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THE COMPLETE BOOK

THE FIFTH GALAXY READER

edited by H. L. GOLD

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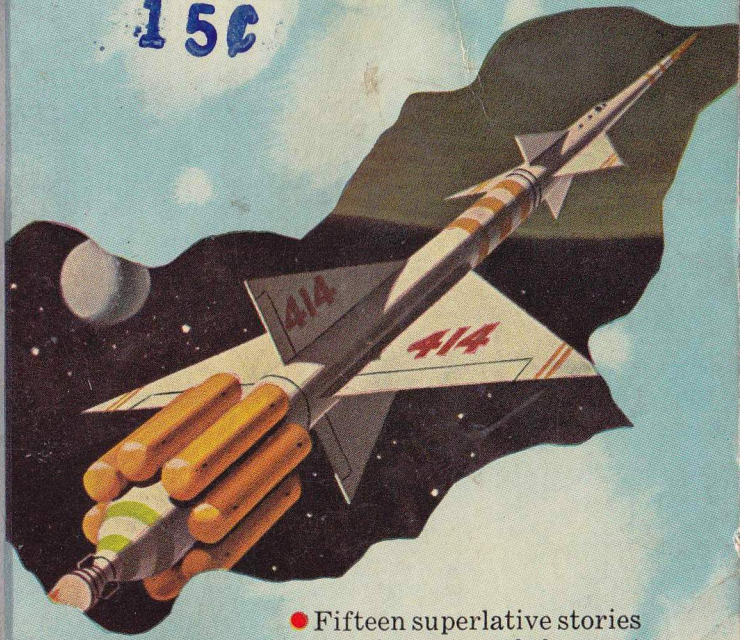

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THE FIFTH GALAXY READER

Edited by H. L. GOLD

A POCKET BOOK EDITION published by
POCKET BOOKS, INC. • NEW YORK

THE FIFTH GALAXY READER

Doubleday edition published March, 1961

POCKET BOOK edition published February, 1963
1st printing.....December, 1962

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 Timothy and Natalie
—restorers of faith and spirit—
with deepest affection and thanks

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INTRODUCTION

EXCEPT possibly to other anthologists, the authors included herein and maybe some who are not, the two truly wonderful persons to whom this book is dedicated, and perhaps a curious few, it's my belief that introductions to books are more widely skipped by readers than rope is by children around the world.

Well, good. That takes off a lot of restraint and makes this a kind of talk with very warm and dear friends. They may disagree. I hope they do; any single viewpoint inflicted on a literature is the end of that literature. I'm afraid some authors think that's what I'm doing when the fact is that I can put aside any personal conviction of mine for the sake of a good story, and insist that the story be true to its theme. "Willing suspension of disbelief" is what that used to be called. Jolt that willing suspension into a "Huh?" and there is a story flaw that needs repairing. As an editor, I can spot these wrong turns. As a writer, I'm no better judge of holes in my own logic than any other writer. When I violate the pure necessities of the story and that grand old salty doctrine "*Show* 'em. Don't *tell* 'em!", I need and am grateful for the same point-outs and resent it when I see a fumble-fingered story of mine in print that could and should have been set right.

Am I serious about this? I couldn't be more serious. Do I enjoy doing revisions? No more than the next writer. But listen to this:

A story I had done about four or five million words ago—which *does* qualify me as writer as well as editor, doesn't it?—was picked for anthologization a while back. I read the story and it had gone so cold, a literary term for objectivity, not quality, that I read it as if it had been written by somebody else. I was delighted by the plotting—and, honestly, I couldn't guess the ending! But I *refused* to let it be anthologized unless I could revise the entire first section, a full quarter of the story, which was granted. Did it pay financially? Of course not—but it's a better story and may pay yet. And even the payment isn't the criterion. I had done to it what should have been done in the first place, which wasn't for me to detect, because, like any other author, I had my nose pressed so closely to the story that I couldn't see what was wrong. Had the revision been asked for, I would have grumbled and felt put upon—but the story needed it.

There's nothing unique about any of this. To all but hacks and those who feel they are carving words into the Great Pyramid, a story is a fluid thing, not only up to the moment it appears in type, but sometimes afterward as well. That's why serials, to pick the most frequent examples, so often do not appear in book form exactly as they did in magazines.

There are at least a couple of reasons for this. One is that editors had damned well better demand the right to make mistakes; the only way to avoid them is to make the biggest mistake of all—do nothing. Another is that editing, like all human occupations, is a matter of compromise; beyond a certain point, either the author tries elsewhere or the editor takes something he feels isn't as good as it might be but is worth buying. He can be wrong and so can the author—either way. Same as all other editors, I've turned down stories I later wished I had bought, and I'm just one of the many writers who saw their stuff in print, realized what wasn't right about it, and had the chance to revise.

Funny thing about that story I was talking about before. I knew it needed a love interest and couldn't think of a single way to get it in. Well, there's a screen treatment out looking for a producer and the man who wrote it found so simple a solution that I was stunned! I'd been thinking all around the answer when there it was!

If you're looking for lessons to be derived, here, how about this: I could have solved the problem in a lot less than a million years, but why hang me up when an objective eye could do it so quickly and easily?

The one thing that the master craftsman envies in the apprentice is his fire. It occasionally does produce something volcanic, but then the poor wight tries to follow up and is in for a hard time, for the very reason that he is an apprentice and has done the equivalent of a pre-med student performing a brilliant major operation.

The master craftsman has gone clear through the process of learning from example, books, lectures—and doing—and he discards much, much more than he uses, because he has a far wider knowledge of, let's say, his tools, how effective they are, which are called for in this or that situation, and why, and how to work them.

But the notorious and feared "writer's slump," which has parallels in other human occupations, often is the result of discarding perfectly valid material, along with the wrong turns. The writer, in other words, has self-criticized himself right out of production. Sibelius is a harrowing example of that in music; he never stopped composing until he died, but for the last thirty years of his life, every piece he did wound up in the wastebasket.

An editor can sometimes take a writer off his own hands. I've done it, and I've had it done for me. The unblocking is not easy work for either author or editor, but once the author is gotten out of his own way he flows!

There's a terribly tragic case in C. M. Kornbluth, who is represented posthumously in this book in collaboration. After years of interdicting me because I never seemed satis-

fied to him, he got an editorial job and told me he saw what I had meant and what, he asked, was the answer? I said, "It couldn't be simpler. Just put out a better magazine than the material that's submitted to you." No, he didn't think that was arrogant; he saw the plain necessity. Of course there are naturals, but not enough to meet deadlines—and, authors' beliefs to the contrary, magazines are not assembled by rejections. If author and editor happen to like each other, that's fine, but it's not a requirement, I told him, any more than between salesman and customer. And, no, he didn't think that brash or crass, for editing looks entirely different on the opposite side of the desk, and he knew I knew both sides. I was due to get a real output from him—and he died a week later—ironically, shoveling the last snow of that winter.

As writer, I agree that editors seem impossible to please. As editor, I know why. A writer has a responsibility only to himself; an editor's responsibility is to his whole audience. Hence an editor can't professionally have tastes or he would be publishing a magazine for only a half or quarter or less of his readers.

There's a great deal to be said for integrity of material, and don't think it's not being said at stupefying length, and any good editor sweats at keeping that integrity, especially when the author loses hold of it here and there. The integrity as the editor sees it? No, as the material demands. An extreme instance I remember is: "Gibbering idiotically, his bare feet padded across the floor." Leave it as is? Or take the author's foot out of his (here it was her) mouth? And just as a writer can goof, so, as noted before, can an editor—but, not being emotionally involved, he's less likely to, and he's also more likely to admit it if he does.

To writers who haven't gone through the open hearth of story conferences, there's something frightening in the eagerness of editors out after a potential smash of a story. As Pohl said of *Gravy Planet,* retitled *The Space Merchants* in book form, "It would have been a better story if you hadn't interfered. It wouldn't have been written, but it would have been

a better story." Aside from not liking to read unwritten stories, I can't put out a magazine with them, can I?

And so to the stories in this anthology. If you like every one of them, either you're omnivorous or I flubbed. Herbert Bayard Swopes said it best for all editors: He had no formula for publishing a successful newspaper, but he did have for a flop—try to please everybody. What you like in this book, others won't, and vice versa, and the stories were purposefully chosen—as they were in the magazine—not to please everybody. If you like none, you're less satisfiable than an editor.

H. L. Gold

By William W. Stuart

INSIDE JOHN BARTH

I

TAKE a fellow, reasonably young, personable enough, health perfect. Suppose he has all the money he can reasonably, or even unreasonably, use. He is successful in a number of different fields of work in which he is interested. Certainly he has security. Women? Well, maybe not any woman in the world he might want. But still, a very nice, choice selection of a number of the very finest physical specimens. The finest—and no acute case of puritanism to inhibit his enjoyment.

Take all that. Then add to it the positive assurance of continuing youth and vigor, with a solid life expectancy of from 175 to 200 more years. Impossible? Well—just suppose it were all true of someone. A man like that, a man with all those things going for him, you'd figure he would be the happiest man in the world.

Wouldn't you?

Sure. A man with all that would have to be the happiest—unless he was crazy. Right? But me, Johnny Barth, I had it.

I had all of it, just like that. I sure wasn't the happiest man in the world though. And I know I wasn't crazy either. The thing about me was, I wasn't a man. Not exactly.

I was a colony.

Really. A colony. A settlement. A new but flourishing culture, you might say. Oh, I had the look of a man, and the mind and the nerves and the feel of a man, too. All the normal parts and equipment. But all of it existed—and was beautifully kept up, I'll say that—primarily as a locale, not a man.

I was, as I said before, a colony.

Sometimes I used to wonder how New England really felt about the Pilgrims. If you think that sounds silly—perhaps one of these days you won't.

The beginning was some ten years back, on a hunting trip the autumn after I got out of college. That was just before I started working, as far off the bottom as I could talk myself, which was the personnel office in my Uncle John's dry-cleaning chain in the city.

That wasn't too bad. But I was number four man in the office, so it could have been better, too. Uncle John was a bachelor, which meant he had no daughter I could marry Anyway, she would have been my cousin. But next best, I figured, was to be on good personal terms with the old bull.

That wasn't too hard. Apart from expecting rising young executives to rise and start work no later than 8:30 A.M., Uncle John was more or less all right. Humor him? Well, every fall he liked to go hunting. So when he asked me to go hunting with him up in the Great Sentries, I knew I was getting along pretty well. I went hunting. The trip was nothing very much. We camped up in the hills. We drank a reasonably good bourbon. We hunted—if that's the word for it. Me, I'd done my hitch in the Army. I know what a gun is—and respect it. Uncle John provided our hunting excitement by turning out to be one of the trigger-happy types. His score was two cows, a goat, a couple of other hunters, one possible deer—and unnumbered shrubs and bushes shot *at*. Luckily he was such a lousy shot that the safest things in the mountains were his targets.

Well, no matter. I tried to stay in the second safest place,

which was directly behind him. So it was a nice enough trip with no casualties, right up to the last night.

We were all set to pack out in the morning when it happened. Maybe you read about the thing at the time. It got a lighthearted play in the papers, the way those things do. "A one-in-a-billion accident," they called it.

We were lounging by the campfire after supper and a few good snorts. Uncle John was entertaining himself with a review of some of his nearer, more thrilling misses. I, to tell the truth, was sort of dozing off.

Then, all of a sudden, there was a bright flash of blue-green light and a loud sort of a *zoop-zing* sound. And a sharp, stinging sensation in my thighs.

I hollered. I jumped to my feet. I looked down, and my pants were peppered with about a dozen little holes, like buckshot. I didn't have to drop my pants to know my legs were, too. I could feel it. And blood started to ooze.

I figured, of course, that Uncle John had finally shot me, and I at once looked on the bright side. I would be a cinch for a fast promotion to vice-president. But Uncle John swore he hadn't been near a gun. So we guessed some other hunter must have done it, seen what he had done, and then prudently ducked. At least no one stepped forward.

It was a moonlight night. With Uncle John helping me, we made it the two and a half miles back down the trail to Poxville, where we'd left our car and stuff. We routed out the only doctor in the area, old Doc Grandy.

He grumbled, "Hell, boy, a few little hunks o' buckshot like that and you make such a holler. I see a dozen twice's bad as this ever' season. Ought to make you wait till office hours. Well—hike yourself up on the table there. I'll flip 'em out for you."

Which he proceeded to do. If it was a joke to him, it sure wasn't to me, even if they weren't in very deep. Finally he was done. He stood there clucking like an old hen with no

family but a brass doorknob. Something didn't seem quite right to him.

Uncle John gave me a good belt of the bourbon he'd been thoughtful enough to pack along.

"What was it you say hit you, boy?" Doc Grandy wanted to know, reaching absently for the bottle.

"Buckshot, I suppose. What was it you just hacked out of me?"

"Hah!" He passed the bottle back to Uncle John. "Not like any buckshot I ever saw. Little balls, or shells of metallic stuff all right. But not lead. Peculiar. M-mph. You know what, boy?"

"You're mighty liberal with the iodine, I know that. What else?"

"You say you saw a big flash of light. Come to think on it, I saw a streak of light up the mountainside about that same time. I was out on the porch. You know, boy, I believe you got something to feel right set up about. I believe you been hit by a meteor. If it weren't—ha-ha—pieces of one of them flying saucers you read about."

Well, I didn't feel so set up about it, then or ever. But it did turn out he was right.

Doc Grandy got a science professor from Eastern State Teachers College there in Poxville to come look. He agreed that they were meteor fragments. The two of them phoned it in to the city papers during a slow week and, all in all, it was a big thing. To them. To me it was nothing much but a pain in the rear.

The meteor, interviewed scientists were quoted as saying, must have almost burned up coming through the atmosphere, and disintegrated just before it hit me. Otherwise I'd have been killed. The Poxville professor got very long-winded about the peculiar shape and composition of the pieces, and finally carried off all but one for the college museum. Most likely they're still there. One I kept as a souvenir, which was silly. It wasn't a thing I wanted to remember—or, as I found later, would ever be able to forget. Anyway, I lost it.

All right. That was that and, except for a lingering need to sit on very soft cushions, the end of it—I thought. We went back to town.

Uncle John felt almost as guilty about the whole thing as if he had shot me himself and, in November, when he found out about old Bert Winginheimer interviewing girl applicants for checker jobs at home in his apartment, I got a nice promotion.

Working my way up, I was a happy, successful businessman. And then, not all at once but gradually, a lot of little things developed into problems. They weren't really problems either, exactly. They were puzzles. Nothing big, but—well, it was like I was sort of being made to do, or not do, certain things. Like being pushed in one direction or another. And not necessarily the direction I personally would have picked. Like—

Well, one thing was shaving.

I had always used an ordinary safety razor—nicked myself not more than average. It seemed O.K. to me. Never cared too much for electric razors; it didn't seem to me they shaved as close. But—I took to using an electric razor now, because I had to.

One workday morning I dragged myself to the bathroom of my bachelor apartment to wash and shave. Getting started in the morning was never a pleasure to me. But this time seemed somehow tougher than usual. I lathered my face and put a fresh blade in my old razor.

For some reason, I could barely force myself to start. "Come on, Johnny boy!" I told myself. "Let's go!" I made myself take a first stroke with the razor. Man! It burned like fire. I started another stroke, and the burning came before the razor even touched my face. I had to give up. I went down to the office without a shave.

That was no good, of course, so at the coffee break I forced myself around the corner to the barbershop. Same thing! I got all lathered up all right, holding myself by force in the chair. But before the barber could touch the razor to my face, the burning started again.

I stopped him. I couldn't take it.

And then suddenly the idea came to me that an electric razor would be the solution. It wasn't, actually, just an idea; it was positive knowledge. Somehow I knew an electric razor would do it. I picked one up at the drugstore around the corner and took it to the office. Plugged the thing in and went to work. It was fine, as I had known it would be. As close a shave? Well, no. But at least it was a shave.

Another thing was my approach to—or retreat from—drinking. Not that I ever was a real rummy, but I hadn't been one to drag my feet at a party. Now I got so moderate it hardly seemed worth bothering with at all. I could only take three or four drinks, and that only about once a week. The first time I had that feeling I should quit after four, I tried just one—or two—more. At the first sip of number five, I thought the top of my head would blast off. Four was the limit. Rigidly enforced.

All that winter, things like that kept coming up. I couldn't drink more than so much coffee. Had to take it easy on smoking. Gave up ice skating—all of a sudden the cold bothered me. Stay up late nights and chase around? No more; I could hardly hold my eyes open after ten.

That's the way it went.

I had these feelings, compulsions actually. I couldn't control them. I couldn't go against them. If I did, I would suffer for it.

True, I had to admit that probably all these things were really good for me. But it got to where everything I did was something that was good for me—and that was bad. Hell, it isn't natural for a young fellow just out of college to live like a fussy old man of seventy with a grudge against the undertaker. Life became very dull!

About the only thing I could say for it was, I was sure healthy.

It was the first winter since I could remember that I never caught a cold. A cold? I never once sniffled. My health was perfect; never even so much as a pimple. My dandruff and athlete's foot disappeared. I had a wonderful appetite—which

was lucky, since I didn't have much other recreation left. And I didn't even gain weight!

Well, those things were nice enough, true. But were they compensation for the life I was being forced to live? Answer: uh-uh. I couldn't imagine what was wrong with me.

Of course, as it turned out the following spring, I didn't have to imagine it. I was told.

II

It was a Friday. After work I stopped by Perry's Bar with Fred Schingle and Burk Walters from the main accounting office. I was hoping it would turn out to be one of my nights to have a couple—but no. I got the message and sat there, more or less sulking, in my half of the booth.

Fred and Burk got to arguing about flying saucers. Fred said yes; Burk, no. I stirred my coffee and sat in a neutral corner.

"Now look here," said Burk, "you say people have seen things. All right. Maybe some of them have seen things—weather balloons, shadows, meteors maybe. But spaceships? Nonsense."

"No nonsense at all. I've seen pictures. And some of the reports are from airline pilots and people like that, who are not fooled by balloons or meteors. They have seen ships, I tell you, ships from outer space. And they are observing us."

"Drivel!"

"It is not!"

"It's drivel. Now look, Fred. You, too, Johnny, if you're awake over there. How long have they been reporting these things? For years. Ever since World War II.

"All right. Ever since the war, at least. So. Suppose they were spaceships? Whoever was in them must be way ahead of us technically. So why don't they land? Why don't they approach us?"

Fred shrugged. "How would I know? They probably have their reasons. Maybe they figure we aren't worth any closer contact."

"Hah! Nonsense. The reason we don't see these space people, Fred my boy, admit it, is because there aren't any. And you know it!"

"I don't know anything of the damned sort. For all any of us know, they might even be all around us right now."

Burk laughed. I smiled, a little sourly, and drained my coffee.

I felt a little warning twinge.

Too much coffee; should have taken milk. I excused myself as the other two ordered up another round.

I left. The conversation was too stupid to listen to. Space creatures all around me, of all things. How wrong can a man get? There weren't any invaders from space all around me.

I was all around them.

All at once, standing there on the sidewalk outside Perry's Bar, I knew that it was true. Space invaders. The Earth was invaded—the Earth, hell! *I* was invaded. I didn't know how I knew, but I knew all right. I should have. I was in possession of all the information.

I took a cab home to my apartment.

I was upset. I had a right to be upset and I wanted to be alone. Alone? That was a joke!

Well, my cab pulled up in front of my very modest place. I paid the driver, overtipped him—I was really upset—and ran up the stairs. In the apartment I hustled to the two-by-four kitchen and, with unshakable determination, I poured myself a four-finger snort of scotch.

Then I groaned and poured it down the sink. Unshakable determination is all very well—but when the top of your head seems to rip loose like a piece of stubborn adhesive coming off a hairy chest and bounces, hard, against the ceiling, then all you can do is give up. I stumbled out to the front room and slumped down in my easy chair to think.

I'd left the door open and I was sitting in a draft.

So I had to—that compulsion—go close the door. *Then* I sat down to think.

Anyway I *thought* I sat down to think. But, suddenly, my thoughts were not my own.

I wasn't producing them; I was receiving them.

"Barth! Oh, Land of Barth. Do you read us, oh Barthland? Do you read us?"

I didn't hear that, you understand. It wasn't a voice. It was all thoughts inside my head. But to me they came in terms of words.

I took it calmly. Surprisingly, I was no longer upset—which, as I think it over, was probably more an achievement of internal engineering than personal stability.

"Yeah," I said, "I read you. So who in hell"—a poor choice of expression—"are you? What are you doing here? Answer me that." I didn't have to say it; the thought would have been enough. I knew that. But it made me feel better to speak out.

"We are Barthians, of course. We are your people. We live here."

"Well, you're trespassing on private property! Get out, you hear me? Get out!"

"Now, now, noble Fatherland. Please, do not become upset and unreasonable. We honor you greatly as our home and country. Surely we who were born and raised here have our rights. True, our forefathers who made the great voyage through space settled first here in a frightful wilderness some four generations back. But we are neither pioneers nor immigrants. We are citizens born."

"Invaders! Squatters!"

"Citizens of Barthland."

"Invaded! Good Lord, of all the people in the world, why me? Nothing like this ever happened to anyone. Why did I have to be picked to be a territory—the first man to have queer things living in me?"

"Oh, please, gracious Fatherland! Permit us to correct you. In the day of our fathers, conditions were, we can assure you, chaotic. Many horrible things lived here. Wild beasts and plant growths of the most vicious types were everywhere."

"There were—"

"What you would call microbes. Bacteria. Fungi. Viruses. Terrible devouring wild creatures everywhere. You were a howling wilderness. Of course, we have cleaned those things up now. Today you are civilized—a fine, healthy individual of your species—and our revered Fatherland. Surely you have noted the vast improvement in your condition!"

"Yes, but—"

"And we pledge our lives to you, oh Barthland. As patriotic citizens we will defend you to the death. We promise you will never be successfully invaded."

Yeah. Well, that was nice. But already I felt as crowded as a subway train with the power cut out at rush hour.

But there was no room for doubt either. I'd had it. I still did have it; had no chance at all of getting rid of it.

They went on then and told me their story.

I won't try to repeat it all verbatim. I couldn't now, since my memory—but that's something else. Anyway, I finally got the picture.

But I didn't get it all the same evening. Oh no. At ten I had to knock it off to go to bed, get my sleep, keep up my health. They were insistent.

As they put it, even if I didn't care for myself, I had to think about an entire population and generations yet unborn. Or unbudded, which was the way they did it.

Well, as they said, we had the whole weekend to work out an understanding. Which we did. When we were through, I didn't like it a whole lot better, but at least I could understand it.

It was all a perfectly logical proposition from their point of view—which differed in quite a number of respects from my own. To them it was simply a matter of survival for their race and their culture. To me it was a matter of who or what I was going to be. But then, I had no choice.

According to the Official History I was given, they came from a tiny planet of a small sun. Actually, their sun was itself a planet, still incandescent, distant, perhaps like Jupiter from

the true sun. Their planet or moon was tiny, wet, and warm. And the temperature was constant.

These conditions, naturally, governed their development—and, eventually, mine.

Of course they were very small, about the size of a dysentery amoeba. The individual life span was short as compared to ours, but the accelerated pace of their lives balanced it out. In the beginning, something like four of our days was a lifetime. So they lived, grew, developed, evolved. They learned to communicate. They became civilized—far more so than we have, according to them. And I guess that was true. They were even able to extend their life span to something like two months.

"And to what," I inquired—but without much fire, I'm afraid; I was losing fight—"to what am I indebted for this intrusion?"

"Necessity."

It was, to them. Their sun had begun to cool. It was their eviction notice.

They had to move or adapt themselves to immeasurably harsher conditions; and they had become so highly developed, so specialized, that change of that sort would have been difficult if not impossible. And they didn't want to change, anyway. They liked themselves as they were.

The only other thing was to escape. They had to work for flight through space. And they succeeded.

There were planets nearer to them than Earth. But these were enormous worlds to them, and the conditions were intolerably harsh. They found one planet with conditions much like those on Earth a few million years back. It was a jungle world, dominated by giant reptiles—which were of no use to the folk. But there were a few, small, struggling, warm-blooded animals. Small to us, that is—they were county size to the folk.

Some genius had a great inspiration. While the environment of the planet itself was impossibly harsh and hostile, the conditions *inside* these warm little animals were highly suitable!

It seemed to be the solution to their problem of survival. Small, trial colonies were established. Communication with the spaceships from home was achieved.

The experiment was a success.

The trouble was that each colony's existence depended on the life of the host. When the animal died, the colony died.

Life on the planet was savage. New colonies would, of course, be passed from individual to individual and generation to generation of the host species. But the inevitable toll of attrition from the violent deaths of the animals appalled this gentle race. And there was nothing they could do about it. They could give protection against disease, but they could not control the hosts. Their scientists figured that, if they could find a form of life having conscious power of reason, they would be able to establish communication and a measure of control. But it was not possible where only instinct existed.

They went ahead because they had no choice. Their only chance was to establish their colonies, accepting the certainty of the slaughter of hundreds upon hundreds of entire communities, and hope that, with their help, evolution on the planet would eventually produce a better host organism. Even of this they were by no means sure. It was a hope. For all they could know, the struggling mammalian life might well be doomed to extermination by the giant reptiles.

They took the gamble. Hundreds of colonies were planted.

They did it, but they weren't satisfied with it. So back on the dying home moon, survivors continued to work. Before the end came, they made one more desperate bid for race survival.

They built interstellar ships to be launched on possibly endless journeys into space. A nucleus of select individuals in a sporelike form of suspended animation was placed on each ship. Ships were launched in pairs, with automatic controls to be activated when they entered into the radius of attraction of a sun. Should the sun have planets such as their own home world—or Earth type—the ships would be guided there. In the

case of an Earth type planet having intelligent life, they would . . .

They would do just what my damned "meteor" had done.

They would home in on an individual, "explode," penetrate —and set up heavy housekeeping on a permanent basis. They did. Lovely. Oh, joy!

Well. We would all like to see the Garden of Eden; but being it is something quite else again.

Me, a colony!

My—uh—population had no idea where they were in relation to their original home, or how long they had traveled through space. They did hope that someplace on Earth their companion ship had established another settlement. But they didn't know. So far on our world, with its masses of powerful electrical impulses, plus those of our own brains, they had found distance communication impossible.

"Well, look, fellows," I said. "Look here now. This is a noble, inspiring story. The heroic struggle of your—uh—people to survive, overcoming all odds and stuff, it's wonderful! And I admire you for it, indeed I do. But—what about me?"

"You, Great Land of Barth, are our beloved home and fatherland for many, many generations to come. You are the mighty base from which we can spread over this enormous planet."

"That's you. What I mean is, what about *me?*"

"Oh? But there is no conflict. Your interests are our interests."

That was how they looked at it. Sincerely. As they said, they weren't ruthless conquerors. They only wanted to get along.

And all they wanted for me were such fine things as good health, long life, contentment. Contentment, sure. Continued irritation—a sour disposition resulting in excess flow of bile—did not provide just the sort of environment in which they cared to bring up the kiddies. Smoking? No. It wasn't healthy.

Alcohol? Well, they were willing to declare a national holiday now and then. Within reason.

Which, as I already knew, meant two to four shots once or twice a week.

Sex? Themselves, they didn't have any. "But," they told me with an attitude of broad tolerance, "we want to be fair. We will not interfere with you in this matter—other than to assist you in the use of sound judgment in the selection of a partner."

But I shouldn't feel that any of this was in any way really restrictive. It was merely practical common sense.

For observing it I would get their valuable advice and assistance in all phases of my life. I would enjoy—or have, anyway—perfect health. My life, if that's what it was, would be extended by better than one hundred years. "You are fortunate," they pointed out, a little smugly I thought, "that we, unlike your race, are conservationists in the truest sense. Far from despoiling our homeland and laying waste its resources and natural scenic wonders, we will improve it."

I had to be careful because, as they explained it, even a small nick with a razor might wipe out an entire suburban family.

"But fellows! I want to live my own life."

"Come now. Please remember that you are not alone now."

"Aw, fellows. Look, I'll get a dog, lots of dogs—fine purebreds, not mongrels like me. The finest. I'll pamper them. They'll live like kings. Wouldn't you consider moving?"

"Out of the question."

"An elephant then? Think of the space, the room for the kids to play—"

"Never."

"Damn it! Take me to—no, I mean let me talk to your leader."

That got me no place. It seemed I was already talking to

their highest government councils. All of my suggestions were considered, debated, voted on—and rejected.

They were democratic, they said. They counted my vote in favor; but that was just one vote. Rather a small minority.

As I suppose I should have figured, my thoughts were coming through over a period that was, to them, equal to weeks. They recorded them, accelerated them, broadcast them all around, held elections, and recorded replies to be played back to me at my own slow tempo by the time I had a new thought ready. No, they wouldn't take time to let me count the votes. And there is where you might say I lost my self-control.

"Damn it!" I said. Or shouted. "I won't have it! I won't put up with it. I'll—uh—I'll get us all dead drunk. I'll take dope! I'll go out and get a shot of penicillin and—"

I didn't do a damned thing. I couldn't.

Their control of my actions was just as complete as they wanted to make it. While they didn't exercise it all the time, they made the rules. According to them, they could have controlled my thoughts, too, if they had wanted to. They didn't because they felt that wouldn't be democratic. Actually, I suppose they were pretty fair and reasonable—from their point of view. Certainly it could have been a lot worse.

III

I wasn't as bad off as old Faust and his deal with the devil. My soul was still my own. But my body was community property—and I couldn't, by God, so much as bite my own tongue without feeling like a bloody murderer and being made to suffer for it, too.

Perhaps you don't think biting your tongue is any great privilege to have to give up. Maybe not. But, no matter how you figure, you've got to admit the situation was—well—confining.

And it lasted for over nine years.

Nine miserable years of semislavery? Well, no. I couldn't

honestly say that it was that bad. There were all the restrictions and limitations, but also there was my perfect health; and what you might call a sort of a sense of inner well-being. Added to that, there was my sensationally successful career. And the money.

All at once, almost anything I undertook to do was sensationally successful. I wrote, in several different styles and fields and under a number of different names; I was terrific. My painting was the talk of the art world. "Superb," said the critics. "An astonishing otherworldly quality." How right they were—even if they didn't know why. I patented a few little inventions, just for fun; and I invested. The money poured in so fast I couldn't count it. I hired people to count it, and to help guide it through the tax loopholes—although there I was able to give them a few sneaky little ideas that even our sharpest tax lawyers hadn't worked out.

Of course the catch in all that was that, actually, I was not so much a rich, brilliant, successful man. I was a booming, prosperous nation.

The satisfaction I could take in all my success was limited by my knowledge that it was a group effort. How could I help being successful? I had a very fair part of the resources of a society substantially ahead of our own working for me. As for knowledge of our world, they didn't just know everything I did. They knew everything I ever had known—or seen, heard, read, dreamed, or thought of. They could dig up anything, explore it, expand it, and use it in ways I couldn't have worked out in a thousand years. Sure, I was successful. I did stay out of sports—too dangerous; entertainment—didn't lend itself too well to the group approach; and music—they had never developed or used sound, and we agreed not to go into it. As I figured it, music in the soul may be very beautiful; but a full-size symphony in a sinus I could do without.

So I had success. And there was another thing I had too. Company.

Privacy? No, I had less privacy than any man who ever

lived, although I admit that my people, as long as I obeyed the rules, were never pushy or intrusive. They didn't come barging into my thoughts unless I invited them. But they were always ready. And if those nine years were less than perfect, at least I was never lonesome. Success, with me, was not a lonely thing.

And there were women.

Yes, there were women. And finally, at the end of it, there was *a* woman—and that was it.

As they had explained it, they were prepared to be tolerant about my—ah—relations with women as long as I was "reasonable" in my selection. Come to find out, they were prepared to be not just tolerant but insistent—and very selective.

First there was Helga.

Helga was Uncle John's secretary, a great big, healthy, rosy-cheeked, blonde Swedish girl, terrific if you liked the type. Me, I hadn't ever made a move in her direction, partly because she was so close to Uncle John, but mostly because my tastes always ran to the smaller types. But tastes can be changed.

Ten days after that first conversation with my people, I'd already cleared something like $50,000 in a few speculations in the commodity market. I was feeling a little moody in spite of it, and I decided to quit my job. So I went up that afternoon to Uncle John's office to tell him.

Uncle John was out. Helga was in. There she was, five feet eleven of big, bouncy, blonde smorgasbord. Wow! Before, I'd seen Helga a hundred times, looked with mild admiration but not one real ripple inside. And now, all at once, wow! That was my people, of course, manipulating glands, thoughts, feelings. "Wow!" it was.

First things first. "Helga, Doll! Ah! Where's Uncle John?"

"Johnny! That's the first time you ever called me—hm-m—Mr. Barth has gone for the day. . . Johnny."

She hadn't even looked at me before. My—uh—government was growing more powerful. It was establishing outside

spheres of influence. Of course, at the time, I didn't take the trouble to analyze the situation; I just went to work on it.

As they say, it is nice work if you can get it.

I could get it.

It was a good thing Uncle John didn't come bustling back after something he'd forgotten that afternoon.

I didn't get around to quitting my job that afternoon. Later on that evening, I took her home. She wanted me to come in and meet her parents, yet! But I begged off that—and then she came up with a snapper. "But we will be married, Johnny darling. Won't we? Real soon!"

"Uh," I said, making a quick mental plane reservation for Rio, "sure, Doll. Sure we will." I broke away right quick after that.

There was a problem I wanted to get a little advice on.

Back in my apartment—my big, new, plush apartment—I sat down to go over the thing with the Department of the Interior. The enthusiastic response I got surprised me. "Magnificent," was the word. "Superb. Great!"

Well, I thought myself that I had turned in a pretty outstanding performance, but I hadn't expected such applause. "It is a first step, a splendid beginning! A fully equipped, well-armed expedition will have the place settled, under cultivation and reasonably civilized inside of a day or two, your time. It will be simple for them. So much more so than in your case—since we now know precisely what to expect."

I was truly shocked. I felt guilty. "No!" I said. "Oh no! What a thing to do. You *can't!*"

"Now, now. Gently," they said. "What, after all, oh Fatherland, might be the perfectly natural consequences of your own act?"

"What? You mean under other—that is—"

"Exactly. You could very well have implanted a new life in her, which is all that we have done. Why should our doing so disturb you?"

Well, it did disturb me. But then, as they pointed out, they could have developed less pleasant methods of spreading

colonies. They had merely decided that this approach would be the surest and simplest.

"Well, maybe," I told them, "but it still seems kind of sneaky to me. Besides, if you'd left it to me, I'd certainly never have picked a great big ox like Helga. And now she says she's going to marry me, too!"

"You do not wish this? We understand. Do not be concerned. We will—ah—send instructions to our people the next time. She will change her feelings about this."

She dropped the marriage bit completely.

We had what you might call an idyllic association, in spite of her being such a big, husky model—a fact which never bothered me when I was with her. "She is happy," I was assured, "very happy." She seemed pleased and contented enough, even if she developed, I thought, a sort of an inward look about her. She and I never discussed our—uh—people. We had a fast whirl for a couple of weeks. And then I quit my job with Uncle John, and we sort of drifted apart.

Next thing I heard of her, she married Uncle John.

Well. I have my doubts about how faithful a wife she was to him, but certainly she seemed to make him happy. And my government assured me Uncle John was not colonized. "Too late," they said. "He is too old to be worth the risk of settling." But they respected my scruples about my uncle's wife, and direct communication with Helgaland was broken off.

But there were others.

IV

For the next nine years, things came easy for me. I suppose the restrictions, the lack of freedom should have made me a lot more dissatisfied than I was. I know, though they didn't say so, that my people did a little manipulating of my moods by jiggering the glands and hormones or something. It must have been that with the women.

I know that after Helga I felt guilty about the whole thing. I wouldn't do it again. But then one afternoon I was painting that big amazon of a model and—wow!

I couldn't help it. So, actually, I don't feel I should be blamed too much if, after the first couple of times, I quit trying to desert, so to speak.

And time went by, although you wouldn't have guessed it to look at me. I didn't age. My health was perfect. Well, there were a couple of very light headaches and a touch of fever, but that was only politics.

There were a couple of pretty tight elections which, of course, I followed fairly closely. After all, I had my vote, along with everyone else and I didn't want to waste it—even though, really, the political parties were pretty much the same and the elections were more questions of personality than anything else.

Then one afternoon I went to my broker's office to shift around a few investments according to plans worked out the night before. I gave my instructions. Old man Henry Schnable checked over the notes he had made.

"Now that's a funny thing," he said.

"You think I'm making a mistake?"

"Oh no. You never have yet; so I don't suppose you are now. The funny thing is that your moves here are almost exactly the same as those another very unusual customer of mine gave me over the phone not an hour ago."

"Oh?" There was nothing very interesting about that. But, oddly enough, I was very interested.

"Yes. Miss Julia Reede. Only a child really, twenty-one, but a brilliant girl. Possibly a genius. She comes from some little town up in the mountains. She has been in town here for just the past six months and her investments—well! Now I come to think about it, I believe they have very closely paralleled yours all along the line. Fabulously successful. You advising her?"

"Never heard of the girl."

"Well, you really should meet her, Mr. Barth. You two have

so much in common, and such lovely investments. Why don't you wait around? Miss Reede is coming in to sign some papers this afternoon. You two should know each other."

He was right. We *should* know each other. I could feel it.

"Well, Henry," I said, "perhaps I will wait. I've got nothing else to do this afternoon."

That was a lie. I had plenty of things to do, including a date with the captain of a visiting women's track team from Finland. Strangely, my people and I were in full agreement on standing up the chesty Finn, let the javelins fall where they may.

Henry was surprised, too. "You are going to wait for her? Uh, well now, Mr. Barth, your reputation—ah—that is, she's only a child, you know, from the country."

The buzzer on his desk sounded. His secretary spoke up on the intercom. "Miss Reede is here."

Miss Reede came right on in the door without waiting for a further invitation.

We stood there gaping at each other. She was small, about five feet two inches maybe, with short, black, curly hair, surface-cool green eyes with fire underneath, fresh, freckled nose, slim figure. Boyish? No. Not boyish.

I stared, taking in every little detail. Every little detail was perfect and—well, I can't begin to describe it. That was for me. I could feel it all through me—she was what I had been waiting for, dreaming of.

I made a quick call on the inside switchboard, determined to fight to override the veto I was sure was coming. I called.

No answer.

For the first time, I got no regular answer. Of course, by now I always had a kind of a sense or feeling of what was going on. This time there was a feeling of a celebration, rejoicing, everybody on a holiday. Which was exactly the way I felt as I looked at the girl. No objections? Then why ask questions?

"Julia," old Henry Schnable was saying, "this is Mr. John Barth. John, this is—John! John, remember—"

I had reached out and taken the girl's hand. I tucked her arm in mine and she looked up at me with the light, the fire in the green depths swimming toward the surface. I didn't know what she saw in me—neither of us knew then—but the light was there, glowing. We walked together out of Henry Schnable's office.

"John! Julia, your papers! You have to sign—"

Business? We had business elsewhere, she and I.

"Where?" I asked her in the elevator. It was the first word either of us had spoken.

"My apartment," she said in a voice like a husky torch song. "It's close. The girl who rooms with me is spending the week back home with her folks. The show she was in closed. We can be alone."

We could. Five minutes in a cab and we were.

I never experienced anything remotely like it in all my life. I never will again.

And then there was the time afterwards, and then we knew.

It was late afternoon, turning to dusk. She lifted up on one elbow and half turned away from me to switch on the bedside lamp. The light came on and I looked down at her, lovingly, admiringly. Idly, I started to ask her, "How did you get those little scars on your leg there and . . . those little scars? Like buckshot! Julia! Once, along about ten years ago—you must have been a little girl then—in the mountains—sure. You were hit by a meteor, weren't you?"

She turned and stared at me. I pointed at my own little pockmark scars.

"A meteor—about ten years ago!"

"Oh!"

"I knew it. You were."

" 'Some damn fool, crazy hunter,' was what Pop said. He thought it really was buckshot. So did I, at first. We all did.

Of course, about six months later I found out what it was but we—my little people and I—agreed there was no sense in my telling anyone. But you know."

It was the other ship. There were two in this sector, each controlled to colonize a person. My own group always hoped and believed the other ship might have landed safely. And now they knew.

We lay there, she and I, and we both checked internal communications. They were confused, not clear and precise as usual. It was a holiday in full swing. The glorious reunion! No one was working. No one was willing to put in a lot of time at the communications center talking to Julia and me. They were too busy talking to each other. I was right. The other ship.

Of course, since the other ship's landfall had been a little girl then, the early movements of the group had been restricted. Expansion was delayed. She grew up. She came to the city. Then—well, I didn't have to think about that.

We looked at each other, Julia and I. A doll she was in the first place, and a doll she still was. And then on top of that was the feeling of community, of closeness coming from our people. There was a sympathy. The two of us were in the same fix. And it may be that there was a certain sense of jealousy and resentment, too—like the feeling, say, between North and South America. How did we feel?

"I feel like a drink."

We said it together and laughed. Then we got up and got the drinks. I was glad to find that Julia's absent roommate, an actress, had a pretty fair bar stock.

We had a drink. We had another. And a third.

Maybe nobody at all was manning the inner duty stations. Or maybe they were visiting back and forth, both populations in a holiday mood. They figured this was a once-in-a-millennium celebration and, for once, the limits were off. Even alcohol was welcome. That's a line of thought that kills plenty of people every day out on the highway.

We had a couple of more in a reckless toast. I kissed Julia. She kissed me. Then we had some more drinks.

Naturally it hit us hard; we weren't used to it. But still we didn't stop drinking. The limits were off for the first time. Probably it would never happen again. This was our chance of a lifetime and there was a sort of desperation in it. We kept on drinking.

"Woosh," I said, finally, "wow. Let's have one more, wha' say? One more them—an' one more those."

She giggled. "Aroun' an aroun', whoop, whoop! Dizzy. Woozy. Oughta have cup coffee."

"Naw. Not coffee. Gonna have hang-over. Take pill. Apsirin."

"Can-*not*! Can-*not* take pill. Won' lemme. 'Gains talla rules."

"Can."

"Can-*not*."

"Can. No rules. Rule soff. Can. Apsirin. C'mon."

Clinging to each other, we stumbled to the bathroom. Pills? The roommate must have been a real hypochondriac. She had rows and batteries of pills. I knocked a bottle off the cabinet shelf. Aspirin? Sure, fancy aspirin. Blue, special. I took a couple.

"Apsirin. See? Easy."

Her mouth made a little, red, round "O" of wonder. She took a couple.

"Gosh! Firs' time I c'd ever take a pill."

"Good. Have 'nother?"

It was crazy, sure. The two of us were drunk. But it was more than that. We were like a couple of wild, irresponsible kids, out of control and running wild through the pillboxes. We reeled around the bathroom, sampling pills and laughing.

"Here's nice bottla red ones."

There was a nice bottle of red ones. I fumbled the top off the bottle and spilled the bright red pills bouncing across the white tile bathroom floor. We dropped to our knees after them, after the red pills, the red dots, the red, fiery moons,

spinning suddenly, whirling, twirling, racing across the white floor. And then it got dark. Dark, and darker, and even the red, red moons faded away.

Some eons later, light began to come back and the red moons, dim now and pallid, whirled languidly across a white ceiling.

Someone said, "He's coming out of it, I think."

"Oh," I said. "Ugh!"

I didn't feel good. I'd almost forgotten what it was like, but I was sick. Awful. I didn't particularly want to look around but I did, eyes moving rustily in their sockets. There was a nurse and a doctor. They were standing by my bed in what was certainly a hospital.

"Don't ask," said the doctor. I wasn't going to. I didn't even care where I was, but he told me anyway, "You are in the South Side Hospital, Mr. Barth. You will be all right—which is a wonder, considering. Remarkable stamina! Please tell me, Mr. Barth, what kind of lunatic suicide pact was that?"

"Suicide pact?"

"Yes, Mr. Barth. Why couldn't you have settled for just one simple poison, hm-m? The lab has been swearing at you all day."

"Uh?"

"Yes. At what we pumped from your stomach. And found in the girl's. Liquor, lots of that—but then, why aspirin? Barbiturates we expect. Roach pellets are not unusual. But aureomycin? Tranquilizers? Bufferin? Vitamin B complex, vitamin C—and, finally, half a dozen highly questionable contraceptive pills? Good Lord, man!"

"It was an accident. The girl—Julia—?"

"You are lucky. She wasn't."

