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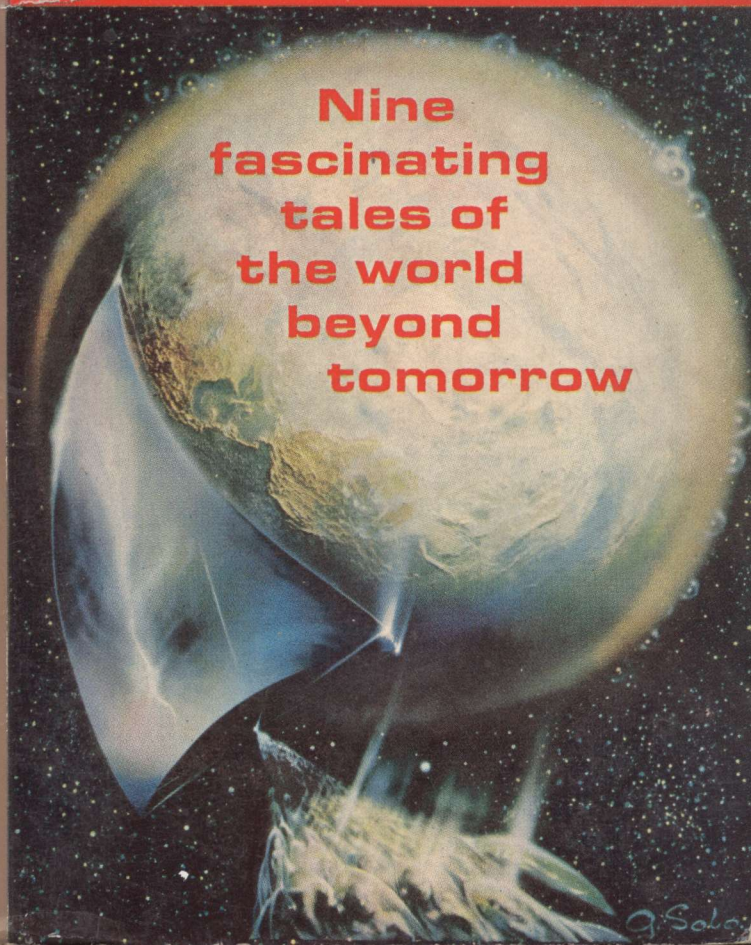
THE COMPLETE BOOK

MIND PARTNER

AND 8 OTHER NOVELETS FROM GALAXY

Edited by H. L. Gold



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MIND PARTNER AND 8 OTHER NOVELETS FROM GALAXY

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MIND PARTNER AND 8 OTHER NOVELETS FROM GALAXY

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

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TO FREDERIK POHL, ACE AUTHOR,
PINCH-HITTER AND FULL-TIME FRIEND

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INTRODUCTION

In New York there is a real find of a restaurant called the Serendipity. Wander in for a meal and you may find yourself staggering out under a load of antiques, for every single thing there is for sale, including the plates and silver you eat with. It's fun, of course, but the real wonder is that the term "serendipity" has gone from obscurity in two centuries to near-common usage in a couple of decades, thanks to science and science fiction.

The word comes from an eighteenth-century story, "The Three Princes of Serendip," by Horace Walpole. The princes each go off on an assignment, much like Hercules' tasks, only they return at story's end with something completely different and far more valuable. Serendipity is thus looking for one thing and finding something else. In the restaurant, go in for a meal and come out with antiques. In science and science fiction, hunt down one principle and you find another instead.

Perhaps the most famous case of serendipity was the discovery of penicillin by Fleming in 1929. He was running an experiment when some *penicillium notatum* spores settled in his culture-filled Petri dishes. He dutifully noted that the spores left a circle of death around themselves, and went on with his experiment. It was ten years before that notation was followed up. Such a gap today would be unthinkable, for serendipity is as much a part of research now as experiment itself—every by-product and bypath is studied carefully for just such unexpected findings.

One such instance is the fantastically rapid evolution of the

antihistamine family. Calming effects were observed in histamine victims and research produced the tranquilizers. Then it was seen that tranquilizers elevated moods in some patients and the result is a third-generation group of antidepressants. All this came about in approximately half a decade. Muscle relaxants have to be brought in there somewhere, incidentally —or should I say serendipitally? And all this was predicted a full five years before by a *Galaxy* story titled "Beyond Bedlam," by Wyman Guin, an executive of a pharmaceutical laboratory.

Prediction is a nice thing when it happens to come about, but it's purely serendipitous in science fiction. Good science fiction, like all other kinds of good fiction, is written solely to entertain. Anything else is an unexpected and unexpectable bonus.

For example, just speculate on the possible outcomes of this brief introduction. The restaurant named Serendipity may branch out, or it may be imitated elsewhere, and high time, too, possibly—who knows?—by you or somebody you mention it to. Somewhere in the audience may be a scientist who, reminded that serendipity is a vital part of research, might go back over a puzzling but seemingly extraneous finding. And readers with peripheral interest in the sciences may be drawn more closely to them. And, I have to add, so forth, because the wonderful nature of this kind of speculation is that it never ends, and it can't possibly be foreguessed.

How about writing to me and letting me know how this diverting litle treatise on serendipity, introducing a whole bookful of serendipitous stories, serendipitously influenced you? Even if it accomplishes nothing else, it may have you suddenly break out in print.

H. L. Gold

MIND PARTNER
and 8 other novelets
from GALAXY

MIND PARTNER

Christopher Anvil

Jim Calder studied the miniature mansion and grounds that sat, carefully detailed, on the table.

"If you slip," said Walters, standing at Jim's elbow, "the whole gang will disappear like startled fish. There'll be another thousand addicts, and we'll have the whole thing to do over again."

Jim ran his hand up the shuttered, four-story replica tower that stood at one corner of the mansion. "I'm to knock at the front door and say, 'May I speak to Miss Cynthia?' "

Walters nodded. "You'll be taken inside, you'll stay overnight, and the next morning you will come out a door at the rear and drive away. You will come directly here, be hospitalized and examined, and tell us everything you can remember. A certified check in five figures will be deposited in your account. How high the five figures will be depends on how much your information is worth to us."

"Five figures," said Jim.

Walters took out a cigar and sat down on the edge of his desk. "That's right—10,000 to 99,999."

Jim said, "It's the size of the check that makes me hesitate. Am I likely to come out of there in a box?"

"No." Walters stripped the cellophane wrapper off his cigar, lit it, and sat frowning. At last he let out a long puff of smoke and looked up. "We've hit this setup twice before in the last three years. A city of moderate size, a quietly retired elderly person in a well-to-do part of town, a house so situated that people can come and go without causing comment." Walters glanced at the model of mansion and grounds on the table.

"Each time, when we were sure where the trouble was coming from, we've raided the place. We caught addicts, but otherwise the house was empty."

"Fingerprints?"

"The first time, yes, but we couldn't trace them anywhere. The second time, the house burned down before we could find out."

"What about the addicts, then?"

"They don't talk. They—" Walters started to say something, then shook his head. "We're offering you a bonus because we don't know what the drug is. These people are addicted to something, but *what?* They don't accept reality. There are none of the usual withdrawal symptoms. A number of them have been hospitalized for three years and have shown no improvement. We don't *think* this will happen to you—one exposure to it shouldn't make you an addict—but we don't *know*. We have a lot of angry relatives of these people backing us. That's why we can afford to pay you what we think the risk is worth."

Jim scowled. "Before I make up my mind, I'd better see one of these addicts."

Walters drew thoughtfully on his cigar, then nodded and picked up the phone.

Behind the doctor and Walters and two white-coated attendants, Jim went into the room at the hospital. The attendants stood against the wall. Jim and Walters stood near the door and watched.

A blonde girl sat on the cot, her head in her hands.

"Janice," said the doctor softly. "Will you talk to us for just a moment?"

The girl sat unmoving, her head in her hands, and stared at the floor.

The doctor dropped to a half-kneeling position beside the cot. "We want to talk to you, Janice. We need your help. Now, I am going to talk to you until you show me you hear me. You do hear me, don't you, Janice?"

The girl didn't move.

The doctor repeated her name again and again.

Finally she raised her head and looked through him. In a flat, ugly voice, she said, "Leave me alone. I know what you're trying to do."

"We want to ask you just a few questions, Janice."

The girl didn't answer. The doctor started to say something else, but she cut him off.

"Go away," she said bitterly. "You don't fool me. You don't even exist. You're nothing." She had a pretty face, but as her eyes narrowed and her lips drew slightly away from her teeth and she leaned forward on the cot, bringing her hands up, she had a look that tingled the hair on the back of Jim's neck.

The two attendants moved warily away from the wall.

The doctor stayed where he was and talked in a low, soothing monotone.

The girl's eyes gradually unfocused, and she was looking through the doctor as if he weren't there. She put her head hard back into her hands and stared at the floor.

The doctor slowly came to his feet and stepped back.

"That's it," he told Jim and Walters.

On the way back, Walters drove, and Jim sat beside him on the front seat. It was just starting to get dark outside. Abruptly Walters asked, "What did you think of it?"

Jim moved uneasily. "Are they all like that?"

"No. That's just one pattern. An example of another pattern is the man who bought a revolver, shot the storekeeper who sold it to him, shot the other customer in the store, put the gun in his belt, went behind the counter and took out a shotgun, shot a policeman who came in the front door, went outside and took a shot at the lights on a theater marquee; he studied the broken lights for a moment, then leaned the shotgun against the storefront, pulled out the revolver, blew out the right rear tires of three cars parked at the curb, stood looking from one of the cars to another and said, 'I just can't be sure, that's all.' "

Walters slowed slightly as they came onto a straight stretch

of highway and glanced at Jim. "Another policeman shot the man, and that ended that. We traced that one back to the *second* place we closed up, the place that burned down before we could make a complete search."

"Were these places all run by the same people?"

"Apparently. When we checked the dates, we found that the second place didn't open till after the first was closed, and the third place till the second was closed. They've all operated in the same way. But the few descriptions we've had of the people who work there don't check."

Jim scowled and glanced out the window. "What generally happens when people go there? Do they stay overnight, or what?"

"The first time, they go to the front door, and come out the next morning. After that, they generally rent one of the row of garages on the Jayne Street side of the property, and come back at intervals, driving in after dark and staying till the next night. They lose interest in their usual affairs, and gradually begin to seem remote to the people around them. Finally they use up their savings, or otherwise come to the end of the money they can spend. Then they do like the girl we saw tonight, or like the man in the gun store, or else they follow some other incomprehensible pattern. By the time we find the place and close it up, there are seven hundred to twelve hundred addicts within a fifty-mile radius of the town. They all fall off their rockers inside the same two- to three-week period, and for a month after that, the police and the hospitals get quite a workout."

"Don't they have any of the drug around?"

"That's just it. They must get it all at the place. They use it there. They don't bring any out."

"And when you close the place up—"

"The gang evaporates like a sliver of dry ice. They don't leave any drug or other evidence behind. This time we've got a precise model of their layout. We should be able to plan a perfect capture. But if we just close in on them, I'm afraid the same thing will happen all over again."

"Okay," said Jim. "I'm your man. But if I don't come out the next morning, I want you to come in after me."

"We will," said Walters.

Jim spent a good part of the evening thinking about the girl he'd seen at the hospital, and the gun-store addict Walters had described. He paced the floor, scowling, and several times reached for the phone to call Walters and say, "No." A hybrid combination of duty and the thought of a five-figure check stopped him.

Finally, unable to stay put, he went out into the warm, dark evening, got in his car and drove around town. On impulse, he swung down Jayne Street and passed the dark row of rented garages Walters had mentioned. A car was carefully backing out as he passed. He turned at the next corner and saw the big, old-fashioned house moonlit among the trees on its own grounds. A faint sensation of wrongness bothered him, and he pulled to the curb to study the house.

Seen through the trees, the house was tall and steep-roofed. It reached far back on its land, surrounded by close-trimmed lawn and shadowy shrubs. The windows were tall and narrow, some of them closed by louvered shutters. Pale light shone out through the narrow openings of the shutters.

Unable to place the sensation of wrongness, Jim swung the car away from the curb and drove home. He parked his car, and, feeling tired and ready for sleep, walked up the dark drive, climbed the steps to the porch, and fished in his pocket for his keycase. He felt for the right key in the darkness, and moved back onto the steps to get a little more light. It was almost as dark there as on the porch. Puzzled, he glanced up at the sky.

The stars were out, with a heavy mass of clouds in the distance, and a few small clouds sliding by overhead. The edge of one of the small clouds lit up faintly, and as it passed, a pale crescent moon hung in the sky. Jim looked around. Save for the light in the windows, the houses all bulked dark.

Jim went down the steps to his car and drove swiftly back

along Jayne Street. He turned, drove a short distance up the side street, and parked.

This time, the outside of the huge house was dark. Bright light shone out the shutters onto the lawn and shrubbery. But the house was a dark bulk against the sky.

Jim swung the car out from the curb and drove home slowly.

The next morning, he went early to Walters' office and studied the model that sat on the table near the desk. The model, painstakingly constructed from enlarged photographs, showed nothing that looked like a camouflaged arrangement for softly floodlighting the walls of the house and the grounds. Jim studied the location of the trees, looked at the house from a number of angles, noticed the broken slats in different shutters on the fourth floor of the tower, but saw nothing else he hadn't seen before.

He called up Walters, who was home having breakfast, and without mentioning details asked, "Is this model on your table complete?"

Walters' voice said, "It's complete up to three o'clock the day before yesterday. We check it regularly."

Jim thanked him and hung up, unsatisfied. He knelt down and put his eye in the position of a man in the street in front of the house. He noticed that certain parts of the trees were blocked off from view by the mansion. Some of these parts could be photographed from a light plane flying overhead, but other positions would be hidden by foliage. Jim told himself that floodlights *must* be hidden high in the trees, in such a way that they could simulate moonlight.

In that case, the question was—why?

Jim studied the model. He was bothered by much the same sensation as that of a man examining the random parts of a jigsaw puzzle. The first few pieces fitted together, the shapes and colors matched, but they didn't seem to add up to anything he had ever seen before.

As he drove out to the house, the day was cool and clear. The house itself, by daylight, seemed to combine grace,

size, and a sort of starched aloofness. It was painted a pale lavender, with a very dark, steeply slanting roof. Tall arching trees rose above it, shading parts of the roof, the grounds, and the shrubs. The lawn was closely trimmed, and bordered by a low spike-topped black-iron fence.

Jim pulled in to the curb in front of the house, got out, opened a low wrought-iron gate in the fence, and started up the walk. He glanced up at the trees, saw nothing of floodlights, then looked at the house.

The house had a gracious, neat, well-groomed appearance. All the windowpanes shone, all the shades were even, all the curtains neatly hung, all the trim bright and the shutters straight. Jim, close to the house, raised his eyes to the tower. All the shutters there were perfect and even and straight.

The sense of wrongness that had bothered him the day before was back again. He paused in his stride, frowning.

The front door opened and a plump, gray-haired woman in a light-blue maid's uniform stood in the doorway. With her left hand, she smoothed her white apron.

"My," she said, smiling, "isn't it a nice day?" She stepped back and with her left hand opened the door wider. "Come in." Her right hand remained at her side, half-hidden by the ruffles of her apron.

Jim's mouth felt dry. "May I," he said, "speak to Miss Cynthia?"

"Of course you may," said the woman. She shut the door behind him.

They were in a small vestibule opening into a high-ceilinged hallway. Down the hall, Jim could see an open staircase to the second floor, and several wide doorways with heavy dark draperies.

"Go straight ahead and up the stairs," said the woman in a pleasant voice. "Turn left at the head of the stairs. Miss Cynthia is in the second room on the right."

Jim took one step. There was a sudden sharp pressure on his skull, a flash of white light, and a piercing pain and a pressure in his right arm—a sensation like that of an injection. Then there was nothing but blackness.

Gradually he became aware that he was lying on a bed, with a single cover over him. He opened his eyes to see that he was in an airy room with a light drapery blowing in at the window. He started to sit up and his head throbbed. The walls of the room leaned out and came back. For an instant, he saw the room like a photographic negative, the white woodwork black and the dark furniture nearly white. He lay carefully back on the pillow and the room returned to normal.

He heard the quick tap of high heels in the hallway and a door opened beside him. He turned his head. The room seemed to spin in circles around him. He shut his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, a tall, dark-haired woman was watching him with a faint hint of a smile. "How do you feel?"

"Not good," said Jim.

"It's too bad we have to do it this way, but some people lose their nerve. Others come with the thought that we have a profitable business and they would like to have a part of it. We have to bring these people around to our way of thinking."

"What's your way of thinking?"

She looked at him seriously. "What we have to offer is worth far more than any ordinary pattern of life. We can't let it fall into the wrong hands."

"What is it that you have to offer?"

She smiled again. "I can't tell you as well as you can experience it."

"That may be. But a man going into a strange country likes to have a road map."

"That's very nicely put," she said, "but you won't be going into any strange country. What we offer you is nothing but your reasonable desires in life."

"Is that all?"

"It's enough."

"Is there any danger of addiction?"

"After you taste steak, is there any danger of your wanting more? After you hold perfect beauty in your arms, is

there any danger you might want to do so again? The superior is always addicting."

He looked at her for a moment. "And how about my affairs? Will they suffer?"

"That depends on you."

"What if I go from here straight to the police station?"

"You won't. Once we are betrayed, you can never come back. We won't be here. You wouldn't want that."

"Do you give me anything to take out? Can I buy—"

"No," she said. "You can't take anything out but your memories. You'll find they will be enough."

As she said this, Jim had a clear mental picture of the girl sitting on the cot in the hospital, staring at the floor. He felt a sudden intense desire to get out. He started to sit up, and the room darkened and spun around him.

He felt the woman's cool hands ease him back into place.

"Now," she said, "do you have any more questions?"

"No," said Jim.

"Then," she said briskly, "we can get down to business. The charge for your first series of three visits is one thousand dollars per visit."

"What about the next visits?"

"Must we discuss that now?"

"I'd like to know."

"The charge for each succeeding series of three is doubled."

"How often do I come back?"

"We don't allow anyone to return oftener than once every two weeks. That is for your own protection."

Jim did a little mental arithmetic, and estimated that by the middle of the year a man would have to pay sixteen thousand dollars a visit, and by the end of the year it would be costing him a quarter of a million each time he came to the place.

"Why," he asked, "does the cost increase?"

"Because, I've been told to tell those who ask, your body acquires a tolerance and we have to overcome it. If we have to use twice as much of the active ingredient in our treatment, it seems fair for us to charge twice as much."

"I see." Jim cautiously eased himself up a little. "And suppose that I decided right now not to pay anything at all."

She shook her head impatiently. "You're on a one-way street. The only way you can go is forward."

"That remains to be seen."

"Then you'll see."

She stepped to a dresser against the wall, picked up an atomizer, turned the little silver nozzle toward him, squeezed the white rubber bulb, and set the atomizer back on the dresser. She opened the door and went out. Jim felt a mist of fine droplets falling on his face. He tried to inhale very gently to see if it had an odor. His muscles wouldn't respond.

He lay very still for a moment and felt the droplets falling one by one. They seemed to explode and tingle as they touched his skin. He lay still a moment more, braced himself to make one lunge out of the bed, then tried it.

He lay flat on his back on the bed. A droplet tingled and exploded on his cheek.

He was beginning to feel a strong need for breath.

He braced himself once more, simply to move sidewise off the pillow. Once there, he could get further aside in stages, out of the range of the droplets. He kept thinking, "Just a moment now—steady—just a moment—just—Now!"

And nothing happened.

He lay flat on his back on the bed. A droplet tingled and exploded on his cheek.

The need for air was becoming unbearable.

Jim's head was throbbing and the room went dark with many tiny spots of light. He tried to suck in air and he couldn't. He tried to breathe out, but his chest and lungs didn't move. He could hear the pound of his heart growing fast and loud.

He couldn't move.

At the window, the light drapery fluttered and blew in and fell back.

He lay flat on the bed and felt a droplet tingle and explode on his cheek.

His skull was throbbing. His heart writhed and hammered in his chest. The room was going dark.

Then something gave way and his lungs were dragging in painful gasps of fresh air. He sobbed like a runner at the end of a race. After a long time, a feeling of peace and tiredness came over him.

The door opened.

He looked up. The woman was watching him sadly. "I'm sorry," she said. "Do you want to discuss payment?"

Jim nodded.

The woman sat down in a chair by the bed. "As I've explained, the initial series of three visits cost one thousand dollars each. We will accept a personal check or even an I. O. U. for the first payment. After that, you must have cash."

Jim made out a check for one thousand dollars.

The woman nodded, smiled, and folded the check into a small purse. She went out, came back with a glass of colorless liquid, shook a white powder into it, and handed it to him.

"Drink it all," she said. "A little bit can be excruciatingly painful."

Jim hesitated. He sat up a little and began to feel dizzy. He decided he had better do as she said, took the glass and drained it. It tasted exactly like sodium bicarbonate dissolved in water. He handed her the glass and she went to the door.

"The first experiences," she said, "are likely to be a little exuberant. Remember, your time sense will be distorted, as it is in a dream." She went out and shut the door softly.

Jim fervently wished he were somewhere else. He wondered what she had meant by the last comment. The thought came to him that if he could get out of this place, he could give Walters and the doctors a chance to see the drug in action.

He got up, and had the momentary sensation of doing two things at once. He seemed to lie motionless on the bed and to stand up at one and the same time. He wondered if the drug could have taken effect already. He lay down and

got up again. This time he felt only a little dizzy. He went to the window and looked out. He was in a second-story window, and the first-floor rooms in this house had high ceilings. Moreover, he now discovered he was wearing a sort of hospital gown. He couldn't go into the street in that without causing a sensation, and he didn't know just when the drug would take effect.

He heard the soft click of the door opening and turned around. The woman who had talked to him came in and closed the door gently behind her. Jim watched in a daze as she turned languorously, and it occurred to him that no woman he had ever seen had moved quite like that, so the chances were that the drug had taken effect and he was imagining all this. He remembered that she had said the first experiences were likely to be a little exuberant, and his time sense distorted as in a dream.

Jim spent the night, if it was the night, uncertain as to what was real and what was due to the drug. But it was all vivid, and realistic events shaded into adventures he *knew* were imaginary, but that were so bright and satisfying that he didn't care if they were real or not. In these adventures, the colors were pure colors, and the sounds were clear sounds, and nothing was muddied or uncertain as in life.

It was so vivid and clear that when he found himself lying on the bed with the morning sun streaming in, he was astonished that he could remember not a single incident save the first, and that one not clearly.

He got up and found his clothes lying on a chair by the bed. He dressed rapidly, glanced around for the little atomizer and saw it was gone. He stepped out into the hall and there was a sudden sharp pressure on his skull, a flash of white light, and a feeling of limpness. He felt strong hands grip and carry him. He felt himself hurried down a flight of steps, along a corridor, then set down with his back against a wall.

The plump, gray-haired woman took a damp cloth and held it to his head. "You'll be all over that in a little while," she said. "I don't see why they have to do that."

"Neither do I," said Jim. He felt reasonably certain that

she had done the same thing to him when he came in. He looked around, saw that they were in a small bare entry, and got cautiously to his feet. "Is my car still out front?"

"No," she said. "It's parked in back, in the drive."

"Thank you," he said. "Say good-by to Miss Cynthia for me."

The woman smiled. "You'll be back."

He was very much relieved to get outside the house. He walked back along the wide graveled drive, found his car, got in, and started it. When he reached the front of the house, he slowed the car to glance back. To his surprise, the two shutters on the third floor of the tower had broken slats. He thought this had some significance, but he was unable to remember what it was. He sat for a moment, puzzled, then decided that the important thing was to get to Walters. He swung the car out into the early morning traffic, and settled back with a feeling compounded of nine parts relief and one part puzzlement.

What puzzled him was that anyone should pay one thousand dollars for a second dose of that.

The doctors made a lightning examination, announced that he seemed physically sound, and then Walters questioned him. He described the experience in close detail, and Walters listened, nodding from time to time. At the end, Jim said, "I'll be *damned* if I can see why anyone should go back!"

"That *is* puzzling," said Walters. "It may be that they were all sensation-seekers, though that's a little odd, too. Whatever the reason, it's lucky you weren't affected."

"Maybe I'd better keep my fingers crossed," said Jim.

Walters laughed. "I'll bring your bankbook in to keep you happy." He went out, and a moment later the doctors were in again. It wasn't until the next morning that they were willing to let him go. Just as he was about to leave, one of them remarked to him, "I hope you never need a blood transfusion in a hurry."

"Why so?" Jim asked.

"You have one of the rarest combinations I've ever seen." He held out an envelope. "Walters said to give you this."

Jim opened it. It was a duplicate deposit slip for a sum as high as five figures could go.

Jim went out to a day that wasn't sunny, but looked just as good to him as if it had been.

After careful thought, Jim decided to use the money to open a detective agency of his own. Walters, who caught the dope gang trying to escape through an unused steam tunnel, gave Jim his blessing, and the offer of a job if things went wrong.

Fortunately, things went very well. Jim's agency prospered. In time, he found the right girl, they married, and had two boys and a girl. The older boy became a doctor, and the girl married a likable fast-rising young lawyer. The younger boy had a series of unpleasant scrapes and seemed bound on wrecking his life. Jim, who was by this time very well to do, at last offered the boy a job in his agency, and was astonished to see him take hold.

The years fled past much faster than Jim would have liked. Still, when the end came near, he had the pleasure of knowing that his life's work would be in the capable hands of his own son.

He breathed his last breath in satisfaction.

And woke up lying on a bed in a room where a light drapery blew back at the window and the morning sun shone in, and his clothes were folded on a chair by his bed.

Jim sat up very carefully. He held his hand in front of his face and turned it over slowly. It was not the hand of an old man. He got up and looked in a mirror, then sat down on the edge of the bed. He was young, all right. The question was, was this an old man's nightmare, or was the happy life he had just lived a dope addict's dream?

He remembered the woman who had doped him saying, "What we offer you is nothing but your reasonable desires in life."

Then it had all been a dream.

But a dream should go away, and this remained clear in his memory.

He dressed, went out in the hall, felt a sudden pressure on his skull, a flash of white light, and a feeling of limpness.

He came to in the small entry, and the plump, gray-haired woman carefully held a damp cool cloth to his head.

"Thanks," he said. "Is my car out back?"

"Yes," she said, and he went out.

As he drove away from the house he glanced back and noticed the two broken shutters on the third floor of the tower. The memory of his dream about this same event—leaving the place—jarred him. It seemed that those broken shutters meant something, but he was unable to remember what. He trod viciously on the gas pedal, throwing a spray of gravel on the carefully tailored lawn as he swung into the street.

He *still* did not see why anyone should go back there with anything less than a shotgun.

He told Walters the whole story, including the details of his "life," that he remembered so clearly.

"You'll get over it," Walters finally said, when Jim was ready to leave the hospital. "It's a devil of a thing to have happen, but there's an achievement in it you can be proud of."

"You name it," said Jim bitterly.

"You've saved a lot of other people from this same thing. The doctors have analyzed the traces of drug still in your blood. They think they can neutralize it. Then we are going to put a few sturdy men inside that house, and while they're assumed to be under the influence, we'll raid the place."

The tactic worked, but Jim watched the trial with a cynical eye. He couldn't convince himself that it was true. He might, for all he knew, be lying in a second-floor room of the house on a bed, while these people, who seemed to be on trial, actually were going freely about their business.

This inability to accept what he saw as real at last forced Jim to resign his job. Using the generous bonus Walters had given him, he took up painting. As he told Walters on one of his rare visits, "It may or may not be that what I'm doing is real, but at least there's the satisfaction of the work itself."

"You're not losing any money on it," said Walters shrewdly.

"I know," said Jim, "and that makes me acutely uneasy."

On his 82nd birthday, Jim was widely regarded as the "Grand Old Man" of painting. His hands and feet felt cold that day, and he fell into an uneasy, shallow-breathing doze. He woke with a start and a choking cough. For an instant everything around him had an unnatural clarity; then it all went dark and he felt himself falling.

He awoke in a bed in a room where a light drapery fluttered at the window, and the morning sun shone into the room.

This time, Jim entertained no doubts as to whether or not this was real. He got up angrily and smashed his fist into the wall with all his might.

The shock and pain jolted him to his heels.

He went out the same way as before, but he had to drive one-handed, gritting his teeth all the way.

The worst of it was that the doctors weren't able to make that hand exactly right afterward. Even if the last "life" had been a dream—even if this one was—he wanted to paint. But every time he tried to, he felt so clumsy that he gave up in despair.

Walters, dissatisfied, gave Jim the minimum possible payment. The gang escaped. Jim eventually lost his job, and in the end he eked out his life at poorly paid odd jobs.

The only consolation he felt was that his life was so miserable that it must be true.

He went to bed sick one night and woke up the next morning on a bed in a room where a light drapery fluttered at the window and the early morning sun shone brightly in.

This happened to him twice more.

The next time after that, he lay still on the bed and stared at the ceiling. The incidents and details of five lives danced in his mind like jabbering monkeys. He pressed his palms to his forehead and wished he could forget it all.

The door opened softly and the tall, dark-haired woman was watching him with a faint smile. "I told you," she said, "that you couldn't take anything away but memories."

He looked up at her sickly. "That seems like a long, long while ago."

She nodded and sat down. "Your time sense is distorted as in a dream."

"I wish," he said drearily, looking at her, "that I could just forget it all. I don't see why anyone would come back for more of that."

She leaned forward to grip the edge of the mattress, shaking with laughter. She sat up again. "Whew!" she said, looking at him and forcing her face to be straight. "Nobody comes back for *more*. That is the unique quality of this drug. People come back to forget they ever had it."

He sat up. "I can forget that?"

"Oh, yes. *Don't* get so excited! That's what you really paid your thousand dollars for. The forgetfulness drug lingers in your blood stream for two to three weeks. Then memory returns and you're due for another visit."

Jim looked at her narrowly. "Does my body become tolerant of this drug? Does it take twice as much after three visits, four times as much after six visits, eight times as much after nine visits?"

"No."

"Then you lied to me."

She looked at him oddly. "What would you have expected of me? But I didn't lie to you. I merely said that that was what I was told to tell those who asked."

"Then what's the point of it?" Jim asked.

"What's the point of bank robbery?" She frowned at him. "You ask a lot of questions. Aren't you lucky I know the answers? Ordinarily you wouldn't get around to this till you'd stewed for a few weeks. But you seem precocious, so I'll tell you."

"That's nice," he said.

"The main reason for the impossible rates is so you can't pay off in money."

"How does that help you?"

"Because," she said, "every time you bring us a new patron, you get three free visits yourself."

"Ah," he said.

"It needn't be so terribly unpleasant, coming here."

"What happens if, despite everything, some sorehead actually goes and tells the police about this?"

"We move."

"Suppose they catch you?"

"They won't. Or, at least, it isn't likely."

"But you'll leave?"

"Yes."

"What happens to me?"

"Don't you see? We'll *have* to leave. Someone will have betrayed us. We couldn't stay because it might happen again. It isn't right from your viewpoint, but we can't take chances."

For a few moments they didn't talk, and the details of Jim's previous "lives" came pouring in on him. He sat up suddenly. "Where's that forgetfulness drug?"

She went outside and came back with a glass of colorless liquid. She poured in a faintly pink powder and handed it to him. He drank it quickly and it tasted like bicarbonate of soda dissolved in water.

He looked at her. "This isn't the same thing all over again, is it?"

"Don't worry," she said. "You'll forget."

The room began to go dark. He leaned back. The last thing he was conscious of was her cool hand on his forehead, then the faint click as she opened the door to go out.

He sat up. He dressed, drove quickly to Walters and told him all he could remember. Walters immediately organized his raid. Jim saw the place closed up with no one caught.

After two weeks and four days, the memories flooded back. His life turned into a nightmare. At every turn, the loves, hates, and tiny details of six separate lives poured in on him. He tried drugs in an attempt to forget, and sank from misery to hopeless despair. He ended up in a shooting scrap as Public Enemy Number Four.

And then he awoke and found himself in a bed in a room with a light drapery blowing in at the window, and the early morning sun shining brightly in.

"Merciful God!" he said.

The door clicked shut.

Jim sprang to the door and looked out in the carpeted hall. There was the flash of a woman's skirt; then a tall narrow door down the hallway closed to shut off his view.

He drew back into the room and shut the door. The house was quiet. In the distance, on the street, he could hear the faint sound of a passing car.

He swallowed hard. He glanced at the window. It had been, he reasoned, early morning when he had talked to the woman last. It was early morning now. He recalled that before she went out she said, "You'll forget." He had then lived his last miserable "life"—and awakened to hear the click as the door came shut behind her.

That had all taken less than five seconds of actual time.

He found his clothes on a nearby chair and started to dress. As he did so, he realized for the first time that the memories of his "lives" were no longer clear to him. They were fading away, almost as the memories of a dream do after a man wakes and gets up. *Almost* as the memories of a dream, but not quite. Jim found that if he thought of them, they gradually became clear again.

He tried to forget and turned his attention to the tree he could see through the window. He looked at the curve of its boughs, and at a black-and-yellow bird balancing on a branch in the breeze.

The memories faded away, and he began to plan what to do. No sooner did he do this than he remembered with a shock that he had said to Walters, "If I don't come out next morning, I want you to come in after me."

And Walters had said, "We will."

So that must have been just last night.

Jim finished dressing, took a deep breath, and held out his hand. It looked steady. He opened the door, stepped out into the hall, and an instant too late remembered what had happened six times before.

When he opened his eyes, the plump, gray-haired woman

was holding a damp cloth to his forehead and clucking sympathetically.

Jim got carefully to his feet, and walked down the drive to his car. He slid into the driver's seat, started the engine, and sat still a moment, thinking. Then he released the parking brake, and pressed lightly on the gas pedal. The car slid smoothly ahead, the gravel of the drive crunching under its tires. He glanced up as the car reached the end of the drive, and looked back at the tower. Every slat in the shutters was perfect. Jim frowned, trying to remember something. Then he glanced up and down the street, and swung out into the light early morning traffic.

He wasted no time getting to Walters.

He was greeted with an all-encompassing inspection that traveled from Jim's head to his feet. Walters looked tense. He took a cigar from a box on his desk and put it in his mouth unlit.

"I've spent half the night telling myself there are some things you can't ask a man to do for money. But we *had* to do it. Are you all right?"

"At the moment."

"There are doctors and medical technicians in the next room. Do you want to see them now or later?"

"Right now."

In the next hour, Jim took off his clothes, stood up, lay down, looked into bright lights, winced as a sharp hollow needle was forced into his arm, gave up samples of bodily excretions, sat back as electrodes were strapped to his skin, and at last was reassured that he would be all right. He dressed, and found himself back in Walters' office.

Walters looked at him sympathetically.

"How do you feel?"

"Starved."

"I'll have breakfast sent in." He snapped on his intercom, gave the order, then leaned back. He picked up his still unlit cigar, lit it, puffed hard, and said, "What happened?"

Jim told him, starting with the evening before, and ending when he swung his car out into traffic this morning.

Walters listened with a gathering frown, drawing occasionally on the cigar.

A breakfast of scrambled eggs and Canadian bacon was brought in. Walters got up, and looked out the window, staring down absently at the traffic moving past in the street below. Jim ate with single-minded concentration, and finally pushed his plate back and looked up.

Walters ground his cigar butt in the ashtray and lit a fresh cigar. "This is a serious business. You say you remembered the details of each of those six lives *clearly*?"

"Worse than that. I remembered the emotions and the attachments. In the first life, for instance, I had my own business." Jim paused and thought back. The memories gradually became clear again. "One of my men, for instance, was named Hart. He stood about five-seven, slender, with black hair, cut short when I first met him. Hart was a born actor. He could play any part. It wasn't his face. His expression hardly seemed to change. But his manner changed. He could stride into a hotel and the bellboys would jump for his bags and the desk clerk spring to attention. He stood out. He was important. Or he could slouch in the front door, hesitate, look around, blink, start to ask one of the bellboys something, lose his nerve, stiffen his shoulders, shamble over to the desk, and get unmercifully snubbed. Obviously, he was less than nobody. Or, again, he could quietly come in the front door, stroll across the lobby, fade out of sight somewhere, and hardly a person would notice or remember him. Whatever part he played, he lived it. That was what made him so valuable."

Walters had taken the cigar out of his mouth, and listened intently. "You mean this Hart—this imaginary man—is real to you? In three dimensions?"

"That's it. Not only that, I like him. There were other, stronger attachments. I had a family."

"Which seems real?"

Jim nodded. "I realize as I say these things that I sound like a lunatic."

"No." Walters shook his head sympathetically. "It all begins

to make sense. Now I see why the girl at the hospital said to the doctor, 'You aren't real.' Does it *hurt* to talk about these 'lives'?"

Jim hesitated. "Not as long as we keep away from the personal details. But it hurt like nothing I can describe to have all six of these sets of memories running around in my head at once."

"I can imagine. All right, let's track down some of these memories and see how far the details go."

Jim nodded. "Okay."

Walters got out a bound notebook and pen. "We'll start with your business. What firm name did you use?"

"Calder Associates."

"Why?"

"It sounded dignified, looked good on a business card or letterhead, and wasn't specific."

"What was your address?"

"Four North Street. Earlier, it was 126 Main."

"How many men did you have working with you?"

"To begin with, just Hart, and another man by the name of Dean. At the end, there were twenty-seven."

"What were their names?"

Jim called them off one by one, without hesitation.

Walters blinked. "Say that over again a little more slowly."

Jim repeated the list.

"All right," said Walters. "Describe these men."

Jim described them. He gave more and more details as Walters pressed for them, and by lunch time, Walters had a large section of the notebook filled.

The two men ate, and Walters spent the rest of the afternoon quizzing Jim on his first "life." Then they had steak and French fries sent up to the office. Walters ate in silence for a moment, then said, "Do you realize that you haven't stumbled once?"

Jim looked up in surprise. "What do you mean?"

Walters said, "Quiz me on the names of every man who ever worked for me. I won't remember all of them. Not by a

long shot. You remember every last detail of this dream life with a total recall that beats anything I've ever seen."

"That's the trouble. That's why it's pleasant to forget."

Walters asked suddenly, "Did you ever paint? *Actually,* I mean. I ask because you say you were an outstanding painter in one of these 'lives.' "

"When I was a boy, I painted some. I wanted to be an artist."

"Can you come out to my place tonight? I'd like to see whether you can really handle the brushes."

Jim nodded. "Yes, I'd like to try that."

They drove out together, and Walters got out a dusty paint set in a wooden case, set up a folding easel, and put a large canvas on it.

Jim stood still a moment, thinking back. Then he began to paint. He lost himself in the work, as he always had, all through the years, and what he was painting now he had painted before. Had painted it, and sold it for a good price, too. And it was worth it. He could still see the model in his mind as he painted with swift precise strokes.

He stepped back.

"My Lady in Blue" was a cheerful girl of seventeen. She smiled out from the canvas as if at any moment she might laugh or wave.

Jim glanced around. For an instant the room seemed strange. Then he remembered where he was.

Walters looked at the painting for a long moment, then looked at Jim, and swallowed. He carefully took the painting from the easel and replaced it with another blank canvas. He went across the room and got a large floor-type ashtray, a wrought-iron affair with a galloping horse for the handle.

"Paint this."

Jim looked at it. He stepped up to the canvas, hesitated. He raised the brush—and stopped. He didn't know where to begin. He frowned and carefully thought back to his first lessons. "Let's see." He glanced up. "Do you have any tracing paper?"

"Just a minute," said Walters.

Jim tacked the paper over the canvas and methodically drew the ashtray on the paper. He had a hard time, but at last looked at the paper triumphantly. "Now, do you have any transfer paper?"

Walters frowned. "I've got carbon paper."

"All right."

Walters got it. Jim put a sheet under his tracing paper, tacked it up again, and carefully went over the drawing with a pencil. He untacked the paper, then methodically began to paint. At length, weary and perspiring, he stepped back.

Walters looked at it. Jim blinked and looked again. Walters said, "A trifle off-center, isn't it?"

There was no doubt about it, the ashtray stood too far toward the upper right-hand corner of the canvas.

Walters pointed at the other painting. "Over there we have a masterpiece that you dashed off freehand. Here we have, so to speak, a piece of good, sound mechanical drawing that isn't properly placed on the canvas. This took you longer to do than the other. How come?"

"I had done the other before."

"And you remember the motions of your hand? Is that it?" He put another canvas up. "Do it again."

Jim frowned. He stepped forward, thought a moment, and began to paint. He lost himself in a perfection of concentration. In time, he stepped back.

Walters looked at it. He swallowed hard, glanced back and forth from this painting to the one Jim had done at first. He lifted the painting carefully from the easel and placed it beside the other.

They looked identical.

The sun was just lighting the horizon as they drove back to the office. Walters said, "I'm going in there and sleep on the cot. Can you get back around three this afternoon?"

"Sure."

Jim drove home, slept, ate, and was back again by three.

"This is a devil of a puzzle," said Walters, leaning back at

his desk and blowing out a cloud of smoke. "I've had half a dozen experts squint at one of those paintings. I've been offered five thousand, even though they don't know the artist's name. Then I showed them the other painting and they almost fell through the floor. It isn't possible, but each stroke appears identical. How do you feel?"

"Better. And I've remembered something. Let's look at your model."

They went to the big model of the mansion, and Jim touched the upper story of the tower. "Have some of the boys sketch this. Then compare the sketches with photographs."

Soon they were looking at sketches and photographs side by side. The sketches showed the tower shutters perfect. The photographs showed several slats of the shutters broken.

Walters questioned the men, who insisted the shutters were perfect. After they left, Jim said, "Everyone who sketched that place wasn't drugged. And the cameras certainly weren't drugged."

Walters said, "Let's take a look." They drove out past the mansion, and the shutters looked perfect. A new photograph showed the same broken slats.

Back at the office, Walters said, "Just what are we up against here?"

Jim said, "I can think of two possibilities."

"Let's hear them."

"Often you can do the same thing several different ways. A man, for instance, can go from one coastal town to another on foot, riding a horse, by car, by plane, or in a speedboat."

"Granted."

"A hundred years ago, the list would have been shorter."

Walters nodded thoughtfully. "I follow you. Go on."

"Whoever sees those shutters as perfect is, for the time being, in an abnormal mental state. How did he get here? We've assumed drugs were used. But just as there are new ways of going from one city to another, so there may be new ways of passing from one mental state to another. Take subliminal advertising, for instance, where the words,

'THIRSTY,' 'THIRSTY,' 'BEER,' may be flashed on the screen too fast to be consciously seen."

"It's illegal."

"Suppose someone found out how to do it undetected, and decided to try it out on a small scale. What about nearly imperceptible *verbal* clues instead of visual ones?"

Walters' eyes narrowed. "We'll analyze every sound coming out of that place and check for any kind of suspicious sensory stimulus whatever. What's your other idea?"

"Well, go back to your travel analogy. Going from one place to another, any number of animals can outrun, outfly, and outswim a man. Let Man work on the problem long enough, and roll up to the starting line in his rocket-plane, and the result will be different. But until Man has time to concentrate enough thought and effort, the nonhuman creature has an excellent chance to beat him. There are better fliers, better swimmers, better fighters, better—"

Walters frowned. "Better *suggestionists*? Like the snake that's said to weave hypnotically?"

"Yes, and the wasp that stings the trapdoor spider, when other wasps are fought off."

"Hmm. Maybe. But I incline to the subliminal advertising theory myself." He looked at the mansion. "Where would they keep the device?"

"Why not the tower?"

Walters nodded. "It's an easy place to guard, and to shut off from visitors."

Jim said, "It might explain those shutters. They might not care to risk painters and repairmen up there."

Walters knocked the ash off his cigar. "But how do we get in there to find out?"

They studied the model. Walters said, "Say we send in a 'building inspector.' They'll knock him out, hallucinate a complete series of incidents in his mind, and send him out totally ignorant. If we try to raid the place in a group, they'll vanish with the help of that machine. But there must be *some* way."

Jim said thoughtfully, "Those trees overhang the room."

"They do, don't they?"

The two men studied the trees and the tower.

Jim touched one of the arching limbs. "What if we lowered a rope from here?"

Walters tied an eraser on a string and fastened the string to a limb. The eraser hung by the uppermost tower window. Walters scowled, snapped on the intercom, and asked for several of his men. Then he turned to Jim. "We'll see what Cullen thinks. He's done some jobs like this."

