at such wanton exposure, he looked away quickly. "I'll have to—uh—may I use your transplat?"

"It's better than walking," she said and smiled. "It's over there." A long bare arm appeared, carrying a pointing finger. The arm was retracted and there was a small fumbling at the door-latch. "I'll show you."

"No!" How could this creature forget that—that she wasn't decently covered? "I'll find it." He floundered against the drapes, fumbled along them, at last threw one away from the dial pedestal. With his back firmly toward her, he said, "I have no tokens with me."

"Do you *have* to go?"

"Yes!"

She laughed. "Well, either way, be my guest."

"Thanks," he managed. "I'll—uh—send—" he began to dial busily and carefully, to avoid another wrong number—"send it to—when I—as soon as—good of you—three *five*."

Averting his eyes, he stood on the transplat. She was still inside her cubicle, thank the powers. Then he remembered that he hadn't the slightest idea of the number he had mistakenly dialed; although it had stared him in the face on her dialpost, he had been too distraught to read it.

"Oh, I didn't get your number!" he said hoarsely, but the familiar flicker of total blackness had come and gone, and he was standing on the transplat inside the office of J. & D. Walsh, waving his hand stupidly at Corsonmay, the oldish receptionist with the youngish hair.

"My number?" Corsonmay echoed. Appallingly, she giggled. "Why, Roan *Walsh*, I never!" Under the privacy hood, her hands flickered. As he passed her desk, she pressed upon him a slip of paper. "It's really a very easy one to remember," she simpered.

He wordlessly stepped to his door. It slid back. He entered and, while it was closing behind him, hurled the paper violently at the disposal slot. "*Blossom!*" he cursed and slumped into his chair.

"Roan, step in here a moment!" snarled the grille above him.

"Yes, Private!" Roan gasped out.

He sat for a moment, drawing deep breaths as if the extra oxygen would somehow give him the right words to say.

Then he rose and approached a side panel, which slid open for him. His father sat glowering at him. His father was dressed exactly as he was, exactly as Hallmay and Corsonmay and Walshmam and everyone else in the world was, except—but don't think about *her* now, whatever happens!

Private Walsh swung his glower, beard and all, across Roan, then slipped his gloved hands under the privacy hood and studied them thoughtfully. Though Roan could not see them, he knew they were held with the fingers decently together, as unlike living things as possible.

"I am not pleased," said Private Walsh.

What now? Roan wondered hopelessly.

"There is more to a business than making profits," said the bearded man. "There is more to this business than moving goods. It is not a large business, but an arch's key is not necessarily a large stone. The transportation platform—" he droned, using the device's formal name as if the service wore a mitred hat—"is the keystone of our entire culture, and this firm is the keystone of the transplat industry. Our responsibilities are great. *Your* responsibilities are great. A position such as yours requires certain intangibles over and above your ability to make out manifests. Integrity, boy, reliability—respect for privacy. And, above all, personal honor and decency."

Roan, having heard this many times before, wrenched his features into an expression of penitence.

"One of the first indications of a gentleman—and to be a good businessman, one must be a good man, and the best of good men is a gentleman—one of the first ways of detecting the presence of a gentleman in our midst, I say, is to ask oneself this question: 'Is he punctual?'" Walsh leaned so far forward that his beard audibly brushed the privacy hood. The sound made Roan's flesh creep. "You were late this morning!"

Roan had a hysterical impulse to blurt, "Well, you see, I stopped off at a girl's place on the way and had a chat with her while she waved her bare arm . . ." But even hysteria yielded to his conditioning. And then his mind began to work again.

"Private," he said sorrowfully, "I *was* late. I can explain—" he heard the intake of breath and raised his voice slightly—

"but I cannot excuse and will not try." The breath slid out again. Roan stepped backward one step. "With your permission, then, Byepry."

"Bye nothing. What is this explanation?"

This had better be good, Roan told himself. He put his hand behind him. He knew this, with face downcast, added to his penitent appearance.

"I awoke this morning caught up with a great idea," he said. "I have found an *economy*."

"If you have," rumbled the beard, "it's been hiding from me."

"Each load of freight we transplat carries a man with it. This man does nothing but hold the manifest in his hand and look up the receiver's clerk at the arrival point. My plan is to eliminate that man."

"You awoke with this in mind?"

"Yes, Private," Roan lied, still marveling at his mental resourcefulness.

"And thinking about it delayed you?"

"Yes, Private."

"Since you were apparently fated to be late in any case," the old man said acidly, "you'd have done better to stay asleep. You would have wasted less of your time—and mine."

Roan knew enough to keep his mouth shut.

"In the history of matter transmission," said his father, "nine shipments have gone astray. The consequences are appalling. I shall assign you to read the history of these nine cases and memorize the figures. In one such case—the arrival of one hundred and twelve cubic meters of pig-iron in a private house measuring eighty-four meters—the results were spectacularly expensive."

"But that can't happen now!"

"No, it can't," admitted Private Walsh. "Not since the capacity-lock, which prevents the shipment of any volume to a smaller one. But there is still room for some gruesome possibilities, as in the Fathers of Leander case, when two hundred female assembly workers were sent, in error, into the monastery of this silent order. The damages—first degree violation of privacy, you know—were quadrupled for the particular aggravation and multiplied by the number of

Fathers and novitiates. Eight hundred and fourteen, if I remember correctly, and I do.

"Now, the employment of a properly trained operator would have reduced the presence of these females in that building to a matter of tenths of a second and the damages accordingly. The shipment would have been returned to its source almost before it had arrived. As long as such things can occur, the wages paid these operators are cheap insurance indeed." He paused ironically. "Is there anything else you want to suggest?"

"If you please, Private," Roan said formally, "I am acquainted with these matters. My suggestion was this—that phone contact be made with the receiving party when the shipment is ready—that our bonded transplat operator dial seven of the eight digits necessary—and that the final impulse be activated at the receiving point by audio or video, or even by a separate beamed radio, which we could supply to our regular customers or deliver by messenger a few minutes before the main shipment."

It got very quiet in the office. "You see," said Roan, pressing his advantage, "if the final shipping orders come from the receiver himself, it is difficult to imagine how anyone else could possibly receive the load."

This silence was longer, and was ended by a sound from the beard precisely as if the old man had bitten into an olive pit. "You mentioned a messenger for the impulse-device. Where's your saving?"

"Most of our trade is with regular customers. Each of these could be given his own machine."

Silence.

Roan all but whispered, "An exclusive service of J. & D. Walsh."

"Well!" said Private Walsh. It was the most unreadable syllable Roan had ever heard. "This is not a suggestion, nor the consequence of anything specific which may or may not have happened; it is purely a request for a private opinion. Which strikes you as more—shall we say euphonious—J. & D. Walsh & Son, or J., D. & R. Walsh?"

Roan felt one of his fingernails bite through his glove as he clasped his hands behind him. He hoped his voice would not shake when he answered. "I could not presume

to express an opinion on such a matter to one as familiar with . . ." and, beyond that, his voice would not go.

He flashed a glance at his father, and almost extraneously it occurred to him that if the old man ever smiled, he might not be able to see it at all through the beard. Chalk yet one more advantage up to the enviable state of being head of a family.

He thought for a moment that his father was about to say something pleasant, but the impossibility remained impossible, and the old man merely nodded at the door. "You're expected at my Mam's this evening," he said curtly. "Be prompt there, at least."

It stung, and the old man followed it up. "Lying abed immersed in company problems, even if they are of doubtful value, speaks well of an employee's devotion to his work. Unpunctuality speaks badly of it. A Private—" he squared his shoulders—"can be on time *and* be inspired."

Roan lowered his chin another notch and shuffled backward to the panel. It opened. He went through. When the panel clicked home, Roan leaped straight up in the air, his whole being filled with a silent shout. *The partnership! He's going to shake loose that gorgeous, beautiful, blossomy old partnership!* His gloved hands pounded silently and gleefully together. *Oh, Roan, you dog you, how do you do it? What makes that fuzzy head of yours tick when you get in a jam? Oh, you're a—*

He stopped, his mouth slack and his eyes abulge. There on his desk, in precisely the same pose, sat the golden-haired vision he had seen during the night and whose number he had dialed by error in the morning.

She was dressed—if one could call it dressed—in a long garment which fell from her throat and cascaded softly around her, rolling and folding and completely unlike the wrinkle-free, metrical cone-thrust-in-a-cone of conventional garb. Her arms were entirely bare and so, incredibly, were the feet which peeped out from under the flowing hem. She sat with both hands crossed on one knee and regarded him gravely. She smiled and was for a second transparent—and then she vanished.

Roan saw people and huge cargoes vanish every day—but

not sixty meters from the nearest transplat! And not people indecently clad in outlandish fabrics which fell close to the body instead of standing properly away from it!

There was a heat in his face, and he became aware that he had not breathed in—how long? There was a straining ache about him and he realized that, at some point in this extraordinary experience, he had slumped to his knees on the carpet.

He got shakily to his feet and let himself be preoccupied with the reflex of adjusting his pantalets. They were neat and glossy and perfectly cylindrical, and not at all like the delicate pink taper of her—her limb. She'd had toes, too. Had it ever occurred to him before to wonder if women had toes? Surely not! Yet they had. *She had.*

Then reaction struck him and he staggered to his desk.

His first lucid thought was to wonder what this vision would look like properly clad and he found that he could not possibly imagine it. He found, further, that he did not want to imagine it, and he descended into a scalding shame at the discovery. Oh, cried every ounce of upbringing within him, the Private was right in withholding the partnership for so long; he'd be so wrong in trusting me with it! What am I, he sobbed silently, what horrible thing am I?

II.

Private Whelan Quinn
Quinn and Glass,
Level 4,
Matrix 124-10-9783.

Honored Private:

In reference to yours of the seventeenth instant, we regret to inform you that the supply of chromium-plated ventilator girls is, at the moment, insufficient to complete the minimum mass for transplat shipment to you, which must total two toes. However, knowing that you use prefab paneling in considerable amounts, we are prepared to make up the weight in standard sheets if

this is marriageable to you. We have the material in white, gold, dream and ivory. Please inform the undersigned as soon as possible if a doctor would be any help.

Yours in Privacy,

Roan stared dully at the words which glowed on the voice-writer screen, his hand hovering over the SEND button of his telefax. He was wondering mistily whether that line about radiator grilles was quite right when the annunciator hummed.

"Yes?"

Corsonmay's giggly voice then emerged. "Greenbaum Grofast just called, Roan Walsh. Query on a 'fax transmitted at 1013 from your matrix. They want to know what is meant by item eleven on it."

"What's item eleven?"

"It says here, 'smiling toenails.'"

"Whatever it means, it's wrong. Is there a price on the item?"

"Just a blank."

"Then it doesn't matter. Tell them to cancel the line and upnumber the other items. You could have thought of that."

"I'm sawrrree," she said in such a disgustingly ingratiating tone that, had she been in the room with him, he would certainly have bashed her head clear down to her bedroom—no, *backbone*.

"Listen," he snapped, "lift the copy of every 'fax I've sent out since I got here this morning and bring them in."

Roan growled. The shot of adrenalin his irritation yielded up cleared his mind and his vision, and he stared appalled at the letter on his screen. Shuddering, he cleared it. He could just see old Quinn puzzling out "*if this is marriageable to you.*" Further, he could see the deep, secret ripples at the base of his father's beard if by any chance Quinn happened to check through to him.

Corsonmay minced in with a sheaf of copies. "This one says—"

"Give me those. Byemay," he rapped.

"Well, bye." At the panel, she stopped and said solicitously, "Roan Walsh, you look—I mean is there anything . . ."

"Byemay!" he roared.

She gulped. "You could tell *me*." Then her eyes widened as she watched his face. That odd, detached part of himself which irrepressibly wondered about such things wondered now just what expression he was wearing. Whatever it was, it blew her out of the office as if the room were a cannon and she the shell.