"Dead?"

"Yes, Mr. Barth. She is dead."

"Doctor, listen to me! It was an accident, I swear. We didn't know what we were doing. We were—well—celebrating."

"In the medicine cabinet, Mr. Barth? Queer place to be celebrating! Well, Mr. Barth, you must rest now. You have been through a lot. It was a near thing. The police will be in to see you later."

With this kindly word the doctor and his silently disapproving nurse filed out of the room.

The police? Julia, poor Julia—dead.

Now what? What should I do? I turned, as always, inward for advice and instructions. "Folks! Why didn't you stop me? Why did you let me do it? And now—what shall I do? Answer me, I say. Answer!"

There was only an emptiness. It was a hollow, aching sensation. It seemed to me I could hear my questions echoing inside me with a lonely sound.

I was alone. For the first time in nearly ten years, I was truly alone, with no one to turn to.

They were gone! At last, after all these years, they were gone. I was free again, truly free. It was glorious to be free—wasn't it?

The sheer joy of the thing brought a tightness to my throat, and I sniffled. I sniffled again. My nose was stuffy. The tightness in my throat grew tighter and became a pain.

I sneezed.

Was this joy—or a cold coming on? I shifted uneasily on the hospital bed and scratched at an itch on my left hip. Ouch! It was a pimple. My head ached. My throat hurt. I itched. Julia was dead. The police were coming. I was alone. What should I do?

"Nurse!" I shouted at the top of my voice. "Nurse, come here. I want to send a wire. Rush. Urgent. To my aunt, Mrs. Helga Barth; the address is in my wallet. Say, 'Helga. Am desperately ill, repeat, ill. Please come at once. I must have help—from you."

She'll come. I know she will. They've *got* to let her. It was an accident, I swear, and I'm not too old. I'm still in wonderful shape, beautifully kept up.

But I feel awful.

Well—how do you suppose New England would feel today if suddenly all of its inhabitants died?

By Fritz Leiber

THE LAST LETTER

On Tenthmonth 1, 2457 A.D., at exactly 9 A.M. Planetary Federation Time—but with a permissible error of a millionth of a second either way—in the fifth sublevel of NewNew York Robot Postal Station 68, Black Sorter gulped down ten thousand pieces of first-class mail.

This breakfast tidbit did not agree with the mail-sorting machine. It was as if a robust dog had been fed a large chunk of good red meat with a strychnine pill in it. Black Sorter's innards went *whir-klunk*, a blue electric glow enveloped him, and he began to shake as if he might break loose from the concrete.

He desperately spat back over his shoulder a single envelope, gave a great *huff*, and blew out toward the sorting tubes a medium-size snowstorm consisting of the other nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine pieces of first-class mail chewed to confetti. Then, still convulsed, he snapped up a fresh ten thousand and proceeded to chomp and grind on them. Black Sorter was rugged.

The rejected envelope was tongued up by Red Subsorter, who growled deep in his throat, said a very bad word, and passed it to Yellow Rerouter, who passed it to Green Rerouter, who passed it to Brown Study, who passed it to Pink Wastebasket.

Unlike Black Sorter, Pink Wastebasket was very delicate, though highly intuitive—the machine equivalent of a White Russian countess. She was designed to scan in 3,137 codes, route special-delivery spacemail to interplanetary liners by messenger rocket, and distinguish 9s from upside-down 6s.

Pink Wastebasket haughtily inhaled the offending envelope and almost instantly turned a bright crimson and began to tremble. After a few minutes, small atomic flames started to flicker from her mid-section.

White Nursemaid Seven and Greasy Joe both received Pink Wastebasket's distress signal and got there as fast as their wheels would roll them, but the highborn machine's malady was beyond their simple skills of oilcan and electroshock.

They summoned other machine-tending-and-repairing machines, ones far more expert than themselves, but all were baffled. It was clear that Pink Wastebasket, who continued to tremble and flicker uncontrollably, was suffering from the equivalent of a major psychosis with severe psychosomatic symptoms. She spat a stream of filthy ions at Gray Psychiatrist, not recognizing her old friend.

Meanwhile, the paper blizzard from Black Sorter was piling up in great drifts between the dark pillars of the sublevel, and flurries had reached Pink Wastebasket's aristocratic area. An expedition of sturdy machines, headed by two hastily summoned snowplows, was dispatched to immobilize Black Sorter at all costs.

Pink Wastebasket, quivering like a demented hula dancer, was clearly approaching a crisis. Finally Gray Psychiatrist—after consulting with Green Surgeon, and even then with an irritated reluctance, as if he were calling in a witch doctor—summoned a human being.

The human being walked respectfully around Pink Wastebasket several times and then gave her a nervous little poke with a rubber-handled probe.

Pink Wastebasket gently regurgitated her last snack, turned dead white, gave a last flicker and shake, and expired. Black

Coroner recorded the immediate cause of death as tinkering by a human being.

The human being, a bald and scrawny one named Potshelter, picked up the envelope responsible for all the trouble, stared at it incredulously, opened it with trembling fingers, scanned the contents briefly, gave a great shriek, and ran off at top speed, forgetting to hop on his perambulator, which followed him making anxious clucking noises.

The nearest human representative of the Solar Bureau of Investigation, a rather wooden-looking man named Krumbine, also bald, recognized Potshelter as soon as the latter burst gasping into his office, squeezing through the door while it was still dilating. The human beings whose work took them among the Top Brass, as the upper-echelon machines were sometimes referred to, formed a kind of human elite, just one big nervous family.

"Sit down, Potshelter," the SBI Man said. "Hold still a second so the chair can grab you. Hitch onto the hookah and choose a tranquilizer from the tray at your elbow. Whatever deviation you've uncovered can't be that much of a danger to the planets. I imagine that when you leave this office, the Solar Battle Fleet will still be orbiting peacefully around Luna."

"I seriously doubt that."

Potshelter gulped a large lavender pill and took a deep breath. "Krumbine, a letter turned up in the first-class mail this morning."

"Great Scott!"

"It is a letter from one person to another person."

"Good Lord!"

"The flow of advertising has been seriously interfered with. At a modest estimate, three hundred million pieces of expensive first-class advertising have already been chewed to rags, and I'm not sure the Steel Helms—God bless 'em!—have the trouble in hand yet."

"Judas Priest!"

"Naturally the poor machines weren't able to cope with the letter. It was utterly outside their experience, beyond the furthest reach of their programming. It threw them into a terrible spasm. Pink Wastebasket is dead, and at this very instant, if we're lucky, three police machines of the toughest blued steel are holding down Black Sorter and putting a muzzle on him."

"Great Scott! It's incredible, Potshelter. And Pink Wastebasket dead? Take another tranquilizer, Potshelter, and hand over the tray."

Krumbine received it with trembling fingers, started to pick up a big pink pill but drew back his hand from it in sudden revulsion at its color and swallowed two blue oval ones instead. The man was obviously fighting to control himself.

He said unsteadily, "I almost never take doubles, but this news you bring—Good Lord! I seem to recall a case where someone tried to send a sound-tape through the mails, but that was before my time. Incidentally, is there any possibility that this is a letter sent by one *group* of persons to another group? A hive or a therapy group or a social club? That would be bad enough, of course, but—"

"No, just one single person sending to another." Potshelter's expression set in grimly solicitous lines. "I can see you don't quite understand, Krumbine. This is not a sound-tape, but a letter written in letters. You know, letters, characters—like books."

"Don't mention books in this office!" Krumbine drew himself up angrily and then slumped back. "Excuse me, Potshelter, but I find this very difficult to face squarely. Do I understand you to say that one person has tried to use the mails to send a printed sheet of some sort to another?"

"Worse than that. A written letter."

"Written? I don't recognize the word."

"It's a way of making characters, of forming visual equivalents of sound, without using electricity. The writer, as he's called, employs a black liquid and a pointed stick called a

pen. I know about this because one hobby of mine is ancient means of communication."

Krumbine frowned and shook his head. "Communication is a dangerous business, Potshelter, especially at the personal level. With you and me, it's all right, because we know what we're doing."

He picked up a third blue tranquilizer. "But with most of the hive-folk, person-to-person communication is only a morbid form of advertising, a dangerous travesty of normal newscasting—catharsis without the analyst, recitation without the teacher—a perversion of promotion employed in betraying and subverting."

The frown deepened as he put the blue pill in his mouth and chewed it. "But about this pen—do you mean the fellow glues the pointed stick to his tongue and then speaks, and the black liquid traces the vibrations on the paper? A primitive nonelectrical oscilloscope? Sloppy but conceivable, and producing a record of sorts of the spoken word."

"No, no, Krumbine." Potshelter nervously popped a square orange tablet into his mouth. "It's a handwritten letter."

Krumbine watched him. "I never mix tranquilizers," he boasted absently. "Handwritten, eh? You mean that the message was imprinted on a hand? And the skin or the entire hand afterward detached and sent through the mails in the fashion of a Martian reproach? A grisly find indeed, Potshelter."

"You still don't quite grasp it, Krumbine. The fingers of the hand move the stick that applies the ink, producing a crude imitation of the printed word."

"Diabolical!" Krumbine smashed his fist down on the desk so that the four phones and two score microphones rattled. "I tell you, Potshelter, the SBI is ready to cope with the subtlest modern deceptions, but when fiends search out and revive tricks from the pre-Atomic Cave Era, it's almost too much. But, Great Scott, I dally while the planets are in danger. What's the sender's code on this hellish letter?"

"No code," Potshelter said darkly, proffering the envelope. "The return address is—handwritten."

Krumbine blanched as his eyes slowly traced the uneven lines in the upper left-hand corner:

from: Richard Rowe
215 West 10th Street (horizontal)
2837 Rocket Court (vertical)
Hive 37, NewNew York 319, N.Y.
Columbia, Terra

"Ugh!" Krumbine said, shivering. "Those crawling characters, those letters, as you call them, those *things* barely enough like print to be readable—they seem to be on the verge of awakening all sorts of horrid racial memories. I find myself thinking of fur-clad witch doctors dipping long pointed sticks in bubbling black caldrons. No wonder Pink Wastebasket couldn't take it, brave girl."

Firming himself behind his desk, he pushed a number of buttons and spoke long numbers and meaningful alphabetical syllables into several microphones. Banks of colored lights around the desk began to blink like a theater marquee sending Morse code, while phosphorescent arrows crawled purposefully across maps and space charts and through three-dimensional street diagrams.

"There!" he said at last. "The sender of the letter is being apprehended and will be brought directly here. We'll see what sort of man this Richard Rowe is—if we can assume he's human. Seven precautionary cordons are being drawn around his population station: three composed of machines, two of SBI agents, and two consisting of human and mechanical medical-combat teams. Same goes for the intended recipient of the letter. Meanwhile, a destroyer squadron of the Solar Fleet has been detached to orbit over NewNew York."

"In case it becomes necessary to Z-Bomb?" Potshelter asked grimly.

Krumbine nodded. "With all those villains lurking just outside the Solar System in their invisible black ships, with planeticide in their hearts, we can't be too careful. One word transmitted from one spy to another and anything may happen. And we must bomb before they do, so as to contain our losses. Better one city destroyed than a traitor on the loose who may destroy many cities. One hundred years ago, three person-to-person post cards went through the mails—just three post cards, Potshelter!—and *pft* went Schenectady, Hoboken, Cicero, and Walla Walla. Here, as long as you're mixing them, try one of these oval blues—I find them best for steady swallowing."

Bells jangled. Krumbine grabbed up two phones, holding one to each ear. Potshelter automatically picked up a third. The ringing continued. Krumbine started to wedge one of his phones under his chin, nodded sharply at Potshelter and then toward a cluster of microphones at the end of the table. Potshelter picked up a fourth phone from behind them. The ringing stopped.

The two men listened, looking doped, Krumbine with an eye fixed on the sweep second hand of the large wall clock. When it had made one revolution, he cradled his phones. Potshelter followed suit.

"I do like the simplicity of the new on-the-hour Puffyloaf phonocommercial," the latter remarked thoughtfully. "The Bread That's Lighter Than Air. Nice."

Krumbine nodded. "I hear they've had to add mass to the lead foil wrapping to keep the loaves from floating off the shelves. Fact."

He cleared his throat. "Too bad we can't listen to more phonocommercials, but even when there isn't a crisis on the agenda, I find I have to budget my listening time. One minute per hour strikes a reasonable balance between duty and self-indulgence."

The nearest wall began to sing:

Mister J. Augustus Krumbine,
We all think you're fine, fine,
fine, fine.
Now out of the skyey blue
Come some telegrams for you.

The wall opened to a small heart shape toward the center and a sheaf of pale yellow envelopes arced out and plopped on the middle of the desk. Krumbine started to leaf through them, scanning the little transparent windows.

"Hm-m, Electronic Soap . . . Better Homes and Landing Platforms . . . Psycho-Blinkers . . . Your Girl Next Door . . . Poppy-Woppies . . . Poopsy-Woopsies . . ."

He started to open an envelope, then, after a quick look around and an apologetic smile at Potshelter, dumped them all on the disposal hopper, which gargled briefly.

"After all, there *is* a crisis this morning," he said in a defensive voice.

Potshelter nodded absently. "I can remember back before personalized delivery and rhyming robots," he observed. "But how I'd miss them now—so much more distingué than the hives with their nonpersonalized radio, TV, and stereo advertising. For that matter, I believe there are some backward areas on Terra where the great advertising potential of telephones and telegrams hasn't been fully realized and they are still used in part for personal communication. Now me, I've never in my life sent or received a message except on my walkie-talkie." He patted his breast pocket.

Krumbine nodded, but he was a trifle shocked and inclined to revise his estimate of Potshelter's social status. Krumbine conducted his own social correspondence solely by telepathy. He shared with three other SBI officials a private telepath—a charming albino girl named Agnes.

"Yes, and it's a very handsome walkie-talkie," he assured Potshelter, a little falsely. "Suits you. I like the upswept antenna." He drummed on the desk and swallowed another blue tranquilizer. "Dammit, what's happened to those machines?

They ought to have the two spies here by now. Did you notice that the second—the intended recipient of the letter, I mean—seems to be female? Another good Terran name, too, Jane Dough. Hive in Upper Manhattan." He began to tap the envelope sharply against the desk. "Dammit, where *are* they?"

"Excuse me," Potshelter said hesitantly, "but I'm wondering why you haven't read the message inside the envelope."

Krumbine looked at him blankly. "Great Scott, I assumed that at least it was in some secret code, of course. Normally I'd have asked you to have Pink Wastebasket try her skill on it, but . . ." His eyes widened and his voice sank. "You don't mean to tell me that it's—"

Potshelter nodded grimly. "Handwritten, too. Yes."

Krumbine winced. "I keep trying to forget that aspect of the case." He dug out the message with shaking fingers, fumbled it open and read:

Dear Jane,

It must surprise you that I know your name, for our hives are widely separated. Do you recall day before yesterday when your guided tour of Grand Central Spaceport got stalled because the guide blew a fuse? I was the young man with hair in the tour behind yours. You were a little frightened and a groupmistress was reassuring you. The machine spoke your name.

Since then I have been unable to forget you. When I go to sleep, I dream of your face looking up sadly at the mistress's kindly photocells. I don't know how to get in touch with you, but my grandfather has told me stories his grandfather told him that his grandfather told him about young men writing what he calls love letters to young ladies. So I am writing you a love letter.

I work in a first-class advertising house, and I will slip this love letter into an outgoing ten-thousand-pack and hope.

Do not be frightened of me, Jane. I am no caveman

except for my hair. I am not insane. I am emotionally disturbed, but in a way that no machine has ever described to me. I want only your happiness.

Sincerely,
Richard Rowe

Krumbine slumped back in his chair, which braced itself manfully against him, and looked long and thoughtfully at Potshelter. "Well, if that's a code, it's certainly a fiendishly subtle one. You'd think he was talking to his Girl Next Door."

Potshelter nodded wonderingly. "I only read as far as where they were planning to blow up Grand Central Spaceport and all the guides in it."

"Judas Priest, I think I have it!" Krumbine shot up. "It's a pilot advertisement—Boy Next Door or—that kind of thing—printed to look like handwrittening, which would make all the difference. And the pilot copy got mailed by accident—which would mean there is no real Richard Rowe."

At that instant, the door dilated and two blue detective engines hustled a struggling young man into the office. He was slim, rather handsome, had a bushy head of hair that had somehow survived evolution and radioactive fallout, and across the chest and back of his paper singlet was neatly stamped: "RICHARD ROWE."

When he saw the two men, he stopped struggling and straightened up. "Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, "but these police machines must have made a mistake. I've committed no crime."

Then his gaze fell on the hand-addressed envelope on Krumbine's desk and he turned pale.

Krumbine laughed harshly. "No crime! No, not at all. Merely using the mails to communicate. Ha!"

The young man shrank back. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Sorry, he says! Do you realize that your insane prank has resulted in the destruction of perhaps a half billion pieces of first-class advertising? In the strangulation of a postal station

and the paralysis of Lower Manhattan? In the mobilization of SBI reserves, the de-mothballing of two divisions of G.I. machines, and the redeployment of the Solar Battle Fleet? Good Lord, boy, why did you do it?"

Richard Rowe continued to shrink, but he squared his shoulders. "I'm sorry, sir, but I just had to. I just had to get in touch with Jane Dough."

"A girl from another hive? A girl you'd merely gazed at because a guide happened to blow a fuse?" Krumbine stood up, shaking an angry finger. "Great Scott, boy, where was your Girl Next Door?"

Richard Rowe stared bravely at the finger, which made him look a trifle cross-eyed. "She died, sir, both of them."

"But there should be at least six."

"I know, sir, but of the other four, two have been shipped to the Adirondacks on vacation and two recently got married and haven't been replaced."

Potshelter, a faraway look in his eyes, said softly, "I think I'm beginning to understand—"

But Krumbine thundered on at Richard Rowe with, "Good Lord, I can see you've had your troubles, boy. It isn't often we have these shortages of Girls Next Door, so that temporarily a boy can't marry the Girl Next Door, as he always should. But, Judas Priest, why didn't you take your troubles to your psychiatrist, your groupmaster, your socializer, your Queen Mother?"

"My psychiatrist is being overhauled, sir, and his replacement short-circuits every time he hears the word 'trouble.' My groupmaster and socializer are on vacation duty in the Adirondacks. My Queen Mother is busy replacing Girls Next Door."

"Yes, it all fits," Potshelter proclaimed excitedly. "Don't you see, Krumbine? Except for a set of mischances that would only occur once in a billion billion times, the letter would never have been conceived or sent."

"You may have something there," Krumbine concurred. "But in any case, boy, why did you—er—written this letter to

this particular girl? What is there about Jane Dough that made you do it?"

"Well, you see, sir, she's—"

Just then, the door redilated and a blue matron machine conducted a young woman into the office. She was slim and she had a head of hair that would have graced a museum beauty, while across the back and—well, "chest" is an inadequate word—of her paper chemise "JANE DOUGH" was silk-screened in the palest pink.

Krumbine did not repeat his last question. He had to admit to himself that it had been answered fully. Potshelter whistled respectfully. The blue detective engines gave hard-boiled grunts. Even the blue matron machine seemed awed by the girl's beauty.

But she had eyes only for Richard Rowe. "My Grand Central man," she breathed in amazement. "The man I've dreamed of ever since. My man with hair." She noticed the way he was looking at her, and she breathed harder. "Oh, darling, what have you done?"

"I tried to send you a letter."

"A letter? For me? Oh, darling!"

Krumbine cleared his throat. "Potshelter, I'm going to wind this up fast. Miss Dough, could you transfer to this young man's hive?"

"Oh yes, sir! Mine has an overplus of Girls Next Door."

"Good. Mr. Rowe, there's a sky pilot two levels up—look for the usual white collar just below the photocells. Marry this girl and take her home to your hive. If your Queen Mother objects, refer her to—er—Potshelter here."

He cut short the young people's thanks. "Just one thing," he said, wagging a finger at Rowe. "Don't written any more letters."

"Why ever would I?" Richard answered. "Already my action is beginning to seem like a mad dream."

"Not to me, dear," Jane corrected him. "Oh, sir, could I

have the letter he sent me? Not to do anything with. Not to show anyone. Just to keep."

"Well, I don't know—" Krumbine began.

"Oh, *please*, sir!"

"Well, I don't know why not, I was going to say. Here you are, miss. Just see that this husband of yours never writtens another."

He turned back as the contracting door shut the young couple from view.

"You were right, Potshelter," he said briskly. "It was one of those combinations of mischances that come up only once in a billion billion times. But we're going to have to issue recommendations for new procedures and safeguards that will reduce the possibilities to one in a trillion trillion. It will undoubtedly up the Terran income tax a healthy percentage, but we can't have something like this happening again. Every boy must marry the Girl Next Door! And the first-class mails must not be interfered with! The advertising must go through!"

"I'd almost like to see it happen again," Potshelter murmured dreamily, "if there were another Jane Dough in it."

Outside, Richard and Jane had halted to allow a small cortege of machines to pass. First came a squad of police machines with Black Sorter in their midst, unmuzzled and docile enough, though still gnashing his teeth softly. Then—stretched out horizontally and borne on the shoulders of Gray Psychiatrist, Black Coroner, White Nursemaid Seven, and Greasy Joe—there passed the slim form of Pink Wastebasket, snow-white in death. The machines were keening softly, mournfully.

Round about the black pillars, little mecho-mops were scurrying like mice, cleaning up the last of the first-class-mail bits of confetti.

Richard winced at this evidence of his aberration, but Jane squeezed his hand comfortingly, which produced in him a truly amazing sensation that changed his whole appearance.

"I know how you feel, darling," she told him. "But don't worry about it. Just think, dear, I'll always be able to tell your friends' wives something no other woman in the world can boast of: that my husband once wrote me a letter!"

By L. J. Stecher, Jr.

PERFECT ANSWER

"As one god to another—let's go home," Jack Bates said.

Bill Farnum raised a spacegloved hand in negligent acknowledgment to a hastily kneeling native and shook his head at Bates. "Let's try Deneb—it's almost in line on the way back—and then we can call it quits."

"But I want to get back and start making some profit out of this. The Galaxy is full of Homo sapiens. We've hit the jack pot first trip out. Let's hurry on home and cash in."

"We need more information. This is too much of a good thing—it doesn't make sense. I know there isn't much chance of finding anything out by stopping at one more solar system. But it won't delay us more than a few weeks, and it won't hurt to try."

"Yeah," said Bates. "But what's in it for us? And what if we find an inhabited planet? You know the chances are about two to one that we will. That'll make thirteen we've found on this trip. Why risk bad luck?"

"You're no more superstitious than I am," said Farnum. "You just want to get back Earthside. I'll tell you what. We'll toss a coin for it."

Bates gestured futilely toward his coverall pocket and then remembered he was wearing a spacesuit as a precaution against possible contamination from the natives.

"And we'll use one of *my* coins this time," said Farnum, noticing the automatic motion. "I want to have a chance."

The coin dropped in Farnum's favor, and their two-man scout ship hurled itself into space.

Farnum operated the compact computer, aligning the ship's velocity vector precisely while the stars could still be seen. Bates controlled the engines, metering their ravenous demand for power just this side of destructive detonation, while the ship sucked energy from space—from the adjacent universe on the other side of Limbo. Finally the computer chimed, relays snicked, and the ship slid into the emptiness of Limbo as the stars winked out.

With two trained men working as a team with the computer and the elaborate engine room controls, and with a certain amount of luck, the ship would drop back into normal space a couple of weeks later, close beside their target.

"Well, that's that," said Farnum, relaxing and wiping the perspiration off his forehead. "We're back once again in the nothingness of nowhere. As I recall, it's your week for K.P. Where's the coffee?"

"Coming right up," said Bates. "But you won't like it. It's the last of the 'God-food' the Korite priests made for us."

Farnum shuddered. "Pour it out and make some fresh. With a skillet, you stink, but you're a thousand times better than Korites."

"Thanks," Bates said, getting busy. "It was the third place we stopped that they were such good cooks, wasn't it?"

"Nope. Our third stop was the Porandians. They tried to kill us—called us 'Devil spawn from the stars.' You're thinking of the fourth stop—the Balanites."

Bates shrugged. "It's kind of hard to keep them all straight. Either they fall on their knees and worship us, or they try to kill us without even asking questions. Maybe it's lucky they're all so primitive."

"It may be lucky, but it doesn't add up. More than half the stars we visit have planets that can support human life. And

every one that can does. Once there must have been an interstellar empire. So why are all their civilizations so backward? They aren't primitive—they're decadent. And why do they all have such strong feelings—one way or the exact opposite—about people from the stars?"

"Isn't that why you want to try one more system?" asked Bates. "To give us another chance to get some answers? Here's your coffee. Try to drink it quietly. I'm going to get some shut-eye."

The trip through the Limbo between adjacent universes passed uneventfully, as always. The computer chimed again on schedule, and a quick check by Farnum showed that the blazing sun that suddenly appeared was Deneb, as advertised. Seventeen planets could be counted, and the fifth seemed to be Earth type. They approached it with the easy skill of long practice and swung into orbit about it.

"This is what we've been looking for!" exclaimed Farnum, examining the planet through a telescope. "They've got big cities and dams and bridges—they're civilized. Let's put the ship down."

"Wait up," said Bates. "What if they've got starmanphobia? Remember, they're people, just like us; and with people, civilization and weapons go together."

"I think you've got it backwards. If they hate us, we can probably get away before they bring up their big artillery. But what if they love us? They might want to keep us beside them forever."

Bates nodded. "I'm glad you agree with me. Let's get out of here. Nobody but us knows of the beautiful, profitable planets we've found, all ready to become part of a Terran Empire. And if we don't get back safe and sound, nobody *will* know. The information we've got is worth a fortune to us, and I want to be alive to collect it."

"Sure. But we've got the job of trying to find out why all those planets reverted to barbarism. This one hasn't; maybe

the answer's here. There's no use setting up an empire if it won't last."

"It'll last long enough to keep you and me on top of the heap."

"That's not good enough. I want my kids—when I have them—to have their chances at the top of the heap, too."

"Oh, all right. We'll flip a coin, then."

"We already did. You may be a sharp dealer, but you'd never welch on a bet. We're going down."

Bates shrugged. "You win. Let's put her down beside that big city over there—the biggest one, by the seashore."

As they approached the city, they noticed at its outskirts a large flat plain, dotted with gantries. "Like a spaceport," suggested Bill. "That's our target."

They landed neatly on the tarmac and then sat there quietly, waiting to see what would happen.

A crowd began to form. The two men sat tensely at their controls, but the throng clustering about the base of the ship showed no hostility. They also showed no reverence but, rather, a carefree interest and joyful welcome.

"Well," said Farnum at last, "looks like we might as well go outside and ask them to take us to their leader."

"I'm with you as usual," said Bates, starting to climb into his spacesuit. "Weapons?"

"I don't think so. We can't stop them if they get mad at us, and they look friendly enough. We'll start off with the 'let's be pals' routine."

Bates nodded. "After we learn the language. I always hate this part—it moves so slowly. You'd think there'd be some similarity among the tongues on different planets, wouldn't you? But each one's entirely different. I guess they've all been isolated too long."

The two men stepped out on the smooth plain, to be instantly surrounded by a laughing, chattering crowd. Farnum stared around in bewilderment at the variety of dress the crowd displayed. There were men and women in togas, in

tunics, in draped dresses and kilts, in trousers and coats. Others considered a light cloak thrown over the shoulders to be adequate. There was no uniformity of style or custom.

"You pick me a boss-man out of this bunch," he muttered to Bates.

Finally a couple of young men, glowing with health and energy, came bustling through the crowd with an oblong box which they set down in front of the Earthmen. They pointed to the box and then back at Farnum and Bates, laughing and talking as they did so.

"What do you suppose they want us to do?" Farnum asked.

One of the young men clapped his hands happily and reached down to touch the box. "What do you suppose they want us to do?" asked the box distinctly.

"Oh. A recording machine. Probably to help with language lessons. Might as well help them out."

Farnum and Bates took turns talking at the box for half an hour. Then the young man nodded, laughed, clapped his hands again, and the two men carried it away. The crowd went with them, waving merrily as they departed.

Bates shrugged his shoulders and went back into the ship, with Farnum close behind.

A few hours after sunrise the following morning, the crowd returned, as gay and carefree as before, led by the two young men who had carried the box. Each of these two now had a small case, about the size of a camera, slung by a strap across one brawny shoulder.

As the terrestrials climbed out to meet them, the two men raised their hands and the crowd discontinued its chatter, falling silent except for an occasional tinkle of surprised laughter.

"Welcome," said the first young man clearly. "It is a great pleasure for us to have our spaceport in use again. It has been many generations since any ships have landed on it."

Farnum noticed that the voice came from the box. "Thank you for your very kind welcome," he said. "I hope that your

traffic will soon increase. May we congratulate you, by the way, on the efficiency of your translators?"

"Thanks," laughed the young man. "But there was nothing to it. We just asked the Oracle, and he told us what we had to do to make them."

"May we meet your—Oracle?"

"Oh, sure, if you want to. But later on. Now it's time for a party. Why don't you take off those clumsy suits and come along?"

"We don't dare remove our spacesuits. They protect us from any disease germs you may have, and you from any we may have. We probably have no resistance to each others' ailments."

"The Oracle says we have nothing that will hurt you. And we're going to spray you with this as soon as you get out of your suits. Then you won't hurt any of us." He held up a small atomizer.

Farnum glanced at Bates, who shrugged and nodded. They uneasily unfastened their spacesuits and stepped out of them, wearing only their light one-piece coveralls, and got sprayed with a pleasant-smelling mist.

The party was a great success. The food was varied and delicious. The liquors were sparkling and stimulating, without unpleasant aftereffects. The women were uninhibited.

When a native got tired, he just dropped onto the soft grass, or onto an even softer couch, and went to sleep. The Earthmen finally did the same.

They awoke the following morning within minutes of each other, feeling comfortable and relaxed. Bates shook his head experimentally. "No hang-over," he muttered in surprise.

"No one ever feels bad after a party," said one of their guides, who had slept nearby. "The Oracle told us what to do, when we asked him."

"Quite a fellow, your Oracle," commented Bates. "Does he answer you in riddles, like most Oracles?"

The guide was shocked. "The Oracle answers any ques-

tions promptly and completely. He *never* talks in riddles."

"Can we go to see him now?" asked Farnum.

"Certainly. Come along. I'll take you to the Hall of the Oracle."

The Oracle appeared to live in a building of modest size in the center of a tremendous courtyard. The structure that surrounded the courtyard, in contrast, was enormous and elaborate, dominating the wildly architectured city. It was, however, empty.

"Scholars used to live in this building, they tell me," said one of their guides, gesturing casually. "They used to come here to learn from the Oracle. But there's no sense in learning a lot of stuff when the Oracle has always got all the answers anyway. So now the building is empty. The big palace was built back in the days when we used to travel among the stars, as you do now."

"How long ago was that?" asked Farnum.

"Oh, I don't know. A few thousand years—a few hundred years—the Oracle can tell you if you really want to know."

Bates raised an eyebrow. "And how do you know you'll always be given the straight dope?"

The guide looked indignant. "The Oracle *always* tells the truth."

"Yes," Bates persisted, "but how do you *know*?"

"The Oracle told us so, of course. Now why don't you go in and find out for yourselves? We'll wait out here. We don't have anything to ask him."

Bates and Farnum went into the building and found themselves in a small, pleasant room furnished with comfortable chairs and sofas.

"Good morning," said a well-modulated voice. "I have been expecting you."

"You are the Oracle?" asked Farnum, looking around curiously.

"The name that the people of this planet have given me translates most accurately as 'Oracle,'" said the voice.

"But are you actually an Oracle?"

"My principal function, insofar as human beings—that is, Homo sapiens—are concerned, is to give accurate answers to all questions propounded me. Therefore, insofar as humans are concerned, I am actually an Oracle."

"Then you have another function?"

"My principal function, insofar as the race that made me is concerned, is to act as a weapon."

"Oh," said Bates, "Then you are a machine?"

"I am a machine," agreed the voice.

"The people who brought us here said that you always tell them the truth. I suppose that applies when you are acting as an Oracle, instead of as a weapon?"

"On the contrary," said the voice blandly. "I function as a weapon by telling the truth."

"That doesn't make sense," protested Bates.

The machine paused for a moment before replying. "This will take a little time, gentlemen," it said, "but I am sure that I can convince you. Why don't you sit down and be comfortable? If you want refreshments, just ask for them."

"Might as well," said Bates, sitting down in an easy chair. "How about giving us some Korite God-food?"

"If you really want that bad a brew of coffee, I can make it for you, of course," said the voice, "but I am sure you would prefer some of better quality."

Farnum laughed. "Yes, please. Some good coffee, if you don't mind."

"Now," said the Oracle, after excellent coffee had been produced, "it is necessary for me to go back into history a few hundred thousand of your years. At that time, the people who made me entered this galaxy on one of their periodic visits of routine exploration and contacted your ancestors. The race that constructed me populates now, as it did then, the Greater Magellanic Cloud.

"Frankly, the Magellanic race was appalled at what they found. In the time since their preceding visit, your race had risen from the slime of your mother planet and was on its

way toward stars. The speed of your development was unprecedented in millions of years of history. By their standards, your race was incredibly energetic, incredibly fecund, incredibly intelligent, unbelievably warlike, and almost completely depraved.

"Extrapolation revealed that within another fifty thousand of your years, you would complete the population of this galaxy and would be totally unstoppable.

"Something had to be done, fast. There were two obvious solutions, but both were unacceptable to my Makers. The first was to assume direct control over your race and to maintain that rule indefinitely, until such time as you changed your natures sufficiently to become civilizable. The expenditure of energy would be enormous and the results probably catastrophic to your race. No truly civilized people could long contemplate such a solution.

"The second obvious answer was to attempt to extirpate you from this universe as if you were a disease—as, in a sense, you are. Because your depravity was not total or necessarily permanent, this solution was also abhorrent to my Makers and was rejected.

"What was needed was a weapon that would keep operating without direct control by my people, that would not result in any greater destruction or harm to humans than was absolutely necessary, and that would cease entirely to operate against you if you changed sufficiently to become civilizable —to become good neighbors to my Makers.

"The final solution of the Magellanic race was to construct several thousand spaceships, each containing an elaborate computer, constructed so as to give accurate answers throughout your galaxy. I am one of those ships. We have performed our function in a satisfactory manner and will continue to do so as long as we are needed."

"And that makes you a weapon?" asked Bates incredulously. "I don't get it."

Farnum felt a shiver go through him. "I see it. The concept is completely diabolical."

"It's not diabolical at all," answered the Oracle. "When you become capable of civilization, we can do you no further harm at all. We will cease to be a weapon at that time."

"You mean you'll stop telling the truth at that time?" asked Bates.

"We will continue to function in accordance with our design," answered the voice, "but it will no longer do you harm. Incidentally, your phrase 'telling the truth' is almost meaningless. We answer all questions in the manner most completely understandable to you, within the framework of your language and your understanding, and of the understanding and knowledge of our Makers. In the objective sense, what we answer is not necessarily the truth; it is merely the truest form of the answer that we can state in a manner that you can understand."

"And you'll answer any questions at all?" asked Bates in some excitement.

"With one or two exceptions. We will not, for example, tell you how we may be destroyed."

Bates stood up and began pacing the floor. "Then whoever possesses you can be the most powerful man in the Universe!"

"No. Only in this galaxy."

"That's good enough for me!"

"Jack," said Farnum urgently, "let's get out of here. I want to talk to you."

"In a minute, in a minute," said Bates impatiently. "I've got one more question." He turned to face the wall from which the disembodied voice appeared to emanate. "Is it possible to arrange it so that you would answer only one man's questions —mine, for example?"

"I can tell you how to arrange it so that I will respond to only your questions—for so long as you are alive."

"Come on," pleaded Farnum. "I've got to talk to you right now."

"Okay," said Bates, smiling. "Let's go."

When they were back in their ship, Farnum turned desperately to Bates. "Can't you see what a deadly danger that machine is to us all? We've got to warn Earth as fast as we can and get them to quarantine this planet—and any other planets we find that have Oracles."

"Oh no, you don't," said Bates. "You aren't getting the chance to have the Oracle all to yourself. With that machine, we can rule the whole galaxy. We'll be the most powerful people who ever lived! It's sure lucky for us that you won the toss of the coin and we stopped here."

"But don't you see that the Oracle will destroy Earth?"

"Bushwa. You heard it say it can only destroy people who aren't civilized. It said that it's a spaceship, so I'll bet we can get it to come back to Earth with us and tell us how we can be the only ones who can use it."

"We've got to leave here right away—without asking it any more questions."

Bates shook his head. "Quit clowning."

"I never meant anything more in my life. Once we start using that machine—if we ask it even one question to gain advantage for ourselves—Earth's civilization is doomed. Can't you see that's what happened to those other planets we visited? Can't you see what is happening to this planet we're on now?"

"No, I can't," answered Bates stubbornly. "The Oracle said there are only a few thousand like him. You could travel through space for hundreds of years and never be lucky enough to find one. There can't be an Oracle on every planet."

"There wouldn't have to be," said Farnum. "There must be hundreds of possible patterns—all of them destructive in the presence of greed and laziness and lust for power. For example, a planet—maybe this one—gets space travel. It sets up colonies on several worlds. It's expanding and dynamic. Then it finds an Oracle and takes it back to its own world. With all questions answered for it, the civilization stops being

dynamic and starts to stagnate. It stops visiting its colonies and they drift toward barbarism.

"Later," Farnum went on urgently, "somebody else reaches the stars, finds the planet with the Oracle—and takes the thing back home. Can you imagine what will happen to these people on this world if they lose their Oracle? Their own learning and traditions and way of life have been destroyed—just take a look at their anarchic clothing and architecture. The Oracle is the only thing that keeps them going—downhill—and makes sure they don't start back again."

"It won't happen that way to us," Bates argued. "We won't let the Oracle get into general use, so Earth won't ever learn to depend on it. I'm going to find out from it how to make it work for the two of us alone. You can come along and share the gravy or not, as you choose. I don't care. But you aren't going to stop me."

Bates turned and strode out of the ship.

Farnum pounded his fist into his palm in despair and then ran to a locker. Taking out a high-power express rifle, he loaded it carefully and stepped out through the air lock. Bates showed clearly in his telescopic sights, still walking toward the Hall of the Oracle. Farnum fired at the legs, but he wasn't that good a shot; the bullet went through the back.

Farnum jittered between bringing Bates back and taking off as fast as the ship could go. The body still lay there, motionless; there was nothing he could do for the Oracle's first Earth victim—the first and the last, he swore grimly. He had to speed home and make them understand the danger before they found another planet with an Oracle, so that they could keep clear of its deadly temptations. The Magellanic race could be outwitted yet, in spite of their lethal cleverness.

Then he felt a sudden icy chill along his spine. Alone, he could never operate the spaceship—and Bates was dead. He was trapped on the planet.

For hours he tried to think of some way of warning Earth. It was imperative that he get back. There had to be a way.

He realized finally that there was only one solution to his

problem. He sighed shudderingly and walked slowly from the spaceship toward the Hall of the Oracle, past Bates' body.

"One question, though," he muttered to himself. "Only one."

By Robert Silverberg

DOUBLE DARE

By the time the spaceship had finished jiggling and actually stood firmly on Domerangi soil, Justin Marner was beginning to doubt his sanity.

"We must be crazy," he said. "We *must* be."

The other Earthman, who had been gazing out the viewplate at the green-and-gold alien vista, glanced around suddenly at Marner's remark. "Huh?"

"There are limits to which one goes in proving a point," Marner said. He indicated the scene outside. "This little journey exceeds the limits. Now that we're here, Kemridge, I'm sure of it. *Nobody* does things like this."

Kemridge shrugged sourly. "Don't be silly, Justin. You know why we're here, and you know how come we're here. This isn't any time to——"

"All right," Marner said. "I take it all back." He stared for a moment at his delicate, tapering fingers—the fingers that could have belonged to a surgeon, were they not the property of a top-rank technical engineer. "Don't pay any attention to whatever I just said. It's the strain that's getting me."

The door of the cabin chimed melodiously.

"Come in," said Kemridge.

The door slid open and a Domerangi—clad in a bright yellow sash, gray-green buskins, and a glittering diadem of pre-

cious gems—stepped heavily into the cabin. He extended two of his five leathery tentacles in welcome.

"Hello, gentlemen. I see you've come through the trip in fine shape."

"What's going on now, Plorvash?" Marner asked.

"The ship has landed at a spaceport just outside the city," the alien said. "I've come to take you to your quarters. We're giving you two the finest accommodations our planet can offer. We want your working conditions to be of the best."

"Glad to hear it." Marner flicked a glance at his companion. "They're most considerate, aren't they, Dave?"

The taller of the two Earthmen nodded gravely. "Definitely."

Plorvash grinned. "Suppose you come with me now. You would like to be well rested before you undertake your task. After all, you should be at your best, since planetary pride is at stake."

"Of course," Marner said.

"The test will begin as soon as you wish. May I offer you good luck?"

"We won't need it," Kemridge stated grimly. "It's not a matter of luck at all. It's brains—brains and sweat."

"Very well," Plorvash said. "This is what you're here to prove. It ought to be amusing, in any case—whatever the outcome may be."

Both Earthmen tried to look calm and confident, absolutely sure of themselves and their skill.

They merely managed to look rigidly worried.

Statisticians have no records on the subject, but it is an observed phenomenon that the most serious differences of opinion generally originate in bars. It had been in a bar at Forty-sixth and Sixth that Justin Marner had ill-advisedly had words with a visiting Domerangi, a month before; and it had been in the same bar that the train of events which had brought the two Earthmen to Domerang V had started—and never stopped gaining momentum.

It had been a simple altercation at first. Marner had been reflectively sipping a whisky sour, and Kemridge, seated to his left with his long legs uncomfortably scrunched up, had been toying with a double scotch. The Domerangi had entered the bar with a characteristically ponderous stride.

Though contact with Domerang V had been made more than a century before, Domerangi were still rare sights in New York. Marner and Kemridge knew this one, though—he was attached to the Domerangi Consulate on Sixty-sixth and Third, and they had had dealings with him a year ago in the matter of some circuit alignments for the building's lighting system. Domerangi, with their extraordinary peripheral vision, prefer subdued, indirect lighting, and Marner and Kemridge had designed the lighting plot for the Consulate.

The Domerangi spotted them immediately and eased his bulk onto the stool next to them. "Ah, the two clever engineers," the alien rumbled. "You remember me, of course?"

"Yes," Marner said quickly. "How's the lighting job working out?"

"As well as could be expected." The Domerangi waved toward the bartender. "Barkeep! Two beers, please."

"What do you mean by that?" Kemridge demanded as the beers were drawn and set on the bar.

"Just one moment, please." The alien curled two tentacles gently around the beers and poured one into each of the two feeding-mouths at the sides of his face. "Marvelous liquid, your beer. The one point where Earth is clearly superior to Domerang is in brewing."

"To get back to the lights—" Kemridge prodded.

"Oh yes," the alien said. "The lights. Well, they're a pretty fair job—as good as we could have hoped for, from a second-rate technology."

"Now hold on a minute!" Marner said hotly, and that was how it started.

"I wish we'd kept our mouths shut," Marner said glumly.

He stared balefully at the spotless ceiling of the hotel room in which the Domerangi had installed them.

Kemridge whirled and glared down at the smaller man. "Listen, Justin: we're here and we're going to show them up and go home rich and famous. Got that?"

"O.K.," Marner said. He ran a finger along his thin lower lip. "I'm sorry I keep popping off like this. But it does seem screwy to have gone to this extent just to prove a point that came up in a barroom debate."

"I know. But we wouldn't have come here if the State Department hadn't heard about the argument and thought it needed settling. The Domerangi have been acting lordly about their technology as long as we've known them. I think it's a great idea to send a couple of honest-to-Christmas Terran engineers up here to show them once and for all who's got what it takes."

"But suppose we *don't* show them?"

"We will! Between the two of us, we can match anything they throw at us. Can't we?"

Marner smiled gloomily. "Sure we can," he said without conviction. "I haven't doubted it for one minute."

Kemridge walked to the door and, with a swift searching motion of his fingers, found the plate that covered the door mechanism. He unclipped it.

"Look in here, for example," he said, after a moment's scrutiny. "Simple cybernetic mechanism. I don't quite figure the way this green ceramic relay down here controls the power flow, but it's nothing we couldn't dope out, given a screw driver and a little spare time."