Cullen had sharp eyes and a mobile face that grew unhappy as he listened to Walters. Finally, he shook his head. "No, thanks. Ask me to go up a wall, or the side of a building. But not down out of a tree branch on the end of a rope."

He gave the eraser a little flip with his finger. It swung in circles, hit the wall, and bounced away.

"Say I'm actually up there. It's night. The rope swings. The limb bobs up and down. The tree sways. All to a different rhythm. I'm spinning around on the end of this rope. One second this shutter is one side of me. The next second it's on the other side and five feet away. A job is a job, but this is one I don't want."

Walters turned to Jim after Cullen went out. "That settles that."

Jim looked at the tree limb. Two or three weeks from today, he told himself, the memories would come flooding back. The people who had done it would get away, and do it again. And he would have those memories.

Jim glanced at Walters stubbornly. "I am going to climb that tree."

The night was still, with a dark overcast sky as Jim felt the rough bark against the insides of his arms. He hitched up the belt that circled the tree, then pulled up one foot, then another as he sank the climbing irons in higher up. He could hear Cullen's advice: "Practice, study the model, do each step over and over in your head. Then, when you're actually do-

ing it and when things get tight, *hold your mind on what to do next.* Do that. *Then* think of the next step."

Jim was doing this as the dark lawn dropped steadily away. He felt the tree trunk grow gradually more slender, then begin to widen. He worked his way carefully above the limb, refastened the belt, and felt a puff of warm air touch his face and neck, like a leftover from the warm day. Somewhere, a radio was playing.

He climbed, aware now of the rustling around him of leaves.

The trunk widened again, and he knew he was at the place where the trunk separated into the limbs that arched out to form the crown of the tree.

He pulled himself up carefully, and took his eyes from the tree for a moment to look toward the mansion. He saw the slanting tile roof of an entirely different house, light shining down from a dormer window. He glanced around, to see the looming steep-roofed tower of the mansion in the opposite direction. He realized he must have partially circled the tree and lost his sense of direction.

He swallowed and crouched in the cleft between the limbs till he was sure he knew which limb arched over the tower. He fastened the belt and started slowly up. As he climbed, the limb arched, to become more and more nearly horizontal. At the same time, the limb became more slender. It began to respond to his movements, swaying slightly as he climbed. Now he was balancing on it, the steep roof of the tower shining faintly ahead of him. He remembered that he had to take off the climbing irons, lest they foul in the rope later on. As he twisted to do this, his hands trembled. He forced his breath to come steadily. He looked ahead to the steep, slanting roof of the tower.

The limb was already almost level. If he crawled further, it would sag under him. He would be climbing head down. He glanced back, and his heart began to pound. To go back, he would have to inch backwards along the narrow limb.

Cullen's words came to him: "When things get tight, *hold*

your mind on what to do next. Do that. *Then* think of the next step."

He inched ahead. The limb began to sag.

There was a rustling of leaves.

The limb swayed. It fell, and rose, beneath him.

He clung to it, breathing hard.

He inched further. The leaves rustled. The limb pressed up, then fell away. He shut his eyes, his forehead tight against the bark, and crept ahead. After a time, he seemed to feel himself tip to one side. His eyes opened.

The tower was almost beneath him.

With his left arm, he clung tightly to the limb. With his right, he felt carefully for the rope tied to his belt. He worked one end of the rope forward and carefully looped it around the limb. He tied the knot that he had practiced over and over, then tested it, and felt it hold.

A breeze stirred the leaves. The limb began to sway.

The dark lawn below seemed to reach up and he felt himself already falling. He clung hard to the limb and felt his body tremble all over. Then he knew he had to go through the rest of his plan without hesitation, lest he lose his nerve completely.

He sucked in a deep breath, swung over the limb, let go with one hand, caught the rope, then caught it with the other hand, looped the rope around one ankle, and started to slide down.

The rope swung. The limb dipped, then lifted. The tree seemed to sway slightly.

Jim clung, his left foot clamping the loop of the rope passed over his right ankle. The swaying, dipping, and whirling began to die down. His hands felt weak and tired.

He slid gradually down the rope. Then the shutter was right beside him. He reached out, put his hand through the break in the slats, and lifted the iron catch. The hinges of the shutters screeched as he pulled them open.

A dead black oblong hung before him.

He reached out, and felt no sash in the opening. He climbed higher on the rope, pushed away from the building,

and as he swung back, stepped across, caught the frame, and dropped inside.

The shutters screeched as he pulled them shut, but the house remained quiet. He stood still for a long moment, then unsnapped a case on his belt, and took out a little polarizing flashlight. He carefully thumbed the stud that turned the front lens. A dim beam faintly lit the room.

There was a glint of metal, then another. Shiny parallel lines ran from the ceiling to floor in front of him. There was an odd faint odor.

The house was quiet. A shift of the wind brought the distant sound of recorded music.

Carefully, Jim eased the stud of the flashlight further around, so the light grew a trifle brighter.

The vertical lines looked like bars.

He stepped forward and peered into the darkness.

Behind the bars, something stirred.

Jim reached back, unbuttoned the flap of his hip pocket and gripped the cool metal of his gun.

Something moved behind the bars. It reached out, bunched itself, reached out. Something large and dark slid up the bars.

Jim raised the gun.

A hissing voice said quietly, "You are from some sort of law-enforcement agency? Good."

Jim slid his thumb toward the stub of the light, so he could see more clearly. But the faint hissing voice went on, "Don't. It will do no good to see me."

Jim's hand tightened on the gun at the same instant that his mind asked a question.

The voice said, "Who am I? Why am I here? If I tell you, it will strain your mind to believe me. Let me show you."

The room seemed to pivot, then swung around him faster and faster. A voice spoke to him from all sides; then something lifted him up, and at an angle.

He stared at the dial, rapped it with his finger. The needle didn't move from its pin. He glanced at the blue-green planet on the screen. Photon pressure was zero, and there was

nothing to do but try to land on chemical rockets. As he strapped himself into the acceleration chair, he began to really appreciate the size of his bad luck.

Any solo space pilot, he told himself, should be a good mechanic. And an individual planetary explorer should be his own pilot, to save funds. Moreover, anyone planning to explore Ludt VI, with its high gravity and pressure, and its terrific psychic stress, should be strong and healthy.

These requirements made Ludt VI almost the exclusive preserve of big organizations with teams of specialists. They sent out heavily equipped expeditions, caught a reasonable quota of spat, trained them on the way home, and sold the hideous creatures at magnificent prices to the proprietors of every dream parlor in the system. From this huge income, they paid their slightly less huge costs, and made a safe moderate profit on their investment. With a small expedition, it was different.

A small expedition faced risk, and a one-man expedition was riskiest of all. But if it succeeded, the trained spat brought the same huge price, and there were no big-ship bills for fuel, specialists, power equipment, and insurance. This, he thought, had almost been a successful trip. There were three nearly trained spat back in his sleeping compartment.

But, though he was a competent trainer, a skilled explorer, a passable pilot, and in good physical condition, he was no mechanic. He didn't know how to fix what had gone wrong.

He sat back and watched the rim of the world below swing up in the deep blue sky.

There was a gray fuzziness. Jim was standing in the dark, seeing the bars shining faintly before him.

The black knot still clung to the bars.

Somewhere in the old mansion, a phone began to ring.

Jim said, in a low voice, "You were the pilot?"

"No. I was the spat. The others died in the crash. Some of your race found me and we made a—an agreement. But it has worked out differently here than I expected. The experiences I stimulate in your minds are enjoyable to you and

to me. Yet either the structure of your brains is different from that of the pilot, or you lack training in mind control. You cannot wipe away these experiences afterward, and though I can do it for you easily, it is only temporary."

A door opened and shut downstairs. There was a sound of feet on the staircase.

The hissing began again. "You must go and bring help."

Jim thought of the rope and the trees. His hand tightened on the gun and he made no move toward the window.

The hissing sound said, "I see your difficulty. I will help you."

There was the crack of a rifle, then several shots outside. Jim swung the shutter open, felt a faint dizziness, and looked down on a warm sunlit lawn some thirty feet below.

A hissing voice said, "Take hold the rope. Now carefully step out. Loop the rope with your foot."

Somewhere in Jim's mind, as he did this, there was an uneasiness. He wondered at it as he climbed up the rope to the bar overhead, swung up onto the bar, slipped and nearly lost his grip. He could see the bar was steady and solid, and he wondered as it seemed to move under him. The green lawn was such a short distance down that there clearly was little danger, and he wondered why his breath came fast as he swung around on the bar, slid down to a sort of resting place where he put on climbing irons before starting down again. Always on the way down, the whistling voice told him that it was just a few feet more, just a few feet, as bit by bit he made his way down, and suddenly heard shots, shouts, and a repeated scream.

Jim stepped off onto the soft lawn, stumbled, and knelt to take off the climbing irons. His heart pounded like a trip-hammer. He realized there was a blaze of spotlights around him. He saw lights coming on in the mansion, and memory returned in a rush. He drew in a deep shaky breath, glanced at the tree, then saw a little knot of people near the base of the tower. He walked over, recognized Walters in the glow of the lights and saw a still figure on the ground.

Walters said, "I shouldn't have let him try it. Cover his face, Cullen."

Cullen bent to draw a coat up over the head of the motionless figure, which was twisted sidewise.

Jim looked down.

He saw his own face.

He was aware of darkness and of something hard beneath him. Voices came muffled from somewhere nearby. He heard the sound of a phone set in its cradle, the slam of a door, the scrape of glass on glass. He breathed and recognized a choking smell of cigar smoke.

Jim sat up.

Nearby was the model of the mansion. Jim swung carefully to his feet, made his way across the room, and opened the door to the next office. He blinked in the bright light, then saw Walters look up and grin. "One more night like this and I retire. How do you feel?"

"I ache all over and I'm dizzy. How did I get here?"

"I was afraid your going in there might misfire and touch off their escape, so I had the place surrounded. We saw you go in, there was about a five-minute pause, and the shutters seemed to come open. A figure came out. Then there was the crack of a rifle from the dormer window of a house across the street. I sent some men into that house, and the rest of us closed in on the mansion. We used the spotlights on our cars to light the place. We'd just found what we thought was your body—with a broken neck—when there was a thud behind us. There you were, and the other body was gone.

"Right then, I thought it was going to be the same as usual. But this time we nailed several men and women in quite a state of confusion. Some of them have fingerprints that match those from the first place we raided. We don't have the equipment yet, because that tower staircase was boarded up tight . . . What's wrong?"

Jim told his own version, adding, "Since that shot came *before* I opened the shutters, the 'figure' you saw go up the rope must have been an illusion, to fool whoever had the gun across the street. And since I heard someone running up the

stairs a few minutes before you came in, I don't see how the stairs can be boarded up."

Walters sat up straight. "*Another* illusion!"

Jim said, "It would be nice to know if there's any limit to those illusions."

Walters said, "This afternoon, we tried looking at those shutters through field glasses. Beyond about four hundred feet, you could see the broken slats. So there's a limit. But if there's no equipment, this is uncanny, 'spat' or no 'spat.'"

Jim shook his head. "I don't know. You can use the same electromagnetic laws and similar components to make all kinds of devices—radios, television sets, electronic computers. What you make depends mainly on how you put the parts together. It may be that in the different conditions on some other planet, types of nerve components similar to those we use for thought might be used to create dangerous illusions in the minds of other creatures."

"That still leaves us with a problem. What do we do with this thing?"

"I got the impression it was like a merchant who has to sell his wares to live. Let me go back and see if we can make an agreement with it."

"I'll go with you."

Jim shook his head. "One of us has to stay beyond that four-hundred-foot limit."

The stairs were narrow leading up into the tower. Jim found weary men amidst plaster and bits of board at a solid barricade on the staircase. He scowled at it, then shouted up the stairs, "I want to talk to you!"

There was a sort of twist in the fabric of things. Jim found himself staring at the wall beside the stairs, its plaster gone and bits of board torn loose. The staircase itself was open. He started up.

Behind him, a man still staring at the wall said, "Did you see that? He went *around* somehow."

The back of Jim's neck prickled. He reached a tall door, opened it, turned, and he stood where he had been before.

There was a faint hissing. "I am glad you came back. I can't keep this up forever."

"We want to make an agreement with you. Otherwise, we'll have to use force."

"There is no need of that. I ask only food, water, and a chance to use my faculties. And I would be very happy if the atmospheric pressure around me could be increased. Falling pressure tires me so that it is hard for me to keep self-control."

Jim thought of the first night, when there had been the appearance of light on mansion and grounds, but heavy clouds and only a thin moon in the sky.

The hissing voice said, "It had stormed, with a sharp fall in atmospheric pressure. I was exhausted and creating a wrong illusion. Can you provide what I need?"

"The food, water, and pressure chamber, yes. I don't know about the opportunity to 'use your faculties.' "

"There is a painting in the world now that wasn't there before. You and I did that."

"What are you driving at?"

"I can't increase skill where there has been no practice, no earnest thought or desire. I can't help combine facts or memories where none have been stored. But within these limits I can help you and others to a degree of concentration few men of your world know."

"Could you teach us to concentrate this way on our own?"

"I don't know. We would have to try it. Meanwhile, I have been here long enough to have learned that your race has used horses to extend their powers of movement, dogs to increase their ability to trail by scent, cows and goats to convert indigestible grass and leaves into foodstuffs. These all were your partners in the physical world. It seems to me that I am much the same, but in the mental world."

Jim hesitated. "Meanwhile, you can help us to forget these dream lives?"

"Easily. But, as I say, the effect is not permanent."

Jim nodded. "I'll see what we can do."

He went to tell Walters, who listened closely, then picked up the phone.

Early the next morning, Jim climbed the steps to the high narrow door of the tower, put on dark glasses and went in. Right behind him came a corporal with a creepie-peepie TV transmitter. From outside came the windmill roar of helicopters, and, high up, the rumble of jets.

The corporal opened the shutter and spoke quietly into the microphone. A hissing voice spoke in Jim's mind. "I am ready."

Jim said, "This entire place is being watched by television. If there is any important difference between what observers here report and what the cameras show, this place and everything in it will be destroyed a few seconds later."

"I understand," said the hissing voice. Then it told him how to loosen one of the bars, and Jim loosened it and stood back.

There was the sound of footsteps on the staircase. A large heavy box with one end hinged and open was thrust in the doorway.

On the floor, something bunched and unbunched, and moved past into the box. Jim closed the box and snapped shut the padlock. Men lifted it and started down the staircase. Jim and the corporal followed. As they went out the front door, heavy planks were thrown across to a waiting truck. Sweating men in khaki carried the box up the planks into the truck. Then the rear doors swung shut, the engine roared, and the truck moved away.

Jim thought of the truck's destination, a pressure tank in a concrete blockhouse under a big steel shed out in the desert.

He looked around and saw Walters, who smiled at him and held out a slim envelope. "Good work," said Walters. "And I imagine some hundreds of ex-addicts reclaimed from mental hospitals are going to echo those sentiments."

Jim thanked him, and Walters led him to the car, saying, "Now what you need is sleep, and plenty of it."

"And how!"

Once home, Jim fell into an exhausted sleep, and had a

nightmare. In the nightmare, he dreamed that he woke up, and found himself in a bed in a room where a light curtain blew in at the window, and the morning sun shone brightly in.

He sat up, and looked around carefully at the furniture, and felt the solid wall of the room as he asked himself a question that he knew would bother him again.

Which was the nightmare?

Then he remembered his fear as he climbed the tree, and Cullen's advice: "When things get tight, *hold your mind on what to do next.* Do that. *Then* think of the next step."

He thought a moment, then lay back and smiled. He might not be absolutely certain this was real. But even if it wasn't, he felt sure he would win in the end.

No nightmare could last forever.

THE LADY WHO SAILED THE SOUL

Cordwainer Smith

I

The story ran—how did the story run? Everyone knew the reference to Helen America and Mr. Gray-no-more, but no one knew exactly how it happened. Their names were welded to the glittering timeless jewelry of romance. Sometimes they were compared to Heloise and Abelard, whose story had been found among books in a long-buried library. Other ages were to compare their life with the weird, ugly-lovely story of the Go-Captain Taliano and the Lady Dolores Oh.

Out of it all, two things stood forth—their love and the image of the great sails, tissue-metal wings with which the bodies of people finally fluttered out among the stars.

Mention him and others knew her. Mention her and they knew him. He was the first of the inbound sailors, and she was the lady who sailed the *Soul.*

It was lucky that people lost their pictures. The romantic hero was a very young-looking man, prematurely old and still quite sick when the romance came. And Helen America, she was a freak, but a nice one; a grim, solemn, sad little brunette who had been born amid the laughter of humanity. She was not the tall, confident heroine of the actresses who later played her.

She was, however, a wonderful sailor. That much was true. And with her body and mind she loved Mr. Gray-no-more, showing a devotion which the ages can neither surpass nor forget. History may scrape off the patina of their names

and appearances, but even history can do no more than brighten the love of Helen America and Mr. Gray-no-more.

Both of them, one must remember, were sailors.

II

She was a child and she was playing with a spieltier. She got tired of letting it be a chicken, so she reversed it into the fur-bearing position. When she extended the ears to the optimum development, the little animal looked odd indeed. A light breeze blew the animal-toy on its side, but the spieltier good-naturedly righted itself and munched contentedly on the carpet.

The little girl suddenly clapped her hands and broke forth with the question, "Mama, what's a sailor?"

"There used to be sailors, darling, a long time ago. They were brave men who took the ships out to the stars, the very first ships that took people away from our sun. And they had big sails. I don't know how it worked, but somehow the light pushed them, and it took them a quarter of a life to make a single one-way trip. People only lived a hundred and sixty years at that time, darling, and it was forty years each way, but we don't need sailors any more."

"Of course not," said the child. "We can go right away. You've taken me to Mars and you've taken me to New Earth too, haven't you, Mama? And we can go anywhere and it only takes one afternoon."

"That's planoforming, honey. But it was a long time before the people knew how to planoform. And they could not travel the way we could, so they made great big sails. They made sails so big that they could not build them on Earth. They had to hang them out halfway between Earth and Mars. And you know, a funny thing happened . . . Did you ever hear about the time the world froze?"

"No, Mama. What was that story about?"

"Well, a long time ago, one of these sails drifted and people tried to save it because it took a lot of work to build it.

But the sail was so large that it got between Earth and the sun. And there was no more sunshine, just night all the time. And it got very cold on Earth. All the atomic power plants were busy, and all the air began to smell funny. And the people were worried and in a few days they pulled the sail back out of the way. And the sunshine came again."

"Mama, were there ever any girl sailors?"

A curious expression crossed over the mother's face. "There was one. You'll hear about her when you are older. Her name was Helen America and she sailed the *Soul* out to the stars. She is the only woman that ever did it. And that is a wonderful story."

The mother dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

The child said: "Mama, tell me now. What's the story all about?"

At this point the mother became very firm and she said: "Honey, there are some things that you are not old enough to hear yet. But when you are a big girl, I'll tell you all about them."

The mother was an honest woman. She reflected a moment, and then she added, "Unless you read about it yourself first."

III

Helen America was to make her place in the history of mankind, but she started badly. The name itself was a misfortune.

No one ever knew who her father was. The officials agreed to keep the matter quiet.

Her mother was not in doubt. Her mother was the celebrated she-man Mona Muggeridge, a woman who had campaigned a hundred times for the lost cause of complete identity of the two sexes. She had been a feminist beyond all limits, and when Mona Muggeridge, the one and only *Miss* Muggeridge, announced to the press that she was going to have a baby, that was first-class news.

Mona Muggeridge went further. She proclaimed that no woman should have consecutive children with the same man, that women should be advised to pick different fathers for their children, so as to diversify and beautify the race. She capped it all by announcing that she, Miss Muggeridge, had selected the perfect father and would inevitably produce the only perfect child.

Miss Muggeridge, a bony, pompous blonde, stated that she would avoid the nonsense of marriage and family names, and that therefore the child, if a boy, would be called John America, and, if a girl, Helen America.

Thus it happened that little Helen America was born with the correspondents in the press services waiting outside the delivery room. News screens flashed the picture of a pretty three-kilogram baby.

That was just the beginning. Mona Muggeridge was belligerent. She insisted, even after the baby had been photographed for the thousandth time, that this was the finest child ever born. She pointed to the child's perfections. She demonstrated all the foolish fondness of a doting mother, but felt that she, the great crusader, had discovered this fondness for the first time.

Helen America was a wonderful example of raw human material triumphing over its tormentors. By the time she was four years old, she spoke six languages, and was beginning to decipher some of the old Martian texts. At the age of five she was sent to school. Her fellow school children immediately invented a rhyme:

Helen, Helen,
Fat and dumb,
Doesn't know where
Her daddy's from!

Helen took all this and perhaps it was an accident of genetics that she grew to become a compact little person—a deadly serious little brunette. Challenged by lessons,

haunted by publicity, she became careful and reserved about friendships, and desperately lonely.

When Helen America was sixteen, her mother came to a bad end. Mona Muggeridge eloped with a man she announced to be the perfect husband for the perfect marriage hitherto overlooked by mankind. The perfect husband was a skilled machine polisher. He already had a wife and four children. He drank beer and his interest in Miss Muggeridge seems to have been a mixture of good-natured comradeship and a sensible awareness of her motherly bankroll. The planetary yacht on which they eloped broke the regulations with off-schedule flight. The bridegroom's wife and children had alerted police. The result was a collision with a robot barge which left both bodies identifiable.

At sixteen Helen was already famous, and at seventeen already forgotten, and very much alone.

IV

This was the age of sailors. The thousands of photo-reconnaissance and measuring missiles had begun to come back with their harvest from the stars. Planet after planet swam into the ken of mankind. The new worlds became known as the interstellar search missiles brought back photographs, samples of atmosphere, measurements of gravity, cloud coverage, chemical makeup and the like.

Of the very numerous missiles which returned from their two- or three-hundred-year voyages, five brought back reports of New Earth, a planet so much like Terra itself that it could be settled.

The first sailors had gone out almost a hundred years before. They had started with small sails not over two thousand miles square. Gradually the size of the sails increased. The technique of adiabatic packing and the carrying of passengers in individual pods reduced the damage done to the human cargo. It was great news when a sailor returned to Earth, a man born and reared under the light of another

star. He was a man who had spent a month of agony and pain, bringing a few sleep-frozen settlers, guiding the immense light-pushed sailing craft which had managed the trip in an objective-time period of forty years.

Mankind got to know the look of a sailor. There was a plantigrade walk to the way he put his whole body on bed, couch or ground. There was a sharp, stiff, mechanical swing to his neck. The man was neither young nor old. He had been awake and conscious for forty years, thanks to the drug which made possible a kind of limited awareness. By the time the psychologists interrogated him, first for the proper authorities of the Instrumentality and later for the news releases, it was plain enough that he thought the forty years were about a month. He never volunteered to sail back, because he had actually aged forty years. He was a young man, young in his hopes and wishes, but a man who had burned up a quarter of a human lifetime in a single agonizing experience.

At this time Helen America went to Cambridge. Lady Joan's College was the finest woman's college in the Atlantic world. Cambridge had reconstructed its protohistoric traditions, and the neo-British had recaptured that fine edge of engineering which reconnected their traditions with the earliest antiquity.

Naturally enough the language was cosmopolite Earth and not archaic English, but the students were proud to live at a reconstructed university very much as the archeological evidence showed it to have been before the period of darkness and troubles came upon the Earth.

Helen shone a little in this renaissance.

News release services watched Helen in the cruelest possible fashion. They revived her name and the story of her mother. She had put in for six professions, and her last choice was sailor. It happened that she was the first woman to make the application—first because she was the only woman young enough to qualify who had also passed the scientific requirements.

Her picture was beside his on the screens before they ever met each other.

Actually, she was not anything like that at all. She had suffered so much in her childhood from *"Helen, Helen, fat and dumb"* that she was competitive only on a coldly professional basis. She hated and loved and missed the mother she had lost, and she resolved so fiercely not to be like her mother that she became an embodied antithesis of Mona.

The mother had been horsy, blonde, big—the kind of woman who is a feminist because she is not very feminine. Helen never thought about her own femininity. She just worried about herself. Her face would have been round if it had been plump, but she was not plump. Black-haired, dark-eyed, small and slim, she was a genetic demonstration of her unknown father. Her teachers often feared her. She was a pale, quiet girl, and she always knew her subject.

Her fellow-students had joked about her for a few weeks and then most of them had banded together against the indecency of the press. When a newsframe came out with something ridiculous about the long-dead Mona, the whisper went through Lady Joan's: "Keep Helen away. Those people are at it again."

They protected her, and it was only by chance that she saw her own face in a newsframe. There was the face of a man beside her. He looked like a little old monkey, she thought. Then she read, "PERFECT GIRL WANTS TO BE A SAILOR. SHOULD SAILOR HIMSELF DATE PERFECT GIRL?" Her cheeks burned with old helpless embarrassment and rage, but she had grown too expert at being herself to do what she might have done in her teens—hate the man. She knew it wasn't his fault either. It wasn't even the fault of the news services. She had only to be herself, if she could ever find out what that really meant.

Their dates, when they came, had the properties of a nightmare. A news service notified Helen that she had been awarded a week's holiday in New Madrid—with the sailor from the stars.

Helen refused.

Then *he* refused too, and he was a little too prompt for her liking. She became curious about him.

Two weeks passed, and in the office of the news service a treasurer brought two slips of paper to the director. They were the vouchers for Helen America and Mr. Gray-no-more to obtain the utmost in preferential luxury at New Madrid.

The treasurer said, "These have been issued and registered as gifts with the Instrumentality, sir. Should they be canceled?"

The executive of the news service had his fill of stories that day, and he felt humane. On an impulse he commanded the treasurer, "Give those tickets to them again. No publicity. We'll keep out of it. If they don't want us, they don't have to have us. Push it along. That's all. Go."

The tickets went back out to Helen. She had made the highest record ever reported at the university and she needed a rest. When the news service woman gave her the ticket, she said, "Is this a trick?"

Assured that it was not, she then asked, "Is that man coming?"

She couldn't say "*the* sailor"—it sounded too much like the way people had always talked about herself—and she honestly didn't remember his other name at the moment.

The woman did not know.

"Do I have to see him?" said Helen.

"No," said the woman. "The gift is unconditional."

Helen laughed, almost grimly. "All right, I'll take it and say thanks. But one picturemaker—mind you, just one—and I walk out. Or I may walk out for no reason at all. Is that all right?"

It was.

Four days later Helen was in the pleasure world of New Madrid, and a master of the dances was presenting her to an odd, intense old man whose hair was black.

"Junior Scientist Helen America—Sailor of the Stars Mr. Gray-no-more."

He looked at them shrewdly and smiled a kindly, experi-

enced smile. He added the empty phrase of his profession, "I have had the honor and I withdraw."

They were alone together on the edge of the dining room. The sailor looked at her very sharply indeed and then said, "Who are you? Are you somebody I have already met? Should I remember you? There are too many people here on Earth. What do we do next? What are we supposed to do? Would you like to sit down?"

Helen said one "Yes" to all those questions and never dreamed that the single *yes* would be articulated by hundreds of great actresses, each one in the actress's own special way, across the centuries to come.

They did sit down.

How the rest of it happened, neither one was ever quite sure.

She had had to quiet him almost as though he were a hurt person in the House of Recovery. She explained the dishes to him, and when he still could not choose, she gave the robot selections for him. She warned him, kindly enough, about manners when he forgot the simple ceremony of eating which everyone knows, such as standing up to unfold the napkin or putting the scraps into the solvent tray and the silverware into the transfer.

At last he relaxed and did not look so old.

Momentarily forgetting the thousand times she had been asked silly questions herself, she asked him, "Why did *you* become a sailor?"

He stared at her in open-eyed inquiry, as though she had spoken to him in an unknown language and expected a reply. Finally he mumbled the answer, "Are you—you, too—saying that—that I shouldn't have done it?"

Her hand went to her mouth in instant apology. "No, no, no. You see, I myself have put in to be a sailor."

He looked at her, his young-old eyes open wide. He did not stare, but merely seemed to be trying to understand words, each one of which he could comprehend individually but which in sum amounted to sheer madness. She did not

turn away from his look, odd though it was. Once again, she had the chance to note the indescribable peculiarity of this man who had managed enormous sails out in the blind, empty black between untwinkling stars.

He was young as a boy. The hair which gave him his name was glossy black. His beard must have been removed permanently, because his skin was like that of a middle-aged woman—well-kept, pleasant, but showing the unmistakable wrinkles of age and betraying no sign of normal stubble. The skin had age without experience. The muscles had grown older, but they did not show *how* the person had grown.

Helen had learned to be an acute observer of people as her mother took up with one fanatic after another; she knew that people carry their secret biographies written in the muscles of their faces, and that a stranger passing on the street tells us (whether he wishes to or not) all his inmost intimacies. If we but look sharply enough, and in the right light, we know whether fear or hope or amusement has tallied the hours of his days, we divine the sources and outcome of his most secret sensuous pleasures, we catch the dim but persistent reflections of those other people who have left the imprints of their personality on him in turn.

All this was absent from Mr. Gray-no-more.

He had age but not the stigmata of age; he had growth without the normal markings of growth; he had lived without living, in a time and world in which most people stayed young while living too much.

He was the uttermost opposite to her mother that Helen had ever seen, and with a pang of undirected apprehension Helen realized that this man meant a great deal to her future life, whether she wished him to or not. She saw in him a young bachelor, prematurely old, a man whose love had been given to emptiness and horror, not to the tangible rewards and disappointments of human life.

He had had all space for his mistress, and space had used him harshly. Still young, he was old; already old, he was young.

The mixture was one which she knew that she had never seen before, and which she suspected that no one else had ever seen, either. He had in the beginning of life the grief, compassion, and wisdom which most people find only at the end.

It was he who broke the silence. "You did say—didn't you? —that you yourself had put in to be a sailor?"

Even to herself, her answer sounded silly and girlish. "I'm the first woman ever to qualify with the necessary scientific subjects while still young enough to pass the physical . . ."

"You must be an unusual girl," said he mildly.

Helen realized, with a thrill, a sweet and bitterly real hope that this young-old man from the stars had never heard of the "perfect child" who had been laughed at in the moments of being born, the girl who had all America for a father, who was famous and unusual and alone so terribly much so that she could not even imagine being ordinary, happy, decent, or simple.

She thought to herself, *It would take a wise freak who sails in from the stars to overlook who I am,* but to him she simply said, "It's no use talking about being 'unusual.' I'm tired of this Earth and since I don't have to die to leave it, I think I would like to sail to the stars. I've got less to lose than you may think . . ." She was about to tell him about Mona Muggeridge, but she stopped in time.

The compassionate gray eyes were upon her, and at this point it was he, not she, who was in control of the situation. She looked at the eyes themselves. They had stayed open for forty years, in the blackness near to pitch darkness of the tiny cabin. The dim dials had shone like blazing suns upon his tired retinas before he was able to turn his eyes away. From time to time he had looked out at the black nothing to see the silhouettes of his dials, almost blackness against total blackness, as the miles of their sweep sucked up the push of light itself and accelerated him and his frozen cargo at almost immeasurable speeds across an ocean of unfathomable silence. Yet what he had done, she had asked to do.

The stare of his gray eyes yielded to a smile of his lips. In that young-old face, masculine in structure and feminine in texture, the smile had a connotation of tremendous kindness. She felt singularly much like weeping when she saw him smile in that particular way at her. Was that what people learned between the stars? To care for other people very much indeed and to spring upon them only to love and not to devour?

In a measured voice he said, "I believe you. You're the first one that I have believed. All these people have said that they wanted to be sailors too, even when they looked at me. They could not know what it means, but they said it anyhow, and I hated them for saying it. You, though—perhaps you will sail among the stars, but I hope that you will not."

As though waking from a dream, he looked around the luxurious room, with the gilt-and-enamel robot-waiters standing aside with negligent elegance. They were designed to be always present and never obtrusive: This was a difficult esthetic effect to achieve, but their designer had achieved it.

The rest of the evening moved with the inevitability of good music. He went with her to the forever-lonely beach which the architects of New Madrid had built beside the hotel. They talked a little, they looked at each other, and they made love with an affirmative certainty which seemed outside themselves. He was very tender, and he did not realize that in a genetically sophisticated society, he was the first lover she had ever wanted or had ever had. (How could the daughter of Mona Muggeridge want a lover or a mate or child?)

On the next afternoon, she exercised the freedom of her time and asked him to marry her. They had gone back to their private beach, which, through miracles of ultrafine miniweather adjustment, brought a Polynesian afternoon to the high, chilly plateau of central Spain.

She asked him, *she* did, to marry her, and he had refused, as tenderly and as kindly as a boy of twenty aged sixty can refuse a girl of eighteen. She did not press him; they continued the love affair.

They sat on the artificial sand of the artificial beach and dabbled their toes in the man-warmed water of the ocean. Then they lay down against an artificial sand dune which hid New Madrid from view.

"Tell me," Helen said, "may I ask again, why did you become a sailor?"

"Not so easily answered," he said. "Adventure, maybe, at least in part. And I wanted to see Earth. Couldn't afford to come in a pod. Now—well, I've enough to keep me the rest of my life. I can go back to New Earth as a passenger in a month instead of forty years—be frozen in no more time than the wink of an eye, put in my adiabatic pod, linked to the next sailing ship, and wake up home again while some other fool does the sailing."

Helen nodded. She did not bother to tell him that she knew all this.

"Out where you sail among the stars," she said, "can you tell me—can you possibly tell me anything of what it's like out there?"

His face looked inward on his soul and afterward his voice came as from an immense distance. "There are moments—or is it weeks? You can't really tell in the sail ship—when it seems —worth while. You feel—your nerve endings reach out until they touch the stars. You feel enormous."

Gradually he came back to her. "It's trite to say, of course, but you're never the same again. I don't mean just the obvious physical thing, but—you find yourself—or maybe you lose yourself. That's why," he continued, gesturing toward New Madrid, out of sight behind the sand dune, "I can't stand this. New Earth—well, it's like Earth must have been in the old days, I guess. There's something fresh about it. Here . . ."

"I know," said Helen America, and she did. The slightly decadent, slightly corrupt, too comfortable air of Earth must have had a stifling effect on the man from beyond the stars.

"There," he said, "you won't believe this, but sometimes the ocean's actually too cold to swim in. We have music that

doesn't come from machines, and pleasures that come from inside our own bodies without being put there. I have to get back to New Earth," he said.

Helen said nothing for a little while, concentrating on stilling the pain in her heart. "I—I—" she began.

"I know!" he said, almost savagely turning on her. "But I can't take you! You're too young; you've got a life to live and I've thrown away a quarter of mine. No, that's not right. I didn't throw it away. I wouldn't trade it back because it's given me something inside that I never had before. And it's given me you."

"But if—" she started again to argue.

"No. Don't spoil it. I'm going next week to be frozen in my pod to wait the next sail ship. I can't stand much more of this and I might weaken. That would be a terrible mistake. But we have this time together now, and we have our separate lifetimes to remember in. Don't think of anything else. There's nothing else, nothing we can do."

Helen did not tell him—then or ever—of the child they would now never have. She could have tied him to her with it, for he was an honorable man and would have married her, had she told him. But Helen, even then in her youth, wanted him to come to her of his own free will. To that marriage their child would have been an additional blessing.

There was the other alternative, of course. She could have borne the child without naming the father. But she was no Mona Muggeridge. She knew too well the terror and loneliness of being a Helen America ever to be responsible for creating another. And for the course she had laid out, there was no place for a child. So, at the end of their time in New Madrid, she let him say a real good-by. Wordless and without tears, she left.

Then she went up to an arctic city, a pleasure city where such carelessnesses are known to happen, and a confidential medical service eliminated the unborn child. Then she went back to Cambridge and confirmed her place as the first woman to sail a ship to the stars.

V

The Presiding Lord of the Instrumentality at that time was a man named Waite. Waite was not cruel; he had a job that left no room for anything but efficiency.

His aide said to him, "This girl wants to sail a ship to New Earth. Are you going to let her?"

"Why not?" said Waite. "If she fails, we will find out something eighty years from now, when the ship comes back. Don't give her any convicts, though. Convicts are too valuable as settlers to be sent on a gamble. Give her fanatics. Don't you have twenty or thirty thousand who are waiting?"

"Yes, sir, twenty-six thousand two hundred. Not counting recent additions."

"Very well," said the Lord of the Instrumentality, "give her the whole lot of them and assign her that new ship. Have we named it?"

"No, sir," said the aide.

"Name it."

The aide looked blank.

A contemptuous wise smile crossed the face of the senior bureaucrat. He said, "All right, then—name it the *Soul*—and let the *Soul* fly to the stars. And let Helen America be an angel if she wants to. Poor thing, she hasn't had much of a life on this Earth, not the way she was born and brought up. And it's no use to try and reform her, to transform her personality, when it's a lively, rich personality. It does not do any good. We don't have to punish her for being herself. Let her go. Let her have what she wants."

Waite sat up and stared at his aide and then repeated very firmly: "Let her have what she wants—*but only if she qualifies.*"

VI

Helen America did qualify. The doctors and the experts tried to warn her against it.

One technician said: "Don't you realize what this is going to mean? Forty years will pour out of your life in a single month. You leave here a girl. You will get there a woman of sixty. There will be about thirty thousand pods strung on sixteen lines behind you, and you will have the control cabin to live in. We will give you as many robots as you need, probably a dozen. You will have a main sail and a foresail and you will have to keep the two of them."

"I know. I have read the book," said Helen America. "And I sail the ship with light, and if the infrared touches that sail, I go. If I get radio interference, I pull the sails in. And if the sails fail, I wait as long as I live."

The technician looked a little cross. "There is no call for you to get tragic about it. Tragedy is easy enough to contrive. And if you want to be tragic, you can do it without destroying thirty thousand other people or wasting a large amount of Earth cargo and shipping. You can drown right here, or jump into a volcano, or get into an accident. Tragedy is not the hard part. The hard part is when you don't quite succeed and you have to keep on fighting. When you must keep going on and on and on in the face of really hopeless odds.

"Now this is the way the foresail works. That sail will be twenty thousand miles at the wide part. It tapers down and the total length will be just under 80,000 miles. It will be retracted or extended by small servo-robots. The servo-robots are radio-controlled. You had better use your radio sparingly, because these batteries have to last forty years. They have got to keep you alive."

"Yes, sir," said Helen America very contritely.

"You've got to remember what your job is. You're going because a sailor takes a lot less weight than a machine. There is no all-purpose computer built that weighs as little as you do. You go simply because you are expendable. Anyone who goes out to the stars takes one chance in three of never getting there. But you are not going because you are a leader. You are going because you are young, because you qualify

intellectually and academically—because your nerves are good. You understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Furthermore, you are going because you'll make the trip in forty years. If we send automatic devices and have them manage the sails, they would get there—possibly. But it would take them a hundred years or more, and by that time the adiabatic pod would have spoiled, most of the human cargo would not be fit for revival, and the leakage of heat would be enough to ruin the entire expedition. So remember that the tragedy and the trouble you face is mostly work. Work, and that's all it is. That is your big job."

Helen smiled. She was a short girl with rich dark hair, brown eyes, and very pronounced eyebrows, but when Helen smiled she looked almost like a child again, and a rather charming one. She said: "My job is work. I understand that, sir."

VII

In the preparation area, the make-ready was fast but not hurried. Twice the technicians urged her to take a holiday before she reported for final training. She did not accept their advice. She wanted to go forth; she knew that they knew she wanted to leave Earth forever, and she also knew they knew she was not merely her mother's daughter. She was trying, somehow, to be herself. She knew the world did not believe, but the world did not matter.

The third time they suggested a vacation, the suggestion was mandatory. She had a gloomy two months which she ended up enjoying a little bit on the wonderful islands of the Hesperides, islands which were raised when the weight of the earthports caused a new group of small archipelagoes to form below Bermuda.

She reported back, fit, healthy, and ready to go.

The senior medical officer was very blunt. "Do you really know what we are going to do to you? We are going to make you live forty years out of your life in one month."

She nodded, and he went on, "Now to give you those forty years we've got to slow down your bodily processes. After all, the sheer biological task of breathing forty years' worth of air in one month involves a factor of about five hundred to one. No lungs could stand it. Your body must circulate water. It must take in food. Most of this is going to be protein. There will be some kind of a hydrate. You'll need vitamins.

"Now, what we are going to do is slow the brain down, very much indeed, so that the brain will be working at about that five-hundred-to-one ratio. We don't want you incapable of working. Somebody has to manage the sails.

"Therefore, if you hesitate or start to think, a thought or two is going to take several weeks. Meanwhile your body can be slowed down some. But the different parts can't be slowed down at the same rate. Water, for example, we brought down to about eighty to one, food to about three hundred to one.

"You won't have time to drink forty years' worth of water. We circulate it, get it through, purify it, and get it back in your system, unles you break your link-up.

"So what you face is a month of being absolutely wide awake, on an operating table *and being operated on without anesthetic,* while doing some of the hardest work that mankind has ever found."

White of face, she nodded again when he paused, and again he continued.

"You'll have to take observations. You'll have to watch your lines with the pods of people and cargo behind you. You'll have to adjust the sails. If there is anybody surviving at your destination point, they will come out and meet you.

"At least that happens most of the times.

"I am not going to assure you you will get the ship in, and if they don't meet you, take an orbit beyond the furthest planet and either let yourself die or try to save yourself. You can't get thirty thousand people down on a planet single-handedly.

"Meanwhile, though, you've got a real job. We are going to have to build these controls right into your body. We'll start by putting valves in your chest arteries. Then we catheterize you. We are going to make an artificial colostomy that will go forward here, just in front of your hip joint. Your water intake has a certain psychological value, so that about one five-hundredth of your water we are going to leave you to drink out of a cup. The rest of it is going to go directly into your blood stream. Again about a tenth of your food will go that way. You understand that?"

"You mean," said Helen, "I eat one-tenth, and the rest goes in intravenously?"

"That's right," said the medical technician. "We will pump it into you. The concentrates are there. The reconstituter is there. Now these lines have a double connection. One set of connections runs into the maintenance machine. That will become the logistic support for your body. And these lines are the umbilical cord for a human being alone among the stars. They are your life.

"If they should break or if you should fall, you might faint for a year or two. If that happens, your local system takes over: that's the pack on your back.

"On Earth, it weighs as much as you do. You have already been drilled with the model pack. You know how easy it is to handle in space. That'll keep you going for a subjective period of about two hours. No one has ever worked out a clock yet that would match the human mind, so, instead of giving you a clock, we are giving you an odometer attached to your own pulse and we mark it off in grades. If you watch it in terms of ten-thousands of pulse beats, you may get some information out of it. I don't know what kind of information, but you may find it helpful somehow."

Helen nodded.

He looked at her sharply and then turned back to his tools, picking up a shining needle with a disk on the end.

"Now, let's get back to this. We are going to have to get right into your mind. That is a chemical too."

Helen interrupted. "You said you were not going to operate on my head."

"Just the needle. That's the only way we can get to the mind. Slow it down enough so that you will have this subjective mind operating at a rate that will make the forty years pass in a month." He smiled grimly, but the grimness changed to momentary tenderness as he took in her brave, obstinate stance, her girlish, admirable, pitiable determination.

"I won't argue it," she said. "This is as bad—and as good—as a marriage, and the stars are my bridegroom." The image of the sailor went across her mind, but she said nothing of him.

The technician went on, "We have already built in psychotic elements. You'll have to be insane to manage the sails and to survive utterly alone and be out there even a month. And the trouble is, in that month you are going to *know* it's really forty years. There is not a mirror in the place, but you'll probably find shiny surfaces to look at yourself.

"You will see yourself aging, every time you slow down to look. I don't know what the problem is going to be on that score. It's been bad enough on men.

"Your hair problem is going to be easier than men's. With the sailors we sent out, we simply had to kill all the hair roots. Otherwise the men would have been swamped in their own beards. And a tremendous amount of the nutrient would be wasted if it went into raising of hair on the face. I think what we will do is inhibit hair on the top of your head. Whether it comes out the same color or not is something you will find for yourself later. Did you ever happen to meet the sailor who came in?"

The doctor knew she had. He did not know that it was the sailor from beyond the stars who called her.