He looked at the top sheet. . . . *your question as to how many support poles in a lading ton. The clerk in charge will supply the information. —What is her number anyway?* Then there was another reference to gold, this time *with the light behind it*, and a fantastic paragraph about shipping a generator *complete with ankling bolts*.

Going through the sheets, the most recent first, he was relieved to see that his preoccupation had noticeably affected only the last four messages. He settled himself down to a grim and careful enunciation of the corrections, worded with apologies but without explanations, checked them carefully and sent them. Then he destroyed the copies he had corrected.

When he straightened up, his face was flushed and his head spun. Noon already. Thank the powers for that.

Then he saw the note on his desk, at the corner on which the vision had appeared. In beautifully firm calligraphy was a transplat number—nothing more.

Hussy!

But he put it in his pocket.

On the way out, he said to Corsonmay, without looking at her, "Won't be back today. Field work."

"Oh, but you're not scheduled for—"

Before she could finish, he whirled and glared at her. She gulped so hard, he had the mad conviction that she was about to swallow her own lips. He strode to the dialpost, spun a number and got out of there.

He stood for a moment under the sky—well, under the metalglas canopy—drinking in the sights of Grosvenor Center. There were shops and a restaurant and a library, and a theater as well, an immense structure honeycombed from top to bottom with its one-seat cells and one-man screens. Something called *The Glory of Stasis* was playing. He remembered the reviews—a two-hour prose poem dedicated to

the fantasy of eternal afternoons, permanent roses and everlasting youthfulness. He should see it, he thought. After all, wasn't that what he needed—a reaffirmation in the permanence of things and his place in this eternal society?

How comforting the Center was! People moved from one shop to another, not hurrying, not idling, each as sure of where he was going as where he had come from. Each dressed alike, walked alike, the rectangular feet unhesitating, the tubular limbs alternating, the cone-in-cone clothing never rippling, never draping, never clinging close to bodies . . .

He shook himself.

. . . And concealed under the decent capes, stockinged hands were folded, unused until needed—just as Godmade as a bird's wing—and hidden when they worked, as all working mechanisms were housed. And as far as the eye could see them, these sane folk were identifiable, correct. One was never in doubt, for that smooth-faced one was a Bachelor like himself, and the long hair yonder was a May, and the bound hair a Mam, and the bearded ones were Privates.

Noble title, Private—constant reminder of the great principle of Privacy, which was the very essence of all order. It was born, he had been taught, of the people themselves when, in the days of the barbarities, they had formed great armies—millions upon millions of just people in a single organization—and their majority were called Private. Magnificent then and magnificent today.

He saw the bank of transplats and felt a surge of pride. Someone had used the term "keystone." A good one. For the transplat covered the Earth like a great clean cape, standardizing language, dress, customs and ambitions. Every spot on Earth was but a step and a split-second away from every other, and all resources lay ready for the seeking glove. He had been curious enough, at one time, to attempt an orientation in geographic distances. He soon gave it up as profitless. What did it matter that the company offices were in Old New Mexico and his home near what had once been called Philadelphia? Could it be important that Corsonmay arrived each morning from Deutsch Polska and Hallmay, the Private's secretary, slept each night in Karachi?

The population was stabilized below its resources. Why, there was enough copper to supply power fuel for seven

centuries—copper which, so they said, was once used to carry feeble little pulses of electricity. And when the copper was gone, it would be simple enough to synthesize more. Food—filthy, necessary, secret stuff—was no longer a problem. And for delicacies of mind and heart, there were the spaceships, roaring away to the stars and returning years later, carrying strange fossils and odd stones, after having traveled every laborious inch out and every inch back again, aging their crews and enriching the world.

Once, he knew, there had been talk of an interplanetary transplat, but it was now unshakably established that the effect was possible only in a gravitic field of planetary “viscosity.” Once the immense task of establishing the dial central was finished, the system could be extended anywhere on a planet, but never between them. And a good thing, too, as his father had explained to him. What would happen to the beautifully balanced cultural structure if humanity were suddenly free to scatter through the Universe as it now scattered over the Earth? And why leave? What could there possibly be for anyone—except a crazy spaceman—off Earth?

He had read this, too: *A species which can build perfection as fast as we have done is a species capable of maintaining perfection forever.* It took fifteen thousand years to populate the Earth and then explode it in a mighty war. It took half a thousand years to concentrate the few hundred thousand survivors in Africa, the only continent left in which men could live. It took the African Colony six hundred years to reach the transplat stage in its technology. But *that* was only a hundred and fifty years back. The transplat built cities in days, floated them on impervious bedplates and shielded them with radiation-proof domes when necessary. People could settle anywhere—and they did. People could work the Earth for its resources almost anywhere—and they did.

Roan sighed, feeling much better. He looked away from the calm but busy Center and idly took in what could be seen of the horizon. There a snow-capped mountain hung like a cloud, and yonder was blue water as far as the eye could see. He wondered what mountain it might be, what

sea; and then he laughed. It was all the same to a man, all the same to humanity.

He paced out the Center, from one end to the other, delighted, proud. He was young and vital and marriageable—perhaps all such as he suffered from the equivalent of his blonde apparition when that time of life came upon them. Marriage, after all, held certain animal mysteries, and like those of his flower shop, where he cleaned his body and teeth and stoked himself with food concentrates, they just could not be discussed. He would wait and see; when the time came, the mysteries would be explained, even as had all the others.

He came out into the walkway loving everybody, even, for a moment, Granny.

Granny! He stopped and closed his eyes, his face twisted. He'd very nearly forgotten about her. Well, she could blossom well wait. He'd had a bad time this morning and the very thought of Granny then had been unbearable. Who, in the throes of self-abasement, wanted contact with a veritable monolith of respectability? And who, having regained his respectability, needed the monolith? Either way, the visit was insupportable. He'd make his sister Valerie go. Someone from the family had to make the visit once a week. Why, he didn't know and had never asked. Let Valerie do it. What was the use of having a sister if you couldn't get her to do the dirty work once in a while?

He crossed the walkway, went to the phone banks and dialed Valerie's number after a glance at his watch. She should be back at work from noonrest by now.

She was. As soon as she saw his face, she said, "Roan Walsh, if you're calling up to palm that visit to Granny off on *me*, you have another think coming. I do my duty by the family and I'm blessed if I can see why I should do any more than my duty or why you should do any less so don't even say a word about it." He opened his mouth, but before anything came out of it, she said, "And don't be late either. And especially, don't be early."

Roan opened his mouth again, but the screen went black.

Out in the filtered sunlight again, he let the chagrin fade and the amusement grow. It grew into something rare in Roan—an increasing glow of heady resentment and conscious

command. How did these magnificent human beings get so magnificent in the first place? Why, by asking if everything was all right or if it weren't—and, if it weren't, then they changed things until it was. Now everything was all right with him, except this Granny business. Then ask the question—why should he go see Granny? Because someone always had to. That was no answer. Put it another way, then—what would happen if he just didn't go?

He strode buoyantly down the walkway, beaming fiercely at the passersby, and the wonderful thought defeated him in exactly seven minutes, twenty seconds. Because the answer to 'What if he just didn't go?' was:

From Mam, that hurt look and then an avalanche of "understanding."

From Val, a silent, holier-than-thou waspishness, day after day.

And from the Private, thunder and lightning. And no partnership. Well, buds with the partnership!

At this point, he stopped walking. What did you do when you walked out on your family's business?

He'd never known anyone who had. Where did you go? What did you do?

His other, inner self said, banteringly, *Aw, come off it. Are you going to kick over the Cosmos to save yourself sixty minutes with the old woman?*

Roan said nothing to that. So the voice added, *What have you got against Granny, anyway?*

"She bothers me," Roan said aloud. He turned and went into a decorator.

What for? demanded the inner Roan.

"To buy something for Granny," he replied. And the inner voice, damn its stinking stamens, chuckled and said, *Know what, Roan? You're a crawling coward.*

"Why can't you be on my side for once?" he demanded, but its only answer was a snigger so smug that even his sister Valerie might have envied it.

The decorator was an old bachelor with a fierce countenance. Roan bought roses and hybrid jonquils, paid for them and started out. Suddenly he went back, prodded by his weird questioning mood, and said, "What did they call a place where you buy roses before they called it a decorator?"

The man uttered a soprano nickering which, Roan deduced, was laughter. He leaned across the counter and, looking over each of his shoulders in turn, said in a shrill whisper, "Flower shop." He clung to the counter and twisted up his face until the tears spurted.

Roan waited patiently until the man calmed down and then asked, "Well, then, why do they call the you-know-what a flower shop?"

This seemed to sober the man. He scratched his pale, cropped head. "I don't know. I guess because, whatever they called it before, people used to make jokes and cuss-words about it. Like now with—with flower shops."

Roan shuddered. Its motivation was beyond definition for him, but with it came a feeling of having taken a ludicrous path to a great truth, and somehow he knew he would never joke or swear about flower shops again. Or, for that matter, about whatever new name they gave the plumbing after they got through with muddying up this one. For this much he could say aloud, "There ought to be something else to curse and make jokes about."

The man's fierce face yielded for a moment to puzzlement, and then he shrugged. To Roan, it was a disgusting gesture and an alarming one, the one his father had made years ago, when Roan's tongue was a little more firmly attached to his curiosity than it had been of late. It was transplat this and transplat that, until he had suddenly asked his father how the thing worked. The Private had stopped dead, hesitated, then shrugged just that way. It was a gesture which said, "That's how things are, that's all."

On the way to the transplats, Roan stopped where people clustered. There was a shop there dealing in, according to its sign, FAD AND FASHION. Having passed through a number of engrossing fads in his life—Whirlstick and Chase and Warp and, once, a little hand loom on which he had woven a completely useless strip of material twice his length and two fingers wide—he stopped to see what people were buying.

It was a motion-picture of white-gloved hands manipulating two thick needles and a sort of soft heavy thread. No one would have dared to do such a thing in the open, but the picture was acceptable, though giggle-making.

On a shelf at waist height were many samples of the fabric which seemed to be the product of this exercise. He stepped forward until his cape covered enough of the shelf for him to pick up a piece of the material.

It was loosely woven, with a paradoxical texture, very rough, yet very soft.

It fell on and around his hand and draped away like—like . . .

“What is it? What’s this called?” he blurted.

A woman next to him said, “They call it knitting.”

III.

He skipped to the laFarge yards and Kimberley, Danbury Marble and Krasniak, checking inventories and consulting accountants. He did it all without notes, which he had left in his office when he charged out at noon. He did it efficiently and he did it, without at first knowing why or even how, in the most superb cross-spoor fashion, so that, by quitting time, it would take far more trouble than it was worth for the office to discover he had used the first two hours of the afternoon for his own purposes.

This small dishonesty troubled him more than a little. Honor was part of the decency-privacy-perfection complex, and yet, to a degree, it seemed to be on the side of good business and high efficiency to operate without it. Did this mean that he was not and could not be what his father called a gentleman? If not, how much did it matter?

He decided it didn’t matter, cursed silently and jovially at the inner voice which sneered at him, and went to see his grandmother.

There was very little difference between one transplat court and another. A business might have a receptionist and homes might have a larger or smaller facility, but with the notable exception of the blonde’s apartment in his dream—surely it *was* a dream—when he first found walls covered with drapes, he had never noticed much difference between courts.

Granny’s, however, always gave him a special feeling of awe. If it could be found anywhere on Earth, here, right

here in this court, was the sum and symbol of their entire culture—neat, decent, *correct*.

He stepped off the transplat and went to the dialpost to check the time, and was pleased. He could hardly have been any more punctual.

There was a soft sound and a panel stood open. It was the same one as always and he wondered, as he had many times before, about the other rooms in Granny's house. He would not have been surprised if they all proved to be empty. What could she need but her rectitude, her solitude and a single room?

He entered and stood reverently. Granny, all ivory and white wax, made a slight motion with her hooded eyes and he sat opposite her. Between them was a low, bare table.

"Great Mam," he said formally, "good Stasis to you."