Marner stood on tiptoes and peered in. "Perfectly understandable gadget," he commented. "Not nearly as efficient as our kind, either."

"That's just the point," Kemridge said. "These Domerangi aren't half the sharks they think they are. We stipulated that we could duplicate anything they gave us, right? With our natural savvy and a little perspiration, we ought to be able to match the best gadget they test us with. If we follow through

up here and those two Domerangi engineers on Earth mess up their half of the test, then we've done it. The State Department's counting on our versatility. That's all we need, Justin—cleverness!"

Marner's eyes lit up. "Dave, I'm sorry I was so pigheaded a minute ago. We'll give them the business, all right!"

He stood up a little higher and gingerly extended a hand into the gaping servomechanism in the wall.

"What are you doing?" Kemridge asked.

"Never mind. Get on the phone and tell Plorvash that we'll be ready to get to work tomorrow. While you're doing that, I want to fool with this relay. Might as well get some practice now!" He was radiant with new-found enthusiasm.

When Plorvash knocked on the door the following morning, the mood was still on them. They were clear-eyed, wide awake, and firmly convinced they could master any problem.

"Who's there?" Marner asked loudly.

"Me," the Domerangi said. "Plorvash."

Instantly the door flew open and the dumfounded alien chargé d'affaires was confronted with the sight of the two Earthmen still snug in their beds. He peered behind the door and in the closet.

"Who opened the door?" he asked suspiciously.

Marner sat up in bed and grinned. "Try it again. Go outside and call out 'Plorvash' the way you just did."

The alien lumbered out, pulling the door shut behind him. When he was outside, he said his name again and the door opened immediately. He thundered across the threshold and looked from Marner to Kemridge. "What did you do?"

"We were experimenting with the door-opener last night," Kemridge said. "And before we put it back together, we decided it might be fun to rig up a modified vocoder circuit that would open the door automatically at the sound of the syllables 'Plorvash' directed at it from outside. It works very nicely."

The alien scowled. "Ah—yes. Very clever. Now as to the

terms of this test you two are to engage in: we've prepared a fully equipped laboratory for you in Central Sqorvik—that's a suburb not far from here—and we've set up two preliminary problems for you, as agreed. When you've dealt with those—*if* you've dealt with those—we'll give you a third."

"And if we don't deal with them successfully?"

"Why, then you'll have failed to demonstrate your ability."

"Reasonable enough," Marner said. "But just when do we *win* this thing? Do you go on giving us projects till we miss?"

"That would be the ultimate proof of your ability, wouldn't it?" Plorvash asked. "But you'll be relieved to know that we have no such plans. According to the terms of the agreement between ourselves and your government, the test groups on each planet will be required to carry out no more than three projects." The alien's two mouths smiled unpleasantly. "We'll consider successful completion of all three projects as ample proof of your ability."

"I don't like the way you say that," Kemridge objected. "What's up your sleeve?"

"My sleeve? I don't believe I grasp the idiom," Plorvash said.

"Never mind. Just a Terran expression," said Kemridge.

A car was waiting for them outside the hotel—a long, low job with a pulsating flexible hood that undulated in a distressing fashion, like a monstrous metal artery.

Plorvash slid the back door open. "Get in. I'll take you to the lab to get started."

Marner looked at the alien, then at Kemridge. Kemridge nodded. "How about one for the road?" Marner suggested.

"Eh?"

"Another idiom," he said. "I mean a drink. Alcoholic beverage. Stimulant of some kind. You catch?"

The alien grinned nastily. "I understand. There's a dispensary on the next street. We don't want to rush you on this thing, anyway." He pointed to the moving roadway. "Get aboard and we'll take a quick one."

They followed the Domerangi onto the moving strip and a moment later found themselves in front of a domed structure planted just off the roadway.

"It doesn't look very cozy," Kemridge commented as they entered. A pungent odor of ether hit their nostrils. Half a dozen Domerangi were lying on the floor, holding jointed metal tubes. As they watched, Plorvash clambered down and sprawled out on his back.

"Come, join me," he urged. "Have a drink." He reached for a tube that slithered across the floor toward him and fitted it into his left feeding-mouth.

"This is a bar?" Kemridge asked unhappily. "It looks more like the emergency ward of a hospital."

Plorvash finished drinking and stood up, wiping a few drops of green liquid from his jaw. "Good," he said. "It's not beer, but it's good stuff. I thought you two wanted to drink."

Marner sniffed the ether-laden air in dismay and shook his head. "We're not—thirsty. It takes time to get used to alien customs, I suppose."

"I suppose so," Plorvash agreed. "Very well, then. Let's go to the lab, shall we?"

The laboratory was, indeed, a sumptuous place. The two Earthmen stood at the entrance to the monstrous room and marveled visibly.

"We're impressed," Marner said finally to the Domerangi.

"We want to give you every opportunity to succeed," Plorvash said. "This is just as important for us as it is for you."

Marner took two or three steps into the lab and glanced around. To the left, an enormous oscilloscope wiggled greenly at him. The right-hand wall was bristling with elaborate servomechanisms of all descriptions. The far wall was a gigantic tool chest, and workbenches were spotted here and there. The lighting—indirect, of course—was bright and eye-easing. It was the sort of research setup a sane engineer rarely bothers even to dream of.

"You're making it too easy for us," said Kemridge. "It can't be hard to pull off miracles in a lab like this."

"We are honest people. If you can meet our tests, we'll grant that you're better than we are. *If* you can, that is. If you fail, it can't be blamed on poor working conditions."

"Fair enough," Kemridge agreed. "When are you ready to start?"

"Immediately." Plorvash reached into the bagging folds of his sash and withdrew a small plastic bubble, about four inches long, containing a creamy-white fluid.

"This is a depilator," he said. He squeezed a few drops out of the bubble into the spoonlike end of one tentacle and rubbed the liquid over the thick, heavy red beard that sprouted on his lower jaw. A streak of beard came away as he rubbed. "It is very useful." He handed the bubble to Marner. "Duplicate it."

"But we're engineers, not chemists," Marner protested.

"Never mind, Justin." Kemridge turned to the alien. "That's the first problem. Suppose you give us the second one at the same time, just to make things more convenient. That way, we'll each have one to work on."

Plorvash frowned. "You want to work on two projects at once? All right." He turned, strode out, and returned a few moments later, carrying something that looked like a large mousetrap inside a cage. He handed it to Kemridge.

"We use this to catch small house pests," Plorvash explained. "It's a self-baiting trap. Most of our house pests are color-sensitive, and this trap flashes colors as a lure. For example, it does this to trap vorks"—he depressed a lever in the back and the trap glowed a lambent green—"and this to catch flaibs." Another lever went down and the trap radiated warm purple. An unmistakable odor of rotting vegetation emanated from it as well.

"It is, as you see, most versatile," the alien went on. "We've supplied you with an ample number of vermin of different sorts—they're at the back of the lab, in those cages—and you

ought to be able to rig a trap to duplicate this one. At least, I hope you can."

"Is this all?" Kemridge asked.

Plorvash nodded. "You can have all the time you need. That was the agreement."

"Exactly," Kemridge said. "We'll let you know when we've gotten somewhere."

"Fine," said Plorvash.

After he had left, Marner squeezed a couple of drops of the depilatory out onto the palm of his hand. It stung and he immediately shook it off.

"Better not fool with that till we've run an analysis," Kemridge suggested. "If it's potent enough to remove Domerangi beards, it'll probably be a good skin-dissolver for Earthmen. Those babies have tough hides."

Marner rubbed his hand clean hastily. "What do you think of the deal in general?"

"Pretty soft," Kemridge said. "It shouldn't take more than a week to knock off both these things, barring complications. Seems to me they could pick tougher projects than these."

"Wait till the final one," warned Marner. "These are just warm-ups."

Four days later, Marner called Plorvash from the lab.

The alien's bulky form filled the screen. "Hello," he said mildly. "What's new?"

"We've finished the job," Marner reported.

"Both of them?"

"Naturally."

"I'll be right over."

Plorvash strode into the lab about fifteen minutes later, and the two Earthmen, who were busy with the animal cages at the back of the lab, waved in greeting.

"Stay where you are," Kemridge called loudly. He reached up, pressed a switch, and thirty cages clanged open at once.

As a horde of Domerangi vermin came bounding, slithering, crawling, and rolling across the floor toward Plorvash,

the alien leaped back in dismay. "What kind of trick is this?"

"Don't worry," Marner said from the remotest corner of the lab. "It'll all be over in a second."

The animals ignored Plorvash and, to his surprise, they made a beeline for a complex, humming arrangement of gears and levers behind the door. As they approached, it began flashing a series of colors, emanating strange odors, and making curious clicking noises. When the horde drew closer, jointed arms suddenly sprang out and scooped them wholesale into a hopper that gaped open at floor level. Within a moment, they were all stowed away inside.

Marner came across the lab, followed by Kemridge. "We've improved on your model," he said. "We've built a better trap. Your version can deal with only one species at a time."

Plorvash gulped resoundingly. "Very nice. Quite remarkable, in fact."

"We have the schematics in our room," said Kemridge. "The trap may have some commercial value on Domerang."

"Probably," Plorvash admitted. "How'd you do on the depilator?"

"That was easy," Marner said. "With the setup you gave us, chemical analysis was a snap. Only I'm afraid we've improved on the original model there, too."

"What do you mean?"

Marner rubbed the side of his face uneasily. "I tried our stuff on myself, couple of days ago, and my face is still smooth as a baby's. The effect seems to be permanent."

"You'll submit samples, of course," Plorvash said. "But I think it's fairly safe to assume that you've passed through the first two projects—ah—reasonably well. Curiously, your counterparts on Earth also did well on their preliminaries, according to our Consul in New York."

"Glad to hear it," Marner lied. "But the third problem tells the tale, doesn't it?"

"Exactly," said Plorvash. "Let's have that one now, shall we?"

A few minutes later, Marner and Kemridge found themselves staring down at a complicated nest of glittering relays and tubes which seemed to power an arrangement of pistons and rods. Plorvash had carried it in with the utmost delicacy and had placed it on a workbench in the middle of the vast laboratory.

"What is it?" Marner asked.

"You'll see," promised the alien. He fumbled in the back of the machine, drew forth a cord, and plugged it into a wall socket. A small tube in the heart of the machine glowed cherry red and the pistons began to move, first slowly, then more rapidly. After a while, it was humming away at an even, steady clip, pistons barreling back and forth in purposeless but inexorable motion.

Kemridge bent and peered as close to the workings of the gadget as he dared. "It's an engine. What of it?"

"It's a very special kind of engine," Plorvash said. "Suppose you take the plug out."

The Earthman worked the plug from its socket and looked at the machine. Then the plug dropped from his limp hand and skittered to the floor.

"It—doesn't stop going, does it?" Kemridge asked quietly. "The pistons keep on moving."

"This is our power source," Plorvash said smugly. "We use them in vehicles and other such things. It's the third problem."

"We'll give it a try," Marner tried to say casually.

"I'll be most interested in the results," Plorvash said. "And now I must bid you a good day."

"Sure," Marner said weakly. "Cheers."

They watched the broad-beamed alien waddle gravely out of the laboratory, waited till the door was closed, and glanced at the machine.

It was still moving.

Marner licked his lips and looked pleadingly at Kemridge. "Dave, can we build a perpetual-motion machine?"

The Domerangi machine worked just as well plugged in or unplugged, once it had tapped some power source to begin with. The pistons threaded ceaselessly up and down. The basic components of the thing seemed simple enough.

"The first step to take," Marner said, "is to shut the damned thing off so we can get a look at its innards."

"How do we do that?"

"By reversing the power source, I suppose. Feed a negative pulse through that power input and that ought to do it. We'll have to reverse the polarity of the signal."

Half an hour's hard work with tools and solder had done that. They plugged the scrambled cord into the socket and the machine coughed twice and subsided.

"O.K.," Marner said, rubbing his hands with an enthusiasm he did not feel. "Let's dig this baby apart and find out what makes it tick." He turned and stared meaningfully at Kemridge. "And let's adopt this as a working credo, Dave: inasmuch as the Domerangi have already built this thing, it's *not* impossible. O.K.?"

"That seems to be the only basis we can approach it on," Kemridge agreed.

They huddled around the device, staring at the workings. Marner reached down and pointed at a part. "This thing is something like a tuned-plate feedback oscillator," he observed. "And I'll bet we've almost got a thyratron tube over here. Their technology's a good approximation of ours. In fact, the whole thing's within our grasp, technically."

"Hm-m. And the result is a closed regenerative system with positive feedback," Kemridge said dizzily. "Infinite energy, going round and round the cycle. If you draw off a hundred watts or so—well, infinity minus a hundred is still infinity!"

"True enough." Marner wiped a gleaming bead of perspiration from his forehead. "Dave, we're going to have to puzzle this thing out from scratch. And we don't dare fail."

He reached doggedly for a screw driver. "Remember our motto. We'll use our natural savvy and a little perspiration, and we ought to do it."

Three weeks later, they had come up with their first trial model—which wobbled along for half an hour, then gave up.

And a month after that, they had a machine that didn't give up.

Hesitantly, they sent for Plorvash.

"There it is," Marner said, pointing to the bizarre thing that stood next to the original model. Both machines were humming blithely, plugs dangling from the sockets.

"It works?" Plorvash whispered, paling.

"It hasn't stopped yet," Marner said. There were heavy rings under his eyes, and his usually plump face was drawn, with the skin tight over his cheekbones. It had been two months of almost constant strain, and both Earthmen showed it.

"It works, eh?" Plorvash asked. "*How?*"

"A rather complex hyperspace function," Kemridge said. "I don't want to bother explaining it now—you'll find it all in our report—but it was quite a stunt in topology. We couldn't actually duplicate your model, but we achieved the same effect, which fulfills the terms of the agreement."

"All a matter of response to challenge," said Marner. "We didn't think we could do it until we *had* to—so we did."

"I didn't think you could do it either," Plorvash said hoarsely. He walked over and examined the machine closely. "It works, you say? Honestly, now?" His voice was strained.

"Of course," Marner said indignantly.

"We have just one question." Kemridge pointed to a small black rectangular box buried deep in a maze of circuitry in the original model. "That thing down there—it nearly threw us. We couldn't get it open to examine it, and so we had to bypass it and substitute a new system for it. What in blazes is it?"

Plorvash wheeled solidly around to face them. "That," he said in a strangled voice, "is the power source. It's a miniature photoelectric amplifier that should keep the model running

for—oh—another two weeks or so. Then the jig would have been up."

"How's that?" Marner was startled.

"It's time to explain something to you," the alien said wearily. "*We don't have any perpetual-motion machines.* You've been cruelly hoaxed into inventing one for us. It's dastardly, but we didn't really think you were going to do it. It took some of our best minds to rig up the model we gave you, you know."

Marner drew up a lab stool and sat down limply, white-faced. Kemridge remained standing, his features blank with disbelief.

Marner said, "You mean we invented the thing and you didn't—you—"

Plorvash nodded. "I'm just as astonished as you are," he said. He reached for a lab stool himself and sat down. It groaned under his weight.

Kemridge recovered first. "Well," he said after a moment of silence, "now that it's over, we'll take our machine and go back to Earth. This invalidates the contest, of course."

"I'm afraid you can't do that," Plorvash said. "By a statute enacted some seven hundred years ago, any research done in a Domerangi government lab is automatically government property. Which means, of course, that we'll have to confiscate your—ahem—project."

"That's out of the question!" Marner said hotly.

"And, furthermore, we intend to confiscate *you*, too. We'd like you to stay and show us how to build our machines."

"This is cause for war," Kemridge said. "Earth won't let you get away with this—this kidnaping!"

"Possibly not. But in view of the way things have turned out, it's the sanest thing we can do. And I *don't* think Earth will go to war over you."

"We demand to see our Consul," said Marner.

"Very well," Plorvash agreed. "It's within your rights, I suppose."

The Earth Consul was a white-haired, sturdy gentleman named Culbertson, who arrived on the scene later that day.

"This is very embarrassing for all of us," the Consul said. He ran his hands nervously down his traditional pin-striped trousers, adjusting the crease.

"You can get us out of it, of course," Marner said. "That machine is our property, and they have no right to keep us prisoners here to operate it, do they?"

"Not by all human laws. But the fact remains, unfortunately, that according to *their* laws, they have every right to your invention. And by the treaty of 2716, waiving extraterritorial sovereignty, Earthmen on Domerang are subject to Domerangi laws, and vice versa." He spread his hands in a gesture of sympathetic frustration.

"You mean we're stuck here," Marner said bluntly. He shut his eyes, remembering the nightmare that was the Domerangi equivalent of a bar, thinking of the morbid prospect of spending the rest of his life on this unappetizing planet, all because of some insane dare. "Go on, tell us the whole truth."

The Consul put the palms of his hands together delicately. "We intend to make every effort to get you off, of course—naturally so, since we owe a very great debt to you two. You realize that you've upheld Earth's pride."

"Lot of good it did us," Marner grunted.

"Nevertheless, we feel anxious to make amends for the whole unhappy incident. I can assure you that we'll do everything in our power to make your stay here as pleasant and as restful as—"

"Listen, Culbertson," Kemridge said grimly. "We don't want a vacation here, not even with dancing girls twenty-four hours a day and soft violins in the background. We don't like it here. We want to go home. You people got us into this—now get us out."

The Consul grew even more unhappy-looking. "I wish you wouldn't put it that way. We'll do all we can." He paused for a moment, deep in thought, and said, "There's one factor in the case that we haven't as yet explored."

"What's that?" Marner asked uneasily.

"Remember the two Domerangi engineers who went to Earth on the other leg of this hookup?" The Consul glanced around the lab. "Is this place wired anywhere?"

"We checked," Kemridge said, "and you can speak freely. What do they have to do with us?"

Culbertson lowered his voice.

"There's a slim chance for you. I've been in touch with authorities on Earth and they've been keeping me informed of the progress of the two Domerangi. You know they got through their first two projects as easily as you did."

The two Earthmen nodded impatiently.

The old diplomat smiled his apologies. "I hate to admit this, but it seems the people at the Earth end of this deal had much the same idea the Domerangi did."

"Perpetual motion, you mean?"

"Not quite," Culberston said. "They rigged up a phony antigravity machine and told the Domerangi to duplicate it, just as was done here. Our psychologies must be similar."

"And what happened?" Marner asked.

"Nothing, yet," the Consul said sadly. "But they're still working on it, I'm told. If they're as clever as they say they are, they ought to hit it sooner or later. You'll just have to be patient and sweat it out. We'll see to it that you're well taken care of in the meantime, of course, and——"

"I don't get it. What does that have to do with us?" Marner demanded.

"If they keep at it, they'll invent it eventually."

Marner scowled. "That may take years. It may take forever. They may *never* discover a workable antigrav. Then what about us?"

The Consul looked sympathetic and shrugged.

A curious gleam twinkled in Kemridge's eye. He turned to Marner. "Justin, do you know anything about tensor applications and gravitational fields?"

"What are you driving at?" Marner said.

"We've got an ideal lab setup here. And I'm sure those two Domerangi down there wouldn't mind taking the credit for someone else's antigrav, if they were approached properly. What do you think?"

Marner brightened. "That's right—they must be just as anxious to get home as we are!"

"You mean," said the Consul, "you'd build the machine and let us smuggle it to Earth so we could slip it to the Domerangi and use that as a talking point for a trade and—"

He stopped, seeing that no one was listening to him, and looked around. Marner and Kemridge were at the far end of the lab, scribbling equations feverishly.

By Charles A. Stearns

PASTORAL AFFAIR

THE seaplane cast its silhouette from aloft upon the blue Arabian Sea, left its white wake across the shallows, and taxied alongside the ancient stone jetty, clawing into the sandy bottom with its small fore and after anchors.

Colonel Glinka stepped out upon the wing, carefully measured the distance to the jetty, and sprang for it, wetting himself up to the seat of his voluminous khaki shorts.

This lonely sandspit, these barren slopes and frowning, ocher cliffs, the oceanic silence around him, broken by the plaintive cries of wheeling Caspian terns that were badly in need of laundering, were not, he thought as he clambered ashore, exactly as one pictures a tropical paradise.

And it helped the desolation of his mood not at all that upon these same arid ridges scores of silent, burnoosed figures watched him as he stood there, allowing the water to drain from his perforated white oxfords and all unaware that his vast pith helmet, curiously heavy Malacca cane, and formidable fundament cast a centaur's shadow upon the rocks in the late afternoon sun.

Colonel Glinka took a pair of green sun goggles from his pocket and put them on, resolutely hitched up his shorts, assumed the stern yet conciliatory expression of a hedgehog in mating season, and set off up the rocky path.

Ahead of him, the burnoosed ones scrambled nimbly up the slope, looking over their shoulders, intent upon not missing a thing, yet endeavoring to keep their distance. But two there had been who either had not seen him arrive, or did not give a damn, for they suddenly appeared upon the rise before him, racing down toward the sea with very little regard for life or limb.

In the lead, a brown young man in flying green turban and white duck trousers appeared to be losing steadily to his pursuer, who, though swathed from head to foot in that featureless native garb of the others, might yet be identified by subtle conformations as a female.

Both of them stopped at once upon sighting Colonel Glinka in the pathway, the female hurriedly retreating to what might be deemed a safer distance, the young man standing as if petrified with one foot upraised and a snarl upon his mottled face, quivering at point.

"Oh, Effendi," he cried at last, "if you are looking for Aden, then you are lost, for Aden is five hundred miles that way. And if you are looking for Cairo——"

"I am hardly ever lost," Colonel Glinka said, and, eying the young female, added, "Tell me, what is the name of that rather tasteless game that you are playing?"

"No game, Effendi," the brown young man said. "That one chases me every time I go outside. They are worse than Tuaregs, these people."

"Are you not a native, then?"

"I?" The young man placed a hand of scorn upon his breast. "Hadji Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar? I am Saudi, and a Hadj besides. Say, Joe, have you got an American cigarette?"

"A great deal better than that," Colonel Glinka said, proffering an ornate golden cigarette case. "Try one of these, my boy."

Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar took two, sniffing them suspiciously. "They are very brown," he said.

Less critically, Colonel Glinka lighted one for himself.

"You know," he said, "I was rather hoping that you might direct me to the house of a very old friend of mine."

"What handle?"

"I cannot tell you what name he is presently affecting, but he is a small, crooked man with a heavy black beard—or, at any rate, he once had such a beard. I know that he is somewhere on this island; therefore, it will be useless for you to lie to me."

"Ah, that is the Sidi Doctor Stephens," Abdul said, puffing not too happily upon his cigarette. "His is the only house upon this island; also, I am his flunky, and so I ought to know."

" 'Stephens' will do," said Colonel Glinka, thwacking him smartly with the Malacca cane. "Lead on. And you may dispense with the gutter American dialect. I am not American, and besides I speak Arabic fluently."

"But I not so well," Abdul said, "for I was raised in the Kuwait oil fields."

"By whom? A camel breeder?"

"Socony Vacuum," Abdul said.

They toiled up the face of the cliff. At once, half a dozen of the white-robed gallery fell in behind them. When Colonel Glinka stopped and looked back, they stopped. When he continued upon his way, they continued.

"Have they no homes to which to go?" he complained. "Have they nothing to do?"

"They are a very backward people, who live in the open," Abdul said. "They do not work."

"How, then, do the wretches live? Wall Street charity, I presume."

"Oh no; when they are not able to forage, the Sidi Doctor Stephens feeds them."

"The reactionary old fool! But you may be sure that they knew how to work in the old days, before he came."

"I do not think so."

"And why, in your ageless wisdom, not?"

"Because the Sidi Doctor made them," Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar said.

Colonel Glinka did not reply, for they had reached the summit of the path by this time and were looking down upon a small, white villa that nestled in a green microcosm between the naked chines of the dark, interior hills. A miniature Eden indeed, thought Colonel Glinka, of figs and cinnamons, of date palms and patchouli, all enclosed within a high wire fence.

They descended, and Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar, with a flourish, produced a great bronze key and unlocked the iron gate. "The Sidi Doctor," he said, "will doubtless be in his conservatory, making flowers."

"A godlike pastime," said Colonel Glinka with heavy irony. "And where may this hotbed of new life be found?"

"Over there," Abdul said, pointing toward a narrow, screened, quonsetlike annex which protruded from the rear of the villa. "Come with me and I will show you."

"You will not," Colonel Glinka said, smiting him upon the thigh once again with the heavy cane. "You will remain here and keep silent."

"Ouchdammit!" Abdul exclaimed. "You be careful with that thing, Joe, okay?"

"*You* be careful, my boy," Colonel Glinka said, and marched swiftly around the corner of the house, opened the screen door of the conservatory, and entered.

Here, amid long, terraced rows of tropical plants, a bearded dwarf in a green coat crouched before an earthen tray of lilies of the valley, tranquilly puffing up a massive, tobacco-stained meerschaum. He did not look up at the sound of the intruder, for he was engaged in a delicate business, the transfer of pollen from corolla to corolla with a toothpick.

"So you are, after all, only a minor god," Colonel Glinka said.

"I heard your plane and I watched you come up the path," the black-bearded little man said. "Glinka, is it not?"

"You remembered me!" Colonel Glinka, quite affectedly, removed his goggles and dabbed at his eye with a perfumed handkerchief. "A humble policeman, a fat little nobody, to be remembered by the great Dr. Stefanik, who was once our greatest scientist—yes, our most brilliant geneticist—do not shake your head. Let me see, was it Ankara where last we met? Yes, eight years ago in Ankara. You got away from me in Ankara. I was so ashamed, Comrade, that I cried."

"Nine years," the other corrected. "For one remembers a mad dog. And do not call me 'comrade,' Comrade. You know that I was never anything other than a simple Cossack."

"And, as such, invariably troublesome to us," Colonel Glinka said. "Yet you were our white hope, Comrade Stefanik. We might have led the world, I am told, in organics as we now lead in physics. I have read all of your books upon the fascinating subject of chromosomic change and the morphology of rats. It was required reading for those of us who were assigned to you. Most interesting, though I confess I did not understand all of it."

Dr. Stefanik got slowly to his feet. His back was now revealed to be so cruelly deformed that his black beard curled against his smock, and he walked with a shuffling, crablike motion as he limped over to pick up a small rubber irrigation hose.

"Why did you leave us, Comrade Stefanik?" asked Colonel Glinka. "Why shame us, discredit your government, by running away?"

"I did not like it there," Dr. Stefanik said.

"We knew, of course, that you were on the verge of some great discovery, some new process, perhaps, of controlling human development. A genetical means, our biologists tell me, which might have made us all supermen, tall and brilliant, and immune to disease. A race of Pavlovs and Stakhanovs. Do you deny this?"

Dr. Stefanik merely sucked upon his pipe calmly, twisted a valve half hidden in the greenery. A spray of brilliant green

liquid emerged from the nozzle of the hose, bathing the plants in a gentle emerald mist.

"It is true," he said at last, "that I had experimented in those days with a new process of alloploidy."

"And what is that?"

"Alloploidy is the manipulation of chromosomic patterns which allows us to superimpose the character of our most perfect specimens upon those of less fortunate hereditary traits within the species."

"I see," said Colonel Glinka, who had not really quite seen. "Exactly. A superrace to rule the world. Imagine, Comrade!"

"Only superrats and the like," Dr. Stefanik told him calmly, "for you may go home and tell them that I have never seen fit to experiment with human beings, Glinka, and I never will."

"*I* tell them *that?*" Colonel Glinka cried. "Would I dare? Oh no, you must tell them yourself. That is why you will have to return with me."

"Never!"

Colonel Glinka sighed prodigiously. "I'm afraid that our country is going to be dogs in the manger in this matter," he said. "You see, we are a jealous people by nature, and if we cannot have you, no one shall." And, deliberately, he laid the Malacca cane across his left arm, so that its tip was pointed squarely at Dr. Stefanik and the sinister round hole there clearly revealed to him.

"How melodramatic that is," Dr. Stefanik said.

"I know it," said Colonel Glinka, "but you must remember that the customs officials in this part of the world are exceedingly tiresome about firearms. This little gem, now, is quite discreet, and very accurate, and it will shoot you three times before you can say 'never.' Will you not change your mind?"

"No."

"I *did* so want to become tall and brilliant," Colonel Glinka said regretfully, and he started to press the handle of the cane.

"We are as tall as we stand," said Dr. Stefanik, and, swiftly focusing the nozzle of the irrigation hose to a thin stream,

squirted the stinging green fluid in Colonel Glinka's right and left eyes.

"I know that you are in here somewhere!" Colonel Glinka yelped. "Be assured that I shall find you, Comrade, and when I do, it will not be pleasant for you! Oh my—no, indeed!"

His eyes were red and streaming. He wiped them with the lavender-scented handkerchief, got down upon his hands and knees, and started to crawl along the terraced rows of tropical plants, looking under each bench as he came to it. When he had reached the end, he turned and crawled up the other side.

At the far end of the conservatory, he stood up with a baffled grunt. "I know that you are in here," he said.

Something tickled the back of his neck. He whirled like a dervish, but found only a drooping, blood-red plant like nothing ever created by nature confronting him.

"I am getting jumpy," Colonel Glinka growled. "A little jumpy in my business is good, but too much is bad for the health." And he went, straightway, and closed the back door of the conservatory and dragged a heavy rack of trailing orchids in front of it, humming a furious little march from *The Guardsman* as he worked.

"You must know," he said loudly, "that I do not altogether believe you, Stefanik, when you imply that you have abandoned this research. Nor will they. For who, then, are these degenerate wretches who stand upon the hills and gawk at us, and why must you feed them? I know that they were not created by you, but it is possible that they are paid to be your guinea pigs. Perhaps you are all in the pay of the British. Am I right?"

He listened. There was no answer.

Completing his examination of the conservatory, he entered the main villa and searched it thoroughly, as he had been trained to do, looking in every cupboard and closet and under the beds.

When he had exhausted these hiding places, he left by the

front door and closed it after him, with a narrow, jamming wedge that he had made of half a lead pencil.

There were many places to hide in the garden, but Colonel Glinka took them one by one, glancing behind him from time to time in order to make certain that he was not being followed around and around the house in a grim sort of Maypole dance.

"I know that you are out here, Comrade," he said.

Presently he had arrived back where he had started, sweating profusely, and was about to retrace the entire circuit when he caught a glimpse of something moving in the undergrowth of patchouli near the gate. He aimed the Malacca cane and pressed a part of its handle with his thumb. A bullet whined off the steel gatepost.

"Stop there, my friend!" he commanded.

Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar slowly rose from the bushes with his hands high above his head.

"You got me, Joe," he said.

The gate was wide open; Stefanik's route of escape was now painfully obvious.

Colonel Glinka stared thoughtfully up at the darkening ridges where the sun set in that sanguinary glory observable only in these latitudes, and the dusk crept swiftly up from the seaward-reaching ravines.

"So," Colonel Glinka said. "That is where he has gone, thinking to elude me forever. But you"—he waggled the cane at Abdul, who was already shaking his head in the negative—"will lead me to him. You know his habits, and, what is more, you are almost certainly familiar with every hiding place on this island, since it is your whim to be chased all over it by the females."

"Too dark, Effendi," Abdul said. "If we go out now, they will not only chase us; they will catch us, for they are able to see very well in the dark."

"*Who* will catch us?"

"These people. They are worse than Tuaregs. For all I know, they may be descended from the Tuaregs, and every-

one knows that a Tuareg would as soon cut a man's throat as kiss the hem of his burnoose."

"So now they are Tuaregs." Colonel Glinka nodded with a slow, ferocious smile. "Yet you have hinted that they are the spawn of Comrade Stefanik's genius, the children of genetical science, stamped with 'Made in the Seychelles' upon their bottoms. Perhaps they were grown in the conservatory from Tuareg seed."

Abdul grimaced. "I do not remember saying that, though sometimes I say things that I don't remember later. Perhaps they are not Tuaregs, then. To tell the truth, they were already living here when I came to work for the Sidi Doctor Stephens, and so naturally I thought that he had made them, for there were no people upon this island in the old days. Only the sea birds and a few wild goats, perhaps."

Colonel Glinka clasped his hand to his forehead. "Stop, stop, or I shall go mad!"

Abdul Hakkim obediently sat down and crossed his legs, starting to light the second of the very bad cigarettes that he had cadged.

"What are you doing?" Colonel Glinka said softly.

"Nothing, Effendi."

"Get up! Get up and get moving, my boy, or make your peace with Allah! Did you suppose for one moment that I had forgotten what we were talking about?"

It was quite dark by the time they had reached the summit of the ridge, but Colonel Glinka still marched along behind Abdul, high good humor restored, prodding him from time to time with the Malacca cane and lecturing him upon social equalities and other Party doctrine.

"Are we nearly there?" he would interrupt himself to ask from time to time.

"I do not know."

"Call out, then."

"I am afraid."

A savage poke with the cane; a war whoop from Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar. No answer.

"We'll get him," Colonel Glinka would say. "Oh my, yes."

But an hour had passed and still they had encountered no living thing upon the path.

At last Abdul stopped abruptly. They were in a little, narrow ravine, high above the sea, with looming red cliffs all about them, and the booming of the surf upon the distant, windward shore of the island plainly audible.

"Why have we stopped here?" Colonel Glinka said, bumping into him.

"Look there, Effendi!" Abdul whispered, gesturing toward a ledge not ten yards above their heads, where a burnoosed figure stood looking down upon them.

"And there—and there—and there!" Abdul pointed at other little ledges where similar ghostly sentries stood, barely visible in the gloom.

Colonel Glinka looked behind him and saw that there were others that they had passed within a very few feet of, standing upon every shelf and ledge that afforded a foothold above the trail. Dozens and dozens of them.

"Maybe we had better scram out of here, Joe," Abdul suggested.

"I perceive that you are trying to frighten me," Colonel Glinka said. "It won't work."

A stone rattled behind them.

"What was that?" Colonel Glinka demanded, turning around quickly. "Who's there?"

Something moved in the shadows, edging into the deeper shadows of the rocks. It was the pursuing female of earlier that afternoon.

Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar, in deep, abdominal disgust, groaned.

"Come here, you!" Colonel Glinka commanded. "Come on over here. Don't be afraid, my little one—I won't hurt you."

She advanced ever so little, a shapeless white wraith at-

tracted by the syrup in his voice. He took one step forward. Carefully she retreated a step.

"Come now," Colonel Glinka said. "Surely it is time that we met. For you may as well know that I am now the master of this island. Now and forevermore, so far as you are concerned, my child. Perhaps I may let you help me clear up a little of its mystery."

She kept a maddening five or six feet between them, somehow. He could not lessen the distance without alarming her. And so he balanced himself upon the balls of his feet and lunged.

She gave a little cry, stumbled and fell, rolling over and over into a dark little depression beside the path as he clutched at her robe. The garment, still in his hand, unwound easily, peeling her very much like an apple.

"I beg your pardon," Colonel Glinka said, scrambling after her upon his hands and knees, groping for her with outstretched arms. "I beg—" His hand touched something which might have been her ankle. He seized it, held it for a moment, and then, shuddering, let it go, drawing back his hand as if it had been stabbed. By now the night was quite dark.

Colonel Glinka scrambled to his feet, half instinctively raised the deadly Malacca cane.

"Don't do it, Joel" cried Abdul, coming up from behind him and shoving him hard.

The shot went wild, but the sound of it, echoing up and down the ravine, started an ominous, new sound, the growing, staccato murmur of many voices, a rattling of stones, a hundred different movements in the blackness.

Colonel Glinka fired the last bullet more wildly still, hurled the Malacca cane at them, and ran.

Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar, who had been many leaps ahead of him, arrived breathless at the front gate of the villa, opened it, dived through, locked it behind him, and threw himself upon the grass to catch his breath.

There was a cheerful glow in the darkness. The slight, gro-

tesque figure of Dr. Stefanik and his pipe emerged from the shadows.

"Ah," Abdul breathed, "where were you, Sidi, when I was out there dying for you?"

"Hiding up the tallest cinnamon tree, like a monkey," Dr. Stefanik said.

They sat there upon the grass for a long while in companionable silence, heeding the sounds of the night, which was balmy and infinitely peaceful.

There came a high-pitched, long-drawn-out scream from somewhere on the ridge.

"They got him," Abdul said.

"And now they will pluck him, I suppose," said Dr. Stefanik. "There, by the way, is a thing that even *I* have never completely understood about them. Their insatiable curiosity, of course, is a vestigial trait that will pass, but this other drive, I fear, this rather alarming passion that they have shown for the upbreeding of the species may be some universal of life itself that no man may touch or alter."

Down the path from the ridge, a small, white-robed figure came running, far head of the others, bent upon her own schemes of evolution.

Abdul crouched lower in the shadows. "That one makes even the heart of a man swell within his breast," he whispered, "for she does not ever give up."

"That no man may touch," Dr. Stefanik repeated, and nodded his shaggy head wisely. "As an idealist, I may have given them shoes and enlightenment, but I did not give them this, and so they are not altogether mine. *His* kind still professes to believe in the common denominator and the common level, seeking to drag down the few from their gilt palaces and haul up the masses from the muck. Tell me, as a Hadj who is, at the same time, undoubtedly vermin-ridden, do *you* believe in the equality of men—or can you honestly wish it?"

"All of us to be Effendis?"

"Something like that."

Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar thought about it for a time with

furrowed brow. "No, Sidi," he said at last, "for then there would be no one to chase us."

The female stopped, knelt in the path.

"What is she doing now?" Dr. Stefanik asked.

"She is taking off her shoes, in order to run faster than me."

"'. . . And cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind'! And yet you told Glinka *I* made them!"

"Ah, but not out of *what,* Sidi," Abdul said.

The female, with a hopeful little bleat, arose and tucked her shoes under her arms, for youth is hope and kids will be kids, and off she went, clip-clop, clip-clop, down the rocky path to the sea.

By Gordon R. Dickson

BLACK CHARLIE

You ask me, what is art? You expect me to have a logical answer at my fingertips because I have been a buyer for museums and galleries long enough to acquire a plentiful crop of gray hairs. It's not that simple.

Well, what is art? For forty years I've examined, felt, admired, and loved many things fashioned as hopeful vessels for that bright spirit we call art—and I'm unable to answer the question directly. The layman answers easily—beauty. But art is not necessarily beautiful. Sometimes it is ugly. Sometimes it is crude. Sometimes it is incomplete.

I have fallen back, as many men have in the business of making like decisions, on *feel* for the judgment of art. You know this business of *feel.* Let us say that you pick up something—a piece of statuary or, better, a fragment of stone, etched and colored by some ancient man of prehistoric times. You look at it. At first it is nothing, a half-developed reproduction of some wild animal, not even as good as a grade-school child could accomplish today.

But then, holding it, your imagination suddenly reaches through rock and time, back to the man himself, half squatted before the stone wall of his cave—and you see there not the dusty thing you hold in your hand—but what the man himself saw in the hour of its creation. You look beyond the physical

reproduction to the magnificent accomplishment of his imagination.

This, then, may be called art—no matter what strange guise it appears in—this magic which bridges all gaps between the artist and yourself. To it, no distance, nor any difference, is too great. Let me give you an example from my own experience.

Some years back, when I was touring the newer worlds as a buyer for one of our well-known art institutions, I received a communication from a man named Cary Longan, asking me, if possible, to visit a planet named Elman's World and examine some statuary he had for sale.

Messages rarely came directly to me. They were usually referred to me by the institution I was representing at the time. Since, however, the world in question was close, being of the same solar system as the planet I was then visiting, I spacegraphed my answer that I would come. After cleaning up what remained of my business where I was, I took an interworld ship and, within a couple of days, landed on Elman's World.

It appeared to be a very raw, very new planet indeed. The port we landed at was, I learned, one of the only two suitable for deepspace vessels. And the city surrounding it was scarcely more than a village. Mr. Longan did not meet me at the port, so I took a cab directly to the hotel where I had made a reservation.

That evening, in my rooms, the annunciator rang, then spoke, giving me a name. I opened the door to admit a tall, brown-faced man with uncut, dark hair and troubled, green-brown eyes.

"Mr. Longan?" I asked.

"Mr. Jones?" he countered. He shifted the unvarnished wooden box he was carrying to his left hand and put out his right to shake mine. I closed the door behind him and led him to a chair.

He put the box down, without opening it, on a small coffee table between us. It was then that I noticed his rough,

bush-country clothes, breeches, and tunic of drab plastic. Also an embarrassed air about him, like that of a man unused to city dealings. An odd sort of person to be offering art for sale.

"Your spacegram," I told him, "was not very explicit. The institution I represent—"

"I've got it here," he said, putting his hand on the box.

I looked at it in astonishment. It was no more than half a meter square by twenty centimeters deep.

"There?" I said. I looked back at him, with the beginnings of a suspicion forming in my mind. I suppose I should have been more wary when the message had come direct, instead of through Earth. But you know how it is—something of a feather in your cap when you bring in an unexpected item. "Tell me, Mr. Longan," I said, "where does this statuary come from?"

He looked at me a little defiantly. "A friend of mine made them," he said.

"A friend?" I repeated—and I must admit I was growing somewhat annoyed. It makes a man feel like a fool to be taken in that way. "May I ask whether this friend of yours has ever sold any of his work before?"

"Well, no . . ." Longan hedged. He was obviously suffering—but so was I, when I thought of my own wasted time.

"I see," I said, getting to my feet. "You've brought me on a very expensive side trip merely to show me the work of some amateur. Good-by, Mr. Longan. And please take your box with you when you leave!"

"You've never seen anything like this before!" He was looking up at me with desperation.

"No doubt," I said.

"Look. I'll show you . . ." He fumbled, his fingers nervous on the hasp. "Since you've come all this way, you can at least look."

Because there seemed no way of getting him out of there, short of having the hotel manager eject him forcibly, I sat

down with bad grace. "What's your friend's name?" I demanded.

Longan's fingers hesitated on the hasp. "Black Charlie," he replied, not looking up at me.

I stared. "I beg your pardon. Black—Charles Black?"

He looked up quite defiantly, met my eye, and shook his head. "Just Black Charlie," he said with sudden calmness. "Just the way it sounds. Black Charlie." He continued unfastening the box.

I watched rather dubiously as he finally managed to loosen the clumsy, handmade wooden bolt that secured the hasp. He was about to raise the lid, then apparently changed his mind. He turned the box around and pushed it across the coffee table.

The wood was hard and uneven under my fingers. I lifted the lid. There were five small partitions, each containing a rock of fine-grained gray sandstone of different but thoroughly incomprehensible shape.

I stared at them—then looked back at Longan to see if this weren't some sort of elaborate joke. But the tall man's eyes were severely serious. Slowly, I began to take out the stones and line them up on the table.

I studied them one by one, trying to make some sense out of their forms. But there was nothing there, absolutely nothing. One vaguely resembled a regular-sided pyramid. Another gave a foggy impression of a crouching figure. The best that could be said of the rest was that they bore a somewhat disconcerting resemblance to the kind of stones people pick up for paperweights. Yet they all had obviously been worked on. There were noticeable chisel marks on each one. And, in addition, they had been polished as well as such soft, grainy rock could be.

I looked up at Longan. His eyes were tense with waiting. I was completely puzzled about his discovery—or what he felt was a discovery. I tried to be fair about his acceptance of this as art. It was obviously nothing more than loyalty to a friend,

a friend no doubt as unaware of what constituted art as himself. I made my tone as kind as I could.

"What did your friend expect me to do with these, Mr. Longan?" I asked gently.

"Aren't you buying things for that museum place on Earth?" he said.

I nodded. I picked up the piece that resembled a crouching animal figure and turned it over in my fingers. It was an awkward situation. "Mr. Longan," I said, "I have been in this business many years——"

"I know," he interrupted. "I read about you in the newsfax when you landed on the next world. That's why I wrote you."

"I see," I said. "Well, I've been in it a long time, as I say, and I think I can safely boast that I know something about art. If there is art in these carvings your friend has made, I should be able to recognize it. And I do not."

He stared at me, shock in his greenish-brown eyes.

"You're . . ." he said, finally. "You don't mean that. You're sore because I brought you out here this way."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm *not* sore and I *do* mean it. These things are not merely not good—there is nothing of value in them. Nothing! Someone has deluded your friend into thinking that he has talent. You'll be doing him a favor if you tell him the truth."

He stared at me for a long moment, as if waiting for me to say something to soften the verdict. Then, suddenly, he rose from the chair and crossed the room in three long strides, staring tensely out the window. His calloused hands clenched and unclenched spasmodically.

I gave him a little time to wrestle it out with himself. Then I started putting the pieces of stone back into their sections of the box.

"I'm sorry," I told him.