Helen managed to remain composed as she smiled at him to say: "Your technician planted a new scalp. The hair came out black and he got the nickname of Mr. Gray-no-more."

"If you are ready next Tuesday, we'll be ready too. Do you think you can possibly make it by then, my lady?"

Helen felt odd seeing this old, serious man refer to her as

"lady," but she knew he was paying respect to a profession and not just to an individual.

"Tuesday is time enough." She felt complimented that he was old-fashioned enough to know the ancient names of the days of the week and to use them. That was a sign that he had not only learned the essentials at the university but that he had picked up the elegant inconsequentials as well.

VIII

Two weeks later was twenty-one years later by the chronometers in the cabin. Helen turned for the ten-thousandth-times-ten-thousand time to scan the sails.

Her back ached with a violent throb.

She could feel the steady roar of her heart like a fast vibrator as it ticked against the time-span of her awareness. She could look down at the meter on her wrist and see the hands on the dials indicate tens of thousands of pulses very slowly.

She heard the steady whistle of air in her throat as her lungs seemed shuddering with sheer speed.

And she felt the throbbing pain of a large tube feeding water directly into her neck.

Her abdomen felt as though someone had built a fire there. The evacuation tube operated automatically, but it burned as if a coal had been held to her skin, and a catheter, which connected her bladder to another tube, stung as savagely as the prod of a scalding-hot needle.

Her head ached and her vision blurred.

But she could still see the instruments and she still could watch the sails. Now and then she could glimpse, faint as a tracery of dust, the immense skein of people and cargo that lay behind the sails.

She could not sit down.

The only way that she could be comfortable was to lean against the instrument panel, her lower ribs against the panel, her tired forehead against the meters.

Once she rested that way and realized that it was two and a half months before she got up. She knew that rest had no meaning, and she could see her face moving, a distorted image of her own face growing old in the reflections from the glass face of the "apparent weight" dial. She could look at her arms with blurring vision, note the skin tightening, loosening and tightening again as changes in temperatures affected it.

She looked out one more time at the sails and decided to take in the foresail. Wearily she dragged herself over the control panel with a servo-robot. She selected the right control and opened it for a week or so. She waited there, her heart buzzing, her throat whistling air. Finally she checked to see if the control really had been the right one, pushed again, and nothing happened.

She pushed a third time. There was no response.

Now she went back to the master panel, re-read, checked the light direction, found a certain amount of infrared pressure which she should have been picking up. The sails had very gradually risen to something not far from the speed of light itself because they moved fast with the one side dulled; the pods behind, sealed against time and eternity, swam obediently in an almost perfect weightlessness.

Her reading had been correct.

The sail *was* wrong.

She went back to the emergency panel and pressed. Nothing happened.

She broke out a repair robot and sent it out to effect repairs, punching the papers as rapidly as she could, to give instructions. The robot went out and an instant (three days) later it replied. The panel on the repair robot rang forth, "Does not conform."

She sent a second repair robot. That had no effect either.

She sent a third, the last. Three bright lights. "Does not conform" stared at her. She moved the servo-robots to the other side of the sails and pulled hard.

The sail was still not at the right angle.

She stood there wearied and lost in space, and she prayed.

She thought she had prayed very fervently and she hoped that she would get an answer to her prayer.

It did not work out that way. She was bewildered, alone.

There was no sun. There was nothing except the tiny cabin and herself, more alone than any woman had ever been before. She sensed the thrill and ripple of her muscles as they went through days of adjustment while her mind noticed only the matter of minutes. She leaned forward, forced herself not to relax, and finally she remembered that one of the official busybodies had included a weapon.

What she would use a weapon for, she did not know.

It pointed. It had a range of two hundred thousand miles. The target could be selected automatically.

She got down on her knees trailing the abdominal tube and the feeding tube and the catheter tubes and the helmet wires, each one running back to the panel. She crawled underneath the panel for the servo-robots and she pulled out a written manual. She finally found the right frequency for the weapon's controls. She set the weapon up and went to the window.

At the last moment she thought, "Perhaps the fools are going to make me shoot the window out. It ought to have been designed to shoot through the window without hurting it. That's the way they *should* have done it."

She wondered about the matter for a week or two.

Just before she fired, she turned. There, next to her, stood her sailor from the stars, Mr. Gray-no-more. He said: "It won't work that way."

He stood clear and handsome, the way she had seen him in New Madrid. He had no tubes, he did not tremble, she could see the normal rise and fall of his chest as he took one breath every hour or so. One part of her mind knew that he was a hallucination. Another part of her mind believed that he was real. She was mad, and she was very happy to be mad at this time, and she let the hallucination give her advice. She re-set the gun so that it would fire through the cabin wall, and it fired a low charge at the repair mechanism out beyond the distorted and immovable sail.

The low charge did the trick. The interference had been something beyond all technical anticipation. The weapon had cleaned out the forever-unidentifiable obstruction, leaving the servo-robots free to attack their tasks like a tribe of maddened ants. They worked again. They had had defenses built in against the minor impediments of space. All of them scurried and skipped about.

With a sense of bewilderment close to religion, she perceived the wind of starlight blowing against the immense sails. The sails snapped into position. She got a momentary touch of gravity as she sensed a little weight. The *Soul* was back on her course.

IX

"It's a girl," they said to him on New Earth. "It's a girl. She must have been eighteen or twenty when she left Earth."

Mr. Gray-no-more did not believe it.

But he went to the hospital and there in the hospital he saw Helen America.

"Here I am, sailor," said she. "I sailed too." Her face was white as chalk, her expression that of a girl of about twenty, body that of a well-preserved woman of sixty.

As for him, he had not changed again, since he had returned home inside a pod.

His eyes narrowed, and then, in a sudden reversal of roles, it was he who was kneeling beside her bed and covering her hands with his tears.

Half-coherently, he babbled at her: "I ran away from you because I loved you so. I came back here where you would never follow, or if you did follow, you'd still be a young woman, and I'd still be too old. But you sailed here and you wanted me."

The nurse of New Earth did not know about the rules which should be applied to sailors from the stars. Very quietly she went out of the room. But she was a practical woman. She called a friend of hers at the news service and

said: "If you get over here fast, you can get the scoop on Helen America and Mr. Gray-no-more. They just met like that and fell in love."

The nurse did not know that they had foresworn a love on Earth. The nurse did not know that Helen America had made a lonely trip with an icy purpose, and the nurse did not know that the crazy image of Mr. Gray-no-more, the sailor himself, had stood beside Helen twenty years out from nothing-at-all in the depth and blackness of space between the stars.

X

The little girl had grown up, had married, and now had a little girl of her own. The mother was unchanged, but the spieltier was very, very old. It had outlived all its marvelous tricks of adaptability, and for some years had stayed frozen in the role of a yellow-haired, blue-eyed girl doll. Out of sentimental sense of the fitness of things, she had dressed the spieltier in a bright blue jumper with matching panties. The little animal crept softly across the floor on its tiny human hands, using its knees for hind feet. The mock-human face looked up blindly and squeaked for milk.

The young mother said, "Mom, you ought to get rid of that thing. It's all used up and it looks horrible with your nice period furniture."

"I thought you loved it," said the older woman.

"It was cute when I was a child, but I'm not a child any more, and it doesn't even work."

The spieltier had struggled to its feet and clutched its mistress's ankle. The older woman took it away gently, and put down a saucer of milk and a cup the size of a thimble. The spieltier tried to courtsey, as it had been motivated to do at the beginning, slipped, fell, and whimpered. The mother righted it and the little old animal-toy began dipping milk with its thimble and sucking the milk into its tiny, toothless old mouth.

"You remember, Mom—" said the younger woman, and stopped.

"Remember what, dear?"

"You told me about Helen America and Mr. Gray-no-more when that was brand-new."

"Yes, darling, maybe I did."

"You didn't tell me everything," said the younger woman accusingly.

"Of course not. You were a child."

"But it was awful. Those messy people, and the horrible way sailors lived. I don't see how you idealized it and called it a romance—"

"But it was. It is."

"Romance, my foot," said the daughter. "It's as bad as you and the worn-out spieltier." She pointed at the tiny, living, aged doll who had fallen asleep beside its milk. "I think it's horrible. You ought to get rid of it. And the worlds ought to get rid of sailors."

"Don't be harsh, darling," said the mother.

"Don't be a sentimental old slob," said the daughter.

"Perhaps we are," said the mother with a little loving sort of laugh.

Unobtrusively, she put the sleeping spieltier on a padded chair where it would not be stepped on or hurt.

THE STENTORII LUGGAGE

Neal Barrett, Jr.

The Double-A call light wailed and blinked itself into a bright red hemorrhage on the wall. I woke up fast. My first thought was fire. Logically, reasonably, I know there hasn't been a hotel fire in 800 years—but tradition is tradition.

I punched the visor and Greel's face popped on the screen. The lobby clock over his shoulder read 3:35. I moaned silently and flipped on vocal.

"Duncan here."

"Chief, get down here quick." I didn't ask why. Greel's my head bellhop and bellhops can smell hotel trouble.

"Where are you?"

"Level 12. Desk 19."

"Check. Hold everything, kid." I started to cut off, then I saw something else behind him. I took a deep breath and held it.

"Greel. Is that—Ollie?" Greel nodded. Like he was going to be sick. I was in my clothes and out the door. I took a manual emergency lift and fell seventy-eight floors in eighty seconds, not even thinking about my stomach. Not with Ollie to think about.

Ollie's uncle is Mike Sorrenson, owner of Hotel Intergalactica, and a reasonably decent person. Ollie is something else again. Crewcut, eager, bow tie and fresh out of college. My job—teach him "all there is to know about the hotel business." Which should be a real snap, as he already knows all there is to know about everything.

Thursday, for instance. Ollie got his menus mixed and served scrambled eggs to five hundred visiting Vegans. That's

all. No trouble. Except the difference between a Vegan and a chicken is strictly a matter of size and evolution—and we're still cleaning up Ballroom Nine.

I came out of the lift, my stomach only ten floors behind. Ollie popped out of his chair and came toward me, a sick smile pasted across his face.

"Mr. Duncan, I—"

"Sit down, Ollie, and shut up," I said quietly. He swallowed and sat down.

I turned to Greel.

"Okay," I said. "I'm ready. Let's have it."

"I'll save the details for later," said Greel. "We've got to get moving. Fast. I have reason to believe there are from four to fifty Skeidzti loose in the hotel."

I drew a blank at first. Then it hit me and I felt cold all over.

"Oh, my God," I said, sending a withering look at Ollie.

"Uh-huh." Greel nodded. "The way I get it from Ollie, four Stentorii checked in about 3:00. They wanted to go right up to their room so Ollie sent a boy with them and told the Stentorii he'd put their luggage in a lift right away."

"They kind of grinned at me, Mr. Duncan," Ollie interrupted, "and said that was fine, there was no hurry about the bags."

"Yeah, I'll bet they did," I said. I looked at Greel, and we both felt sick. "Don't tell me the rest. Ollie checked them in on the Master Register, turned to get their bags—and what-do-you-know, they were gone."

Ollie looked surprised. He started to ask how I could possibly know but I glared him back to his chair.

"Okay," I said. "What have you done so far?" Greel took a deep breath.

"First, they have about thirty to thirty-five minutes head start. I've shielded four levels above and below. I don't think they'll get that far, but no use taking chances. We've got one lucky break. Since the whole Quadrant borders on Free City they can't get out except through a Registration area."

"What about—"

Greel nodded. "Already done it. I've closed all five Desks in the Quadrant. Anyone wants to register has to come in by way of Seven."

"Fine. Just one thing—" I flipped through the register. "Could they have gotten outside through this door?"

"No. It was unshielded, all right. But there were no check-outs after the Stentorii registered."

Our luck was holding. At least the Skeidzti were still just the hotel's problem. I've got a few friends on Free City's revolving council, but I don't like to mess with those boys unless I have to.

I sent to Greel to organize the bellboys into search squads. Then I checked the Stentorii's room number and hauled Ollie out of his chair, figuring the only way to make sure he stayed out of trouble was to keep him with me. Before I left the lobby I picked up a pair of low-charge stunners and handed one to Ollie.

"Look," I said, "do you think you could possibly handle one of these things without knocking us both out cold?"

Ollie nodded vaguely. He took the weapon and held it as if he were certain it would go off in his hand.

"Sure, Mr. Duncan, but why do we need weapons? I mean, I'm sorry I let those things get loose, but—"

I stopped at the lift and stared at him. I suddenly realized the poor kid had no idea what he had done wrong. All he could see was that Greel and I were making a big fuss over a couple of alien housepets.

"Ollie," I said patiently, "do you really know what a Skeidzti is? I don't want an oration. Just tell me the simple truth. Do you or don't you?" He started to say something, then changed his mind and shook his head.

"I thought so. Well, first of all, don't refer to them as 'pets.' They may be cute as a kitten to a Stentorii, but as far as you're concerned they are dangerous, quick, carnivorous, highly adaptable little monsters. Only 'adaptable' is about as descriptive as calling the ocean moist. A Skeidzti in a kitchen will hide in a stack of plates and, by God, you'll eat off of him and swear he *is* a plate. A Skeidzti in a garden is a rock,

a weed, a pile of leaves. In your bedroom he's a garter, a sock or a necktie. Only—put one around your neck and you'll damn well know he's not a necktie. Now do you think it might be permissible for me to continue to bear arms against the Skeidzti, just in case?"

Ollie was taken aback, I could tell. Almost enough to keep his mouth shut. He thought for maybe a full second before he said anything.

"But Mr. Duncan, if the Stentorii knew they were dangerous—" And that did it. I poked a hard finger in his chest and backed him against the wall.

"Look, Ollie," I said grimly, "that college line of logic is what got us into this jam in the first place. Now get this, and remember it. You don't need a degree in Alien Psychology to know that Rule One is *never* use your own viewpoint as a premise in guessing what an alien is thinking or doing. It just simply doesn't work that way. An alien's actions are based upon what he thinks is reasonable and proper—not what you think he ought to think.

"Why do you think we have separate Quadrants and private entrances to each room? It sure as hell isn't for economy's sake, I can tell you that. It so happens that some of these so-called reasonable civilized beings still consider each other as rare culinary delights. While that sort of nonsense is SOP in Free City, this hotel is strictly out of bounds. And here's another rule you can put down in Duncan's lectures on Alien Psychology: If a guest phones down for a midnight snack, he may mean he wants the key to his neighbor's room." I took a deep breath.

"Am I getting through to you, Ollie?" Ollie nodded, wide-eyed, and I shoved him into the lift ahead of me. We hung for a moment, then the gravs caught hold.

In my business you learn to get along with aliens, or at least put up with the ones you can't possibly get along with. And some *are* completely impossible—like the Nixies. Except for simple trade relations, I can't conceive of anything I might have in common with a Nixie.

And there was another rule of thumb for Ollie: Never be

deceived by appearances. An alien's resemblance to human form is no indication that his outlook will in any way resemble human logic and reason. Until you know, don't guess; and don't assume, either, that a lack of human form denotes a lack of common interest. A Goron is a repulsive, warty glob of pink and brown protoplasm consisting of twelve eyes, nine pseudo-arms—and an entirely human liking for jazz, poetry, Scotch and women. Or anyway, Goron females.

On the other hand, ignoring the general hairiness and the rodent-like features, a Stentorii looks as humanoid as I do. He is also a completely alien, cold-blooded, murderous creature without a shred of mercy in his body.

I stared hard at the Stentorii who opened the door. He stared back at me from tiny red eyes set wide on either side of his whiskery pink muzzle. Then he saw Ollie and gave a high squeaky laugh, baring a mouthful of sharp yellow teeth. He turned into his room and said something in Stentor to his companions. They nearly fell apart.

I had had just about enough. Time was running out. I switched on my portable recorder and said:

"According to Statute XII, Galactic Standard Code, I wish to invoke the privilege of communicating with you; without fear of future prosecution in case I may offend, by way of accidental implication, any tradition, custom or moral standard of your race." The Stentorii just grinned. I spoke a little louder. "I said I speak without offense!"

The Stentorii frowned. He didn't like that at all. But he understood it.

"All right," he said grudgingly, "I accept."

"Fine," I said, and let him see that I had switched off my recorder. I never start an argument with an alien without invoking the non-offense clause. Of course, the same clause is stated in every Registration Contract, providing mutual protection for the hotel's guests and its employees. But I like to play it safe.

By now the three other Stentorii were up, grinning at Ollie. I ignored them and spoke to the one at the door.

"My name is Duncan," I told him. "I am manager of the

hotel. This is my assistant, Mr. Sorrenson. I will come right to the point. You played a little joke down in the lobby a few minutes ago. Although this incident is a serious breach of your Registration Contract, I am willing to forget the matter if I am able to gain your full cooperation. On behalf of Hotel Intergalactica, I formally request you recall your Skeidzti immediately and turn them over to me for housing in the hotel kennel."

The Stentorii glanced at his companions, then turned to me with a look of mock astonishment.

"Mr. Duncan, do you imply the hotel has allowed my pets to become lost? Naturally, I will hold you responsible if they come to any harm while in your charge." I had half expected something like this. I couldn't do a thing but play it out.

"All right," I said, "I haven't time to appreciate your humor. You know it is illegal to bring unregistered alien pets into this hotel. I am also certain you are aware that we are in the Federation Circle, which is *not* in Free City territory —which means all guests, by the act of signing their Registration Contracts, place themselves under Federation law for the duration of their stay here."

The Stentorii grinned, showing his yellow teeth.

"Mr. Duncan, you are bluffing. I am quite aware of the law, and respectfully submit that if you check your copy of our Registration Contracts you will find your employee here countersigned the Alien Responsibility Clause."

Well, that was his round. I was sure he was too oily a character to fall for it, but I had had to try. He was right. Under our Registration Contract it is presumed that while the hotel is responsible for a full knowledge of the Galactic Customs Restrictions, an alien cannot be expected to inform the Desk Clerk of all possible violations he may be guilty of on any particular world. And any clerk green enough, or stupid enough, or both—like Ollie—who signs a Responsibility Clause without checking Galactic Customs—ought to have his head examined. Of course, we could take the Stentorii to court. Maybe we might even win, on the grounds of purpose-

ful malice, but I don't like to get the hotel into law suits. It's bad publicity, and it gives other wise guys grand ideas.

The legal pitch having failed, I was ready to continue with Unveiled Threat No. 1.

"Look," I said wearily, "I admit you are within your legal rights. Although just how far within I'm not too certain at the moment. But before you come to any decision let me remind you that, while I may not be in a position to take official action against you, I fully intend to file a Warning Report to every member of the Galactic Hotel Association, which includes nearly twelve million first-class hotels and their subsidiaries. I don't know what your business is. But since you are here I presume it entails traveling. Traveling means hotels. If you refuse your cooperation, I assure you it may be quite difficult to find a decent room within twelve thousand parsecs of this planet."

The Stentorii shrugged and closed the door on my foot. I'm sure he would have hacked it off for a souvenir if I hadn't jerked it out.

I looked at Ollie. His fists were clenched by his side and there was a look of iron determination in his eyes.

"Well?" I said.

"Boy," said Ollie. "Just *wait* until they try to check into a GHA hotel again."

"Ollie," I said weakly, "I didn't come up here to actually accomplish anything with those characters. It is strictly a matter of form. A necessary routine for the record. Everything I said went completely down the drain. They were not impressed, frightened or embarrassed in any way. It is impossible to reason with a Stentorii because he is inherently incapable of taking anything you say seriously. He is also incapable of caring whether he gets a hotel room. Anywhere. Ever. He has one now, and the future is absolutely of no importance. He doesn't care about you, me, life, death *or* hotel rooms. Didn't you hear anything I said in the lift?"

"Sure, Mr. Duncan, but—"

"Ollie. Shut up."

I ditched Ollie and stopped off at my office for a wake-up

pill. Greel had his command post set up in the Level 12 lobby and I joined him there. The lobby was full of squat Fensi bellhops, swarming in and out of the lifts like agitated ants.

Most of my bellhops and some of the Administrative staff are Fensi. I like to have them on the payroll, and I'd hire fifty more if I could get them. Fensi are quick, alert, reasonably honest and highly adaptable. Their adaptability alone makes them worth their weight in gold to a big hotel. A Fensi can breathe a wide variety of atmospheres, take plenty of G's, and doesn't care whether he's hot, cold or in-between. Unless you're a Fensi, room service around here can be a literally killing job.

Greel sprinted across the lobby, a wide smile stretching over his hairless blue face.

"I'm glad you're so happy," I said. "Maybe you should have gone to see our friends upstairs."

Greel laughed. "Maybe we won't need 'em, chief. The boys think we can clean the Skeidzti out by morning—with a little luck, of course."

"More than a little, if you ask me. Get any yet?"

Greel held up a finger. "One. Skorno picked up an ashtray on Ten and it nearly bit his hand off." He nodded toward the desk and Ollie and I followed. He picked up a small stationery box and pushed it toward me.

"Skorno got it before it could change completely—you can see what it was trying to do."

I could. The object in the box was a dead Skeidzti, but only one-quarter of it was in its natural form. The last thing it had touched was Skorno's hand. Following its blind-rule instinct it had imitated a hairless blue Fensi arm nearly up to the elbow, before it had either run out of material or died.

Now that it was dead it was slowly changing back to its natural form. The part we could see resembled a thin, eight-inch-wide worm-like creature with stubby serrated legs. I figured it could move about as fast as a caterpillar without adapting. It was a highly vulnerable creature, and in order to survive it had developed a high degree of protective camouflage. With its soft body and slow speed almost anything could pick

up a quick and easy meal. And its natural color didn't help at all. The dead quarter of the Skeidzti was a brilliant, almost phosphorescent orange.

"Well, son, get some idea what we're up against?" Ollie's eyes were glued to the box and his face was as blue as Greel's.

"Can they—can they adapt to *anything*?"

"No," said Greel, "they have limitations. I'm sure they can *imitate* most anything, but they couldn't change as quickly under six or eight G's, or, say, in a methane atmosphere."

"Not for two or three generations, anyway," I added soberly. Greel nodded.

"Anyway, Ollie, the point is these varmints are already used to a Stentor-Earth atmosphere. And if any get out—"

"It would be comparable," I added, "to a plague of invisible bobcats."

I think for the first time Ollie was hit with the seriousness of our problem. I could sense a kind of helpless panic in his eyes, as if he had suddenly realized he'd opened the floodgates and let the valve break off in his hand.

"Mr. Duncan, I—well, maybe we ought to get help. I mean —I'll take the blame—and—and—" He was shaking like a leaf. I eased him down to a chair.

"And just what sort of help did you have in mind?" I asked.

"Well, the police! Couldn't you—"

I shook my head firmly. "No. I certainly could not. That, my friend, is all we need. The Federation would quarantine the hotel, rout several thousand guests out of their various notions of sleep, and raise enough hell to wake every Deep-Dream addict from here to Andromeda."

"Aside from the fact," Greel added, "that every Skeidzti in the hotel could hitch a free ride out of here in some cop's pocket."

"Right. No, we can handle it ourselves, a hell of a lot quieter. We've had worse before." Ollie's face told me he thought I was an out-and-out liar. But then, like I said, this kid has a lot to learn about the hotel business.

The Skeidzti had been loose in the hotel since 3:00 a.m. By

5:30 we had killed eight of them. And eight Fensi bellhops had bandaged hands.

It was obvious we couldn't go around touching everything in the hotel to see if it was real or Skeidzti. Added was the problem of knowing *when* we had killed them all. The Skeidzti came in disguised as four pieces of Stentorii luggage, but we had no idea how many had clustered together to form each piece. And the Stentorii weren't telling.

I called Greel and Ollie to the Desk for a strategy meeting. Ollie dropped in a chair and sank into brooding silence. Even Greel's customary optimism semed to have temporarily vanished. He reported the bellhops were doing their poking with sticks now, but the results were still alarmingly low.

"What we need," Greel complained, "is a system."

"Yeh, we need a system, all right," added Ollie helpfully. I stood up, paced around the Desk. The strategy meeting was dying on its feet.

"Look," I said, "let's analyze it. Our problem is to get rid of the Skeidzti, right?"

"Right," from Greel and Ollie.

"Okay. Now to kill them we have to see them. And by seeing them I mean we have to see them as they really are."

"Or catch them during a change," added Greel.

"Exactly." Somewhere in the back of my head an idea was catching hold. I kept talking, trying to push it out.

"Then our problem is this. We have to *force* them to change into something we can recognize as a definite Skeidzti." Greel's frown vanished. He sat up straight in his chair.

"You mean, like if we made them all change into an object we knew we only had one of."

"Sort of like that. Only that means we'd have to be able to isolate the Skeidzti in a specified area—and even if we could do that it'd be a hell of problem to get rid of all the objects we didn't want them to imitate. Which means more stick poking. Remember, they can flatten out on the walls and ceiling just as easily as they can curl up like an ashtray or a sofa pillow." Greel's face dropped back into a disappointed frown.

"No, you've got the general idea," I said quickly. "But I

think I've got a way to work the same thing, only quicker." Greel suddenly looked around, and I turned and saw Skorno, our first casualty, coming out of the lift. In his bandaged hand he held an ominous-looking club, and in the other a limp and bloody throwrug. He stopped before us, grinning, and tossed the rug on the floor.

He said. "Three more, chief."

I bent down for a closer look. This time, three Skeidzti had joined to imitate a portion of the rug. It was a near-perfect job. They had continued the intricate pattern, carrying out the design exactly where the real rug stopped. The only thing wrong, Skorno explained, was that he passed the rug fifty times a day and knew it was about twice as large as it should have been.

Something about Skorno's rug worried me. I asked him how long he thought it took for the Skeidzti to change from one form to another.

"About half a second," he said. "But I think it varies, depending on what they're imitating."

"For instance?"

"Well, on a plain surface, like a wall or something, they're faster—much faster."

"You mean," I asked, "if they have something more complicated to imitate, it takes longer?" Skorno shook his head.

"I wish it did. When I said it varies, I meant just the first few times. Once they've imitated something, they don't forget it."

"Well, hell," I snapped, "I know they can't imitate simultaneously! There has to be *some* definite minimum time lapse!" Skorno spread his hands helplessly.

"I know, chief. But whatever it is, it's too small to do us much good. They're just too fast for our reaction time. We still only get about one out of every ten we see." Swell, I thought. If they were too fast for the Fensi, we were really up the creek.

"What about spraying a low-charge disrupter all over the place and picking up the pieces?" said Greel hopefully.

Skorno said, "I forgot to mention that with a low-charge

you have to hit them in just the right place or they're only knocked out for a while."

"And while they're unconscious they're just as safe as ever," I finished for him. Then Skorno's words suddenly sank in. "Good Lord! Do you mean you're using *high*-charge disruptors—inside this hotel!"

Skorno nodded sheepishly. "What else can we do, chief? Sure, the place looks like a two-cluster cruiser plowed through. But we're getting 'em, slow but sure."

I was beginning to get a little bit mad. I thought about the Stentorii, sleeping peacefully in their rooms while we blasted four levels of valuable real estate looking for their damnable pets. And what, I asked myself, are we doing about it? Mooning around in the lobby on our respective rears, that's what we are doing. I stood up again, glaring at Ollie on general principles.

"All right," I said firmly. "This has gone far enough, gentlemen. I'm not saying there *is* any other way to finish off this mess, but I do have one humble idea that might save a little of Hotel Interglactica's property. I figure as long as we're going to turn this place into a shooting gallery we might as well have something to shoot at."

I went over our floor plan with Greel and Skorno and picked out an area where the Skeidzti had proven particularly obnoxious. Then I sent Greel to seal off the other contaminated levels, and told Skorno to marshal his forces in Humanoid Hall. I picked Humanoid Hall for two reasons: One, plenty of Skeidzti to work on, and two, a minimum of furniture. For previously stated reasons I kept Ollie with me, and hopped a Class-A lift for Level Eight.

More than once I've had good reason to be thankful we enforce strong lift security measures. No matter where the Skeidzti might go, I was dead sure they would never reach guest quarters.

There's a good reason for this. We ordinarily house about thirty thousand guests in the hotel at any one time. That number represents five to fifteen thousand separate races, each one requiring its own unique set of conditions. In Quadrant Four

I've got Denebian Iceworms at −200° F. right "next door" to a cluster of Calistan Feroids sleeping soundly in boiling mercury. No problem. We can handle 1,240 different atmospheres, with innumerable variations in density, temperature and lighting.

The real problem is sociological, not mechanical. If the Galaxy is old, the oldest things in it are its grudges. To put it bluntly, some of these characters have hated each other's guts so long they forgot *why* about two million years ago.

Naturally, an Altaran isn't going to walk into a Vegan's room and strangle him. There's a problem of about 900 degrees and thirty G's to overcome first. But that's no real problem either—about 500,000 years ago they swarmed all over each other's planets in protective armor, and strangling was the nicest thing that happened.

And that's where we come in.

What they do outside Hotel Intergalactica is none of our business—but inside we make sure no one is faced with temptation. That's why our room segregation is vertical instead of horizontal. The hotel is built on the hive principle. Each cell or room has a private entrance bordering on the lift. There are no halls or corridors to wander around in, and any connecting rooms connect up and down. No exceptions.

It's a necessary rule and we enforce it. There are plenty of Common Rooms on the opposite side of the lifts for conferences and amiable gatherings—free of charge.

We work it that way for economical reasons, too. It's a lot easier to, say, keep a gravitic lift at 9G constant for a Cygnian than to change it to forty-five for a Lyri passenger. Everybody minds their own business—and nobody waits for an elevator.

That's where lift security comes in.

We run a high density force shield over each lift entrance. Try to enter one that's not attuned to your requirements and you run smack into an invisible wall. Which is precisely what would happen if the Skeidzti tried it. Imitation is one thing. Fortunately, duplication is another.

It suddenly dawned on me that here was the real reason

the Stentorii played their little joke on Ollie. They knew the Skeidzti couldn't get by the lift shields, so they didn't even try. A typical bit of Stentorii humor, I thought wryly. Don't dump your problems just anywhere—toss 'em where they can do some good.

I knew pretty well what to expect on Level Eight.

It was worse.

What did Skorno say? Like a two-cluster cruiser plowed through? It was more like a complete re-enactment of the Battle of the Rim.

Through a low cloud of acrid blue smoke I made out the dim outlines of Fensi bellhops, lined up in military order across the room. Skorno groped toward me through the wreckage. I put a handkerchief to my nose and stumbled out to meet him, Ollie choking along behind. The air was full of the smell of fused plastic, burnt carpeting and a particularly nauseous odor I identified as fried Skeidzti.

"Are you sure there's *anything* left alive up here?" I asked. Skorno nodded, breathing in the poisonous atmosphere like fresh country air.

"Sure, chief, they're here all right. You just can't see 'em." He nodded toward the ready Fensi crew. "We're all here, I think. What next?"

"Nothing," I choked, "until this smoke clears away. What happened to the air conditioning?"

"Greel's working on it. We had to block off some of the vents. Grid's not fine enough to keep out a Skeidzti." I looked up. The air was already beginning to clear. I gave it a few more minutes, then stepped up on a scorched sofa. I was anxious to get started so I cut it as short as possible. The idea, I explained, was to take advantage of the fact that there was a lapse, however small it might be, between the time a Skeidzti could change from one form to another. Catch them in that stage, and we had 'em. Simple as that, if it worked.

I lined the Fensi in a crude circle in the center of the room, facing outwards. Then I pulled some debris together for a shield, jerked Ollie down behind it and dimmed the lights. Dimmed them—not turned them off. The idea was to force the

Skeidzti to adapt to new lighting conditions, and I was afraid if I turned them off altogether they'd sense they were safe in the absolute darkness and not adapt at all.

I gave them plenty of time, dimming the lights slowly until I could hardly tell they were on at all. Then I pressed the switch for maximum brightness and the room was flooded with brilliant light.

And there they were. They were fast, but not faster than the speed of light. For nearly a full second they stood out like ink spots on a clean white sheet, and we poured it on 'em. They were stunned perhaps a quarter-second past their normal reaction time. The Fensi are fast anyway, and that quarter-second margin was all they needed. We went through the routine three more times, then had to wait for the smoke to clear. We had killed thirty-seven Skeidzti.

Fine. But it gave me something to think about.

We had estimated there were at most fifty or sixty Skeidzti loose—and if we had killed thirty-seven on one level, in one room—how many did that mean were left? I mentioned it to Greel. He shrugged it off with typical Fensi optimism.

"What difference does it make, chief? We've got 'em on the run!"

"Sure," I said cautiously, "we've got 'em on the run *now*, all right." Both Greel and Skorno were grinning from ear to ear, having the time of their lives.

But I wasn't sure at all. Something kept asking me how long it would be before the Skeidzti caught on to the system —and whether we could come up fast enough with something to meet them. Before I left I gave explicit instructions to keep all isolation shields up—even after they were sure a room was clean. Greel gave a resigned shrug. I could tell they both thought the old man was taking the sport of Skeidzti hunting entirely too seriously.

Back in the lobby I sank into a chair and lit a cigarette. Ollie brought coffee, and we stared bleary-eyed at each other for half an hour. Ollie obviously didn't feel like talking and I was too damn tired to chew him out anymore. I could tell he

was giving it to himself pretty hard anyway. That was probably doing more good than anything I could say.

Poor Ollie! If nothing else, one night of crisis at Hotel Intergalactica had rubbed off a considerable amount of shiny college exterior. His perfectly trimmed hair was caked with ceiling plaster. His neat bow tie dangled from his neck like last night's lettuce, and somehow he had managed to crack one side of his gold-rimmed glasses. He was beginning to look exactly like what he was supposed to be—a harried night clerk, who wished to hell he could remember why he had ever thought of going into the hotel business.

At 7:20 I located my army on the intercom. They had finished Eight, Nine and Ten, and were mopping up on Eleven. I told Greel to split his crew and send half up to Thirteen. We gulped the last of our coffee and headed down to Eleven.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Eleven wasn't nearly as bad as Eight. Either the Fensi had improved their marksmanship or the light trick was cutting out a lot of random shooting. Greel walked up, holstering his weapon.

"Well," I asked, "what do you think?"

"I think we just may survive the night," he said tiredly. "I'm going to try one more go-around here, then move up to Twelve."

"I have purposely been avoiding that thought," I said dryly, picturing the grinning Fensi horde blasting through my expensive lobby. "And of course," I added casually, "we haven't really *seen* any Skeidzti in the lobby, Greel. It may be that—ah—" Greel shot me a suspicious glance and I shut up. So who needs a lobby?

Greel reloaded his disruptor—a little too eagerly, I thought—and leaned against the wall.

"Actually," he said, "I don't picture it being too bad on Twelve."

"You don't, huh?" I said doubtfully.

"No, I mean it, chief. Funny thing, they were as thick as flies on Eight and Nine, but on Ten, and here on Eleven—they seem to be sort of thinning out." I raised an eyebrow at that.

"I don't suppose there could be a leaky shield, somewhere, or they might be catching on to that light trick."

"Oh, no," Greel insisted, "we're getting them all. They're just not as thick is all. I figure when they got loose on Twelve they all high-tailed it down to the lower floors for some reason, maybe to make—"

I grabbed Greel's arm and squeezed it hard. Something he had said suddenly sent a cold chill down my neck. Greel looked puzzled. I motioned him and Ollie to a quiet corner of the room, then turned to Greel.

"Did you send half your crew up to Thirteen?" I asked carefully.

Greel shrugged. "Sure, chief. You said—"

"Okay. Now think. I want to know exactly how many men you had here—*before* you split the crew." Greel thought.

"Forty-eight."

"Exactly forty-eight?"

"Exactly. I'm sure because it's the whole night shift for the Quadrant and everyone's on duty."

"Mr. Duncan," said Ollie, "what are you—"

I cut him off sharply. "Hold it, Ollie. Whatever it is can wait." I turned back to Greel. "Then if you split your crew, we should have twenty-four men in this room. Right?" Greel nodded. He started to speak, gave me a puzzled frown instead. He turned and carefully counted his crew.

"Oh, my God!" he said.

"I get thirty-six," I told him. "Ollie?" Ollie nodded, wide-eyed. I felt Greel stiffen beside me. I looked, and his hand was sliding toward his holster.

"Hold it," I said. "There's one way to make sure."

I checked on the intercom with Skorno on thirteen. Skorno counted twenty-four men. I nodded to Greel and Ollie.

I had wondered what the Skeidzti would come up with to counter our move. Now I knew. They had done the only thing they could do. They had imitated the most common thing in the room, the only thing that wasn't being blasted to shreds by the disruptors: the Fensi themselves.

I walked quickly to the center of the room.

"Attention, everyone," I yelled. "Line up against the wall, quick!" I watched them carefully, getting dizzy trying to spot the phonies.

"I'm going to tell you this once," I said. "Listen, and get it right!" I told them right off that twelve of them were fakes. They caught on fast, knowing better than anyone what the Skeidzti were capable of. I wasn't worried about warning the Skeidzti. Whatever they were, they were no more intelligent than a well-trained dog.

"There is going to be some shooting," I said. "Ignore it and do exactly as I say." I paused, and Ollie and Greel drew their weapons.

"All right, first man. When I say go, walk to the lift and drop to Ten. Go!" The first Fensi walked to the lift and disappeared.

"Second man, go!"

"Third man, go!" the third Fensi walked to the lift, exactly like the first two. Only that was as far as he could go.

Ollie, Greel and I burned him before he could change.

Then it happened. The Skeidzti sensed something wrong. Eleven fakes suddenly bolted for the lift. The real Fensi ignored my order and joined the shooting. I yelled but no one could hear me.

Suddenly the whole area about the lift erupted in blinding blue flame. I shielded my face and felt a sharp pain in my side as the floor came up to meet me.

Greel was on his feet first. I shook my head and limped over to him. There was a large jagged hole in the wall and I knew right away what it was, even before I saw the tangled mass of fused wire and metal. I picked up a hunk of carpet and tossed it down the lift. Then I went limp all over.

The carpet went down the lift as smooth as any living thing. The shields were down. The Skeidzti had the run of the whole Quadrant.

Greel was giving his crew a royal chewing out. I cut him off and ordered the Fensi to Level Twelve, on the double. It was too damn late for chewing out now. We were in real trouble. I looked around for Ollie. He was gone. I cursed

myself and kicked a piece of furniture halfway across the room. That's all I needed—the Skeidzti and Ollie running loose.

"Greel! Check the inner shields, see if we've still got *anything* sealed off in this place!"

"I did. So far as I can tell it's just the lift."

"That's bad enough," I said grimly. "On this side of the lift they're open to anything one room deep. And on the other side, the first guest who steps out of his room will—" Greel shook his head violently. I brightened, suddenly remembering. We had already sealed the guest side and I knew the two sides were controlled separately. Unless something else happened, we still had them sealed into the lift with access restricted to the Common Rooms, kitchens and ballrooms. They were still within the Quadrant, and away from the guests.

"All right," I said as calmly as possible, "we start over. It means maybe eighty floors of isolation, and they won't fall for that light trick again. We'll have to escort every guest through the lift and arrange for alternate dining areas. And I want every Fensi tested through a shield that's working. I don't think they'll try that again, but—"

The intercom crackled and Skorno's voice came on high and frantic.

"Chief! Listen, that crazy kid has opened the shields! He broke into Central Control and let down every barrier in the Quadrant!"

"*What!* Why in—look, it may be too late but try to get the damn things up again. Quick!"

Skorno moaned. "I can't. He's fused the controls! I can't even *find* the cut-off switch!" I felt a sharp pain in my mouth and realized I was trying to bite my tongue off. If I ever got my hands on that kid—

"Listen, Skorno, find him! I don't care what you do to him, just find him!"

"I can't figure it," moaned Greel. "He must have gone completely off his rocker."

"He had better be off his rocker," I said grimly. "That's

the only thing that's going to save him from me." The intercom sputtered again. Ollie. Somehow, I knew before he even spoke.

"Mr. Duncan, listen, I had to do it. I couldn't tell you because I knew you'd—"

"Listen, you little punk—" growled Greel. I frowned and shook my head.

"Ollie," I said gently, "this is Mr. Duncan. I understand. I'm not angry. Not at all. Now listen, Ollie. I know you're not feeling well. You're tired, Ollie. Tell us where you are and we'll come and get you—help you, I mean—"

"Listen," Ollie said angrily, "I'm not crazy. Now pay attention and do what I say—exactly!" I swallowed. He was gone, all right.

"Yes, Ollie. We're listening. Go ahead."

His voice relaxed. "I'm on Eighteen. The Crystal Ballroom." I swallowed again. My beautiful new ballroom.

"Come up through the loading entrance," Ollie went on. "You'll enter at Lift, ah—Forty-five, Humanoid Kitchen annex."

"Yes, Ollie. We'll do that."

"And Mr. Duncan—"

"Yes, Ollie?"

"This is not a threat, sir. But don't bring any weapons."

"Oh—" The intercom went dead. Ollie was through talking.

"Well?" said Greel.

"Well what?" I snapped. "Do *you* want to flush him out of there?"

Greel shrugged. "Lift Forty-five is this way, chief."

Ollie let us into the kitchen. The smell nearly knocked us back into the lift.

"Gahhhh! What is it, Ollie!"

"Ghayschi stew," he said. "Pretty horrible, isn't it? Here. Wear these." He tossed me a box and I quickly jammed two of the Chef's Little Wonder Air Filters into my nose and passed the box to Greel. Ghayschi stew, I thought. The kid has really flipped.

"Ollie—" Then I stopped. He was evidently not kidding. His

eyes were a little too bright and his face was wet and glistening. Also, he had a disruptor in his hand.

"It's on low charge," he said, "but I don't want to knock anybody out, Mr. Duncan. I got us into this mess and I've got to get us out—my own way." He paused. "Now," he said, "will you give me a hand with this pot?" I shot him a skeptical glance.

"Why? Where are we taking it?" Ollie tensed.

"Mr. Duncan," he pleaded, "you've got to trust me!"

"Trust you! You've wrecked my hotel, let those infernal pests loose, and you—you stand there with a gun in your hand and ask me to trust you? Move the damn pot yourself!" Ollie seemed to think a minute, then a hurt expression spread over his face.

"All right," he said calmly. "If I give you the gun, will you help me? You said yourself the hotel is wrecked. Why not give me a chance?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Okay, Ollie. Give me the gun." Ollie handed me the disruptor. Greel started to move and I motioned him back. Ollie was right. I really had absolutely nothing to lose.

I grabbed one end of the pot.

"This way," said Ollie, shoving open the door to the ballroom.

"Here?" Ollie nodded.

The Crystal Ballroom is new, and I'm proud of it. The floor is imported Denebian seaglass and the walls are Serinese protomurals. When the murals are on and the floor is lit, there isn't a hotel in the system that can touch it. I cringed as we set the large pot of Ghayschi stew square in the middle of the seaglass floor.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now we get out of here. Quick." I followed him back to the kitchen. Behind him he trailed a long, thin wire. One end was attached to the top of the pot. Greel and I watched in silent wonder as he pulled the wire through the kitchen and into a tiny room off the kitchen pantry.

I knew where we were; it was the light control booth for

the seaglass floor. I had shown it to Ollie several days before.

Ollie seated himself at the control board and began to play the lights. Through a small window I could see the ballroom, and the huge pot of Ghayschi stew. The floor began to glow, pulsing from gold to blue to green and back again. Ollie experimented a while, then seemed to be satisfied.

"Now," he said finally, without turning away from the controls, "we are ready." I raised an eyebrow to Greel. Both of us were wondering just exactly what we were ready for.

"Fortunately," said Ollie, "the ballroom itself doesn't border directly onto one of the unshielded lifts. The anteroom shield is still up, though. And now—" he pressed a button by his chair—"it's down." Greel and I exchanged another look.

"Next," said Ollie suddenly, "dinnertime."

I shut my eyes. Ollie jerked his wire. The pot tipped and the gray and brown viscous mess of Ghayschi stew spread slowly across the ballroom floor.

"Now what?" I asked cautiously.

"Now we wait. I've turned on the auxiliary blowers. The smell is spreading through the Skeidzti occupied areas." I had a few choice comments on this move, but I kept them to myself. This was Ollie's party. I figured I could always strangle him later.

We waited ten minutes.

Then Ollie suddenly went into action. His hands swept over the light control board and the seaglass floor danced and pulsed with shifting colors, shifting faster and faster through the spectrum. I watched Ollie's face. His skin was tight and great beads of sweat poured from his forehead down his neck. Then the tense mask suddenly broke and a wide grin spread over his face.