"Hi," she said quaintly. "How you doing, boy?" For all his patient irritation with Granny, as always he felt the charm of her precise, archaic speech. Her voice was loud enough, clear enough, but always had the quality of a distant wind. "You look like you hoed a hard row."

Roan understood, but only because of many years of experience of her odd phrasing. "It's not too bad. Business."

"Tell me about it." The old woman lived in some hazy, silent world of her own, separated incalculably in time and space from the here and now, and yet she never failed to ask this question.

He said, "Just the usual . . . I've brought you something." From the pocket under his cape, he took the decorations he had bought, twisted the tube which confined them and handed the explosion of roses and daffodils to her. The other package clattered to the table.

There was the demure flash of a snowy glove and she had the stems. She put her face down into the fragrant mass and he heard her breath whisper. "That was very kind," she said. "And what's this?" She popped the wrapping and peeped down between the edge of the table and the hem of her cape to see. "*Knitting!* I didn't know anyone remembered knitting. Used to be just the thing for the old folk, when I was a sprout like you. Sit in the Sun and rock and knit, waiting for the end."

"I thought you'd like it." He caught the slight movement

of her shoulders and heard the snap of the wrappings as she closed the package again and slid it to the undershelf.

They beamed at each other and she asked him, "Aren't you working too hard? You look—well, you were going to tell me about the business."

He said, "It's about the same. Oh, I had an idea this morning and told the Private about it. I think he's going to use it. He was pleased. He talked about the partnership."

"That's fine, boy. What was the idea?"

She wouldn't understand. But he told her anyway, choosing his words carefully, about his plan to eliminate the transplat operators. She nodded gravely as he spoke, and at one point he had a mad impulse to start making up nonsense technological terms out of his head, just to see if she'd keep nodding. She would; it was all the same to her. She was just being polite.

He restrained himself and concluded, "So, if it works out, it will be a real economy. There just wouldn't be any way for a shipment to go astray the way"—he almost blurted out the story of the arrival of the passenger van at the monastery, and caught himself just in time; the old lady would have been shocked to death—"the way some have in the past."

"I reckon they couldn't," she agreed, nodding as if she understood.

He ought to return her courtesy, he thought, and said, "And what has occupied you, Great Mam?"

"I do wish you'd keep calling me Granny," she said, a shade of petulance creeping into the weary whisper. "What have I been doing? What might I be doing at my age? Know how old I am, Roan?"

He nodded.

"A hundred and eighty-three come spring," she said, ignoring him. "I've seen a lot in my time. The stories I could tell you . . . Did you know I was born in the African Colony?"

He nodded again, and again she ignored him. "Yes indeed, I was about your age when all this started, when the transplat broke the bubble we lived in and scattered us all over the world."

Yes, you saw it happen! he thought, for the first time fully

realizing something he had merely known statistically before. *You saw folk dancing chest to chest and having food together and no one thinking a thing about it. You knew the culture before there was any real privacy or decency—you, who are the most private and decent of people today. The stories you could tell? Oh, yes—couldn't you, though! What did they call them before they called them 'flower shops'?*

Certain she couldn't conceivably divine his motivations, he asked, "What did people *do* then, Granny? I mean—today, if you could name one single job all of us had to do, it would be keeping the perfection we have. Could you say that you folks had any one thing like that?"

Her eyes lighted. Granny had the brightest eyes and the whitest, soundest teeth of anyone he knew. "Sure we had." She closed her eyes. "Can't say we thought much about perfection—not in the early days. I think the main job was the next step up. The next step up," she repeated, savoring the phrase. "You know, Roan, what we have today—well, we're the first people in human history that wasn't working on that, one way or another. They'd ought to teach human history nowadays. Yes, they should. But I guess most folks wouldn't like it. Anyway, folks always wanted to be a bit better in those days.

"Sometimes they stopped dead a couple hundred years and tried to make their souls better, and sometimes they forgot all about their souls and went ahead gettin' bigger and faster and tougher and noisier. Sometimes they were real wrong and sometimes they did right just by accident; but all the time they worked and worked on that next step up. Not now," she finished abruptly.

"Of course not. What would we do with a step up? What would we step up to?"

She said, "Used to be when nobody believed you could stop progress. A grass seed can bust a piece of granite half in two, you know. So can a cup o' water if you freeze it in the right place."

"We're different," he said smugly. "Maybe that's the real difference between us and other kinds of life. We can stop."

"You can say that again." He did not understand her inflection. Before he could wonder about it, she said, "What do you know about psi, Roan?"

"Psi?" He had to search his mind. "Oh—I remember it. Fad and Fashion was selling it a couple of years ago. I thought it was pretty silly."

"*That!*" she said, with as much scorn as her fragile, distant-wind voice could carry. "That was a weejee-board. That thing's older'n anyone knows about. It didn't deserve the name of psi. Well, look here—for ten thousand years, there've been folks who believed that there was a whole world of powers of the mind—telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation, clairvoyance, clairaudence . . . lots more. Never mind, I'm not going to give you a lecture," she said, her eyes suddenly sparkling.

He realized that he had essayed a yawn—just a small one—with his mouth closed, and that she had caught him at it. He flushed hotly. But she went right on.

"All I'm saying is this—there's plenty of proof of this power if you know where to look. One mind talks to another, a person moves in a blink from place to place without a transplat, a mind moves material things, someone knows in advance what's going to happen—all this by mind power. Been going on for thousands of years. All that time, nobody understood it—and now nobody needs to. But it's still around."

He wondered what all this had to do with the subject at hand. As if she had heard him wonder, she said, "Now you wanted to know what the next step up might be, in case anybody was interested. Well, that's it."

"I can't see that as a step upward," he said, respectfully but positively. "We already do move things—speak over distances—all those things you mentioned. We even know what's going to happen next. Everything is arranged that way. What good would it be?"

"What good would it be to move the operators off the transplats?"

"Oh, that's an economy."

"What would you call it if telekinesis and teleportation moved goods and people without the transplat?"

"*Without the transplat?*" he almost shouted. "But you—but we—"

"We'd all be in the same boat with those operators you're replacing."

"The op—I never thought about them!"

She nodded.

Shaken, he mused, "I wonder why the Private never thought of that when I told him about it this morning."

There was a dry, delighted sound from deep in the old chest. "He wouldn't. He never did understand how anything works. He just rides it."

Roan controlled himself. One did not listen to criticism of one's parents. But this was Great Mam herself. The effort for control helped bring the whole strange conversation into perspective and he laughed weakly. "Well, I hardly think we're going to have any such—economy—as that."

She raised her eyebrows. "This progress we were talking about. You know, even in my time most folks had the idea that humans planned human progress. But when you come to think of it, the first human who walked upright didn't do it because he wanted to. He did it because he already could." When she saw no response on his face, she added, "What I mean is that *if* the oldtimers were right and progress *can't* be corked up, then it's just going to bust loose. And if it busts loose, it's going to do it whether you're the head of J. & D. Walsh or a slag-mucker, whether you're happy about it or not."

"Well, I don't think it will happen."

"Haven't you been listening to me? It's *always* been with us."

"Then why didn't they—why should it show up now and not a thousand years from now?"

"We never stopped progressing before—not like this," she said, with a sweeping glance at the walls and ceiling which clearly indicated the entire planet.

"Granny, do you *want* this to happen? *You?*"

"What I want doesn't matter. There've always been people who had—powers. All I'm suggesting is that now, of all times, is the moment for them to develop—now that we don't develop in any other way."

He was persistent. "You think it's a good thing, then?"

She hesitated. "Look at me, how old I am. Is that a good thing? It doesn't matter—it happened—it had to happen."

"Why have you told me this?" he whispered.

"Because you asked me what was occupying me," she said, "and I figured to tell you, for a change. Frighten you?"

Sheepishly, he nodded.

She did, too, and laughed. "Do you good. In my day, we were frightened a whole lot. It took us a long way."

He shook his head. *Do you good?* He failed to see what good could come of any so-called "progress" that threatened the transplat. Why, what would happen to things? What would happen to their very way of life—to privacy itself, if anyone could—what was it, teleport?—teleport into a man's office or cubicle . . .

"Look, boy, you don't have to wait until it's your turn to come chat with your old Granny, you know. Come over any time you have something to talk about. Just let me know first, that's all."

There was nothing in life he wanted less than another session like this one, but he remembered to thank her. "Bye-mam."

"Byeboy."

He rushed out to the dialpost and feverishly got the number of his home. He stepped up on the platform and the last he saw of Granny's face through the open panel was her expression of—was it pity?

Or perhaps compassion was a better name for it.

IV.

HE went straight to his cubicle, brushing past his sister as she stood at the edge of the court. He thought she was going to speak, but deliberately showed his back and quickened his stride. Her kind of smugness, her endless, placid recitations of her day's occupations, were the prime thing he could do without at the moment. He needed privacy, lots of it, and right now.

He leaned back against the panel when it closed. His head spun. It was a head which had the ability to thrust indigestible ideas into compartments, there to seal them off from one another until he had time to ruminate. This was how he was able to handle so many concurrent business affairs. It was also how he had been able to get through this extraordinary day—till then. But the compartments were full; nothing else must happen.

He had awakened before daylight to see, in the soft glow of the walls, a girl in a flowing garment who regarded him gravely. Her hair had been golden and her hands were clasped over one knee. He had not been able to see her feet—not then.

He had stepped on the 'plat to get to the office and had arrived, instead, in an unmentionable place containing drapes and this same girl. She had spoken to him.

He had seen her again, perched on his desk.

He had lost two hours in an unwonted self-examination, which had left him bewildered and unsure of himself, and had gone most respectably to see his most respectable grandmother, who had filled him full of the most frightening conjectures he had ever experienced—including the one which brought this mad business full circle. For she had suggested to him that, by a force called tele-something-or-other, certain people might appear just anywhere, transplat or no transplat.

He snorted. You didn't need a transplat to have a dream! He had dreamed the girl here and in the draped court. He had dreamed her in the office. "There!" he said to himself. "Feel better?"

No.

Anyone who had dreams like that had to be off his 'plat. All right: they *weren't* dreams.

In which case, Granny was right; someone had something so much better than a transplat that the world—his world—would come to an end. If only this were a technological development, it could be stopped, banned, to maintain the Stasis. But it wasn't—it was some weird, illogical, uncontrollable mystery known to only certain people *and he, Roan, wasn't one of them.*

It was unthinkable, insupportable. Indecent!

Going into his flower shop, he reached for his dinner ration. He grunted in surprise, for instead of the usual four tablets and tumbler of vitabroth, his hand fell on something hot, slightly greasy and fibrous. He lifted it, turned it over. It was like nothing edible he had ever seen before. On the other hand, there had been innovations from time to time, as the Nutrient Service saw fit to allow for this or that change in the environment, the isolation of mutated bacteria

and their antibiotics, the results of their perpetual inventory of sample basals.

But this thing was far too big to be swallowed. Maybe, he thought suddenly, it was a combination of nutrients and roughage.

His teeth sank readily into it. Hot, reddish juice dribbled down his chin and a flavor excruciatingly delectable filled his mouth and throat, his nostrils and, it seemed, his very eyes. It was so good, it made his jaw-hinges ache.

He demolished the entire portion before it had a chance to get cold, then heaved a marveling sigh. He fumbled about the foodshelf in the vain hope of finding more—but that was all, except for the usual broth. He lifted the cup, then turned and carefully poured it down the sink. Nothing was going to wash that incredible flavor out of his mouth as long as he could help it.

He slipped into his dressing shield and changed rapidly. As he transferred his wallet, he paused to glance into it to see if it needed replenishing.

He grunted with the impact of memory. As he had left the Private's office, he had come face to face with his—with that—well, dream or no, there she had been. And had disappeared. And on the corner of his desk, just where she had sat, had been the 'plat number—*this* number, here in his hand.