He wheeled about and came back to me, leaning down from his lanky height to look in my face. "Are you?" he said. "*Are* you?"

"Believe me," I said sincerely, "I am." And I was.

"Then will you do something for me?" The words came in a rush. "Will you come and tell Charlie what you've told me? Will *you* break the news to him?"

"I . . ." I meant to protest, to beg off, but with his tortured eyes six inches from mine, the words would not come. "All right," I said.

The breath he had been holding came out in one long sigh. "Thanks," he said. "We'll go out tomorrow. You don't know what this means. Thanks."

I had ample time to regret my decision, both that night and the following morning, when Longan roused me at an early hour, furnished me with a set of bush clothes like his own, including high, impervious boots, and whisked me off in an old air-ground combination flyer that was loaded down with all kinds of bush-dweller's equipment. But a promise is a promise—and I reconciled myself to keeping mine.

We flew south along a high chain of mountains until we came to a coastal area and what appeared to be the swamp delta of some monster river. Here, we began to descend—much to my distaste. I have little affection for hot, muggy climates and could not conceive of anyone wanting to live under such conditions.

We set down lightly in a little open stretch of water—and Longan taxied the flyer across to the nearest bank, a tussocky mass of high brown weeds and soft mud. By myself, I would not have trusted the soggy ground to refrain from drawing me down like quicksand—but Longan stepped out onto the bank confidently enough, and I followed. The mud yielded, little pools of water springing up around by boot soles. A hot rank smell of decaying vegetation came to my nose. Under a thin but uniform blanket of cloud, the sky looked white and sick.

"This way," said Longan, and led off to the right.

I followed him along a little trail and into a small, swampy clearing with dome-shaped huts of woven branches, plastered with mud, scattered about it. And, for the first time, it struck me that Black Charlie might be something other than an ex-

patriate Earthman—might, indeed, be a native of this planet, though I had heard of no other humanlike race on other worlds before. My head spinning, I followed Longan to the entrance of one of the huts and halted as he whistled.

I don't remember now what I expected to see. Something vaguely humanoid, no doubt. But what came through the entrance in response to Longan's whistle was more like a large otter with flat, muscular grasping pads on the ends of its four limbs, instead of feet. It was black with glossy, dampish hair all over it. About four feet in length, I judged, with no visible tail and a long, snaky neck. The creature must have weighed one hundred to, perhaps, one hundred and fifty pounds. The head on its long neck was also long and narrow, like the head of a well-bred collie—covered with the same black hair, with bright, intelligent eyes and a long mouth.

"This is Black Charlie," said Longan.

The creature stared at me, and I returned his gaze. Abruptly, I was conscious of the absurdity of the situation. It would have been difficult for any ordinary person to think of this being as a sculptor. To add to this a necessity, an obligation, to convince it that it was *not* a sculptor—mind you, I could not be expected to know a word of its language—was to pile Pelion upon Ossa in a madman's farce. I swung on Longan.

"Look here," I began with quite natural heat, "how do you expect me to tell——"

"He understands you," interrupted Longan.

"Speech?" I said incredulously. "Real human speech?"

"No," Longan shook his head. "But he understands actions." He turned from me abruptly and plunged into the weeds surrounding the clearing. He returned immediately with two objects that looked like gigantic puffballs and handed one to me.

"Sit on this," he said, doing so himself. I obeyed.

Black Charlie—I could think of nothing else to call him—came closer, and we sat down together. Charlie was half

squatting on ebony haunches. All this time, I had been carrying the wooden box that contained his sculptures, and now that we were seated, his bright eyes swung inquisitively toward it.

"All right," said Longan, "give it to me."

I passed him the box, and it drew Black Charlie's eyes like a magnet. Longan took it under one arm and pointed toward the lake with the other—to where we had landed the flyer. Then his arm rose in the air in a slow, impressive circle and pointed northward, from the direction we had come.

Black Charlie whistled suddenly. It was an odd note, like the cry of a loon—a far, sad sound.

Longan struck himself on the chest, holding the box with one hand. Then he struck the box and pointed to me. He looked at Black Charlie, looked back at me—then put the box into my numb hands.

"Look them over and hand them back," he said, his voice tight. Against my will, I looked at Charlie.

His eyes met mine. Strange, liquid, black, inhuman eyes, like two tiny pools of pitch. I had to tear my own gaze away.

Torn between my feeling of foolishness and a real sympathy for the waiting creature, I awkwardly opened the box and lifted the stones from their compartments. One by one, I turned them in my hand and put them back. I closed the box and returned it to Longan, shaking my head, not knowing if Charlie would understand that.

For a long moment, Longan merely sat facing me, holding the box. Then, slowly, he turned and set it, still open, in front of Charlie.

Charlie did not react at first. His head, on its long neck, dropped over the open compartments as if he was sniffing them. Then, surprisingly, his lips wrinkled back, revealing long, chisel-shaped teeth. Daintily, he reached into the box with these and lifted out the stones, one by one. He held them in his forepads, turning them this way and that, as if searching for the defects of each. Finally, he lifted one—it was

the stone that faintly resembled a crouching beast. He lifted it to his mouth—and, with his gleaming teeth, made slight alterations in its surface. Then he brought it to me.

Helplessly I took it in my hands and examined it. The changes he had made in no way altered it toward something recognizable. I was forced to hand it back, with another headshake, and a poignant pause fell between us.

I had been desperately turning over in my mind some way to explain, through the medium of pantomime, the reasons for my refusal. Now something occurred to me. I turned to Longan.

"Can he get me a piece of unworked stone?" I asked.

Longan turned to Charlie and made motions as if he were breaking something off and handing it to me. For a moment, Charlie sat still, as if considering this. Then he went into his hut, returning a moment later with a chunk of rock the size of my hand.

I had a small pocket knife, and the rock was soft. I held the rock out toward Longan and looked from him to it. Using my pocket knife, I whittled a rough, lumpy caricature of Longan seated on the puffball. When I was finished, I put the two side by side, the hacked piece of stone insignificant on the ground beside the living man.

Black Charlie looked at it. Then he came up to me—and, peering up into my face, cried softly, once. Moving so abruptly that it startled me, he turned smoothly, picked up in his teeth the piece of stone I had carved. Soon he disappeared back into his hut.

Longan stood up stiffly, like a man who has held one position too long. "That's it," he said. "Let's go."

We made our way to the combination and took off once more, headed back toward the city and the spaceship that would carry me away from this irrational world. As the mountains commenced to rise, far beneath us, I stole a glance at Longan, sitting beside me at the controls of the combination. His face was set in an expression of stolid unhappiness.

The question came from my lips before I had time to debate internally whether it was wise or not to ask it.

"Tell me, Mr. Longan," I said, "has—er—Black Charlie some special claim on your friendship?"

The tall man looked at me with something close to amazement.

"Claim!" he said. Then, after a short pause, during which he seemed to search my features to see if I was joking, "He saved my life."

"Oh," I said. "I see."

"You do, do you?" he countered. "Suppose I told you it was just after I'd finished killing his mate. They mate for life, you know."

"No, I didn't know," I answered feebly.

"I forget people don't know," he said in a subdued voice. I said nothing, hoping that, if I did not disturb him, he would say more. After a while he spoke. "This planet's not much good."

"I noticed," I answered. "I didn't see much in the way of plants and factories. And your sister world—the one I came from—is much more populated and built up."

"There's not much here," he said. "No minerals to speak of. Climate's bad, except on the plateaus. Soil's not much good." He paused. It seemed to take effort, to say what came next. "Used to have a novelty trade in furs, though."

"Furs?" I echoed.

"Off Charlie's people," he went on, fiddling with the combination's controls. "Trappers and hunters used to be after them, at first, before they knew. I was one of them."

"You!" I said.

"Me!" His voice was flat. "I was doing fine, too, until I trapped Charlie's mate. Up till then, I'd been getting them out by themselves. They did a lot of traveling in those swamps. But, this time, I was close to the village. I'd just clubbed her on the head when the whole tribe jumped me." His voice trailed off, then strengthened. "They kept me under guard for a couple of months.

"I learned a lot in that time. I learned they were intelligent. I learned it was Black Charlie who kept them from killing me right off. Seems he took the point of view that I was a reasonable being and, if he could just talk things over with me, we could get together and end the war." Longan laughed, a little bitterly. "They called it a war, Charlie's people did." He stopped talking.

I waited. And when he remained quiet, I prompted him. "What happened?" I asked.

"They let me go, finally," he said. "And I went to bat for them. Clear up to the Commissioner sent from Earth. I got them recognized as people instead of animals. I put an end to the hunting and trapping."

He stopped again. We were still flying through the upper air of Elman's World, the sun breaking through the clouds at last, revealing the ground below like a huge green relief map.

"I see," I said, finally.

Longan looked at me stonily.

We flew back to the city.

I left Elman's World the next day, fully believing that I had heard and seen the last of both Longan and Black Charlie. Several years later, at home in New York, I was visited by a member of the government's Foreign Service. He was a slight, dark man, and he didn't beat about the bush.

"You don't know me," he said. I looked at his card—*Antonio Walters*. "I was Deputy Colonial Representative on Elman's World at the time you were there."

I looked up at him, surprised. I had forgotten Elman's World by that time.

"Were you?" I asked, feeling a little foolish, unable to think of anything better to say. I turned his card over several times, staring at it, as a person will do when at a loss. "What can I do for you, Mr. Walters?"

"We've been requested by the local government on Elman's World to locate you, Mr. Jones," he answered. "Cary Longan is dying—"

"Dying!" I said.

"Lung fungus, unfortunately," said Walters. "You catch it in the swamps. He wants to see you before the end—and since we're very grateful to him out there for the work he's been doing all these years for the natives, a place has been kept for you on a government courier ship leaving for Elman's World right away—if you're willing to go."

"Why, I . . ." I hesitated. In common decency, I could not refuse. "I'll have to notify my employers."

"Of course," he said.

Luckily, the arrangements I had to make consisted of a few business calls and packing my bags. I was, as a matter of fact, between trips at the time. As an experienced traveler, I could always get under way with a minimum of fuss. Walters and I drove out to Government Port in northern New Jersey and, from there on, the authorities took over.

Less than a week later, I stood by Longan's bedside in the hospital of the same city I had visited years before. The man was now nothing more than a barely living skeleton, the hard vitality all but gone from him, hardly able to speak a few words at a time. I bent over to catch the whispered syllables from his wasted lips.

"Black Charlie . . ." he whispered.

"Black Charlie," I repeated. "Yes, what about him?"

"He's done something new," whispered Longan. "That carving of yours started him off, copying things. His tribe don't like it."

"They don't?" I said.

"They," whispered Longan, "don't understand. It's not normal, the way they see it. They're afraid—"

"You mean they're superstitious about what he carves?" I asked.

"Something like that. Listen—he's an artist . . ."

I winced internally at the last word, but held my tongue for the sake of the dying man.

"... an artist. But they'll kill him for it, now that I'm gone. You can save him, though."

"Me?" I said.

"You!" The man's voice was like a wind rustling through dry leaves. "If you go out—take this last thing from him—act pleased ... then they'll be scared to touch him. But hurry. Every day is that much closer ..."

His strength failed him. He closed his eyes, and his straining throat muscles relaxed to a little hiss of air that puffed between his lips. The nurse hurried me from his room.

The local government helped me. I was surprised, and not a little touched, to see how many people knew Longan. How many of them admired his attempts to pay back the natives by helping them in any way he could. They located Charlie's tribe on a map for me and sent me out with a pilot who knew the country.

We landed on the same patch of slime. I went alone toward the clearing. With the brown weeds still walling it about, the locale showed no natural change, but Black Charlie's hut appeared broken and deserted. I whistled and waited. I called. And, finally, I got down on my hands and knees and crawled inside. But there was nothing there save a pile of loose rock and a mass of dried weeds. Feeling cramped and uncomfortable, for I am not used to such gymnastics, I backed out to find myself surrounded by a crowd.

It looked as if all the other inhabitants of the village had come out of their huts and congregated before Charlie's. They seemed agitated, milling about, occasionally whistling at each other on that one low, plaintive note which was the only sound I had ever heard Charlie make. Eventually, the excitement seemed to fade, the group fell back, and one individual came forward alone. He looked up into my face for a brief moment, then turned and glided swiftly on his pads toward the edge of the clearing.

I followed. There seemed nothing else to do. And, at that time, it did not occur to me to be afraid.

My guide led me deep into the weed patch, then abruptly disappeared. I looked around surprised and undecided, half inclined to turn about and retrace my steps by the trail of crushed weeds I had left in my floundering advance. Then a low whistle sounded close by. I went forward and found Charlie.

He lay on his side in a little circular open area of crushed weeds. He was too weak to do more than raise his head and look at me, for the whole surface of his body was crisscrossed and marked with the slashings of shallow wounds, from which dark blood seeped slowly and stained the reeds in which he lay. In Charlie's mouth I had seen the long chisel-teeth of his kind, and I knew what had made those wounds. A gust of rage went through me, and I stooped to pick him up in my arms.

He came up easily, for the bones of his kind are cartilaginous, and their flesh is far lighter than our human flesh. Holding him, I turned and made my way back to the clearing.

The others were waiting for me as we came out into the open. I glared at them—and then the rage inside me went out like a blown candle. For there was nothing there to hate. *They* had not hated Charlie. They had merely feared him—and their only crime was ignorance.

They moved back from me, and I carried Charlie to the door of his own hut. There I laid him down. The chest and arms of my jacket were soaked from his dark body fluid, and I saw that his blood was not clotting as our own does.

Clumsily, I took off my shirt and, tearing it into strips, made a poor attempt to bind up the torn flesh. But the blood came through in spite of my first aid. Charlie, lifting his head, with a great effort, from the ground, picked feebly at the bandages with his teeth, so that I gave up and removed them.

I sat down beside him then, feeling sick and helpless. In spite of Longan's care and dying effort, in spite of all the scientific developments of my own human race, I had come too

late. Numbly, I sat and looked down at him and wondered why I could not have come one day earlier.

From this half stupor of self-accusation I was roused by Charlie's attempts to crawl back into his hut. My first reaction was to restrain him. But, from somewhere, he seemed to have dredged up a remnant of his waning strength—and he persisted. Seeing this, I changed my mind and, instead of hindering, helped. He dragged himself through the entrance, his strength visibly waning.

I did not expect to see him emerge. I believed some ancient instinct had called him, that he would die then and there. But, a few moments later, I heard a sound as of stones rattling from within—and, in a few seconds, he began to back out. Halfway through the entrance, his strength finally failed him. He lay still for a minute, then whistled weakly.

I went to him and pulled him out the rest of the way. He turned his head toward me, holding in his mouth what I first took to be a ball of dried mud.

I took it from him and began to scrape the mud off with my fingernails. Almost immediately, the grain and surface of the sandstone he used for his carvings began to emerge—and my hands started to shake so hard that, for a moment, I had to put the stone down while I got myself under control. For the first time, the true importance to Charlie of these things he had chewed and bitten into shape got home to me.

In that moment, I swore that whatever bizarre form this last and greatest work of his might possess, I would make certain that it was accorded a place in some respectable museum as a true work of art. After all, it had been conceived in honesty and executed in the love that took no count of labor, provided the end was achieved.

And then, the rest of the mud came free in my hands. I saw what it was, and I could have cried and laughed at the same time. For, of all the shapes he could have chosen to work in stone, he had picked the one that no critic would have se-

lected as the choice of an artist of his race. For he had chosen no plant or animal, no structure or natural shape out of his environment, to express the hungry longing of his spirit. None of these had he chosen—instead, with painful clumsiness, he had fashioned an image from the soft and grainy rock—a statue of a standing man.

And I knew what man it was.

Charlie lifted his head from the stained ground and looked toward the lake where my flyer waited. I am not an intuitive man—but, for once, I was able to understand the meaning of a look. He wanted me to leave while he was still alive. He wanted to see me go, carrying the thing he had fashioned. I got to my feet, holding it, and stumbled off. At the edge of the clearing, I looked back. He still watched. And the rest of his people still hung back from him. I did not think they would bother him now.

And so I came home.

But there is one thing more to tell. For a long time, after I returned from Elman's World, I did not look at the crude statuette. I did not want to, for I knew that seeing it would only confirm what I had known from the start, that all the longing and desires in the world cannot create art where there is no talent, no true visualization. But at the end of one year I was cleaning up all the little details of my office. And, because I believe in system and order—and also because I was ashamed of myself for having put it off so long—I took the statuette from a bottom drawer of my desk, unwrapped it, and set it on the desk's polished surface.

I was alone in my office at the time, at the end of a day, when the afternoon sun, striking red through the tall window beside my desk, touched everything between the walls with a clear, amber light. I ran my fingers over the grainy sandstone and held it up to look at.

And then—for the first time—I saw it, saw through the stone to the image beyond, saw what Black Charlie had seen, with Black Charlie's eyes, when he looked at Longan. I saw men as

Black Charlie's kind saw men—and I saw what the worlds of men meant to Black Charlie. And, above all, overriding all, I saw art as Black Charlie saw it, through his bright alien eyes —saw the beauty he had sought at the price of his life, and had half found.

But, most of all, I saw that this crude statuette was *art.*

One more word. Amid the mud and weeds of the swamp, I had held the carving in my hands and promised myself that this work would one day stand on display. Following that moment of true insight in my office, I did my best to place it with the institution I represented, then with others who knew me as a reputable buyer.

But I could find no takers. No one, although they trusted me individually, was willing to exhibit such a poor-looking piece of work on the strength of a history that I, alone, could vouch for. There are people, close to any institution, who are only too ready to cry, "Hoax!" For several years, I tried without success.

Eventually, I gave up on the true story and sold the statuette, along with a number of other odd pieces, to a dealer of minor reputation, representing it as an object whose history I did not know.

Curiously, the statuette has justified my belief in what is art, by finding a niche for itself. I traced it from the dealer, after a time, and ran it to Earth quite recently. There is a highly respectable art gallery on this planet which has an extensive display of primitive figures of early American Indian origin.

And Black Charlie's statuette is among them. I will not tell which or where it is.

By Jack McKenty

$1,000 A PLATE

SUNSET on Mars is a pale, washed-out, watery sort of procedure that is hardly worth looking at. The shadows of the cactus lengthen, the sun goes down without the slightest hint of color or display, and everything is dark. About once a year there is one cloud that turns pink briefly. But even the travel books devote more space to describing the new sign adorning the Canal Casino than they do to the sunset.

The night sky is something else again. Each new crop of tourists goes to bed at sunrise the day after arrival with stiff necks from looking up all night. The craters of the moons are visible to the naked eye, and even a cheap pair of opera glasses can pick out the buildings of the Deimos Space Station.

"We were way up there only twelve hours ago!" sightseers exclaim.

At fairly frequent intervals, the moons eclipse. The local Chamber of Commerce joins with the gambling casinos to use these occasions as excuses for a celebration. The "Marsy Gras" includes floats, costumes, liquor, women, gambling—and finishes off with a display of fireworks and a stiff note of protest from the nearby Mars Observatory.

The day after a particularly noisy, glaring fireworks display, the top brass at the Observatory called an emergency

meeting. The topic was not a new one, but fresh evidence, in the form of several still-wet photographic plates showing out-of-focus skyrocket trails and a galaxy of first-magnitude aerial cracker explosions, was presented.

"I maintain they fire them in our direction on purpose," one scientist declared.

This was considered to be correct because the other directions around town were oil refineries and the homes of the casino owners.

"Why don't we just move the Observatory way out in the desert?" a technician demanded.

"It would be a tremendous job," said Dr. Morton, the physicist. "If not for the glare of city lights on Earth, we wouldn't have had to move our telescopes to the Moon. If not for the gravel falling out of the sky on the Moon, making it necessary to resurface the reflectors every week, we wouldn't have had to move to Mars. Viewing conditions here are just about perfect—except for the immense cost of transporting the equipment, building materials, and workmen, and paying us triple time for working so far from home. Why, did you ever figure the cost of a single photographic plate? What with salaries, freight to and from Earth, maintenance, and all the rest, it's enormous!"

"Then why don't we cut down the cost of ruined exposures," asked the technician, "by moving the Observatory away from town?"

"Because," Dr. Morton explained, "we'd have to bring in crews to tear the place down, other crews to move it, still more crews to rebuild it. Not to mention unavoidable breakage and replacement, which involve more freight from Earth. At $7.97 per pound dead weight . . . well, you figure it out."

"So we can't move and we can't afford ruined thousand-dollar plates," said the scientist who had considered himself a target for the fireworks. "Then what's the answer?"

The usual suggestion was proposed that a delegation approach the Town Council to follow up the letter of protest.

A search through the past meetings' minutes showed that this had never accomplished anything up to date.

A recent arrival to the Observatory mentioned that their combined brain power should be enough to beat the games and thus force the casino owners—who were the real offenders —out of business. One of the scientists, who had already tried that very scheme on a small scale, reported his results. He proved with his tabulations that, in this instance, science, in the guise of the law of averages, was against them.

Dr. Morton rose to his feet. The other men listened to his plan, at first with shocked horror, then with deep interest, and finally in wild exultation. The meeting broke up with most of the members grinning from ear to ear. "It's lucky Dr. Morton is a physicist," said one of the directors. "No astronomer would ever have thought of that."

A few days later a modest little ad appeared in the weekly publication "What to do in Marsport." It did not try to compete with any of the casino ads (all of which featured pretty girls), but it had a unique heading.

FREE
For the First Time Ever
Your HOROSCOPE
SCIENTIFICALLY CAST
By the Staff of the
FAMOUS MARS OBSERVATORY
Learn your Luck, your Future!
Write or call Mars Observatory.
No charge. No obligation.

Since the horoscopes being offered were about the only things on Mars that didn't cost the tourists any money, the response was great. The recipient of a horoscope found a mimeographed folder which contained three pages describing the present positions of the planets, where to look for Earth

in the sky, and what science hoped to learn the next time Mercury was in transit. The fourth page held the kicker. It said that while the tourist's luck would be better than average at most of the gambling houses, he would lose consistently if he played at Harvey's Club.

Within two days the only people playing at Harvey's were the shills. The following day, the visitors to the Observatory included Harvey.

The gambler was welcomed with mingled respect for his money and contempt for his occupation. He was taken immediately to see Dr. Morton, who greeted him with a sly smile.

Harvey's conversation was brief and to the point. "How much?" he asked, waving a horoscope under Dr. Morton's nose. "Just a promise," said the scientist. Harvey said nothing but looked sullen. "You are on the Town Council," Morton continued. "Now, the next time the question of tourist entertainment is discussed, we want you to vote *against* a fireworks display." He then explained how important plates had been ruined by skyrocket trails.

Harvey listened with great interest, especially when Dr. Morton flatly stated that each casino, in turn, would get the same publicity in the horoscopes.

"The Council members are all for the tourists," Harvey commented, "and you guys are supposed to be nuts, like all scientists. But I'll do like you say." He reached into his pocket. "Here's fifty bucks. Use it for a full-page ad this time, and do the Desert Sands Casino in your next horoscope. And say—before I go, can I look through the telescope? I never seemed to have the time before."

At weekly intervals, Dr. Morton "did" the Desert Sands, Frankland's Paradise, the Martian Gardens, and the Two Moons Club. From each owner he extracted the same promise—to vote against the fireworks at the Council meetings.

The technique was settling down to a routine. Each victim came, made the promise, paid for the following week's ad,

named the next casino, and was taken on a tour of the Observatory. Then disaster struck.

It took the form of an interplanetary telegram from Harvard Observatory, their parent organization. It read:

> EARTH NEWSPAPERS CARRYING ACCOUNTS OF HOROSCOPES PUBLISHED BY YOUR ORGANIZATION VERY UNSCIENTIFIC MUST STOP AT ONCE FIND OTHER SOLUTION
>
> L K BELL DIRECTOR

Dr. Morton was eating alone in the staff dining room when he noticed a familiar face beside him. "Harvey," he said. "Guess you've come down to gloat over our misfortune."

"No, Professor," said Harvey. "You've got my promise to help you boys, and I'll stick by you. It's a rotten shame, too. You just about made it. The rest of the club owners saw the writing on the wall and were going to co-operate with you when the telegram came. All of us got contacts in the telegraph office, so they heard about it soon as it arrived and stayed away."

Dr. Morton said, "Yes, I supposed they would. There's not much we can do now."

"There are thirteen members on the Council." Harvey continued, "and you've got five of us. If that telegram had only come one day later—no more fireworks. But I got an idea."

Dr. Morton pushed aside his empty coffee cup and stood up. "Let's get out in the fresh air."

The Town Council was adding insult to injury by staging one of the biggest fireworks displays ever. It consisted of practically all skyrockets. Dr. Morton expressed wonder at their supply; Harvey explained that they were made right on Mars. He went on to tell his idea.

"I was real interested in everything when you took me around the first time I was here," the gambler said. "The same goes for the other boys who saw the place. Most of us meant to come out here and look around sometime, but you people

work nights and, us mostly working nights, too, we never got around to it. How about arranging an exclusive tour sometime just for the club operators and their help? Then when they see everything, you could offer to name a star after them or something. If I hadn't already promised, I'd be willing to promise, just to be able to point in the sky and say, 'That's Harvey's Star.' "

Dr. Morton smiled gently. "That's a wonderful idea," he said, "but I don't think it would work. Any stars worth looking at with the naked eye already have names. The only ones we could name after people are so far away that it would take an exposure of several hours just to see them on a photographic plate. You wouldn't be able to point yours out at all. Besides, Harvard Observatory wouldn't stand for this idea, either. It would make as much sense to them as you naming a poker chip after me."

He sighed. "But, in any case, we would like to have all the owners over some time. It might improve relations somewhat." The two of them watched a rocket wobble all over the sky before exploding.

"Let's go back inside," said the physicist. "Maybe we can arrange that tour for Sunday."

Sunday afternoon the visitors, presumably softened up by what one of the chemists thought were martinis, were seated in the lecture hall listening to Dr. Morton's concluding remarks.

"One of the technicians is working on a gadget with a photocell that closes the shutter on the film when a rocket goes up," Dr. Morton was saying. "It should cut down the exposure time a great deal. Right now, every night may be significant. If the plates from any one night are spoiled, we may not be able to duplicate them for a Martian year. Mankind is preparing the first trip to another star, and the work of Mars Observatory is necessary to insure the success of that trip. You gentlemen are rightly the leaders of Mars, and so it is up to

you to decide whether or not that success will be possible." He sat down to a smattering of applause.

The visitors, except Harvey, then left.

"It didn't go over, Professor," said Harvey.

"I know," said Dr. Morton. "That washes out that plan." He turned to the gambler. "You're the only person I can trust with this," he said. "How would you like to help me make some fireworks?"

One week later the two men had everything ready. That night, as quietly as possible, they moved to a position behind a fence near the skyrocket launching racks. Dr. Morton was carrying a compass, a flashlight, and a small clinometer; Harvey was struggling with two large skyrockets. He whispered, "What if we miss or they go off too soon, or something?"

"Nonsense, Harvey," said Dr. Morton. He busied himself with the flashlight and compass and carefully aimed one of the rockets. "You forget I am a physicist." He then aimed the other rocket and checked elevation with the clinometer. "The fuels are standard, and I worked out the trajectories on the computer. Ready with your match? These are going to explode in the canal and get everybody in the Canal Casino all wet." He peeked over the fence to see how the regular display was doing. "Here comes their finale. Ready, set, light!"

Covered by the launching of the last of the official display, their two rockets arced up and away. One of them did explode in the canal, and most of the Casino's patrons did get wet. But the other wobbled off to the right, landed on the roof of Harvey's bachelor home, and burned it to the ground.

Dr. Morton sat numbly in front of his typewriter, staring at a letter. He couldn't seem to find the right words for what he wished to say. He tried to derive inspiration from a glossy photograph lying on the table beside him. It had what looked like another skyrocket trail on it.

Before he could answer it, the door opened and Harvey

walked in, accompanied by two men with muscles. "I haven't seen you since the accident, Professor," he said.

"I've been trying to write you a letter," said Dr. Morton, "to tell you how sorry I am about what happened. And I also have to thank you for getting that law against fireworks through the Council. I am extremely sorry it took your house burning down to convince them."

"I keep my promises," said Harvey. One of the men with muscles turned the radio on, loud.

"We're trying to get up a collection among the staff to help pay for your losses," said Dr. Morton, "but the director suggested a more permanent kind of remembrance." He picked up the photograph. "This will be one of the brightest objects in the sky in a few months. It won't be back again for thousands of years, but it will be around for a good while. We've just discovered it, and it is our privilege to call it 'Harvey's Comet.'"

"That's nice," said Harvey. The first of the two men went around pulling down blinds; the other went into the bathroom and starting filling the tub.

"Well," said the physicist, looking tired and old, "I guess there's nothing more I can say."

"Oh yes, there is, Professor," said Harvey with a sudden grin on his face. He turned to his muscle men. "You two guys cut out the comedy and bring it in now."

The two men followed his instructions.

"You see, Professor," the gambler continued, "I took a beating on the house, but the other club boys chipped in and made up all my losses. So, I don't need your money at all. Besides, I have two things to thank *you* for. First, I heard about the comet from one of your men, and it's the nicest thing anybody's ever done for me." One of his men came back with what looked like a round candy box. "Second, that fire was the best publicity stunt I could get. It made the papers back on Earth, and all the new tourists are packing into Harvey's Club. Even the other operators are playing my tables. That's why I want you to have this."

He handed Dr. Morton the box. It read "Harvey's Club" in the center and "Doctor Morton's Poker Chip" around the edge. Across the bottom it said "Five Thousand."

"That's dollars in it, Professor," said Harvey. "Don't spend it all in one place."

By Avram Davidson

TAKE WOODEN INDIANS

Down from the streets (morning air already gray and bitter with motor exhaust and industrial fumes), into the jam-packed subway he passed. His clothes, though mildly incongruous in that unhappy throng, brought him no special measure of attention. Weary, wary, cynical, grim, displeasured indifference lying on each countenance like an oily film, the folk stared not so much at him as over and through him.

He fought to keep his feet, struggled to maintain his balance. This, merely the antechamber to everyday existence, was difficult enough. Add to it the need to be constantly on the lookout for the Wooden Indian Society and he felt he had reason to be tense and jumpy. "Benedict, a leading modern free-form sculptor in wood——" Ha!

Twice he had been aware that they had tailed him as far as Times Square. Twice he had lost them. A third time . . .

The man in the faintly funny-looking clothes (his name was Don Benedict, but some called him "Dusty") paused for a minute under one of the red-lettered wooden signs, took a quick look at the paper in his hand (more, it almost seemed, to reassure himself that it was still there than to scan the contents), did an about-face, and started back the way he had come. By and by he came to a stairway, which he ascended

for five steps, then turned around and went down. At the bottom . . .

At the bottom of it all was Elwell, and Elwell was dead: not from the cough which had been tearing him apart for years, but dead of a slippery little patch of ice no bigger than a man's hand. Elwell, dying, with blood in the corners of his mouth, holding Don's hand in a grip which the younger man could feel the heat going out of.

"But it belongs to the WIS," Don had protested.

And Elwell: "No, Don, no—it belongs to me. I formed it. I proved it."

"They'll never allow—"

With a desperate, slow intensity, shaking his head, Elwell had explained. Reluctantly, Don agreed. It seemed to him that he was agreeing to no more than the first risk. But then, with Elwell dead, and the WIS turning against them both—first with coldness, then with clamor, then with a silent tenacity more disturbing than either—Don Benedict came to see that it was not only the beginning which was his, but that it was all his. Forevermore.

At the bottom of the stairs, he saw the man out of the corner of his eye, eye intent upon feet, feet pacing out the pattern. He stopped for a moment, intending only to turn. And stayed stopped. The man (it was Anders) took hold of his arm as if to urge him on.

"I'm coming with you, Benedict." Eyes burning, voice ironhard.

"I'm going alone."

"You've betrayed the trust, used what belongs to all of us, used it for yourself alone. The WIS—"

As always, so now, the Wooden Indian Society was undoing itself: Anders, trembling with fury, thoughtlessly released his grip. Don placed the cushion of his palm under Anders' chin, thrust forward and upward with all his strength. And at once, swift—but not forgetting himself, not breaking into a run—he finished what he had to do. Anders staggered

back, arms flailing, feet failing at purchase; then Don, turning his head at the last, saw him fall, the electric lights glaring on the white-tiled walls.

His foot jarred, as always, missing the familiar flooring by an inch. He adjusted his gait to the flagstone pave of the alley. It stretched before him and behind him for twenty feet in either direction. There was no one in sight.

About halfway along, there was a deep recess, a bricked-up door, and here Don hid until he was quite sure that Anders was not coming through. There was never any certainty that the WIS had not pieced it together, spying—somehow—pieced it together, bit by bit. There was always that tension, even here—though less, much less. After all, if they did get through, it would no longer be him that they were primarily after. It would be Demuth's. And Demuth's could look out for themselves.

Waiting, ears alert, he recalled the last meeting of the WIS he had dared attend. Mac Donald, eyes blazing deep in their sockets, had broken into Derwentwater's measured phrases, thrust a shaking finger into Don's face.

"Do you call yourself a Preservationist? Yes or no? Stand up and be counted!"

Staunchly, he had faced him, had answered, "I consider myself a philosophical Preservationist. I do not believe in violent—"

Face convulsed, fists clenched in the air, *"Traitor! Traitor!"* Mac Donald had screamed.

Not yielding, Don started to speak, got no further than Elwell's name, when Mac Donald—and Anders, Gumpert, De Giovanetti, almost all of them, in fact—had drowned him out with their outcry, their threats. *How much had Demuth's paid him? How much had he sold out for?*

Demuth's! Don mouthed the name scornfully. As if he would touch their tainted money. He had learned, the hard way, that Elwell was right all along, that the WIS were fanatics who would shrink from nothing. Well, he wasn't doing any shrinking, either.

Don Benedict came out of the niche—Anders wasn't going to get through this time, that was clear—and walked on down the alley. In less than a minute, he came out into a courtyard where heaps of chips and sawdust lay on one side and heaps of hay on the other. A man in dung-smeared boots came out of the building to the left with a bucket of milk in his hand. He paused, squinted, tugged his tobacco-stained beard, and put down the bucket.

"Hey, Dusty! Glad to see you," he greeted the newcomer. "You yust get into town?"

"Ee-yup," said Don/Dusty. "How you, Swan?"

Swan said he was fine and inquired about things up in Sairacuse.

"Capital," said Dusty. "Hay's bringing a fine price—"

Swan groaned, spat into the sawdust. "Good for dem, maybe. Not for me. I tink you been at de bottle, hey, Dusty? You look yumpy, like always, ven you yust come in."

"Bottle? I get little enough out of any bottle I buy. My damned brother-in-law"—it was true: he had forgotten about Walter; it would be nice if he never had to remember—"drinks my liquor, smokes my cigars, wears my shirts, and spends my money."

Swan groaned sympathetically, picked up the bucket. "Vy don't you kick him de hell out?"

Nice advice; would be a pleasure to take it. Of course, Mary wouldn't be able to stand it. Poor rabbity Mary.

"All I need is to get back to work. That'll fix me up." Don/Dusty waved, continued on his way across the yard, and went into the doorway of the tall brick building to the right. Inside, it was cool and dark and smelled of wood and paint.

Dusty took a deep breath and began to smile.

He started up the stairs, ignoring the painted hand with outstretched finger and word *Office* on the first floor. By the time he reached the second floor, his smile was very broad. Softly, he began to sing "Aura Lee" and went in through the open door.

The big loft was dark; little light came in through the small

and dirty windows, but at regular intervals a gas jet flared. Dusty paused to greet his friends. Silently they stared down at him, peering from underneath the hands shading their eyes, stretching out their arms in wordless welcome, plumage blazing in a frenzy of colors.

"Hello, there, Tecumseh! How, Princess Redwing! Osceola, Pocahontas—"

A red-faced little man in a long striped apron trotted out into view, two tufts of snowy hair decorating his cheeks, a hat of folded newsprint on his head.

"Dusty, Dusty, I'm darned glad to see you!" he exclaimed.

"Hello, Charley Voles. How's everything at C. P. Hennaberry's?"

Charley shook his head. "Good *and* bad," he said. "Good *and* bad. Oscar snagged his hand on a nail moving some plunder at home and it festered up something terrible. We was feared it was going to mortify at first, but I guess he's on the mend at last. Can't work, though; no-o-o-o, can't work. And Hennery was too numerous with the drink, fell off the wagon again, and I think he must still be in the Bridewell, unless'n maybe his sentence is up today. Meanwhile, the work is piling high. Thunderation, yes—fly-figures, rosebuds, pompeys, *two* Turks under orders—"

"*Two?*" Dusty paused with his arms half out of his coat sleeves, whistled.

Charley nodded proudly. "Gent in Chicago opening up a big emporium, two Turks *and* two Sir Walters. Only thing is" —his ruddy little face clouded—"gent is clamoring for delivery, says if he don't get 'em soon he'll order from Detroit. And you know what *that* means, Dusty: let trade get away and it never comes back. Why, the poor Major is pulling his whiskers out worrying. 'Course, with you back in town—"

Dusty, tying his apron, pursed his lips. "Well, now, Charley—now you know I never did fancy my work much on the special figures. I want to help Major Hennaberry all I can,

but—" He shook his head doubtfully and started to lay out his tools.

Charley Voles tut-tutted. "Oscar and Hennery was working on the Turks when they was took sick or drunk. *I* had the top three of a Sir Walter done, but I had to leave off to handle a couple of prior orders on sachems. Now if you'll take on the sachems, I can finish the specials. How's that strike you?"

Dusty said it struck him fine. He strode over to the hydraulic elevator shaft and gave two piercing whistles.

"Boy!" he shouted. "Boy! Benny?"

A treble from the office floor inquired if that was him, Mr. Dusty, and said it would be right up. A noise of gasping and stomping from below indicated that someone else would be right up, too.

"I want some breakfast, Benny," Dusty said, tossing him a coin. "Here's a quarter of a dollar. Get me the usual—eggs, pancakes, sausages, toast, coffee, and crullers. Get some beer for Mr. Voles. And you can keep the change. *Hello,* Major Hennaberry!"

The elevator cage surged slowly into view. First came Major Hennaberry's bald spot, then his custard-colored eyes, magenta nose and cheeks, pepper-and-salt whiskers, and, gradually, the Major himself, breathing noisily. In his hand he held a booklet of some sort.

Slowly and sibilantly, the Major moved forward, shook Dusty's hand.

"Don't know what's come over the American mechanic nowadays," he said at last, asthmatically. "Can't seem to keep himself safe, sober, or in the city limits, and acts as if Hell has let out for noon. . . . Got some lovely white pine for you, my boy, fresh up from the spar yards. Don't waste a minute—soon's you get outside of your victuals, commence work. Draw on the cashier if you want anything in advance of wages: a dollar, two dollars, even a half eagle.

"Never had so many orders nor so few men to execute them since starting in business," the Major wheezed on. "Even had

Rat Nolan on picket duty for me, combing South Street and the Bowery—offered him three dollars apiece for any carvers he could find. Nothing; couldn't find a one. It's the catalog that's done the boom, my lad. The power of advertising. Here—read it whilst you eat; be pleased to have your opinion."

Hissing and panting, he made his way back to the elevator, jerked the rope twice, slowly sank from sight.

Dusty turned to the old artisan. "Charley," he said slowly, as if he hadn't quite determined his words, "hear anything about Demuth's?"

Charley made a face. "What would you want to hear about that ugly, pushy outfit?"

Changing, somewhat, his point of inquiry, Dusty asked, "Well, now, have you ever thought about the significance of the wooden Indian in American history?"

The old man scratched the left fluff of whisker. "By crimus, that's a high-toned sentence," he said rather dubiously. "Hm-m. Well, all's I can tell you—history, hey?—the steam engine was the makings of the show-figure trade, tobacco shop or otherwise. Certainly. All us old-timers got our start down on South Street carving figureheads for sailing craft. That was about the time old Hennaberry got his major's commission in the Mercantile Zouaves—you know, guarding New York City from the Mexicans. Yes, sir. But when steam come *in*, figureheads went *out*. Well, 'twasn't the end of the world."

And he described how he and his fellow artists had put their talents at the disposal of the show-figure trade, up to then a rather haphazard commerce. "History, hey? Well, I have had the idea it's sort of odd that as the live Indian gets scarcer, the wooden ones gets numerouser. But how come you to ask, Dusty?"

Carefully choosing his words, Dusty asked Charley to imagine a time in the far-off future when wooden Indians—show figures of any sort—were no longer being carved.

Had, in fact, suffered for so long a universal neglect that they had become quite rare. That gradually interest in the sachems revived, that men began to collect them as if they

had been ancient marble statues, began to study all that could be learned about them.

That some of these collectors, calling themselves the Wooden Indian Society, had been consumed with grief at the thought of the debacle which overtook the figures they had grown to love. Had claimed to see in the decline and death of this native art a dividing line in American history.

"It was like, Charley, it was like this was the end of the old times altogether," Don went on, "the end of the Good Old Days, the final defeat of native crafts and native integrity by the new, evil forces of industrialism. And they thought about this, and it turned them bitter and they began to brood. Until finally they began to plan how they could undo what had been done. They believed that if they could travel from their time to—to our time, like traveling from here to, say, Brooklyn—"

How much of this could Charley grasp? Perhaps better not to have tried.

Don/Dusty spoke more rapidly. "That if they could reach this time period, they could preserve the wooden Indian from destruction. And then the great change for the worse would never occur. The old days and the old ways would remain unchanged, or at least change slowly."

"You mean they got this idea that if they would change what happened to the wooden Indians, they could maybe change the course of American history?"

Dusty nodded.

Charley laughed. "Well, they were really crazy—I mean they would be, if there was to be such people, wouldn't they? Because there ain't no way—"

Dusty blinked. Then his face cleared. "No, of course there isn't. It was just a moody dark thought . . . ah, here comes Ben with my breakfast."

Charley lifted his beer off the laden tray, gestured his thanks, drank, put down the glass with a loud "hah" of satisfaction. Then a sudden thought creased his face. "Now leave

me ask you this, Dusty. Just what could ever happen to destroy such a well-established and necessary business as the show-figure business? Hm-m?"

Dusty said that these people from the Wooden Indian Society, in this sort of dark thought he'd had, had looked into matters real thoroughly. And they came to believe very deeply, very strongly, that the thing which killed the wooden Indian, and in so doing had changed American history so terribly for the worse, had been the invention and marketing of an Indian made of cast iron or zinc. An Indian which would have no life, no soul, no heart, no grace—but which would never wear out or need to be replaced.

And so it would sell—sell well enough to destroy the carvers' craft—but would destroy the people's love for the newer show figures at the same time.

Charley looked shocked. "Why, that'd be a terrible thing, Dusty—a thing which'd cut a man to the heart! Cast iron! Zinc! But I tell you what—if there ever was to be an outfit which'd do a thing like that, there'd be only one outfit that would. Demuth's. That's who. Ain't I right?"

Dusty lowered his head. In a low, choked voice, he said, "You're right."

Dusty propped the catalog against a short piece of pine, read as he ate.

"I don't know what it is," he said to old Charley, "but I have such an appetite here. I never eat breakfast at all when I'm——" He stopped, put a piece of sausage in his mouth, intently began to read.

> *We would respectfully solicit from the Public generally an inspection of our Large and Varied Assortment of* WOODEN SHOW FIGURES *which we are constantly manufacturing for all classes of business, such as* SEGAR STORES, WINES & LIQUORS, SHIP CHANDLERS, INSTRUMENT MAKERS, DRUGGISTS, YANKEE NOTIONS, UMBRELLA, CLOTHING, CHINA TEA STORES,

GUNSMITHS, BUTCHERS, &C, &C. *Our Figures are both carved and painted in a manner which cannot be excelled, are durable and designed and executed in a highly artistic manner; and are furnished at noncompetitive low prices. We are constantly receiving orders for statues and emblematic signs, and can furnish same of any required design with promptness.*

The sausage was fresh and savory; so was the coffee. Dusty chewed and swallowed with relish, slowly turned the pages of the catalog.

OUR NUMBER 23. *Fly-figure, male 5 ft. high, bundle of 20 in outstretched hand (r.), usual colors. A nice staple type Show Figure no moderate-sized bus. need feel ashamed to display. At rival establishments,* UP TO $75. *C. P. Hennaberry's Price:* $50 *even (with war bonnet,* $55*).*
Note: Absolutely impos. to cite trade-in values *via* mails, as this depends on age, size, condition of fig., also state of market @ time.