"Look!" he yelled, nodding toward the floor.

I looked. At first there was nothing to see. Then I rubbed my eyes. The fast-changing lights must have affected my vision because the whole floor seemed alive with bright orange spots.

Then it hit me. *Skeidzti!* The floor around the stew was

crowded three deep with them—and they were all changing back to their natural form!

We watched for an hour and a half. Finally Ollie jerked a lever and the colors faded away. He sank weakly back in his chair. I felt cold all over, and suddenly realized I was soaking wet. Later, we counted two hundred seventy-nine dead Skeidzti on the ballroom floor.

It was all over.

I had plenty of questions but I saved them until after breakfast. Some of it I could figure out, but I still didn't know how Ollie had been sure the Skeidzti would eat his infernal stew.

"Oh, I knew they'd like it," said Ollie. "Ghayschi stew is a favorite Stentorii dish. I looked it up. I figured the Skeidzti ate table scraps."

"That I can guess," I said. "But when they couldn't keep up with the changing lights why didn't they stop eating? Were they too stupid to know they either had to give up a meal or die?"

"No," said Ollie, "not stupid. They just couldn't help themselves. I figured any animal that could adapt so quickly and move around so fast was bound to have a pretty high metabolism. Any animal like that has to eat, oh, maybe six or eight times his weight in food every day or starve to death. They came into the hotel at 3:00. When I turned on the lights upstairs it was nearly ten o'clock. After seven hours they *had* to eat. There was nothing in the world that could have stopped them." Ollie paused, sipped his coffee.

"They finally adjusted to your light trick because they had no alternative stronger than survival. I used the same idea, but this time they had to make an impossible choice between two basic instincts."

"And they couldn't," I added. "So to avoid it they sort of, what—died of a nervous breakdown?"

"Something like that. In school there was this thing about some old experiments where a chicken or a rat was trained

to certain responses, then the responses were mixed or taken away and—"

I yawned and got up to leave. "Sure, Ollie," I said. "Let's be sure and talk about it some time." I started for the door.

"Mr. Duncan—?"

"Yes?"

"Am I fired?"

I thought a minute. I was so tired I could hardly hear him.

"No, Ollie," I said wearily. "I don't think so. There's just one thing, though."

"Sir?"

"Keep," I said sternly, "the hell out of *my* kitchens!"

SNUFFLES

R. A. Lafferty

I

"I always said we'd find one of them that was fun," remarked Brian. "There's been entirely too much solemnity in the universe. Did you never panic on thinking of the multiplicity of systems?"

"Never," said Georgina.

"Not even when, having set down a fine probability for the totality of worlds, you realized suddenly that you had to raise it by a dozen powers yet?"

"What's to panic?"

"Not even when it comes over you, 'This isn't a joke; this is serious; every one of them is serious'?"

" 'Cosmic intimidation,' Belloc called it. And it does tend to minimize a person."

"And did you never hope that out of all that prodigality of worlds, one at least should have been made for fun? One should have been made by a wild child or a mixed-up goblin just to put the rest of them in proper perspective, to deflate the pomposity of the cosmos."

"You believe this is it, Mr. Carroll?"

"Yes. Bellota was made for fun. It is a joke, a caricature, a burlesque. It is a planet with baggy pants and a putty nose. It is a midget world with floppy shoes and a bull-roarer voice. It was designed to keep the cosmos from taking itself too seriously. The law of levity here conspires against the law of gravity."

"I never heard of the law of levity. And Mr. Phelan believes

that he will soon have the explanation for the peculiar gravity here."

"The law of levity does not apply to you, Georgina. You are immune. But I spoke lightly."

The theory that Bellota was made for a joke had not been proved; no more were the other theories about it. But it was a sport, a whole barrelful of puzzles, a place of interest all out of proportion to its size, eminently worthy of study. And the six of them had been set down there to study it.

Sociability impels—and besides they weren't a bad bunch at all. Meet them now, or miss them forever. They were six.

1. John Hardy. Commander and commando. As capable a man as ever lived. A good-natured conglomerate of clanking iron who was always in control. A jack of all techniques, a dynamic optimist. He had the only laugh that never irritated, however often heard, and he handled danger cavalierly. He was a blue-eyed, red-headed giant, and his face was redder than his hair.

2. William Malaquais (Uncle Billy) Cross. Engineer, machinist extraordinary, gadgeteer, theorist, arguefier, first mate, navigator, and balladier. Billy was a little older than the rest of them, but he hadn't mellowed. He said that he was still a green and growing boy.

3. Daniel Phelan. Geologist and cosmologist, and holder of heretical doctrines about field forces. "Phelan's Corollary" may be known to you; and, if so, you must be both intrigued and frustrated by the inherent contradictions that prevented its acceptance. A highly professional man in the domain of magnetism and gravity, he was also a low amateur rake and a determined wolf. A dude. Yet he could carry his share of the load.

4. Margaret Cot. Artist and photographer, botanist and bacteriologist. Full of chatter and a sort of charm. Better-looking than anyone deserves to be. Salty, really the newest thing in salinity. A little bit wanton. And a little kiddish.

5. Brian Carroll. Naturalist. And natural. He had been hunting for something all his life, but did not know what it was, and was not sure that he would know it when he found

it, but he hoped that it would be different. "O Lord," he would pray, "however it ends don't let it have a pat ending. That I couldn't stand." He believed that anything repeated was trite. And it was for that reason that there were pleasant surprises for him on Bellota.

6. Georgina Chantal. Biologist and iceberg. But the capsule description may be unjust. For she was more than biologist and much more than iceberg. Frosty only when frostiness was called for, she was always proper and often friendly. But she was no Margie Cot, and in contrast perhaps she was a little icy.

Actually there wasn't a bad apple in that basket.

The most obvious peculiarity of Bellota was its gravity, which was half that of Earth's, though the circumference of the globe was no more than a hundred miles. It was on account of this peculiarity that Daniel Phelan was on the little planet in the first place. For it was held by those who decide such things that there was a bare chance that he could find the answer; no one else had found it. His own idea was that his presence there was fruitless: he already had the answer to the gravity behavior of Bellota; it was contained in Phelan's Corollary. Bellota was the only body that behaved as it should. It was the rest of the universe that was atypical.

And in other ways Bellota was a joker. Fruits proved noisome and thorns succulent. Rinds and shells were edible and heartmeat was not. Proto-butterflies stung like hornets, and lizards secreted honeylike manna. And the water—the water was soda water—sheer carbonated soda water.

If you wanted it any other way, you caught rain water, and this was so highly nitric that drinking it was something of an experience also; for the thunderstorms there were excessive.

No, they were not excessive, claimed Phelan, they were normal. It was on all other atmospheric planets known that there was a strange deficiency of thundershowers.

Here, at least, there was no deficiency: it rained about five minutes out of every fifteen, and the multi-colored lightning was omnipresent. In all their stay there, the party was never

without the sound of thunder, near or distant, nor of the probe of lightning. For this reason there could be no true darkness there, not even between the flashes; there were flashes between the flashes. Here was meteorology concentrated, without dilution, without filler.

"But it is always different," said Georgina. "Every lightning flash is entirely different, just as every snowflake is different. Will it snow here?"

"Certainly," said Phelan. "Though it did not last night, it should tonight. Snow before midnight and fog by morning. After all, midnight and morning are only an hour apart."

At that time they had been on the planet only a few hours.

"And here the cycle is normal," said Phelan. "It is normal nowhere else. It is natural for humans and all other creatures to sleep for two hours and to wake for two hours. That is the fundamental cycle. Much of our misbehavior and perversity comes from trying to adapt to the weird day-night cycle of whatever alien world we happened to be born on. Here within a week we will return to that normal that we never knew before."

"Within what kind of a week?" asked Hardy.

"Within Bellota's twenty-eight-hour week. And do you realize that the projected working week here would be just six and two-thirds hours? I always thought that that was long enough to work anyhow."

There were no seas there, only the soda-water lakes that covered a third of the area. And there were flora and fauna that burlesqued more than they really resembled Earth's and kindred worlds'.

The trees were neither deciduous nor evergreen (though Brian Carroll said that they were ever-green), nor palm. They were trees as a cartoonist might draw them. And there were animals that made the whole idea of animals ridiculous.

And there was Snuffles.

Snuffles was a bear—possibly—and of sorts. The bear is himself a caricature of animalkind, somehow a giant dog, somehow a shaggy man, an ogre, and also a toy. And Snuffles was a caricature of a bear.

Billy Cross tried to explain to them about bears. Billy was an old bear man.

"It is the only animal that children dream of without having seen or been told about. Moncrief by his recall methods has studied thousands of early childhood dreams. Children universally dream of bears, Tahitian children subject to no ursine influence in themselves or their ancestry, Australian children, town tykes before they ever saw a bear toy. They dream of bears. The bear is the boogerman. Bears live in the attics of old childhood houses. They did in my own and in thousands of others. Their existence there is not of adult suggestion, but of innate childhood knowledge.

"But there is a duality about this boogerman. He is friendly and fascinating as well as frightening. The boogerman is not a story that adults tell to children. It is the only story that children tell to adults who have forgotten it."

"But how could you know?" asked Margie Cot. "I had no idea that little boys dreamed of bears. I thought that only girls did. And with us I had come to believe that the bear dreams symbolized grown man in his fundamental aspect, both fascinating and frightening."

"To you, Margie, everything symbolizes grown man in his fundamental aspect. Now the boogerman is also philologically interesting, being actually one of the less than two hundred Indo-European root words. Though *Bog* has come to mean God in the Slavic, yet the booger was earlier an animal-man demiurge, and the Sanscrit *bhaga* is not without this meaning. In the sense of a breaker, a smasher, it is in the Old Irish as *bong*, and the early Lithuanian as *banga*. In the sense of a devourer, it survives in the Greek root *phag*, and as one who puts to flight it is in the Latin *fug*. We have, of course, the Welsh *bwg*, a ghost, and *bogey* has been used in the meaning of the devil. And we have *bugbear*, which rounds out the circuit."

"So you make God and the Bear and the Devil one," said Georgina.

"In many mythologies it was the bear who made the world,"

said John Hardy. "After that he did nothing distinguished. It was felt by his devotees that he had done enough."

Snuffles was not a bear exactly. He was a pseudo-ursine. He was big and clumsy, and bounced around on four legs, and then up on two. He was friendly, chillingly so, for he was huge. And he snuffled like some old track-eating train.

He was a clown, but he seemed to observe the line that the visitors drew. He did not come really close, though often too close for comfort. He obeyed, or when he did not wish to obey, he pretended to misunderstand. He was the largest animal on Bellota, and there seemed to be only one of him.

"Why do we call him he?" asked Brian Carroll, the naturalist. "Only surgery could tell for sure, but it appears that Snuffles has no sex at all. There is no way I know of that he could reproduce. No wonder there is only one of him; the wonder is that there should be any at all. Where did he come from?"

"That could be asked of any creature," said Daniel Phelan. "The question is, where is he going? But he shows a certain sophistication in this. For it is only with primitives that toy animals (and he is a toy, you know) are sexed. A modern teddy bear or a toy panda isn't. Nor were the toys in the European tradition except on the fringes (Tartary before the ninth century, Ireland before the fifth) since pre-classical times. But before those times in its regions, and beyond its pale even today, the toy animals are totems and are sexed, exaggeratedly so."

"Yes, there is no doubt about it," said Brian. "He does not have even the secondary characteristics of mammal, marsupial, or what you will. But he has characteristics enough of his own."

Snuffles was, among other things, a mimic. Should a book be left around, and they were a bookish bunch, he would take it in his forepaws and hold it as to read, and turn the pages, turn them singly and carefully. He could use his padded paws as hands. His claws were retractable and his digits projective. They were paws, or they were claws, or they were hands; and he had four of them.

He unscrewed caps and he could use a can opener. He kept the visitors in firewood, once he understood that they had need of it, and that they wanted dry sticks of a certain size. He'd bite the sticks to length, stack them in small ricks, bind them with lianas, and carry them to the fire. He'd fetch water and put it on to boil. And he gathered bellotas by the bushel.

Bellota means an acorn, and they had named the planet that from the profusion of edible fruit-nuts that looked very like the acorn. These were a delicacy that became a staple.

And Snuffles could talk. All his noises were not alike. There was the "snokle, snokle, snokle" that meant he was in a good humor, as he normally was. There was a "snook, snook" and a "snoof." There were others similar in vocables but widely varied in tone and timbre. Perhaps Billy Cross understood him best, but they all understood him a little.

In only one thing did Snuffles become stubborn. He marked off a space, a wild old pile of rocks, and forbade them to enter its circle. He dug a trench around it and he roared and bared foot-long fangs if any dared cross the trench. Billy Cross said that Snuffles did this to save face; for Commander John Hardy had previously forbidden Snuffles a certain area, their supply dump and weapons center. Hardy had drawn a line around it with a mattock and made it clear that Snuffles should never cross that line. The creature understood at once, and he went and did likewise.

The party had been set down there for two Earth weeks—twelve Bellota weeks—to study the life of the planetoid, to classify, to take samples, tests, notes, and pictures; to hypothesize and to build a basis for theory. But they ventured hardly at all from their original campsite. There was such an amazing variety of detail at hand that it would take many weeks even to begin to classify it.

A feature there was the rapidity of enzyme and bacterial action. A good wine could be produced in four hours, and a fungus-cheese made from grub exudations in even less time. And in the new atmosphere thoughts also seemed to ferment rapidly.

"Every person makes one major mistake in his life," said

John Hardy to them once. "Were it not for that, he would not have to die."

"What?" quizzed Phelan. "Few die violently nowadays. How could all die for a mistake?"

"Yet it's a fact. Deaths are not really explained, for all the explanations of medicine. A death will be the result of one single much earlier rashness, of one weakening of the mind or body, or a crippling of the regenerative force. A person will be alive and vital. And one day he will make one mistake. In that moment the person begins to die. But if a man did not make that one mistake, he would not die."

"Poppycock," said Daniel Phelan.

"I wonder if you know the true meaning of 'poppycock'?" asked Billy Cross. "It is poppy-talk, opium-talk, the rambling of one under the narcotic. Now the element 'cock' in the word is not (as you would imagine) from either the Norwegian *kok*, a dung heap, nor from *coquarde* in the sense that Rabelais uses it, but rather from—"

"Poppycock," said Phelan again. He disliked Billy Cross's practice of analyzing all words, and he denied his assertion that a man who uses a word without feeling its full value is a dealer in false coinage, in fact a liar.

"But if a person dies only by making a mistake, how does an animal die?" asked Margie Cot. "Does he also make a mistake?"

"He makes the mistake of being an animal and not a man," said Phelan.

"There may be no clear line between animal and man," Margie argued.

"There is," said Phelan, and three others agreed.

"There is not," said Billy Cross.

"An animal is paradoxically a creature without an *anima*—without a soul," said Phelan. "This comes oddly from me because I also deny it to man in its usual connotation. But there is a total difference, a line that the animal cannot cross, and did not cross. When we arrive at wherever we are going, he will still be skulking in his den."

"Here, at least, it is the opposite of that," said Brian Carroll. "Snuffles sleeps in the open, and it is we who den."

It was true. Around their campsite, their supply dump and weapons center, there were three blind pockets, grottoes back in the rocks. Billy Cross, Daniel Phelan, and Margie Cot each had one of these, filled with the tools of their specialties. Here they worked and slept. And these were dens.

John Hardy himself slept in the weapons center, inside the circle where Snuffles was forbidden. And the hours that he did not sleep he kept guard. Hardy made a fetish of security. When he slept, or briefly wandered about the region, someone else must always take a turn at guard, weapon at hand. There was no relaxation of this, no exception, no chance of a mistake.

And Snuffles, the animal, who slept right out in the open ("Is it possible," Brian asked himself, "that I am the only one who notices it? Is it possible that it happens?") did not get wet. It rained everywhere on that world. But it did not rain on Snuffles.

"The joy of this place is that it is not pat," said Brian Carroll. As previously noted, he hated anything that was pat. "We could be here for years and never see the end of the variety. With the insects there may be as many species as there are individuals. Each one could almost be regarded as a sport, as if there were no standard to go by. The gravity here is cockeyed. Please don't analyze the word, Billy; I doubt myself that it means rooster-eyed. The chemistry gives one a hopeful feeling. It uses the same building blocks as the chemistry elsewhere, but it is as if each of those blocks were just a little off. The lightning is excessive, as though whoever was using it had not yet tired of the novelty; I never tired of the novelty of lightning myself. And when this place ends, it will not have a pat ending. Other globes may turn to lava or cold cinders. Bellota will pop like a soap bubble, or sag like spaghetti, or turn into an exploding world of grasshoppers. But it won't conform. I love Bellota. And I do hate a pat ending."

"There is an old precept of 'Know thyself,'" said Georgina

Chantal. They talked a lot now, as they were often wakeful, not yet being accustomed to the short days and nights of Bellota. "Its variant is 'Look within.' Look within, but our eyes point outward! The only way we can see our faces is in a mirror or in a picture. Each of us has his mirror, and mine is more often the microscope. But we cannot see ourselves as we are until we see ourselves distorted. That is why Snuffles is also a mirror for all of us here. We can't understand why we're serious until we know why he's funny."

"We may be the distortion and he the true image," said Billy Cross. "He lacks jealousy and pomposity and greed and treachery—all the distortions."

"We do not know that he lacks them," said Daniel Phelan.

So they talked away the short days and nights on Bellota, and accumulated data.

II

When it happened, it happened right in narrow daylight. The phrase was Brian's, who hated a pat phrase. It happened right in the middle of the narrow two-hour Bellota day.

All were awake and aware. John Hardy stood in the middle of the weapons center on alert guard with that rifle cradled in the crook of his arm. Billy and Daniel and Margaret were at work in their respective dens; and Brian and Georgina, who did not den, were gathering insects at the open lower end of the valley, but they had the center in their sight.

There was an unusual flash of lightning, bright by even Bellota standards, and air snapped and crackled. And there was an unusual sound from Snuffles, far removed from his usual "snokle, snokle" talk.

And in a moment benignity seemed to drain away from that planet.

Snuffles had before made as if to cross the line, and then scooted off, chortling in glee, which is perhaps why the careful John Hardy was not at first alarmed.

Then Snuffles charged with a terrifying sound.

But Hardy was not tricked entirely; it would be impossible for man or beast to trick him entirely. He had a split second, and was not one to waste time making a decision, and he was incapable of panic. What he did, he did of choice. And if it was a mistake, why, even the shrewdest decision goes into the books as a mistake if it fails.

He was fond of Snuffles and he gambled that it would not be necessary to kill him. It was a heavy rifle; a shoulder shot should have turned the animal. If it did not, there would not be time for another shot.

It did not, though, and there was not. Commander John Hardy made one mistake and for that he died. He died uncommonly, and he did not die from the inside out, as meaner men do.

It was ghastly, but it was over in an instant. Hardy's head was smashed and his face nearly swiped off. His back was broken and his body almost sheared in two. The great creature, with the foot-long canines and claws like twenty long knives mangled him and crushed him and shook him like a red mop, and then let go.

It may be that Brian Carroll realized most quickly the implications. He called to Georgina to come out of the valley onto the plain below, and to come out fast. He realized that the other three still alive would not even be able to come out.

Incongruously, a thing that went through Brian Carroll's mind was a tirade of an ancient Confederate general against ancient General Grant, to the effect that the blundering fool had moved into a position that commanded both river and hill and blocked three valley mouths, and it could only be hoped that Grant would move along before he realized his advantage.

But Brian was under no such delusion. Snuffles realized his advantage; he occupied the supply dump and weapons center, and commanded the entrances to the three blind pockets that were the dens of Billy Cross and Daniel Phelan and Margie Cot.

With one move, Snuffles had killed the leader, cornered

three of the others, and cut off the remaining two from base weapons, to be hunted down later. There was nothing unintentional about it. Had he chosen another moment, when another than John Hardy was on guard, then Hardy alive would still somehow have been a threat to him, even weaponless. But, with Hardy dead, all the rest were no match for the animal.

Brian and Georgina lingered on the edge of the plain to watch the other three, though they knew that their own lives depended on getting out of there.

"Two could get away," said Georgina, "if a third would make a rush for it and force Snuffles into another charge."

"But none of them will," said Brian. "The third would die."

It was a game, but it couldn't last long. Phelan whimpered and tried to climb the rock wall at the blind end of his pocket. Margie cajoled and told Snuffles how good friends they had always been, and wouldn't he let her go? Billy Cross filled his pipe and lit it and sat down to wait it out.

Phelan went first, and he died like a craven. But no one, not sure how he himself might die, should hold that overly against a man.

Snuffles thundered in, cut him down in the middle of a scream, and rushed back to his commanding spot in the middle of the weapons center.

Margie spread out her hands and began to cry, softly, not really in terror, when he attacked. The pseudo-bear broke her neck, but with a blow that was almost gentle in comparison with the others, and he scurried again to the center.

And Billy Cross puffed on his pipe. "I hate to go like this, Snuff, old boy. In fact, I hate to go at all. If I made a mistake to die for, it was in being such a pleasant, trusting fellow. I wonder if you ever noticed, Snuff, what a fine, upstanding fellow I really am?"

And that was the last thing Billy Cross ever said, for the big animal struck him dead with one tearing blow. And the smoke still drifted in the air from Billy's pipe.

Then it was like black thunder coming out of the valley after the other two, for that clumsy animal could move. They

had a start on him, Brian and Georgina had, of a hundred yards. And soon their terror subsided to half-terror as they realized that the shoulder-shot bear animal could not catch them till they were exhausted.

In a wild run, they could even increase their lead over him. But they would tire soon and they did not know when he would tire. He had herded them away from the campsite and the weapons. And they were trapped with him on a small planet.

Till day's end, and through the night, and next day (maybe five hours in all) he followed them until they could hardly keep going. Then they lost him, but in the dark did not know if he was close or not. And at dawn they saw him sitting up and watching them from a quarter of a mile away.

But now the adversaries rested and watched. The animal may have stiffened up from his shot. The two humans were so weary that they did not intend to run on again till the last moment.

"Do you think there is any chance that it was all a sudden fury and that he may become friendly again?" Georgina asked Brian.

"It was not a sudden fury. It was a series of very calculated moves."

"Do you think we could skirt around and beat him back to the weapons center?"

"No. He has chosen a spot where he can see for miles. And he has the interceptor's advantage—any angle we take has to be longer than his. We can't beat him back and he knows it."

"Do you think he knows that the weapons are weapons?"

"Yes."

"And that all our signal equipment is left at the center and that we can't communicate?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he's smarter than we are?"

"He was smarter in selecting his role. It is better to be the hunter than the hunted. But it isn't unheard of for the hunted to outsmart the hunter."

"Brian, do you think you would have died as badly as Daniel or as well as Billy?"

"No. No to both."

"I was always jealous of Margie, but I loved her at the end. She didn't scream. She didn't act scared. Brian, what will happen to us now?"

"Possibly we will be saved in the nick of time by the Marines."

"I didn't know they had them any more. Oh, you mean the ship. But that's still a week away, Earth time. Do you think Snuffles knows it is to come back for us?"

"Yes, he knows. I'm sure of that."

"Do you think he knows when it will come?"

"Yes, I have the feeling that he knows that too."

"But will he be able to catch us before then?"

"I believe that all parties concerned will play out the contest with one eye on the clock."

Snuffles had now developed a trick. At sundown of the short day, he would give a roar and come at them. And they would have to start their flight just as the dark commenced. They ran more noisily than he and he would always be able to follow them; but they could never be sure in the dark that he was following, or how closely. They would have to go at top panting, gasping, thumping speed for an hour and a half; then they would ease off for a little in the half hour before dawn. And in the daytime one of them had to watch while the other slept. But Snuffles could sleep as he would, and they were never able to slip away without his waking instantly.

Moreover, he seemed to herd them through the fertile belt on their night runs and let them rest on the barrens in the daytime. It wasn't that food was really scarce; it was that it could only be gathered during time taken from flight and sleep and guard duty.

They also came on a quantity of red fruit that had a weakening and dizzying effect on them, yet they could hardly leave it alone. There was a sort of bean sprout that had the

same effect, and a nut, and a cereal grass whose seed they winnowed with their hands as they went along.

"This is a narcotic belt," said Brian. "I wish we had the time to study it longer, and yet we may get all too much of studying it. We have no idea how far it goes, and this method of testing its products on ourselves may be an effective one, but dangerous."

From that time on, they were under the influence of the narcotics. They dreamed vividly while awake and walking. And they began to suffer hallucinations which they could not distinguish from reality.

It was only a Bellota day or so after their dreaming began that Brian Carroll felt that the mind of Snuffles was speaking to him. Carroll was an intelligent amateur in that field and he put it to the tests; there are valid tests for it. And he concluded that it was hallucination and not telepathy. Still (and he could see it coming) there would be a time when he would accept his hallucination and believe that the ursine was talking to him. And that would signal that he was crazy and no longer able to evade death there.

Carroll renounced (while he still had his wits) his future belief in the nonsense, just as a man put to torture may renounce anything he concedes or confesses or denies under duress.

Yet, whatever frame it was placed in, Snuffles talked to him from a distance. "Why do you think me a bear because I am in a bear skin? I do not think you a man, though you are in a man skin. You may be a little less. And why do you believe you will die more bravely than Daniel? The longer you run, the meaner will be your death. And you still do not know who I am?"

"No," said Brian Carroll aloud.

"No what?" asked Georgina Chantal.

"It seems that the bear is talking to me, that he has entered my mind."

"Me also. Could it be, or is it the narcotic fruit?"

"It couldn't be. It is hallucination brought on by the narcotics, and tiredness from travel, and lack of sleep—and our

shock at seeing our friends killed by a toy turned into a monster. There are tests to distinguish telepathic reception from hallucination: objective corroboration, impossible at this time (with Snuffles in his present mood) and probably impossible at any time; sentient parallelism—surely uncertain, for I have more in common with millions of humans than with one pseudo-ursine; circumstantial validity and point-for-point clarity—this is negative, for I know myself to be fevered and confused and my senses unreliable in other matters. By every test that can be made, the indication is that it is not telepathy, that it is hallucination."

"But there isn't any way to be *sure,* is there, Brian?"

"None, Georgina; no more than I can prove that it is not a troup of Boy Scouts around a campfire that is causing pain and burning in my gullet, that it is really the narcotic fruit or something else I have eaten conspiring with my weariness and apprehension to discomfort me. I cannot prove it is not Boy Scouts and I cannot prove it is not telepathy, but I consider both unlikely."

"I don't think it is unlikely at all, Brian. I think that Snuffles is talking to me. When you get a little nuttier and tireder, then you'll believe it too."

"Oh, yes—I'll believe it then—but it won't be true."

"It won't matter if it's true or not. Snuffles will have gained his point. Do you know that Snuffles is king of this world?"

"No. What are you talking about?"

"He just told me he was. He told me that if I would help him catch you, he would let me go. But I won't do it. I have become fond of you, Brian. Did you know that I never did like men before?"

"Yes. You were called the iceberg."

"But now I like you very much."

"You have no one else left to like."

"It isn't that. It's the mood I'm in. And I won't help Snuffles catch you unless he gives me very much better reasons for it."

Damn the girl! If she believed Snuffles talked to her, then for all practical purposes he did. And, however the idea of

a trade for her life had been implanted in her mind, it would grow there.

Now Snuffles talked to Brian Carroll again, and it was somehow a waste of time to intone the formality that it was hallucination only.

"You still do not know what I am, but you will have to learn it before you die. Hardy knew it at the last minute. Cross guessed it from the first. Phelan still isn't sure. He goes about and looks back at his body lying there, and he still isn't sure. Some people are very hard to convince. But the girl knew it and she spread out her hands."

In his fever, that was the way the bear animal talked to him.

They ate leaves now and buds. They would have no more of the narcotic fruits even if they had to starve. But narcosis left them slowly, and the pursuit of them tightened.

It was just at sunset one day that disaster struck at Brian. The bear had nearly hypnotized him into immobility, talking inside his head. Georgina had started on before him and repeatedly called for him to follow, but for some reason he loitered. When Snuffles made his sudden sundown charge, there seemed no escaping him. Brian was trapped on a rimrock. Georgina had already taken a winding path to the plain below. Brian hesitated, then held his ground for the bruin's charge. He believed that he could draw Snuffles on, and then break to the left or the right at the last instant, and perhaps the animal would plunge over the cliff.

But old Snuff modified but did not halt his charge at the last minute. He came in bottom-side first, like an elephant sliding bases, and he knocked Brian off the cliff.

There are few really subjective accounts of dying, since most who die do not live to tell about it. But the way it goes is this:

First one hangs in space; then he is charged by the madly rising ground armed with trees and rocks and weapons. After that is a painful sleep, and much later a dazed wakening.

III

He was traveling upside down, that was sure, and roughly, though at a slow rate of speed. Perhaps that is the normal way for people to travel after they are dead. He was hung from the middle in an odd doubled-up manner, and seemed supported and borne along by something of a boatlike motion, yet of a certain resilience and strength that was more living than even a boat. It had a rough softness, this thing, and a pleasant fragrance.

But, though it was bright morning now, it was hard to get a good look at the thing with which he was in contact. All he could see was grass flowing slowly by, and heels.

Heels?

What was this all about? Heels and backs of calves, no more.

He was being carried, carried slung like a sack over her shoulder by Georgina. For the thing of the pleasant fragrance was Georgina Chantal.

She set him down then. It was a very rough valley they were in, and he saw that they had traveled perhaps four miles from the base of the rim-rock; and Snuffles had settled down in the morning light a quarter of a mile behind them.

"Georgina, did you carry me all night?"

"Yes."

"How could you?"

"I changed shoulders sometimes. And you aren't very heavy. This is only a half-gravity planet. Besides, I'm very strong. I could have carried you even on Earth."

"Why wasn't I killed by the fall?"

"Snuffles says he isn't ready to kill you yet, that he could kill you any time he wanted to with the lightning or rock or poison berry. But you did hit terribly hard. I was surprised to be able to pick you up in one piece. And now Snuffles says that I have lost my last chance."

"How?"

"Because I carried you away from him before he could get down the cliff in the dark. Now he says he will kill me too."

"Snuff is inconsistent. If he could kill me any instant with the lightning, why would he be angered if you carried me away from him?"

"I thought of that too. But he says he has his own reasons. And that lightning—do you know that it doesn't lighten all the time everywhere on Bellota? Only in a big circle around Snuffles, as a tribute to him. I've noticed myself that when we get a big lead over him, we almost move clear out of the lightning sphere."

"Georgina, that animal doesn't really talk to us. It is only our imaginations. It is not accurate to so personify it."

"It may not be accurate, but if that isn't talk he puts out, then I don't know talk. And a lot of his talk he makes come true. But I don't care if he does kill me for saving you. I'm silly over you now."

"We are both of us silly, Georgina, from the condition we are in. But he can't talk to us. He's only an animal run amok. If it were anything else, it would mean that much of what we know is not so."

Brian had the full effect of it one sunny afternoon a couple of Bellota days later. He was dozing and Georgina was on guard when Snuffles began to talk inside his head.

"You insult me that you do not recognize my identity. When Hardy said that in many mythologies it was the Bear who made the world, he had begun to guess who I was. I am the creator and I made the world. I have heard that there are other worlds besides Bellota, and I am not sure whether I made them or not. But if they are there, I must have made them. They could not have made themselves. And this I did make.

"It isn't an easy thing, or all of you would have made them, and you have not. And there is pride in creation that you could not understand. You said that Bellota was made for fun. It was *not* made for fun. I am the only one who knows why it was made, for I made it. And it is not a little planet; it is a grand planet. I waited for you to confess your error

and be amazed at it. Since you did not, you will have to die. I made you, so I can kill you if I like. I must have made you, since I made all. And if I did not, then I made other things, red squirrels and white birds.

"You have no idea of the achievement itself. I had very little to work with and no model or plans or previous experience. And I made mistakes. I would be the last to deny that. I miscalculated the gravity, a simple mathematical error that anyone could make. The planet is too small for the gravity, but I had already embodied the calculated gravity in other works that I did not choose to undo, and I had no material to make a larger planet. So what I have made I have made, and it will continue so. An error, once it is embodied, becomes a new truth.

"You may wonder why my birds have hair. I will confess it, I did not know how to make feathers, nor could you without template or typus. And you are puzzled that my butterflies sting and my hornets do not? But how was I to know that those fearfully colored monsters should have been harmless? It ill befits one who has never made even the smallest—but why do I try to explain this to you?

"You wonder if I am talking to you or if it is only a delusion of your mind. What is the difference? How could there be anything in your mind if I did not put it there? And do not be afraid of dying. Remember that nothing is lost. When I have the pieces of you, I will use them to make other things. That is the law of conservation of matter as I understand it.

"But do you know that the one thing desired by all is really praise? It is the impelling force, and a creator needs this more than anyone. Things and beings are made to give praise, and if they do not, they are destroyed again. You had every opportunity to give it, and instead you jeered.

"Did any of you ever make a world? I tell you that there are a million things to remember all at once. And there can be no such thing as a bad world, since each of them is a triumph. Whether it was that I made the others and I forgot them is only a premise; or whether I will make them in the

future, and they are only now talked of out of their proper time. But some of your own mythologies indicate that I made your own.

"I would tell you more, only you would not understand it. But after I have conserved your matter, then you will know all these things."

"Snuffles is cranky with me today," said Georgina Chantal. "Is he also cranky with you?"

"Yes," said Brian Carroll.

"He says that he made Bellota. Did he tell you that too? Do you believe it?"

"He told me. I do not believe it. We are delirious. Snuffles cannot communicate."

"You keep saying that, but you aren't sure. He told me that when he chews us up he will take a piece of me and a piece of you and chew them together and make a new thing, since we are belatedly taken with each other. Isn't that nice?"

"How cozy."

"I wonder why he made the grass so sharp, though. There is no reason for it to be like that."

"Why, and what?"

"Snuffles. Why did he make the grass so sharp? My shoes are nearly gone and it's killing me."

"Georgina, hold onto what's left of your mind. Snuffles did not make the grass or anything else. He is only an animal, and we are sick and walking in delirium."

So they walked on awhile, for evening had come. Then the voice of Snuffles came again inside the head of Brian.

"How was I to know that the grass should not be sharp? Are not all pointed things sharp? Who would have guessed that it should be soft? If you had told me gently, and without shaming me, I would have changed it at once. Now I will not. Let it wound you!"

So they walked on awhile, for evening had come. Then days and nights.

"Brian, do you think that Snuffles knows the world is round?"

"If he made it, he must know it."

"Oh, yes, I had forgotten."

"Dammit, girl, I was being ironic! And you are now quite nutty, and I hardly less so. Of course he didn't make it. And of course he doesn't know that it's round. He's only an animal."

"Then we have an advantage back again."

"Yes. I'd have noticed it before if I hadn't been so confused. We are more than halfway around the little planet. He is no longer between us and our weapons center, but he behaves as though he thought he was. We have no more than forty miles to go to it. We will step up our pace, though gradually. Our old camp valley is prominent enough so that we could recognize it within several miles either way, and we can navigate that close. And if he seems to say in your mind that he is onto our trick, do not believe him. The animal does not really talk to our minds."

But their narcosis still increased. "It isn't a narcotic belt," said Brian. "It is a narcotic season on all Bellota—a built-in saturnalia. But we have not been able to enjoy the carnival."

"Snuffles shows up well as a carnival king, though, don't you think? It is easier to believe in time of carnival that he made the cosmos. I went to the big carnival once in Nola when I was a little girl. There was a big bear wearing a crown on one of the floats, and I believe that he was king of the carnival. It wasn't an ordinary bear. I am sure now that it represented Snuffles, though I was only six years old when I saw it. Do you think that Snuffles' explanation of the law of gravity here is better than Phelan's?"

"More easily understandable at least than the corollary, and probably more honest. I always thought that the corollary also embraced a simple mathematical error and that Phelan stuck to it out of perversity."

"It is one thing to stick to an error. It is another to build a world to conform to it. Brian, do you know what hour it is?"

"It is the three hundred and twelfth since we were set down."

"And they return for us at the three hundred and thirty-sixth. We will be back at our campsite and in control by then, won't we?"

"If we are ever to make it back and be in control, we should make it by then. Are you tired, Georgina?"

"No. I will never again be tired. I have been walking in a dream too long for that. But I never felt more pleasurable than now. I look down at my feet which are a sorry mess, but they don't seem to be my feet. Only a little while ago I felt sorry for a girl in such a state, and then I came to half realize that the girl was me. But the realization didn't carry a lot of conviction. It doesn't seem like me."

"I feel disembodied myself. But I don't believe that this comical old body that I observe will carry me much farther."

"Snuffles is trying to talk to us."

"Yes, I feel him. No, dammit, Georgina, we will not give in to that nonsense. Snuffles is only a wounded old bear that is trailing us. But our hallucination is coming again. It will take a lot of theory to cover a dual hallucination."

"Hush, I want to hear what he says."

Then Snuffles began to talk inside the heads of the two of them.

"If you know and do not tell me, then you are guilty of a peculiar affront. A maker cannot remember everything, and I had forgotten some of the things that I had made before. But we are coming on a new world now that is very like Bellota. Can it be that I have only repeated myself, and that I did not improve each time? These hills here I made once before. If you know, then you must tell me now. It may be that I cannot wait to chew your brains to find out about it. How will I ever make a better world if I make them all alike?"

"He has forgotten that he made it round, Brian."

"Georgina, he did not make anything. It is our own minds trying to reassure us that he does not know we are ahead of him and going toward our weapons."

"But how do we both hear the same thing if he isn't talking to us?"

"I don't know. But I prefer it the way it is. I never did like easy answers."

Then there came the evening they were within sight of their original valley; and if they moved at full speed through the night, they should reach their campsite very soon after dawn.

"But the weariness is beginning to creep up through the narcosis," said Brian. "Now I'm desiring the effect that we tried to avoid before."

"But what has happened?"

"I believe that the narcotic period of the planet is over. The carnival is coming to an end."

"Do you know something, Brian? We did not have to go around the world at all. At any time we could have separated and outmaneuvered him. He could not have intercepted both of us going toward the weapons pile if we went different ways. But we could not bear to part."

"That is a woman's explanation."

"Well, let's see you find another one. You didn't want to be parted from me, did you, Brian?"

"No, I didn't."

It was a rough, short night, but it would be the last. They moved in the agony of a cosmic hangover.

"I've become addicted," said Brian, "and the fruit has lost its numbing properties. I don't see how it is possible for anyone to be so tired."

"I'd carry you again if I weren't collapsing myself."

"Dammit, you couldn't! You're only a girl!"

"I am not only a girl! Nobody is only an anything. Our trouble here may have started with your thinking that Snuffles was only an animal; and he read your thoughts and was insulted."

"He did not read my thoughts. He *is* only an animal. And I will shoot his fuzzy hide full of holes when we get to our campsite. Let's keep on with it and not take any chances of his catching or passing us in the dark."

"How could Phelan's corollary apply to this planet and no other when he had never been here then?"

"Because, as I often suspected, Phelan had a touch of the joker in him and he composed it sardonically."

"Then he made it for fun. And do you still think that Bellota was made for fun?"

"The fun has developed a grotesque side to it. I am afraid I will have to put an end to a part of that fun. The dark is coming, and there is our campsite, and we are in the clear. I'll make it before I drop if I have to bust a lung. There's an elephant gun with a blaster attachment that I'll take to that fur-coated phony. We're going to have bear steak for breakfast."

He achieved the campsite. He had reached the wobbly state, but he still ran. He was inside the circle and at the gun stack, when a roar like double thunder froze his ears and his entrails.

He leaped back, fell, rolled, crawled, snaked his way out of reach; and the sudden shock of it bewildered him.

And there was Snuffles sitting in the middle of the supply dump and smoking the pipe of Billy Cross.

And when the words rattled inside Brian's head again, how could he be sure that it was hallucination and not the bear talking to him?

"You thought that I had forgotten that Bellota was round? If you knew how much trouble I had making it as round as it is, you would know that I could never forget it."

Georgina came up, but fell to her knees in despair when she saw that Snuffles was there ahead of them.

"I can't run any more, Brian, and I know that you can't. I am down and I can never get up again. How soon will they get here?"

"The Marines?"

"Yes, the ship."

"Too late to help us. I used to wish they would be late just once. I am getting that wish, but it isn't as amusing as I anticipated."

Snuffles knocked out his pipe then, as a man would; and laid it carefully on a rock. Then he came out and killed them: Georgina, the friendly iceberg, and Brian, who did hate a pat ending.

And Snuffles was still king of Bellota.

The report of the ship read in part:

"No explanation of the fact that no attempt seems to have been made to use the weapons, though two of the party were killed nearly a week later than the others. All were mangled by the huge pseudo-ursine which seems to have run amok from eating the local fruit, seasonally narcotic. Impossible to capture animal without unwarranted delay of takeoff time. Gravitational incongruity must await fuller classification of data."

The next world that Snuffles made embodied certain improvements, and he did correct the gravity error, but it still contained many elements of the grotesque. Perfection is a very long, very hard road.

THE SLY BUNGERHOP

William Morrison

Colmer was five feet four inches tall and as ferocious as a baby bunny, but he had a powerful voice for the size of him. He was using it now.

"You bloated battener on better men's brains!" he thundered alliteratively. "What makes you think you know more than I do about the future?"

L. Richard de Wike fiddled nervously with the button that would summon his secretary, but refrained from pushing it. He sighed and allowed the storm of vivid invective to burst around his ears. It was a part of his job.

There are publishing-house editors who are employed because of a great sensitivity to syntax and style; de Wike had a tin ear. There are editors who hold their jobs because of their ability to make friends and attract authors; de Wike got on badly with his own mother, and all subsequent relationships were worse.

As an editor, de Wike had only one real talent and that was an ability to absorb punishment. It was enough. Let an author come in and blow his stack—no advertising! a miserable job of production! a deliberate, calculated insult from Miss Hargreave on the switchboard, who pretended not to recognize his name!—and it was de Wike who had the task of riding out the storm.

His title was Executive Editor, but it might just as well have been Whipping Boy. After half an hour's exercise on de Wike, even the most outraged of authors found his passions spent and was then easy meat for whatever the other editors in the firm wished to do with him.

This particular storm, though, showed no signs of spending itself.

At a momentary lull, de Wike cleared his throat and said: "Now, really, Colmer. It's only that the editorial board feels your picture of thirty-first-century life lacks a certain *warmth.* Surely you can understand—"

"Warmth!" howled Colmer, freshly enraged. "Good God, de Wike, this is *my* book and *my* future. I don't tell you how to cheat an author out of his reprint royalties—don't you tell me what the thirty-first century's going to be like! Remember *Tales of Millennium!* Remember what *Life* said in its editorial about *T Is for Tomorrow!* Remember—"

De Wike closed his ears and concentrated on remembering. True, Colmer was the best science fiction writer they had. He was also the most temperamental. He didn't look the part in either case—a mousy little man with thick glasses over his watery eyes; he was blind as a bat without them. His heroes conquered galaxies and alien maidens with equal ease and daring; Colmer himself had never ventured west of the Hudson River nor north of his apartment on the Grand Concourse. But the critics loved him and the cash customers ate his books up. So—

Crash!

L. Richard de Wike pulled out the mental plugs in his ears and paid attention. Colmer had been making a point about the hereditary cretinism in the ancestry of all publishers' men and had pulled off his glasses to gesticulate with them. He had gestured wildly and collided with the Luna Cup that rested proudly atop de Wike's desk. The crash was the sound of the Luna Cup flying across the room and smashing into silverplated scrap against the base of the marble bust of L. Richard de Wike as a boy.

"Now, really, Colmer!" De Wike was horrified. It wasn't just the cost of the cup—that had been only thirty or forty dollars. It was the *principle.* That cup was awarded for the best line of science fiction books; it had been the property of de Wike's firm for six years running and it had cost a pretty penny, indeed, to set up an organization willing to award it

to them, to pay the expenses of the award dinners, to keep the judges complacently in line, year after year.

Colmer stared blindly at de Wike. He said in a furious roar, "My only pair of glasses, ruined. And you worry about your lousy cup! Oh, you'll pay for this, de Wike!"

And he blundered blindly out of the office, crashing against a chair, a file cabinet and the half-open door.