Like the dream she was—wasn't she?—the girl had not spoken to him here in his cubicle or in the office. But in the draped court she had. That episode, improbable as it seemed, could hardly have been a dream. He had dialed that transplat to get there. He might have misdialed, but he had been wide awake when he did it.

She must be one of those—those next-step-upward monsters Granny was talking about, he decided. He had to know, had to speak to her again. Not because of her hair, of course, or the brazen garment. It was because of the transplat, because of the hard-won Stasis that held society together. It was a citizen's simple duty to his higher pink toes. No, his higher self.

He adjusted a fresh pair of gloves and strode out to the court. Valerie was still there, looking wistful.

"Roan!"

"Later," he barked, already spinning the dial.

"Please! Only a minute!"

"I haven't got a minute," he snapped and stepped up on the platform. The flicker of blackness cut off her pleading.

He stepped down from his arrival platform and stopped dead.

No drapes! No perfume! No—oh, holy Private in Heaven!

"Roan Walsh!" squeaked Corsonmay. The secretary's eyeballs all but stood out on her dry cheekbones. Under them, her hands—decently gloved, thank the powers—were pressed, and in her hair obscenely hung a comb which, he deduced, he had interrupted in midstroke. He saw instantly what had happened, and a coruscation of fury and embarrassment spun dazzlingly inside him.

She must have seen him throw away the number she had written down for him and supplied him with another. And he had had to go and assume that it was . . . oh, to expect the drapes, the arms, the—and all that—and to come face to face with *this!*

"Private!" she shrilled. "*Mam! Mam!*" calling her parents. Well, of course. Any decent girl would.

He dived for the dialpost. So did she, but he got there first.

"Don't go, Roan Walsh," she panted. "Corsonmam and my father, they're not here, they would have been if only I'd known, they'll be back soon, so *please* don't go."

"Look," he said, "I found the number on my desk and I thought Grig Labine had left it there. I was supposed to see him and I'm late now. I'm sorry I invaded your privacy, but it was a mistake, see? Just a mistake."

The eagerness faded from her almost-wrinkled face and homely hot eyes. She seemed to shrink two inches in a tenth of a second. Her mouth pouted, wet and pathetic, and quivering puckers appeared at its sides. *Oh, you stinker, what did she ever do to you?* he said to himself.

"Be serene," he blurted. He dialed his home.

"Oh-h-h-h . . ." Her wail was cut off by the transplat.

He stood where he was, his eyes squeezed closed on his embarrassment, and breathed hard.

And then he became aware of a whimpering "Please . . ." and, for one awful moment, thought Corsonmay's transplat

had not operated. He opened his eyes cautiously and then sighed and stepped down. He was home. It was Valerie who was whimpering.

"Well, what's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Roan," she wept, "*please* don't be angry with me. I know I was a beast. It was just—oh, I meant it, but I didn't have to be so . . ."

"What are you talking about?"

"When you called about wanting me to go to Granny's." That seemed so long ago and so completely trivial. "Forget it, Val. You were absolutely right. I went, so forget it."

"You're not mad?"

"Of course I'm not."

"Well, I'm glad, because I want to talk to you. Can I?" she begged.

This was unusual. "What about?"

"Can we go out, Roan?"

"Where are the parents?"

"In the Family Room. We can be right back. Please, Roan," she pleaded.

He yielded. In his cosmos, Val was merely a perennial and harmless irritation; this was probably the first time he had consciously realized that she might be a person, too, with personal problems.

"Grosvenor Center?" he asked.

She nodded. He dialed it and stepped up on the platform and down again at Grosvenor. It was still daylight there and he wondered vaguely where on Earth it might be. The sea on one side was an evening blue, the mountaintop a glory.

Val appeared on the transplat and stepped down. They walked silently past the decorator and the Fad and Fashion and the restaurant until they reached the park. They sat down side by side on a bench, with its shoulder-high partitions between each seat, and looked at the fountain.

She was very pale and her shoulders were moving under the cape, a complex motion that was partly stifled sobs and partly the kneading of hands.

He said, as gently as he could, "What's up?"

"You don't like me."

"Aw, sure I do. You're all right."

"No, please don't like me. I don't *want* you to. I came to you because you don't like me."

This was completely incomprehensible to Roan. He decided that listening might extract more data than talking.

Valerie said in a low voice, "I've got to tell you something that would make you hate me if you didn't already, so that's why. Oh, Roan, I'm no *good!*"

He opened his mouth to deny this, but closed it silently. He had the wit not to agree with her, either.

"There's somebody I—saw. I have to see him again, talk with him. He's—I want—*Oh!*" she cried, and burst into tears.

Roan fumbled for a clean handkerchief and passed it deftly around the front of the partition, down low. He felt it taken from his fingers.

"A May's supposed to wait," she said brokenly, "and one day her Private will come looking for her, and he will be her Private, and she will be his help and service until the end. But I don't want to be help and service to the Private who comes. Who knows, one might come any minute. I want *this* one to come!"

"Maybe he will," soothed Roan. "Who is he?"

"I don't *know!*" she said in agony. "I only saw him. Roan, you have to find him for me."

"Well, where—"

"He's tall, as tall as you," she said hurriedly. "His eyes are green. He has—" she gulped and her voice sank—"long hair, only not like a May. And right on the bottom of his chin there's a little cleft and on one side—yes, on the left side—there's a little curl of a scar."

"Hair? Men don't have long hair!"

"*This* one has."

"Now look," he said, suppressing his laughter at the outlandish concept. "If there were such a man, long hair and all, *everybody'd* know where he is."

"Yes," she said miserably.

"So there you are. There's no such man."

"But there *is!* I *saw* him!"

"Where?" She was silent. He said impatiently, "If you don't tell me where, how can I find him?"

"I can't tell you," she said at last, painfully. "It doesn't matter—you'd never find him—there." She colored. "He must

be somewhere else, too. Please find him, Roan. His name. Where he is. Even if he never—I'd like to know what his name is," she finished wistfully. She stood up. "The Private will miss us."

On the way back to the transplat, she said to the air straight in front of her, "You think I'm just awful, don't you?"

"No!" he said warmly. "Sometimes I think everyone's just a little different from what the Stasis expects. It isn't 'awful' to be a little different." And his subconscious, instead of objecting, dropped its prim jaw in astonishment.

V.

THE Family Room was the heart of their house, as such rooms were to every house on Earth. A chair—virtually a throne—dominated one wall. It held the video controls and the audio beams which came to audible focus in their proper places in the room—the miniature of the throne at the right wall, which was the place of the son of the house; the wooden bench at the left, which was the daughter's; and the small stool at the throne's foot, where the mother sat.

The room, because of its beams and its padded floor and acoustically dead walls and ceiling, was a silent one and it was the custom for each family to convene there for two hours at the end of the day. There were stylized prayers, such reading as the Private chose, whatever conversation he dictated and, when he was so moved, transmitted entertainment of his choice for the clan.

When Roan and Valerie entered, the original silence was compounded by towering disapproval. The Private's hand lay on the video control, which he had just switched off. The Mam's head had bobbed once, sidewise, so engrossed had she been in the program; it was as if a prop had been snatched away.

Son and daughter separated and went to their places. Roan felt the old hovering terror as the Private's gaze flicked across his withers like a rowel. He sat down and glanced quickly at his sister. She huddled on her bench so oppressed, so indrawn, that even her wrinkle-free, foldless garments

could not conceal her crushed look. Roan, with hands properly folded, swallowed apprehensively.

"Late," said the Private. "*Both* of you. This sort of thing can hardly help in my recommendations, Valerie, you unwanted creature." This was an idiom used in chastising all Mays and passed Valerie by. Then, to Roan, "One would assume that my generosity and forgiveness"—that would be the hint about the partnership—"would result in at least a minimal effort not to repeat the offense. You are thirty years of age—old enough to know the difference between Stasis and chaos. You will be confined, by my personal lock, to your cubicle for forty-eight hours, where you may reflect on the consequences of disorganization. *Valerie!*"

She twitched and gave the proper response, which was to meet his eyes. Roan said nothing. In such occasions, there was no appeal.

"Valerie, were you and your brother together in whatever escapade it was that led you to flout the organization of this house?"

"Yes, Private, but it was really my—"

"Then you must bear the same punishment—not primarily for being tardy, which is not one of your habitual defects, but for your failure to use your influence on your irresponsible sibling. I assume you failed to try, since it would be too painful for me to conclude that both my offspring lacked the basic elements of decency."

Another massive silence followed. The mother, sitting at his feet, rolled her eyes upward to the cushions, where his gloved hand lay. With a slight, unconscious movement, her ear sought the focal point of the currently non-existent audio beam. The Private's beard bulged as he dropped his glare upon her.

"And since I must cling to a single shred of satisfaction," he said, "let it be my faith in *your* knowledge of correct behavior, Mam. Assuming that this knowledge exists, the circumstance clearly indicates that you too have not properly applied it. There will therefore be no video for you tonight." He unleashed a semi-circular glare in which his beard smote across their presences like the back of a hand. "Leave me."

They rose and shuffled out. The panel slid shut behind them. "I'm sorry." Val barely breathed the apology.

"*Silence!*" roared the grille over the door.

They hung their heads and waited. Walshmam tiptoed away and returned in a moment with two small cubes. She led Valerie to her cubicle and stood aside. Valerie glanced once at Roan, who twitched a dismal smile at her. Then the panel slid shut on her and Walshmam pressed one of the cubes into its socket, effectively sealing the door until removed again from this side. True to custom, Roan waited until she passed him and then shuffled along behind her to his own cubicle.

"And furthermore," enounced the grille over the door, "I herewith refuse to consider the merits of the suggestion you made this morning. For, if good, it issues from an unworthy source and is tainted—if bad, it deserves no consideration."

Walshmam seemed very sad, but then few Mams were anything else. Their lives alternated between silent patience and silent regret, with only an occasional flicker of preventive action. He grimaced in an effort to convey a certain camaraderie, but she misunderstood and looked away, and he knew she had taken it as a rebellious or unrepentant expression.

He wondered, as he dropped the dressing shield over his head, what would happen if he got up and hauled on the Private's beard.

Reaching for his brief nightshirt and sleeping shorts and bedshoes, he told himself, "I bet he hasn't even got anything in his rulebook to cover that. And he never was so good with a new idea."

That reminded him of what Granny had said—the Private "never did understand how anything works. He just rides it." He sure rides his family, Roan thought.

So he himself would be a Private some day, have a family and get it all back again, he thought sleepily, and let himself sink down and down into a place where he sat on a monstrous throne with a beard to his knees, and watched his father, who sat on the boy's chair, weeping. At his feet was—well, for heaven's sake, *it was Granny!*

At some point, it must have turned into a nightmare—a dreadful fragment involving being lost in the flicker of final black that one experienced on the transplat. Here, however, he was immersed in it, with dimensionless space at his freez-

ing back and the unyielding "inner" surface of reality pressing into his face. He cried out and struggled—and thumped his cheekbone on solid rock. He yelped and pressed away from the rock and sat up.

Not an inch from his head was the lintel of a shimmering, rectangular rock. Beyond it, a pale, green, alien sky which brightened by the moment.

He glanced behind him and saw nothing but purple plain, cracked and crevassed, from which cactuslike spears sprouted grotesquely.

He stepped through the doorway and, a few yards beyond, the desolation abruptly ended. Before him stretched rolling parkland, then a curving line of trees following a brook. Across the brook were fields—one brown, one tan, one a tender green—and they seemed, at this distance, as smooth as the surface of a cup of milk. To the right were mountains, one with a flaming cap so brilliant his eyes stung. He recognized it as dawnlight on snow. To the left was a broad rolling valley. The air was warm but sparkling-fresh.

He paused and inhaled deeply, seeking comprehension, then saw, to his right, a boulder as big as a Private's chair. On the boulder sat a girl with golden hair and strange eyes. She wore a belted singlet that revealed far more girl than Roan had ever seen before. She held one delicately bronzed, bare knee in both hands. Her bare feet acknowledged the snowfire pinkly, and they were wet with dew.