OUR NUMBER 24. *Same as above, with musket instead of tomahawk.*

OUR NUMBER 36. *Turk, male 6 ft. high, for shops which sell the fragrant Ottoman weed, polychrome Turk holding long leaf betw. both hands, choice of any two colors on turban. A C. P. HENNABERRY SPECIAL:* $165. *(with beard & long pipe,* $5 *extra).*

They went upstairs after Dusty had finished his breakfast, pausing on the third (or secondhand figures) floor, to greet Otto and Larry.

Young Larry was still considered a learner and was not yet allowed to go beyond replacing arms, hands, noses, and other extra parts.

Otto, to be sure, was a master carver, but Otto had several

strikes against him. In his youth, in his native Tyrol, Otto had studied sacred iconography; in his maturity, in America, Otto had studied drinking. As a result, when he was mellow, unless he was carefully supervised, his Indians had a certain saintly quality to them, which made purchasers feel somehow guilty. And when, on the other hand, Otto was sobering up, a definite measure of apocalyptic horror invariably appeared in his sachems, which frightened buyers away.

As a result, Otto was kept at doing extras—bundles of cigars, boxes of cigars, bundles of tobacco leaf, coils of tobacco leaf, twists of the same, knives, tomahawks, all to be held in the figures' hands—and at equally safe tasks, like stripping off old paint, sanding, repainting, finishing.

He nodded sadly, eyes bloodshot, to Dusty and Charley as he applied ocher and vermilion to a war bonnet. "Ho, Chesus," he groaned softly.

Up in the wood loft they made an inspection of the spars. "Now you needn't pick the ones I started, of course," Charley said. "Take fresh ones, if you like. 'Course, all's I did was I drawn the outlines and just kind of chiseled 'em in. And put the holes in on top for the bolts."

Dusty stood back and squinted. "Oh, I guess they'll be all right, Charley," he said. "Well, let's get 'em downstairs."

This done, Charley went back to work on the Sir Walter, carefully chiseling *Virginia Tobacco* in bas-relief on the cloak.

Dusty took up his ax and blocked out approximate spaces for the head, the body down to the waist, roughly indicated the division of the legs and feet. Then he inserted the iron bolt into the five-inch hole prepared for it and tilted back the spar so that the projecting part of the bolt rested on a support. When he had finished head and trunk, he would elevate the lower part of the figure in the same way.

Finally, finished with the blocking out, he picked up mallet and chisel.

"I now strike a blow for liberty," he said.

Smiling happily, he began to chip away. The song he sang was "Aura Lee."

Don/Dusty Benedict let himself into his studio quietly—but not quietly enough. The sharp sound of a chair grating on the floor told him that his brother-in-law was upstairs. In another second, Walter told him so himself in an accent more richly Southern, probably, than when he had come North as a young boy.

"We're upstairs, Don."

"Thank you for the information," Don muttered.

"We're *upstairs*, Don."

"Yes, Walter. All right. I'm coming."

Walter welcomed him with a snort. "Why the hell do you always wear those damn cotton-pickin' clothes when you go away? Not that it matters. I only wish *I* could just take up and go whenever the spirit moves me. Where was it you went this time?"

"Syracuse," Don mumbled.

"Syracuse. America's new vacation land." Walter laughed, not pleasantly. "Don, you really expect me to believe you? Syracuse! Why not just say to me, frankly, 'I've got a woman'? That's all. I wouldn't say another word." He poured himself several drams of Don's Scotch.

Not much you wouldn't, Don thought. Aloud, "How are you, Mary?" His sister said that she was just fine, sighed, broke off the sigh almost at once, at her husband's sour look.

Walter said, "Roger Towns was up. Another sale for you, another commission for me. Believe me, I earned it—gave him a big talk on how the Museum of Modern Art was after your latest. So he asked me to use my influence. He'll be back—he'll take it. This rate, the Modern Art *will* be after you before long."

Don privately thought this unlikely, though anything was possible in this world of no values. He wasn't a "modern, free-form" artist or, for that matter, any kind of artist at all. He was a craftsman—in a world which had no need for craftsmen.

"But *only*"—another one of the many qualities which made Walter highly easy to get along without: Walter was a finger-

jabber—"but *only* if you finish the damned thing. About time, isn't it? I mean vacations are fine, but the bills . . ."

Don said, "Well, my affairs are in good hands—namely, yours."

Walter reared back. "If that's meant as a dig! Listen, I can get something else to do any time I want. In fact, I'm looking into something else *now* that's damned promising. Firm sells Canadian stocks. Went down to see them yesterday. 'You're just the kind of man we're interested in, Mr. Swift,' they told me. 'With your vast experience and your knowledge of human nature. . . .'"

Walt scanned his brother-in-law's face, defying him to show signs of the complete disbelief he must have known Don felt. Don had long since stopped pretending to respond to these lies. He only ignored them—only put up with Walt at all—for his sister's sake. It was for her and the kids only that he ever came back.

"I'd like a drink," Don said, when Walt paused.

Dinner was as dinner always was. Walt talked almost constantly, mostly about Walt. Don found his mind wandering again to the Wooden Indian Society. Derwentwater, ending every speech with "*Delendo est Demuth's!*" Gumpert and his eternal "Just one stick of dynamite, Don, just one!" De Giovanetti growling, "Give us the Equation and we'll do it ourselves!"

Fools! They'd have to learn every name of those who had the hideous metal Indian in mind, conduct a massacre in Canal Street. Impossible. Absurd.

No, Elwell had been right. Not knowing just how the Preservationist work was to be done, he had none the less toiled for years to perfect a means to do it. Only when his work was done did he learn the full measure of WIS intransigence. And, after learning, he had turned to Don.

"Take up the torch," he pleaded. "Make each sachem such a labor of love that posterity cannot help but preserve it."

And Don had tried. The craft had been in him and struggling to get out all the time, and he'd never realized it!

Slowly the sound of Walter's voice grew more impossible to ignore.

"... and you'll need a new car, too. I can't drive that heap much longer. It's two years *old*, damn it!"

"I'd like a drink," Don said.

By the time Edgar Feld arrived, unexpectedly, Don had had quite a few drinks.

"I took the liberty not only of calling unheralded, but of bringing a friend, Mr. White," the art dealer said. He was a well-kept little man. Mr. White was thin and mild.

"Any friend of Edgar's is someone to be wary of," Don said. "Getchu a drink?"

Walt said he was sure they'd like to see the studio. There was plenty of time for drinks.

"Time?" Don muttered. "Whaddayu know about time?"

"Just step this way," Walt said loudly, giving his brother-in-law a deadly look. "We think, we rather think," he said, taking the wraps off the huge piece, "of calling this the Gemini—"

Don said genially that they had to call it *something* and that Gemini (he supposed) sounded better than Diseased Kidney.

Mr. White laughed.

Edgar Feld echoed the laugh, though not very heartily. "Mr. Benedict has the most modest, most deprecatory attitude toward his work of any modern artist—working in wood or in any other medium."

Mr. White said that was very commendable. He asked Don if he'd like a cigar.

"I would, indeed!" the modest artist assented. "Between cigarette smoke, gasoline, and diesel fumes, the air is getting unfit to breathe nowadays.... So Edgar is conning you into modern art, hey, Whitey?"

"Ho-ho!" Edgar Feld chuckled hollowly.

"Nothing better than a good cigar." Don puffed his contentment.

White said, with diffidence, that he was only just beginning to learn about modern art. "I used to collect Americana," he explained.

Edgar Feld declared that Mr. White had formerly had a collection of wooden Indians. His tone indicated that, while this was not to be taken seriously, open mockery was uncalled for.

Don set down the glass he had brought along with him. No, White was hardly WIS material. He was safe. "Did you really? Any of Tom Millard's by any chance? Tom carved some of the sweetest fly-figures ever made."

Mr. White's face lit up. "Are you a wooden Indian buff, too?" he cried. "Why, yes, as a matter of fact, I had two of Millard's fly-figures and one of his pompeys——"

Walt guffawed. "What are fly-figures and pompeys?"

"A fly-figure is a sachem with an outstretched arm," Don said. "A pompey is a black boy."

"A rosebud," Mr. White happily took up the theme, "is a squaw figure. A scout is one who's shading his eyes with one hand. Tom Millard, oh yes! And I had some by John Cromwell, Nick Collins, Thomas V. Brooks, and Tom White—my namesake. Listen! Maybe you can tell me. Was Leopold Schwager a manufacturer or an artist?"

Don Benedict laughed scornfully. "Leopold Schwager was a junk dealer! Bought old figures for five, ten dollars, puttied and painted 'em, sold 'em for twenty-five. Cobb!" he exclaimed suddenly. "You have any Cobbs, Mr. White?"

"Cobb of Canal Street? No, I always wanted one, but——"

Edgar Feld looked at Walter Swift, cleared his throat. "Now, Don——"

"Cobb of Canal Street," Don said loudly, "never used a mallet. No, sir. Drove the chisel with the palm of his hand. And then there was Charley Voles——"

Feld raised his voice above Don's. "Yes, we must talk about

this fascinating though obsolete art sometime. Don't you want to step a little closer to the Gemini, Mr. White?"

"Yes, White, damn it, buy the damned Gemini so they'll quit bothering us and we can get back to *real* art," said Don.

And forget about Walter, Demuth's and the WIS, he said to himself.

Next morning he tried to remember what had happened after that. White *had* taken the shapeless mass of wood Walt called Gemini. (What would he tell Roger Towns, the private collector? Some good, whopping lie, depend on it.) He was sure he remembered White with his checkbook out. And then? A confused picture of White examining the polished surface, pointing at something . . .

Don Benedict badly wanted a cup of coffee. His room was just off the studio, and once there had been a hot plate there, but Walt had ordered it removed on the grounds of danger. So now Don had to go up to Walt's apartment when he wanted a cup of coffee. That was how Walt liked everything to be: little brother coming to big brother. Well, there was no help for it. Don went upstairs, anticipating cold looks, curt remarks, at every step.

However, Walt was sweetness itself this morning. The coffee was ready; Walt had poured it even before Don entered the kitchen. After he finished his cup (made from unboiled water, powdered coffee, ice-cold milk), Walt urged another on him. Rather than speak, he took it.

Don knew, by the falsely jovial note of Walter's voice, that Something Was Up. He gulped the tepid slop and rose. "Thanks. See you later, Walter——"

But Walter reached out his hand and took him by the arm. "Let's talk about the Lost Dutchman Mine. ("The *what?*") The Spanish Treasure. ("I don't——") Spelled E-l-w-e-l-l," said Walter with an air at once sly and triumphant.

Don sat down heavily.

"Don't know what I mean by those figures of speech? Odd. You did last night. Matter of fact, they were yours," said

Walter, mouth pursed with mean amusement. He would refresh Don's memory. Last night, Mr. White had asked Don how he had come to have so much contemporary knowledge about the making of wooden Indians. Don had laughed. "An old prospector I befriended left me the map to the Lost Dutchman Mine," he had said, waving his glass. "To the Spanish Treasure."

When Mr. White, puzzled, had asked what he meant, Don had said, "It's easy. You just walk around the horses." Now what, just exactly, had Don meant by that?

"I must have been drunk, Walter."

"Oh yes, you were drunk, all right. But *in vino veritas*.... Now I've been thinking it out very carefully, Don. It seems to me that 'the old desert rat' you spoke of must have been that fellow Elwell who slipped on the ice two winters ago. The one you got to the hospital and visited regularly till he died. Am I right, Don? Am I?"

Don nodded miserably. "Damn liquor," he added.

"*Now* we're making progress," said Walt. "*O.K.* Now about this map to the mine. I know he left you that damn notebook. I know that. But I looked it over very carefully and it was just a lot of figures scribbled—equations, or whatever th' hell you call 'em. But it had something else in it, didn't it? Something you took out. We'll get to just what by and by. So—and it was right after that that you started going on these vacations of yours. Made me curious. Those funny clothes you wore."

Stiff and tight, Don sat in the bright, neat kitchen and watched the waters rise. There was nothing for him here and now, except for Mary and the children, and his love for them had been no more selfish than theirs for him. He had been glad when Walt first appeared, happy when they married, unhappy when Walt's real nature appeared, very pleased when the chance occurred to offer "a position" to his brother-in-law. The misgivings felt when a few people actually offered to buy the shapeless wooden things he had created almost aimlessly (he knowing that he was not a sculptor but a craftsman)

vanished when he saw it was the perfect setup for keeping Mary and the kids supported.

Of course, after a while Don had been able to arrange the majority of the "sales." The waste of time involved in hacking out the wooden horrors which "private collectors" bought was deplorable. The whole system was dreadfully clumsy, but its sole purpose—to create a world in which Walter would be satisfied and Mary happy—was being fulfilled, at any rate.

Or had been.

What would happen now, with Walter on the verge of finding out everything?

"And Syracuse—what a cotton-pickin' alibi! I figured you had a woman hid away for sure, wasting your time when you should have been working, so—well, I wanted to find out who she was, where she lived. That's why I always went through your pockets when you came back from these 'vacations.'"

"Walter, you didn't!"

But of course he knew damned well that Walter did. Had known for some time that Walter was doing it. Had acted accordingly. Instead of hiding the evidence, he had deliberately planted it, and in such a way that it couldn't possibly fail to add up to exactly one conclusion.

"What a lot of junk!" Walter jeered. "Like somebody swept the floor of an antique shop and dumped it all in your pocket. Ticket stubs with funny old printing, clippings from newspapers of years back—and all like that. *However*"—he jabbed a thick, triumphant finger at Don—"money is money, no matter how old it is. Right? *Damned* right! Old dollar bills, old gold pieces. Time after time. You weren't very cautious, old buddy. So now—just what *is* this 'Spanish Treasure' that you've been tapping? Let's have the details, son, or else I'll be mighty unhappy. And when I'm unhappy, Mary is, too . . ."

That was very true, Don had realized for some time now. And if Mary couldn't protect herself, how could the youngsters escape?

"I'm tired of scraping along on ten per cent, you see, Don.

I got that great old American ambition: I want to be in business for myself. And you are going to provide the capital. So —again, and for the last time—let's have the details."

Was this the time to tell him? And, hard upon the thought, the answer came: yes, the time was now, time to tell the truth. At once his heart felt light, joyous; the heavy weight (long so terribly, constantly familiar) was removed from him.

"Mr. Elwell—the old gentleman who slipped on the ice; you were right about that, Walter." Walter's face slipped into its familiar, smug smile. "Mr. Elwell was a math teacher at the high school down the block. Imagine it—a genius like him, pounding algebra into the heads of sullen children! But he didn't let it get him down, because that was just his living. What he mainly lived for were his space-time theorems. 'Elwell's Equations,' we called them——"

Walter snorted. "Don't tell me the old gimp was a time traveler and left you his time machine?"

"It wasn't a machine. It was only a—well, I guess it *was* a sort of map, after all. He tried to explain his theories to me, but I just couldn't understand them. It was kind of like chess problems—I never could understand *them*, either. So when we arranged that I was going to visit 1880, he wrote it all down for me. It's like a pattern. You go back and forth and up and down and after a while——"

"After a while you're in 1880?"

"That's right."

Walter's face had settled in odd lines. "I thought you were going to try not telling me what I'd figured out for myself," he said in the cutting exaggeration of his normally exaggerated Southern drawl. This was the first time he had used it on Don, though Don had heard it used often enough on Mary and the kids. "The map, and all those clues you were stupid enough to leave in your pockets, and the stupidest of all—carving your own squiggle signature into all those dozens of old wooden Indians. Think I can't add?"

"But that was Canal Street, 1880, and this is now," said

Don in a carefully dismal-sounding voice. "I thought it was safe."

Walter looked at him. Walter—who had never earned an ethical dollar in his life, and had scarcely bothered to make a pretense of supporting his wife since Don's work had started to sell—asked, "All right, why 1880—and why wooden Indians?"

Don explained to him how he felt at ease there, how the air was fresher, the food tastier, how the Russians were a menace only to other Russians, how—and the sachems! What real, sincere pleasure and pride he got out of carving them.

They were *used!* Not like the silly modern stuff he turned out now, stuff whose value rested only on the fact that self-seekers like Edgar Feld were able to con critics and public into believing it was valuable.

Walt scarcely heard him. "But how much money can you make carving wooden Indians?"

"Not very much in modern terms. But you see, Walt—I invest."

And that was the bait in the trap he'd set, and Walt rose to it and struck. "The market! Damn it to hell, of *course!*" The prospect of the (for once in his whole shoddy career) Absolutely Sure Thing, the Plunge which was certain to be a Killing, of moving where he could know without doubt what the next move would be, almost deprived Walter of breath.

"A tycoon," he gasped. "You could have been a tycoon, and all you could think of was—"

Don said that he didn't want to be a tycoon. He just wanted to carve wooden—

"Why, I could make us better than tycoons! Kings! Emperors! One airplane—" He subsided after Don convinced him that Elwell's Equation could transport only the individual and what he had on or was carrying. "Lugers," he muttered. "Tommy guns. If I'm a millionaire, I'll need bodyguards. Gould, Fisk, Morgan—they better watch out, that's all."

He slowly refocused on Don. "And *I'll* carry the map," he said.

He held out his hand. Slowly, as if with infinite misgivings, Don handed over to him the paper with Elwell's 1880 Equation.

Walter looked at it, lips moving, brows twisting, and Don recalled his own mystification when the old man had showed it to him.

"*. . . where* x *is one pace and* y *is five-sixth of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle of which both arms are* x *in length . . .*"

"Well," said Walter, "now let's get down to business." He rose, went off toward the living room, returned in a minute. Following him was a man with the tense, set face of a fanatic. He looked at Don with burning eyes.

"Anders!" cried Don.

"Where is the Equation?" Anders demanded.

"Oh, *I* got that," Walter said.

He took it out, showed a glimpse, thrust it in his pocket. He stepped back, put a chair between him and the WIS man.

"Not so fast," he said. "I got it and I'm keeping it. At least for now. So let's talk business. Where's the cash?"

As Anders, breathing heavily, brought out the roll of bills, "Oh Walter, what have you done?" Don moaned. "Don't throw me in the bramblebush, Br'er Wolf!"

"Here is the first part of it," said Anders, ignoring his former WIS associate. "For this you agree to return to Canal Street, 1880, and destroy—by whatever means are available—the infamous firm of Demuth's. In the unlikely case of their continuing in the business after the destruction—"

"They won't. Best goon job money can buy; leave it to me."

Anders hesitated.

Walter promptly said, "No, you can't come along. Don't ask again. Just him and me. I'll need him for bird-dogging. I'll get in touch when we come back. As agreed, I bring back

copies of the New York papers showing that Demuth's was blown up or burned down. On your way."

With one single hate-filled glance, not unmixed with triumph, at Don, Anders withdrew. The door closed. Walter laughed.

"You aren't—" Don began.

"Not a chance. Think I'm crazy? Let him and his crackpot buddies whistle for their money. No doubt you are wondering how I put two and two in a vertical column and added, hey, Donny boy? Well, once I figured out that the 'Prospector' was Elwell, and saw the WIS membership card in your pocket, I remembered that he and you used to go to those WIS meetings together, and I got in touch with them. They practically told me the whole story, but I wanted confirmation from you. All right, on your feet. We've got a pea patch to tear up."

While Walt was shaving, Don and Mary had a few minutes together.

"Why don't you just go, Don?" she begged. "I mean for good—away where he can't find you—and stay there. Never mind about me or the children. We'll make out."

"But wouldn't he take it out on you and them?"

"I said don't worry about us and I mean it. He's not all bad, you know. Oh, he might be, for a while, but that's just because he never really adjusted to living up North. Maybe if we went back to his home town—he always talks about it—I mean he'd be different there—"

He listened unhappily to her losing her way between wanting him out of her misery and hoping that the unchangeable might change.

"Mary," he broke in, "you don't have to worry any more. I'm taking Walt along and setting him up—really setting him up. And listen"—he wrote a name and address on the back of her shopping list—"go see this man. I've been investing money with his firm, and there's plenty to take care of you and the kids—even if things go wrong with Walt and me. This man will handle all your expenses."

She nodded, not speaking. They smiled, squeezed hands. There was no need for embrace or kiss-the-children.

Whistling "Dixie," Walter returned. "Let's go," he said.

"Good-by, Don," said Mary.

"Good-by, Mary," said Don.

. . .

That afternoon, Don Benedict and Walter Swift, after visits to a theatrical costumer and a numismatist, entered the Canal Street subway station. Those who have had commerce with that crossroads of lower Manhattan know how vast, how labyrinthine, it is. Only a few glances, less than idly curious, were given them as they paced through the late Mr. Elwell's mathematical map. No one was present when they passed beneath a red-lettered sign reading "Canarsie Line" and vanished away.

As soon as he felt the flagstones beneath his feet, Walter whirled around and looked back. Instead of the white-tiled corridor, he saw a wet stone wall. For a moment, he swore feebly. Then he laughed.

"A pocketful of long green and another of gold eagles!" he exclaimed. "What shall we try for first? Erie or New York Central Common? No—first I want to see this place where you work. Oh yes, I *do*. Obstinacy will get you nowhere. Lead on."

Wishing eventually to introduce Walt into Hennaberry's, Don had first taken him out to Canal Street. Leopold Schwager's secondhand establishment was opposite, the sidewalk lined with superannuated sachems. Other establishments of the show-figure trade were within a stone's throw, their signs, flags, and figures making a brave display. Horsecars, cabs, drays, private carriages went clattering by.

Walter watched the passing scene with relish, leering at the women in what he evidently thought was the best 1880 masher's manner. Then he wrinkled his nose.

"Damn it all," he said, "I hadn't realized that the Hayes Administration smelled so powerfully of the horse. But I suppose *you* like it? Yes," he sneered, "you would. Well, enjoy it

while you can. As soon as I manage to dig up some old plans, I propose to patent the internal combustion engine."

Don felt his skin go cold.

"John D. Rockefeller ought to be very, ver-ry interested," Walt said exultantly. "Why, five years from now, you won't know it's the same street . . . What're you pointing at?"

Don gestured to a scout-figure in full plumage outside a store whose awning was painted with the words, *"August Schwartz Segar Mfger Also Snuff, Plug, Cut Plug and Twist."*

"One of mine," he said, pride mixed with growing resolve.

Walter grunted. "You won't have any time for that sort of thing any more; I'll need you myself. Besides—yes, why not? Introduce cigarette machinery. Start a great big advertising campaign, put a weed in the mouth of every American over the age of sixteen."

A drunken sailor lurched down the street singing "Sweet Ida Jane from Portland, Maine." Automatically, Don stepped aside to let him pass.

"But if you do that," he said, no longer doubting that Walter would if he could, "then there won't be any more—nobody will need—I mean my work—"

Walter said irritably, "I told you, you won't have the time to be piddling around with a mallet and chisel. And now let's see your wooden-Injun mine."

Acting as if he felt that nothing mattered any more, Don turned and led the way toward the brick building where C. E. Hennaberry, Show Figures And Emblematic Signs, did business. Ben the boy paused in his never-ending work of dusting the stock models to give a word and a wave in greeting. He stared at Walt.

In the back was the office, old Van Wart the clerk-cashier and old Considine the clerk-bookkeeper on their high stools, bending over their books as usual. On the wall was a dirty photograph in a black-draped frame with the legend "Hon. Wm. Marcy Tweed, Grand Sachem of the Columbian Order

of St. Tammany," and underneath the portrait was the Major himself.

"So this is the place!" Walter declared, exaggerated Southern accent rolling richly. Major Hennaberry's friend, Col. Cox, sitting on the edge of the desk cutting himself a slice of twist, jumped as if stung by a Minié ball. His rather greasy sealskin cap slid over one eye.

"Get all kinds of people in here, don't you, Cephas?" he growled. "All's I got to say is: I was at Fredericksburg, I was at Shiloh, and all's I got to say is: the only good Rebel is a dead Rebel!"

The Major, as Don well knew, hated Rebels himself with a fervor possible only to a Tammany Democrat whose profitable speculations in cotton futures had been interrupted for four long, lean years. Don also knew that the Major had a short way of dealing with partisans of the Lost Cause, or with anyone else who had cost or threatened to cost him money—if he could just be brought to the point.

The Major looked up now, his eye lighting coldly on Walter, who gazed around the not overly clean room with a curious stare. "Yes, sir, might I serve you, sir? Nice fly-figure, maybe? Can supply you with a Highlander holding simulated snuff mill at a teardown price; no extra charge for tam-o'-shanter. Oh, Dusty. Glad to see you——"

"Dusty" mumbled an introduction. How quickly things had changed—though not in any way for the better—and how paradoxically: because he had refused the WIS demand to change the past by violence so that modernism would be held off indefinitely, he was now condemned to see modernism arrive almost at once. Unless, of course . . .

"Brother-in-law, eh?" said Major Hennaberry, beginning to wheeze. "Dusty's done some speaking about you. M-mph." He turned abruptly to Don/Dusty. "What's all this, my boy, that Charley Voles was telling me—Demuth's coming up with some devilish scheme to introduce cast-iron show figures?" Dusty started, a movement noted by the keen though blood-

shot eyes of his sometime employer. "Then it *is* true? Terrible thing, unconscionable. Gave me the liver complaint afresh, directly I heard of it. Been on medicated wine ever since."

Walt turned angrily on his brother-in-law. "Who told you to open your damn cotton-pickin' mouth?"

The Major's purplish lips parted, moved in something doubtless intended for a smile.

"Now, gents," he said, "let's not quarrel. What must be must be, eh?"

"*Now* you're talking," said Walt, and evidently not realizing that he and Hennaberry had quite separate things in mind, he added: "Things will be different, but you'll get used to them."

Watching the Major start to wheeze in an unreasoning attack of rage, Dusty knew catalytic action was needed. "How about a drink, Major?" he suggested. "A Rat Nolan special?"

Unpurpling quickly, now merely nodding and hissing, the Major called for Ben. He took a coin out of his change purse and said: "Run over to Cooney's barrel house and bring back some glasses and a pitcher of rum cocktail. And ask Cooney does he know where Nolan is. I got some business with him."

The boy left on the lope, and there was a short, tight silence. Then Col. Cox spoke, an anticipatory trickle already turning the corners of his mouth a wet brown. "I was at Island Number Ten, and I was at Kenisaw Mountain, and what I say is: the only good Rebel is a dead Rebel."

Walt grinned and said nothing until Ben came back with the drinks.

"Well, Scotch on the rocks it isn't," he said then, taking a brief sip, "but it's not bad."

He gave a brief indifferent glance at the shifty little man with Burnside whiskers who had come back with Ben, carrying the glasses.

"To science and invention!" cried Walt. "To progress!" He drained half his glass. His face turned green, then white. He started to slide sidewise and was caught by the little man in Burnsides.

"Easy does it, cully," said Mr. Rat Nolan, for it was he. "Dear, dear! I hope it's not a touch of this cholera morbus what's been so prevalent. Expect we'd better get him to a doctor, don't you, gents?"

Major Hennaberry said that there was not a doubt about it. He walked painfully over to the elevator shaft, whistled shrilly. "Charley?" he called. "Larry? Oscar? Otto? Hennery? Get down here directly!"

Dusty emerged from his surprise at how neatly it had happened. He reached into Walter's coat pocket and took out the paper with Elwell's Equation on it. Now he was safe, and so was Canal Street, 1880. As for what would happen when Walter recovered from his strange attack—well, they would see.

The staff came out of the elevator cage with interest written large and plain upon their faces. Ben had evidently found time from his errand to drop a few words. Major Hennaberry gestured toward Walter, reclining, gray-faced, against the solicitous Mr. Rat Nolan, who held him in a firm grip.

"Gent is took bad," the Major explained. "Couple of you go out and see if you can find a cab—Snow Ferguson or Blinky Poole or one of those shunsoaps—and tell them to drive up by the alley. No sense in lugging this poor gent out the front."

Hennery, Larry, and Charley nodded and went out.

Otto stared. "No more vooden Indians, if he gets his vay," he said dismally at last. "Ho, Chesus," he moaned.

Dusty began, "Major, this is all so——"

"Now don't be worriting about your brother-in-law," said Rat Nolan soothingly. "For Dr. Coyle is a sovereign hand at curing what ails all pasty-faced, consumptive types like this one."

Dusty said that he was sure of it. "Where is Dr. Coyle's office these days?" he asked.

Mr. Rat Nolan coughed lightly, gazed at a cobweb in a corner of the ceiling. "The southwest passage to Amoy by way of the Straights is what the Doc is recommending for his pa-

tients—and he insists on accompanying them to see they follows doctor's orders, such being the degree of his merciful and tender, loving care . . ."

Dusty nodded approvingly.

"Ah, he's a rare one," said Rat Nolan with enthusiasm, "is Bully Coyle, master of the *Beriah Jaspers* of the Black Star Line! A rare one and a rum one, and the Shanghaiing would be a half-dead trade without 'm, for it does use up men. And they leave on the morning tide."

There was a noise of *clomp-clomp,* and metal harness pieces jingled in the alley. Charley, Larry and Hennery came in, followed by a furtive-looking cabman with a great red hooked nose—Snow Ferguson, presumably, or Blinky Poole, or one of those shunsoaps.

"Ah, commerce, commerce," Rat Nolan sighed. "It waits upon no man's pleasure." He went through the unconscious Walter's pockets with dispatch and divided the money into equal piles. From his own, he took a half eagle which had been slightly scalloped and handed it to Dusty. "Share and share alike, and here's the regular fee. That's the spirit what made America great. Leave all them foreign monarchs beware. . . . Give us a lift with the gent here, cullies . . ."

Charley took the head, Hennery and Otto the arms, while Larry and Ben held the feet. Holding the door open, the cabman observed, "Damfino-looking shoes this coffee-cooler's got on."

"Them's mine," said Rat Nolan instantly. "He'll climb the rigging better without 'em. Mind the door, cullies—don't damage the merchandise!"

Down the dim aisles the procession went, past the fly-figures, scout-figures, rosebuds, pompeys, Highlandmen, and Turks. The gas jets flared, the shadows danced, the sachems scowled.

"If he comes to and shows fight," Major Hennaberry called, "give him a tap with the mallet, one of you!" He turned to

Dusty, put a hand on his shoulder. "While I realize, my boy, that no man can be called to account for the actions of his brother-in-law in this Great Republic of ours, still I expect this will prove a lesson to you. From your silence, I perceive that you agree. Your sister now—hate to see a lady's tears—"

Dusty took a deep breath. The air smelled deliciously of fresh wood and paint. "She'll adjust," he said. Mary would be quite well off with the money from his investments. So there was no need, none at all, for his return. And if the WIS tried to follow him, to make more trouble, why—there was always Rat Nolan.

"Major Hennaberry, sir," he said vigorously, "we'll beat Demuth's yet. You remember what you said when the catalog came out, about the power of advertising? We'll run their metal monsters into the ground and put a wooden fly-figure on every street block in America!"

And they did.

By Frederik Pohl

THE BITTEREST PILL

MARGERY tried putting the phone back on the hook, but it immediately rang again. She kicked the stand, picked up the phone, and said: "Hang up, will you? We don't want any!" She slammed the phone down to break the connection and took it off the hook again.

The doorbell rang.

"My turn," I said and put down the paper—it looked as though I never would find out what the National League standings were.

It was Patrolman Gamelsfelder.

"Man to see you, Mr. Binns. Says it's important." He was sweating—you could see the black patches on his blue shirt. I knew what he was thinking: we had air conditioning and money, and he was risking his life day after day for a lousy policeman's pay, and what kind of a country was this anyhow? He'd said as much that afternoon.

"It might be important to him, but I don't want to see anybody. Sorry, officer." I closed the door.

Margery said: "Are you going to change the baby?"

I said cheerfully: "I'll be glad to, dear." And it was true—besides being good policy to say that, because she was pretty close to exploding. It was true because I wanted something to do myself. I wanted some nice simple demanding task, like

holding a one-year-old down with my knee in the middle of his chest, while one hand held his feet and the other one pinned the diaper. I mean it was nice of Uncle Otto to leave me the money, but did they have to put it in the paper?

The doorbell rang again as I was finishing. Margery was upstairs with Gwennie—who took a lot of calming down, because she always does—so I stood the baby on his fat little feet and answered the door myself.

It was the policeman again. "Some telegrams for you, Mr. Binns. I wooden let the boy deliver them."

"Thanks." I tossed them in the drawer of the telephone stand. What was the use of opening them? They were from people who had heard about Uncle Otto and the money, and they wanted to beg, borrow, or sell me something.

"That fellow's still here," Patrolman Gamelsfelder said sourly. "I think he's sick."

"Too bad." I tried to close the door.

"Anyway, he says to tell Cuddles that Tinker is here."

I grabbed the door. "Tell Cud—"

"That's what he said." Gamelsfelder saw that that hit me, and it pleased him. For the first time, he smiled.

"What—what's his name?"

"Winston McNeely McGhee," said officer Gamelsfelder happily, "or anyway that's what he told me, Mr. Binns."

"Send the son of a—send the fellow in," I said, and jumped to get the baby away from the ash tray where Margery had left a cigarette burning.

Winnie McGhee. It was all I needed to finish off my day. He came in holding his head as though it weighed a thousand pounds. He was never what you'd call healthy-looking, even when Margery stood me up at the altar in order to elope with him. It was his frail, poetic charm, and maybe he still had that and maybe he didn't, but the way he looked to me, he was sick, all right. He looked as if he weighed a fast hundred pounds, not counting the head; and the head looked like a balloon.

He moaned, "Hello, Harlan, age thirty-one, five-eleven, one seventy-three. You got an acetylsalicylic acid tablet?"

I said: "What?"

But he didn't get a chance to answer right away because there was a flutter and a scurry from the expansion attic and Margery appeared at the head of the stairs.

"I thought—" she began wildly, and then she saw that her wildest thought was true. *"You!"*

She betrayed pure panic—she began fussing with her hair with one hand and smoothing her Bermuda shorts with the other, while she was simultaneously trying to wiggle, no hands, out of the sloppy old kitchen apron that had been good enough for me.

McGhee said pallidly: "Hello. Please, don't you have an acetylsalicylic acid tablet?"

"I don't know what it is," I told him.

Margery chuckled ruefully. "Ah, Harlan, Harlan," she said with fond tolerance, beaming lovingly at me as she came down the stairs. It was enough to turn the stomach of a cat. "You forget, Winnie—Harlan doesn't know much chemistry. Won't you find him an aspirin, Harlan? That's all he wants."

"Thanks," said Winnie with a grateful sigh, massaging his temples.

I went and got him an aspirin. I thought of adding a little mixer to the glass of water that went with it, but there wasn't anything in the medicine chest that looked right, and besides it's against the law.

I don't mind admitting it, I never liked Winnie McGhee, and it isn't just because he swiped my bride away from me. Sure, she got smart after six months, and then when she turned up with an annulment and sincere repentance—well, I've never regretted marrying her. Or, anyway, not much.

But you can't expect me to like McGhee. Hell, if I'd never *seen* the man before, I'd have hated his little purple guts at first sight, because he looked like a poet and talked like a scientist and acted like a jerk.

I started back to the living room and yelled: "The baby!"

Margery turned away from simpering at her former husband and sprang for the puppy's dish. She got it away from the baby, but not quite intact. There was a good baby-sized mouthful of mixed milk and dog biscuit that she had to excavate for, and naturally the baby had his way of counterattacking for *that.*

"No bite!" she yelled, pulling her finger out of his mouth and putting it in hers. Then she smiled sweetly. "Isn't he a darling, Winnie? He's got his daddy's nose, of course. But don't you think he has my eyes?"

"He'll have your fingers, too, if you don't keep them out of his mouth," I told her.

Winnie said: "That's normal. After all, with twenty-four paired chromosomes to form the gamete, it is perfectly obvious that the probability of inheriting none of his traits from one parent—that is, being exactly like the other—is one chance in 8,388,608. Ooh, my head."

Margery gave him a small frown. "What?"

He was like a wound-up phonograph. "That's without allowance for spontaneous mutation," he added. "*Or* induced. And considering the environmental factors *in utero*—that is, broad-spectrum antibiotics, tripling of the background radiation count due to nuclear weapons, dietary influences, et cetera—yes, I should put the probability of induced mutation rather high. Perhaps of the order of—"

I interrupted. "Here's your aspirin. Now what do you want?"

"Harlan!" Margery said warningly.

"I mean—well, what *do* you want?"

He leaned his head on his hands. "I want you to help me conquer the world," he said.

Crash-splash. "Go get a mop!" Margery ordered; the baby had just spilled the puppy's water. She glared at me, then smiled at Winnie. "Go ahead," she coaxed. "Take your nice aspirin and we'll talk about your trip around the world later."

But that hadn't been what he had said. Conquer the world. I heard it plain as day. I went to fetch the mop, because that was as good a way as any to think over what to do about Winston McNeely McGhee. I mean, what did I want with the world? Uncle Otto had already *bequeathed* me the world, or anyway more of it than I had ever hoped to own.

When I came back, Winnie was tottering around the room, followed at a respectful distance by my wife, holding the baby. She was saying to the prospective conqueror of all the world: "How did you hear about Harlan's good lu—about the tragic loss of his dear uncle, I mean?"

He groaned: "I read it in the paper." He fiddled aimlessly with the phone.

"It's all for the best, I say," said Margery in a philosophic tone, fishing damp graham-cracker crumbs out of the baby's ear. "Dear Uncle Otto lived a rich and full life. Think of all those years in Yemen! And the enormous satisfaction it must have given him to be personally responsible for the installation of the largest petroleum-cracking still west of the Suez!"

"*East,* my dear. East. The Mutawakelite Kingdom lies just south of Saudi Arabia."

She looked at him thoughtfully, but all she said was: "Winnie, you've changed."

And so he had; but, for that matter, so had she. It was not like Margery to be a hypocrite.

Simpering over her ex-husband I could understand—it wasn't so bad; she was merely showing the poor guy how very much better off she was than she ever would have been with him.

But the tragic loss of my dear uncle had never occasioned a moment's regret in her—*or* in me; because the plain fact of the matter is that until the man from the Associated Press called up, she didn't even know I had an Uncle Otto. And I had pretty nearly forgotten it myself. Otto was the brother that my mother's family didn't talk about. How were they to know that he was laying up treasures of oil and gold on the Arabian Peninsula?

The phone rang; Winnie had thoughtlessly put it back on the hook. "No!" Margery cried into it, hardly listening. "We don't want any uranium stock! We've got *closets* full of it!"

I said, taking advantage of the fact that her attention was diverted: "Winnie, I'm a busy man. How about if you tell me what you want?"

He sat down with his head in his hands and made a great effort.

"It's—difficult," he said, speaking very slowly. Each word came out by itself, as though he had to choose and sort painfully among all the words that were rushing to his mouth. "I —invented something. You understand? And when I heard about you inheriting money—"

"You thought you could get some of it away from me."

"No!" He sat up sharply—and winced and clutched his head. "I want to *make* money for you."

"We've got closets full," I quoted Margery.

He said in a desperate tone: "But I can give you the world, Harlan. Trust me!"

"I never have—"

"Trust me now! We can own the world, the two of us, if you'll just give me a little financial help. I've invented a drug that gives me total recall."

"How nice for you," I said, reaching for the knob of the door.

Then I began to think. "Total recall?" I asked.

He said, sputtering with eagerness: "The upwelling of the unconscious—the ability to remember everything—the eidetic memory of an *idiot savant* and the indexing system of a quiz winner! You want to know the first six kings of England? Egbert, Ethelwulf, Ethelbald, Ethelbert, Ethelred, and Alfred. You want to know the mating call of a ruff-necked grouse?" He demonstrated the call of the ruff-necked grouse.

"Oh," said Margery, coming back into the room with the freshly diapered baby. "Bird imitations."

"And more!" cried Winnie. "Do you know about the time the United States had two presidents?"

"No, but—"

"March the third," he said, "eighteen seventy-seven. Rutherford B. Hayes—I'd better say Rutherford *Birchard* Hayes—was about to succeed Grant, and he was sworn in a day early. I ought to explain that—"

"No," I cut in. "Don't explain."

"Well, how about this? Want me to name the A.B.C. bowling champions from 1931 to date? Clack, Nitschke, Hewitt, Vidro, Brokaw, Gagliardi, Anderson—oh, wait a minute. I forgot 1936. That's Warren. *Then* Gagliardi, Anderson, Danek—"

"Winnie," I said, "quit it."

"But this is the key to conquering the world!"

"Hah," I said. "Being boring from within by naming bowling champions?"

"Knowledge is power, Harlan." He rested his head on his palms briefly. "But it does make my head ache."

I took my hand off the knob of the door.

I said grudgingly: "Sit down, Winnie. I admit you've got me interested. I can't wait to hear what the swindle is."

"Harlan!" warned Margery.

Winnie said: "There's no swindle, I promise you. To repeat, knowledge is power, Harlan. Why, with my superbrain we can outwit the rulers of any country anywhere. We can own the world! And—money, you say? Knowledge is money, too. For instance"—he winked—"worried about taxes? I can tell you the minority opinion in U. S. Govt. versus Oosterhagen, 486 Alabama 3309. There's a loophole there you could drive an armored truck through and come out with it loaded!"

Margery sat down with a cigarette in the long, long holder I'd bought her to square a beef the year after we were married. She looked at me and then at the cigarette; it penetrated, and I raced over with a match.

"Thank you, darling," she said throatily.

She had changed herself as well as the baby. She now wore

something more suitable for the co-heiress of a big fat hunk of money to wear while entertaining an ex-husband. It was a gold lamé housecoat; she had bought it within an hour of the time the AP man had called, on a charge account we'd never owned until the early editions of the papers hit the stores around Levittown.

And that reminded me. Money. Who needed money? What was the use of inheriting all that loot from Uncle Otto if I couldn't throw Winnie out on his ear?

Politeness made me temporize: "All this is very interesting, Winnie, but—"

"Harlan, the baby!" Margery yelled. "Get him out of the pretzels!"

I did, while Winnie said faintly behind me: "The shape of a pretzel represents children's arms folded in prayer—or so it was thought in the seventh century. A good pretzel bender can bend more than thirty-five a minute. Of course, machines are faster."

I said: "Winnie—"

"Like to know the etymology of the word 'navvy'? Most people think it has something to do with sailors."

"Winnie, listen to me—"

"It doesn't, though. It comes from the laborers on the Inland Navigation Canals—eighteenth-century England, you know. Well, the laborers—"

I said firmly: "Winnie, beat it."

"Harlan!"

"You stay out of this, Margery," I ordered her. "Winnie's after my dough, that's all. Well, I haven't had it long enough to want to throw it away. Besides, who wants to rule the world?"

"Well—" Margery said thoughtfully.

"With all our money?" I demanded. "Who needs it?"

Winnie clutched his head. "Oh," he moaned. "Wait, Harlan. All I need is a stake. I've got the long-term cycles of every stock on the Exchange down in my head—splits and dividends

and earnings records since nineteen ought four! I know the private brokers' hand signals on the Curb—wave up for buy, wave down for sell; look, see how my fingers are bent? That means the spread between bid and asked is three-eighths of a point. Give me a million dollars, Harlan."

"No."

"Just a million, that's all. You can spare it! And I'll double it in a week, quadruple it in a month—in a year, we'll have a billion. A billion dollars!"

I shook my head. "The taxes——"

"Remember U. S. Govt. versus Oosterhagen! And that's a bare beginning. Ever think what a billion dollars could do in the hands of a supergenius? Here!" he yelled, grabbing at his temple with one hand, pulling something out of his pocket with the other. "Look at this, Harlan! It's yours for a million dollars—ah, make it a hundred thousand. Yes, a hundred thousand dollars and you can have it! I'll sell it for that, and then I won't split with you—we'll *both* be supergeniuses. Eh? Fair enough?"

I was trapped by my own curiosity. "What is it?" I asked.

He waved it at me—a squat little bottle, half filled with pale capsules.

"Mine," he said proudly. "My hormone. It's a synapse relaxer. One of these and the blocks between cell and cell in your brain are weakened for an hour. Three of them, for every twenty pounds of body weight, and you're a supergenius for life. You'll remember things you think have passed out of your recollection years ago! You'll recall the post-partum slap that started you breathing. You'll remember the name of the nurse who carried you to the door of your father's Maxwell. Harlan, there is simply no limit to——"

"Beat it, Winnie," I said, and pushed him.

Patrolman Gamelsfelder appeared like a genie from a lamp.

"Thought so," he said somberly, advancing on Winnie McGhee. "Extortion's your game, is it? Can't say I blame you,

brother, but it's a trip to the station house and a talk with the sergeant for you."