Colmer turned in the general direction of the elevator, afraid of bumping into someone. Hamlet could tell a hawk from a handsaw, but Colmer couldn't—not without his glasses, not from as much as a dozen feet away. Even a human figure merged into mists at six feet or so; he could tell that it *was* a figure, but identity, age and sex were beyond his recognition. Not that he much cared. The memory of his insults and ill treatment was too strong in his mind.

"My only glasses!" he muttered searingly. "The thirty-first century!"

A figure that might have been either a pink-faced baboon or a fat man in a brown suit appeared out of the mists and murmured pleasantly: "This way, sir."

"Thanks," growled Colmer, and fumbled his way to the elevator.

Usually that was easy enough, even without his glasses; de Wike's office was on the top floor, and ordinarily there would be one elevator waiting there, door open, until the starter on the ground floor buzzed it to start its descent. Not this time, though. All the doors were closed.

Colmer found the handiest door, stuck his face almost into it to make sure it wasn't another office, and located a signal button. Bending down almost to touch it with his nose to see that it wasn't a fire alarm or Western Union signal, he put his forefinger on it and pressed. It was an elevator button, all right. It said, "Up."

He waited for a second, and then the door opened and he stepped in.

Then something registered with him for the first time.

De Wike's office was on the top floor.

But the button had said "Up."

He stared witheringly at the operator, a vague blue blur of uniform with a vague blonde blur of hair on top. Practical jokes?

The operator said in a pleasant soprano voice, "Wettigo mizzer?"

Colmer demanded suspiciously, "What are you talking about?"

"Ah," said the pleasant soprano, and then there was a sort of flat, fleshy click, as though she had popped her bubblegum. "Where to, sir?" she asked.

"Where to!" he mimicked. "Where the devil *can* I go to? Down, of course! I want to get out of this confounded place before—"

"Sorry, sir. This car only goes up. Where would you like to stop?"

"Now stop that!" he commanded. Up! There simply *was* no up, not from de Wike's office—not in this building. "I want to go down. I want to go down *now*. And no nonsense about it."

"Sorry, sir. This car only goes up. Where would you like to stop?"

He stared at her, but her face was no more than a pink blur under the blonde halo. He would have liked to get a better look at her—he was nearly sure all the elevator operators he'd ever seen in this building were men—but, after all, you can't put your face right up against that of a strange blonde with no better excuse than that you've broken your glasses. Or can you?

The pleasant soprano said again, "Where would you like to stop, sir?"

Like a damned parrot, he thought scathingly, or like a machine. But what could you expect in a building tenanted by creatures like de Wike?

He chose a number at random. "A hundred and tenth," he snapped. "And let's get started!" *That* would hold her.

"Sorry, sir. We're already started, but this car only goes up to ninety-nine."

"Ah," he said disgustedly, "ninety-nine will do."

What was the use of going along with this nonsense? And

the car certainly wasn't moving; he was sure of that! He'd ridden in enough elevators to know. Why, his famous free-fall sequence in *The Martian Chanukah* was based on an express elevator ride from the top of the R.C.A. Building. If this were going up, he would feel heavier; if it were going down, he'd feel lighter. And all he felt was—why, he thought wonderingly, *queasy*. Maybe it *was* moving, some way or another; certainly he seemed to be having a little trouble keeping his balance.

Colmer leaned against the back of the car and glowered blindly into space. Above the closed door there were winking pink-and-green lights—like an indicator, he thought. Well, all right, they *were* moving. Good. Since the only way to move was down, they would soon be at the ground floor, and he would be out of the building, and then it was only a short cab-ride to the offices of Forestry, Brasbit and Hoke, who could be relied on to publish his books the way he wrote them, and who had said as much just the other day . . .

Still, he thought, softening, de Wike wasn't such a bad sort. As editors went, that is. And old man Brasbit was known to have some idiosyncrasies of his own—for example, there was the time he had hauled five of his own authors into court for violating the option clauses of their contracts—and, on the whole, de Wike's firm could be counted on to be reasonable about things like that. If a better offer turned up for a particular book, they wouldn't usually stand in an author's way.

And this present difficulty—well, who was to know whose impression of what the thirty-first century would be like was correct? Colmer thought of it as harsh and mechanized; de Wike's editorial board thought there would be more human softness. Well, why wasn't that possible, too? Suppose in chapter nineteen, for instance, he had the Eugenics Committee set aside the ruling that ninth cousins couldn't intermarry and—

"Here you are, sir. Ninety-nine."

"Oh." Colmer blinked. The door was open and the queasy-making motion had stopped. "Thanks," he said, and then,

moved by a sudden impulse and the hell with what she might think of it, he put his face close to hers.

She didn't slap him.

She didn't draw back.

She just stood there, waiting.

Colmer was suddenly conscious of two things, one of them obvious because it was positive, the other negative and hard to trace.

The obvious thing was that this was, indeed, a young lady —or a doll. The face was a doll's face, with bright, unwinking blue eyes, pink and almost inhumanly perfect features.

The negative thing was harder. Something was missing. And then, in a moment, it came to him. She didn't *smell.*

Colmer was no lady's man, but he had not completely isolated himself from them. Moreover, he read the magazines and—that unfailing barometer of what their readers really liked—the advertisements the magazines contained. He knew that no self-respecting American girl would be caught dead without at least a few drops of scent behind each ear and maybe some sort of perfumed liquid or spray on the hair, plus, of course, something dainty-smelling to protect her from perspiration all day or all week long.

But there was no odor whatsoever to the bright and doll-like operator of the car.

She said, inches from his face, "You get out here, sir. Ninety-nine."

A little afraid of her and more than a little perplexed, Colmer stepped out. She was pretty but vacuous and insistently repetitious. He wondered if it was worth his while to ask the elevator starter about her. The starter should be right there, under the clock, or chatting with the owner of the cigar stand—

Colmer looked blearily and wonderingly around him.

No elevator starter. No cigar stand. No clock.

Wherever he was, and his myopic vision made it more than merely hard to tell, he was not in the lobby of the Pinkstone Building, where de Wike had his offices.

As far as he could tell, he wasn't in a lobby at all.

There was a droning electrical sound in the air and a faint, sneezy tang of ozone. Long, glowing corridors spread away from him on either side, and though he could see no details, he could at least see that some of the glowing light came from objects in motion along the corridors.

He peered unbelieving, shaking his nearly blind head.

This was the end, he thought sourly. If this was some trick of de Wike's—if somehow de Wike had conspired with the operator to bring him to the basement of the building or—

No. None of that was possible.

Colmer reached out one hand to the wall of the corridor for support, more moral than real, and recoiled. The wall was tingling and warm; it seemed to be vibrating.

He screwed his eyes shut and opened them again. Nearsightedness was sometimes an oddly comforting affliction; by being unable to see much of the world around one without glasses, one had sometimes the impression of being wrapped in warm and fuzzy cotton batting, insulated from harm.

But not this time.

This time, Colmer didn't like the world around him and he wanted to know it better.

He opened his eyes and placed his index fingers on the skin at the corners of the eyes, pulling them taut and Oriental. Generally that helped; deforming the eyeball by a little outside pressure sometimes partly took the place of glasses . . .

Well, no. Or did it? He couldn't tell. The vaguely glowing nimbuses of light that he could see moving *did* lose some of their fuzziness, but they were warped and distorted into shapes he couldn't recognize—

Or didn't want to.

He shook his head again and felt the beginning tremor of physical fear.

It was all right for philosophers, he thought numbly, to talk of being unable to distinguish dream from reality. Maybe they didn't know whether they were Chinese sages or bluebottle flies, but maybe they spent their time in a daze anyhow. Not Colmer. *He* knew: he wasn't dreaming. This was incredible, but it was real. You don't have to pinch yourself

to find out if you're awake. You just know. When you stop knowing, you're—

You're crazy, he finished.

He put that out of his mind, though not easily; but if he was crazy, there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it.

Drunk, maybe? No, he hadn't had a drink that day—de Wike, that skunk, hadn't taken him to lunch.

Hypnotized? No, that was also pretty improbable; he had seen no one but de Wike; and de Wike, whose personality was neither electric nor even quite bearable, was not the sort of person who could hypnotize another. De Wike couldn't hypnotize a poet, much less a science fiction novelist, always alert for plot gimmicks.

That seemed to leave insanity.

Well, Colmer thought gloomily, facing up to it, most writers were nuts anyway, or else they would be real estate salesmen, where the big money was, or editors— De Wike kept pestering him about heading their science fiction department. If that was the only remaining possibility, by all the laws of scientific evidence Colmer had painstakingly learned at the feet of such Titans as Einstein, Jeans and Sherlock Holmes, then it had to be accepted as true.

Unless—

He laughed ruefully. It was a silly thought, but there *was* one other possibility.

Suppose, for instance, that maybe one of the stories he made his living by was—well, true?

It was funny. More than funny—it was downright hilarious; he was beginning to drink the stuff he made himself. But just suppose, he thought, stretching the corners of his eyes in a vain attempt to see just what the devil it *was* he had got into, just suppose there really was such a thing as, for example, a weak spot in the paratime web. Whatever that was.

He'd used it glibly enough in stories and he had intended it to mean that certain places might be sort of gateways between the familiar world of H-bombs and TV commercials

and—different worlds. Parallel worlds, in a space of more than four dimensions.

Suppose it was true? Suppose the elevator had somehow transported him into an *if* world or maybe another planet?

There was a strange taste at the back of Colmer's mouth. He looked around him with effort. Wherever he looked. the walls glowed with light. The ceiling—high overhead, as far as he could tell—also glowed. The light varied in color, but his eyes, even pulled out of shape, were too inefficient to pick out details. In some places, the lights were moving.

Now what would that be? A factory, perhaps?

He suddenly got part of the answer. People, he thought. People walking. Their clothes were luminous as the walls; maybe that was the moving blobs of light.

Colmer took a deep breath and walked toward the moving lights.

The confounded things pursued their own paths. He selected a lavender pair of blobs, hurried toward them; they were gone. Ducked into a doorway? He couldn't tell. Disappointed, he stopped short.

A pale blue glow appeared and came toward him. When it was a dozen feet away, he saw that it was in fact the approximate size and shape of a man. He cleared his throat and blocked the path.

The pale blue glow said, "You-all tucker me?"

Colmer jumped; deep-south Alabama he had not expected. He asked, "What?"

"Dassita say. Tucker me?"

Colmer said miserably, "I don't know what you're talking about. All I know is I pushed the up button and—well, here I am."

The man in glowing blue said something quick and impatient; Colmer couldn't even hear him, much less understand. He turned away and called something to a glow of muted rose that was approaching down the hall. It sounded like, "Putta sly bungerhop"; there was more to it, but not that Colmer could understand.

The rose glow came closer and, in turn, revealed itself to be human.

There was a very quick, low-voiced conference, and then the rose glow said, "*Que veut-vous?*"

French, thought Colmer. Could he be suddenly in France? He said slowly, "I only speak English. Can you tell me where I am?"

Click-pop—it was the sound the elevator operator had made, like popping bubble-gum. Then the man in glowing rose said, "You are in the Palace Building, on the tenth floor. Can't you see the signs?" It was a pleasant, reassuring voice —but accented somehow. The accent was not French, whatever it was.

Colmer said doubtfully, "I can't see much of anything. My eyes are bad and I've broken my spectacles."

"Ah," said the pale blue glow in a tone of satisfaction, "putta sly bungerhop."

"Wayman," the rose glow said, and then, to Colmer, "You came in the slide?"

"I came in the elevator, if that's what you mean."

There was a silence, as though the man were studying him.

Colmer made himself say, with studied indifference, "Just as a matter of curiosity, could you tell me what planet we're on?"

The man laughed, but there was a puzzled wonder in his laughter. "Excuse me," he said, "we're rushed just now—" He began to move away.

"Please," Colmer begged blindly. "I'm serious. Are we on—uh—the planet Earth?"

"Of course!"

"How far away is the Sun?"

"The Sun?" Pause. "I don't know. Ninety million miles, something like that."

"How many moons?"

The man laughed again, but with a definite note of strain. He backed away. He must think I'm crazy, thought Colmer, and small wonder!

"Wait!" Colmer called. "Look, can you tell me—let's see, can you tell me where the manager is?"

There would have to be a manager, or something like a manager, and maybe that would get him to someone who could explain things.

"Manager?" The voice was doubtful. "I don't know—oh, I see. Front office, eh? First floor."

"Thanks," said Colmer gratefully. "How do I get there?"

"Side drop," the man said impatiently.

"What's that?" Colmer begged, but the man was gone.

Colmer cursed to himself. He should have saved a few choice words, he thought, and not wasted them all on an innocent like de Wike. He had never before met such unhelpful people.

Still, maybe things weren't so bad. Side drop. Maybe—

He moved over to the side of the corridor. That might be the "side" part. He stuck his nose close to the wall and moved along until he found a pattern of lights that seemed to offer some help. The glow of lights in his nearsighted eyes nearly blinded him, but at least he could distinguish the fine details in the difference of color.

These marks were red letters against a glowing gray background—syncopated, sketchy letters that formed misspelled words: "Hozontal transmit," "Noth End," "Wes End," and —"Syd Drop."

This was the place, all right. Now what?

He ran his eyes along the walls. No buttons to push. Apparently there was some trick to it. He gingerly felt the wall all around the glowing words "Syd Drop"—

It vanished. The floor fell away from beneath him.

For a second, he was petrified, and then some invisible force steadied him and he came to a stop.

Now where was he?

There were more moving lights here than on the tenth floor and some of them were approaching him.

"Excuse me," he said, clutching at the nearest. "I'd like to talk to the manager, please, or whatever you call him."

Click-pop again. A woman's voice this time. "Manager? One who manages—oh, North Transmit."

Apparently even the females of these people were sparing of words. He sighed and stuck his face up against a wall again. This time he knew what to expect and he was not surprised when he suddenly felt himself clutched, whirled and carried rapidly in a horizontal direction. Off the "Noth Transmit," he stared around, stretching his eyes, which were beginning to water and ache very much.

There was a large glowing patch of white light set in the middle of the gray, and a greenish glow moving toward it. He intersected the greenish glow. "Is this the manager's office—I mean the front office?"

The greenish glow growled at him and moved away. Colmer hesitated. Then he heard voices coming from behind the glowing patch of white. He moved toward it slowly.

One of the voices was familiar. It was saying, "Thing temple sly. Putta bungerhop, thing."

Colmer pulled at his aching eyes again and saw, through the square of white, two lesser glows, one violet, one a familiar blue. That was the voice. It was the man he had met back on the tenth floor, here before him.

Colmer sighed and felt his way through the glowing white door. As long as the man was going this way anyhow, *why* hadn't he escorted Colmer and spared him the nearly impossible job of finding his own way here?

These people, curse their inconsiderateness!

Colmer said loudly, "I'd like to speak to the manager."

There was no click-pop this time; the man answered him at once in English. "About what you're doing here?" The voice was again accented, but in a way like nothing Colmer had ever heard.

"That's right," Colmer said doggedly. "How did I get here?"

"That's what I was going to ask you," said the manager. "Do you have a permit for the temporal slide?"

"The what?" Colmer gritted his teeth. "Look, I was waiting

for the elevator. I pushed the button marked 'Up' and the elevator stopped and—"

"Temple sly bungerhop!" crowed the enraging blue glow.

The violet one, the manager, said, "Wait a minute. Where were you when this happened?"

"Why—the Pinkstone Building. The twentieth floor. That's the top floor, you see, so I wondered about that button. But I had just broken my glasses and I couldn't see very well, so—well, here I am."

There was a rapid and confused babbling among the glows —more voices than two, Colmer realized, and by squeezing his eyes again, he discovered that there were at least half a dozen persons in the room. Colmer couldn't follow a word of it, though it had a haunting familiarity, like syncopated and slurred English, until the violet-glowing manager's voice said, "Wait a minute until everyone gets his translator on."

There was a series of tiny click-pops.

"Now," said the manager, "you'd better explain." His tone was mild, but it seemed to carry a threat.

Colmer said bravely, "I've got nothing to explain. I never saw this place before in my life. I've had the devil of a time getting around—practically had to feel my way—and your people weren't very helpful, either. They didn't tell me a thing except how to reach this place."

Pause. Then the manager's voice said meditatively, "That may be just as well. What do you think, Arrax?"

A silvery glow just within the range of Colmer's vision said, "But how did he find the temporal slide?"

"What about that?" the manager demanded. "What were you doing just before that?"

"Why—" Colmer stopped, remembering. "I was talking to my publisher. We'd been discussing a new book of mine—I'm a science fiction writer, you see. The book was about the thirty-first century. I said the thirty-first century was likely to be a harsh, mechanistic—"

"Out loud?"

"What? Of course. How else?"

"Ah," said the distant bass rumble of the silvery glow in a satisfied tone. "And the monitor—"

"Yes," agreed the manager, less satisfied. "The monitor vectored him in to the temporal slide and he pushed the slide button up. The question is, now what?" He paused. "You," he said to Colmer, "when did all this happen?"

"When?" Colmer was completely at sea. "About one-thirty, I'd say. I remember it was time for lunch and—"

"You misunderstand me. What *year?*"

"What year?" Colmer blinked and a great light seemed to come over him. "Oh," he said faintly. "Temporal slide, eh? What year? You mean—"

"Of course," said the manager. "You got on the temporal slide, going up. You're in the ninety-ninth century."

There was a ragged series of click-pops and another argument raged in the slurred and sketchy English. Colmer didn't mind; it gave him a chance to catch his breath.

What an opportunity! What an incredible, gorgeous, million-billion-trillion-dollar *opportunity!* The ninety-ninth century and here he was smack in the middle of it! Let de Wike argue with him now—here was his chance to write science fiction that would live and sell and make his name famous forever!

There was a sudden local concentration of chatter at the door and then a new figure in a glowing suit—orange, this time—joined the party. He approached Colmer, close enough so that Colmer could actually see the face. It was a man, not young, not old, no taller than Colmer himself, with a wise and patient and studious face. He poked something glittering and gleaming under Colmer's eyes. Flaring white light danced out and blinded Colmer for a second.

"Hey!" cried Colmer. "What the devil do you think you're doing?"

Click-pop; a series of click-pops. The manager's voice soothed, "Ogratz is a doctor. You understand, we have to have a doctor look you over."

"Oh, all right," Colmer grumbled. "Listen, I've got a mil-

lion questions! My year was 1961. Now what happened right after that?"

The booming silver-glow voice said, "The recommendation for the monitor, then, is to replace it with a human."

Colmer interrupted: "Excuse me! Now, after 1961, when was the next war? Did the Russians—hey! Ouch!"

It was bright green light this time and it stung. The doctor said something under his breath in a satisfied tone.

The manager's voice said, "Arrax, the whole thing was a stupid error; I've always said that robot monitors were a false economy. We'll have to change the code word. 'Century' isn't any good now. Maybe we ought to replace the slide operators, too, but we can table that. As for this one—"

"You mean me?" Colmer yelped. "Look, get this fellow away from me, will you? I want to know about the H-bomb. Was it ever used? Did Nasser get—"

"We'll vote yes on the monitors," said Arrax. "I leave the arrangements to you. What about him, Doctor?"

The doctor stepped away from Colmer, scratching his cheek. "Well," he said meditatively, "it checks. Fovea central, bilateral occlusions. Efficiency? I'd say fifteenth percentile rods, twenty-fifth cones—oh, yes. Without his glasses, he's just about blind. Couldn't have seen a thing."

Colmer began to grow irritated. "I *told* you I didn't see anything. Now why don't you get me some glasses as a starter? I'd like a look at what technological wonders you people—"

"Shall I?" asked the doctor.

The manager chuckled. "Why not?"

"Thanks," said Colmer, gratified as the dim orange glow that was the doctor bent and did something with what seemed to be the equivalent of a little black bag. "Now about my questions. Do you think you could spare me someone who speaks English to act as—"

"I have the report," the manager said, ignoring him. "The people who spoke to him told him nothing of any consequence."

"Good," said the silvery glow named Arrax. "Take care, then."

"Wait a minute!" Colmer cried. "That sounds as if you were going to send me back! Please, just let me stay a little while, won't you? I promise not to be any trouble! Listen, there must be lots of things I can do for you—bring you up to date on the twentieth century, maybe, or help your historians check facts, or—"

"Certainly," soothed the manager. "Of course." He advanced on Colmer and took his arm. "If you'll just come this way, we'll take care of everything. Into this little door—that's right. And—here, don't forget these—" He pressed something into Colmer's hand.

There was a sudden flare of polychrome light, brighter than light had ever been before. . . .

The world went black, and spun, and then sharpened again. Colmer, ready for anything, fearful of everything, reached out, touched a wall, braced himself, turned—

A man was approaching him.

"Arrax?" he called fearfully. "Dr. Ogratz? Manager?"

"Why, Colmer!" said the voice, pleased. "I thought you'd gone."

It was L. Richard de Wike.

Colmer slumped against the wall. It was all over. It was too late.

"Heavens, but he has mellowed fast," thought L. Richard de Wike. And it was true. Colmer had acted very peculiarly —what was that nonsense of looking for an "Up" button at the elevators?—but now he seemed quiet, mild, reasonable—almost dazed.

"Look," said de Wike eagerly, "suppose we go out to lunch? We're reasonable men. It doesn't matter about the Luna Cup—and I'm sure we can work something out about your book. After all, I'm no expert on what's *really* going to happen centuries from now—"

Colmer turned and looked at him through his new glasses —funny, thought de Wike; I could have sworn he said those

others were his only pair. And these were odd-looking, rose-pink, of a most unusual shape.

"That's true," said Colmer at last. "And, damn it, neither am I."

De Wike blinked happily. "Why, now, that's the way to look at it, Colmer," he said. "Let's go to lunch now, shall we? Just you and I, eh?"

Colmer paused.

He looked around him, with the sharpness of vision the new glasses had brought. *Here* was where he had pressed the "Up" button (no button, no scar, no shadow now to mark where it had been). *There* was where the monitor had met him, triggered by the code-word "century." A secret recess in the wall? An imagined figure, born of suggestion and gullible neurones?

Whatever it was, there was no trace of the monitor or its hiding place there, either. No trace of anything. No chance that, ever again, Colmer would find the key and unlock the door to the future, where—surely this time!—forewarned and careful, he would find some way to stay there long enough to learn.

No chance?

Colmer drew a deep breath, his first breath of hope and—greed? Whatever it was, greed or nobility, that makes men want to know what is forbidden to them.

He said, "Sure, de Wike." He said, "Certainly, de Wike, let's talk things over. The two of us understand each other, after all!" And he said, "Oh, by the way, de Wike—I just happened to think, de Wike. Haven't you kept asking me to head up your science fiction book department?"

And so it was that Colmer, rose-pink glasses and all, came to occupy the office next to de Wike's, and the refurbished Luna Cup now sits atop his desk.

He's a good editor. He understands the problems of the writer; he sympathizes deeply; he comprehends fully; and the contracts he signs give an author a full fifteen per cent less than any other editor in the firm has ever been able to manage.

His employers are well satisfied, except for his one little idiosyncrasy.

Editors do their work over the lunch table and maybe so, in a way, does Colmer; but what his colleagues see is a man who brings a brown-paper bag of sandwiches to the office every morning, and never steps out of the place at noon; and every day from twelve to one-fifteen, stands in the corridor outside his door, where once a blurred figure led him to a button.

He has a sandwich in one hand and a dictionary in the other; and it is munch and read, munch and read, for seventy-five minutes every day; and if there *is* a word that will unlock the monitor's help again, it begins with no letter up through the letter R.

BLACKSWORD

A. J. Offutt

STEP ONE

The hotel clerk shook his head obstinately. "I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Blacksword is an honored guest, a friend of the management. In view of the circumstances surrounding—" he hesitated—"the termination of his recent position, and the enmity toward him from several sources, I am afraid we must refuse—"

The little man scrawled on a sheet of hotel stationery. "Would you please have this sent up to Mr. Blacksword? He'll understand, I think."

The clerk regarded the paper dubiously. "Just 'Box 91'?"

The little man nodded.

The clerk's eyes went over the little man's shoulder and he turned. Two men stood a couple of feet behind him. They were big fellows, both wearing guns. Union bodyguards, then.

One took the piece of stationery. "I'll take this up to Mr. Blacksword myself. You will please remain here."

The little man bowed and the fellow strode to the elevator. His companion stood very still, his eyes on the little man.

"You needn't stare," the little man said. "I won't run away. I also haven't any bombs, guns, poisons, or whatever. I assume you have a permit for *your* gun? May I see it?"

The fellow reached inside his jacket and handed the little man a leather case.

"Ummm . . . Protectors Union, Local 110. Assigned to Mr. G. P. Blacksword. Thank you." The little man handed back the credentials and turned away, ignoring the bodyguard.

The light on the house phone winked and the clerk flipped it on.

"Blacksword talking. Frisk him and send him up."

"All right, Mr. Blacksword," said the clerk.

The little man smiled angelically and raised his arms to shoulder level. The protector patted him thoroughly.

"Clean," he said, and the little man took the elevator up.

The bodyguard went with him. They met the second protector in the corridor and they flanked him as he approached the door to Blacksword's room. They were duly scanned by winking lights and the door opened.

G. Paul Blacksword sat in a chair smoking a cigar. "Come in," he said around it, and the little man went in.

Blacksword touched the stud on the arm of the chair and the door closed. The little man turned and saw that the protectors had not come in.

"Alone?" he asked.

"I'm not a psycho," Blacksword told him. "Just cautious." He grinned around the cigar. "You know who I am," he pointed out, "so I'm one play behind."

"Keplar. A. J. Keplar."

Blacksword inclined his head without rising. "Representing?"

"Troy."

Blacksword raised his brows. "Troy!" He turned his head to one side with a twist of his mouth. "Well! Please sit down, Mr. Keplar. You'll pardon me for not rising . . . I'm sure you're aware I have a bad leg."

STEP TWO

The man generally referred to as the Black Sword blew white clouds of cigar smoke at the ceiling. "How is it that Troy finds herself so suddenly in need of a dictator, Mr. Keplar?"

"Mr. Blacksword—"

"People don't call me mister," Blacksword interrupted.

"Just Blacksword. Some commentator had a brainstorm once and my name became two words. It has a lovely romantic ring which the news services like. Pardon me for interrupting, but as long as I've done so, will you join me in a drink?"

"I think not, Mr.—pardon me—Blacksword. But please feel free to have one yourself."

Blacksword grinned. His finger had already dialed a scotch-on-the-rocks. The servo began making noises and the glass popped out on the tray. Blacksword picked it up negligently.

"Troy has been a dictatorship for thirty-one years, Blacksword," said Keplar. "For the last seventeen years, it was under Colonel Hines, who seized power in the conventional manner, a military coup. As you may be aware from the newscasts, he died very suddenly two weeks ago. The council finds that no man on Troy is capable of taking his place. So we placed our ad."

"Died very suddenly, hm? How was that?"

Keplar shrugged. "Rather an unromantic end for a man of Hines' stature, I'm afraid. He suffered a heart attack."

"I see. Proceed."

"That about sums it up, sir. After casting about for two weeks, we of the council found no acceptable successor. It goes without saying that there were numerous candidates. One, Major General Farris, attempted to seize power. He was forestalled by the council and subsequently murdered by his own men."

"The council stopped him, you say?"

The little man nodded. "According to TAI law, a dictatorship having a secondary control council, when without a dictator, is in the hands of the council until a replacement is found for the dictator."

Blacksword nodded and sipped noisily at his scotch.

"We decided to advertise," Keplar went on. "When your ad coincidentally appeared at the same time, we were curious and wrote. When we received your rather—uh—laconic reply, we decided to take the chance of contacting you. We had requested references, of course, but naturally we are familiar with your background."

"Thank you," said Blacksword. "Recognition is very flattering, especially when one finds oneself out of a job."

Blacksword sipped scotch, puffed cloudily on the cigar, and regarded Keplar. "But you're a damned liar, Keplar. I happen to know the full story. Item: Troy is on the brink of war. Item: The council felt that this Major General Farris would make a better commander in wartime than Hines. So you murdered Hines. Or had him murdered. When Major General Farris tried to take command, he was killed by the army, which remained loyal to Hines. Item: You want me very badly and placed your ad immediately *after* you learned of mine.

"Naturally, the true circumstances are not widely known," Blacksword went on. "The people of Troy, for instance, aren't aware of the illegal intervention of the Trojan Council. For your information, you were rather sloppy, and I'm sure TAI shares my knowledge. But they are inclined not to take action, provided the situation is cleared up satisfactorily. They wouldn't accomplish anything by arresting the council en masse. I'm not *sure* of this, of course. I have little dealings with Terra Alta Imperata. I'm merely assuming their agents are nearly as competent as mine." He smiled lazily. "Although not as well paid.

"Come, Keplar," Blacksword concluded. "You didn't think I'd swallow your tale, did you? Hell's bells, I have spies and sources that make your council and its machinations look like a Boy Scout troop."

Blacksword stuck the cigar back in his mouth, raised one eyebrow in the characteristic mannerism witnessed by trillions on the video. He glared amusedly at the little man from Troy.

Keplar sighed and spread his hands. "A test, of course. We deliberately concocted the story I told you. If you were the man we wanted, we were sure you would know it to be a fabrication."

"You're *still* lying!" said Blacksword. "Smoothly, though, and my compliments for that. I admire a man who thinks

on his feet—a prime requisite for salesmen, dictators and diplomats."

Blacksword regarded the ceiling reminiscently. "As you no doubt know, I was a salesman when I first went to Alsace. A twenty-thousand-a-year salesman. I was good at thinking on my feet. Reading and studying were my hobby—I can quote you chapter and verse of Napoleon and Caesar and Lee and Arthenburg. By being a good salesman and thinking on my feet *and* with the aid of my hobby, I took over Alsace when they decided to try a dictatorship. I ruled as absolute dictator for seven years. Then the Alsacians decided on a democracy—the idiots!—and, according to TAI law, I resigned. I left the planet. Unfortunately some fool fanatic took a shot at me. So at present I'm not only out of a job, I'm out one good leg."

Blacksword looked back at Keplar, puffed and grinned. "My apologies. I hadn't intended to give a personal history. It's natural enough, I suppose. A man can't be a dictator—or even a good salesman—without being something of an egotist." He looked squarely into Keplar's eyes. "Just as he can't be a diplomat without being an expert liar. I think you'll admit the truth of both statements, Keplar. Your story was no test. You underestimated me. You thought I might not want to talk about Troy if I knew what *really* happened to your last ruler. And naturally you don't want the story to get out. If someone—*someone,* Keplar—mentioned publicly that Hines was assassinated by agents of the Trojan Council, TAI would have to make use of its knowledge and prosecute."

The ex-dictator of the planet Alsace leaned forward and pointed with his cigar. "I think we fully understand each other now. Shall we discuss terms?"

Keplar sighed. "Let's," he said.

STEP THREE

The major picked up the report. It was stamped "Terra Alta Imperata: TOP SECRET," and sealed. He poked the packet into

an unsealer, waited for the foolproof seal to open, and took out the report marked "TROY: BLACKSWORD."

Page one summed up the recent death of Troy's dictator, the unsuccessful attempt by Farris to gain control, and Farris' murder by the army. There was a brief summary of what TAI knew to be the actual circumstances in the situation.

The major turned to page two, read a moment, then flicked the button on his intercom. "Come in here a few minutes, Jack."

The young lieutenant entered and shut the door. He saw the TOP SECRET seal and locked the door.

"Sit down. I want you to hear this. Light up if you want."

This reading of reports aloud to his adjutant was a habit of the major's. He felt both of them gained a more thorough understanding than by scanning and digesting the reports individually.

"First a quick refresher on the general situation," the major said. "Here's one that's been boiled down to the bone. It's been abridged and digested—umm—seven times."

The lieutenant grinned and turned his face quickly away.

"'A brief summary of the Troy-Macedon situation,'" the major read. "'There are five planets in the Hellenic system. They are called Troy, Macedon, Monos, Deutoros and Tritos. Troy and Macedon, the innermost two, are fully inhabited. Monos, Deutoros and Tritos have never been colonized, although Monos is able to support human life.

"'Tensions exist between Troy and Macedon for the following basic reasons:

"'(1) They use different governmental systems, Troy being a dictatorship while Macedon is a parliamentary monarchy.

"'(2) They have never been able to reach a mutually acceptable mutual trade agreement.

"'(3) They have been unable to reach a mutually acceptable agreement for exploiting the remaining three worlds of their system.

" 'They have consistently declined TAI offers of aid and/or mediation.

" 'TAI is thus forced to maintain a strict non-intervention policy with regard to the Hellenic system.' "

The major discarded the sheet. "Now to current events," he said. He read through the first page of the report and looked up. "We know that on March 13 Troy advertised for a dictator, identifying themselves only by a GBS box number. At the same time Blacksword advertised for employment. A seeming coincidence—but we also know that Troy placed their ad *after* they saw Blacksword's."

"In other words, they wanted him," the lieutenant said.

With a nod, the major returned to the report. " 'On March 22 A. J. Keplar, Vice-Presidor of the Trojan Secondary Control Council, arrived on Luna. He proceeded at once to the Hotel Starlight and was subsequently admitted to the room occupied by G. P. Blacksword, recently resigned dictator of the planet Alsace, now a democracy.

" 'Blacksword and Keplar remained in conference for two hours and thirty-seven minutes. At the end of that time, Blacksword checked out, and he and Keplar, accompanied by two armed guards from the Protectors Union, took a taxi to the port. All four boarded the Trojan ship *Ilium*, but after a few minutes the protectors came out again and left, carrying their gunbelts. Obviously they had been discharged.' " The major looked up with a wry face. "Obviously," he said drily. "This agent loves detail. Cloak-and-dagger stuff goes to your head sometimes. Ummm . . . 'The *Ilium* was immediately cleared and blasted away for Troy. Report ends.' "

He picked up another.

" 'The *Ilium* landed on Troy on March 24. A. J. Keplar, Vice-Presidor—' etc., etc., etc. Here: 'On March 26 G. Paul Blacksword assumed office as dictator of Troy. His first act was to accuse Council Presidor Wood of high treason. Wood and a hired assassin were turned over to TAI as the murderers of the ex-dictator of Troy. In his formal charge Blacksword stated that no one else on the planet was implicated

in Hines' murder. Wood and the assassin were returned to Earth under guard.' "

The major looked up. "Now we happen to know, Jack, that the decision to murder Hines was voted upon by the entire council and carried unanimously. The arrest of Wood and the assassin was Blacksword's way of gaining the favor of the people of Troy. On the other hand, he had no wish to replace the entire council."

"Clever fellow," the lieutenant drawled.

The major smiled. "That's the very mildest way of putting it, Jack. TAI has decided to accept Wood and let the matter drop. We haven't any particular desire to arrest the entire council, either. Besides, if we did that now, we'd have to take Blacksword as well."

"But we have something on him," the lieutenant said, "for future reference."

The major nodded and resumed reading. " 'At the same time, Blacksword advised the council of his personal preference for Keplar as Presidor. The council accordingly voted Keplar into office.' "

"Sounds like a deal," said the lieutenant.

"Of course. A private deal between Blacksword and Keplar, aside from the council's contract with Blacksword," the major said. " 'Blacksword immediately closeted himself in an all-night session with Troy's general staff. On March 28 Blacksword, Keplar, and Foreign Minister Cole spaced to the planet Macedon aboard the *Ilium*. Report ends.' "

The major began a new page. " 'On Macedon, Blacksword, Keplar, and Cole met with Macedon's King Robert and his diplomatic staff. The meetings lasted three days. At the end of this time, the Trojan delegation returned to Troy. Immediately after their departure, King Robert called for a meeting of the Macedonian general staff. Opinion: War between Macedon and Troy immediately imminent. Report ends.' "

The major flipped to a new page. " 'In a world-televised speech on April 6, Dictator Blacksword informed Troy that Macedon remained "insolently adamant" in its demands, and

that he might be "forced to call on you, the people of Troy, to lend us your loyal sons to protect our planet against the Macedonian aggressors." The speech was followed by hotly anti-Macedon demonstrations all over Troy. Opinion: Immediate war between Troy and Macedon.' "

"So it's war," the lieutenant commented.

"Hell, we've known that for eight years. But Blacksword's presence changes things. The probability factor of Macedon's emerging victorious was 83 on 20 March. On 8 April, it had dropped to 60. As of today, it's minus 10—60-40 in favor of Blacksword's winning. Of course that's our computer. Macedon still ranks higher on the news services—but they don't have the information we do."

The lieutenant whistled. "One man."

"One man. He's that good. He gets things done, even though his methods may not be the most humane or popular. Witness Alsace. He whipped them into a power, but they were so shocked by his methods that they voted themselves a democracy."

The lieutenant nodded. "What do we do?"

"We— I'll reserve my answer for a moment, Jack, until I hear your opinion. What would you say?"

The lieutenant considered the problem, weighing the factors carefully in his mind. "The differences are strictly between Troy and Macedon . . . no other worlds are involved . . . no conceivable immediate danger to TAI . . . both are grade-C planets . . . I'd say we do nothing. TAI has no grounds for intervention unless Blacksword—no, he's too smart. We do nothing." He looked questioningly at his superior, read the verification of his decision in the major's eyes.

"Correct. This is none of our business. We let them have their war. But we do a little more than nothing. We watch. As always, TAI sits back and watches." The major initialed the report. "Seal this and forward it to headquarters, Jack. By the way, are you and Alice doing anything Friday night? How about some bridge over at our place?"

STEP FOUR

At least ten feet long and five feet wide, the desk was empty of paper or books or letter opener. There was a calendar on it and a cigar box and two ashtrays and a visual communicator. In one corner was a panel of buttons. The desk and the big swivel chair behind it gave the impression of bigness—bigness and power.

The man behind the desk was big, too, and it was obvious he wielded vast power, just as it was obvious he was accustomed to power and knew how to wield it.

Judging from what showed above the top of the desk, he had to be at least six feet two. There was a swelling expanse of at least two feet between his shoulders. His neck was thick and the head above it massive and jowly. The face was slightly red, the hair gray-shot brown and cut crisply short. The nose was too large even for the man who wore it. His brows were bushy and dark, without the streaks of gray in his hair. Beneath them, very round, very dark brown eyes glistened and pierced like diamond drills.

His hands were the biggest Gorham had ever seen, and the hairiest. The cigar smelled, like all cigars to Gorham, bad. The bear-man (man-bear?) behind the desk seldom took it out of his mouth, but when he did, with two hairy fingers, its end was a wet, thoroughly shredded pulp.

As Gorham entered, the cigar jutted out of the face like a second nose.

"Captain Gorham, I believe," said the big man, the cigar bobbing up and down. "Come on in and sit down, Captain. I haven't bitten anyone in years."

Captain Gorham walked to the desk, hesitated, and sat. The chair on his side of the desk was a great deal smaller, its front legs shorter than the rear ones.

"You'll pardon me for not rising, Captain, but as you no doubt know, I'm crippled. And if you're anything like me, you wouldn't deign to shake hands with a seated man."

"Quite so," Gorham said. He crossed his legs.

"That isn't true, really," the big man went on. "My leg is quite all right. I don't rise because it gives me an advantage —makes the other fellow feel uncomfortable. Uncomfortable chair, isn't it?"

"Well, I wouldn't—"

"Of course it is. Purposely uncomfortable, and for the same reason. I'd offer you a cigar, Captain Gorham, but this one is so visibly distasteful to you I won't waste the effort."

"I never—"

"What can I do for you, Captain Gorham?"

Gorham mustered himself. "Mr. Blacksword—"

"Someone should've briefed you, Captain Gorham. I'm not called mister. Blacksword suffices. My father gave it to me in one piece, but a GBS newscaster took the liberty of changing it to two words. Sorry to interrupt. Please go on."

The brown eyes drilled into Gorham and he cleared his throat. Then he caught the twinkle in the eyes and took another ten seconds.

"If you're quite through attempting to make me feel ill at ease, Blacksword, I'd like to talk with you a few minutes and be on my way. I have pressing duties elsewhere."

Blacksword stared. Then he snatched the cigar out of his mouth and fell back in the swivel chair, laughing. Following the example set by centuries of swivel chairs, it creaked.

"Well, I'll just be happy damned! My very sincere apologies, Captain—" He broke off into laughter. "My very sincere apologies! Just a moment, will you?"

He bent forward across the immense desk and activated the communicator. "Bring a comfortable chair in here, please. And—" he looked up, one eyebrow raised—"Captain, I realize you're on duty, but you won't force a man to drink alone, will you?"

"Never. Severe breach of etiquette."

"Two scotches on the rocks," Blacksword continued into the box, beaming at Gorham. "Fast."

He clicked off and leaned back with the cigar in his mouth again. "May as well discuss the weather, Captain. The s. o. b.

would probably interrupt us right in the middle of a vital sentence, anyhow."

"Nice weather you're having here," Gorham remarked.

"Very. Sorry I had to cut your man out of it the other day. But let's face it, Captain, he's a disgrace to TAI." Blacksword shook his head. "Lousiest spy I *ever* saw."

"I'm afraid I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about," Gorham smiled.

"Of course you haven't. Oh, I don't mind—that's why I fired him from my staff ostensibly for seducing one of the girls in the kitchen. But we all understand each other; she was paid to seduce him."

Captain Gorham shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"My prime aim in life. That's why I'm keeping my pilot. He's such a damn fine pilot, I intend to let him continue reporting to his superior in TAI. He'll be surprised when he sees the new uniform I've designed for him, however. Green and blue!"

Gorham glanced down at his green and blue TAI uniform with a rather sickly grin.

"Ah! I think you'll find that chair a little better, Captain Gorham. Thanks, Swahili." Blacksword took the drinks and handed one to Gorham after the captain had settled himself into the new chair.

"One of my personal idiosyncrasies," Blacksword said, smacking his lips. "Always call my servants Swahili." He leaned back and rattled the ice in his glass. "I requested a representative of TAI, Captain Gorham, because I thought I'd better find out your views concerning the Troy-Macedon situation."

Captain Gorham appeared to swallow with the wrong tract. "Sir?"

"As far as I'm able to see, there's no reason here for TAI to interfere," Blacksword explained.

"As far as I can see, Blacksword, you're correct," Gorham said. "You're aware of our policy."

"Big brother. Shoulder to cry on. Helping hand if needed. No intervention unless someone threatens galactic security.

The usual benevolent TAI policy. My spies had so informed me, but I wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth."

Gorham made a mental note to demand a thorough security check of his staff.

"I also wanted to assure you I have absolutely no intentions of threatening anyone but the Macedonians. As a matter of fact, I'm not threatening them. They're the troublemakers here."

"That's very thoughtful of you," Gorham said. "In that case, we shall go on keeping an eye on you, but remain outside the dispute. By the same token, we can't be expected to lend assistance to the defeated planet."

"Oh, certainly not. But naturally Earth will. She always comes through in a pinch. It's almost worthwhile being defeated, just to let good old Earth come in and rehabilitate."

Gorham smiled drily. "Surely you don't intend being defeated?"

Blacksword snorted. "Captain, perhaps there's one thing more we should get straight between us. TAI will be very happy to know this. It's something your spies don't—and won't—know. I have absolutely no intention of being defeated, because I have absolutely no intention of fighting."

STEP FIVE

The big man with the smelly cigar was ushered into the office of Vassily Kearney, President of United Earth. Noting the cigar, President Kearney delightedly lit one of his own.

"Have to be very careful with these," he explained. "Diplomacy, y'know. Some people don't like cigar smoke."

"That's why I haven't a reputation for diplomacy," Blacksword informed him. "That a genuine Havana?"

Kearney nodded, turning the cigar lovingly between his fingers. "One of our chief exports."

"How well I know," Blacksword snorted. "Cost forty dollars each on Troy."

Kearney extended a humidor. "In the White House, they're free to guests," he beamed.

Blacksword helped himself to a handful and stuffed them in his pockets. He carefully stubbed his own out in the guest ashtray, lit the Havana, and sent up a cloud to arouse the envy of any ancient rocket ship. Kearney stared at the mangled butt.

"I'm well aware of the value of your time, President Kearney," Blacksword puffed, "and I'll try to take up very little of it. As you've probably heard, I'm now affiliated with Troy."

"Oh, yes. As dictator."

Blacksword looked introspective. "I just had a thought. I'm not going to fire my laundry maid. The one with the Earth accent and the pocket transmitter. She doesn't find out much and she's very nice to look at."