She laughed a greeting and rose and flowed over to him. "Come along," she said.

He clutched himself and hid his naked hands. With a swift, strong movement, she had his hand in hers.

"Up we go," she sang and, before he could think, she was leading him.

His cheek touched her bare shoulder. He smelled her perfume and her sweet breath, and his eyes rolled up and his knees sagged. Her arm went briefly round his shoulders and she laughed again.

"It's all right, it's only a dream," she told him.

"A dre"—he coughed—"eam?"

"Thirsty?" She held out her hand, and he started violently when a cup appeared in it. "Here you are."

He took it, hesitated, then raised it. She stood still, smiling at him. Modestly he turned his back and drank. It was bright orange, cold, sweet-acid and delicious. He patted his lips carefully and turned back, waving the cup helplessly.

"Throw it," she said.

"Th—what?"

She gestured. Obediently, he tossed the cup straight up. It vanished.

"Feel better? Come on, they're all waiting for you."

Gaping up at the spot into which the cup had vanished, Roan said, "I want to go home."

"You can't. Not until the dream's finished."

He put his arms straight down and fluttered his hands until the cuffs concealed them. "I want to go home," he said forlornly.

"Why?"

"I just . . ." He looked longingly over his shoulder at the doorway. When he looked back, she was gone. And suddenly, urgently, he wanted her back. He took a step forward.

"*Boo!*" she said, her lips just touching the nape of his neck.

He whirled, and there she stood. "Where were you?"

"Here—anywhere." She vanished and reappeared instantly at his right.

"Please," he said, "don't do that any more. And just let me stand here quietly for a minute."

"All right." She wandered away, picked a snowdrop and a strange green-and-purple flower, added a fern-frond and came back toward him, her fingers deft and a-dance. She held out the flowers, woven into a tiny circular wreath, and spun them on her finger. Then she set them into her golden hair.

"Pretty?"

"Yes." His eyes fell away from her and were dragged back again. "Why don't you cover your arms?" he blurted.

"We wear what we please here."

"Where is *here*?"

"Sort of another world." He glanced back at the gateway. "It wouldn't do any good," she explained. "There isn't anything in there now but blackness. The way out is a time, not a place. Don't be afraid. You'll go back when it's time."

"When?"

"How long did you have to sleep?"

"Forty-eight hours, though I'd never—"

"Maybe you can stay that long. Who's to know?"

"You're—sure I'll get back in time?"

"Sure as sure. Is it all right now?"

Shyly, he smiled. "Fine. Everything's fine."

She took his hand, and skipped two paces, so he had to follow. He tried politely to tug his hand free, but she held fast and seemed not to notice. A giggle, a blush, the slightest sign of self-consciousness in her, and he would have found the contact unbearable.

But she was so completely at ease that the revulsion would not come, and she chattered so gaily, making him answer, keeping him busy, that, even had he felt like asking her to let go, he had no space for the words, nor the words with which to do it.

"You were in my cubicle," he said breathlessly, as she hurried him down the slope.

"Oh, yes—more than you know. I watch you sleep. You sleep nicely. There's a tanager!" She stopped, balancing, something flowing out of her shining face to the blazing bird and back again. "I came to see you at your office, too. Everything's straight and hard there, and sort of lonely. But all you people are lonely."

"We're not!"

"You wait until the dream's finished and you won't say that. Want to see a magic?" She stooped, still walking, and brushed her long fingers across a thick growth of tiny spiked leaves. They all closed up like little green fists.

"Why'd you come?" he asked.

"Because you were ready to wonder."

"Wonder what?"

She appeared not to consider this worth answering, but released his hand and bounded like a deer once, twice, then high over a brook. He floundered through it, soaking his bedshoes.

When he caught up with her, she touched his chest.

"Shh!"

On the wind floated a note, then another note and, high

and sweet, another, so that they became a chord. Then a note changed, and another, and another, and the chorus of voices modulated softly, like the aurora, which is the same as long as one looks, but changes if one looks away and back.

"What's your name?" he asked abruptly.

"What would you like it to be?"

"*Flower!*" he cried, the strange pressures of a dream asserting themselves; and with it he felt a liberation from the filth with which custom had clothed the word.

"And you're Roan, and a roan is a horse with wind in his mane and thunder in his feet, sweet-nostriled, wild-eyed, all courage and speed."

He thought it was a phrase from a song, yet it could have been speech—her speech. He squished the water in his muddy shoes and almost whinnied with delight at the thought of the thunder in his feet. She took his hand again and they leaped together to the brow of a foothill. Ahead, the song finished in a roar of good laughter.

"Who is it?" he wanted to know.

"You'll see. There—*there!*"

Where the hill shouldered into the forest was a clear, deep pool. In the forest and on the hillside, buildings nestled. Their walls were logs and their roofs were thatch. They were low and wide, and very much part of the hill and the woods. In the clearing between woods and slope, by the pool, was a great trestle table and, around the table, were the people who had been singing—you could tell by the sound of their laughter.

"I can't—I *can't!*" Roan croaked miserably.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Flower.

"They have no decency!"

"There are only two things which are indecent—fear and excess—and you'll see neither here. Look again."

"So many limbs," he breathed. "And the colors—a green-and-red man, a blue woman . . ."

"A blue dress and a harlequin suit. It's grand to wear colors."

"There are some things one shouldn't even dream."

"Oh, no! There's nothing you can't dream. Come and see."

They went to see. They were made very welcome.

AT dusk, on the second day, Flower and Roan walked a shadowed aisle in the forest. Roan's sleeping garments were tattered and seam-gutted, for he would not give them up, though they had not been designed for the brutality they had suffered. Yet he did not mind the rips and gapes, for no one else did. His bedshoes were long gone and he felt that if he were told he would never again feel the coolth of moss under his bare feet, or the tumble of brooksand, he would die. He knew the Earth as something more than a place on which to float sealed cities. He had worked till he hurt, laughed till he cried, slept till he was healed. He had helped with a saw, with a stone, with a song. Wonder on wonder, and greatest wonder of all—the children.

He had never seen any before. He did not know where children came from except that, when they were twelve, they went to their families from the crèches. He did not know how they were born. He did know that each child was educated specifically for a place in his Family and in the Stasis, and that the largest part of this education was a scrubbing and soaking and rubbing in of the presence of the father—his voice, features, manners of living and speaking and working. When the child emerged, there was a place for him in the home, by then very little different from his last place in the crèche, and he was fitted to it, not by the accidental authority of parentage, but through the full-time labors of a bank of specialists.

Each family had one boy, one girl—one trade, one aim. This was how an economy could be balanced and kept balanced. This was how the community could raise its young and still maintain the family.

But here, in this dream . . .

Children babbled and sang and burned their fingers. They ran howling underfoot and swam like seals in the pool. They fought and, later, loved. They grieved, sweated, made their music and their mistakes. It was all very chaotic and perplexing and made for a strong, sane settlement which knew

how to laugh and how to profit from an argument. It was barbarous and very beautiful.

And it had a power—for these people quite casually did what Roan had seen Flower do. They seemed to have a built-in transplat and could send and receive from anywhere to anywhere. They could reach up into nothingness and take down bread or a hatchet or a book. They could stand silently for a time and then know what a wife would serve for nutrient—which they brazenly sat together to eat, though they went privately for other functions no more disgusting—or the tune of a new song or news of a find of berries.

They seemed willing enough to tell him how all this was done, yet his questions got him nowhere. It was as if he needed a new language or perhaps a new way of thinking before he could absorb the simple essence. But for all their power, they had calluses on their hands. They burned wood as fuel and ate the yield of the land around them. To put it most simply, they made their bodies function at optimum because it made them joyful. They never let the *psi* factor turn, cancerlike, from a convenience to a luxury.

So Roan walked quietly in the dusk, Flower at his side, thinking about these things and trying to shake them down into a shape he could contain. "But, of course, this isn't real," he said suddenly.

"Just a dream," nodded Flower.

"I'll wake."

"Very soon." She laughed then and took his hands. "Don't look so mournful. We're never very far away!"

He couldn't laugh with her. "I know, but I feel that this is—I can't say it, Flower. I don't know how!"

"Then don't try for now."

Before he knew it, his arms were around her. "Flower—please let me stay."

She stirred in his arms. "Don't make me sad," she whispered.

"Why can't I? Why?"

"Because it's your dream, not mine."

"I won't let you go! I'll hold onto you and I won't wake up!" He staggered then and fell heavily. Flower stood calmly ten feet away.

"Don't make me sad," she said again. "It hurts me to push you away like this."

He climbed slowly to his feet and held out his hand. "I won't spoil any more of it," he said huskily.

They walked silently in the dimness, toward the shaft of light which the Sun laid up the valley to the settlement each evening at this season.

"How soon?" he asked, because he could not help himself.

"When it's time," she said. She released his hand, put her arm through his and took his hand again. They came to the light.

Roan looked slowly from one end of the clearing to the other, trying to see it as it had been to him at first, then as it was with the familiarity of two days. There was the kettle they used, they said, to make sugar from the maples, and he pretended he had seen it boil, seen the frantic dogs snapping the caramelized sweetmeat up from the snow and running in circles frantically until it melted and they could get their silly mouths open again. There was the buckwheat field which would carpet the spring snow with quick emerald on a warm day. There was the pond, there the ducks with old-ivory webs and mother-of-pearl lost in their necks. He saw—

"There!" he yelled and twisted away from Flower, to go racing across the clearing. "You!" he shouted. "You! Stop! You by the pool!"

But the man did not turn. He was tall, as tall as Roan; his hair was very long, his eyes were green and, at the side of his cleft chin, was a curl of a scar. In the water, there was a chuckle of laughter, a flash of white.

"You with the scar," Roan gasped. "Your name—I've got to know your—"

As the man turned, Roan looked past his shoulder, down at the water, straight into the startled eyes of his sister Valerie.

And that was the end of the dream.

Only one good thing had happened since his mother had removed the block from his cubicle door. The cubicle itself had been the most depressing conceivable place to wake up in; its walls crushed him, its filtered air made him cough. It had no space, no windows. The dressing shield brought

out a thudding in his temple and he hurled it to the floor, turning violently away from it, physically and mentally. He felt that if he itemized the symbolism of that tubular horror, he would go berserk and tear this coffin-culture apart corpse by corpse. Breakfast was an abhorrence. The clothes—well, he put them on, not daring to be angry about them, or he never would have gotten to the office.

Corsonmay looked his way only long enough to identify, then stuck her silly flaccid face in a file-drawer until he was safely in his office. He looked at the desk, its efficient equipment, at the vise-jaws called walls and the descending heel called a ceiling, and he shook with anger. But he was weak with it when the heavy voice issued from the grille: "Step in here, Roan Walsh."

Trouble again. Out of the prison into the courtroom.

He took four great breaths, three for composure, one a sigh. He went to the panel and it admitted him. His father sat back, his head and beard vying texture against texture. Before him was a scattering of field reports, and he looked as if he had nibbled the corner off one of them and found it unexpectedly good.

"Good Stasis, Private."

The old man nodded curtly. "Your absence made it necessary for me to take up the threads of your work as well as my own. You will find what I have done on reports subsequent to yours." He stacked the cards neatly and scattered them. "On reviewing these, I found to my surprise—my pleasant surprise, I may add in all fairness—that you have done a phenomenal amount of work. Kimberley, Krasniak, that warehouse tangle in Polska. And in spite of its speed, the work is good. I investigated it in detail."

This, thought Roan, sounded *really* bad. He put his hands behind him, lowered his chin in The Stance, and set his teeth.

"The investigation brings out," lumbered the vocal juggernaut, "that the work was done in roughly speaking four hours, three and one-half minutes. Very good. It seems, further, that the elapsed time involved was five hours, forty-eight minutes and some odd seconds. Approximately, that is." He tapped the edges of the cards on the desk, flickered the lightning at Roan, then snapped forward and roared,

"One hour and forty-five minutes seem to have disappeared here!"