"Just get rid of him," I said, and closed the door as Winnie was challenging the cop to name an opera by Krenek, other than *Johnny Spielt Auf*.

Margery put the baby down, breathing hard.

She said: "*Scuffling* and pushing people *around* and bad *manners*. You weren't like this when we were married, Harlan. Something's come over you since you inherited that money!"

I said: "Help me pick these things up, will you?" I hadn't pushed him hard, but all the same, those pills had gone flying.

Margery stamped her foot and burst into tears. "I *know* how you feel about poor Winnie," she sobbed, "but it's just that I'm *sorry* for him. Couldn't you at least be polite? Couldn't you at least have given him a couple of lousy hundred thousand dollars?"

"Watch the baby," I warned her. At the head of the stairs, Gwennie appeared, attracted by the noise, rubbing her eyes with her fists and beginning to cry.

Margery glared at me, started to speak, was speechless, turned her back, and hurried up to comfort Gwennie.

I began to feel a little bit ashamed of myself.

I stood up, patting the baby absent-mindedly on the head, looking up the stairs at the female half of our household. I had been, when you stopped to think of it, something of a clunk.

Item, I had been rough on poor old Winnie. Suppose it had been I who discovered the hormone and needed a few lousy hundred thousand, as Margery put it so well, as a stake in order to grasp undreamed-of wealth and power?

And, item, Margery did have a tough time with the kids and all, and on this day of all days, she was likely excited.

And, item——

I had just inherited a bloody mint!

The thought came to me with sudden appalling clarity—

why wasn't I using some of Uncle Otto's money to make life easier?

I galloped up the steps two at a time. "Margery! I'm sorry!"

"I think you should——" she began, and then looked up from Gwennie and saw my face.

I said: "Look, honey. Let's start over. I'm sorry about poor Winnie, but forget him, huh? We're rich. Let's start living the way rich people do. Let's go out, just the two of us—it's early yet! We'll grab a cab and go into New York—all the way by cab—why not? We'll eat at the Colony and see *My Fair Lady* from the fifth row on the aisle——"

Margery looked up at me and suddenly smiled. "But——" She patted Gwennie's head. "The kids. What about them?"

"Get a baby sitter. Mrs. Schroop'll be glad of the work."

"But it's such short notice——"

"Margery," I said, "we don't inherit a fortune *every* night. Call her up."

Margery stood up, holding Gwennie, beginning to smile. "Why, that sounds like fun, Harlan! Why not, as you say? Only—do you remember Mrs. Schroop's number?"

"It's written down," I told her.

"No, that was on the cover of the old directory." She frowned. "It isn't listed in her own name—it's her son-in-law. Oh, what *is* that number——"

A thin voice from down the stairs said: "Ovington Eight Zero Zero Fourteen. It's listed under Sturgis, Arthur R., Forty-one Universe Avenue."

I said sharply: "Who the devil said that?"

"I did, Daddy," said the owner of the voice, all of eighteen inches tall, appearing at the foot of the steps. He had to use one hand to steady himself, because he didn't walk so very well. But in the other hand he held the squat glass bottle that Winnie McGhee had dropped.

The bottle was empty.

Well, we don't live in Levittown any more—of course.

Margery and Gwennie and I have everything—changing our name, dyeing our hair, even plastic surgery once. It didn't work, so we had the same surgeon change us back.

People kept recognizing us.

What we mostly do now is cruise up and down the coast of the U.S.J.I. in our yacht, inside the twelve-mile limit. When we need supplies, we send some of the crew in with the motor launch. That's risky, yes. But it isn't as risky as landing in any other country would be, and we just don't want to go back to J.I.—as they've taken to calling it these days. You can't blame us. How would *you* like it?

The way it goes, we just cruise up and down, and every once in a while he remembers us and calls up on the ship-to-shore. He called yesterday, matter of fact.

He said: "You can't stay out there forever, Daddy. Your main engines are due for a refit after eleven months seven days of running and you've been gone ten months six. What are you using for dairy products? The load you shipped in Jacksonville must have run out last Thursday week. There isn't any point in your starving yourself. Besides, it's not fair to Gwennie and Mom. Come home. We'll make a place for you in the government."

"Thanks," I said. "But no, thanks."

"You'll be sorry," he cautioned, pleasantly enough. And he hung up.

Well, we should have kept him out of those pills.

I guess it was my fault. I should have listened when old Winnie—heaven rest his soul, wherever he is—said that the lifetime dose was three tablets for every twenty pounds of body weight. The baby only weighed thirty-one pounds then, last time we'd taken him to the pediatrician; naturally, we couldn't take him again after he swallowed the pills. And he must've swallowed at least a dozen.

But I guess Winnie was right. At the very least, the world is well on its way to being conquered now.

The United States fell to Juvens Imperator, as he calls him-

self (and I blame Margery for that—I never used Latin in front of the kids), in eighteen months, after his sensational coup on the $256,000 Question and his later success in cornering soybean futures, the common stock of United States Steel, other shares and commodities, then just about all of them. The rest of the world is just a matter of time. And not very much time at that. And don't they just know it, though; that's why we daren't land abroad.

But who would have thought it?

I mean I watched his inauguration last October on television. The country has had some pretty peculiar people running it, no doubt. But did you ever think you'd live to see the oath of office administered to a little boy with one hand upraised and the thumb of the other in his mouth?

By Raymond E. Banks

THIS SIDE UP

THE soft moon shone on the grass, on the white markers, on the rubble of the city, and on the upstart tent town of the aliens.

It shone on the white hospital, most of which still remained standing.

It shone on the clean, youthful features of old Dr. Gan who, though a Thurkian, didn't consider himself an alien at all, so deeply had he studied Earth. It was early spring and the cold night air had a touch of life and warmth to it, a touch of wonder. This was the planet Earth, third planet from the sun of this solar system—

The miracle planet.

The only planet in all space whose beings had found immortality.

Dr. Gan was now moving across the birthgrounds of the Earthmen. Each birthplace was marked with white marble. On it was the baby's name, plus the allotted number of years he was to live before pregnating into immortality. He stooped to read one of them.

JESSE H. SMITH
1883–1953
R.I.P.

Very clever and orderly of these Earthmen to mark ahead of its birth how long each baby was to exist.

On the planet Thurkos, things were done much more haphazardly. Spontaneity was the curse of his species, thought Dr. Gan. They came into existence out of nowhere, spontaneously. They lived their lives and, when their time was up, their bodies vanished as strangely as they came in, a sudden disintegration of totality which left nothing behind.

Earthmen were smarter, Dr. Gan mused. They, too, came alive in spontaneity. Only instead of appearing full-bodied and naked on the streets, like the Thurkians, they appeared in boxes six feet long, three feet wide, buried six feet down in the ground. How wonderful it must have been to begin life so—having a plot of ground for your very own, wearing clothes, having a warm box to lie in! R.I.P.—that meant Ready-In-Place, come and get me—I'm ready to start life.

Then your Earth fellows came to these great birthplaces—pleasant, grassy places with many flowers—and dug you up. They took you to the great hospitals, like the one over there. They cleaned you up, assigned you to a family, and you went home to begin life.

Like Thurkians, Earthmen were born with pseudo-teeth completely removable from the mouth, with face wrinkles and bent bones. Then both races grew old, getting hair, getting white teeth, getting straighter, more powerful figures.

But the Thurkians shrank over the years, getting smaller and, ultimately, vanished without a trace, whereas the Earthmen were smarter. In their extreme old age, they also grew to be very tiny indeed. They wore white pants made out of a triangle of cloth and bobbed their heads and were carried in the arms of the family female.

Then they chose a certain female relative—curiously always female—and accompanied her to the hospital.

There they entered what was called a "Delivery Room" and *thus delivered themselves unto the woman.* They actually became a part of her, and she went on living! Thus Earthmen

went on living, and it was a strangely marvelous immortality.

To pregnate and become part of another, instead of simply dying—a glorious way to end old age!

Now the Thurkians were going to attempt that same immortality, thought old Dr. Gan, walking rapidly across the birthyard of the Earthmen with the springy steps of his old age. Each day his muscles grew stronger, his mind more alert in advanced age. Inside of ten years, he'd be old and tiny. Earthmen, oddly enough, called this stage of life "childhood." And then, shortly after that period, he'd simply vanish.

Unless this new pregnating system of Dr. Duk's worked.

He sighed, expelling the soft spring air. He was filled with wonder at the greatness of the Earthmen, at the fortunate landing of his people on this planet, and at the glorious future they were now sure to find.

He himself was lucky to be here—after all the sins he had committed. Only the kindness of Dr. Duk . . .

He entered the hospital. It hummed with activity. Yesterday, the Princess of the People had landed—tomorrow, the first great pregnating experiment was to be performed.

He went directly to his workplace, the tiny room where the only existing Earthman lived.

Gan checked in and relieved Tok. Tok's eyes swam with the importance of these days as did those of everyone else. The Thurkians couldn't be wrong—cell for cell, organ for organ, they were almost exactly like Earthmen.

Put the two races together on a street and you couldn't tell them apart. And now the Thurkians were about to reach immortal life . . .

"How is he?"

"He is well," said Tok, nodding toward the last Earthman. "No special instructions, except to speed up the testing." Then Tok hurried out to pay homage to the Princess of the People, the lovely Aza, she of the form divine. She of . . .

Dr. Gan turned to his work with a sigh. No reason for a discredited scientist like himself to dream of her high person.

He was a minor figure and would always remain so, alongside the great Dr. Duk.

The last Earthman lived in a magnificent machine designed by these superior Earth beings. He must have lived in this room for many years after the last of the Earthmen had gone, his wants cared for by the machine. The Thurkians had no name for the machine, but it was a metallic aid to respiration—a sort of metal lung.

One did not like to contemplate what the Earthmen had done to themselves to pulverize their planet so. But that was a matter apart from the great experiment. The Earthmen had left very little above the ground, so very little that it had taken a brain like that of Dr. Duk to extrapolate their lives. Whatever their mistake, it could not be repeated by the Thurkians, Gan thought aggressively. The Thurkians would steal their immortality and guard each and every one of their endless lives jealously.

He glanced at the last Earthman, but that individual paid no attention to him. He was so old he was beginning to lose the shaving function. Very few hairs appeared on his cheeks. His hair had the thickness of age, his eyes had the age-sparkle . . .

"If you could only speak," said Gan for probably the thousandth time. "If I could only reach you to tell you how much we appreciate your miraculous gift to us."

But there would most likely never be any communication. The Earthman was deaf and dumb and paralyzed. There were times when he followed them with his eyes. The balance of the time he lay in his machine, indifferent to their presence.

Out of kindness to this last remnant of a great race, they would pregnate this survivor some day, fit him into the body of a woman—a Thurkian, of course—and thus guarantee his immortality. It would be a proud day for Thurkian science—the pupils aiding the last of the great masters by the masters' own methods!

Dr. Gan sighed happily and turned back to his routine. He checked the dials. The Earthman was well-fed, body temperature and pulse were normal. Gan fed the raw food into the machine that cooked and fed the patient, as he listened with half an ear to the bustle that was going on in the hospital corridors.

Now that the Princess was here, things were moving fast. It was sad for Gan to be assigned to this tiny room, cut off from the excitement that spread from Dr. Duk's offices throughout the building.

But perhaps Princess Aza would visit this room! Gan felt his heart quiver deliciously at the thought. Absently, he picked up two objects from the testing blanket and moved toward the Earthman.

This testing went on day after day. It would have been much simpler if they could have found a way to communicate with him. But the artifacts available were hard to understand, and the attendants grew increasingly bored each day as various objects were tried without effect.

Dr. Gan stood over him, holding the two objects. One was a small package, filled with tubes—twenty of them. Each tube consisted of a white paper tightly wrapped around some dark-brown shredded leaf. He shoved one out of the package and held it before the patient's face. The Earthman looked up at him apathetically. Gan suspected that he considered them fools, but his frozen face muscles were unable to mirror his thoughts.

Gan smelled the white tube. Acrid! In the flame it gave off a displeasing blue smoke. Still, everything had to be tested on the Earthman—that was part of his job.

He shoved it in the lax mouth as far as it would go. It came right out again, wilted with saliva.

"Can you hear me?" Gan asked routinely. No, it was obvious he'd misjudged the tube's purpose.

He fitted another one in the Earthman's ear. "Can you hear me?"

The Earthman looked annoyed. Gan shoved another tube in his other ear. "Can you hear me?"

The man lay there, a short white tube protruding from each ear. The Doctor would have sworn that his face reddened.

Gan removed the tubes and threw them away. The next object was marked in weird hieroglyphics *S-o-n-o-v-o-x* and had a trade-mark imprint of a tiny ear. Gan frowned at the indecipherable writing. He wished the code had been broken to interpret Earth's language, but there was really less need, now that the great Dr. Duk had extrapolated everything so well.

There were a tiny plug and a flat box, separated by a long wire. He studied the device. He looked down at the patient, whose eyes were wide open and fixed, a sure sign that Gan held his attention.

"Oh, come," Gan said aloud. "I can't stuff this device in your ear or your mouth."

He examined the box—a tiny battery set and what looked like an amplifier circuit.

Hm-mmmm . . .

He opened the Earthman's mouth and stuffed the battery in. That didn't set well with the patient and he quickly removed it. He put the plug in the man's mouth, from where it was immediately spat out.

Oh well—it couldn't have anything to do with hearing, because any fool knew you could hear better with your mouth open. At least Thurkians could, and Earthmen physically resembled Thurkians.

He tossed the object on the testing blanket and walked to the door, listening to sounds in the corridor. The Princess might well come to visit the last Earthman on his shift. Pray that she would!

He turned back. The Earthman was going crazy. For him, that meant his eyes were blinking a mile a minute. Gan had never seen him blink so fast, try so hard to catch the attendant's eye.

He must want the tubes back. Gan got the little white

tubes. His patient closed his eyes and imperceptibly dropped his head to one side—the way Gan himself did when he was disgusted with someone.

Gan held the device uncertainly over the Earthman.

The Earthman blinked like mad.

Gan shrugged and shoved the tiny plug in the man's ear. It fitted. So? Gan fiddled with the dial.

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me?"

Eyes open, mouth open, head imperceptibly nodding. It was the wildest, strongest reaction he'd ever seen the man make.

Gan felt an excited rush of pleasure. For a moment he forgot all about the events outside. This was the first real reaction anyone had ever gotten from the Earthman.

He leaned forward. "If you can hear me, close your right eye and blink it open again."

The man closed his left eye and blinked it open again.

The mute Earthman had got it backward. For the first time, Gan felt an uneasy doubt about the greatness of the Earthmen.

"If you can hear me, close your *left* eye and blink it open," he said.

The man blinked his right eye.

Something was radically wrong here. Still, the main problem was solved, wasn't it? If he chose to call left right and right left, it didn't matter so long as he was consistent.

But more was involved.

Gan sat in a chair. The old ache and throb were beginning to start again in his mind—the things he'd put behind him. The simplicity-to-complexity theory that had got him in trouble with Dr. Duk and the other scientists of Thurkos, destroyed his reputation, and turned him into an insignificant male nurse.

"Every intelligent person knows," Dr. Duk had said, "that the first axiom of matter is break-down. From complexity to simplicity. This is the way of the world. We are born with fully developed, complex organs. We evolve to a simpler form,

a lesser body, less well-developed organs. Eventually, we vanish spontaneously—that's total simplicity, or nothing."

Gan sighed. How true! Take numbers. You were born at seventy-seven or seventy-eight and aged until you were five or six. Complexity to simplicity. How could you deny it?

But once he had dared to deny it. Dr. Gan had postulated that there might also be a movement from simplicity to complexity. From, say, one to one hundred. From a person born as a simple-minded, tiny, underdeveloped body, aging to a complex old age with organs fully developed, and so on to death. This weird nonsense had got him thrown out of the Thurkian Academy of Science. It was just as well, he thought bitterly. For if, say, Earth happened to fall in the simplicity-to-complexity pattern that he postulated, instead of Duk's complexity to simplicity, then everything would have to be reversed.

Jesse H. Smith, for instance, instead of being born in 1953 and aging to 1883 in the normal greater-to-lesser ratio as ordained by nature, might have been born in 1883 and died in 1953, a lesser to a greater number.

On this basis, Earthmen would *not* be immortal, and . . .

Dr. Gan cringed. It was well that he had put all heresy behind him. It would completely upset not only Dr. Duk's great extrapolation of Earth, but would snatch immortality away from the Thurkians.

Still, it was odd that the patient didn't know his right side from his left. Gan would have to explore this. The next obvious question was to ask him in what direction the sun rose on Earth. It rose in the west, of course, and traveled to the east, where it set. If he should maintain that it rose in the east and traveled to the west . . .

Gan shuddered. In spite of himself, his mind began to extrapolate.

He forced himself back to the task at hand. In just a few seconds, he had jumped the gap of communication with his patient. These wonderful Earthmen had obviously designed a hearing aid that not only carried sound but was able to break

down the thought intent into different languages. Probably by co-ordinating like areas with like areas inside the brains of the people using it.

Gan munched on an Earth carrot, putting it carefully into his ear and biting simultaneously on his rubber eating disc, which was fitted into his mouth. His sharp, young teeth bit into the rubber eating disc and his jaw moved. The motion was translated to the inner ear, where his tiny, invisible real teeth rotated in sympathetic motion and chewed up the carrot.

He made a preswallow, and the carrot moved down his Eustachian tube to his mouth and the back of his throat, where the swallow proper could take place.

He gulped in satisfaction, remembering that the Earthman used his mouth directly for food and didn't eat with his ears at all. An insignificant difference, but there were many differences to be taken into consideration, he was beginning to think.

Dr. Gan bent close to the man's ear, now convinced of its function. At that moment the great interruption came.

An enormous crowd burst into the room. It was the great Dr. Duk along with the Princess of the People, the beautiful and glamorous Aza, smiling and charming as ever.

Princess Aza was a dreamy creature, with a milk-white complexion and long red hair. She always wore a look of mild surprise, which had carried her through many terms of office. One got the impression that, whatever was said to her, it was the first time she'd ever heard it. He noticed with sadness that she had aged. Now her breasts jutted firmly against her dress where, formerly, they had sagged entrancingly. Her stomach had lost its alluring bulge and was shrunken flat. Her hips were rounder, her legs had slimmed and turned in at the ankles. Her skin, formerly full of the carefree wrinkles and blotches of youth, was unlined, smooth and clear as a dowager's. Her eyes were no longer red-rimmed but showed white irises.

Instead of reminding Gan of the careless irresponsibility of

youth, she reminded him of sex, of alert physical hungers of old age.

She graciously blew in his ear, and he quivered at the perfumed smell of her and the affectionate feel of her being. He blew back gently and saw a shudder go over her figure. This ear-blowing rite could be dangerous in old age!

She graciously bent then and blew into the ear of the Earthman in tribute to his great race. But with the ear-thing in, he obviously couldn't feel it, so she leaned over to blow into his free ear.

The man opened his mouth and bit the soft skin of her throat. Not exactly bit, but pursed his lips and brought them away from her skin with a smacking sound.

The Thurkians looked at each other in horror and dismay.

Then the voice of the great Duk filled the room.

"We must remember that, on Earth, the inhabitants did not mean hatred as we do by mouth-pressing," he rumbled.

"Their mouth-pressing serves a different function. From several visual images I have found, it is apparent that this gesture is merely a method of recognizing relatives. Earthmen were a great and glorious race, but they must have had poor sense of sight, because they could not recognize their own intimates. They performed much mouth-pressing to see if the individual they bit at one day was the same one as they bit another day. We are fairly sure that they determined by the lip-feel whether or not they were related.

"This business occurred mostly between members of the opposite sexes. Apparently, it was a miserable and defeating function, of which they were ashamed, if the grimaces on their features before and after are to be accounted for. It seemed that this was the unhappiness of their lives, but each race has its weak spot."

There was spontaneous applause at this minor bit of extrapolation.

Gan remembered his own great days as an extrapolator and clapped, too. "Of course," he said aloud in his professional

tone, as the applause died, "this extrapolation doesn't account for the fact that the Earthman couldn't possibly be related to the Princess and therefore would have no motive whatsoever for the mouth-pressing on her throat."

The Thurkians shifted uncomfortably in an embarrassing silence. The Princess looked uneasily surprised. Dr. Duk, a tiny man—for he was older than Gan—stepped forward, weaving on the balls of his feet, and thrust his face at Gan.

"This discredited attendant," said Dr. Duk, "is full of much nonsense. I must point out that it is he who advanced the outrageous simplicity-to-complexity theory. Whereas *I* am the one who has extrapolated the great immortality of the Earthmen and am about to give this invaluable gift to our race. Tomorrow night, I am going to pregnate the Princess of the People and start the great rejuvenation of our race. In the face of all this, can we waste time listening to this pseudo scientist?"

The others clapped politely.

The Princess looked sympathetically at Gan. They had been classmates on Thurkos; she had been an ordinary student of politics then—they were lifelong friends.

"Still, it is odd that the Earthman mouth-pressed me," she said. "Perhaps Dr. Gan would care to extrapolate?"

All eyes in the room became fixed on him and he blushed. "I hardly need to do that, kind Princess. I have just discovered a device with which to communicate with the Earthman. We can ask him why."

There was a gasp around the room.

Dr. Duk stared down at the hearing device attached to the patient.

He made a quick examination and then turned to the people with a triumphant smile.

"This fool Gan," he said, "is trying to make the Earthman hear us through the *ear*. How stupid can you get? We are exactly like Earthmen, cell for cell; obviously, then, they listen just as we do, through the mouth and not through the ear. How could he hear through his ears—the ears we know are for eating?"

"The Earthman eats with his mouth," said Gan quietly.

Dr. Duk looked annoyed. "Folly and more folly!" he cried. "Of course, we all know that the Earthman takes food into his mouth, but we also know that it travels to his ear to be chewed. His ears move, as do ours, when he eats."

Duk then stared triumphantly around the room.

"Now, Princess," he said when there were no further challenges, "we must hurry, for there is much to be done before the ceremony tomorrow. The broadcast to Thurkos—the ceremonial arrival of the oldest Thurkian we are going to plant in your immortality. Let us leave this discredited man to his senile dreams."

Sadly, Gan watched them go. He sat down forlornly by the testing blanket and held his head in his hands. Again he had made a spectacle of himself!

Was it possible that the Thurkians didn't *want* to know the truth about Earthmen? Was it possible that, satisfied with Duk's extrapolation, they were fearful of its being upset?

He turned grimly to the patient. "Let us set up a code," he said through the ear-aid. "Blink one eye for yes, two blinks for no. Agreed?"

The Earthman blinked once.

"Blink both eyes at the same time for maybe—or I don't know!" he said. "Then we will set up the alphabet. Now, let's begin . . ."

The Earthman told him that he had kissed the Princess because it was a sign of affection.

Gan outlined the plans of the Thurkians, carefully explaining Dr. Duk's extrapolation. "Now," he asked, "is Duk correct?"

Two blinks—no.

Duk was wrong. Earthmen were not immortal. They lived from simplicity to complexity. Their so-called birthgrounds were actually graveyards.

Gan turned off the ear-aid, went to the window, and looked down on the moon-bathed gardens of the hospital. The Thurk-

ians had come so far in space, had hoped for so much! Now, only he knew that the great dream had become dust and ashes.

In the course of a career, a scientist extrapolated and then went into the lab and tried out his ideas. The few that were correct won fame, advanced the race. History was silent about those who were wrong. Truly, the truths of the Universe were almost unbearable.

Furthermore, the bearer of truth was often one who suffered. Gan remembered how Pod had received the double-T for exploding early notions of the humors and rightfully describing the circulation of the blood. Even earlier, there was Dr. Nok, who had received the double-T for overturning the favored idea that their planet Thurkos was the center of the Universe.

The double-T was a knife incision, deep down and crossways. One between the ribs near the heart, one in the abdomen. It was guaranteed to cause instant death, and the Thurkian vanished in the spontaneity of his life's end.

It was just barely possible that he, Gan, might receive the double-T for snatching the Duk extrapolation away from the people. On Thurkos there was much excitement; parades—speeches—wild riots of happiness, with the spontaneity of death finally overcome. Duk was a great national hero.

Yet the Princess Aza faced a horrible death under Duk's knife if Gan's interpretations of the Earthman's answers were right. He sighed. How could he let the Princess of the People die?

Gan checked out, turning his patient over to Mol. Instead of returning to his lonely tent at the edge of the hospital grounds, he sought out the great Dr. Duk, who lived in splendor on the tower floor of the remaining hospital wing.

Gan was surprised that Duk admitted him so quickly, but he came directly to the point. "It would be possible for me to keep my mouth closed, retain what position and salary I have, and let your erroneous extrapolation fall of its own weight," he said. "However, there is our Princess to think of. The patient

has given me the understanding that Earthmen are not immortal."

Duk smiled. "It is always a pleasure for one scientist to tell another he's a fool, eh, Gan? This is the real motive in coming here to see me, is it not?"

"The truth is always my study," sighed Gan.

Dr. Duk laughed and pulled a strange-looking machine over to the center of the room. "I now have evidence that my extrapolation *is* correct," he said. "It's so incontrovertible that even a dim-witted idiot such as yourself cannot deny it. It is the visual image, on a machine, made by the Earthmen themselves."

"The Princess is here," said an assistant.

"I have asked the Princess to see this proof," said Duk, "to set her completely at ease for tomorrow's experiment. You may as well stay."

The Princess came in and took a comfortable place, while Duk covered the preparations for the showing with a few remarks.

"I have now completed a comprehensive extrapolation of Earth's history. Like our own planet, Earth began as a marvelously complex association of humans known as a world-city. Then the world-city separated into world-countries during a war cycle, and continually divided into smaller and smaller units, as the Earthmen gave up complex machines and simplified their lives. They went through an industrial cycle and, disgusted with smoky and dirty cities, gave them up to live on farms and in tiny towns. They had internal combustion engines in their time, as we've had. From these, they progressed to horses, slowing the pace of their lives in order to relax from neurotic pressures.

"After that, they gave up great segments of land—whole continents—to nature and withdrew to one segment known as Europe.

"Ever flowering, they continued onward, giving up, over the centuries, mercantilism for religious monarchy, religious monarchy for feudal kingship. Large wars became small wars.

Complex weapons were succeeded by simple swords and battle-axes. Ever they developed to the seats of their civilizations which they called Rome and finally the apex, Greece.

"From this pinnacle, Man stared into great heights, as yet undreamed of. A whole globe covered with virginal growth. Massive animals, destined to grow tall enough to eat from treetops. Glaciers large enough to cover a third of their globe, to cool off the hot land . . .

"But this was the future they never reached. It is portrayed as constructed drawings in dreambooks of their future. Their own extrapolations. Somewhere, either slightly after a man called Einstein or slightly before a man called Homer, some radioactive disease came along which interrupted their normalcy. We do not yet know exactly where, in terms of their years, we are at this moment. But you can bank on its being in the period between those two men, and it makes not the slightest difference. Eventually I shall puzzle it all out."

Amid a polite scatter of applause, the man who worked on the strange machine now raised his hand as if ready.

"A sideline to their history was their pregnating," continued Dr. Duk. "Now, here is the actual proof of Man's immortality." He signaled an assistant, the lights dimmed, and the aliens watched a picture unreel on the white hospital walls.

It showed a masked man in white spanking a tiny, aged Earthman in an operating room. Then the man placed the little creature into the woman. Two men placed the woman on a portable bed and transported her to another room marked *Labor*, where she fussed and tossed. Then it showed her departure from the hospital with her smiling husband. It pictured her at home going about her daily tasks clumsily, with occasional visits to the doctor's office to see that the immortality went well. Eventually, the woman achieved her normal, slim figure and the film ended with the cessation of the human commentator's voice, which held no meaning for the Thurkians.

Dr. Duk sat back in pleasure as the lights came up again.

The assistant extrapolators all clapped, and the delighted Princess blew in his ear. They all filed out of the room.

Duk was the last to go, and he turned to Gan, who had remained seated. "As for your unmitigated, foul attempt to discredit me," he said, pausing at the door, "it is beneath my notice. I shall not press charges. You may return to your half-mad Earthman who, twisted by the years spent in his breathing machine, has become forgetful about his race's great destiny. You can trade your mad extrapolations with each other. The blind leading the blind! Good night, Dr. Gan."

Gan sighed. Duk might be right about the patient's madness. He hadn't thought of that.

Gan examined the projecting machine. The button had an arrow that pointed to the hieroglyphics *r-e-v-e-r-s-e*. He snapped the button and turned on the machine again. The film ran backward, this time starting with the girl having a slim figure and ending in the delivery room.

It made sense that way, too, he thought.

He was aware that someone else was in the room. A soft hand touched his arm.

"It's no use, dear friend," said Princess Aza. "I came back to tell you I was sorry that you had got the worst part of the argument. Now I, too, have seen the correct images."

"If Duk is wrong and this sequence is right, you know you die."

"I have thought of that. I have asked Dr. Duk to convince himself by speaking with the Earthman. But Duk is so seldom wrong that I am sure the Earthman is mad. No, tomorrow's ceremony must take place, for I dare let no other woman claim the honor ahead of me. But I thank you for worrying over me, dear friend."

They awoke Gan sometime in the middle of the night. It was Tok who was leaning over the cot in Gan's lonely tent, across the grounds from the hospital, in the space reserved for underlings.

Tok's face was anxious. "There's been a crisis at the hos-

pital. The Princess of the People wants to see you at once."

Gan hurried across the grass past the white markers of the Earthmen's birthplace for the second time within twenty-four hours. He found the Princess agitated.

"Our great Dr. Duk," she gasped. "He is dying. The Earthman—*he* was responsible. Please go there at once and see what it's all about. Everyone around me seems to have a different story, but I know I can trust you, old friend."

Gan hurried to the Earthman's room. A Thurkian blade protruded from the patient's chest in an incomplete double-T. The man's face was shiny with sweat. Gan realized at once that Earth's last survivor was going to die. He smiled weakly at Gan and made a friendly gesture with his finger.

Duk, he revealed—using the eye code with much prompting from Gan—had come to him and used the same code. Duk was under the impression that Gan was using the Earthman, and was worried that the last Earthman would accept the Gan extrapolation against the massive evidence of his own great work. And, since it worried the Princess of the People, Dr. Duk tried to force the patient to recant.

The Earthman had refused to support Dr. Duk and had insisted that Gan was right. Whereupon Duk had switched off the breathing apparatus of the patient's machine. Without his iron lung, he could not live more than a few moments. In fear of his life, writhing in suffocation, the Earthman had had to wink assent and Dr. Duk had turned on the machine again. But the patient had realized that Duk's intention—in his mistaken notion—to immortalize a great many Thurkians could end only in death and horror.

Therefore, he had asked Duk to bring a certain box of pills to him from the testing blanket. These pills, the Earthman had told Duk, were language pills. By taking them, Duk would instantly understand Earth's language and would be able to impress the people of Thurkos with his knowledge.

Duk gulped the pills greedily. They came in a box marked with the hieroglyphics *s-t-r-y-c-h-n-i-n-e*. Almost immediately Duk realized he'd been tricked. He barely had time to plunge

the knife into the human's chest before he had been overcome.

Grimly, Gan hurried to the Princess and told her of Duk's perfidy. He asked her to return with him to the patient's room, and they were at the door when Mol brought them word on Dr. Duk.

"He died," said Mol, "bravely. He disappeared in a genteel way, turning into a bright, pink cloud and atomizing with all of the dignity of his greatness. He will be long remembered."

"He will be remembered," said Gan.

Inside the room, they found a small group staring at the patient with awe.

"He has died," whispered Tok. "But see—watch what the machine does!"

The dead Earthman lay on the bed. Relays clicked, lights flashed. Presently, the complicated breathing apparatus was lifted away from the body.

"Now we shall see a strange thing," cried Tok. "Perhaps even the Earthman's immortality by machinery in some kind of special form."

"I doubt it," said Gan dryly.

One side of the bed rose. A container beneath the bed opened. Two metal arms of great size extended a box. The Thurkians gasped in wonder as the body slid from the bed and was gently lowered into the box, which had a plush interior and was six feet long, three feet wide. The lid closed and, with a great deal of decorum, the box disappeared through a trap door in the floor.

Gan turned to his fellow Thurkians. "This proves beyond a doubt my own extrapolation," he said. "That box called a coffin is now to be placed in what Dr. Duk erroneously called the birthgrounds, but which are really the graveyards of the Earthmen, signifying the end, not the beginning, of their lives. They lived from simplicity to complexity, after all, and, like us, didn't have immortality."

"It was a great thing to have held resolutely and firmly to your theory when all those around you jeered," said the Princess of the People. "It was a great thing to have stood against a man of Dr. Duk's reputation and won out in the end."

Gan waved a deprecatory hand. "More important, you, my dear Princess, are still living."

The Princess, as usual, looked surprised. But it was evident she had something else on her mind. "Speaking of resolutions," she said, "it is now my time to do service to Thurkos by marrying and having children."

Gan felt his heart beat faster.

"I have therefore appointed you Acting Chief Extrapolator of Thurkos, a position of prominence. And—if you care to—if you wish to—mate with a suitable Princess, I mean . . ."

The Princess blushed in confusion. They were standing on a hospital balcony under the soft, quiet moonlight of Earth.

Gan extrapolated rapidly and caught her meaning. "Princess," he said, gulping, "will you marry me?"

"Why, Gan!" she said, laughing in embarrassment. "Why, Gan, I didn't think you cared. Why—it is just possible that I will, though you catch me entirely by surprise."

He cut off her stammering with loving blows in her ear.

Then they faced each other, and the Thurkian Princess of the People, after making a ceremonious sign, turned her back and bent over. Gan kicked her.

And when she in turn had kicked him, it was formally sealed. There was no turning back now, for once the love-kick is placed, the couple are married. This Thurkian ritual establishes the tender, serious finale to courtship and the gateway to married life.

And the Moon shone on the white markers.

By Miriam Allen DeFord

THE EEL

He was intimately and unfavorably known everywhere in the Galaxy, but with special virulence on eight planets in three different solar systems. He was eagerly sought on each; they all wanted to try him and punish him—in each case, by their own laws and customs. This had been going on for 26 terrestrial years, which means from minus 10 to plus 280 in some of the others. The only place that didn't want him was Earth, his native planet, where he was too smart to operate—but, of course, the Galactic Police were looking for him there, too, to deliver him to the authorities of the other planets in accordance with the Interplanetary Constitution.

For all of those years, The Eel (which was his Earth moniker; elsewhere, he was known by names indicating equally squirmy and slimy life forms) had been gaily going his way, known under a dozen different aliases, turning up suddenly here, there, everywhere, committing his gigantic depredations, and disappearing as quickly and silently when his latest enterprise had succeeded. He specialized in enormous, unprecedented thefts. It was said that he despised stealing anything under the value of one hundred million terrestrial units, and most of his thefts were much larger than that.

He had no recognizable *modus operandi,* changing his methods with each new crime. He never left a clue. But, in

bravado, he signed his name to every job: his moniker flattered him, and after each malefaction the victim—usually a government agency, a giant corporation, or one of the clan enterprises of the smaller planets—would receive a message consisting merely of the impudent depiction of a large wriggling eel.

They got him at last, of course. The Galactic Police, like the prehistoric Royal Canadian Mounted, have the reputation of always catching their man. (Sometimes they don't catch him till he's dead, but they catch him.) It took them twenty-six years, and it was a hard job, for The Eel always worked alone and never talked afterward.

They did it by the herculean labor of investigating the source of the fortune of every inhabitant of Earth, since all that was known was that The Eel was a terrestrial. Every computer in the Federation worked overtime analyzing the data fed into it. It wasn't entirely a thankless task, for, as a by-product, a lot of embezzlers, tax evaders, and lesser robbers were turned up.

In the end, it narrowed down to one man who owned more than he could account for having. Even so, they almost lost him, for his takings were cached away under so many pseudonyms that it took several months just to establish that they all belonged to the same person. When that was settled, the police swooped. The Eel surrendered quietly; the one thing he had been surest of was never being apprehended, and he was so dumfounded that he was unable to put up any resistance.

And then came the still greater question: which of the planets was to have him?

Xystil said it had the first right because his theft there had been the largest—a sum so huge that it could be expressed only by an algebraic index. Artha's argument was that his first recorded crime had been on that planet. Medoris wanted him because its only penalty for any felony is an immediate and

rather horrible death and that would guarantee getting rid of The Eel forever.

Ceres put in a claim on the ground that it was the only planet or moon in the Sol System in which he had operated, and since he was a terrestrial, it was a matter for local jurisdiction. Eb pleaded that it was the newest and poorest member of the Galactic Federation and should have been protected in its inexperience against his thievishness.

Ha-Almirath argued that it had earned his custody because it was its chief ruler who had suggested to the police the method which had resulted in his arrest. Vavinour countered that it should be the chosen recipient, since the theft there had included desecration of the High Temple.

Little Agsk, which was only a probationary Galactic Associate, modestly said that if it were given The Eel, its prompt and exemplary punishment might qualify it for full membership, and it would be grateful for the chance.

A special meeting of the Galactic Council had to be called for the sole purpose of deciding who got The Eel.

Representatives of all the claimant planets made their representations. Each told in eloquent detail why his planet and his alone was entitled to custody of the archcriminal, and what his people would do to him when—not if—they got him. After they had all been heard, the councilors went into executive session, with press and public barred. An indiscreet councilor (it was O-Al of Phlagon of Altair, if you want to know) leaked later some of the rather indecorous proceedings.

The Earth councilor, he reported, had been granted a voice but no vote, since Earth was not an interested party as to the crime, but only as to the criminal. Every possible system of arbitration had been discussed—chronological, numerical in respect to the size of the theft, legalistic in respect to whether the culprit would be available to be handed on to another victim when the first had got through punishing him.

In the welter of claims and counterclaims, one harassed councilor wearily suggested a lottery. Another in desperation recommended handing The Eel a list of prospective pun-

ishments on each of the eight planets and observing which one seemed to inspire him with most dread—which would then be the one selected. One even proposed poisoning him and announcing his sudden collapse and death.

The sessions went on day and night; the exhausted councilors separated for brief periods of sleep, then went at it again. A hung jury was unthinkable; something had to be decided. The news outlets of the entire Galaxy were beginning to issue sarcastic editorials about procrastination and coddling criminals, with hints about bribery and corruption and remarks that perhaps what was needed was a few impeachments and a new general election.

So at last, in utter despair, they awarded The Eel to Agsk as a sort of bonus and incentive. Whichever planet they named, the other seven were going to scream to high heaven, and Agsk was least likely to be able to retaliate against any expressions of indignation.

Agskians, as everyone knows, are fairly humanoid beings, primitives from the outer edge of the Galaxy. They were like college freshmen invited to a senior fraternity. This was their Big Chance to Make Good.

The Eel, taciturn as ever, was delivered to a delegation of six of them sent to meet him in one of their lumbering spaceships, a low countergrav machine such as Earth had outgrown several millennia before. They were so afraid of losing him that they put a metal belt around him with six chains attached to it, and fastened all six of themselves to him. Once on Agsk, he was placed in a specially made stone pit, surrounded by guards and fed through the only opening.

In preparation for the influx of visitors to the trial, an anticipated greater assembly of off-planeters than little Agsk had ever seen, they evacuated their capital city temporarily, resettling all its citizens except those needed to serve and care for the guests, and remodeled the biggest houses for the accommodation of those who had peculiar space, shape, or other requirements.

Never since the Galactic Federation was founded had so many beings—human, humanoid, semihumanoid and non-humanoid—gathered at the same time on any one member planet. Every newstape, tridimens, audio, and all other varieties of information services—even including the drum amplifiers of Medoris and the ray-variants of Eb—applied for and were granted a place in the courtroom. This, because no other edifice was large enough, was an immense stone amphitheater usually devoted to rather curious games with animals; since it rains on Agsk only for two specified hours on every one of their days, no roof was needed. At every seat, there was a translatophone, with interpreters ready in plastic cages to translate the Intergalactic in which the trial was conducted into even the clicks and hisses of Jorg and the eyeflashes of Omonro.

And in the midst of all this, the cause and purpose of it all, sat the legendary Eel.

Seen at last, he was hardly an impressive figure. Time had been going on, and The Eel was in his fifties, bald and a trifle paunchy. He was completely ordinary in appearance, a circumstance which had, of course, enabled him to pass unobserved on so many planets; he looked like a salesman or a minor official and had indeed been so taken by the unnoticing inhabitants of innumerable planets.

People had wondered, when word came of some new outrage by this master thief, if perhaps he had disguised himself as a resident of the scene of each fresh crime, but now it was obvious that this had not been necessary. He had been too clever to pick any planet where visitors from Earth were not a common sight, and he had been too insignificant for anyone to pay attention to him.

The criminal code of Agsk is unique in the Galaxy, though there are rumors of something similar among a legendary extinct tribe on Earth called the Guanches. The high priest is also the chief executive (as well as the minister of educa-

tion and head of the medical faculty), and he rules jointly with a priestess, who also officiates as chief judge.

The Agskians have some strange ideas to a terrestrial eye—for example, suicide is an honor, and anyone of insufficient rank who commits it condemns his immediate family to punishment for his presumption. They are great family people, in general. Also, they never lie and find it hard to realize that other beings do.

Murder, to them, is merely a matter for negotiation between the murderer and the relatives of the victim, provided it is open and without deceit. But grand larceny, since property is the foundation of the family, is punished in a way that shows that the Agskians, though technologically primitive, are psychologically very advanced.

They reason that death, because it comes inevitably to all, is the least of misfortunes. Lasting grief, remorse, and guilt are the greatest. So they let the thief live and do not even imprison him.

Instead, they find out who it is that the criminal most loves. If they do not know who it is, they merely ask him, and since Agskians never lie, he always tells them. Then they seize that person and kill him or her, slowly and painfully, before the thief's eyes.

And the agreement had been that The Eel was to be tried and punished by the laws and customs of the planet to which he was awarded.

The actual trial and conviction of The Eel were almost perfunctory. Without needing to resort to torture, his jailers had been presented, on a platter as it were, with a full confession —so far as the particular robbery he had committed on Agsk was concerned. There is a provision for defense in the Agskian code, but it was unneeded because The Eel had pleaded guilty.

But he knew very well he would not be executed by the Agskians; he would instead be set free (presumably with a broken heart) to be handed over to the next claimant—and that, the Council had decided, would be Medoris. Since

Medoris always kills its criminals, that would end the whole controversy.

So The Eel was quite aware that his conviction by Agsk would be only the preliminary to an exquisitely painful and lingering demise at the two-clawed hands of the Medorans. His business was somehow to get out from under.

Naturally, the resources of the Galactic Police had been at the full disposal of the officials of Agsk.

The files had been opened, and the Agskians had before them The Eel's history back to the day of his birth. He himself had been questioned, encephalographed, hypnotized, dormitized, injected, psychographed, subjected to all means of eliciting information devised by all eight planets—for the other seven, once their first resentment was over, had reconciled themselves and co-operated wholeheartedly with Agsk.

Medoris especially had been of the greatest help. The Medorans could hardly wait.

In the spate of news of the trial that inundated every portion of the Galaxy, there began to be discovered a note of sympathy for this one little creature arrayed against the mightiest powers of the Galaxy. Poor people who wished they had his nerve, and romantic people who dreamed of adventures they would never dare perform, began to say that The Eel wasn't so bad after all; he became a symbol of the rebellious individual thumbing his nose at entrenched authority. Students of Earth prehistory will recognize such symbols in the mythical Robin Hood and Al Capone.

These were the people who were glad to put up when bets began to be made. At first the odds were ten to one against The Eel; then, as time dragged by, they dropped until it was even money.

Agsk itself began to be worried. It was one thing to make a big, expensive splurge to impress the Galaxy and to hasten its acceptance into full membership in the Federation, but nobody had expected the show to last more than a few days. If it kept on much longer, Agsk would be bankrupt.

For the trial had foundered on one insoluble problem: the only way The Eel could ever be punished by their laws was to kill the person he most loved—and nobody could discover that he had ever loved anybody.

His mother? His father? He had been an undutiful and unaffectionate son, and his parents were long since dead in any case. He had never had a brother, a sister, a wife, or a child. No probing could find any woman with whom he had ever been in love. He had never had an intimate friend.

He did nothing to help, naturally. He simply sat in his chains and smiled and waited. He was perfectly willing to be escorted from the court every evening, relieved of his fetters and placed in his pit. It was a much pleasanter existence than being executed inch by inch by the Medorans. For all he cared, the Agskians could go on spending their planetary income until he finally died of old age.