Kearney coughed. "I—ah—understand Troy and Macedon are about to go to war." He sounded very unhappy.

Blacksword nodded and leaned back. "Looks that way," he said. "I'm glad you brought it up. That's mainly what I wanted to discuss with you."

"Yes. I suppose it's about the rehab—"

"In a way. How'd this rehabilitation business get started, anyhow?"

"It's one of our oldest—ah—traditions," Kearney said, shaking his head regretfully. "We're the Mother Planet, you know, and somehow we've always continued the—ah—tradition of aiding conquered peoples get back on their feet."

"I see," Blacksword sympathized. "That must cost Earth a pretty penny."

"My dear fellow!" Kearney cried. "You have no idea! You should see the World Debt!"

"Then you'd be most happy to avoid such expenditures whenever possible. Which explains your spies being on every inhabited planet in the Galaxy, I suppose."

The President looked embarrassed. "Ah—Mr. Blacksword—about your—ah—laundry maid. We shall—"

"My apologies for bringing in my household affairs," Black-

sword interrupted. "What would you estimate the cost of rehabilitating, say, Troy or Macedon?"

Kearney threw up his hands. "*Any* amount! Depending, of course, on the amount of destruction."

"A real holocaust," Blacksword said with a careless wave of his hand. "Say, forty per cent destruction."

Kearney groaned.

"That *can* be avoided, Mr. President," Blacksword said.

Kearney stared at him questioningly. And hopefully.

"*I* can stave off a war. Personally. Alone. I hate to sound pompous, but I doubt seriously if anyone else could."

Kearney began thanking him on behalf of all Earth.

Blacksword raised a hand. "This is rather embarrassing," he said, wearing his best embarrassed look, "but we'll need a small sum to carry it off. Without a shot being fired," he went on smoothly, as Kearney opened his mouth. "A *very* small sum, compared to the cost of rehabilitation. We figure half a million."

"Good heavens! My dear fellow—"

"You must remember," Blacksword pressed, "that Troy is a very poor planet, but that it will be a very big war."

"—is that all it would cost?" Kearney finished.

"—and—" Blacksword clamped his lips together and nodded solemnly. The sales job was over. "Guaranteed: no war!"

Kearney was obviously elated. But he remembered to be politic. "We'd need assurance—"

"The Secondary Control Council of Troy has authorized me to write out an agreement to the effect that, in the event of war, there'd be no rehabilitation appeal to Earth. Signed by me, as Dictator of Troy." His hand came out of his pocket with a pen and a cigar. He replaced the Havana lovingly.

Overjoyed, Kearney pulled letterheads from a desk drawer.

"Oh, I already have the agreement. Had to clear it with the Council before I left, of course," Blacksword explained with a winning smile. "It lacks only our signatures."

"Of course," the President said. Then, "Of course!"

They signed.

"Now there's the matter of efficacy," Blacksword said. "I believe that in a democracy the people must be consulted on expen—"

"Not at all, not at all! Comes out of petty cash. Goes on the budget under 'defense' or 'foreign affairs' or something." He pressed a button on his desk.

Ten minutes later the draft—made out to Blacksword personally—was in his hands and Kearney was saying, "It has been a pleasure, sir. Delighted."

"Always glad to do business with a democracy," Blacksword said, and he left.

He put a coin in the Newsbuoy on the corner and requested the current handicap on the expected war between Macedon and Troy.

"According to GBS computer, probability factor of Macedon emerging victorious is 72.9, Troy's 27.1."

"Suggest you check with Earth High Command," Blacksword said, and walked on. "Ah, that Kearney drives a shrewd bargain!"

At a bank six blocks away, he opened an account. The size of his initial deposit carried him into the office of the president, who called the White House for verification of the half-million-dollar check. The White House was delighted that Blacksword was opening an account on Earth. So was the president of the Home Planet Bank and Trust Co. of Earth.

"A very wise move," he was saying as Blacksword left with a checkbook. "We have been in business for one hundred and seventy-six years, and in all that time we have never—"

Blacksword neither heard nor cared what the bank had not done in one hundred and seventy-six years. He limped out hurriedly.

At the post office on the corner, he filled out a $500,000 check from his new book, marked it for deposit only, and mailed it to the First Planetary Bank of Luna, to the personal account of G. Paul Blacksword.

The owner of the First Planetary Bank of Luna, G. Paul Blacksword, then departed for Troy.

STEP SIX

The lieutenant took Blacksword in to the captain, who took him in to the major, who escorted him upstairs to the Sector Colonel.

"The Black Sword!" Colonel McClintock exclaimed. "Come in! Sit down! What may I do for you?"

Blacksword sat down quickly and rubbed his leg. "Business call, Colonel," he growled. He took the last gratis Havana from his lips and pointed it at the colonel. "I've got a complaint to make."

Colonel McClintock nodded and fitted his hands together. "I see. I've heard, of course, about Troy's disagreement with Macedon—"

"No doubt. This complaint isn't against Macedon, Colonel. It's against TAI, in the person of Captain T. L. Gorham, and it will mean your eagles, your career, and your pension."

Colonel McClintock raised the CO_2 content of the room with a whoosh. "Sir?"

Blacksword leaned forward and drummed stubby fingers on McClintock's desk. "Am I correct in assuming that the—as you put it—disagreement between my planet and Macedon is our own business and not subject to TAI intervention?"

"Well, I—Blacksword, I—yes. And we have kept our hands off."

"Perhaps so. But Captain Gorham has not. I told Captain Gorham, in my office, in strictest confidence, that I had absolutely no intention of fighting Macedon."

Colonel McClintock nodded. "Captain Gorham reported that fact directly to me and I assure you, sir, the information has not left this office!"

"The information *has* left this office, Colonel. In Gorham's fat mouth. And it did not stay there! Hold on, I'm far from through. Gorham went straight to King Robert of Macedon and dropped a hint that I was not planning to fight. I suppose he hoped Macedon would be overjoyed—they didn't

really want to fight either—there'd be no war, and he'd get the credit. I'd judge he's bucking for your job, on the sly."

"The scoundrel!"

"Well," Blacksword went on, "Macedon *was* overjoyed, all right. So overjoyed, they immediately redoubled their offensive preparations, and completely shelved defensive plans."

The colonel opened his mouth.

"Dammit, I'm not through yet!" Blacksword rapped out. "This constitutes illegal TAI intervention. Whether Gorham was authorized or not, he represents TAI and he spilled the beans. And he's your man. Ten words to your superior, Colonel, and that chicken farm you've been planning for your old age will end right there—in the planning stage. Along with your career."

Colonel McClintock stared.

He sagged slowly back in his chair. It objected squeakily. When he finally found his voice, it was scarcely less squeaky than the chair. "And—and—?"

Blacksword leaned back complacently. "And why have I come to you, rather than your superior? Because you and I have had no trouble to date. You can handle this easily. First, you drum Gorham out of TAI."

The colonel waited a long moment, then prompted Blacksword hopefully. "Second?"

"Second," came Blacksword's voice from a billowing cloud of smoke, "since my feelings are hurt and my plan endangered, and since my feelings and my plans come high, you can assuage my deep injury by about half a million dollars."

Colonel McClintock bounced up in his chair and clamped his hands on the edge of his desk. "Why, that's nothing but black—"

"—sword," Blacksword cut in. "Careful with your language, Colonel. My feelings might get even more hurt. What's the name of your superior, by the way?"

McClintock fell back in the chair. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"You'll be worse than that if you don't dig out a checkbook!" Blacksword snapped. "And sign this agreement that

the check is bona fide and you won't try any nonsense such as stopping payment." He flipped the paper across the desk. "And let's have no nonsense about the money. I can name you any one of six TAI accounts for six different exigencies, any one of which will never feel a mere half million. Do you need a pen?"

There were a few words bandied as to where the co-signed agreement should be kept. Blacksword, of course, limped from Colonel McClintock's office with both check and agreement. Colonel McClintock left his office shortly after with a sick headache.

Blacksword sent the check, marked deposit only, to the Home World Bank and Trust Co. of Earth, special delivery. He then wrote himself a check to the amount of $500,000 on that bank. This he marked for deposit only and dispatched, regular mail, to the First Planetary Bank of Luna.

He then departed for Troy.

STEP SEVEN

Captain Gorham bounced to his feet. "You *what?*"

"You heard me," Blacksword told him. "I told Colonel McClintock you dropped a hint to Macedon that I'm not planning to fight them. To save his own skin, he wrote me a rather large check—never mind on what TAI emergency account—and immediately set into motion proceedings for having you court-martialed. You've had it with Terra Alta Imperata, Captain Gorham."

"You filthy—I didn't—you told him a deliberate lie, Blacksword! Why? What in the devil have I—"

"Easy on that adrenalin, Captain Gorham. Sit down. There, that's much better. I want you to hear something. It's a recording of our conversation here a couple of weeks ago." Blacksword touched a switch.

"—to interrupt. Please go on," came Blacksword's recorded voice.

"If you're quite through attempting to make me feel ill at ease, Blacksword, I'd like to talk with you a few minutes and be on my way. I have pressing duties elsewhere." That was Gorham's caustic voice.

Blacksword switched off the machine and regarded Gorham over his cigar.

"Surely you don't mean that merely because of that remark, you've done all this to me?" Gorham asked incredulously.

"I do. Because of that remark, plus the results of a very extensive investigation, I find I like you very much, Gorham. So I set about working out a plan to have you with me, rather than wasting your nerve and talent with TAI. And, incidentally, I managed to pick up a piece of change from TAI, as well as placing Colonel McClintock in my 'bought man' ledger."

Gorham leaned forward across Blacksword's massive desk. "And what's to prevent my taking this whole story to Earth High Command headquarters?"

"Nothing—except a little adult thinking on your part. You're not TAI material, Gorham. You know it and I know it. You're damned fine Blacksword material. Please allow me to point out that Blacksword men receive ample opportunity for travel and excitement, frequent raises and bonuses, and the very best of salary. As a matter of fact, the starting figure I have in mind for you is considerably above a TAI captain's pay. Or a TAI colonel's pay, for that matter.

"And there's another inducement. My men and I accept bribes as a matter of course, and energetically solicit such additional emolument. All I require in return is loyalty and a closed mouth."

Blacksword sat back and relit the cold cigar. He regarded Captain Gorham with a very slight smile.

Gorham smiled back. "Quite a sales pitch. Only it wasn't necessary. But you knew that before you began, didn't you? I assume the plan is for me to resign from TAI at once?"

Blacksword nodded. He opened a drawer in his desk and

passed a deposit voucher across the desk. It showed that the sum of $25,000 had been deposited to the account of Captain T. L. Gorham.

"First six months in advance," Blacksword said.

Gorham examined the slip of paper with a raised eyebrow, noted it was dated two weeks earlier, and grinned. He buttoned it into his tunic. He stood.

"Gorham reporting for duty assignment, sir."

Blacksword laughed aloud. "None of that. My name is Blacksword. And we don't report that way. I have little use for the military way of doing things. Keep it sloppy."

Gorham stuck his hands in his pockets. "Admitting the fact that you were absolutely sure of yourself—and me—what if I had refused?"

"Oh, that's something I forgot to mention, Tom. You'll be watched. And the man who watches you will be watched. And—well, I hope you won't mind, but there's the matter of the recording. This is a composite of all you said when you were here before." He flipped the switch again, and again they listened to Gorham's voice. "This will give you an idea of how we do things."

"If you're quite through attempting to make me feel ill at ease, Blacksword, I'd like to talk with you a few minutes and be on my way. I have pressing duties elsewhere. Never. Severe breach of etiquette. Nice weather you're having here. I'm afraid I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about. Suit yourself. Sir? As far as I can see, Blacksword, you're correct. You're aware of our policy. That's very thoughtful of you. In that case, we shall go on keeping an eye on you, but remain outside the dispute. By the same token, we can't be expected to lend assistance to the defeated planet. Surely you don't intend being defeated?"

Gorham looked questioningly at his new employer and shrugged.

Blacksword grinned. "Here's what my experts have done with it." He waved at the still-playing machine.

Gorham: Surely you don't intend being defeated?

Blacksword: Of course not. But I want my methods kept under glass. This is a check, Captain Gorham. It's drawn to the amount of twenty-five thousand dollars. Would you consider . . .

Gorham: Never. Severe breach of etiquette. You're aware of our policy.

Blacksword: Oh, naturally. But if I were to mail this check to your bank . . .

Gorham: Suit yourself. That's very thoughtful of you. Of course we can't be expected to go on keeping an eye on you.

Blacksword: Fine. It's been a pleasure, Captain Gorham. Of course this little matter will remain strictly between the two of us.

Gorham: Of course. In that case, I have pressing duties elsewhere. Nice weather you're having here.

Blacksword: Ah! Good!

Gorham: I'd like to be on my way.

Blacksword: All right. Thank you very much, Captain Gorham.

Gorham stared at him. Then he burst out laughing. "At least in this work I'll never have to worry about the wisdom of my orders or my superior's competence!"

STEP EIGHT

Macedonian scouts kept Troy under constant surveillance for signs of departing warcraft. Trojan scouts kept Macedon under constant surveillance for signs of departing warcraft. Scouts from neither planet saw any evidence of action. Scouts from both planets were greatly surprised, therefore, when they were angrily called home.

The Trojans disembarked to find themselves under arrest. Their protests were answered with a very curt gesture. Their eyes followed the pointing finger.

There was a satellite in the sky.

No, not a satellite—it was stationary. A large round steel

thing, perched on nothing, far (a hundred miles? fifty? how big was the thing?) above their capital.

They were all subsequently court-martialed for gross neglect in the line of duty. They never understood how the thing had got there. But it was Macedonian, and it ended the war before it began.

The assembled members of the Secondary Control Council of Troy looked up as Dictator G. Paul Blacksword limped briskly in.

"Good day, gentlemen. It would appear negotiations are the order of the day."

A councilor—Frey—stood and leveled a finger at him.

"Blacksword, we hired you as dictator for one reason—to win the war against Macedon!" he shouted. There was loud assent.

Blacksword continued to the podium. He inclined his head to the seated Keplar and leaned on the lectern a moment. Then he picked up the gavel and brought it down with a crash. The head flew across the room and rattled into a corner. He dropped the handle.

"This meeting will come to order! Sergeant-at-arms, you will eject Councilor Frey unless he sits down in the next ten seconds." Blacksword regarded his watch.

The councilor sat and immediately shot up his hand. Blacksword chuckled around his cigar.

"Okay, okay. I heard you the first time. No need repeating. Obviously your memory needs refreshing, Councilor. You say this council hired me for one reason—to win the war against Macedon. Mmm? All right.

"One: there *is* no war against Macedon, and there wasn't when I was hired. Two: that's *not* the way my contract reads. I was employed to open trade with Macedon and patch up a share-and-share-alike policy with Macedon concerning the three unpopulated worlds of this system. That correct, Mr. Presidor?"

Keplar nodded without speaking.

"All right. And one thing else. This is for you personally,

Councilor Frey, and to you personally, every man in this room. I demonstrated my faith when I threw in with you in the matter of Colonel Hines' murder. I remind you in passing, because you force me to, that we are all accessories after the fact in the deliberate hoodwinking of the authorities in that little matter."

Frey subsided. He disdained the many exchanged looks on all sides.

"Now then. There's a 'satellite' in our sky. It's a ship, a spherical ship, hovering directly over our capital. Thus it *isn't* a satellite. It's loaded with cobalt rockets. They're aimed at Troy. What's worse, they're aimed at Troy City—right here, gentlemen, at us. It's a Macedonian ship and we have an ultimatum—capitulate or go the way of all atoms.

"The ship broadcast that ultimatum and clammed up. It refuses to acknowledge contact. We are unable to contact Macedon because her moon is in the way, and the ultimatum runs out before the moon's out of the way. So they deliberately planned this to negate all but personal contact. I repeat: capitulate or else. Are these facts correct, Mr. Presidor?"

A. J. Keplar nodded unhappily.

"All right. We have one hour and—umm—seven minutes. Anyone here *not* want to capitulate?"

There was a considerable amount of noise in the council room. But when Blacksword banged his fist in lieu of the decapitated gavel and repeated the question, there was no answer.

"Sergeant-at-arms, our men are waiting at the transmitter. Please inform them that they may go ahead and read the prepared statement I have already given them."

Blacksword waved meatily at a dense cloud of smoke. "Now then. Their only demand is that *I*, personally and unaccompanied, go to Macedon to discuss terms. Is there any objection to that?"

"So long as you agree to nothing!" Frey cried.

"Gentlemen, you employed me because you wanted *me*. I'm an expert salesman. I guarantee you my wages against

double that sum that I shall open trade with Macedon *and* arrive at an agreement concerning the other three worlds of this system. I *guarantee* it against full forfeiture of my wages. Now. As of the moment I sign the papers with Macedon, I resign as Dictator of Troy. That's the contract. My job will be done. I want my money *now*."

The stormy Frey shouted again. "And what assurance have we that you'll carry out your duty, instead of vanishing with the money?"

"Why, sir, I'm shocked. But since the thought had previously occurred to me that that thought might occur to you, I have prepared an agreement which Presidor Keplar and I shall co-sign. That way you have me. TAI will take over if I abscond with your funds. There are a half-dozen charges: money under false pretenses, failure to fulfill governmental contract, so forth, so on."

A. J. Keplar read the mutually binding agreement aloud. He and Blacksword signed it, and Blacksword handed it to him. Councilor Frey demanded it be photocopied and filed at once. Blacksword agreed, with a rueful shake of his head. Keplar gave him his wages, a check for $500,000. Blacksword pocketed it and winked as he shook Keplar's hand.

"Gentlemen, it has been a pleasure. You will agree with me in a few days when the Macedonian ambassadors arrive. Thank you, I have a ship waiting to take me to Macedon. Oh, and Councilor Frey, it's my *own* ship."

Blacksword tarried on Troy only long enough to special-delivery the check to the Home Planet Bank and Trust Co. of Earth, for deposit only, to write himself a check on that bank to the amount of $500,000, and to mail it to the First Planetary Bank of Luna, for deposit only.

Then he departed for Macedon.

Approximately one hour later, the ever-suspicious Councilor Frey discovered the very interesting fact that the agreement Blacksword had brought to the meeting had been prepared the day before the appearance of the Macedonian warship.

STEP NINE

The ports of the *Ebon Cutlass* opened and disgorged two men. One was the pilot. The other, when the cigar smoke had cleared in the Macedonian air, proved to be G. Paul Blacksword, leaning lightly on a cane.

A very long, very black, very chrome-trimmed limousine growled up alongside Blacksword's allegorically named ship and the chauffeur leaped out and opened the rear door. Blacksword, after a couple of words to his pilot, entered the car.

"I want my ship kept clear and ready for takeoff," he said to the soldier-chauffeur.

"I'll see to it, Dictator."

"Fine. My pilot will remain with the ship. When I am ready to leave, I'll tolerate no folderol about delays."

"I'll see to it personally, Dictator."

"Thank you very much."

The young soldier tooled the big car across the port to the group of waiting men.

"Please start at the left and give me name, rank and serial number of those men," Blacksword said as they approached the party. "I think I remember them, but I don't want to miscall any names."

"Yes, sir." Starting with General Dane and ending with twenty-three-year-old King Robert II, he identified the members of the Macedonian delegation.

The car drew up before the group and Blacksword was out before the chauffeur could open his own door.

"King Robert!" Blacksword cried jovially. "It's certainly a pleasure to see you again!"

The young monarch took Blacksword's extended hand impersonally. "Dictator Blacksword," he acknowledged, and turned to his deputation. "I'm sure you'll remember—"

Blacksword was already shaking hands down the line, calling each man by name. They were obviously surprised and impressed with his "memory."

Reaching the end of the line, Blacksword swung and peered up at the sky.

"It is still there, sir," General Dane told him quietly.

The spherical ship bearing the Trojan coat of arms hung almost directly above them.

"So I see, so I see. Well, gentlemen, we can certainly ease ourselves of that burden at once. King Robert, have I your word that there will be no last-ditch attempts, once that warship and its bombs are removed?"

"We have capitulated, sir. You have our word."

"Fine. Quite sufficient, of course. Where's the transmitter?"

"You cannot contact your world, Dictator. Our moon is in the way and contact will not be possible for nearly an hour."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. But it won't be necessary to contact Troy. The ship is under my command, as are all things Trojan."

They accompanied him, exchanging looks at his brusque affability, to the transmitting room.

Blacksword beamed at the operator and usurped his chair. "Blacksword to *Ebon Cutlass*. Blacksword to *Ebon Cutlass*. Hey, there!"

A face appeared hazily on the screen.

"Battleship *Ebon Cutlass* to Blacksword. Battleship *Ebon Cutlass* to Blacksword. Commander Gorham standing by for orders, sir."

The Macedonians did not understand Blacksword's chuckle. T. L. Gorham, formerly of Terra Alta Imperata, had visited Macedon only once. They recognized neither the name nor the static-distorted outline of his face on the viewscreen.

"Disarm cobalt rockets and pull away from Macedon at once, Commander. Proceed according to plan."

"I'm sorry, sir. You'll have to give the code word."

"Cry Wolf."

"Very well, Dictator." The misty face disappeared.

"Shall we watch, gentlemen?" Blacksword said pleasantly, and King Robert nodded with set lips. Outside, they stared up as the spherical craft jetted fire, shivered, started to move,

and vanished in a soundless rush. Blacksword did not miss the Macedonian sighs.

They proceeded to the palace in two cars. Blacksword waved away suggestions that he rest, shower, eat, before they began their talks, and they trooped into the conference room.

"If I am not being too impertinent, Dictator, just where was your ship—" General Dane gestured at the sky—"based? Our scouts reported no warcraft leaving the surface of Troy."

"That must remain a military secret, at least until we are through here, General," Blacksword told him. "But it did arrive suddenly and hover directly over the capital at 7:30 this morning, did it not? And demand immediate surrender under pain of instant bombardment with cobalt rocket-bombs?"

"It did," King Robert said. "Since there would have been needless and inhumane slaying of civilians, we chose to—" he hesitated over the word—"surrender."

"That word is equally disagreeable to me, King Robert. Let's say 'parley' instead. There has been no war, and both our worlds want precisely the same thing. It will be quite satisfactory to Troy to forget that the incident occurred. We can merely state 'the two governments decided to parley without the needless horrors of war' in our press releases."

The Macedonians registered surprise.

"In that event, I am happy we were unable to contact Troy this morning," General Dane said. "This is a gesture on your part, sir, which we cannot fail to appreciate."

"Fine. Now then. We want merely three things, gentlemen. As you know, I am fully authorized by the Secondary Control Council of Troy to present our terms, haggle if I have to, and sign the necessary papers. Shall we begin?" Blacksword glanced at his watch.

"As you will," King Robert II replied.

Drawing on his cigar, Blacksword turned his head politely to Robert's left and exhaled. General Dane, seated on Robert's left, coughed surreptitiously.

"Well. First, we *demand* nothing. Not a damned thing. I mean that. Our expenditures have been slim and we have

lost nothing but a bit of face. For that loss of face, or defamation of character, or whatever you choose to term your calling us—" Blacksword paused and frowned slightly as he quoted from memory—" 'heartless, blood-sucking aggressors dominated by a war-mongering council and a megalomaniac dictator'—for such cruel terms, we shall require restitution. The only way that can be made is through advertising. We are undertaking a galaxy-wide publicity campaign to clear ourselves."

Blacksword drew in and blew out a white cloud at the ceiling. Still regarding the ceiling, he said, "That was unkind of you, gentlemen. 'Heartless, blood-sucking aggressors dominated by a war-mongering council and a megalomaniac dictator!' I should like you to know that is untrue. I completely dominate Troy myself, and the council has merely carried my words to the people."

The young Macedonian minister of defense grinned and sobered quickly, glancing about to ascertain if he'd been seen. Blacksword leered at him.

"As I was saying, the public relations campaign. We feel it only fair that Macedon should assist us in defraying the costs. And I reiterate that that is the *only* payment or recompense, of any kind, we—request."

"And the amount?" Robert II prompted suspiciously.

The chief speaker of Macedon's parliament leaned forward anxiously.

Blacksword shrugged. "We feel that half a million should cover it."

"Half a *million?*"

"Yes. Million, not billion."

"That sounds reasonable in the extreme, Majesty," the chief speaker observed.

"I should say!" the minister of defense exclaimed.

"Agreeable," King Robert said. "I admit, Dictator, we had expected far greater demands."

"I told you we demanded nothing. Mmm. I *do* have instructions to clear each point as we reach it, so please prepare the

check now, if you will, and make it out to me. A token to take home, you understand."

Young Robert had appeared to bridle at Blacksword's pushing, but the final sentence satisfied him. "This government pays its debts in cash," he said with regal pride.

Blacksword nearly dropped his cigar. "I suppose that will be acceptable," he said, with a desperate attempt at unconcerned calm.

The king nodded at the chief speaker, who sent his secretary a-running for the money.

Blacksword leaned back with a sigh. "Now. As to Monos, Deuteros and Tritos, the three unpeopled planets of this system."

The Macedonians leaned forward. Robert II narrowed his eyes.

"We have drawn up an agreement concerning their exploitation," Blacksword said. He paused and peered at them over the tops of the papers he held. "Monos, which is fully equipped with oxygen atmosphere and the other requirements for human life, we wish to be colonized jointly and equally by Troy and Macedon, thus permanently uniting our two worlds, and forming, with the new world, an interplanetary triumvirate."

General Dane could not restrain himself. "*Excellent!*" he breathed.

"What will be the governmental system of the planet?" King Robert asked. "And what flag will she fly?"

Blacksword nodded. "First, we propose to call her Athena. Secondly, we have designed a new coat of arms and flag—here you are. It's a combination of the symbols of Troy and Macedon. Thirdly, we propose she be governed by a Trojan-Macedonian council for two years. At the end of that time, she is to be allowed to choose her own system. That way we won't have the—'Athenians'—rebelling."

"Done!" Robert snapped. He was obviously admiring the sketches of the Athenian flag and coat of arms. Blacksword had had them prepared secretly on Luna by a professional

designer. This had been done twelve days after Blacksword's arrival on Troy, five months before.

"Fine. As for Deuteros and Tritos, we propose that a corporation be formed—Hellenistic Enterprises, Inc., perhaps—for exploitation of all natural resources of the worlds. The profits will be shared 50-50 by Troy and Macedon. We may want to sub-contract the actual work on a percentage basis to a private concern, but that can be settled later."

They gaped at him. Even the careful King Robert lost his composure.

"The board of directors, of course," Blacksword went on, glancing at his watch, "will be composed of an equal number of members of the Trojan Council and the Macedonian Parliament. I'd suggest you hire a businessman as president of the corporation."

Robert II had taken advantage of the opportunity to regain his outward coolness. "Dictator Blacksword, Macedon agrees," he said quietly.

"Good, good. Now here is a trade agreement we have drawn up for your approval." Blacksword handed him a sheet of paper.

The monarch read it, turned it over, looked at Blacksword.

Blacksword answered the unspoken question. "That's all."

Robert handed the page to the minister of defense. Eyebrows peaking, he passed it to General Dane.

" 'There shall be free trade among the worlds of Troy, Macedon and Athena, according to the laws set down by Earth High Command'," he read.

They stared.

"That's all. I think we're all familiar with the TAI free-trade laws. And that, gentlemen, is the complete article of agreement."

They continued to stare.

King Robert said at last, "But—"

"Is there some point which needs clarification or adjustment, Majesty?" Blacksword asked innocently.

"This—is—*all?*"

"Not by a long shot. There's a lot of work to be done. But

this is all we need discuss now. The war did not occur, and our parley is finished. I am happy its results are so mutually satisfactory. These agreements and contracts, when filed with TAI, are binding for one hundred years. We will file them at once, of course. That way there can be no more disagreement between Macedon and Troy—not without TAI intervention, which is very troublesome and expensive. And you and I, King Robert, will have the satisfaction of having created something which will endure after we are gone. Shall we sign?"

They signed.

They beamed the documents to TAI headquarters, where they were photocopied and recorded. The Trojan-Macedonian alliance was irrevocably sealed, at least for the next hundred years.

The Macedonians were disappointed to learn that Blacksword, five fresh one-hundred-thousand-dollar bills in his pocket, must leave at once. Blacksword was sure he detected tears in the eyes of King Robert as they clasped hands. They were standing on the edge of the spaceport when Blacksword glanced up and saw the ship.

It was Trojan and it bore the insignia of the Secondary Control Council and it was coming down very fast.

"Gentlemen, I must hurry," he snapped, and hurled his bulk, along with cane and cigar, into the limousine.

"Get me to my ship and burn the paving!" he ordered.

The car hurtled across the tarmac, leaving Macedonian officials scratching their heads.

As the car pulled up near the *Ebon Cutlass,* a man ran out of the communications room and handed a message to General Dane. He glanced up at the down-sweeping ship, then at the departing Blacksword. He disappeared into the communications room.

Blacksword had both feet and his cane on the ground when the siren went off. Then the loud-speaker bawled in General Dane's voice: *"Stop that man! Stop Blacksword!"*

Blacksword's chauffeur was stupefied for four seconds before he reached for his pistol. Four seconds was approxi-

mately three too long. Blacksword, moving twice as fast as a man his size would be expected to move, cracked the fellow alongside the head with the steel-filled cane.

Blacksword dived into his ship with a last backward look —a kaleidoscope of down-hurtling Trojan ship, milling Macedonian dignitaries, running armed men, and a command car full of uniforms bearing down on the *Ebon Cutlass.*

"Gun it!" he yelled, and slammed the port.

The *Ebon Cutlass* roared off, leaving behind some very angry men of two different worlds with some very interesting things to say.

STEP TEN

COMMUNIQUE from Blacksword to Gorham:

Well done! Get our "Trojan warcraft" and our "Macedonian warcraft" and all those "cobalt bombs" back to base and remove the fake insignia. They both surrendered to each other without knowing it till too late! They are now hopelessly allied, with no possibility of war for at least a century.

A bonus has been deposited to your bank account, "Commander."

Blacksword
Ex-Dictator
Troy

TAI
TOP SECRET
COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF ONLY

TO: G. L. Dienes
Commander-In-Chief
Terra Alta Imperata
Lisbon
Earth

Lee:

The business with Macedon and Troy went off very smoothly, and we even recruited a new man. Former TAI captain.

I note from recent news releases that both Troy and Mace-

don were so disgusted with the way their respective governments were hoodwinked by one Blacksword, a completely unscrupulous blackguard, they have fired the whole crew and become democracies, both of them. It is my understanding they also plan to inflict this form of government on the to-be-colonized world, Athena.

Three new democracies join the ranks.

Why in the name of heaven it is considered so damned important that every world eventually adopt Earth's governmental system, I'm sure I don't know. This observation following dealings with such men as your boss, President Kearney.

It does my heart good to know that men like you are around to protect men like him from the unscrupulous machinations of men like Blacksword.

But so be it, and my services remain available for proselytizing via showing them the fallacies of totalitarianism.

Since my salary is so ridiculously inadequate, and since the Trojan affair entailed such extensive expenses as travel, recruiting, etc., please forward, in the usual way, expenses totaling $500,000 post haste. No swindle sheet attached. Too busy to keep one.

G. Paul Blacksword
Top Secret Agent #1

DICTATOR *desires employment, preferably permanent, in similar capacity. Will accept opportunity to establish own circumstances. Seven years, five months experience. Last position terminated at request of populace. Box 702 GBS Network.*

THE CIVILIZATION GAME

Clifford D. Simak

I

For some time, Stanley Paxton had been hearing the sound of muffled explosions from the west. But he had kept on, for there might be a man behind him, trailing him, and he could not change his course. For if he was not befuddled, the homestead of Nelson Moore lay somewhere in the hills ahead. There he would find shelter for the night and perhaps even transportation. Communication, he knew, must be ruled out for the moment; the Hunter people would be monitoring, alert for any news of him.

One Easter vacation, many years ago, he had spent a few days at the Moore homestead, and all through this afternoon he had been haunted by a sense of recognition for certain landmarks he had sighted. But his visit to these hills had been so long ago that his memory hazed and there was no certainty.

As the afternoon had lengthened toward an early evening, his fear of the trailing man began to taper off. Perhaps, he told himself, there was no one, after all. Once, atop a hill, he had crouched in a thicket for almost half an hour and had seen no sign of any follower.

Long since, of course, they would have found the wreckage of his flier but they might have arrived too late and so, consequently, have no idea in which direction he had gone.

Through the day, he'd kept close watch of the cloudy sky and was satisfied that no scouting flier had passed overhead to spot him.

Now, with the setting of the sun behind an angry cloud bank, he felt momentarily safe.

He came out of a meadow valley and began to climb a wooded hill. The strange boomings and concussions seemed fairly close at hand and he could see the flashes of explosions lighting up the sky.

He reached the hilltop and stopped short, crouching down against the ground. Below him, over a square mile or more of ground, spread the rippling flashes, and in the pauses between the louder noises, he heard faint chatterings that sent shivers up his spine.

He crouched, watching the flashes ripple back and forth in zigzag patterning and occasionally a small holocaust of explosions would suddenly break out and then subside as quickly.

Slowly he stood up and wrapped his cloak about him and raised the hood to protect his neck and ears.

On the near side of the flashing area, at the bottom of the hill, was some sort of foursquare structure looming darkly in the dusk. And it seemed as well that a massive hazy bowl lay inverted above the entire area, although it was too dark to make out what it was.

Paxton grunted softly to himself and went quickly down the hill until he reached the building. It was, he saw, a sort of observation platform, solidly constructed and raised well above the ground, with the top half of it made of heavy glass that ran all the way around. A ladder went up one side to the glassed-in platform.

"What's going on up there?" he shouted, but his voice could be scarcely heard above the crashing and thundering that came from out in front.

So he climbed the ladder.

When his head reached the level of the glassed-in platform area, he halted. A boy, not more than fourteen years of age, stood at the front of the platform, staring out into a noisy sea of fire. A pair of binoculars was slung about his neck and to one side of him stood a massive bank of instruments.

Paxton clambered up the rest of the way and stepped inside the platform.

"Hello, young man!" he shouted.

The youngster turned around. He seemed an engaging fellow, with a cowlick down his forehead.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I'm afraid I didn't hear you."

"What is going on here?"

"A war," said the boy. "Pertwee just launched his big attack. I'm hard-pressed to hold him off."

Paxton gasped a little. "But this is most unusual!" he protested.

The boy wrinkled up his forehead. "I don't understand."

"You are Nelson Moore's son?"

"Yes, sir, I am Graham Moore."

"I knew your father many years ago. We went to school together."

"He will be glad to see you, sir," the boy said brightly, sensing an opportunity to rid himself of this uninvited kibitzer. "You take the path just north of west. It will lead you to the house."

"Perhaps," suggested Paxton, "you could come along and show me."

"I can't leave just yet," said Graham. "I must blunt Pertwee's attack. He caught me off my balance and has been saving up his firepower and there were some maneuvers that escaped me until it was too late. Believe me, sir, I'm in an unenviable position."

"This Pertwee?"

"He's the enemy. We've fought for two years now."

"I see," said Paxton solemnly and retreated down the ladder.

He found the path and followed it and found the house, set in a swale between two hillocks. It was an old and rambling affair among great clumps of trees.

The path ended on a patio and a woman's voice asked: "Is that you, Nels?"

She sat in a rocking chair on the smooth stone flags and was little more than a blur of whiteness—a white face haloed by white hair.

"Not Nels," he said. "An old friend of your son's."

From here, he noticed, through some trick of acoustics in the hills, one could barely hear the sound of battle, although the sky to the east was lighted by an occasional flash of heavy rockets or artillery fire.

"We are glad to have you, sir," the old lady said, still rocking gently back and forth. "Although I do wish Nelson would come home. I don't like him wandering around after it gets dark."

"My name is Stanley Paxton. I'm with Politics."

"Why, yes," she said, "I remember now. You spent an Easter with us, twenty years ago. I'm Cornelia Moore, but you may call me Grandma, like all the rest of them."

"I remember you quite well," said Paxton. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Heavens, no. We have few visitors. We're always glad to see one. Theodore especially will be pleased. You'd better call him Granther."

"Granther?"

"Grandfather. That's the way Graham said it when he was a tyke."

"I met Graham. He seemed to be quite busy. He said Pertwee had caught him off his balance."

"That Pertwee plays too rough," said Grandma, a little angrily.

A robot catfooted out onto the patio. "Dinner is ready, madam," it said.

"We'll wait for Nelson," Grandma told it.

"Yes, madam. He should be in quite soon. We shouldn't wait too long. Granther has already started on his second brandy."

"We have a guest, Elijah. Please show him to his room. He is a friend of Nelson's."

"Good evening, sir," Elijah said. "If you will follow me. And your luggage. Perhaps I can carry it."

"Oh course you can," said Grandma drily. "I wish, Elijah, you'd stop putting on airs when there's company."

"I have no luggage," Paxton said, embarrassed.

He followed the robot across the patio and into the house, going down the central hall and up the very handsome winding staircase.

The room was large and filled with old-fashioned furniture. A sedate fireplace stood against one wall.

"I'll light a fire," Elijah said. "It gets chilly in the autumn, once the sun goes down. And damp. It looks like rain."

Paxton stood in the center of the room, trying to remember.

Grandma was a painter and Nelson was a naturalist, but what about old Granther?

"The old gentleman," said the robot, stooping at the fireplace, "will send you up a drink. He'll insist on brandy, but if you wish it, sir, I could get you something else."

"No, thank you. Brandy will be fine."

"The old gentleman's in great fettle. He'll have a lot to tell you. He's just finished his sonata, sir, after working at it for almost seven years, and he's very proud of it. There were times, I don't mind telling you, when it was going badly, that he wasn't fit to live with. If you'd just look here at my bottom, sir, you can see a dent . . ."

"So I see," said Paxton uncomfortably.

The robot rose from before the fireplace and the flames began to crackle, crawling up the wood.

"I'll go for your drink," Elijah said. "If it takes a little longer than seems necessary, do not become alarmed. The old gentleman undoubtedly will take this opportunity to lecture me about hewing to civility, now that we have a guest."

Paxton walked to the bed, took off his cloak and hung it on a bedpost. He walked back to the fire and sat down in a chair, stretching out his legs toward the warming blaze.

It had been wrong of him to come here, he thought. These people should not be involved in his problems and his dangers. Theirs was the quiet world, the easygoing, thoughtful world, while his world of Politics was all clamor and excitement and sometimes agony and fear.

He'd not tell them, he decided. And he'd stay just the night

and be off before the dawn. Somehow or other he would work out a way to get in contact with his party. Somewhere else he'd find people who would help him.

There was a knock at the door. Apparently it had not taken Elijah as long as it had thought.

"Come in," Paxton called.

It was not Elijah; it was Nelson Moore.

He still wore a rough walking jacket and his boots had mud upon them and there was a streak of dirt across his face where he'd brushed back his hair with a grimy hand.

"Grandma told me you were here," he said, shaking Paxton by the hand.

"I had two weeks off," said Paxton, lying like a gentleman. "We just finished with an exercise. It might interest you to know that I was elected President."

"Why, that is fine," said Nelson enthusiastically.

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"Let's sit down."

"I'm afraid I may be holding up the dinner. The robot said—"

Nelson laughed. "Elijah always rushes us to eat. He wants to get the day all done and buttoned up. We've come to expect it of him and we pay him no attention."

"I'm looking forward to meeting Anastasia," Paxton said. "I remember that you wrote of her often and—"

"She's not here," said Nelson. "She—well, she left me. Almost five years ago. She missed Outside too much. None of us should marry outside Continuation."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"It's all right, Stan. It's all done with now. There are some who simply do not fit into the project. I've wondered many times, since Anastasia left, what kind of folks we are. I've wondered if it all is worth it."

"All of us think that way at times," said Paxton. "There have been times when I've been forced to fall back on history to find some shred of justification for what we're doing here. There's a parallel in the monks of the so-called Middle Ages.

They managed to preserve at least part of the knowledge of the Hellenic world. For their own selfish reasons, of course, as Continuation has its selfish reasons, but the human race was the real beneficiary."

"I go back to history, too," said Nelson. "The one that I come up with is a Stone Age savage, hidden off in some dark corner, busily flaking arrows while the first spaceships are being launched. It all seems so useless, Stan. . . ."

"On the face of it, I suppose it is. It doesn't matter in the least that I was elected President in our just-finished exercise. But there may be a day when that knowledge and technique of politics may come in very handy. And when it does, all the human race will have to do is come back here to Earth and they have the living art. This campaign that I waged was a dirty one, Nelson. I'm not proud of it."

"There's a good deal of dirty things in the human culture," Nelson said, "but if we commit ourselves at all, it must be all the way—the vicious with the noble, the dirty with the splendid."

The door opened quietly and Elijah glided in. It had two glasses on a tray.

"I heard you come in," it said to Nelson, "so I brought you something, too."

"Thank you," Nelson said. "That was kind of you."

Elijah shuffled in some embarrassment. "If you don't mind, could you hurry just a little? The old gentleman has almost killed the bottle. I'm afraid of what might happen to him if I don't get him to the table."

II

Dinner had been finished and young Graham hustled off to bed. Granther unearthed, with great solemnity, another bottle of good brandy.

"That boy is a caution," he declared. "I don't know what's to become of him. Imagine him out there all day long, fighting those fool battles. If he was going to take up something,

I should think he'd want it to be useful. There's nothing more useless than a general when there are no wars."

Grandma clacked her teeth together with impatience. "It isn't as if we hadn't tried. We gave him every chance there was. But he wasn't interested in anything until he took up warring."

"He's got guts," said Granther proudly. "That much I'll say for him. He up and asked me the other day would I write him some battle music. Me!" yelled Granther, thumping his chest. "Me write battle music!"

"He's got the seeds of destruction in him," declared Grandma righteously. "He doesn't want to build. He just wants to bust."

"Don't look at me," Nelson said to Paxton. "I gave up long ago. Granther and Grandma took him over from me right after Anastasia left. To hear them talk, you'd think they hated him. But let me lift a finger to him and the both of them—"

"We did the best we could," said Grandma. "We gave him every chance. We bought him all the testing kits. You remember?"

"Sure," said Granther, busy with the bottle. "I remember well. We bought him that ecology kit and you should have seen the planet he turned out. It was the most pitiful, down-at-heels, hungover planet you ever saw. And then we tried robotry—"

"He did right well at that," said Grandma tartly.

"Sure, he built them. He enjoyed building them. Recall the time he geared the two of them to hate each other and they fought until they were just two piles of scrap? I never saw anyone have such a splendid time as Graham during the seven days they fought."

"We could scarcely get him in to meals," said Grandma.

Granther handed out the brandy.

"But the worst of all," he decided, "was the time we tried religion. He dreamed up a cult that was positively gummy. We made short work of that . . ."

"And the hospital," said Grandma. "That was your idea, Nels . . ."

"Let's not talk about it," pleaded Nelson grimly. "I am sure Stanley isn't interested."

Paxton picked up the cue Nelson was offering him. "I was going to ask you, Grandma, what kind of painting you are doing. I don't recall that Nelson ever told me."

"Landscapes," the sweet-faced old lady said. "I've been doing some experimenting."

"And I tell her she is wrong," protested Granther. "To experiment is wrong. Our job is to maintain tradition, not to let our work go wandering off in whatever direction it might choose."

"Our job," said Grandma bitterly, "is to guard the techniques. Which is not to say we cannot strive at progress, if it still is human progress. Young man," she appealed to Paxton, "isn't that the way you see it?"

"Well, in part," evaded Paxton, caught between two fires. "In Politics, we allow evolvement, naturally, but we make sure by periodic tests that we are developing logically and in the human manner. And we make very sure we do not drop any of the old techniques, no matter how outmoded they may seem. And the same is true in Diplomacy. I happen to know a bit about Diplomacy, because the two sections work very close together and—"

"There!" Grandma said.

"You know what I think?" said Nelson quietly. "We are a frightened race. For the first time in our history, the human race is a minority and it scares us half to death. We are afraid of losing our identity in the great galactic matrix. We're afraid of assimilation."