Roan wet his lips and croaked, "There was noonrest, Private."

The Private leaned back and stretched jovially. "Splendid, my efficient young scoundrel. Superb! And what is the noonrest permitted us at our present altitude in the organization?"

"Forty minutes, Private."

"Good. Now all we have to account for is one hour and five minutes. Sixty-five precious, irredeemable minutes, which the resources of Stasis itself could not buy back. Over an hour unreported, yet somehow a double-time dock from your wages is not entered here. Or perhaps it is entered and, in my haste, I overlooked it."

"No, Private."

"Then either one or more transactions of company affairs were handled on that afternoon and not reported—which is gross inefficiency—or the time was spent on idling and personal indulgence, with every intention of accepting payment from the firm for this time—which is stealing."

Roan said nothing except to himself, and that was, almost detachedly, "I think I can stand about four minutes, thirty-two and three-tenths seconds—approximate—more of this."

"The picture is hardly a pleasant one," said the Private conversationally, and smiled. "The records give me the choice of three courses of action. First, the time owed may be made up. Second, the value of these hours may be paid back. Third, I can turn you over to the Central Court with a full indictment, and thereby wash my hands of you. You might be given a bow and arrow and left to make your way in the wilderness between segments of Stasis. You could survive a long time with your training. Days. Weeks even."

"Eighteen, seventeen, sixteen . . ." Roan counted silently.

"However, I am going to give you every opportunity to ameliorate this—this frightful crime. Take these cards into your office. You have between now and 1600—a punctual 1600, that is—in or out of the office, to revise any slight miscalculations you may have made and to refresh your memory in the event that you did useful work for the firm in any of these lost minutes. Every alteration you make, of course, will be checked to the tenth of a second. Until 1600—be serene."

Roan, quite numb, tottered forward, took the cards, muttered, "Byepry," and awkwardly backed out.

Why, he wondered, did he stand for it?

Because there was no place to go, of course.

There was . . .

No, there wasn't. That had been a dream.

He sank into a black paralysis of rage.

VII.

THE phone roused him. He received, ready to tear the head off the caller, any caller. But it was Valerie.

She said, "It's nearly noonrest." She would not meet his eyes. "Could you—would you mind . . . ?"

"Same place, right away?"

"Oh, *thank* you, Roan!"

He growled affectionately and broke off.

She was not at the Grosvenor transplat when he got there, so he stalked straight to the park. She was waiting for him. He dropped down next to her and put his head in his hands—and damn the passersby. Never seen a man's hands before?

He sat up after a while, however; Valerie's silence positively radiated. He wondered if he should tell her about the man in the dream, and almost laughed. But he could not laugh at Valerie. Not now. In the dream, there had been love. Valerie, in her crushed, priggish way, had fallen in love. All right, tell her you still haven't found the guy and then sympathize with her and get it over with. You have some real worrying to do.

He turned to her. "I haven't been able to—"

"His name's Prester." She leaned close to the partition and whispered, "Oh, Roan, you saw me like that, in the pool. They hadn't meant for you to see me at all. Oh, what you must *think*!"

He said, just as softly, "I hadn't let myself believe it."

"I know," she said desperately. "I'm surprised you even came here."

"What do you mean— Oh, the pool! Do you know, it never occurred to me until this minute that you were—that you'd

be—oh, forget it, Val. I'm just glad you found him. Prester, hm? Nice-looking fellow."

Her face lit up like a second sun. "Roan—*really*? I'm not a—hussy?"

"You're grand and the only person I know in this whole sterile, starched world who's managed to live a little! I'm *glad*, Vall! You don't know—you can't—what I've been through. Enough to make a dozen dreams. And it came like a dream—I mean parts and chunks of real-life things—things Granny was maundering about, things I'd seen, a girl I met once wrong-dialing—an accident, you little prude! I believed it was just a dream—I had to, I guess. I had to believe Flower and she *told* me it was." Lord, he'd said the word right out loud in front of his sister!

But she was quite composed, cheeks excitement-red, not disgusted-red, eyes bright and distant. "She's lovely, Roan, just *beautiful*. She loves you. I *know*."

"Think she does!" He grinned till it hurt. "Oh, Val, Val—the maple sugar kettle."

"Mmm—the oat-field!"

"The big table and the singing!"

"Yes, and the children—all those children!"

"What happened?" he cried. "How could this happen?"

She whispered fervently, "We could both be crazy. Or the whole world could be coming apart and we slipped in and out through a crack into—or maybe it really was a dream, but we had it together. But I don't care, it was beautiful and—and if you'd said I was a—because of—you'd have *spoiled* it and killed me, too. Is it all right then, Roan, is it really all right? Really?"

"You're sort of beautiful yourself. For a sister, that is."

"Oooh!" she squeaked, blushing and enormously pleased. Then, happily, "I'm glad I'm not you."

"Uh—why?"

"How does it work, what makes it go, is it a dream, and, if not, what could it be? Be like me, Roan. It happened—for the rest of my life it has happened! But—I hope there'll be more."

"If I find out how it works, what makes it go and so on, there *will* be more. So you just be glad *I'm* like me in that respect."

"If you found it, you—wouldn't keep me out?"

"If I couldn't take you," he said warmly, "I wouldn't go. Now do you feel better?"

"I'm going to kiss you!"

He roared with laughter at the very idea in a place like this and, under the stares this attracted, she cried, "Be quiet—thunderfeet!" At the phrase from Flower's little song, his heart twisted.

She peeped at his face and said, "I'm sorry, Roan."

"Don't be," he said hoarsely. "For that second, she was right here." He put out his hands, made fists, stared at them, then got them out of sight again. Flower—well, he'd have plenty of time to find her after 1600. "Val . . ."

"I didn't know anyone could be so happy!" she said. "What, Roan?"

"Nothing. Just that I really am late," he said, abruptly changing his mind. No need to air his troubles to her now—the news services would take care of that about 1612. Meanwhile, let her be happy. They walked back to the transplat.

"Roan, let's come here every day and talk about it. I don't know a thing you did and you don't know what I did. Like the time—"

"Sure I will, sure," he said. "Take something pretty big to stop me."

She stopped dead. "There's something the matter."

"Get on your 'plat. Everything's fine. Hurry now."

She dialed and stepped up and was gone. He stood looking at the empty air, where her anxious face had been, until another passenger filled it. He hoped he hadn't worried her.

He walked slowly back to the bench and sat down, and that was where he had his big idea.

"Whoever *is* that?" The thin old voice was edgy.

"Me. Roan," he said from the court.

The top panel of a door slid back and the voice floated to him, gentle now, and firm. "You know you're welcome here, son, but you also know you're to call first. Just spin that dial and clear out of here for an hour. Then you can come and stay as long as you like."

"Petals to that. I haven't *got* an hour. Come on out here or I'm coming in."

"Don't you use that language on me, you leak-brained snipe, or I'll lift your hair with a blunt nailfile!"

The instant she began to shout, he began to roar, "Decent or not, just get on out here. *If you'd shut off your low-fidelity mouth for twelve lousy seconds, you'd stop wasting your own time!*"

They stopped yelling together and the silence was deafening. Suddenly, Granny laughed, "Boy, where'd you learn that type language?"

"For years, I've been hearing you talk, Great Mam," he said diffidently. "It only just now occurred to me that I never really listened. And about being decent—if you're comfortable, come as you are."

"Damfidon't!" She came out of the room and kicked the door closed with a flip of her heel. She wore an immense wrapper of an agonizing blue and seemed to be barefooted. Her hair, instead of lying sleekly away from the center part in two controlled wings, flew free like a May's. Roan had one frozen moment, and then she tossed the hair back on one side with an angry twitch of her head. "Well?" she blazed. There seemed to be nothing left of the gentle talc-on-ivory quality in her voice.

Slowly, he smiled. "Damfidon't like you better the way you are."

She sniffed, but she was pleased. "All you can do to keep your eyes from rolling out onto the carpet. Ah, well, you've found my secret. Reckon I'm old enough to have just one eccentricity?" she demanded challengingly.

"You've lived long enough to earn your privileges."

"Come on in here," she said, starting down the court. "Most folks don't or can't realize I've spent the least part of my life in that cone-in-cone getup. Everybody else around's practically born in it. I just don't *like* it. Chest-padding the men so they won't look different from women!" she snorted. "I wasn't brought up that way." She opened the manual door in the corner. "Here we are."

It was an odd-shaped room, an isosceles triangle. He had never seen it before. "What happened to your voice, Granny? You feeling all right?"

In the familiar wind-in-the-distance tones, she said, "You mean you miss this little gasp?" Then, stridently, "Something

I picked up for company. Had to. Nobody'd take me seriously when I talked natural. They cast me as a frail little pillar of respectability and, by the Lord, I was stuck with it. It's hot in here."

He missed the hint, waited for her to sit down, and then joined her. "Know why I'm here?"

She regarded him closely. "Sleeping well?"

"That wasn't a dream."

"No? What then?"

"I came to find out what it was. Where it is."

She fluttered the lapel of the wrapper. "You got this part of my secret life out of me, but that don't guarantee you all of it. What makes you so sure it wasn't a dream?"

"You just don't go to bed healthy and sleep for two days! Besides, there's Valerie. I saw her there, right at the very last second."

She grunted. "'Fraid of that. No one was sure." She laughed. "Must've been a picnic when you two got your heads together. You come here to kill me?"

"What?"

"Outraged brother and all that?"

"Valerie's happier than she's ever been in her life and so much in love, she can't see straight. I'm just as happy for her as she is for herself."

"Well?" she smiled. "This changes things. So you want to take your sister and go live out your lives in a dreamland?"

"It's more than that," he said. "I need one of your telekinesis operators. I mean *now*."

"The best I can do for you is a little girl who can knock down a balancing straight-edge at any distance under fifteen feet."

He made no attempt to conceal his scorn.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "How'd you mix me up in this, anyway?"

"We're wasting time," he said. "But if you must know, it was your hints to me last time I was here—the transplat obsolete, people appearing in any room anywhere, communication without phones. I'd already seen telekinesis twice when you told me that. And since then . . ." he shrugged. "You *had* to be in it. Maybe you'd like to tell me why I'm mixed up in it."

"Hadn't planned to for a while. Maybe we'll step up the schedule. Now what's the all-fired rush?"

"I have an appointment in—" he checked—"less than two hours that is going to put me under the ground unless I can get help."

He told her, rapidly, about the lost time and his father's threat.

"You're dead right," she said after a moment. "He's afraid of you. I don't know why he should be *that* afraid. He's just like his father, the potbellied old—" She stopped, shocked, as a large hand closed over her wrist.

"I can't listen to that."

"All right," she said with surprising swiftness. "I'm sorry. Given one of my TKs, what would you do?"

He leaned forward, put his elbows on his knees, bringing his gloved hands into plain sight.

"Do? I'm going to take this wrinkle-free civilization and turn it out into the woods. I'm going to clutter up the Family Rooms with the family's own children. I'm going to turn Stasis itself upside down and shake it till the blood runs into its head and it finds out how to sweat again."

Granny's eyes brightened. "Why?"

"I could tell you it was for the good of all the people—because you're Great Mam and lived through it all and had a chance to think about things like that. But I'm not going to say anything like that to you. No—I'll do it because I want to live that way myself, head of a family of hard-handed, barefoot, axe-swinging people who are glad to get up in the morning.

"I thought of finding the dream-people again. I even thought of going out into the wilderness between cities and living that way myself. But if I did, I'd always be afraid that some day a resources survey crew might find me, scoop me up and bring me back. Stasis wouldn't let people live like that, so let's make Stasis live our way."

He took a deep breath. "Now Stasis is built around the transplat. There can't ever be a better machine. But if I go in there today and claim I've spent years secretly developing one—if I get one of your people to start transmitting things all over his office and claim I have a new machine to do it with—why, the Private's got to listen. I'll save my job and

spot your people through and through the whole culture till it falls apart. And one day maybe I'll be the Private at Walsh & Co.—and, Stasis, look out!"