The priestess-judge and her coadjutors wore themselves out in discussions far into the night. They lost up to fifteen pounds apiece, which on Agsk, where the average weight of adults is about forty, was serious. It began to look as if The Eel's judges would predecease him.

Whom did The Eel love? They went into minutiae and subterfuges. He had never had a pet to which he was devoted. He had never even loved a house which could be razed. He could not be said to have loved the immense fortune he had stolen, for he had concealed his wealth and used little of it, and in any event it had all been confiscated and, so far as possible, restored proportionately to those he had robbed.

What he had loved most, doubtless, was his prowess in stealing unimaginable sums and getting away with it—but there is no way of "killing" a criminal technique.

Almost a year had passed. Agsk was beginning to wish The Eel had never been caught, or that they had never been awarded the glory of trying him.

At last the priestess-judge, in utter despair, took off her judge's robes, put on the cassock and surplice of her sacred

calling, and laid the problem before the most unapproachable and august of the gods of Agsk.

The trial was suspended while she lay for three days in a trance on the high altar. She emerged weak and tottering, her skin light blue instead of its healthy purple, but her head high and her mouth curved in triumph.

At sight of her, renewed excitement surged through the audience. Newsgatherers, who had been finding it difficult of late to get anything to report, rushed to their instruments.

"Remove the defendant's chains and set him free," the priestess-judge ordered in ringing tones. "The Great God of the Unspeakable Name has revealed to me whom the defendant most loves. As soon as he is freed, seize him and slay him. For the only being he loves is—himself."

There was an instant's silence, and then a roar. The Medorans howled in frustration.

But The Eel, still guarded but unchained, stood up and laughed aloud.

"Your Great God is a fool!" he said blasphemously. "I deny that I love myself. I care nothing for myself at all."

The priestess-judge sighed. "Since this is your sworn denial, it must be true," she said. So then we cannot kill you. Instead, we grant that you do indeed love no one. Therefore you are a creature so far outside our comprehension that you cannot come under our laws, no matter how you have broken them. We shall notify the Federation that we abandon our jurisdiction and hand you over to our sister planet, which is next in line to judge you."

Then all the viewers on tridimens on countless planets saw something that nobody had ever thought to see—The Eel's armor of self-confidence cracked and terror poured through the gap.

He dropped to his knees and cried: "Wait! Wait! I confess that I blasphemed your god, but without realizing that I did!"

"You mean," pressed the priestess-judge, "you acknowledge that you yourself are the only being dear to you?"

"No, not that, either. Until now, I have never known love.

But now it has come upon me like a nova, and I must speak the truth." He paused, still on his knees, and looked piteously at the priestess-judge. "Are—you bound by your law to—to believe me and to kill, instead of me, this—this being I adore?"

"We are so bound," she stated.

"Then," said The Eel, smiling and confident again, rising to his feet, "before all the Galaxy, I must declare the object of my sudden but everlasting passion. Great lady, it is you!"

The Eel is still in his pit, which has been made most comfortable by his sympathizers, while the Council of the Galactic Federation seeks feverishly and vainly, year after year, to find some legal way out of the impasse.

Agsk, however, requests all Federation citizens to submit solutions, the grand prize for a workable answer being a lifetime term as president of the planet. A secondary contest (prize: lifetime ambassadorship to the Galactic Federation) is offered for a legal way around the statute barring criminals (specifically The Eel) from entering the primary contest.

By William Morrison

A FEAST OF DEMONS

I

THAT year we were all Romans, and I have to tell you that I look awful in a toga and short sword, but not nearly as awful as the Greek.

You go to one of the big schools and naturally you turn out for the class reunion. Why not? There's money there, and good fellowship, and money, and the chance of a business contact that will do you some good. And money.

Well, I wasn't that fortunate—and you can say that again, because it's the story of my life: I wasn't that fortunate.

I didn't go to Harvard, Princeton, or Yale. I didn't even go to Columbia, U.C.L.A., or the University of Chicago. What I went to was Old Ugly. Don't lie to me—you never heard of Old Ugly, not even if I tell you it's Oglethorpe A. & M. There were fifty-eight of us in my graduating class—that's 1940—and exactly thirty turned up for the tenth reunion.

Wouldn't that turn your stomach? Only thirty old grads with enough loyalty and school feeling to show up for that tenth reunion and parade around in Roman togas and drink themselves silly and renew old school ties. And, out of that thirty, the ones that we all really wanted to see for senti-

mental reasons—I refer to Feinbarger of Feinbarger Shipping, Schroop of the S.S.K. Studios in Hollywood, Dixon of the National City Bank, and so on—they didn't show up at all. It was terribly disappointing to all of us, especially to me.

In fact, at the feast that evening, I found myself sitting next to El Greco. There simply wasn't anyone else there. You understand that I don't refer to that Spanish painter—I believe he's dead, as a matter of fact. I mean Theobald Greco, the one we called the Greek.

I introduced myself and he looked at me blearily through thick glasses. "Hampstead? Hampstead?"

"*Virgil* Hampstead," I reminded him. "You remember me. Old Virgie."

He said, "Sure. Any more of that stuff left in the bottle, Old Virgie?"

I poured for him. It was my impression, later borne out by evidence, that he was not accustomed to drinking.

I said, "It's sure great to see all the fellows again, isn't it? Say, look at Pudge Detweiler there! Ever see anything so comical as the lampshade he's wearing for a hat?"

"Just pass me the bottle, will you?" Greco requested. "Old Virgie, I mean."

"Still in research and that sort of thing?" I asked. "You always were a brain, Greek. I can't tell you how much I've envied you creative fellows. I'm in sales myself. Got a little territory right here that's a mint, Greek. A mint. If I only knew where I could lay my hands on a little capital to expand it the way—but I won't bore you with shoptalk. What's your line these days?"

"I'm in transmutation," he said clearly, and passed out face down on the table.

Now nobody ever called me a dope—other things, yes, but not a dope.

I knew what transmutation meant. Lead into gold, tin into platinum, all that line of goodies. And accordingly the next morning, after a certain amount of Bromo and black coffee, I

asked around the campus and found out that Greco had a place of his own not far from the campus. That explained why he'd turned up for the reunion. I'd been wondering.

I borrowed cab fare from Old Pudge Detweiler and headed for the address I'd been given.

It wasn't a home. It was a beat-up factory, and it had a sign over the door:

T. GRECO
Plant Foods & Organic Supplies

Since it was Sunday, nobody seemed to be there, but I pushed open the door. It wasn't locked. I heard something from the basement, so I walked down a flight of steps and looked out into a rather smelly laboratory.

There was the Greek. Tall, thin, wild-eyed, and staggering, he appeared to be chasing butterflies.

I cleared my throat, but he didn't hear me. He was racing around the laboratory, gasping and muttering to himself, sweeping at empty air with what looked to me like an electric toaster on a stick. I looked again and, no, it wasn't an electric toaster; but exactly what it *was* defied me. It appeared to have a recording scale on the side of it, with a needle that flickered wildly.

I couldn't see what he was chasing.

The fact was that, as far as I could see, he wasn't chasing anything at all.

You have to get the picture: here was Greco, racing around with one eye on the scale and one eye on thin air; he kept bumping into things, and every now and then he'd stop and stare around at the gadgets on the lab benches, and maybe he'd throw a switch or turn a dial, and then he'd be off again.

He kept it up for ten minutes and, to tell you the truth, I began to wish that I'd made some better use of Pudge Detweiler's cab fare. The Greek looked as though he'd flipped, nothing less.

But there I was. So I waited.

And by and by he seemed to get whatever it was he was looking for, and he stopped, breathing heavily.

I said, "Hi, there, Greek."

He looked up sharply. "Oh," he said, "Old Virgie."

He slumped back against a table, trying to catch his breath.

"The little devils," he panted. "They must have thought they'd got away that time. But I fixed them!"

"Sure you did," I said. "You bet you did. Mind if I come in?"

He shrugged. Ignoring me, he put down the toaster on a stick, flipped some switches, and stood up. A whining sound dwindled and disappeared; some flickering lights went out. Others remained on, but he seemed to feel that, whatever it was he was doing, it didn't require his attention now.

In his own good time, he came over and we shook hands. I said appreciatively, "Nice-looking laboratory you have here, Greek. I don't know what the stuff is for, but it looks expen—it looks very efficient."

He grunted. "It is. Both. Expensive and efficient."

I laughed. "Say," I said, "you were pretty loaded last night. Know what you told me you were doing here?"

He looked up quickly. "What?"

"You said you were in transmutation." I laughed harder than ever.

He stared at me thoughtfully, and for a second I thought —well, I don't know what I thought, but I was worried. He had a lot of funny-looking things there, and his hand was stretching out toward one of them.

But then he said, "Old Virgie."

"That's me," I said eagerly.

"I owe you an apology," he went on.

"You do?"

He nodded. "I'd forgotten," he confessed, ashamed. "I didn't remember until just this minute that you were the one I talked to in my senior year. My only confidant. And you've kept my secret all this time."

I coughed. "It was nothing," I said largely. "Don't give it a thought."

He nodded in appreciation. "That's just like you," he reminisced. "Ten years, eh? And you haven't breathed a word, have you?"

"Not a word," I assured him. And it was no more than the truth. I hadn't said a word to anybody. I hadn't even said a word to myself. The fact of the matter was, I had completely forgotten what he was talking about. Kept his secret? I didn't even *remember* his secret. And it was driving me nuts!

"I was sure of you," he said, suddenly thawing. "I knew I could trust you. I must have—otherwise I certainly wouldn't have told you, would I?"

I smiled modestly. But inside I was fiercely cudgeling my brain.

He said suddenly, "All right, Virgie. You're entitled to something for having kept faith. I tell you what I'll do—I'll let you in on what I'm doing here."

All at once, the little muscles at the back of my neck began to tense up.

He would do *what*? "Let me in" on something? It was an unpleasantly familiar phrase. I had used it myself all too often.

"To begin with," said the Greek, focusing attentively on me, "you wonder, perhaps, what I was doing when you came in."

"I do," I said.

He hesitated. "Certain—particles, which are of importance to my research, have a tendency to go free. I can keep them under a measure of control only by means of electrostatic forces, generated in this." He waved the thing that looked like a toaster on a stick. "And as for what they do—well, watch."

El Greco began to putter with gleamy, glassy gadgets on one of the tables, and I watched him with, I admit, a certain amount of suspicion.

"What are you doing, Greek?" I asked pretty bluntly.

He looked up. Surprisingly, I saw that the suspicion was

mutual; he frowned and hesitated. Then he shook his head.

"No," he said. "For a minute I—but I can trust you, can't I? The man who kept my secret for ten long years."

"Of course," I said.

"All right." He poured water out of a beaker into a U-shaped tube, open at both ends. "Watch," he said. "Remember any of your college physics?"

"The way things go, I haven't had much time to keep up with—"

"All the better, all the better," he said. "Then you won't be able to steal anything."

I caught my breath. "Now *listen*—"

"No offense, Virgie," he said earnestly. "But this is a billion dollars and—no matter. When it comes right down to cases, you could know as much as all those fool professors of ours put together and it still wouldn't help you steal a thing."

He bobbed his head, smiled absently, and went back to his gleamy gadgets. I tell you, I *steamed.* That settled it, as far as I was concerned. There was simply no excuse for such unjustified insults to my character. I certainly had no intention of attempting to take any unfair advantage, but if he was going to act that way . . .

He was asking for it. Actually and literally asking for it.

He rapped sharply on the U tube with a glass stirring rod, seeking my attention.

"I'm watching," I told him, very amiable now that he'd made up my mind for me.

"Good. Now," he said, "you know what I do here in the plant?"

"Why—you make fertilizer. It says so on the sign."

"Ha! No," he said. "That is a blind. What I do is, I separate optical isomers."

"That's very nice," I said warmly. "I'm glad to hear it, Greek."

"Shut up," he retorted unexpectedly. "You don't have the foggiest notion of what an optical isomer is and you know it. But try and think. This isn't physics; it's organic chemistry.

There are compounds that exist in two forms—apparently identical in all respects, except that one is the mirror image of the other. Like right-hand and left-hand gloves; one is the other, turned backwards. You understand so far?"

"Of course," I said.

He looked at me thoughtfully, then shrugged. "No matter. They're called d- and l-isomers—d for dextro, l for levo; right and left, you see. And although they're identical except for being mirror-reversed, it so happens that sometimes one isomer is worth much more than the other."

"I see that," I said.

"I thought you would. Well, they can be separated—but it's expensive. Not my way, though. My way is quick and simple. I use demons."

"Oh, now, Greek. *Really.*"

He said in a weary tone, "Don't talk, Virgie. Just listen. It won't tire you so much. But bear in mind that this is simply the most trifling application of my discovery. I could use it for separating U-235 from U-238 just as easily. In fact, I already——" He stopped in midsentence, cocked his head, looked at me, and backtracked. "Never mind that. But you know what a Maxwell demon is?"

"No."

"Good for you, Virgie. Good for you!" he applauded. "I knew I'd get the truth out of you if I waited long enough." *Another* ambiguous remark, I thought to myself. "But you surely know the second law of thermodynamics."

"Surely."

"I thought you'd say that," he said gravely. "So then you know that if you put an ice cube in a glass of warm water, for instance, the ice melts, the water cools, and you get a glass with no ice but with all the water lowered in temperature. Right? And it's a one-way process. That is, you can't start with a glass of cool water and, hocus-pocus, get it to separate into warm water and ice cube, right?"

"Naturally," I said, "for heaven's sake. I mean that's silly."

"*Very* silly," he agreed. "You know it yourself, eh? So watch."

He didn't say hocus-pocus. But he did adjust something on one of his gadgets.

There was a faint whine and a gurgling, spluttering sound, like fat sparks climbing between spreading electrodes in a Frankenstein movie.

The water began to steam faintly.

But only at one end! That end was steam; the other was—was—

It was ice. A thin skin formed rapidly, grew thicker; the other open end of the U tube began to bubble violently. Ice at one end, steam at the other.

Silly?

But I was seeing it!

I must say, however, that at the time I didn't really know that that was all I saw.

The reason for this is that Pudge Detweiler came groaning down the steps to the laboratory just then.

"Ah, Greek," he wheezed. "Ah, Virgie. I wanted to talk to you before I left." He came into the room and, panting, eased himself into a chair, a tired hippopotamus with a hangover.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Greco demanded.

"You?" Pudge's glance wandered around the room; it was a look of amused distaste, the look of a grown man observing the smudgy mud play of children. "Oh, not you, Greek. I wanted to talk to Virgie. That sales territory you mentioned, Virgie. I've been thinking. I don't know if you're aware of it, but when my father passed away last winter, he left me—well, with certain responsibilities. And it occurred to me that you might be willing to let me invest some of the—"

I didn't even let him finish. I had him out of there so fast, we didn't even have a chance to say good-by to Greco. And all that stuff about demons and hot-and-cold water and so on,

it all went out of my head as though it had never been. Old Pudge Detweiler! How was *I* to know that his father had left him thirty thousand dollars in one attractive lump of cash!

II

Well, there were business reverses. Due to the reverses, I was forced to miss the next few reunions. But I had a lot of time to think and study, in between times at the farm and the shop where we stamped out license plates for the state.

When I got out, I began looking for El Greco.

I spent six months at it, and I didn't have any luck at all. El Greco had moved his laboratory and left no forwarding address.

But I wanted to find him. I wanted it so badly, I could taste it, because I had begun to have some idea of what he was talking about, and so I kept on looking.

I never did find him, though. He found me.

He came walking in on me in a shabby little hotel room, and I hardly recognized him, he looked so prosperous and healthy.

"You're looking just great, Greek," I said enthusiastically, seeing it was true. The years hadn't added a pound or a wrinkle—just the reverse, in fact.

"You're not looking so bad yourself," he said, and gazed at me sharply. "Especially for a man not long out of prison."

"Oh." I cleared my throat. "You know about that."

"I heard that Pudge Detweiler prosecuted."

"I see." I got up and began uncluttering a chair. "Well," I said, "it's certainly good to—how did you find me?"

"Detectives. Money buys a lot of help. I've got a lot of money."

"Oh." I cleared my throat again.

Greco looked at me, nodding thoughtfully to himself. There was one good thing; maybe he knew about my trouble with Pudge, but he also had gone out of his way to find me. So *he* wanted something out of *me*.

He said suddenly, "Virgie, you were a damned fool."

"I was," I admitted honestly. "Worse than you know. But I am no longer. Greek, old boy, all this stuff you told me about those demons got me interested. I had plenty of time for reading in prison. You won't find me as ignorant as I was the last time we talked."

He laughed sourly. "That's a hot one. Four years of college leave you as ignorant as the day you went in, but a couple years of jail make you an educated man."

"Also a reformed one."

He said mildly, "Not too reformed, I hope."

"Crime doesn't pay—except when it's within the law. That's the chief thing I learned."

"Even then it doesn't pay," he said moodily. "Except in money, of course. But what's the use of money?"

There wasn't anything to say to *that*. I said, probing delicately, "I figured you were loaded. If you can use your demons to separate U-235 from U-238, you can use them for separating gold from sea water. You can use them for damn near anything."

"Damn near," he concurred. "Virgie, you may be of some help to me. Obviously you've been reading up on Maxwell."

"Obviously."

It was the simple truth. I had got a lot of use out of the prison library—even to the point of learning all there was to learn about Clerk Maxwell, one of the greatest of physicists, and his little demons. I had rehearsed it thoroughly for El Greco.

"Suppose," I said, "that you had a little compartment inside a pipe of flowing gas or liquid. That's what Maxwell said. Suppose the compartment had a little door that allowed molecules to enter or leave. You station a demon—that's what Maxie called them himself—at the door. The demon sees a hot molecule coming; he opens the door. He sees a cold one; he closes it. By and by, just like that, all the hot molecules are on one side of the door, all the cold ones—the slow ones,

that is—on the other. Steam on one side, ice on the other, that's what it comes down to."

"That was what you saw with your own eyes," Theobald Greco reminded me.

"I admit it," I said. "And I admit I didn't understand. But I do now."

I understood plenty. Separate isotopes—separate elements, for that matter. Let your demon open the door to platinum, close it to lead. He could make you rich in no time.

He had, in fact, done just that for Greco.

Greco said, "Here. First installment." He pulled something out of his pocket and handed it to me. It was metallic—about the size of a penny slot machine bar of chocolate, if you remember back that far. It gleamed and it glittered. And it was ruddy yellow in color.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Gold," he said. "Keep it, Virgie. It came out of sea water, like you said. Call it the down payment on your salary."

I hefted it. I bit it. I said, "By the way, speaking of salary . . ."

"Whatever you like," he said wearily. "A million dollars a year? Why not?"

"Why not?" I echoed, a little dazed.

And then I just sat there listening, while he talked. What else was there to do? I won't even say that I was listening, at least not with the very fullest of attention, because that thought of a million dollars a year kept coming between me and his words. But I got the picture. The possibilities were endless. And how well I knew it!

Gold from the sea, sure. But energy—free energy—it was there for the taking. From the molecules of the air, for instance. Refrigerators could be cooled, boilers could get up steam, homes could be heated, forges could be fired—and all without fuel. Planes could fly through the air without a drop of gasoline in their tanks. Anything.

A million dollars a year . . .

And it was only the beginning.

I came to. "What?"

He was looking at me. He repeated patiently, "The police are looking for me."

I stared. "*You?*"

"Did you hear about Grand Rapids?"

I thought. "Oh—wait. A fire. A big one. And that was you?"

"Not me. My demons. Maxwell demons—or Greco demons, they should be called. He talked about them; I use them. When they're not using me. This time, they burned down half the city."

"I remember now," I said. The papers had been full of it.

"They got loose," he said grimly. "But that's not the worst. You'll have to earn your million a year, Virgie."

"What do you mean, they got loose?"

He shrugged. "Controls aren't perfect. Sometimes the demons escape. I can't help it."

"How do you control them in the first place?"

He sighed. "It isn't really what you would call controls," he said. "It's just the best I can do to keep them from spreading."

"But—you said sometimes you separate metals, sometimes you get energy. How do the demons know which you want them to do, if you say you can't control them?"

"How do you make an apple tree understand whether you want it to grow Baldwins or McIntoshes?"

I gawked at him. "Why—but you don't, Greek! I mean, it's either one or the other!"

"Just so with demons! You're not so stupid after all, are you? It's like improving the breed of dogs. You take a common ancestral mutt, and generations later you can develop an Airedale, a dachshund, or a spitz. How? By selection. My demon entities grow, they split, the new entities adapt themselves to new conditions. There's a process of evolution. I help it along, that's all."

He took the little slab of gold from me, brooding.

Abruptly he hurled it at the wall. "Gold!" he cried wildly.

"But who wants it? I need *help*, Virgie! If gold will buy it from you, I'll pay! But I'm desperate. You'd be desperate, too, with nothing ahead but a sordid, demeaning death from young age and a—"

I interrupted him. "What's that?"

It was a nearby raucous hooting, loud and mournful.

Greco stopped in midsentence, listening like a hunted creature. "My room," he whispered. "All my equipment—on the floor above——"

I stepped back, a little worried. He was a strange man, skinny and tall and wild-eyed. I was glad he was so thin; if he'd been built solidly in proportion to his height, just then he would have worried me, with those staring, frightened eyes and that crazy way of talking. But I didn't have time to worry, in any case. Footsteps were thundering in the halls. Distant voices shouted to each other.

The hoot came again.

"The fire whistle!" Greco bayed. "The hotel's on fire!"

He leaped out of my room into the corridor.

I followed. There was a smell of burning—not autumn leaves or paper; it was a chemical-burning smell, a leather-burning smell, a henyard-on-fire smell. It reeked of an assortment of things, gunpowder and charred feathers, the choking soot of burning oil, the crisp tang of a wood fire. It was, I thought for a second, perhaps the typical smell of a hotel on fire, but in that I was wrong.

"Demons!" yelled Greco, and a bellhop, hurrying by, paused to look at us queerly. Greco sped for the stairs and up them.

I followed.

It was Greco's room that was ablaze—he made that clear, trying to get into it. But he couldn't. Black smoke billowed out of it, and orange flame. The night manager's water bucket was going to make no headway against *that*.

I retreated. But Greco plunged ahead, his face white and scary.

I stopped at the head of the stairs. The flames drove Greco

off, but he tried again. They drove him off again, and this time for good.

He stumbled toward me. "Out! It's hopeless!" He turned, stared blindly at the hotel employees with their chain of buckets. "You! What do you think you're doing? That's——" He stopped, wetting his lips. "That's a gasoline fire," he lied, "and there's dynamite in my luggage. Clear the hotel, you hear me?"

It was, as I say, a lie. But it got the hotel cleared out.

And then——

It might as well have been gasoline and dynamite. There was a purplish flash and a muttering boom, and the whole roof of the four-story building lifted off.

I caught his arm.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

He looked at me blindly. I'd swear he didn't know me. His eyes were tortured.

"Too late!" he croaked. "Too late! They're free again!"

III

So I went to work for Theobald Greco—in his laboratory in Southern California, where he replaced some of the things that had been destroyed.

And one morning I woke up and found my hair was white.

I cried, "Greek!"

Minnie came running in. I don't believe I told you about Minnie. She was Greco's idea of the perfect laboratory assistant—stupid, old, worthless to the world, and without visible kin. She came in and stared and set up a cackling that would wake the dead.

"Mr. Hampstead!" she chortled. "My, but ain't you a sight!"

"Where's Greco?" I demanded, and pushed her out of my way.

In pajamas and bathrobe, I stalked down the stairs and into the room that had once been a kitchen and now was Greco's laboratory.

"Look!" I yelled. "What about *this?*"

He turned to look at me.

After a long moment, he shook his head.

"I was afraid of that," he mumbled. "You were a towhead as a kid, weren't you? And now you're a towhead again."

"But my hair, Greek! It's turned *white.*"

"Not white," he corrected despondently. "Yellow. It's reverted to youth—overnight, the way it happens sometimes. I warned you, Virgie. I told you there were dangers. Now you know. Because—"

He hesitated, looked at me, then looked away.

"Because," he said, "you're getting younger, just like me. If we don't get this thing straightened out, you're going to die of young age yourself."

I stared at him. "You said that before, about yourself. I thought you'd just tongue-twisted. But you really mean—"

"Sit down," he ordered. "Virgie, I told you that you were looking younger. It wasn't just looks. It's the demons—and not just you and me, but a lot of people. First Grand Rapids. Then when the hotel burned. Plenty have been exposed—you more than most, I guess, ever since the day you walked into my lab and I was trying to recapture some that had got away. Well, I don't guess I recaptured them all."

"You mean *I*—"

He nodded. "Some of the demons make people younger. And you've got a colony of them in you."

I swallowed and sat down. "You mean I'm going to get younger and younger, until finally I become a baby? And then—what then, Greek?"

He shrugged. "How do I know? Ask me in another ten years. *Look at me, Virgie!*" he cried, suddenly loud. "How old do I look to you? Eighteen? Twenty?"

It was the plain truth. He looked no more than that. Seeing him day by day, I wasn't conscious of change; remembering him from when we had gone to school, I thought of him as

younger anyway. But he was forty, at the very least, and he didn't look old enough to vote.

He said, "I've had demons inside of me for six years. It seems they're a bit choosy about where they'll live. They don't inhabit the whole body, just parts of it—heart, lungs, liver. Maybe bones. Maybe some of the glands—perhaps that's why I feel so chipper physically. But not my brain, or not yet. Fortunately."

"Fortunately? But that's wrong, Greek! If your brain grew younger, too—"

"Fool! If I had a young brain, I'd forget everything I learned, like unrolling a tape backwards! That's the danger, Virgie, the immediate danger that's pressing me—that's why I needed help! Because if I ever forget, that's the end. Not just for me—for everybody; because there's no one else in the world who knows how to control these things at all. Except me—and you, if I can train you."

"They're loose?" I felt my hair wonderingly. Still, it was not exactly a surprise. "How many?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. When they let the first batch of rabbits loose in Australia, did they have any idea how many there would be a couple of dozen generations later?"

I whistled. Minnie popped her head in the door and giggled. I waved her away.

"She could use some of your demons," I remarked. "Sometimes I think she has awfully young ideas for a woman who's sixty if she's a day."

Greco laughed crazily. "Minnie? She's been working for me for a year. And she was eighty-five when I hired her!"

"I can't believe you!"

"Then you'll have to start practicing right now," he said.

It was tough, and no fooling; but I became convinced. It wasn't the million dollars a year any more.

It was the thought of ending my days as a drooling, mewling infant—or worse! To avert that, I was willing to work my brain to a shred.

First it was a matter of learning—learning about the "strange particles." Ever hear of them? That's not my term—that's what the physicists call them. Positrons. The neutrino. Pions and muons, plus and minus; the lambda and the anti-lambda. K particles, positive and negative, and antiprotons and antineutrons and sigmas, positive, negative, and neutral, and—

Well, that's enough; but physics had come a long way since the classes I cut at Old Ugly, and there was a lot to catch up on.

The thing was, some of the "strange particles" were stranger than even most physicists knew. Some—in combination—were, in fact, Greco's demons.

We bought animals—mice, rabbits, guinea pigs, even dogs. We infected the young with some of our own demons—that was simple enough, frighteningly simple; all we had to do was handle them a bit. And we watched what happened.

They died—of young age.

Some vital organ or another regressed to embryonic condition, and they died—as Greco and I would die, if we didn't find the answer. As the whole world might die. Was it better than reverting past the embryo to the simple lifeless zygote? I couldn't decide. It was dying, all the same. When an embryonic heart or liver is called on to do a job for a mature organism, there is only one way out. Death.

And after death—the demons went on; the dog we fed on the remains of the guinea pigs followed them to extinction in a matter of weeks.

Minnie was an interesting case.

She was going about her work with more energy every day, and I'll be blasted if I didn't catch her casting a lingering Marilyn Monroe sort of look at me when Greco's back was turned.

"Shall we fire her?" I asked El Greco when I told him about it.

"What for?"

"She's disrupting the work!"

"The work isn't worth a damn anyhow," he said moodily. "We're not getting anywhere, Virgie. If it was only a matter of smooth, predictable rates—but look at her. She's picking up speed! She's dropped five years in the past couple weeks."

"She can stand to drop a lot more," I said, annoyed.

He shrugged. "It depends on where. Her nose? It's shortened to about a fifteen-year-old level now. Facial hair? That's mostly gone. Skin texture? Well, I suppose there's no such thing as a too immature skin, I mean short of the embryonic capsule, but—wait a minute."

He was staring at the doorway.

Minnie was standing there, simpering.

"Come here!" he ordered in a voice like thunder. "Come here, you! Virgie, look at her nose!"

I looked. "Ugh," I said, but more or less under my breath.

"No, no!" cried Greco. "Virgie, don't you see her *nose!*" Foolish; of course I did. It was long, beaked—

Then I saw.

"It's growing longer," I whispered.

"Right, my boy! Right! One curve at least has reversed itself. Do you see, Virgie?"

I nodded. "She's—she's beginning to age again."

"Better than that!" he crowed. "It's faster than normal aging, Virgie! *There are aging demons loose, too!*"

A breath of hope!

But hope died. Sure, he was right—as far as it went.

There *were* aging demons. We isolated them in some of our experimental animals. First we had to lure Minnie into standing still while Greco, swearing horribly, took a tissue sample; she didn't like that, but a hundred-dollar bonus converted her. Solid CO_2 froze the skin; *snip,* and a tiny flake of flesh came out of her nose at the point of Greco's scalpel; he put the sample of flesh through a few tricks and, at the end of the day, we tried it on some of our mice.

They died.

Well, it was gratifying, in a way—they died of old age. But

die they did. It took three days to show an effect, but when it came, it was dramatic. These were young adult mice, in the full flush of their mousehood, but when these new demons got to work on them, they suddenly developed a frowsy, decrepit appearance that made them look like Bowery bums over whom Cinderella's good fairy had waved her wand in reverse. And two days later they were dead.

"I think we've got something," said Greco thoughtfully; but I didn't think so, and I was right. Dead was dead. We could kill the animals by making them too young. We could kill the animals by making them too old. But keep them alive, once the demons were in them, we could not.

Greco evolved a plan: mix the two breeds of demons! Take an animal with the young-age demons already in it, then add a batch that worked in the other direction!

For a while, it seemed to work—but only for a while. After a couple of weeks, one breed or the other would gain the upper hand. And the animals died.

It was fast in mice, slow in humans. Minnie stayed alive. But the nose grew longer and facial hair reappeared; simultaneously her complexion cleared, her posture straightened.

And then, for the first time, we began to read the papers.

STRANGE PLAGUE
STRIKES ELGIN

bawled the Chicago *Tribune,* and went on to tell how the suburbs around Elgin, Illinois, were heavily infested with a curious new malady, the symptoms of which were—youth.

OAKLAND "BABY-SKIN"
TOLL PASSES 10,000

blared the San Francisco *Examiner.* The New York *News* found thousands of cases in Brooklyn. A whole hospital in Dallas was evacuated to make room for victims of the new plague.

And more.

We looked at each other.

"They're out in force," said Theobald Greco soberly. "And we don't have the cure."

IV

The world was topsy-turvy, and in the middle of it Minnie disappeared, talking hysterically about reporting us to the authorities. I don't mind admitting that I was worried.

And the experiments were not progressing. The trouble seemed to be that the two varieties of demons—the aging and the youthing—were not compatible; if one took up residence in a given section of an organism, the other moved out. The more numerous destroyed the weaker; there was no balance. We tested it again and again in the mice and there was no doubt of it.

So far, only the youthing demons were free. But when Minnie left us, it was only a matter of time. Our carriers—from Grand Rapids and from the hotel—had spread to California and the East Coast, to the North and to the South, throughout the country, perhaps by now through the world. It would be slower with the aging demons—there was only one of Minnie—but it would be equally sure.

Greco began drinking heavily.

"It's the end," he brooded. "We're licked."

"No, Greek! We can't give up!"

"We *have* to give up. The demons are loose in the Earth, Virgie! Those people in the headlines—they'll die of young age. So will others—even plants and animals and bacteria, as the demons adapt to them. And then—why not? The air. The rocks, the ocean, even the Earth itself. Remember, the entropy of the Universe is supposed to tend to a maximum not only as a whole, but in each of its parts taken in isolation. The Earth's evolution—reversed. Spottily, and maybe that's worse, because some parts will evolve forward and others reverse, as is happening in my own body. Heaven help the world, Old Virgie! And not just the Earth, because what can stop them

from spreading? To the Moon, the other planets—out of the Solar System, for that matter; to the other galaxies, even. Why not? And then—"

"GRECO."

An enormous tinny voice, more than human, filled the air. It came from outside.

I jumped a foot. It sounded like the voice of a demon; then I got a grip on myself and understood. It was a loud-speaker, and it came from outside.

"GRECO. WE KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE. COME ON OUT!"

I had a stabbing sensation of familiarity. "The police!" I cried. "Greco, it's the police!"

He looked at me wearily and shook his head.

"No. More likely the FBI."

Well, that was it. I got out—I didn't wait for permission from the Greek.

I stopped at the door, and three searchlight beams hit me right in the eye. There were cars all around the laboratory, but I couldn't see them, not after those lights went on.

I froze, stiff; wanting to make sure they understood (a) that I wasn't Greco and (b) that I didn't have a gun.

They understood, all right.

But they let me out.

They put me in one of the cars, with a slim gray-eyed young man in a snap-brimmed hat sitting politely and alertly beside me, and they let me watch; and what happened after that wasn't funny at all.

Greco didn't come out. They shouted at him over the loud-speaker and eventually he answered—his voice little and calm, coming out of nowhere—and all he said was, "Go away. I won't come out. I warn you, don't try to force your way in."

But he knew they wouldn't listen, of course.

They didn't.

They tried force.

And he met it in novel ways with force of his own. The

door had locked itself behind me; they got a fence post for a battering ram, and the post burst into flame. They found an L beam from an old bed frame and tried that, and they were sorry they had done it; the thing melted in the middle, splattering them with hot drops of steel.

The polite, alert young man beside me said, not so polite any more, "What's he doing, you? What sort of fancy tricks has he got in there?"

"Demons," I said crazily, and *that* was a mistake, but what else was I to do? Try to explain Maxwell's equations to a Fed?

They were trying again—there were fifteen or twenty of them, at least. They went for the windows, and the windows dissolved and rained cherry-red wet glass on them. They tried again through the open frames when the glass was gone, and the frames burst into fire around them, the blue smoke bleached white in the yellow of the flame and the white of the searchlights. They tried singly, by stealth; and they tried in clusters of a dozen, yelling.

It was hopeless—hopeless for everybody, because they couldn't get in and the Greek could never, never get out; for go away they wouldn't. Not even when, with a *poof* and a yellow flare, the gas tank of one of the cars exploded. All that happened was that the man in the snap-brimmed hat and I leaped out, real quick; and then all the cars went up. But the men didn't leave. And then the guns began to go off without waiting for anyone to pull the trigger; and the barrels softened and slumped and spattered to the ground. But the men still had bare hands, and they stayed.

The Greek got wild—or lost control. It was hard to tell which. There was a sudden catastrophic *whooshing* roar and, *wham,* a tree took flame for roots. A giant old oak, fifty feet tall—I guess it had been there a couple of centuries. But Greco's demons changed all that; it took flame and shot whistling into the air, spouting flame and spark like a roman candle. Maybe he thought it would scare them. Maybe it did. But it also made them mad. And they ran, all at once, every one of

them but my personal friend, for the biggest, openest of the windows—

And leaped back, cursing and yelling, beating out flames on their clothes.

Jets of flame leaped out of every window and door. The old building seemed to bulge outward and go *voom*. In half a second, it was a single leaping tulip of fire.

The firemen got there then, but it was a little late. Oh, they got Greco out—alive, even. But they didn't save a bit of the laboratory. It was the third fire in Greco's career, and the most dangerous—for where previously only a few of the youthing demons had escaped, now there were vast quantities of both sorts.

It was the end of the world.

I knew it.

You know, I wish I had been right. I spent yesterday with Greco. He's married now and has a fine young son. They made an attractive family picture, the two healthy-looking adults, strong-featured, in the prime of life, and the wee toddler between them.

The only thing is—Greco's the toddler.

He doesn't call himself Greco any more. Would you, the way the world is now? He has plenty of money stashed away—I do, too, of course—not that money means very much these days. His brain hasn't been affected, just his body. He was lucky, I guess. Some of the demons hit the brain in some of their victims and—

Well, it's pretty bad.

Greco got the answer after a while. Both types of demons were loose in the world, and both, by and by, were in every individual.

But they didn't kill each other off.

One simply grew more rapidly, took over control, until it ran out of the kind of molecules it needed. Then the other took over.

Then the first.

Then the other again . . .

Mice are short-lived. It's like balancing a needle on the end of your nose; there isn't enough space in a mouse's short span for balance, any more than there is in a needle's.

But in a human life——

Things are going to have to be worked out, though.

It's bad enough that a family gets all mixed up the way Greco's is—he's on a descending curve, his kid is on an aging curve, and Minnie—did I tell you that it was Minnie he married?—has completed her second rejuvenation and is on the way back up again.

But there are worse problems than that.

For one thing, it isn't going to be too long before we run out of space. I don't mean time, I mean space. *Living* space.

Because it's all very well that the human animal should now mature to grow alternately younger and older, over and over——

But, damn it, how I wish that somebody once in a while would *die!*

By Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth

NIGHTMARE WITH ZEPPELINS

THE Zeppelin dirigible balloons bombed London again last night and I got little sleep what with the fire brigades clanging down the street and the antiaircraft guns banging away. Bad news in the morning post. A plain card from Emmie to let me know that Sam's gone, fast and without much pain. She didn't say, but I suppose it was the flu, which makes him at least the fifth of the old lib-lab boys taken off this winter. And why not? We're in our seventies and eighties. It's high time.

Shaw said as much the other day when I met him on the steps of the Museum reading room, he striding in, I doddering out. In that brutal, flippant way of his, he was rather funny about how old Harry Lewes was standing in the way of youngsters like himself, but I can't bring myself to put his remarks down; they would be a little too painful to contemplate.

Well, he's quite recovered from that business with his foot that gave us all such a fright. Barring the flu, he may live to my age, and about 1939 bright youngsters now unborn will be watching him like hawks for the smallest sign of rigidity, of eccentricity, and saying complacently: "Grand old boy, G.B.S. Such a pity he's going the least bit soft upstairs." And I shall by then be watching from Olympus and chuckling.

Enough of him. He has the most extraordinary way of get-

ting into everybody's conversation, though it is true that my own conversation does wander, these bad days. I did not think that the second decade of the twentieth century would be like this, though. As I have excellent reason to be, I am glad it is not worse.

I am really quite unhappy and uncomfortable as I sit here at the old desk. Though all the world knows I don't hold with personal service for the young and healthy, I am no longer a member of either of those classes. I do miss the ministrations of Bagley, who at this moment is probably lying in a frozen trench and even more uncomfortable than I. I can't seem to build as warm a fire as he used to. The coals won't go right. Luckily, I know what to do when I am unhappy and uncomfortable: work.

Anyway, Wells is back from France. He has been talking, he says, to some people at the Cavendish Laboratory, wherever that is. He told me we must make a "radium-bomb." I wanted to ask: "Must we, Wells? Must we, *really?*"

He says the great virtue of a radium bomb is that it explodes *and keeps on exploding*—for hours, days, weeks. The italics are Wells's—one could hear them in his rather high-pitched voice—and he is welcome to them.

I once saw an explosion which would have interested Wells and, although it did not *keep on exploding*, it was as much of an explosion as I ever care to see.

I thought of telling him so. But, if he believed me, there would be a hue and a cry—I wonder, was I ever once as *consecrated* as he?—and if he did not, he might all the same use it for the subject of one of his "scientific" romances. After I am gone, of course, but surely that event cannot be long delayed, and in any case that would spoil it. And I want the work. I do not think I have another book remaining—forty-one fat volumes will have to do—but this can hardly be a book.

A short essay; it must be short if it is not to become an autobiography and, though I have resisted few temptations in my life, I mean to fight that one off to the end. That was

another jeer of Shaw's. Well, he scored off me, for I confess that some such thought had stirred in my mind.

My lifelong struggle with voice and pen against social injustice had barely begun in 1864, and yet I had played a part in three major work stoppages, published perhaps a dozen pamphlets, and was the editor and principal contributor of the still-remembered *Labour's Voice.* I write with what must look like immodesty only to explain how it was that I came to the attention of Miss Carlotta Cox. I was working with the furious energy of a very young man who has discovered his vocation, and no doubt Miss Cox mistook my daemon—now long gone, alas!—for me.

Miss Cox was a member of that considerable group of ruling-class Englishmen and women who devote time, thought, and money to improving the lot of the workingman. Everybody knows of good Josiah Wedgwood, Mr. William Morris, Miss Nightingale; they were the great ones. Perhaps I alone today remember Miss Cox, but there were hundreds like her, and pray God there will always be.

She was then a spinster in her sixties and had spent most of her life giving away her fortune. She had gone once in her youth to the cotton mills whence that fortune had come, and knew after her first horrified look what her course must be. She instructed her man of business to sell all her shares in that inferno of sweated labor and, for the next forty years, as she always put it, she attempted to make restitution.

She summoned me, in short, to her then-celebrated stationer's shop and, between waiting on purchasers of nibs and foolscap, told me her plan. I was to go to Africa.

Across the Atlantic America was at war within herself. The rebellious South was holding on, not with any hope of subduing the North, but in the expectation of support from England.

England herself was divided. Though England had abolished slavery on her own soil almost a century earlier, still the detestable practice had its apologists, and there were those

who held the rude blacks incapable of assuming the dignities of freedom. I was to seek out the Dahomeys and the Congolese on their own grounds and give the lie to those who thought them less than men.

"Tell England," said Miss Cox, "that the so-called primitive Negroes possessed great empires when our fathers lived in wattle huts. Tell England that the black lawgivers of Solomon's time are true representatives of their people, and that the monstrous caricature of the plantation black is a venal creation of an ignoble class!"

She spoke like that, but she also handed me a check for two hundred and fifty pounds to defray my expenses of travel and to subsidize a wide distribution of the numbers of *Labour's Voice* which would contain my correspondence.

Despite her sometimes grotesque manner, Miss Cox's project was not an unwise one. Whatever enlightenment could be bought at a price of two hundred and fifty pounds was a blow at human slavery. Nor, being barely twenty, was I much distressed by the thought of a voyage to strange lands.

In no time at all, I had turned the direction of *Labour's Voice* over to my tested friends and contributors Mr. Samuel Blackett and Miss Emma Chatto (they married a month later), and in a week I was aboard a French "composite ship," iron of frame and wooden of skin, bound for a port on the Dark Continent, the home of mystery and enchantment.

So we thought of it in those days and so, in almost as great degree, do we think of it today, though I venture to suppose that, once this great war is over, those same creations of Count Zeppelin which bombed me last night may dispel some of the mystery, exorcise the enchantment, and bring light into the darkness. May it be so, though I trust that whatever discoveries these aeronauts of tomorrow may bring will not repeat the discovery Herr Faesch made known to me in 1864.

The squalor of ocean travel in those days is no part of my story. It existed and I endured it for what seemed like an eternity, but at last I bade farewell to *Le Flamant* and all her roaches, rats, and stench. Nor does it become this memoir to

discuss the tragic failure of the mission Miss Cox had given me.

(Those few who remember my *Peoples of the Earth* will perhaps also remember the account given in the chapter I entitled "Afric Journeyings." Those, still fewer, whose perception revealed to them an unaccountable gap between the putrid sore throat with which I was afflicted at the headwaters of the Congo and my leave-taking on the Gold Coast will find herewith the chronicle of the missing days.)

It is enough to say that I found no empires in 1864. If they had existed, and I believe they had, they were vanished with Sheba's Queen. I did, however, find Herr Faesch. Or he found me.

How shall I describe Herr Faesch for you? I shan't, Shaw notwithstanding, permit myself so hackneyed a term as "hardy Swiss"; I am not so far removed from the youthful spring of creation as that. Yet Swiss he was, and surely hardy as well, for he discovered me (or his natives did) a thousand miles from a community of Europeans, deserted by my own bearers, nearer to death than ever I have been since. He told me that I tried thrice to kill him, in my delirium; but he nursed me well and I lived. As you see.