"That's wrong, son," Granther disagreed. "We are not afraid, my boy. We're just awful smart, that's all. We had a great culture at one time and why should we give it up? Sure, most humans nowadays have adopted the galactic way of life, but that is not to say that it is for the best. Some day we may want to turn back to the human culture or we may find that later on we can use parts of it. And this way, if we keep it alive here in Project Continuation, it will be available, all of it or any part, any time we need it. And I'm not speaking,

mind you, from the human view alone, because some facet of our culture might sometime be badly needed, not by the human race as such, but by the Galaxy itself."

"Then why keep the project secret?"

"I don't think it's really secret," Granther said. "It's just that no one pays much attention to the human race and none at all to Earth. The human race is pretty small potatoes against all the rest of them and Earth is just a worn-out planet that doesn't amount to shucks."

He asked Paxton: "You ever hear it was secret, boy?"

"Why, I guess not," said Paxton. "All I ever understood was that we didn't go around shooting off our mouths about it. I've thought of Continuation as a sort of sacred trust. We're the guardians who watch over the tribal medicine bag while the rest of humanity is out among the stars getting civilized."

The old man chortled. "That's about the size of it. We're just a bunch of bushmen, but mark me well, intelligent and even dangerous bushmen."

"Dangerous?" asked Paxton."

"He means Graham," Nelson told him quietly.

"No, I don't," said Granther. "Not him especially. I mean the whole kit and caboodle of us. Because, don't you see, everybody who joins in this galactic culture that they are stewing up out there must contribute something and must likewise give up something—things that don't fit in with the new ideas. And the human race has done just like the rest of them, except we haven't given up a thing. Oh, on the surface, certainly. But everything we've given up is still back here, being kept alive by a bunch of subsidized barbarians on an old and gutted planet that a member of this fine galactic culture wouldn't give a second look."

"He's horrible," said Grandma. "Don't pay attention to him. He's got a mean and ornery soul inside that withered carcass."

"And what is Man?" yelled Granther. "He's mean and ornery, too, when he has to be. How could we have gone so far if we weren't mean and ornery?"

And there was some truth in that, thought Paxton. For what humanity was doing here was deliberate double-crossing. Al-

though, come to think of it, he wondered, how many other races might be doing the very selfsame thing or its equivalent?

And if you were going to do it, you had to do it right. You couldn't take the human culture and enshrine it prettily within a museum, for then it would become no more than a shiny showpiece. A fine display of arrowheads was a pretty thing to look at, but a man would never learn to chip a flint into an arrowhead by merely looking at a bunch of them laid out on a velvet-covered board. To retain the technique of chipping arrows, you'd have to keep on chipping arrows, generation after generation, long after the need of them was gone. Fail by one generation and the art was lost.

And the same necessarily must be true of other human techniques and other human arts. And not the purely human arts alone, but the unique human flavor of other techniques which in themselves were common to many other races.

Elijah brought in an armload of wood and dumped it down upon the hearth, heaped an extra log or two upon the fire, then brushed itself off carefully.

"You're wet," said Grandma.

"It's raining, madam," said Elijah, going out the door.

And so, thought Paxton, Project Continuation kept on practicing the old arts, retaining within a living body of the race the knowledge of their manipulation and their use.

So the section on politics practiced politics and the section on diplomacy set up seemingly impossible problems in diplomacy and wrestled with those problems. And in the project factories, teams of industrialists carried on in the old tradition and fought a never-ending feud with the trade unionism teams. And, scattered throughout the land, quiet men and women painted and composed and wrote and sculped so that the culture that had been wholly human would not perish in the face of the new and wonderful galactic culture that was evolving from the fusion of many intelligences out in the farther stars.

And against what day, wondered Paxton, do we carry on this work? Is it pure and simple, and perhaps even silly,

pride? Is it no more than a further expression of human skepticism and human arrogance? Or does it make the solid sense that old Granther thinks it does?

"You're in Politics, you say," Granther said to Paxton. "Now that is what I'd call a worthwhile thing to save. From what I hear, this new culture doesn't pay too much attention to what we call politics. There's administration, naturally, and a sense of civic duty and all that sort of nonsense—but no real politics. Politics can be a powerful thing when you need to win a point."

"Politics is a dirty business far too often," Paxton answered. "It's a fight for power, an effort to override and overrule the principles and policies of an opposing body. In even its best phase, it brought about the fiction of the minority, with the connotation that the mere fact of being a minority carries with it the penalty of being to a large extent ignored."

"Still, it could be fun. I suppose it is exciting."

"Yes, you could call it that," said Paxton. "This last exercise we carried out was one with no holds barred. We had it planned that way. It was described somewhat delicately as a vicious battle."

"And you were elected President," said Nelson.

"That I was, but you didn't hear me say I was proud of it."

"But you should be," Grandma insisted. "In the ancient days, it was a proud thing to be elected President."

"Perhaps," Paxton admitted, "but not the way my party did it."

It would be so easy, he thought, to go ahead and tell them, for they would understand. To say: I carried it too far. I blackened my opponent's name and character beyond any urgent need. I used all the dirty tricks. I bribed and lied and compromised and traded. And I did it all so well that I even fooled the logic that was the referee, which stood in lieu of populace and voter. And now my opponent has dug up another trick and is using it on me.

For assassination was political, even as diplomacy and war were political. After all, politics was little more than the short-circuiting of violence; an election was held rather than a revo-

lution. But at all times the partition between politics and violence was a thin and flimsy thing.

He finished off his brandy and put the glass down on the table.

Granther picked up the bottle, but Paxton shook his head.

"Thank you," he said. "If you don't mind, I shall go to bed soon. I must get an early start."

He never should have stopped here. It would be unforgivable to embroil these people in the aftermath of the exercise.

Although, he told himself, it probably was unfair to call it the aftermath—what was happening would have to be a part and parcel of the exercise itself.

The doorbell tinkled faintly and they could hear Elijah stirring in the hall.

"Sakes alive," said Grandma, "who can it be this time of night? And raining outdoors, too!"

It was a churchman.

He stood in the hall, brushing water from his cloak. He took off his broad-brimmed hat and swished it to shake off the raindrops.

He came into the room with a slow and stately tread.

All of them arose.

"Good evening, Bishop," said old Granther. "You were fortunate to find the house in this kind of weather and we're glad to have Your Worship."

The bishop beamed in fine, fast fellowship.

"Not of the church," he said. "Of the project merely. But you may use the proper terms, if you have a mind. It helps me stay in character."

Elijah, trailing in his wake, took his cloak and hat. The bishop was arrayed in rich and handsome garments.

Granther introduced them all around and found a glass and filled it from the bottle.

The bishop took it and smacked his lips. He sat down in a chair next to the fire.

"You have not dined, I take it," Grandma said. "Of course you haven't—there's no place out there to dine. Elijah, get the bishop a plate of food, and hurry."

"I thank you, madam," said the bishop. "I've had a long, hard day. I appreciate all you're doing for me. I appreciate it more than you can ever know."

"This is our day," Granther said merrily, refilling his own glass for the umpteenth time. "It is seldom that we have any guests at all and now, all of an evening, we have two of them."

"Two guests," said the bishop, looking straight at Paxton. "Now that is fine, indeed."

He smacked his lips again and emptied the glass.

III

In his room, Paxton closed the door and shot the bolt full home.

The fire had burned down to embers and cast a dull glow along the floor. The rain drummed faintly, half-heartedly, on the window pane.

And the question and the fear raced within his brain.

There was no question of it: The bishop was the assassin who had been set upon his trail.

No man without a purpose, and a deadly purpose, walked these hills at night, in an autumn rain. And what was more, the bishop had been scarcely wet. He'd shaken his hat and the drops had fallen off, and he'd brushed at his cloak and after that both the hat and cloak were dry.

The bishop had been brought here, more than likely, in a hovering flier and let down, as other assassins probably likewise had been let down this very night in all of half a dozen places where a fleeing man might have taken shelter.

The bishop had been taken to the room just across the hall and under other circumstances, Paxton told himself, he might have sought conclusions with him there. He walked over to the fireplace and picked up the heavy poker and weighed it in his hand. One stroke of that and it would be all over.

But he couldn't do it. Not in this house.

He put the poker back and walked over to the bed and picked up his cloak. Slowly he slid it on as he stood there, thinking, going over in his mind the happenings of the morning.

He had been at home, alone, and the phone had rung and Sullivan's face had filled the visor—a face all puffed up with fright.

"Hunter's out to get you," Sullivan had said. "He's sent men to get you."

"But he can't do that!" Paxton remembered protesting.

"Certainly he can," said Sullivan. "It comes within the framework of the exercise. Assassination has always been a possibility . . ."

"But the exercise is finished!"

"Not so far as Hunter is concerned. You went a little far. You should have stayed within the hypothesis of the problem; there was no need to go back into Hunter's personal affairs. You dug up things he thought no one ever knew. How did you do it, man?"

"I have my ways," said Paxton. "And in a deal like this, everything was fair. He didn't handle me exactly as if I were innocent."

"You better get going," Sullivan advised. "They must be almost there. I can't get anyone there soon enough to help you."

And it would have been all right, Paxton thought, if the flier had only held together.

He wondered momentarily if it had been sabotaged.

But be that as it may, he had flown it down and had been able to walk away from it and now, finally, here he was.

He stood irresolutely in the center of the room.

It went against his pride to flee for a second time, but there was nothing else to do. He couldn't let this house become involved in the tag-end rough and tumble of his exercise.

And despite the poker, he was weaponless, for weapons on this now-peaceful planet were very few indeed—no longer household items such as once had been the case.

He went to the window and opened it and saw that the rain had stopped and that a ragged moon was showing through a scud of racing clouds.

Glancing down, he saw the roof of the porch beneath the window and he let his eye follow down the roof line. Not too hard, he thought, if a man were barefoot, and once he reached the edge there'd be a drop of not much more than seven feet.

He took off his sandals and stuffed them in the pocket of his cloak and started out the window.

But, halfway out, he climbed back in again and walked to the door. Quietly he slid back the bolt. It wasn't exactly cricket to go running off and leave a room locked up.

The roof was slippery with the rain, but he managed it without any trouble, inching his way carefully down the incline. He dropped into a shrub that scratched him up a bit, but that, he told himself, was a minor matter.

He put on his sandals and straightened up and walked rapidly away. At the edge of the woods, he stopped and looked back at the house. It stood dark and silent.

Once he got back home and this affair was finished, he promised himself, he'd write Nelson a long apologetic letter and explain it all.

His feet found the path and he followed it through the sickly half-light of the cloudy moon.

"Sir," said a voice close beside him, "I see that you are out for a little stroll . . ."

Paxton jumped in fright.

"It's a nice night for it, sir," the voice went on quietly. "After a rain, everything seems so clean and cool."

"Who is there?" asked Paxton, with his hair standing quite on edge.

"Why, it's Pertwee, sir. Pertwee, the robot, sir."

Paxton laughed a little nervously. "Oh, yes, I remember now. You're Graham's enemy."

The robot stepped out of the woods into the path beside him.

"It's too much, I suppose," Pertwee said, "to imagine that you might be coming out to look at the battlefield."

"Why, no," said Paxton, grasping at a straw. "I don't know how you guessed it, but that's exactly what I'm doing. I've never heard of anything quite like it and I'm considerably intrigued."

"Sir," said the robot eagerly, "I'm entirely at your service. There is no one, I can assure you, who is better equipped to explain it to you. I've been in it from the very first with Master Graham, and if you have any questions, I shall try to answer them."

"Yes, I think there is one question. What is the purpose of it all?"

"Why, at first, of course," said Pertwee, "it was simply an attempt to amuse a growing boy. But now, with your permission, sir, I would venture the opinion that it is a good deal more."

"You mean a part of Continuation?"

"Certainly, sir. I know there is a natural reluctance among humankind to admit the fact, or to even think about it, but for a great part of Man's history war played an important and many-sided role. Of all the arts that Man developed, there probably was none to which he devoted so much time and thought and money as he did to war."

The path sloped down and there before them in the pale and mottled moonlight lay the battle bowl.

"That bowl," asked Paxton, "or whatever it might be that you have tipped over it? Sometimes you can just make it out and other times you miss it . . ."

"I suppose," said Pertwee, "you'd call it a force shield, sir. A couple of the other robots worked it out. As I understand it, sir, it is nothing new—just an adaptation. There's a time factor worked into it as an additional protection."

"But that sort of protection . . ."

"We use TC bombs, sir—total conversion bombs. Each side gets so many of them and uses his best judgment and . . ."

"But you couldn't use nuclear stuff in there!"

"As safe as a toy, sir," said Pertwee gaily. "They are very

small, sir. Not much larger than a pea. Critical mass, as you well understand, no longer is much of a consideration. And the yield in radiation, while it is fairly high, is extremely short-lived, so that within an hour or so . . ."

"You gentlemen," said Paxton grimly, "certainly try to be entirely realistic."

"Why, yes, of course we do. Although the operators are entirely safe. We're in the same sort of position, you might say, as the general staff. And that is all right, of course, because the purpose of the entire business is to keep alive the art of waging war."

"But the art . . ." Paxton started to argue, then stopped.

What could he say? If the race persisted in its purpose of keeping the old culture workable and intact in Continuation, then it must perforce accept that culture in its entirety.

War, one must admit, was as much a part of the human culture as were all the other more or less uniquely human things that the race was conserving here as a sort of racial cushion against a future need or use.

"There is," confessed Pertwee, "a certain cruelty, but perhaps a cruelty that I, as a robot, am more alive to than would be the case with a human, sir. The rate of casualties among the robot troops is unbelievable. In a restricted space and with extremely high firepower, that would be the natural consequence."

"You mean that you use troops—that you send robots in there?"

"Why, yes. Who else would operate the weapons? And it would be just a little silly, don't you think, to work out a battle and then . . ."

"But robots . . ."

"They are very small ones, sir. They would have to be, to gain an illusion of the space which is normally covered by a full-scale battle. And the weapons likewise are scaled down, and that sort of evens things out. And the troops are very single-minded, completely obedient and dedicated to victory. We turn them out in mass production in our shops and

there's little chance to give them varying individualities and anyhow . . ."

"Yes, I see," said Paxton, a little stunned. "But now I think that I . . ."

"But, sir, I have only got a start at telling you and I've not shown you anything at all. There are so many considerations and there were so many problems."

They were close to the towering, fully shimmering force field now and Pertwee pointed to a stairway that led from ground level down toward its base.

"I'd like to show you, sir," said Pertwee, ducking down the stairs.

It stopped before a door.

"This," it said, "is the only entrance to the battlefield. We use it to send new troops and munitions during periods of truce, and at other times we use it to police up the place a bit."

Its thumb stabbed out and hit a button to one side of the door and the door moved upward silently.

"After several weeks of battle," the robot explained, "the terrain is bound to become a little cluttered."

Through the door, Paxton could see the churned-up ground and the evidence of dying, and it was as if someone had pushed him in the belly. He gulped in a stricken breath and couldn't let it out and he suddenly was giddy and nearly sick. He put out a hand to hold himself upright against the trench-like wall beside him.

Pertwee pushed another button and the door slid down.

"It hits you hard the first time you see it," Pertwee apologized, "but given time, one gets used to it."

Paxton let his breath out slowly and looked around. The trench with the stairway came down to the door, and the door, he saw, was wider than the trench, so that at the foot of the steps the area had been widened into a sort of letter T, with narrow embrasures scooped out to face the door.

"You all right, sir?" asked Pertwee.

"Perfectly all right," Paxton told the robot stiffly.

"And now," said Pertwee happily, "I'll explain the fire and tactical control."

It trotted up the steps and Paxton trailed behind it.

"I'm afraid that would take too long," said Paxton.

But the robot brushed the words aside. "You must see it, sir," it pleaded plaintively. "Now that you are out here, you must not miss seeing it."

He'd have to get away somehow, Paxton told himself. He couldn't afford to waste much time. As soon as the house had settled down to sleep, the bishop would come hunting him, and by that time he must be gone.

Pertwee led the way around the curving base of the battle bowl to the observation tower which Paxton had come upon that evening.

The robot halted at the base of the ladder.

"After you," it said.

Paxton hesitated, then went swiftly up the ladder.

Maybe this wouldn't take too long, he thought, and then he could be off. It would be better, he realized, if he could get rid of Pertwee without being too abrupt about it.

The robot brushed past him in the darkness and bent above the bank of controls. There was a snick and lights came on in the panels.

"This, you see," it said, "is the groundglass—a representation of the battlefield. It is dead now, of course, because there is nothing going on, but when there is some action certain symbols are imposed upon the field so that one can see at all times just how things are going. And this is the fire control panel and this is the troop command panel and this . . ."

Pertwee went on and on with his explanations.

Finally it turned in triumph from the instruments.

"What do you think of it?" the robot asked, very clearly expecting praise.

"Why, it's wonderful," said Paxton, willing to say anything to make an end of his visit.

"If you are going to be around tomorrow," Pertwee said, "you may want to watch us."

And it was then that Paxton got his inspiration.

IV

"As a matter of fact," Paxton said, "I'd like to try it out. In my youth, I did a bit of reading on military matters, and if you'll excuse my saying so, I have often fancied myself somewhat of an expert."

Pertwee brightened almost visibly. "You mean, sir, that you'd like to go one round with me?"

"If you'd be so kind."

"You are sure you understand how to operate the board?"

"I watched you very closely."

"Give me fifteen minutes to reach my tower," said Pertwee. "When I arrive, I'll press the ready button. After that, either of us can start hostilities any time we wish."

"Fifteen minutes?"

"It may not take me that long, sir. I'll be quick about it."

"And I'm not imposing on you?"

"Sir," Pertwee said feelingly, "it will be a pleasure. I've fought against young Master Graham until the novelty has worn off. We know one another's tactics so well that there's little chance for surprise. As you can understand, sir, that makes for a rather humdrum war."

"Yes," said Paxton, "I suppose it would."

He watched Pertwee go down the ladder and listened to its footsteps hurrying away.

Then he went down the ladder and stood for a moment at the foot of it.

The clouds had thinned considerably and the moonlight was brighter now and it would be easier traveling, although it still would be dark in the denser forest.

He swung away from the tower and headed for the path, and, as he did so, he caught a flicker of motion in a patch of brush just off the trail.

Paxton slid into the denser shadow of a clump of trees and watched the patch of brush.

He crouched and waited. There was another cautious movement in the brush and he saw it was the bishop. Now sud-

denly it seemed that there was a chance to get the bishop off his neck for good—if his inspiration would only pay off.

The bishop had been let down by the flier in the dark of night, with the rain still pouring down and no moonlight at all. So it was unlikely that he knew about the battle bowl, although more than likely he must see it now, glittering faintly in the moonlight. But even if he saw it, there was a chance he'd not know what it was.

Paxton thought back along the conversation there had been after the bishop had arrived and no one, so far as he remembered, had mentioned a word of young Graham or the war project.

There was, Paxton thought, nothing lost by trying. Even if it didn't work, all he'd lose would be a little time.

He darted from the clump of trees to reach the base of the battle bowl. He crouched against the ground and watched, and the bishop came sliding out of his clump of brush and worked his way along, closing in upon him.

And that was fine, thought Paxton. It was working just the way he'd planned.

He moved a little to make absolutely sure his trailer would know exactly where he was and then he dived down the stairs that led to the door.

He reached it and thumbed the button and the door slid slowly upward without a single sound. Paxton crowded back into the embrasure and waited.

It took a little longer than he had thought it would and he was getting slightly nervous when he heard the step upon the stairs.

The bishop came down slowly, apparently very watchful, and then he reached the door and stood there for a moment, staring out into the churned-up battlefield. And in his hand he held an ugly gun.

Paxton held his breath and pressed his shoulders tight against the wall of earth, but the bishop didn't even look around. His eyes were busy taking in the ground that lay beyond the door.

Then finally he moved, quickly, like a leopard. His silken

garments made a swishing noise as he stepped through the door and out into the battle area.

Paxton held himself motionless, watching the bishop advance cautiously out into the field, and when he was far enough, he reached out a finger and pressed the second button and the door came down, smoothly, silently.

Paxton leaned against the door and let out in a gasp the breath he had been holding.

It was over now, he thought.

Hunter hadn't been as clever as he had thought he was.

Paxton turned from the door and went slowly up the stairs.

Now he needn't run away. He could stay right here and Nelson would fly him, or arrange to have him flown, to some place of safety.

For Hunter wouldn't know that this particular assassin had hunted down his quarry. The bishop had had no chance to communicate and probably wouldn't have dared to even if he could.

On the top step, Paxton stubbed his toe and went down without a chance to catch himself, and there was a vast explosion that shook the universe and artillery fire was bursting in his brain.

Dazed, he got to his hands and knees and crawled painfully, hurling himself desperately down the stairs—and through the crashing uproar that filled the entire world ran an urgent thought and purpose:

I've got to get him out before it is too late! I can't let him die in there! I can't kill a man!

He slipped on the stairs and slid until his body jammed in the narrowness and stuck.

And there was no artillery fire, there was no crash of shells, no wicked little chitterings. The dome glittered softly in the moonlight and was as quiet as death.

Except, he thought, a little weirdly, death's not quiet in there. It is an inferno of destruction and a maddening place of sound and brightness and the quietness doesn't come until afterward.

He'd fallen and hit his head, he knew, and all he'd seen

and heard had been within his brain. But Pertwee would be opening up any minute now and the quietness would be gone, and with it the opportunity to undo what he had so swiftly planned.

And somewhere in the shadow of the dome another self stood off and argued with him, jeering at his softness, quoting logic at him.

It was either he or you, said that other self. You fought for your life the best way you knew, the only way you knew, and whatever you may have done, no matter what you did, you were entirely justified.

"I can't do it!" yelled the Paxton on the stairs and yet even as he yelled he knew that he was wrong, that by logic he was wrong, that the jeering self who stood off in the shadows made more sense than he.

He staggered to his feet. Without his conscious mind made up, he went down the stairs. Driven by some as yet unrealized and undefined instinctive prompting that was past all understanding, he stumbled down the stairs, with the throb still in his head and a choking guilt and fear rising in his throat.

He reached the door and stabbed the button and the door slid up and he went out into the cluttered place of dying and stopped in horror at the awful loneliness and the vindictive desolation of this square mile of Earth that was shut off from all the other Earth as if it were a place of final judgment.

And perhaps it was, he thought—the final judgment of Man.

Of all of us, he thought, young Graham may be the only honest one; he's the true barbarian that old Granther thinks he is; he is the throwback who looks out upon Man's past and sees it as it is and lives it as it was.

Paxton took a quick look back and he saw the door was closed and out ahead of him, in the plowed and jumbled sea of tortured, battered earth, he saw a moving figure that could be no one but the bishop.

Paxton ran forward, shouting, and the bishop turned around and stood there, waiting, with the gun half lifted.

Paxton stopped and waved his arms in frantic signaling. The bishop's gun came up and there was a stinging slash across the side of Paxton's neck and a sudden, gushing wetness. A small, blue puff of smoke hung on the muzzle of the distant gun.

Paxton flung himself aside and dived for the ground. He hit and skidded on his belly and tumbled most ingloriously into a dusty crater. He lay there, at the bottom of the crater, huddled against the fear of a bullet's impact while the rage and fury built up into white heat.

He had come here to save a man and the man had tried to kill him!

I should have left him here, he thought.

I should have let him die.

I'd kill him if I could.

And the fact of the matter now was that he had to kill the bishop. There was no choice but to kill him or be killed himself.

Not only did he have to kill the bishop, but he had to kill him soon. Pertwee's fifteen minutes must be almost at an end and the bishop had to be killed and he had to be out the door before Pertwee opened fire.

Out the door, he thought—did he have a chance? If he ran low and dodged, perhaps, would he have a chance to escape the bishop's bullets?

That was it, he thought. Waste no time on killing if he didn't have to; let Pertwee do the killing. Just get out of here himself.

He put his hand up to his neck, and when he lifted it, his fingers were covered with a sticky wetness. It was funny, he thought, that it didn't hurt, although the hurt, no doubt, would come later.

He crawled up the crater's side and rolled across its lip and found himself lying in a small, massed junkyard of smashed and broken robots, sprawled grotesquely where the barrage had caught them.

And lying there in front of him, without a scratch upon it, where it had fallen from a dying robot's grasp, was a rifle that shone dully in the moonlight.

He snatched it up and rose into a crouch and as he did he saw the bishop, almost on top of him; the bishop coming in to make sure that he was finished!

There was no time to run, as he had planned to—and, curiously, no desire to run. Paxton had never known actual hate before, never had a chance to know it, but now it came and filled him full of rage and a wild and exultant will and capacity to kill without pity or remorse.

He tilted up the rifle and his finger closed upon the trigger and the weapon danced and flashed and made a deadly chatter.

But the bishop still came on, not rushing now, but plodding ahead with a deadly stride, leaning forward as if his body were absorbing the murderous rifle fire, absorbing it and keeping on by will power alone, holding off death until that moment when it might snuff out the thing that was killing it.

The bishop's gun came up and something smashed into Paxton's chest, and smashed again and yet again, and there was a flood of wetness and a spattering and the edge of Paxton's brain caught at the hint of something wrong.

For two men do not—could not—stand a dozen feet apart and pour at one another a deadly blast and both stay on their feet. No matter how poor might be their aim, it simply couldn't happen.

He rose out of his crouch and stood at his full height and let the gun hang uselessly in his hand. Six feet away, the bishop stopped as well and flung his gun away.

They stood looking at one another in the pale moonlight and the anger melted and ran out of them and Paxton wished that he were almost anywhere but there.

"Paxton," asked the bishop plaintively, "who did this to us?"

And it was a funny thing to say, almost as if he'd said: "Who stopped us from killing one another?"

For a fleeting moment, it almost seemed to Paxton as

though it might have been a kinder thing if they had been allowed to kill. For killing was a brave thing in the annals of the race, an art of strength and a certain proof of manhood—perhaps of humanhood.

A kinder thing to be allowed to kill. And that was it, exactly. They had not been allowed to kill.

For you couldn't kill with a popgun that shot out plastic pellets of liquid that burst on contact, with the liquid running down like blood for the sake of realism. And you couldn't kill with a gun that went most admirably through all the motions of chattering and smoking and flashing out red fire, but with nothing lethal in it.

And was this entire battle bowl no more than a toy set with robots that came apart at the right and most dramatic moments and then could be put back together at a later time? Were the artillery and the total-conversion bombs toy things as well, with a lot of flash and noise and perhaps a few well-placed items to plow up the battlefield, but without the power to really hurt a robot?

The bishop said, "Paxton, I feel like an utter fool." And he added other words which a real bishop could never bring himself to say, making very clear just what kind of obscene fool he was.

"Let's get out of here," said Paxton shortly, feeling like that same kind of fool himself.

"I wonder . . ." said the bishop.

"Forget about it," Paxton growled. "Let's just get out of here. Pertwee will be opening up . . ."

But he didn't finish what he was about to say, for he realized that even if Pertwee did open up, there'd be little danger. And there wasn't any chance that Pertwee would open up, for it would know that they were here.

Like a metal monitor watching over a group of rebellious children—rebellious because they weren't adult yet. Watching them and letting them go ahead and play so long as they were in no danger of drowning or of falling off a roof or some other reckless thing. And then interfering only just enough to save their silly necks. Perhaps even encouraging them to play so

they'd work off their rebelliousness—joining in the game in the typically human tradition of let's pretend.

Like monitors watching over children, letting them develop, allowing them to express their foolish little selves, not standing in the way of whatever childish importance they could muster up, encouraging them to think they were sufficient to themselves.

Paxton started for the door, plodding along, the bishop in his bedraggled robes stumbling along behind him.

When they were a hundred feet away, the door started sliding up and Pertwee stood there, waiting for them, not looking any different than it had before, but somehow seeming to have a new measure of importance.

They reached the door and sheepishly trailed through it, not looking right or left, casually and elaborately pretending that Pertwee was not there.

"Gentlemen," said Pertwee, "don't you want to play?"

"No," Paxton said. "No, thank you. I can't speak for both of us—"

"Yes, you can, friend," the bishop put in. "Go right ahead."

"My friend and I have done all the playing we care to do," said Paxton. "It was good of you to make sure we didn't get hurt."

Pertwee managed to look puzzled. "But why should anybody be allowed to get hurt? It was only a game."

"So we've discovered. Which way is out?"

"Why," said the robot, "any way but back."

THE HARDEST BARGAIN

Evelyn E. Smith

"There is a group of citizens engaged in rioting on the lawn, sir," Robot Z-1313A told the President of the United States. "Trampling down the early peas, too," he added, with the objective interest of one whose chief article of diet was oil.

"Well, don't just stand there," President Buchbinder said. "Go out and chase them away!" His voice subsided to a groan. "Have the people no respect for our sacred traditions? Don't they know the White House lawn is the only place for miles around where peas will grow?"

"They're young, most of them," Dr. Livingston, the President's confidential advisor, said tolerantly, puffing at his pipe. "The way the birth rate's been climbing, you take any given number of the population at any one time and the majority will be too young to remember our glorious traditions—"

"Their parents could teach them!" Buchbinder snapped. "After all, isn't that why we have parents instead of incubators?"

"Their parents are too busy scratching out a living and—ah—breeding to be able to instruct the young ones," Livingston said. "It's a vicious circle which has come to a head in this generation."

There was something wrong with that statement, Buchbinder knew, but he didn't dare come right out and say so, for fear of looking a fool. He knew his confidential advisor was smarter than he was. And what with the atomic wars of

the past couple of centuries, the large proportion of strontium 90 in the atmosphere, and general intellectual jealousy, there weren't many intelligent people left in the world, so the ones that remained had to be handled with care.

Buchbinder turned to Z-1313A, who was still standing there. "Why haven't you obeyed my instructions?" he demanded, outraged at this evidence of insubordination in a robot. From people you expected it, but a machine was supposed to be above such petty defectiveness. "Why don't you go chase the rioters off the lawn, per order?"

"I don't dare, sir," Z-1313A explained. "Should I get close enough, they would disassemble me. As a matter of fact, when I informed them from the balcony that they were trespassing, they employed language which—well, sir, if I hadn't been a robot and constitutionally incapable of the pudent graces, it would have made me blush."

"Disassemble a robot!" Buchbinder repeated, shocked. "I never heard of anything so manic in my life. Why should they want to do a thing like that?"

Since the robot did not have parts sufficiently flexible for shrugging, he remained impassive. It was Dr. Livingston who answered. "Haven't you heard, Will? The people are starting to destroy robots when they can get their hands on them. To try to destroy them, that is. Fortunately, most of the people are too weak from hunger and racial debility to do any great damage unless they operate in gangs. Looks like you'll have to pass an anti-congregation law."

"But why should they want to do a silly thing like destroying robots?" Buchbinder persisted.

Livingston smiled wisely. "They're saying that if it weren't for the robots, they'd have jobs, a higher standard of living—the usual complaints you hear at the beginning of every revolution."

"If it weren't for the robots, they wouldn't have anything at all!" Buchbinder said, exasperated. "Don't they realize that the only thing that keeps the country going at all is the fact that there's a plentiful supply of free labor? And I under-

stand from Counter-intelligence that it's the same overseas."

"Oh, there's plenty of free labor," Livingston observed. "Plenty of service, too. But very little to eat."

"That's not true," Buchbinder said hotly. "Maybe hydroponics didn't work out for large-scale operations; still, the people could perfectly well eat synthetics. But, no, they're so stubborn, they'd rather starve to death—"

"Some of them did eat the synthetics and died anyway."

"Some people insist on being allergic to anything! It's all in the mind!" At times like this, Buchbinder felt he was on the verge of going mad, like Presidents Ling and Riccobono before him. If only he had been elected in the days before the atomic wars, when it was a treat to be President! Then, all a Chief Executive had to do were fun things, like appointing ambassadors and making speeches and declaring wars. He didn't have to worry how to feed the people; in those days, there used to be food growing all over the place and it was distributed with such efficiency that only a small portion of the populace ever went hungry.

"You'd think since they know there isn't much food," Buchbinder said, "that people wouldn't have quite so many children and make more mouths to feed."

"I don't suppose they're doing it consciously," Livingston told him. "It's nature's attempt to ensure the survival of the race. And it certainly looks from here as if it's likely to be a futile one."

"You're always so pessimistic, Maurice."

Dr. Livingston cleared his throat, as he always did before making a remark he felt to be especially apt. "The thinking man," he said, "is the despairing man."

Robot Z-1313B came into the President's office. "A ship from outer space has landed on the lawn, sir," he announced, "thus, I am sure you will be gratified to know, effectively disposing of the rioters."

"Oh, good!" Robot Z-1313A said. "That disposes of *my* problem."

Both robots shook hands with a slight grating noise.

"But if there were any peas left," Buchbinder mourned, "this must have finished them."

However, he arose, for when duty summoned, Willis Buchbinder, though possibly reluctant, was never remiss.

"I don't see why the star traders keep on coming all the way out here," he remarked as he put on the sacred frock coat with the authentic moth holes. "Surely what little we have to trade wouldn't be of much value to them."

Livingston took his pipe out of his mouth. "I imagine there must always be little novelty items they can pick up. After all, the fact that we're so far off the beaten track probably gives our products some curio value, if nothing else."

"Oh, I suppose so," Buchbinder sighed. "All right, activate the reception committee," he told Z-1313B. "I don't suppose there's any chance this could be a diplomatic mission or anything like that?" he added wistfully, brushing off the tall genuine silk ceremonial hat.

"No, sir, it is merely a trading ship—and rather a small one," said Z-1313B, who left to turn on the reception committee. That was merely a fancy name for a unitranslator which the government had purchased from a Denebian trader some decades before in return for a partridge in a pear tree. The bargain had, of course, been closed in the days when neither partridges nor pear trees had become obsolescent.

Although interstellar traders had been dropping in on Earth for the past hundred years or so, Earth had no diplomatic relations with the other solar systems—or any kind of official relations at all, in fact. As far as the terrestrials could make out from the information given them by the various life-forms who hit Earth from time to time those days, there had been some kind of embargo on their planet for many centuries. If the more extravagant reports were to be believed, the sanctions dated back to the time when there were no powered vehicles on Earth.

At any rate, as a result of these discriminatory tactics, Earth citizens were not allowed to ride in the extraterrestrial ships back to their point of origin. It was very likely that an

attempt would have been made to prevent them from traveling in their own ships, if they'd had any. Fortunately, however, Earth had not succeeded in developing space travel and so the question never arose.

"Used to be an embargo on all trade, even," a chatty Aldebaranian octopoid had told President Ling. "Now the League seems to be easing up a little on non-vital materials. Who knows, maybe someday, when you're advanced enough or something, they'll even let you into the League. . . . Now what do you have to offer in fine glass and crystal?"

"If we didn't need food," Buchbinder declared, "I wouldn't speak to one of those outworlders. If we're not good enough for them, I don't see why—"

"But we do need food," Livingston said, taking his pipe out of his mouth and pointing it at the President. "Desperately. You have no choice but to dicker with him."

Buchbinder nodded gloomily.

"On the other hand, Will, do you think it dignified to go drive the bargain yourself? What do you have a Secretary of the Interior for?"

"St. Clair?" Buchbinder cried contemptuously. "Why, I wouldn't trust him as far as I could spit. Less, in fact, because I used to be the champion—"

"Willis, Willis," Livingston chided gently as he, too, pulled on his frock coat, "this is no time for dithering."

"If that St. Clair saw a chance to make a fast buck for himself," Buchbinder grumbled, "he wouldn't give a damn about the country. Besides, if there happen to be any truffles, I want to put my bid in for them first. The last time, Defense got them all. And when I reminded General McMullen that, after all, I was Commander-in-Chief, he said he was sorry, but the top brass had already eaten them all in a soufflé.

"Have you ever thought, Maurice," Buchbinder continued as, fully attired in the traditional ceremonial garments, the two dignitaries clattered down the grand stairs, "how funny it is that these extraterrestrial fellows should have the exact kind of food we eat? I mean it's obvious that they're com-

pletely different life-forms with different digestive systems and everything. Some aren't even animals and yet they bring —well, oats, peas, beans and barley. Earth food."

"It's obvious they must know a great deal about us," Livingston answered. "We *are* worth a bit of study. So it's not hard to understand—"

"I'm not asking how they know *what* we eat," Buchbinder said. "I'm asking *where* they get it from. And all properly put up in cans, too."

"It doesn't take a great deal of know-how to put up food in cans. Posnack's experiments with chimpanzees conclusively—"

"I didn't mean—" Buchbinder interrupted. Then he forgot what he was starting to say as he tripped over a roller skate on the bottom step. "Even here," he said bitterly. "In the White House. Children."

"Must be the Secretary of Agriculture's twins," Livingston said. "He brings them to work to save the cost of a baby-sitter."

The reception committee proved to be unnecessary; the trader spoke fluent English. He was also vaguely humanoid, being a biped with only one pair of arms and one—rather small—head. It was in skin coloring that the difference between him and the human was most marked, not so much in hue as in arrangement, for his complexion ranged from the ruddy bronze of the American Indian on one side of his scantily clothed body to a Mongolian ochre on the other. Had he been portly rather than thin, he would have resembled an apple. His name was Foma and he came from the Fomalhaut system.

Foma was one of the most attractive outworlders Buchbinder had ever seen, although the President's favorable opinion was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the alien had not only brought cans of truffles but sauerkraut and pâté de fois gras and beer as well. There were herrings and jam and jellybeans put up in clear, shining glass jars, and lovely plump knockwursts and Brunschweiger sausages neatly encased in their own skins. He had plastic bags of pretzels and potatoes,

and his frozen-food locker actually contained stewed rabbit and pumpernickel and three kinds of strudel.

Foma drove a hard bargain, for he wanted a considerable quantity of Revere silver in return for all these delightful things. However, Buchbinder was no slouch at haggling, either, and he managed to beat down the alien two teapots and a creamer before the bargain was closed.

Then the robots swiftly carried the crates of food into the White House, where a certain portion would be reserved for the government tables. The rest would be carried by other robots to Fort Knox, from which it would be dispensed to the general population according to merit, rank and connections. And, as the food was taken out of the ship, the crowd of children outside the fence, who had been emitting shrill jeers and catcalls throughout the preliminary parleying, fell silent and reverent before the almost legendary dainties borne past them.

"Nice little machines you have there," Foma said, surveying the robots appreciatively. "Is there any chance that you would consider parting with some? I'll give you a good price."

"Oh, no, decidedly not!" the President exclaimed, horrified at such a suggestion. "These were the last creations of our greatest minds before they died," he explained, "and our economy, such as it is, is founded upon them. We couldn't do without our robots. And there's an arbitrary limit on their numbers built in as one of the prime directives. They manufacture themselves, you see," he went on, anxious not to offend the out-worlder, "which is why we have none available for export."

"I do see," Foma said with a smile. "What I can't understand, though, is how you people manage to survive with an economy based on food that doesn't seem to be indigenous to your planet."

"Oh, but it used to be," the President replied wistfully.

He made a sweeping gesture that embraced all of the District of Columbia and part of Maryland. "Once, verdant vegetation stretched as far as the eye could see, while edible ani-

mals gamboled about blissfully in it. Why," he cried, carried away, "prior to the twenty-first century, the whole country looked like a combined zoological and botanical garden."

"It must have been very pretty," Foma said. "Not that it isn't pretty now," he added with polite haste. "A very pleasant spot. A river does so much for a town, and that's a very charming river washing the southern side—"

"The western side," Livingston corrected him thoughtfully. "If you mean the Potomac."

"The southwestern side, to be exact," the President said, exercising diplomacy. "However, you should have seen the place before the wars. I understand it was a veritable fairyland!" He grew sad. "But then came the wars. Most of the land was devastated by those terrible nuclear weapons, except for small patches here and there left fertile by chance. The scientists say nothing will grow on most of it for hundreds of years, by which time the race will have died out, I suppose." He gave a brave smile. "Ah, well, it was fun while it lasted."

"I don't meant to presume," Foma said, "but I suppose you could derive a little moral lesson from what happened: to wit, fighting is unprofitable as well as unethical."

"Oh, the human being has always been a fighting animal," Dr. Livingston replied. "If you must have a moral, it might be—" he cleared his throat— "If your weapons are too good, you'll kill off all the game."

Foma gave the condential advisor a chilling stare, then turned back to Buchbinder. "I am beginning to understand now why you don't rehabilitate your land and start growing things again. I had wondered, but I see now you realize that the same thing would only happen all over again, so it's no use. I really admire you, though, for your national strength of character in—"

"Rehabilitate the land?" Buchbinder repeated incredulously. "You mean the radioactivity can be removed from the soil?"

"Hasn't anyone ever told you?" Foma asked. "Wait a minute, though," he added consideringly. "I might be treading on classified ground. I must consult my handbook."

Placing what looked like a species of optical instrument before his face, he twirled several knobs.

"No," he announced as he removed it, "not classified at all. I'm forced to the shocking conclusion that the other traders didn't want to dry up a profitable source of revenue by decontaminating your land."

"Well, even if such a process were possible," Livingston said, "you can hardly blame them. After all, business is business."

Foma looked at him sternly.

These philosophical irrelevancies made the President impatient. "Do you mean you have a way of removing the radioactivity—"

"Watch out," Livingston whispered. "This looks like the beginning of a sharp practice to me. Personally, I don't believe there is any such process."

Apparently the outworlder's hearing was more acute than the human. "You Earth people are so suspicious. No wonder—" And then he stopped.

"No wonder what?" Livingston pressed.

"Just no wonder," Foma said firmly. He turned to the President. "Would you like your land decontaminated? By good fortune, I do happen to have the requisite equipment for taking the radioactivity out of soil. The same machine is used for many things."

"Aha!" Dr. Livingston cried. "Good fortune, indeed!" He cleared his throat. "The coincidence in the natural state is an extremely rare bird."

"I'm not denying that it is rather an expensive process," Foma continued, ignoring him. "But when you need something done, you've got to pay the—the price."

It was pretty depressing, Buchbinder thought, to know that there was a cure for your ailment and not have the money to pay for the medicine.

"We have so little," he said hopelessly. "So very little. What can we offer that will make it worth your while?"

"You underestimate the value of your native handicrafts,"

Foma smiled. "I will undertake to remove the radioactivity from the entire country," he offered, changing to a brisk, businesslike tone, "in return for the following . . ." Putting his optical instrument to his eye again, he read aloud: "Rembrandt, *Old Woman Cutting Her Nails;* El Greco, *View of Toledo;* Titian, *Venus and Adonis;* Daumier, *Third-class Carriage;* Goya, *Don Manuel Osorio;* Cézanne, *Card Players;* and Picasso, *The Three Musicians.*"

"What's all that in English?" Buchbinder asked, thinking that Foma, in his enthusiasm, had lapsed into his native tongue. "Are you sure we have it?"

"He was speaking English," Livingston hissed. "Those are pictures, famous paintings. Among the nation's most treasured artistic possessions. We can hardly sell them for—" he gave a bitter little laugh—"food."

"You mean better we should starve than sell them?" Buchbinder asked.

"Better we should starve," Livingston said solemnly.

The President struggled hard to understand. "But we sold him the teapots and they're historical. They were made by Paul Revere and he—"

"I know all about Paul Revere, thank you," Livingston said. "And these are just pictures. From the way they sounded, they were all painted by foreigners. And Paul Revere was an American. A patriot—"

"I know, I know," Livingston interrupted. "On the twenty-second of July in 'seventy-six—"

"Now even I know better than that," Buchbinder said, staring at him in amazement, as did the alien. "It's 'On the eighteenth of April in 'seventy-five . . .' "

"Of course," Livingston murmured. "Now why did my subconscious make me get the date wrong like that?"

"Human memory is fallible," Foma suggested suavely.

The President tugged insistently at Livingston's sleeve. "You're willing to sell the teapots of this great American patriot, but when it comes to things that were made by foreigners—"

"You simply don't understand, Willis."

"I know I don't." Buchbinder's voice was plaintive. "That's why I'm asking you to explain it to me."

"Paul Revere was a great man and a fine silversmith. It is a pity to let his creations go out of our solar system. However—" Livingston cleared his throat—"purely utilitarian objects never attain the artistic dignity of beauty created for its own sake."

"Why?" the President wanted to know.

Livingston gave a sigh and turned to the outworlder. "Look, Mr.—ah—Foma, I'm afraid it will require a special session of Congress to settle this matter. Would you mind waiting a few weeks? Or months?"

"Or, possibly, years," the President grumbled.

"Not at all," Foma said, smiling. "I shall amuse myself by browsing through the Congressional Library. Perhaps I can locate one or two little items there that we can make a deal on."