"You know," she said, "I *like* you."

"Help me," he said bluntly. "I'll like you, too."

She rose and punched his arm with sharp knuckles. "I'll have to think. You know, if you can fast-talk your way out of this, you'll only stall things a little. The old—your father—wouldn't buy any parlor tricks. He'd want to see that machine."

"Then let's stall. Can you fix me up with a telekin—telekineticist? That what you call them?"

"TK," she said absently. "I've got something a heap better than any TK. How'd you like a stationless transplat—a matter transmitter that will lift anything from anywhere to anywhere without centrals or depots?"

"There's no such thing, Granny."

"Why do you say that?"

"All my life I've been a transplat man, that's why. There's a limiting factor on matter transmission. It must have a planetary field; it must have a directing central; it must have platforms built of untransmissible material and—"

"Don't tell *me* how a transplat works," she snapped. "Suppose a machine was designed on totally different principles. A forcepump instead of a suction pump. Or an Archimedes screw."

"There isn't any other principle! Don't you think I *know*?"

"I'll show you the damn machine!" She marched to the angled wall of the little room and bumped a scuff-plate near the floor. The entire wall slid upward into the ceiling, swift and silent. Lights blazed.

It was quite a laboratory. Much of its equipment he had thought existed only in factories. Most was incomprehensible to him.

Granny walked briskly down an aisle and stopped at the far wall. Ranged against it was a glittering cluster of equipment beneath a desk-sized control panel. The desk surface seemed to be a vision screen, though it was hinged at the top. At the side, he saw what looked like manipulator controls of the kind used in radiation laboratories.

"There's a servo-robot this size on a hill about forty miles from here," said Granny.

She turned a switch, sat down over the screen and began to spin two control wheels.

"Tell you what it does," she said abstractedly as she worked, "though this ain't really the way it does it. Plot a straight line out from this machine and a line from the other. Where they intersect, that's your transmission point. Now draw two more lines from the equipment and where *they* cross, that's the arrival point. When they're set up, you haul on this 'snivvy' and what was *here* is now *there*. The stuff doesn't travel any more than it does with a transplat. It ceases to exist at one point and conservation of matter makes it appear at another. But you've created just the strain in space which makes it show up."

"Show me."

"All right. Call it."

"My old wallet. Top drawer, left side in the office. Drawer's locked, by the way," he said.

"What's the matrix?"

He reeled off the address co-ordinates. She tapped them on a keyboard and bent over the screen. It showed a Stasis unit. She spun a wheel and the buildings rushed closer. Her hand dropped back to a vernier and the view slowed, seemed to press through the roof and hover over a desk.

"Right?"

"Go on," he said. "Pretty fair spy-ray you have there."

"You don't know!" She reached and from a speaker came the quiet bustle of the office. She went back to the controls and the view sank into the desktop. Suddenly, the contents of the drawer were there. With the manipulators, she deftly hooked the wallet, raised it a fraction. Then the scene disappeared as she shifted to another set of controls.

"Receiver location," she murmured. The garbled picture cleared, became a mass of girders and then a bird's-eye view of the room they stood in, so clear that Roan looked up with a start. He could see nothing. "Stick out your stupid hand," said Granny.

He obeyed and she brought the scene down to it until its image hung in the center of the picture. Roan wiggled his

fingers. Granny cut back to the other view, checked it, then threw over the "snivvy" she had shown him earlier.

The wallet dropped into his hand.

She switched off, turned and looked up at him. "Well?"

He said, "Why play around like this?"

"What do you mean?"

"This thing doesn't do what you say it does. I got the wallet, sure, but not with that thing."

"Do tell. All right, how *did* you get the wallet?"

He considered the instrument carefully. "It's a sort of amplifier—yes, and range-finder, too. It just gets a fix for your TK man. Right?"

"You really think I've got a high-powered psychic hiding around here who does the work after I get it with the finder?"

"You're the TK!"

She slumped resignedly at the controls. "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. Old Roman saying. If that's what you say it is, boy, then that's what it is."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" he grumbled, looking at his watch. "So now what do we do?"

"Wait a minute—I've got to get used to something." She hung over the console and then glanced up brightly. "I'll break out the pilot model. You can't tote this thing under your arm."

She went to a storage wall and dragged out a bin. It was a long box. Roan helped her open it and lift out the spindly collection of coils and bars, setting it on a bench.

"I'll check you through this." She flung off her wrapper and advanced on the machine. "Just turn it on its side for me," she said. "What are you gawping at? Oh!" She looked down at her shorts and halter, and laughed. "I *told* you it was too hot in here."

It was not that age had left no marks on her compact body, but certainly not two centuries' worth. Holding a light-duty soldering iron near her cheek, she slapped herself on the bare midriff.

"One thing you might keep in mind about women as you get to know 'em, Roany—the parts that the decent people expose are exactly the ones that get old first. This face of mine was gone at 75, but the tummy's good for another

hundred yet." She bent over the device. "Maybe it's better that way, maybe not—who's to say? Hand me the millivolt-meter there."

After a time, her work with the machine took precedence over everything else in Roan's cosmos. "You sure can get around in there," he said, awed, as he held the light for her.

"Think so?" she grunted, and went on working steadily.

VIII.

AT 1451, Roan Walsh arrived at the Walsh Building. His head spun with its lopsided weight of advice, technical data and strategy. His arrival was in the warehouse, not in the office, for he brought a long wooden box on casters. He pushed the box himself up the long corridor to the office wing.

"Oh, Roan Walsh, can I help?"

"No, Corsonmay. Wait— Yes, come in." He put his hands on the end of the box and nodded at the dithering secretary. "Grab hold here."

She came close, tittered and let the tips of her gloves show for an instant before she slipped them clumsily under the end of the box.

Not that end up, you addlehead.

Roan yelped and let go. Corsonmay, now bearing most of the not inconsiderable weight, began to mew rapidly. Roan, sitting flat on the floor, gasped. "Who said that?"

"Ewpl" squeaked Corsonmay. "It's heavy!"

"Let it down. My God, Corsonmay, you're as strong as a horse!"

"That's the nicest thing you ever said to me," she beamed without sarcasm.

He turned to her, found himself face to face with her withered ardency. "What did you say about lifting up the wrong end, Corsonmay?"

"I didn't say anything."

I did.

"Byemay," he said, and forestalling her, added, "Really— nothing more. Byemay."

She left and he whirled, hunting futilely in midair. "Granny! Where are you?"

Briefly, just at eye-level, the business end of a needle-focus audio beam projector appeared. Roan patted it happily and it disappeared. Bless her, she'd be watching everything through her big machine, her audio aimed for his inner ear every second.

At 1559.5, the ceiling said, "Roan Walsh, you may step in now."

"Coming, Private." He all but started at the sound of his own voice. How was it that, though he seemed increasingly able to cope with anyone or anything, his father's voice still turned him to mush?

But that could wait. He stepped just inside the room.

"Come, come—stand close. I intend to do one of several things, but biting is not one of them."

Roan stayed where he was. "May I have the Private's permission to bring a piece of equipment in?"

"You have my permission to bring those cards in, revised or not. Nothing more."

"The Private deprives me of the use of evidence he himself assigned me to bring," Roan said stiffly.

"Do I now?" The beard, its lower end invisible under the privacy hood, was pulled thoughtfully. "Very well. But I should warn you—you have no leeway, young man. None!"

Roan wheeled the box through the doorway. He was shaking with apprehension, but Granny's voice pleaded inaudibly, *Trust me.*

Even in front of his father, he nearly smiled. He locked the casters and, with a tremendous effort, heaved the box up on end. The right end, this time.

"What the devil's *that?*" demanded the beard.

"My evidence, Private." Outwardly calm, inwardly aquiver, he drew out the top section of the box with its two knobs and their two sets of horns. Each horn was hollow and had a light inside. Roan turned them on.

"I asked you a question," rumbled the Private.

"Your patience," Roan responded.

What patience? Granny's chuckle did more good for Roan than a week's delay.

"Ready now, Private. May I have the use of some small object—your stylus, perhaps, or a small book?"

"You have taken my money and you are taking my time. Is it now your intention to take my property?"

Whyncha spit in his eye?

Roan threw up a glance of such extreme annoyance that the inaudible voice apologized.

Sorry. It's just that I'm on your side, honey.

Honey! He had tasted his very first honey in his "dream." That was a nice thing to call someone. He wondered if anyone had ever thought of it before. To the Private, he said, "If I use my own property, there could be some suspicion of previous preparation."

"I suspect the previous preparation with which you are cluttering up my office already," growled the old man. "Here's the old paperweight. It dates from the time when buildings had sliding panels opening to the outside air. If anything happens to it—"

"It will do," said Roan levelly, taking it without thanks. The Private's eyebrow ridges moved briefly. "Would you kindly point out a spot on the floor?"

With an expression of saintly patience, the Private drew out his stylus and threw it. It fell near the far wall. Roan placed the paperweight near the point of the stylus, on the carpet.

"And one more indulgence. A point on your desk—somewhere with enough area to support that paperweight."

"Damn it, no! Go get those cards and we'll settle the matter in hand. I fail to see—"

Don't let him rant. Find your own spot and ask him if it suits him.

Like a man in a hailstorm, Roan advanced through the booming and shrieking syllables and pointed.

"Will this do?" he shouted, just loud enough to be heard over the storm.

The Private stopped just then and Roan's voice was like an airfoil crashing the sound barrier. Both men recoiled violently; to his own astonishment, Roan found that he recovered first. The old man was still sunk deep in his chair, the base of the beard quivering. In Roan's ear, Granny cackled.

Roan grasped the two horns protruding from one of the

spheres on his machine and turned them so that the beam from each rested on the center of the paperweight.

"The production model would have other means of aiming," he explained as he worked. "This is for demonstration only." The other two beams were aimed at the indicated spot on the desk. "Ready now, Private."

"For what?" snarled the Private, then grunted as if he had swallowed a triple ration of roughage, for when Roan touched the control, there was a soft click and the paperweight appeared on the desk, exactly in the small pool of light from the beams. He put out a hand, hesitated, dropped back in his chair. "Again."

Roan threw the lever the other way. The paperweight lay quietly on the carpet. "For years, I have used every available minute on the research needed for this device and in building it. If the Private feels that the machine is of no use to this firm and the industry, that the time spent on it was wasted or stolen, then I shall be satisfied with his previously suggested—"

"Now come off it, son," said the beard. He rose and approached Roan, but kept his eyes glued on the machine in fascination. "You know the old man was just trying to throw a scare into you."

Got 'im!

"Could a large model be built?"

"Larger than a transplat," Roan said.

"Have you built any larger than this?"

Tell him yes!

"Yes, Private."

Slowly the Private's eyes left the machine and traveled to Roan's face. Roan would have liked to retreat, but his back was against the wooden case.

Watch out!

"You feel this could be better than the transplat?"

Yes. Tell 'im yes—even if it hurts, tell 'im!"

Roan found he could not speak. He tremblingly nodded his head.

"Hmm." The Private walked around the machine and back, though there was nothing to be seen. "Tell me," he said gently, "is this machine built on the same principle as the transplat?"

Sweat broke out on Roan's brow. He wished he could wipe it off, but to raise his glove would have been a rudeness. He let it trickle.

"No," he whispered.

"You are telling me that this is a new kind of machine, better than the transplat!" When Roan neither moved nor spoke, the Private suddenly shouted, "Liar!"

Roan, white, dry-mouthed, with a great effort brought his eyes up to meet those of the livid Private. "A transplat can't do that," he said, nodding to the paperweight.

"You've got to be lying! If there was such a machine as this, you couldn't build it. You couldn't even conceive it! Where did you get it?"

Say you built it—quick!

"I built it," Roan breathed.

"I can't understand it," mumbled the Private.

Roan had never seen him so distressed and his curiosity got the better of his own tension. "What is it that you want me to say, Private?"