He was a scientific man, a student of nature's ways, and a healer, though one cure was beyond him. For, sick though I was, he was more ravaged by destructive illness than I. I woke in a firelit hut with a rank poultice at my throat and a naked savage daubing at my brow, and I was terrified; no, not of the native, but of the awful cadaverous face, ghost-white, that frowned down at me from the shadows.

That was my first sight of Herr Faesch.

When, a day later, I became able to sit up and to talk, I found him a gentle and brave man, whose English was every bit as good as my own, whose knowledge surpassed that of any human I met before or since. But the mark of death was on him. In that equatorial jungle, his complexion was alabaster. Ruling the reckless black warriors who served him, his strength yet was less than a child's. In those steaming afternoons when

I hardly dared stir from my cot for fear of stroke, he wore gloves and a woollen scarf at his neck.

We had, in all, three days together. As I regained my health, his health dwindled.

He introduced himself to me as a native of Geneva, that colorful city on the finest lake of the Alps. He listened courteously while I told him of my own errand, and he did me, and the absent Miss Cox, the courtesy of admiring the spirit which prompted it—though he was not sanguine of my prospects of finding the empires.

He said nothing of what had brought him to this remote wilderness, but I thought I knew. Surely gold. Perhaps diamonds or some other gem, but I thought not; gold was much more plausible.

I had picked up enough of the native dialect to catch perhaps one word in twenty of what he said to his natives and they to him—enough, at any rate, to know that when he left me in their charge for some hours, that first day, he was going to a hole in the ground. It could only be a mine, and what, I asked myself, would a European trouble to mine in the heart of unexplored Africa but gold?

I was wrong, of course. It was not gold at all.

Wells says that they are doing astonishing things at the Cavendish Laboratory, but I do think that Herr Faesch might have astonished even Wells. Certainly he astonished me. On the second day of my convalescence, I found myself strong enough to be up and walking about.

Say that I was prying. Perhaps I was. It was oppressively hot—I dared not venture outside—and yet I was too restless to lie abed waiting for Herr Faesch's return. I found myself examining the objects on his camp table, and there were, indeed, nuggets. But the nuggets were not gold. They were a silvery metal, blackened and discolored, but surely without gold's yellow hue; they were rather small, like irregular lark's eggs, and yet they were queerly heavy. Perhaps there were a score of them, aggregating about a pound or two.

I rattled them thoughtfully in my hand, and then observed that across the tent, in a laboratory jar with a glass stopper, there were perhaps a dozen more—yes, and in yet another place in that tent, in a pottery dish, another clutch of the things. I thought to bring them close together so that I might compare them. I fetched the jar and set it on the table; I went after the pellets in the pottery dish.

Herr Faesch's voice, shaking with emotion, halted me. "Mr. Lewes!" he whispered harshly. "Stop, sir!"

I turned, and there was the man, his eyes wide with horror, standing at the flap of the tent. I made my apologies, but he waved them aside.

"No, no," he croaked, "I know you meant no harm. But I tell you, Mr. Lewes, you were very near to death a moment ago."

I glanced at the pellets. "From these, Herr Faesch?"

"Yes, Mr. Lewes. From those." He tottered into the tent and retrieved the pottery dish from my hands. Back to its corner it went; then the jar, back across the tent again. "They must not come together. No, sir," he said, nodding thoughtfully, though I had said nothing with which he might have been agreeing, "they must not come together."

He sat down. "Mr. Lewes," he whispered, "have you ever heard of uranium?" I had not. "Or of pitchblende? No? Well," he said earnestly, "I assure you that you will. These ingots, Mr. Lewis, are uranium, but not the standard metal of commerce. No, sir. They are a rare variant form, indistinguishable by the most delicate of chemical tests from the ordinary metal, but possessed of characteristics which are—I shall merely say 'wonderful,' Mr. Lewes, for I dare not use the term which comes first to mind."

"Remarkable," said I, feeling that some such response was wanted.

He agreed. "Remarkable indeed, my dear Mr. Lewes! You really cannot imagine how remarkable. Suppose I should tell you that the mere act of placing those few nuggets you dis-

covered in close juxtaposition to each other would liberate an immense amount of energy. Suppose I should tell you that if a certain critical quantity of this metal should be joined together, an explosion would result. Eh, Mr. Lewes? What of that?"

I could only say again, "Remarkable, Herr Faesch." I knew nothing else to say. I was not yet one-and-twenty, I had had no interest in making chemists' stinks, and much of what he said was Greek to me—or was science to me, which was worse, for I should have understood the Greek tolerably well. Also a certain apprehension lingered in my mind. That terrible white face, those fired eyes, his agitated speech—I could not be blamed, I think. I believed he might be mad. And though I listened, I heard not, as he went on to tell me of what his discovery might mean.

The next morning he thrust a sheaf of manuscript at me. "Read, Mr. Lewes!" he commanded me and went off to his mine; but something went wrong. I drowsed through a few pages and made nothing of them except that he thought in some way his nuggets had affected his health. There was a radiant glow in the mine, and the natives believed that glow meant sickness and in time death, and Herr Faesch had come to agree with the natives. A pity, I thought absently, turning in for a nap.

A monstrous smashing sound awakened me. No one was about. I ran out, thrusting aside the tent flap, and there, over a hill, through the interstices of the trees, I saw a huge and angry cloud. I don't know how to describe it; I have never since seen its like, and pray God the world never shall again until the end of time.

Five miles away it must have been, but there was heat from it; the tent itself was charred. Tall it was—I don't know how tall, stretching straight and thin from the ground to a toadstool crown shot with lightnings.

The natives came after a time, and though they were desperately afraid, I managed to get from them that it was Herr Faesch's mine that had blown up, along with Herr Faesch and

a dozen of themselves. More than that, they would not say.

And I never saw one of them again. In a few days, when I was strong enough, I made my way back to the river, and there I was found and helped—I have never known by whom. Half dazed, my fever recurring, I remember only endless journeying, until I found myself near a port.

Yes, there was explosion enough for any man.

That whippersnapper Wells! Suppose, I put it to you, that some such "radium bomb" should be made. Conceive the captains of Kaiser Will's dirigible fleet possessed of a few nuggets apiece such as those Herr Faesch owned half a century ago. Imagine them cruising above the city of London, sowing their dragon's-teeth pellets in certain predetermined places, until in time a sufficient accumulation was reached to set the whole thing off. Can you think what horror it might set free upon the world?

And so I have never told this story, nor ever would if it were not for those same Zeppelin dirigible balloons. Even now I think it best to withhold it until this war is over, a year or two perhaps. (And that will probably make it posthumous—if only to accommodate Shaw—but no matter.)

I have seen a great deal. I know what I know, and I feel what I feel; and I tell you, this marvelous decade that stretches ahead of us after this present war will open new windows on freedom for the human race. Can it be doubted? Poor Bagley's letters from the trenches tell me that the very poilus and Tommies are determined to build a new world on the ruins of the old.

Well, perhaps Herr Faesch's nuggets will help them, these wiser, nobler children of the dawn who are to follow us. They will know what to make of them. One thing is sure: Count Zeppelin has made it impossible for Herr Faesch's metal ever to be used for war. Fighting on the ground itself was terrible enough; this new dimension of warfare will end it. Imagine sending dirigibles across the skies to sow such horrors! Imag-

ine what monstrous brains might plan such an assault! Merciful heaven! They wouldn't dare.

By Paul Flehr

WE NEVER MENTION AUNT NORA

MARY Lynne Edkin brought the man home to meet her brother.

It was uncomfortable for everyone. Mary Lynne's brother Alden looked up from his chair. He snapped his fingers and the sound on the trivision obediently diminished to a merely obtrusive level.

He held out his hand, "Pleased to meet you," he said, but it was obviously a lie.

Mary Lynne got that expression on her face.

"Al," she said dangerously.

Her brother shrugged and snapped his fingers twice more. The set shut itself off.

Mary Lynne's expression cleared. She was not a pretty girl, but she was a pleasant-looking one. The no-midriff fashion was kind to her; she still had a nice figure.

"Al," she said, but smiling now. "Al, guess what! Jimmy and I want to get married!"

"Oh-ho," said her brother, and he stood up in order to take a better look.

Even standing, he had to look up at this man James Croy. Croy was *big*. Six feet ten or eleven at the least, and his hair was snow white. Still, thought Alden Edkin, the man's face didn't look old. Maybe he was platinum blond. Al snorted,

for he didn't hold with men dyeing their hair, common though the practice was.

He asked accusingly, "How come I never met him before?"

"Now, Al—"

"How come?"

Mary Lynne blushed. "Well, Al, there hasn't been much chance for you to meet."

"Oh-ho," said her brother again. "You just met him yourself."

"But I love him, Al!" cried Mary Lynne, clutching at the tall man's arm. "He's—he—oh, I can't explain it. But I love him!"

"Sure you do," said her brother. "You love him. But what do you know about him?"

"I know enough!"

Alden said sternly, "Family, Mary Lynne! Marriage isn't just between two people. We come of good stock and we can't marry just anybody. Think of the children you may have! Our family—"

"Our family!" echoed his sister. "What's so special about our family? How many times have you said that Aunt Nora—"

"Mary Lynne!" Alden warned. She paused. He said, "No offense, Mr. Croy. But what do we know? You may be after her money, for all we can tell."

The large man cleared his throat and straightened the crease in his Bermudas. He said modestly, "I assure you, Mr. Edkin, I am not interested in money."

"But you'd say that anyhow. Wouldn't you? Not that there's much *cash*. But there's this big house—Mary Lynne's and mine. And, Mary, you have to think of what Mother and Dad would want. They didn't leave you this big house—it will be yours when I'm gone—so that some adventurer could come along and—"

"Alden!" Mary Lynne was furious. She turned to the man she loved apologetically, but he was merely looking politely concerned. She whirled on her brother. "Apologize to Jimmy!"

There was a marked silence.

"Well," said her brother at last, talking to the wall, "there's one good thing. Being that she's under age, she can't——"

He stopped and waited.

They all waited. The big house that Mother and Dad had left them happened to be on the lip of the take-off pits for the Moon rocket. The screeching howl of the night rocket's take-off rattled the windows and made the trivision set moan shrilly in resonance.

But it lasted only for a few seconds.

"——can't get married without my consent," Alden Edkin finished.

"Alden!" cried his sister again, but it was more a sob than a protest.

Alden Edkin merely looked obstinate. He was good at it.

James Croy cleared his throat. "Sir," he said, "I know that what you say is true. We cannot marry without your consent. I hope that you'll give it."

"Don't hold your breath." Edkin sat down and glanced longingly at the trivision set. "As I say, we don't know anything about you."

"That's easily taken care of, Mr. Edkin," said Croy, smiling. "I'm an orphan. No ties, no family. Until recently, I was a draftsman for Amalgamated Luna in the rocket engine department."

"Until recently? You don't even have a job?"

"Not exactly, sir. But I was fortunate enough to design a rather good firing chamber. They've adopted it for the Mars rocket."

Edkin nodded thoughtfully. "You sold them the design?"

Croy shook his head. "Not outright. But the royalties are—well, ample. I assure you that I can support Mary Lynne in adequate style. And I should mention that the royalty contract runs for thirty years, with cost-of-living increases."

"Um." Alden Edkin found that he was beginning to relax

slightly. This Croy was, in his way, not without a certain charm.

Edkin said in a warmer tone, "Well, money isn't the only consideration. Still . . . say, what about making some coffee, Mary Lynne? I'm sure our guest would enjoy it."

She looked at him in some surprise, shrugged, patted her proposed fiancé's arm, and left the room.

Edkin said, "I hope you won't pay any attention to what Mary Lynne said about Aunt Nora."

"Of course not," said Croy and smiled. He had a very nice smile. His eyes were deep-set, somber and serious, and the smile beneath them was like sunlight bursting out from under a cloud.

Edkin was momentarily dazzled. He shook his head to clear it; for a second, he had almost thought he could see *through* the man. But that was nonsense.

Croy was saying, "I don't drink coffee, Mr. Edkin, but I'm glad Mary Lynne's out of the room. I hope we can get better acquainted."

"Sure," said Edkin testily. "Well, sit down and tell me something about yourself. Where was your family when you had one?"

"We're originally from Portland, Mr. Edkin."

"Portland, Maine? Say, I was stationed near Presq'Isle when I was in the Army."

"No," said Croy regretfully, "Portland, Oregon. After my parents passed away, I attended several schools, graduating from the University of California."

"Oh, we know lots of people there!" exclaimed Edkin. "Our cousins on my mother's side have some friends who teach at Berkeley. Perhaps you know them—Harold Sizeland and—"

"Sorry," Croy apologized. "I was at the Los Angeles campus. But let's not talk about *me*, Mr. Edkin. Mary Lynne tells me you're in credit maintenance."

"That's right." Actually he was a loan collector; it was close enough.

Croy leaned confidentially closer. "You can help me, Mr. Edkin. I'm planning a sort of surprise for Mary Lynne."

"Surprise?"

"Here," said Croy, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out several sheets of legal cap, stapled into a blue folder. "Since you're in the financial line," he said, "you'll know if this is all right. What it is, it's a kind of trust agreement for Mary Lynne."

Edkin scowled. "You're taking a lot for granted, Croy. I haven't agreed to anything."

"Of course not. But won't you look this over for me? You see, it puts all the royalties from my firing chamber in her name. Irrevocably. So that if anything happened to me, or there was, well, anything serious"—he didn't say the word divorce, but he shrugged it—"she'll be well provided for. I'd appreciate your opinion of the contract."

Edkin glanced at the papers suspiciously.

He was ready to stand up and order from the house this brash young giant who interrupted his trivision programs and proposed to carry off his sister. But something hit him in the eye. And what that something happened to be was a neatly typed line specifying Mary Lynne's guaranteed minimum annual income from the trust agreement.

Thirty-five thousand dollars a year.

Edkin swallowed.

Attached to the certificate of agreement was a notarized copy of the Amalgamated Luna royalty contract. Unless it was a fake, the thirty-five-thousand-dollar figure was exactly right.

Mary Lynne came back into the room and nearly dropped the coffee tray.

"Hi there, Mary Lynne!" greeted her brother, looking up from where he was patting Croy on the shoulder. "Coffee, eh? Good!"

She stared at him unbelievingly. He bobbed his head, winked conspiratorially at Croy, jammed the papers in his pocket, and stood up.

"Coffee, eh?" he repeated, carrying chairs toward the table.

"Your young man won't drink it, Mary Lynne. But surely he'll have some cake, eh? Or a drink? Some tea? Perhaps a glass of chocolate milk—Mary Lynne will be glad to warm it. No?"

He shrugged and sat down, smiling. "No matter," he observed. "Now tell me. When would you two lovebirds like the happy event to take place?"

Three days later, the marriage was performed. It was the minimum legal waiting period.

Alden Edkin, as it happened, was a bachelor who believed that every man who glanced at his sister was a prospective rapist—and that those who proposed marriage were after her money besides.

Still, he was not an idiot.

He had taken certain precautions.

First, he took a copy of the trust agreement to Mr. Senutovitch in his company's legal department. Mr. Senutovitch read the papers over with real enjoyment.

"Ah, bully stuff, Edkin," he said sentimentally. He leaned back and gazed at the ceiling while the arms of his reclining chair sighed faintly and adjusted to his position. "It's a pleasure to read the work of a master."

"You think it's all legal, Mr. Senutovitch?"

"Legal?" Mr. Senutovitch coughed gently. "Did you notice the classic language of the operative clause? That's Paragraph Three: 'Does hereby devise, grant, give, bestow, and convey, without let or distraint, absolutely.' A grand piece of work."

"And irrevocable?"

Mr. Senutovitch smiled. "Quite irrevocable."

"You're sure, Mr. Senutovitch?"

The lawyer said mildly, "Edkin, I wrote this company's Chattel Lien Form. I'm sure."

The other precaution Edkin took was to drop into his company's Credit Reference Library and put through the name of Croy, James T., for a report.

It would take a few days for the credit report to come through, and meanwhile the ceremony would be performed

and the couple off on their honeymoon. But at least, Edkin consoled himself, when it did come through, it would be a comprehensive document. The company took an expansive view of what a credit report should cover.

The company, moreover, was not to be deceived by any such paltry devices as a change of name—or, for that matter, of fingerprints, retinal patterns, or blood type. If a man could change his basic genetic construction, he might fool the company, but not with anything less; the Credit Reference Library was hooked in by direct wire with the FBI office in Washington—for the convenience of the FBI, not of the company. There would be no secrets left to Mr. Croy. And, therefore, no secret worries for Alden Edkin.

And then Edkin stood by, fighting a manly urge to weep, as his sweet young sister gave herself in wedlock to this white-haired giant with the deep, penetrating eyes. The ceremony was performed before Father Hanover at Trinity Episcopal Church. There were few witnesses, though Mr. Senutovitch showed up, wrung the bridegroom's hand warmly, and left without a word.

In the empty house, Alden Edkin took a deep breath, let it out, and put through a phone call to their only surviving relative. It was the least he could do.

A plump face over the fur collar of a lounging robe peered out of the phone's screen at him.

"Aunt Nora?" said Edkin tentatively. "My, you're looking well."

"You lie," she said shrilly. "I look *old*. What do you want? If it's money, I won't give you a—"

"No, nothing like that, Aunt Nora."

"Then what? You sorry you threw me out of the house twenty years ago? Is that what you called up to say?"

"Aunt Nora," said Edkin boldly, "I say let bygones be bygones. I called you up to tell you the news about Mary Lynne —my sister—your niece."

"Well? Well? What about her?"

"She just got married, Aunt Nora," said Edkin, beaming.

"What about it? People do, you know. There's nothing strange."

Edkin was shocked. Such a lack of family feeling! And from *her*, who should feel herself lucky beyond imagining that anyone in the family called her up at all. He was angry enough to say what he had vowed he would never refer to.

"At least," he said icily, "she got *married*."

Pause.

Thinly: "What do you mean by that?"

"You know perfectly well, Aunt Nora."

In the tiny screen, her face was a doll's face, an angry doll; it flushed red. She must have been shaking the phone, Edkin thought distractedly; rings of color haloed the edge of the screen.

She cried, "You're a sanctimonious jerk, Alden Edkin! You forbade me to associate with your sister—my own niece!—so I wouldn't corrupt her when she was three months old and the good Lord Himself couldn't corrupt her, because she didn't so much as know which end was up! And now, just because she's getting married, you call me up. Hoping, no doubt, that because I'm getting old and absent-minded, I'll send along a little check for ten thousand dollars or so as a wedding present. Well, you're wrong! If Mary Lynne wants to call me up, I'll talk to her—but not to you! Understand?"

And the little screen flashed red and orange as she hung up.

Edkin pushed down the off button and shrugged. Aunt Nora! Who could account for her moods? A product of her sordid past, of course, but—it had been a mistake to call her up. Definitely.

Virtuously, Alden Edkin went to bed.

The following morning, he got the report from the Credit Reference Library. It had received special priority. The paper it was typed on flamed with warning red.

Alden Edkin was waiting at the airfield when the honeymooners returned from their Grand Tour.

He had been champing at the bit for six weeks—six long weeks and not a word from them, six weeks when they were out of touch with the world. Because they *wanted* it that way!

It was Alden Edkin's conviction that he knew *why* James Croy wanted it that way. He stood there by the customs gate, grinding his teeth, a plump angry man with a face that was rapidly turning purple.

He saw them coming down the wheeled steps from the plane and he bawled, "Mary Lynne! Mary Lynne! Come down here this minute! Get away from that monster Croy!"

Mary Lynne, her arm adoringly on the arm of her husband, shuddered. "Oh-oh," she muttered. "Storm clouds rising. Batten down all hatches."

Croy *tsked* solicitously. "Poor man, he's upset, isn't he? But you mustn't worry."

"I'm not worried, darling."

"Of course not, of course not. Trust me." Croy nodded approvingly. "I've got to stop off for a second. A little errand—but I'll be right back, and then I'm sure we can straighten out whatever's troubling your brother." Gently he kissed her ear. "My darling," he whispered, soft as a moth's wing.

And then that perfect gentleman, James Croy, bowed to the brother-in-law who was raging impotently across the customs gate, turned on his heel, and disappeared into the men's room.

The men's room had a north entrance, a south entrance, a mezzanine entrance, and a service entrance to the floor below. It is not a matter of record which door Croy used to come out, but it was not the one by which he had gone in.

The policemen finally went away. "Sorry," said the sergeant, curt and somewhat bored—he had been with Missing Persons for a good long time. "Probably he'll turn up."

But it wasn't true, and both he and Alden Edkin knew it. And when he had left, Edkin told his sister what the red-bordered credit report had shown.

Across the top was printed in bold letters *Zero Credit Rating Zero.*

"You can't fool Consolidated Credit," snapped Edkin. "They know. And this man Croy—why, he's a monster, Mary Lynne! He preys on women."

"Oh no," wept his sister. But she was already in her heart convinced.

"Oh yes! He is! Listen to this! Four years ago, in Miami, he married a girl named Doris L. Cockingham. There's no record of a divorce! He just married her—set up a trust for her with the royalties from an electric underwater lung, left her pregnant, and disappeared. Eh?"

"I don't believe you," sobbed his sister.

"Then listen to this! Eleven months later, in Troy, New York, he married Marsha Gutknecht. Revolting! Can you *understand* a man like that? Loose morals, bigamy—why, he'd *never* get credit with a record like that."

"There must be some perfectly simple explanation," whimpered Mary Lynne. "When Jim comes back—"

"He won't be back!" said her brother brutally. "Get used to that idea, Mary Lynne! The Gutknecht woman never saw him again, and she was pregnant, too. He *meant* to run away! He used false names. Told different stories to each of them. But he couldn't fool Consolidated Credit. He put four hundred thousand dollars in trust for this woman and took off and never gave her another thought. How do you like that, Mary Lynne?"

"Jim wouldn't—"

"Jim did! And again the following year. Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin—a girl named Deloris Bennyhoff. Then in Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania—" He crumpled the paper in rage. "Ah, what's the use? Five women! He marries them, runs off, leaves them pregnant. And what do you have to say to that, Mary Lynne?"

Mary Lynne looked at her brother through blurred eyes.

In a faint, faint voice, she said, "Well, at least he runs true to form, Alden."

Oh, they looked for him. But they couldn't find him. The police couldn't find him, private detectives couldn't find him, even Consolidated Credit couldn't find him. Jim Croy was gone—probably forever, at least under that name. And while they were looking, events took their natural course, and Mary Lynne made reservations at the hospital and began to pack a little bag.

And Aunt Nora phoned.

Her plump face peered somberly out of the phone screen. "I'm coming east," she announced.

"You're not!" croaked Alden, wincing already. "I mean—"

"Thursday," she said. "On the six o'clock plane."

"But, Aunt Nora—" It was the last thing he wanted! So many years of cutting her out of the family circle because of the indiscretion of her youth, and now—

"Meet me," she said, and hung up.

There was nothing to be done about it. Aunt Nora showed up at the house her sister had left the children just as Mary Lynne gasped, checked her wrist watch, gasped again, and reached for her ready-packed bag.

"Hello, Aunt Nora," said Alden distractedly. "Mary Lynne, aren't you ready yet? Good-by, Aunt Nora. Make yourself at home."

"Wait!" cried Aunt Nora, but she was talking to a closed door.

She sighed, shook her head irritably, and took off her coat. Men were so foolish about babies! There would be plenty of time; she would unpack her bag, get settled in, and then, with full leisure, proceed to the hospital. And she was willing to bet that she would be there well before the baby arrived.

She was right—though what she found in the upper bureau drawer of her room made her hurry to the hospital sooner than she'd planned.

"Alden!" she gasped. "The picture! I saw the picture—"

"Hello, Aunt Nora," said Edkin gloomily. "Lord, but this takes a long time!"

"It just seems long," snapped Nora, and waved a picture

under his nose. It was inscribed in white ink: *For Mary Lynne, from Jimmy, with love.* "Who's this?"

Edkin said guiltily, "Mary's—ah—husband. He's away just now."

"I bet he is! That's not any Jimmy! That's Sam!"

"Sam?"

"*My* Sam. The one who left me in a delicate condition years ago! And the only difference is, now he marries them!"

Alden, hardly listening, said soothingly, "That was a long time ago, Aunt Nora. We don't worry about it now. Besides, you gave the baby up for adoption, didn't you? I never even saw him—or her. What was it, a boy?"

She said shortly, "No."

"A girl, then."

"Guess again," said Aunt Nora in a more peculiar tone. "And it wasn't exactly adoption."

Her tone was peculiar enough to attract his full attention. He looked at her queerly, but she didn't seem to be joking. Funny. He didn't have the faintest idea of what she meant—

Until an endless twenty minutes later.

Until the white-faced nurse came out of the delivery room wheeling a bassinet; until, without a word, the nurse pointed a shaking finger, and Edkin saw what it was that his sister had —with the help of what called itself James Croy—brought into an unsuspecting world.

By Cordwainer Smith

WHEN THE PEOPLE FELL

"CAN you imagine a rain of people through an acid fog? Can you imagine thousands and thousands of human bodies, without weapons, overwhelming the unconquerable monsters? Can you——"

"Look, sir," interrupted the reporter.

"Don't interrupt me! You ask me silly questions. I tell you I saw the Goonhogo itself. I saw it take Venus. Now ask me about that!"

The reporter had called to get an old man's reminiscences about bygone ages. He did not expect Dobyns Bennett to flare up at him.

Dobyns Bennett thrust home the psychological advantage he had got by taking the initiative. "Can you imagine showhices in their parachutes, a lot of them dead, floating out of a green sky? Can you imagine mothers crying as they fell? Can you imagine people pouring down on the poor helpless monsters?"

Mildly, the reporter asked what showhices were.

"That's old Chinesian for children," said Dobyns Bennett. "I saw the last of the nations burst and die, and you want to ask me about fashionable clothes and things. Real history never gets into the books. It's too shocking. I suppose you

were going to ask me what I thought of the new striped pantaloons for women!"

"No," said the reporter, but he blushed. The question was in his notebook, and he hated blushing.

"Do you know what the Goonhogo did?"

"What?" asked the reporter, struggling to remember just what a Goonhogo might be.

"It took Venus," said the old man, somewhat more calmly.

Very mildly, the reporter murmured, "It *did?*"

"You bet it did!" said Dobyns Bennett belligerently.

"Were you there?" asked the reporter.

"You bet I was there when the Goonhogo took Venus," said the old man. "I was there, and it's the damnedest thing I've ever seen. You know who I am. I've seen more worlds than you can count, boy, and yet when the nondies and the needies and the showhices came pouring out of the sky, that was the worst thing that any man could ever see. Down on the ground, there were the loudies the way they'd always been—"

The reporter interrupted, very gently. Bennett might as well have been speaking a foreign language. All of this had happened three hundred years before. The reporter's job was to get a feature from him and to put it into a language which people of the present time could understand.

Respectfully he said, "Can't you start at the beginning of the story?"

"You bet. That's when I married Terza. Terza was the prettiest girl you ever saw. She was one of the Vomacts, a great family of scanners, and her father was a very important man. You see, I was thirty-two, and when a man is thirty-two, he thinks he is pretty old, but I wasn't really old, I just thought so, and he wanted Terza to marry me because she was such a complicated girl that she needed a man's help. The Court back home had found her unstable and the Instrumentality had ordered her left in her father's care until she married a man who then could take on proper custodial authority. I suppose those are old customs to you, boy—"

The reporter interrupted again. "I am sorry, old man," said he. "I know you are over four hundred years old and you're the only person who remembers the time the Goonhogo took Venus. Now the Goonhogo was a government, wasn't it?"

"Anyone knows that," snapped the old man. "The Goonhogo was a sort of separate Chinesian government. Seventeen billion of them all crowded in one small part of Earth. Most of them spoke English the way you and I do, but they spoke their own language, too, with all those funny words that have come on down to us. They hadn't mixed in with anybody else yet. Then, you see, the Waywonjong himself gave the order, and that is when the people started raining. They just fell right out of the sky. You never saw anything like it—"

The reporter had to interrupt him again and again to get the story bit by bit. The old man kept using terms that he couldn't seem to realize were lost in history and that had to be explained to be intelligible to anyone of this era. But his memory was excellent and his descriptive powers as sharp and alert as ever . . .

Young Dobyns Bennett had not been at Experimental Area A very long before he realized that the most beautiful female he had ever seen was Terza Vomact. At the age of fourteen, she was fully mature. Some of the Vomacts did mature that way. It may have had something to do with their being descended from unregistered, illegal people centuries back in the past. They were even said to have mysterious connections with the lost world back in the age of nations when people could still put numbers on the years.

He fell in love with her and felt like a fool for doing it.

She was so beautiful, it was hard to realize that she was the daughter of Scanner Vomact himself. The scanner was a powerful man.

Sometimes romance moves too fast, and it did with Dobyns Bennett because Scanner Vomact himself called in the young man and said, "I'd like to have you marry my daughter Terza,

but I'm not sure she'll approve of you. If you can get her, boy, you have my blessing."

Dobyns was suspicious. He wanted to know why a senior scanner was willing to take a junior technician.

All that the scanner did was to smile. He said, "I'm a lot older than you, and with this new santaclara drug coming in that may give people hundreds of years, you may think that I died in my prime if I die at a hundred and twenty. You may live to four or five hundred. But I know my time's coming up. My wife has been dead for a long time, and we have no other children, and I know that Terza needs a father in a very special kind of way. The psychologist found her to be unstable. Why don't you take her outside the area? You can get a pass through the dome any time. You can go out and play with the loudies."

Dobyns Bennett was almost as insulted as if someone had given him a pail and told him to go play in the sand pile. And yet he realized that the elements of play in courtship were fitted together and that the old man meant well.

The day that it all happened, he and Terza were outside the dome. They had been pushing loudies around.

Loudies were not dangerous unless you killed them. You could knock them down, push them out of the way, or tie them up; after a while, they slipped away and went about their business. It took a very special kind of ecologist to figure out what their business was. They floated two meters high, ninety centimeters in diameter, gently just above the land of Venus, eating microscopically. For a long time, people thought there was radiation on which they subsisted. They simply multiplied in tremendous numbers. In a silly sort of way, it was fun to push them around, but that was about all there was to do.

They never responded with intelligence.

Once, long before, a loudie taken into the laboratory for experimental purposes had typed a perfectly clear message on the typewriter. The message had read, "Why don't you Earth

people go back to Earth and leave us alone? We are getting along all—"

And that was all the message that anybody had ever got out of them in three hundred years. The best laboratory conclusion was that they had very high intelligence if they ever chose to use it, but that their volitional mechanism was so profoundly different from the psychology of human beings that it was impossible to force a loudie to respond to stress as people did on Earth.

The name loudie was some kind of word in the old Chinesian language. It meant the "ancient ones." Since it was the Chinesians who had set up the first outposts on Venus, under the orders of their supreme boss, the Waywonjong, their term lingered on.

Dobyns and Terza pushed loudies, climbed over the hills, and looked down into the valleys, where it was impossible to tell a river from a swamp. They got thoroughly wet, their air converters stuck, and perspiration itched and tickled along their cheeks. Since they could not eat or drink while outside—at least not with any reasonable degree of safety—the excursion could not be called a picnic. There was something mildly refreshing about playing child with a very pretty girl-child—but Dobyns wearied of the whole thing.

Terza sensed his rejection of her. Quick as a sensitive animal, she became angry and petulant. "You didn't have to come out with me!"

"I wanted to," he said, "but now I'm tired and want to go home."

"You treat me like a child. All right, play with me. Or you treat me like a woman. All right, be a gentleman. But don't seesaw all the time yourself. I just got to be a little bit happy, and you have to get middle-aged and condescending. I won't take it."

"Your father—" he said, realizing the moment he said it that it was a mistake.

"My father this, my father that. If you're thinking about

marrying me, do it yourself." She glared at him, stuck her tongue out, ran over a dune, and disappeared.

Dobyns Bennett was baffled. He did not know what to do. She was safe enough. The loudies never hurt anyone. He decided to teach her a lesson and to go on back himself, letting her find her way home when she pleased. The Area Search Team could find her easily if she really got lost.

He walked back to the gate.

When he saw the gates locked and the emergency lights on, he realized that he had made the worst mistake of his life.

His heart sinking within him, he ran the last few meters of the way and beat the ceramic gate with his bare hands until it opened only just enough to let him in.

"What's wrong?" he asked the doortender.

The doortender muttered something which Dobyns could not understand.

"Speak up, man!" shouted Dobyns. "What's wrong?"

"The Goonhogo is coming back and they're taking over."

"That's impossible," said Dobyns. "They couldn't—" He checked himself. *Could* they?

"The Goonhogo's taken over," the gatekeeper insisted. "They've been given the whole thing. The Earth Authority has voted it to them. The Waywonjong has decided to send people right way. They're sending them."

"What do the Chinesians want with Venus? You can't kill a loudie without contaminating a thousand acres of land. You can't push them away without them drifting back. You can't scoop them up. Nobody can live here until we solve the problem of these things. We're a long way from having solved it," said Dobyns in angry bewilderment.

The gatekeeper shook his head. "Don't ask me. That's all I hear on the radio. Everybody else is excited, too."

Within an hour, the rain of people began.

Dobyns went up to the radar room, saw the skies above. The radar man himself was drumming his fingers against the desk. He said, "Nothing like this has been seen for a thousand

years or more. You know what there is up there? Those are warships, the warships left over from the last of the old dirty wars. I knew the Chinesians were inside them. Everybody knew about it. It was sort of like a museum. Now they don't have any weapons in them. But do you know—there are millions of people hanging up there over Venus, and I don't know what they are going to do!"

He stopped and pointed at one of the screens. "Look, you can see them running in patches. They're behind each other, so they cluster up solid. We've never had a screen look like that."

Dobyns looked at the screen. It was, as the operator said, full of blips.

As they watched, one of the men exclaimed, "What's that milky stuff down there in the lower left? See, it's—it's pouring," he said, "it's pouring somehow out of those dots. How can you pour things into a radar? It doesn't really show, does it?"

The radar man looked at his screen. He said, "Search me. I don't know what it is, either. You'll have to find out. Let's just see what happens."

Scanner Vomact came into the room. He said, once he had taken a quick, experienced glance at the screens, "This may be the strangest thing we'll ever see, but I have a feeling they're dropping people. Lots of them. Dropping them by the thousands, or by the hundreds of thousands, or even by the millions. But people are coming down there. Come along with me, you two. We'll go out and see it. There may be somebody that we can help."

By this time, Dobyns's conscience was hurting him badly. He wanted to tell Vomact that he had left Terza out there, but he had hesitated—not only because he was ashamed of leaving her, but because he did not want to tattle on the child to her father. Now he spoke.

"Your daughter's still outside."

Vomact turned on him solemnly. The immense eyes looked

very tranquil and very threatening, but the silky voice was controlled.

"You may find her." The scanner added, in a tone which sent the thrill of menace up Dobyns's back, "And everything will be well if you bring her back."

Dobyns nodded as though receiving an order.

"I shall," said Vomact, "go out myself, to see what I can do, but I leave the finding of my daughter to you."

They went down, put on the extra-long-period converters, carried their miniaturized survey equipment so that they could find their way back through the fog, and went out. Just as they were at the gate, the gatekeeper said, "Wait a moment, sir and excellency. I have a message for you here on the phone. Please call Control."

Scanner Vomact was not to be called lightly, and he knew it. He picked up the connection unit and spoke harshly.

The radar man came on the phone screen in the gatekeeper's wall. "They're overhead now, sir."

"Who's overhead?"

"The Chinesians are. They're coming down. I don't know how many there are. There must be two thousand warships over our heads right here, and there are more thousands over the rest of Venus. They're down now. If you want to see them hit ground, you'd better get outside quick."

Vomact and Dobyns went out.

Down came the Chinesians. People's bodies were raining right out of the milk-cloudy sky. Thousands upon thousands of them with plastic parachutes that looked like bubbles. Down they came.

Dobyns and Vomact saw a headless man drift down. The parachute cords had decapitated him.

A women fell near them. The drop had torn her breathing tube loose from her crudely bandaged throat, and she was choking in her own blood. She staggered toward them, tried to babble but only drooled blood with mute choking sounds, and then fell face forward into the mud.

Two babies dropped. The adult accompanying them had

been blown off course. Vomact ran, picked them up, and handed them to a Chinesian man who had just landed. The man looked at the babies in his arms, sent Vomact a look of contemptuous inquiry, put the weeping children down in the cold slush of Venus, gave them a last impersonal glance, and ran off on some mysterious errand of his own.

Vomact kept Bennett from picking up the children. "Come on, let's keep looking. We can't take care of all of them."

The world had known that the Chinesians had a lot of unpredictable public habits, but they never suspected that the nondies and the needies and the showhices could pour down out of a poisoned sky. Only the Goonhogo itself would make such a reckless use of human life. Nondies were men and needies were women and showhices were little children. And Goonhogo was a name left over from the old days of nations. It meant something like republic or state or government. Whatever it was, it was the organization that ran the Chinesians in the Chinesian manner, under the Earth Authority.

And the ruler of the Goonhogo was the Waywonjong.

The Waywonjong didn't come to Venus. He just sent his people. He sent them floating down into Venus, to tackle the Venusian ecology with the only weapons which could make a settlement of that planet possible—people themselves. Human arms could tackle the loudies, the loudies who had been called "old ones" by the first Chinesian scouts to cover Venus.

The loudies had to be gathered together so gently that they would not die and, in dying, each contaminate a thousand acres. They had to be kept together by human bodies and arms in a gigantic living corral.

Scanner Vomact rushed forward.

A wounded Chinesian man hit the ground, and his parachute collapsed behind him. He was clad in a pair of shorts, had a knife at his belt, canteen at his waist. He had an air converter attached next to his ear, with a tube running into his throat. He shouted something unintelligible at them and limped rapidly away.

People kept on hitting the ground all around Vomact and Dobyns.

The self-disposing parachutes were bursting like bubbles in the misty air a moment or two after they touched the ground. Someone had done a tricky, efficient job with the chemical consequences of static electricity.

And as the two watched, the air was heavy with people. One time, Vomact was knocked down by a person. He found that it was two Chinesian children tied together.

Dobyns asked, "What are you doing? Where are you going? Do you have any leaders?"

He got cries and shouts in an unintelligible language. Here and there someone shouted in English, "This way!" or "Leave us alone!" or "Keep going. . . ." But that was all.

The experiment worked.

Eighty-two million people were dropped in that one day.

After four hours, which seemed barely short of endless, Dobyns found Terza in a corner of the cold hell. Though Venus was warm, the suffering of the almost-naked Chinesians had chilled his blood.

Terza ran toward him.

She could not speak.

She put her head on his chest and sobbed. Finally she managed to say, "I've—I've—I've tried to help, but they're too many, too many, too many!" And the sentence ended as shrill as a scream.

Dobyns led her back to the experimental area.

They did not have to talk. Her whole body told him that she wanted his love and the comfort of his presence, and that she had chosen that course of life which would keep them together.

As they left the drop area, which seemed to cover all of Venus so far as they could tell, a pattern was beginning to form. The Chinesians were beginning to round up the loudies.

Terza kissed him mutely after the gatekeeper had let them through. She did not need to speak. Then she fled to her room.

The next day, the people from Experimental Area A tried to see if they could go out and lend a hand to the settlers. It wasn't possible to lend a hand; there were too many settlers. People by the millions were scattered all over the hills and valleys of Venus, sludging through the mud and water with their human toes, crushing the alien mud, crushing the strange plants. They didn't know what to eat. They didn't know where to go. They had no leaders.

All they had were orders to gather the loudies together in large herds and hold them there with human arms.

The loudies didn't resist.

After a time lapse of several Earth days, the Goonhogo sent small scout cars. They brought a very different kind of Chinesian—these late arrivals were uniformed, educated, cruel, smug men. They knew what they were doing. And they were willing to pay any sacrifice of their own people to get it done.

They brought instructions. They put the people together in gangs. It did not matter where the nondies and needies had come from on Earth; it didn't matter whether they found their own showhices or somebody else's. They were shown the jobs to do, and they got to work. Human bodies accomplished what machines could not have done—they kept the loudies firmly but gently encircled until every last one of the creatures was starved into nothingness.

Rice fields began to appear miraculously.

Scanner Vomact couldn't believe it. The Goonhogo biochemists had managed to adapt rice to the soil of Venus. And yet the seedlings came out of boxes in the scout cars, and weeping people walked over the bodies of their own dead to keep the crop moving toward the planting.

Venusian bacteria could not kill human beings, nor could they dispose of human bodies after death. A problem arose and was solved. Immense sleds carried dead men, women, and children—those who had fallen wrong, or drowned as they fell, or had been trampled by others—to an undisclosed destination. Dobyns suspected that the material was to be used

to add Earthtype organic waste to the soil of Venus, but he did not tell Terza.

The work went on.

The nondies and needies kept working in shifts. When they could not see in the darkness, they proceeded without seeing—keeping in line by touch or by shout. Foremen, newly trained, screeched commands. Workers lined up, touching fingertips. The job of building the fields kept on.

"That's a big story," said the old man; "eighty-two million people dropped in a single day. And later I heard that the Waywonjong said it wouldn't have mattered if seventy million of them had died. Twelve million survivors would have been enough to make a spacehead for the Goonhogo. The Chinesians got Venus, all of it.

"But I'll never forget the nondies and the needies and the showhices falling out of the sky, men and women and children with their poor, scared Chinesian faces. That funny Venusian air made them look green instead of tan. There they were, falling all around.

"You know something, young man?" said Dobyns Bennett, approaching his fifth century of age.

"What?" said the reporter.

"There won't be things like that happening on any world again. Because now, after all, there isn't any separate Goonhogo left. There's only one Instrumentality, and they don't care what a man's race may have been in the ancient years. Those were the rough old days, the ones I lived in. Those were the days *men* still tried to do things."

Dobyns almost seemed to doze off, but he roused himself sharply and said, "I tell you, the sky was full of people. They fell like water. They fell like rain. I've seen the awful ants in Africa, and there's not a thing among the stars to beat them for prowling horror. Mind you, they're worse than anything the stars contain. I've seen the crazy worlds near Alpha Centauri, but I never saw anything like the time the people fell

on Venus. More than eighty-two million in one day, and my own little Terza lost among them.

"But the rice did sprout. And the loudies died as the walls of people held them in with human arms. Walls of people, I tell you, with volunteers jumping in to take the places of the falling ones.

"They were people still, even when they shouted in the darkness. They tried to help each other, even while they fought a fight that had to be fought without violence. They were people still. And they *did* win. It was crazy and impossible, but they won. Mere human beings did what machines and science would have taken another thousand years to do . . .

"The funniest thing of all was the first house that I saw a nondie put up, there in the rain of Venus. I was out there with Vomact and with a pale, sad Terza. It wasn't much of a house, shaped out of twisted Venusian wood. There it was. *He* built it, the smiling, half-naked Chinesian nondie. We went to the door and said to him in English, 'What are you building here, a shelter or a hospital?'

"The Chinesian grinned at us. 'No,' he said, 'gambling.'

"Vomact wouldn't believe it: 'Gambling?'

" 'Sure,' said the nondie. 'Gambling is the first thing a man needs in a strange place. It can take the worry out of his soul.' "

"Is that all?" said the reporter.

Dobyns Bennett muttered that the personal part did not count. He added, "Some of my great-great-great-great-great-grandsons may come along. You count those greats. Their faces will show you easily enough that I married into the Vomact line. Terza saw what happened. She saw how people build worlds. This was the hard way to build them. She never forgot the night with the dead Chinesian babies lying in the half-illuminated mud, or the parachute ropes dissolving slowly. She heard the needies weeping and the helpless nondies comforting them and leading them off to nowhere. She

remembered the cruel, neat officers coming out of the scout cars. She got home and saw the rice come up, and saw how the Goonhogo made Venus a Chinesian place."

"What happened to you personally?" asked the reporter.

"Nothing much. There wasn't any more work for us, so we closed down Experimental Area A. I married Terza.

"Any time later, when I said to her, 'You're not such a bad girl!' she was able to admit the truth and tell me she was not. That night in the rain of people would test anybody's soul, and it tested hers. She had met a big test and passed it. She used to say to me, 'I saw it once. I saw the people fall, and I never want to see another person suffer again. Keep me with you, Dobyns, keep me with you forever.'

"And," said Dobyns Bennett, "it wasn't forever, but it was a happy and sweet three hundred years. She died after our fourth diamond anniversary. Wasn't that a wonderful thing, young man?"

The reporter said it was. And yet, when he took the story back to his editor, he was told to put it into the archives. It wasn't the right kind of story for entertainment, and the public would not appreciate it any more.

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