The Private swung around, face to face with his son. "You're holding something back. What is it?"

This is it! Now hold tight, honey. Tell him it works by PK.

Roan shook his head and set his lips, and the Private roared at him. "Are you refusing to answer me?"

Tell him, tell him about the PK. Tell him!

Roan had never felt so torn apart. There had to be more to this than he knew about. What was pushing him? What tied his tongue, knotted his stomach, swelled his throat?

Trust me, Roan. Trust me, no matter what.

It broke him. He choked out, "This is only a direction-finder. It works by psychokinetic energy."

"By what? What?" The Private fairly bounced with eagerness.

"It's called PK. Mental power."

"Then it really isn't a machine at all!"

"Well—yes, you might say so. That's my theory, anyway." And where were the tied tongue, the aching throat? Gone!

"And you believe in that psycho-stuff?"

Roan found himself smiling. "It works."

"Why were you hiding it?"

"Would you have believed in such a thing, Private?"

"I confess I wouldn't."

"Well then—I wanted to get it finished and tested, that's all."

"Then what?"

Give it to him. I mean it—give it to him!

"Why, it's yours. Ours. The company's. What else?"

The dry sound was the slow rubbing of gloved hands together. The other, which only Roan heard, was Granny's acid chuckle. *And he didn't even ask where the psychic operator was—notice? And he never will.*

The Private said, "Would you like to work with the Development Department on the thing?"

Sure, honey. I'll never let you down.

"Fine," Roan said.

"You'll never know—you can't know what this really means," said the Private. For a moment, Roan was sure he was going to clap him on the shoulder or some such unthinkable thing. "I can own up to a mistake. You should've been on the nuts-and-bolts end right from the start. Instead, I had you chasing inventories and consignments. Well, you've shown up the old man. From now on, your time's your own. You just work on anything around here that amuses you."

"I couldn't do that!"

Yes, by God, you could! snapped the voice in his ear. *And while he's soft, hit him again. Get your own home.*

His own home! With one of those PK machines, he could go anywhere, any time. He could take Val—and find Flower again!

IX.

It was warm and windy and very dark. The village was asleep and only a handful of people sat around the great trestle table in the clearing. The stars watched them and the night-birds called.

"To get grim about it," said the old lady in a voice a good deal less than grim, "breaking up a culture isn't something you can do on an afternoon off. You've got to know where it's been and where it is, before you know where it's going. That takes a good deal of time. Then you have to decide how much it needs changing and, after that, whether

or not you were right when you decided. Then it's a good idea to know for sure—but for *sure*—that you don't push it so far, it flops over some other gruesome way."

"But I was right all the same, wasn't I?" Roan insisted.

"Bless you, yes. You don't know how right."

"Then tell me."

"Some of it'll hurt."

"Don't hurt him," said Flower, half-seriously. Roan took her hand in the dark, feeling, as always, the indescribable flood within him brought by the simple touch of living flesh.

"Have to, honey," said Granny. "Blisters'll hurt him too, and his joints will ache at plowin' time, but in the long run he'll be all the better for it. Who's there?" she called.

A voice from the darkness answered, deep and happy, "Me, Granny. Prester."

"Hi, Granny," said Val. They came into the dim, warm glow of the hurricane lamp guttering on the table. Val was wearing a very short sleeveless tunic, which looked as if a spider had spun it. She and Prester moved arm in arm like a single being. Looking at her face, Roan felt dazzled. He squeezed Flower's hand and found her smiling.

"Sit down, kids. I want you to hear this, too. Roan, would you do something for me—something hard?"

"What is it?"

"Promise to shut up until I've finished, no matter what?"

"That's not hard."

"No, huh? All right, Flower, tell us all just exactly what psi powers you have."

Roan closed his eyes in delight, picturing again Flower's appearance in his cubicle, her birdlike flitting about the gateway during his dream, the cup she had drawn out of thin air for him. She said, "None that I know of, Granny."

"What!" he exploded.

Granny snapped, "You have promised to shut up!" To Flower, she went on, "And who's got the most psi potential in the place, far as we know?"

"Annie," said Flower.

"The fifteen-year-old I told you about," Granny explained to Roan. "The one who can knock over a straight-edge. Shut up! Let me finish!"

With a great effort, he subsided.

"In a way, we've lied to you," said Granny, "and, in a way, we haven't. I once told you some of what I've been thinking of—the new race of people that has to be along some day, if we let it—the next step up. I believe in them, Roan; call that a dream if you like. And when you had your dream those two days, we made the dream come true for a little while. We worked that thing out like a play—I had you in the frame of that new machine of mine all the time.

"It is a new machine, Roan, built on a new principle that the transplat boys never thought of. It's just what I told you it was—a stationless matter transmitter—no central, no depots, no platforms. I used it on every psi incident you witnessed in those two days. Believe me?"

"No!"

"Val?"

"I'd like to," she said diffidently. "But I've always thought—"

"There's no use being tactful about this," said Granny. "For the rest of your life, this is going to bother you, Roan, Val—and, later, a lot of other people we'll bring in. You'll rationalize it or you won't, but you'll never believe I have a new kind of machine. Shut up, Roan!"

"You two and the rest of your generation are the first group to get really efficient crèche conditioning. You don't remember it, but ever since you were suckling babes, you've been forced into one or two basic convictions. Maybe we'll find a way to pry 'em loose from you. One of these convictions is that the transplat is the absolute peak of human technology—that there's only one way to make 'em and that there are only certain things they can do.

"You got it more than Val did, Roan, because you males in the transplat families were the ones who might be expected to develop such a machine. That's why, when this new one was built, *women* built it. Don't fight so, son! We have it, whether you believe it or not. We always will have it from now on. I'm sorry—it hurts you even to hear about it and I know what you went through when you had to sell it to your father. You damn near choked to death!"

Roan breathed heavily, but did not speak. Flower put her arm across his shoulders.

"We had to do it to you, boy, we *had* to—you'll see why,"

said Granny, her old face pinched with worry and tenderness. "I'm coming to that part of it. Like I said, you don't break up a culture just all at once, boom. I wanted to change it, not wreck it. Stasis is the end product of a lot of history. Human beings had clobbered themselves up so much for so long, they developed what you might call a racial phobia against insecurity. When they finally got the chance—the transplat—they locked themselves up tight with it. That isn't what the transplat was for, originally. It was supposed to disperse humanity over the globe again, after centuries of huddling. *Hah!*

"About the time they started deep conditioning in the crèches, walling each defenseless new generation off from new thoughts, new places, new ways of life, a few of us started to fear for humanity. Stasis was the first human culture to try to make new ideas impossible. I think it might have been humanity's first eternal culture. I really do. But I think it would also have been humanity's worst one.

"So along came Roan—the first of the deep-conditioned transplat executives, incapable of believing the service could be improved. There were—are—plenty more in other industries and we're going after 'em now, but transplat is the keystone. Roan, believe it or not, you were a menace. You had to be stopped. We couldn't have you heading the firm without introducing the new machine, yet if it weren't introduced in your generation, it never would.

"Your father is the last weak link, the last with the kind of imperfect conditioning that would let him even consider an innovation—remember your suggestion for eliminating freight operators? Only he would be unconditioned just enough to put our new machine into Development before realizing that, once in use, every cubicle in the whole human structure will suddenly be open to the sky. And it's all right—he can be trusted with it, because his 'decency' won't let him abuse privacy. *We'll* take care of that side of it!"

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that about him," said Roan miserably.

"I'm sorry, boy. Does it do any good to tell you that subservience and blind respect for your father are conditioned, too? I wish I could help you—you'll have that particular sore toe tramped on all your life. Anyway, enter Roan, just when

we've perfected the new machine. There would have been no problem if we could have broken your conditioning against it, but the only alternatives seemed to be—either you'd see the machine operate and think you had lost your sanity, or you'd use your position in the firm to eliminate all trace of it."

He objected, "But you were wrong both ways."

"That's because we discovered that the conditioning against any new transplat was against any new *machine*—any new *device*," Granny replied. "They'd never thought of matter transmission by a method *which was in no way a device*!"

"Can you see now why your father was so upset when he was faced with you and your pilot model? One of the props of his decent little Universe was that the conditioning would stick—that of all people on Earth, you'd be the last to even think of a new machine, let alone build one. And when at last you came out with that gobbledygook about psychic power, he recognized the rationalization for what it was and felt safe again. Stasis was secure.

"I don't mind telling you that you made us jump the gun a bit. Our initial plan was to recruit carefully, just the way we did you. Dreams—unexpected and high-powered appeals to everything humanity has that Stasis is crushing. Then when there were enough of us wilderness people, maybe the gates would open. But ultimately we'd win—we have all nature and God Himself on our side.

"But you came along—what a candidate! You responded right down the line—so much so that, if we'd given you your head, you'd have dynamited Stasis and probably yourself and us along with it! And you took to that psi idea the way you took to the steak we planted in your nutrient that day, testing for food preference before the dream sequence. All of a sudden, you wanted to plant our machine spang in the middle of Stasis! It was chancy, but—well, you've seen what happened."

"Can I talk now?" Roan asked uncomfortably.

"Sure, boy."

"I'm not going to argue with you about the new machine—how it works, I mean. All you've done is give Stasis a more

efficient machine. You can interfere with the new network, but you could do that anyway with the one you already had. So what's the big advantage?"

Granny chuckled. From a side pocket, she dug a white object and tossed it across the table. It left a powdery spoor as it rolled. "Know what that is?"

"Chalk?" asked Val.

"No, it isn't," Roan said. "It's Lunar pumice. I've seen a lot of that stuff."

"Well, you'll have to take my word for it," said Granny, "though I'll demonstrate any time you say—but I got that at 1430 this very afternoon—off the Moon, using only the machine you saw in the lab."

"Off the *Moon!*"

"Yup. That's the advantage of the new machine. The transplat operates inside a spherical gravitic field, canceling matter at certain points and recreating it at others—a closed system. But the new machine operates on paragravitic lines—straight lines of subspatial force which stretch from every mass in the Universe to every other. Mass canceled at one point on the line recurs at another point. Like the transplat, the new machine takes no time to cross any distance, because it doesn't actually cover distance.

"The range seems to be infinite—there's a limitation on rangefinding, but it's a matter only of the distance between the two parts of the machine. I got the Moon easily with a forty-mile baseline. Put me a robot on the Moon and I can reach Mars. Set up a baseline between here and Mars and I can spit on Alpha Centauri. In other words, an open system."

They were silent as Roan raised his eyes and, for a dazzling moment, visualized the stars supporting a blazing network of lines stretching from each planet, each star, to all the others—a net that pulsed with the presence of a humanity unthinkably vast.

Prester murmured, "Anybody want to buy a good spaceship?"

"Why did you do it?" whispered Val, ever so softly, as if she were in a cathedral.

"You mean why couldn't I mind my own business and let the world happily dry up and blow away?" Granny chuckled.

"I guess because I've always been too busy to sit still. No, I take that back. Say I did it because of my conscience."

"Conscience?"

"It was Granny who built the first transplat," Flower explained.

"And *you* were telling her what could and couldn't be done, Roan!" gasped Val.

"I still say—" he objected in irritation, and then he began to laugh. "I once took a politeness-present to Granny. Knitting. Something for the old folk to do while they watch the Sun sink."

They all laughed and Flower said, "Granny won't knit."

"Not for a while yet," Granny said, and grinned up at the sky.

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**THEY HAD
REMOVED HIS SKIN**
and replaced it
with a synthetic substance.

BUT WHY?

Jadiver stepped from the bath and examined himself carefully. There were marks on the new skin, so faint as to be almost invisible. No, not on the skin—beneath it. A network that spread over his body, arms, legs, face. Perhaps on his head as well, though he couldn't see that.

WHY?

Suddenly he knew. That network of marks was a circuit—a circuit to gather data and broadcast it. He was to be a spy without knowing it—without being able to help it.

BUT FOR WHOM?