Both houses of Congress tended to support the President's point of view. "For," the Senate majority leader orated, "splendid and enduring monuments to our nation's greatness though these works of art may be—"

"They weren't even painted by Americans," Buchbinder interposed helpfully.

The majority leader glared at him. "I didn't say they *were* splendid and enduring monuments to our nation's greatness. I only said they *may* be. Anyhow, should the race perish, there will be no one to look at these beautiful pictures and appreciate their—er—beauty. But then again, should we entrust them to the keeping of the gentleman from the stars—" he bowed toward Foma—"I am sure that his people will preserve them with the same loving care and solicitude that we ourselves have given them."

"You may rest assured of that," Foma promised, returning the bow.

"Then, when our lands are fruitful once more, when we are

able to give of their abundance to our four-footed friends, so that the animal kingdom may thrive and multiply again, when our race has regained its former glory, invigorated by the renewal of plenty and a reliable supply of meat, we shall develop space travel of our own. A mighty fleet shall set sail for the stars—"

"Hear, hear!" shrieked the children who filled the gallery to bursting.

"—we shall seek out the strongholds where the pictures are kept close," the Senator continued, "and then we—" he glanced at Foma and seemed to recollect himself—"and then we will look at them."

There were boos and catcalls from the gallery.

"Silence!" bellowed the Congressional robots. "Si-lence!"

"But who's to say this alleged process will work?" the minority leader asked. President Buchbinder knew he was a close associate of Dr. Livingston's. "Mr. Foma may make off with our paintings and leave the land as barren as ever."

"Naturally, I shall not ask for payment, gentlemen," Foma said, "until your lands are green once more."

"Well," the minority leader concluded lamely, "nothing can be fairer than that. I guess."

That seemed to settle it. Congress passed an act empowering the alien to commence rehabilitating the barren lands. Dr. Livingston remained in Washington to keep the eternal light burning over the Tombs of the numerous Unknown Soldiers, while Foma and President Buchbinder set off for Smith County, Kansas. Smith County, Kansas, was the geographical center of the United States and hence the place where Foma proposed to set up his equipment.

"Doesn't seem like much," Buchbinder observed as Foma, with the efficient aid of some of the Smith County robots, put together a simple contraption of wheels, springs, pipes, valves, relays, switches, coils, shafts and wires.

"Perhaps not," Foma said affably, "but it is highly effective. When activated, the machine disseminates powerful sonic rays which will accelerate the diminution of the half-life of

the soil until, in very short order, it becomes only a quarter-life, then an eighth-life, a sixteenth-life—"

"I understand," the President interrupted. "But how long does it take until there *is* no life at all—no radioactive life, that is?"

"Perhaps a week," Foma said. "Perhaps eight days, perhaps six."

"I'd also like to know," the President inquired, apprehensively buttoning his jacket up to his throat, "whether it does anything to people. Because it's not much good if the soil turns fertile and we turn the opposite."

"At this setting," Foma said, "it has not the slightest effect upon any form of animal life."

He beamed upon the Smith County children who had gathered to watch the proceedings. They stuck out their tongues at him. Buchbinder hoped that wherever the alien came from, it was a gesture of great respect.

Then the President had a frightening thought. "The emanations won't reach the Eastern Empire, will they? We wouldn't want their soil to become fertile again."

"You are paying to have this country decontaminated," Foma said, "and only this country will be decontaminated. I do not offer my services gratis. People set no value on anything for which they do not pay."

"Well, of course not!" President Buchbinder agreed. Then he had an even more appalling idea. The Eastern Empire, he'd been given to understand, had some art treasures of its own in a place called the Hermitage. "After you've finished with us," he asked, "you're not going to turn around and make a deal with the East to decontaminate them, are you?"

"That," Foma said curtly as he blew into one of the pipes, "is my business."

"Oh, dear," the President thought, "it is going to mean more wars. Well," he consoled himself, "war is more interesting than riots and, as a matter of fact, a lot safer for me personally, since rioters always make for the White House first, whereas war is on a more catch-as-catch-can basis."

At the end of a week, Foma reported that the machine's work was done and dismantled it. President Buchbinder was thankful, for the sonic vibrations were nerve-racking and people had been complaining, even though he had made a video address to the nation beforehand to explain just what they were supposed to do. Now he made another address, exhorting everyone who had any ground at all to go forth and plant seeds.

"And in case the seeds we have should not prove viable," he concluded, "Mr. Foma has been kind enough to throw a group of vegetable seeds from his own stock into the bargain. Do not think, however," he reassured the nation, "that these are the seeds of alien vegetation. On the contrary, we have Swiss chard, cabbage, beets, onions, cucumbers, Brussels sprouts and rhubarb—all perfectly familiar, I may even say beloved, native vegetables."

As they went off the air, the President remembered a question that had been bothering him earlier.

"You don't look like us," he said to Foma. "How come you grow exactly the same vegetables as we used to?"

"A trader must have brought some seeds back from this planet," Foma said. "Must have been a long time ago, too, because the vegetables you describe as yours flourish on a good many of the other worlds now. Although we don't care for the produce ourselves, some of our pets like them, which is why we happened to have supplies on hand when we reopened trading operations with you."

"Oh," the President said. It sounded reasonable enough.

After the broadcast, Foma and President Buchbinder returned to Washington, where Foma reveled in the pleasures of the Congressional Library and the Folger Memorial for some weeks. Then the seeds, both local and imported, began to sprout and the land turned green, according to promise, and Foma's bill came due.

"Mr. Foma of Fomalhaut to see you," Robot X-1313B announced as he came into the President's office, where Buchbinder and Livingston were playing chess.

"Sorry I couldn't wait to have an appointment put through the regular channels," Foma said, coming in hard upon the robot's heels.

"Oh, my dear fellow," said Buchbinder, rising, "think nothing of it—we are very informal here. What can I do for you?"

"Now that my part of the bargain is fulfilled, I'm rather anxious to go home, so I'd appreciate immediate payment of my bill."

"Of course, of course! I'll start getting the pictures together. You should have them by the end of the week."

"Excellent." The alien smiled. "Meanwhile, I'll get my ship ready for the return journey." He shook hands with Buchbinder and left.

"You won't have to bother getting the pictures together," Dr. Livingston said as soon as Foma had gone. "They're all in the basement already."

"Maurice," the President said feelingly, "you did this for me while I was gone. You put aside your personal prejudices in order to save me trouble. You—"

"Well," Livingston interrupted uncomfortably, "you might as well know now: they're not exactly the same pictures he asked for. While you were gone, I got together with a little Congressional committee and we decided—"

"But we promised!" Buchbinder exclaimed in dismay. "We agreed on seven specific pictures. They're listed right here on the bill he rendered!"

"We didn't sign a contract," Livingston said, pushing away the paper the President was thrusting in his face. "Besides, he *is* getting pictures. Masterpieces, too. But more the kind his people will be able to appreciate."

"How do you know that?"

"Look, I'll show them to you."

Dr. Livingston led the President down to the basement. "Here's what Foma's getting," he explained. "Instead of Rembrandt's *Old Woman Cutting Her Nails,* we give him Delacroix's *Arab Tax Collector.* Instead of El Greco's *View of Toledo,* he gets Constable's *Wivenhoe Park, Essex.* For Ti-

tian's *Venus and Adonis,* Hals' *Junker Ramp and His Sweetheart.* For Daumier's *Third-class Carriage,* Eastman's *My Old Kentucky Home.* For Goya's *Don Manuel Osorio,* Canaletto's *Vegetable Garden.* For Cézanne's *Card Players,* Fragonard's *A Game of Hot Cockles.* And for Picasso's *The Three Musicians,* Murillo's *Jacob and Rachel at the Well.*"

"Yes, they are very pretty pictures," the President said, inspecting them. "Very pretty, indeed. I can see how we'd hate to let them go."

"No, no, no!" Livingston cried. "These are the ones we're giving him! Nothing but the best, you see. And, on the average, much larger than the ones he asked for. Why, he might not even have known about these; they are less publicized, so outworlders might not have heard of them."

"That's very considerate of you, Maurice," the President said, "but since we are giving him masterpieces, anyway, why don't we let him have the ones he asked for? Why go to all this trouble?"

"I'll tell you, Will," said Livingston. "It's because the nation has more of a sentimental attachment to the others. And, furthermore, the pictures we are giving him present a more favorable view of terrestrial life. The others—well, I hate to say it about masterpieces, Willis, but some of them might almost be considered sordid. And one of these was painted by an American."

"These *are* nice." The President didn't know much about art, but he didn't see how anybody could help liking the pictures Livingston and the Congressional committee had selected. "*Very* nice."

"That's just it, Will!" Livingston clapped him on the shoulder. "You've hit it exactly. They're *nice!* They're the kind of pictures we'd be proud to have another world see. We want to make a good impression in the other solar systems, don't we, so someday maybe we can get into the Big League ourselves?"

He was convincing, but Buchbinder was still dubious. "Are you sure Foma will understand? He might make a fuss. And he has every right to, you know."

"We'll get the robots to do these up in special gift-wrapping paper," Livingston said, "with ribbons and seals and all, and maybe Foma won't open them until he gets to his home planet."

"Maybe," the President half agreed. "But even if he doesn't open them, somehow it doesn't seem right. Maurice, don't you think we're going to sacrifice a lot of interstellar goodwill if we pull a trick like this?"

"Nonsense! It's just sound business practice." Livingston cleared his throat. "Besides, we cannot let mere material considerations interfere with our duty."

"I suppose not," the President said. "On the other hand—"

"I'll call the robots and have them start wrapping right away," Livingston told him.

"But these aren't the pictures Mr. Foma asked for," Z-1313A said helpfully as he brought out the big roll of gold-foil gift-wrapping paper, with "Compliments of the White House," "Regards from the President," and "Best Wishes from the U.S.A." etched on it in flowing script. "Someone apparently has blundered. Shall we—"

"There's no mistake," the President said, the more impatiently as he could not, in spite of Dr. Livingston's assurances, get his conscience to accept this switching of art works.

"They don't look to me like pictures anybody would ask for," Z-1313B contributed.

"They're not supposed to appeal to *mechanical* tastes!" Buchbinder snapped. "I like them."

"Use the seals that say 'Do Not Open until Inauguration Day,'" Livingston told the robots, "and the heaviest wrapping tape. And be sure you make the knots good and tight, but very ornate, so it'll seem a pity to undo them."

When the pictures were all wrapped, the robots carried them out carefully to the lawn. Foma was waiting next to his ship, in the midst of a welter of debris left by the children who had come to look at it while he was gone. Its once shining metallic sides were marred by scratches and even paint. Some of the disfiguring marks were words.

Buchbinder spelled them out laboriously: "MONSSTER GO HOAM!" "PREZIDENT BUKBINDER LOVS EXTERATERESTRIALS!" "DR LIVINSTUN ISNT AS SMART AS HE THINX HE IS!"

"Oh, my goodness!" the President exclaimed. "What a dreadful thing to have happen! I'll have the robots clean it up at once!"

"Children will be children," Foma smiled. "I find the slogans rather amusing and, in fact, almost decorative. I won't have them touched." And he started to turn to the pictures.

The President gave a scared little gasp. "You've forgotten something!" he babbled. "Under this tarpaulin. Maybe it's important!" He started to lift the tarpaulin, but Foma stopped him.

"No, I haven't forgotten that. It's—ah—some gear that can't be put on board until after the cargo is loaded. Would you take the paper off the pictures?" he said to the robots.

"They did them up so nicely," the President said in a small voice. "It—it seems such a shame—"

"Don't worry about it," Foma told him. "I'm going to put them away in special hyperspace-proof batting, anyhow. And I wouldn't be much of a trader if I bought goods sight unseen, now would I?"

The three of them stood there in a dead silence as the robots unwrapped each picture.

Foma's eyes chilled into steel, including the one which had opened in the middle of his forehead. "These are not the pictures I asked for."

"These are fine pictures," Buchbinder faltered. "Very fine—"

"They are very fine pictures. However, our bargain was for seven others. I kept my part of the bargain; I expect you to keep yours."

Livingston shrugged. "I'm afraid you hardly have much choice. You can't contaminate the country all over again. Even if you have the means to do it, I feel sure that your League would consider such behavior unethical."

"You're quite right," Foma agreed, "although I am rather surprised to find you able to even recognize an ethical point of view."

Livingston grasped the alien's arm. "Be reasonable, man—er—Mr. Foma. These are excellent pictures we're offering you, in tiptop condition. Only the best of pigments—and have you ever seen handsomer frames?"

Foma shook him off. "Those are not the pictures we agreed upon. I refuse to accept them in payment of your debt."

Livingston grinned. "If you persist in your obstinacy, sir, I'm afraid you'll have to go back to your planet unpaid."

"Maurice, Maurice," the President whimpered, tugging at his advisor's sleeve, "this will give us a bad name in the Galaxy. They won't come with food to trade any more."

"We won't need their food, lunkhead!" Livingston snapped. "We can grow our own now." He turned back to Foma. "That's our final offer, sir. Take it or leave it!"

"Your final offer, eh?" Foma repeated. "Very well, then."

"Maurice," Buchbinder bleated, "I'm afraid—"

"Shut up, Willis!"

Foma yanked the tarpaulin away and disclosed what had been concealed underneath it—his decontamination apparatus, already set up.

"You're going to make the land radioactive again!" the President gasped. "I told you, Maurice—"

"He wouldn't dare!" Dr. Livingston cried, but he was pale.

"No," Foma said, "I shall do nothing of the sort. All I want are my just dues. And, as I told you, this is an extremely versatile machine." He blew into a pipe.

There was a moment of silence—a moment in which nothing happened, but everything seemed about to happen. Then there was a clattering sound. And, all of a sudden, the streets were filled with robots. They streamed down Pennsylvania Avenue, they streamed down Connecticut Avenue, marching in perfect unison.

They marched toward the White House; they marched onto the lawn; they marched up the ramp and into the air-

lock of the spaceship, which expanded in a seemingly limitless way to accommodate them.

Hundreds of them came, stolidly marching; thousands came, tens of thousands . . . until it was clear that the District of Columbia and its surrounding communities were being drained of their robots.

"Call out the Army!" shouted the President. "Call out the Navy! Summon the Marine Corps!"

"They're all robots," Livingston said in a tired voice. "Except for the officers, of course, and all they can do is head parades and initial computer directives."

"The Secret Service? . . . No," the President answered himself. "If the soldiers and sailors and marines are robots, then the Secret Service certainly must be." He appealed to Foma. "Please turn off that machine! Turn it off! I'll get you the pictures you wanted—and you can have these into the bargain. You can have the whole National Gallery, only please don't take our robots!"

"Too late," said Foma, and his voice was grand and sad and smug. "Too late. A deal is a deal. When it's broken, the injured party has every right to exact whatever payment he deems fit."

Dr. Livingston stared at Foma, his eyes widening, then widening still further. "Then it *wasn't* a legend! You actually did it!"

Foma bowed low.

"What are you two agreeing about?" the President asked, looking bewilderedly from one to the other.

Dr. Livingston ignored him. "Then take the children! Leave us our robots!"

"We took the children a thousand years ago," said Foma, "in payment for another bad debt, using an earlier model of this same machine. But that was only because there was nothing better to take. We also hoped—naively, as it turned out—that the lesson would teach you the high cost of sharp practice."

"Oh, I remember!" the President exclaimed. "You got rid

of the rats in some foreign town. And then, when the town officials wouldn't pay up, you took the children. Some fellow wrote a poem about it—a rather long one that we studied in school. . . . That must be how come you got the dates mixed up, Maurice," he added, pleased with his own deductive faculties.

"We took a considerable loss on that deal," Foma said, "because we found that, though human children make delightful pets, they're not much good when they grow up—absolutely no talent for solid, honest labor. No, the robots we can use; the children you can keep."

Dr. Livingston cleared his throat, uncomfortably this time, not complacently. "Then there really is an embargo on us."

"Yes, it was placed upon Earth on July 22, 1376, at a little town in Germany called Hameln—or, as Browning misspelled it, Hamelin. In fact, that swindle is what gave rise to a simile we have in the Galaxy: 'As untrustworthy as an Earthman.' Obviously we cannot have diplomatic relations with a species that fits the slogan so exactly, especially after this piece of trickery. The embargo still stands."

The airlock clanged to and whirled shut behind him.

Buchbinder and Livingston watched disconsolately as the spaceship zoomed up into the stratosphere.

"Now we'll never make the Big League," the President moaned.

"Aah, what kind of League would send a piper out as an emissary?" sneered Livingston. "And a pied piper, to boot."

And so the alien vessel hurtled out into space, taking all the robots in the country with it, except for a poor little crippled model from the West Coast, whose reaction time was as defective as his judgment. He arrived from California two weeks later and was so upset at finding himself left behind that he fused completely.

Unrepresentative though he was of the strong, handsome, efficient robots that had gone with Foma, he was all the na-

tion had to memorialize those it had once proudly owned, and he was given a niche in the Hall of Fame. He has the largest bronze plaque there—Browning's poem, engraved all around the base, with appropriate footnotes by historians.

WITH REDFERN ON CAPELLA XII

Charles Satterfield

It wasn't a pillory, exactly, but it served a pillory's purpose. "For God's sake!" Redfern yelled. "Careful with that bear trap!"

His Fnit torturers didn't speak English, but they understood what Redfern was communicating in a writhing scream. They chattered at each other like crickets on a summer night and eventually took away the toothed, spring-clamped, murderous-looking trap and replaced it with coils of wire, with which they bound him to the frame. The wire was tight, but not, Redfern assured himself consolingly, as tight as the trap would have been on his legs and neck.

Next came the tar. At least it looked like tar and served tar's purpose, though it smelled like a swamp at low water. "Ouch!" roared Redfern; it was hot. Then the flaky pumice grit, for unfortunately the Fnits had no feathers—unfortunately for Redfern, that is; the pumice had a way of rubbing him raw that feathers could never have matched.

Then the Fnits chattered at each other for a moment thoughtfully and finally left him alone.

It was time for them to gather faggots for the blaze.

Redfern squinted over his shoulder at Capella, slowly drifting toward the horizon behind him. He had about an hour before sundown. It all depended on whether or not they found enough burnable wood before dark. The insect-legged Fnits were strictly daylight animals; when their planet got cold at night, they were tunneled in their warm, damp cities underground.

Capella XII was not a very fertile planet, at least not this

far north, and there might not be much suitable wood within carrying distance, Redfern told himself. There weren't any big trees at all; he could see that for himself. And that was pretty hopeful. Why, it was ten minutes already and the fuel-gatherers weren't back yet, not even with the first load. His chances of lasting past the sunset, he calculated shrewdly, were at least five or six to one, and that meant that he would live until morning—of course, if he didn't freeze during the night.

Fourteen hours! It seemed like forever.

Someone coughed behind him. "Pardon me," said a voice —a human voice! "Would you be interested in a job?"

Redfern jerked against the cables. "Who—who the devil are you?" he demanded, craning to see.

A man stepped apprehensively out from behind the pillory. "My name," he said swiftly, staring about, "is Di Candia. My, ah, associates and I noticed that you appeared to be in difficulties and we thought that you might—"

"Tell me later!" Redfern snapped. "Get me down off here before the Fnits come back!"

"Surely," said the man agreeably. "However, I should warn you that the pay might be, well, uncertain, since ours is a speculative—"

"Di Candia," begged Redfern, "cut me *down!*"

They spent the night in a cave on the mountainside, where Redfern slept more joyously than he had slept in years. At daybreak, the man named Di Candia nudged Redfern awake. "We might as well get started," he said cheerfully. "It's a long way into the city—"

"Not yet," objected Redfern. "The Fnits will be sniffing around after me like dogs in a garbage dump. Give them a chance to get discouraged."

"Oh, do you think that's necessary?" Di Candia blinked at him thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose you know best. After all—" he nudged Redfern jovially—"you're our expert on Fnits, and if we can't take your advice, what are we paying for?"

Redfern nodded. "Exactly," he said. "What *are* you paying me for?"

"Oh, it's a simple task, Mr. Redfern. My, ah, associates and I have business here on Capella XII. We need someone familiar with the local customs."

Redfern said sourly, "That's me, all right. If I were any more familiar with the customs, I'd be dead. Are these your associates?"

"All but one." Di Candia made the introductions. "General Glick." A red-faced man, ostensible age about fifty, though it was hard to tell these days. "Mr. Cowper." A pale-faced stripling. "And Miss Garney, who is not present. We represent a, well, syndicate which is anxious to do business on this planet."

"You never will," said Redfern positively. "The Fnits don't like humans. They won't have any business dealings."

"We happen to think they will. After all, they tolerated you for nearly a year."

Redfern sighed. "They tolerated me as long as I stuck to my spaceship. But the first time I wandered into town, they grabbed me."

"Because you were in the harem of the Glow," Di Candia supplied.

Redfern looked at him thoughtfully. "Been keeping an eye on things, haven't you? Well, yes, I was. But how was I to know? The Fnits ignored me; I walked into a building; it turned out to be the wrong building. Next thing I knew, I was on the mountainside."

"But nevertheless," General Glick cut in ponderously, "you were there, my boy. Were you not?"

"I was."

"And you can go there again?"

"I can. I won't."

The general looked helplessly at Di Candia, who said smoothly: "Not even for transportation off Capella XII? Not even if the alternative is going back to the stocks?"

Redfern looked unbelievingly at Di Candia. "What the devil do you want with the Glow's harem? Take it from me, you wouldn't be interested!"

"That," said Di Candia, "is our problem. You take us there; we do the rest."

Several hours later, the party was toiling toward the Fnit city. The general was in the lead, puffingly reminiscing. "It was on just such a morning as this," he said to the party at large, "that I shot thirty and a half couple of snipe before breakfast on Glencouley. The wind was from the southeast, perhaps a touch east, and I looked like being high gun until—"

"Please, General," said Di Candia. "We'll attract attention." They were only fifty yards from the Fnit highway, across a rise; they could hear the clatter of unicycles streaming along it.

"Time for a break," said Cowper—almost his first words since Redfern had joined the party. Without discussion, Di Candia and the general stopped in their tracks and sat down.

Redfern leaned against a boulder and lit a cigarette, sweltering. Capella itself was a billion miles away, farther than Saturn from Sol, but it was hot under the fur hoods. All of them were thirty or forty pounds heavier because Capella XII's gravity was twenty per cent or so higher than Earth's; walking was hard work.

Redfern debated casting off the furry parka, but it was important to keep his face shielded as much as possible in case a Fnit should notice them and recognize the late prisoner of the pillory. Of course, with not more than a couple of dozen humans on the whole planet, it wouldn't be much of a feat to track him down, but the Fnits were strange—they didn't show much disposition toward method. They would be as likely as not to ignore the humans, unless they happened to see Redfern himself.

General Glick sighed heavily. "Lunch looks like being late," he mentioned, scowling with the effort of thought. "Could do with a bit of it, too."

"We'll eat when we get back to the ship," said Di Candia harshly. The general looked bleak and frustrated.

Redfern shut his mouth like a prudent man. His new em-

ployers were an odd lot, but, as they had pointed out, he was in no position to be choosy. He sighed and flipped his cigarette away. The Fnit planet had seemed like such a good idea, back on Earth. Newly discovered, virgin territory for commercial exploitation, it had looked like the perfect way to recoup fortunes for a man with a spaceship and no ties.

No doubt the, ah, syndicate had felt much the same; but Redfern could predict no glowing future for them. His own experience was distinctly negative. First the months and months of trying to get the Fnits to pay attention to him; then the unfortunate incident when they did.

Of course, he was a loner and these people numbered at least four. Perhaps they were better equipped; certainly they appeared to be better financed.

Their ship proved that, when they got to it. It was a monster, for a private vessel, thrice the size of Redfern's ancient blowtorch. It had the look of a Navy rocket, outmoded and sold to civilians with political pull. But even with pull, the Navy's castoffs don't come cheap, and the fuel bill for any rocket capable of carting tons of payload around space is a big item in anybody's budget book.

Redfern's practiced eye took in the ship's fittings—Golightly converter for faster-than-light flight, self-contained atmosphere regenerator, even that unqualified luxury, a radio communications set, utterly useless except when within orbiting range of an inhabited planet because of the torpor of radio-wave speed. In the ledger of his mind, the total was astonishing.

The fifth member of the party, the Miss Garney, joined them at the ship. She was, by Redfern's estimate, the most utterly gorgeous piece of femininity a gracious Maker ever put on a planet. She came into the ship's lock like Aphrodite emerging from the waves, and Redfern's adrenals buckled down to heavy-duty pumping.

She said meekly, "Things are coming along. My Fnit contact—"

"Miss Garney!" thundered Di Candia. He looked meaningfully at Redfern and said, "Step into the pilot-chamber with

me and report. I don't want to have to caution you about security again."

Redfern stared after them. It was a moment before he noticed that his fists were clenched and his whole body in a position of combat.

He looked dazedly at young Cowper and the general. Cowper was playing an intricate form of six-deck solitaire and the general was relaxed in a plush armchair, holding a brandy-and-splash, obviously dreaming of keepered moors and screamers against a rainy wind. Were they men or mice, Redfern demanded furiously of himself, that they could stand silent while a crude, rude oaf like Di Candia browbeat so lovely a thing as Miss Garney?

And what was she doing along on a job like this, anyway? Back on Earth was where she belonged, with Titans of industry and the crowned heads of South America fighting to drink champagne from her slipper; back on the TV screens of the world, or the front pages of the newspapers. Not in an out-of-the-way planet of a Godforsaken star, where the entire human population could nearly be counted on the fingers and toes and the non-human population had no eye for mammalian beauty.

Put a name to it: Redfern was, just like that, in love.

He felt like a fool in the false Santa Claus beard, but Miss Garney had insisted on it.

"According to my Fnit contact," she said in a voice like the chiming of mellow gongs, "they think of you as Warm Blood with Freckles. They'll *never* think of spotting you under a false beard, particularly if we dye your hair."

Redfern was less positive, but if Miss Garney wanted it that way, that was the way it would be. Besides, it meant just the two of them going into the Fnit city alone—except, of course, for the Fnits, which hardly counted as competition.

They took the long serpentine tunnel down into the Fnit city, lit with pale greenish fire from the rock ceiling, and walked unnoticed through the scurrying Fnits.

If you've seen one Fnit, you've seen them all: insect-

legged, human-sized, heads like moldy skulls. They could learn to speak English, in a way—a few of them had, when the first exploring spacer roared down. But few of them bothered, and no human had ever learned to speak Fnit. The Fnits didn't bother about their human and other extrastellar visitors at all, as a matter of fact. Live and let live was their motto—until one of their uninvited guests crossed the sharp and invisible line of taboo. Then they crossed out the "let live" part of the motto and began gathering faggots.

Redfern, remembering, loosened his collar. "Let's get this over with," he whispered to Miss Garney.

"They don't understand you," she said conversationally, with a mellow, sympathetic smile. "Don't worry. Where did you say the harem was?"

Redfern said rebelliously: "That's your word, not mine. All I know is that it belongs to the chief, what they call the Glow of All the Fnits, and they grabbed me when I walked in."

"It's the harem," Miss Garney said sunnily. "Trust my—contact for that."

"How did you make a contact?" Redfern demanded. "Heaven knows, I tried for a year and no go."

"Oh, that was Sir Vivian's work."

"Sir Vivian?"

"Major-General Sir Vivian Mowgli-Glick. You wouldn't think it to look at him, but he's quite an expert at making contact with, well, native races. Learned it in India."

Redfern stared at her. He had been in India; in Cawnpore, where the steel mills belched smoke and fire day and night; in Madras, where the big TV studios provided entertainment for the whole world; on the Bengali coast, where the casinos attracted the idle rich of the whole Solar System.

"In India?" he asked.

"Some time ago," she explained. "The general is older than he appears."

"He'd have to be." That was one of the troubles with life these days, Redfern grumbled to himself. Six months in the

rejuvenating clinic and an octogenarian came out as young-looking as he liked.

Naturally, the biochemists were careful to call it a "cosmetic change," for they didn't really make a man younger. They only restored the elasticity of the skin with hormone injections, shored up the crumbling bone structure with chelate ion-exchange, then patched up worn organs and spruced up useful ones, drained the accumulated poisons from the brain and nervous system, generally tightened up the loose neuronic connections and refurbished ancient joints. Of course, age left its marks. A man of 200 could never be the man he'd been at 150, but—"cosmetic change!"

It was like jacking up the rotor-cap on a senile Model-J copter and rolling a 2088 Super-Jetmaster underneath it.

Figure it out: It was late Nineteenth Century or so when anyone could call the Indians a "native race," which meant that the general must have been nearly a hundred when the rejuvenation clinics opened up. Which would make him—

"Older than hell," growled Redfern. He himself was a good fifty years from his first rejuvenation, which accounted for some of his prejudices. Like most juniors, he rather resented the clinics. Without them, the world wouldn't be bulging as precariously as it was, the drive into interstellar space wouldn't be as urgent . . . and people like Redfern wouldn't find themselves pilloried by black-shelled monsters like the Fnits.

Miss Garney was explaining: "—brought along a stock of beads and baubles and so on. Trade goods, you know. But Sir Vivian found out something that's been very useful, Mr. Redfern. Sugar. The Fnits are fond of it. Oh, not to eat, of course—I suppose it would poison them or turn them green or something. But they make a sticky syrup and cement the cracks in their shells. They never get wet, so—"

"There it is," hissed Redfern, jerking his chin at a sphincter-shaped doorway. "That's where they grabbed me. The harem!"

"Oh!" she squealed. "Lovely. It's just lovely, Mr. Redfern!"

To Redfern, it looked like any other Fnit dwelling, only

bigger. The honeycombed rock passages of the Fnit city were not constructed for sweeping views. One entrance looked much like any other entrance, apart from minor differences in design. The essential difference in design between this and any other was the lounging pair of Fnits at the entrance; to Redfern, the last time he had come this way, it had seemed they might be doormen to a public building. It had taken only a few seconds to find out they were guards.

Miss Garney was making careful notes in a little book. "—three, four, five, sixth entrance down from that public drink fountain or whatever it is," she counted. "Sort of hexagonal sign over the entrance. Good." She closed the notebook and smiled meltingly at her escort. "The general won't have much trouble locating it. Now we've got a couple of hours to kill. Would you like to look around the town?"

Something was bothering Redfern. "Why would the general want to locate it?" he asked uneasily.

"Oh, I don't know." Miss Garney looked charmingly vague. "Something about trade relations—he really doesn't tell me much. Oh, Mr. Redfern, what a charming sight! Let's go look at it!"

The "charming view" was the Fnit equivalent of a kiddies' swimming pool, a sort of dusty sandbox, where soft-shelled little Fnits, just past the larval stage, rolled around and threw dust in the air and chattered to each other. But Redfern wasn't bored; he had a charming sight of his own to look at.

While Miss Garney was touring the Fnit city, Redfern was admiring the lovely way her head sat on her neck, and the remarkable grace with which her supple fingers scratched the end of her thin, lovely nose. He thought dazedly of his library of pinups, the telestars and S-girls, back in the ship; but they blurred and grayed in his memory in comparison with Miss Garney. He didn't even know her first name! But his adrenals whispered it to his central nervous system and his pounding heart agreed it was true: "She's beautiful!"

By the time they got back to the ship, Redfern was hinting broadly about cottages and wedding rings. But he stopped short as they approached the ship.

"Good Lord," he said, turning white. "They've found out where I am!"

The base of the ship was ringed with Fnits, a dozen of them, chittering violently at each other.

Miss Garney patted his arm. "Don't worry," she soothed. "It's time for their handout. The general usually takes care of it. It gives him pleasure."

And that was what it was, because as they drew near, the baselock opened and General Sir Vivian Mowgli-Glick stood beaming in the hatch, a carton in one hand. "Here, sir!" he commanded, and tossed little white envelopes of sugar at the Fnits. "Yours, sir. No, no, you with the red collar—you've had your share, I say!"

Redfern and the girl pushed their way through the Fnits into the ship. The general, with one last scattering toss of sugar, followed.

"Dirty little beggars," he said with satisfaction. "Reminds me of the Dogras in Srinagar. It was the Fifty-third Rifles at the time and we'd just come up from the Vale. Bless me, I was only—"

"Shut up," said Cowper from behind his everlasting solitaire. "Did you find the place, Miss Garney?"

The girl nodded. "Mr. Redfern was most helpful." She smiled at Redfern.

"All right," said Cowper, and slammed the cards down on the table. "Let's go. Glick, Di Candia—you come with me. Garney, entertain our associate here. We won't be long."

And they left. Redfern looked warily at the girl.

"Well," she said brightly, "would you like a cup of tea?"

Redfern cleared his throat. "Uh, how long will they, well, be gone?" he asked. "I mean—"

She laughed. "I know what you mean. Have some tea." She opened the galley and expertly drew hot water into a pot. "The general's idea," she said over her shoulder. "He cannot abide instant tea; he insists on tea leaves and a pot. It makes quite a spectacle in free-fall."

It was at least half an hour, Redfern was thinking, to the Fnit city, and half an hour back. So, assume they would take

at least half an hour in the city to do whatever they were going to do, that meant ninety minutes. He glanced at the girl thoughtfully, estimating her powers of resistance. Of course, that was always assuming they were really going to the Fnit city; but it had to be that—

Miss Garney said: "You rocket jockeys, you're all alike." She picked up the pot of scalding water meaningfully and marched to the table. "Tea," she said in a voice of command, shoving Cowper's solitaire cards out of the way.

Redfern scratched his ear and sat at the table. It wasn't the first time he had made a faulty first approach to a landing and had to abort and come in again.

The girl peeked under the lid of the teapot, nodded, and poured. "Now," she said firmly, "we'll have a pleasant chat, won't we? How did you happen to be on Capella Twelve, Mr. Redfern?"

He slid his chair around closer to her. "Well, it's like anything else. Dad ran a fleet of charter ships—all rockets, you know, just local stuff. Then the Golightly drive came along and nobody wanted a ship that couldn't make it past Saturn. Dad went to the bank and got the money to refit the ships, but the bank was smarter than he was and they wound up with the ships, all but one. So we heard about the big opportunities out around here and I came out to look for them. I'm still looking. Did anyone tell you that your eyes are the exact color of—"

"That's very interesting," she said, moving away. "And your family is still on Earth?"

"Oh, I never had any family," said Redfern, absent-mindedly moving closer to the sugar, which was in front of Miss Garney. "Just Dad, I mean. No wife or anything like that. But I've always looked forward to settling down and—"

"You'll make me spill my tea," said Miss Garney. "Now why don't you just have a piece of cake? We've got plenty of time for a nice—I mean I don't know exactly when they *will* be back, it might be any minute, but why don't we just chat?"

She patted her hair back into place, looking hunted. "It's

been a most interesting trip," she said vivaciously. "Really, I had no idea space was so interesting. When Sir Vivian approached me, I mean, I had the idea that it would be just a long, dull thing, but actually it's been terribly interesting."

She made a grab for her bag. "Cigarette?" she asked in a bright tone, lighting one and holding it like a gun between her and Redfern.

Redfern sighed. "Thanks," he said, lighting one for himself. After all, a cigarette only burned for, he calculated, maybe nine minutes. He sat back and remarked conversationally: "So this was Sir Vivian's idea, coming here?"

"Oh, yes—his and Mr. Cowper's and Major Di Candia's. So we formed a syndicate. They had the know-how and the actual experience. Major Di Candia was in business on Iapetus for ever so long. And, well, I had the money." She dimpled charmingly. "Mummy's third husband was ever so wealthy, you see. So here we are."

Redfern stubbed out his cigarette and hitched his chair closer.

Two hours later they heard a clamor outside. "Thank heaven!" said Miss Garney, putting down the carving knife.

She opened the lock. Cowper and Di Candia and the general scrambled in, dragging a chittering, protesting Fnit on a rope.

"Close the port!" bellowed Di Candia, and did it himself without waiting for anyone else to make a move. He leaned against it, breathing hard. "Well!" he said, staring at Miss Garney. "I thought *we* had a rough time, but *you* look like the tag end of a battle royal."

Redfern cleared his throat, but Miss Garney cut in. "Boys will be boys," she elucidated. "What happened? How did it work?"

"Oh, splendid, splendid!" said General Glick happily. "There's a complete change of plan, dear girl. The most fabulous bit of luck, really! We—"

"Save your maundering for a little later," snapped Cowper,

tying the squirming Fnit to a hull brace. "Let's get out of here."

"Oh, right," said the general agreeably, and Di Candia snapped a salute and sat before the control board.

He kicked the ship off the ground, balancing it on its tail, drove it staggeringly off for one minute to what Redfern guessed to be north, then delicately set it down again. Di Candia had a radar screen to navigate by; the rest of those in the ship had nothing. But Redfern had the notion they'd gone not more than a mile from the previous landing site. It was a masterly job of piloting and Redfern looked at Di Candia with wonder in his eyes. But even so, the captive Fnit passed out cold.

Miss Garney made sympathetic noises and knelt beside the insectoid creature. "Leave him alone," Cowper ordered. "He's less trouble that way. Come in here a moment; I want to bring you up to date."

She nodded obediently and left Redfern with the general, the major and the Fnit. If he had had to choose among them for a companion, he thought morosely, it would have been a close decision, but he would have given it to the Fnit.

The general took the opportunity to gloat: "A masterly rear-guard action, Mr. Redfern! Indeed, Rommel's *Afrika Korps* had nothing to teach us. A quick pounce and we secure our captive; a beautiful disengage and we're on our way to the ship, with the little roaches chasing after us and the schooner in sight, what? And once aboard the schooner and—"

Redfern said: "What the devil are you up to? Kidnaping? Don't you realize the State Department will have your hide for it?"

General Glick actually put one finger alongside his nose. "Perhaps there is more to it than meets the eye, Mr. Redfern."

"There better be," snarled Redfern. He was just beginning to get upset; things had moved too quickly for him to react as fast as they occurred. "You idiots think you can move in on a planet and throw your weight around without knowing

a thing about what makes the inhabitants tick. Look at the Fnit! See the golden bands on his foreleg? That means it's royalty—*high* royalty! There are four bands on that one, and even the king, the one they call the Glow, only has five! Why, they'll rip you limb from limb if they catch you!"

The general chuckled ponderously. Redfern, disgusted, had stamped over to the viewport and looked out. It was nearly dark. That was the only good thing, he told himself; the Fnits wouldn't come out at night even to rescue royalty. But after the darkness would follow the dawn; and when the dawn came . . .

He rubbed his neck unconsciously, feeling a sudden pain where the neck-clamps had been. If they were considerate enough merely to pillory and burn us, he thought.

But, he decided, it was not hopeless. The Fnits would undoubtedly be out for blood. But the humans were in the ship and the ship was in shape for flight. Nothing could stop them —if things got as rough as they surely would—from pushing their Fnit captive out of the lock and taking off for calmer worlds. He winced at the thought of abandoning his own ship, but maybe someday, when things cooled down, he could come back for it. Or, better, send someone for it. At any rate, they could surely get away with their lives, as long as they stayed in the ship.

Cowper and the girl came back from the private sections of the ship. "All right," Cowper said to Di Candia and General Glick. "We're set." And he put a hand to the baselock door.

"Hey!" yelped Redfern in dismay, as the other three men tramped out. "They'll tear you to pieces! Where the devil do you think you're going?"

Cowper looked at him coldly. "To the Fnit city, of course," he said, and closed the door behind him.

Miss Garney said waspishly, "Now, Redfern, none of those tricks again!"

"Don't worry!" he snapped. "I've got other things on my mind. Do you know what the Fnits will do to those men? Good Lord, woman, you can't get away with kidnaping!

Even if we escape alive, we can't go home—we'd spend the rest of our lives in jail for molesting natives!"

"Oh, I think not," Miss Garney said lightly. "Mr. Redfern, you worry too much."

"But kidnaping—"

"Now, please," she said maternally, "we don't tell you how to run your business, so why should you tell us how to run ours? I don't deny that Sir Vivian had something like kidnaping in mind originally. But, as you say, it does have its illegal aspect and as things turned out, this is much better."

"Better how?"

Miss Garney hesitated, then looked conspiratorial. "Mr. Cowper would be furious, but— Well, you see, we may not have spent a year studying the Fnits as you did, but we did manage to make a few friends. And we discovered that the Glow was about to be married and Sir Vivian saw the possibilities in it at once. Why should we not, he said, get the Glow's bride aboard our ship? We could then negotiate with the Glow. We want trade privileges; he wants his wife. A simple exchange." She beamed. "Wasn't it clever of Sir Vivian?"

Redfern gasped: "You mean that this Fnit is—"

"Oh, no," she said reassuringly. "Not at all. It was the most wonderful bit of luck. Our Fnit contact gave us an excellent picture of the Glow's bride and of course, thanks to you, we knew where the harem was. So they all went in to get her and—" Miss Garney blushed prettily—"Mr. Cowper said they found her all right, and she was in the most *compromising* situation. With this one right here! Imagine, Mr. Redfern! Practically a queen, on the very eve of her marriage to the Glow, and she allows herself to have a common, vulgar—"

"Wait a minute," Redfern begged hoarsely. "What was the bit of luck?"

"Why, you can see that, can't you, Mr. Redfern? Sir Vivian is going to see the Glow, to tell him that we broke up this affair and have the fellow here, for him to do with as he will; and surely the Fnit's gratitude will—"

Redfern had to swallow. He couldn't speak, but he made

a violent gesture and Miss Garney stopped, staring at him. At last he got it out in a horrified voice: "Miss Garney, didn't your contact tell you that the Fnits have *three sexes?*"

It took her a moment to get her breath. "You mean," she gasped, "They were all three of them going to— Why, the dirty little creatures! Good heavens, Mr. Redfern, if I had known it was going to be anything like this, I certainly would never have—"

"Shut up! Let me think!" He stared at the captive Fnit, now conscious again and staring unreadably back at him out of faceted eyes. Even the general's original half-witted plan wouldn't work now, he realized; they had a fine Fnit captive for trading purposes—but the Fnits had the general, the major and Mr. Cowper.

"We'll just have to bluff it out," he said at last. "The question is, do you want to come with me or stay here?"

"Come with you where?"

"Into the Fnit city. Your friends will be just about ready for a barbecue by now; if somebody doesn't get in there on the double, it'll be too late."

Miss Garney said hastily: "Oh, I'm coming with you! You certainly wouldn't dream of leaving me here with *that,* would you?"

Redfern felt wistful. Staying with a single Fnit seemed so close to Paradise in his eyes, compared with invading a hostile city full of them. But there wasn't any choice. They bound the captive more securely, Miss Garney found weapons for them, and they left.

It was all but dark, and distant Capella made reddish shadows all along the route to the city. At any rate, Redfern knew where the city was. It wouldn't be more than an hour's tramp to get there; in fact, they would pass almost beside his own rocket, where he had left it—so miserably long before!—in his ill-fated expedition that had wound up with him in the stocks, ready for burning.

Maybe, he thought, they would be able to stop off at his own ship. It wasn't a patch on the "syndicate's" ship—ancient rocket tube with auxiliaries, against the trim, compact Go-

lightly drive that Miss Garney's money had bought; a single compartment instead of the plush fittings of the bigger ship. But it was his own. And if he boarded it, there was nothing to stop him from taking off, possibly with Miss Garney, and leaving the idiotic male members of the syndicate to the fate they had richly earned—nothing, that is, but his conscience.

But he didn't have to argue with his conscience. The red-tinged shadows were scary but empty—all except one. And that one held a dozen armed, twittering Fnits; and they were all over Redfern and the girl in the twinkling of an eye; and when the "rescue party" reached the Fnit city, it was in a cocoon of chains.

They were sweating profusely by the time they got to the Chamber of the Glow—only partly because of the muggy damp warmth of the Fnit cities.

If Redfern and the girl were in a cocoon of chains, the major, the general and Mr. Cowper were entombed. They were in a row before a sort of balcony hanging from the rock wall and in the balcony was the Glow of All the Fnits. Looking at him, Redfern knew for the first time why he had that title. He actually glowed. There was a faint radiance all about him—radioactivity? More likely some chemical effect—bioluminescence, like the greenish light of a glowworm. Only this was pure white.

There was a Fnit translator below him, looking threateningly at the newcomers. "Why, Walter," exclaimed Miss Garney. "I didn't know you were connected with the—"

"Silence!" chittered the Fnit. "It is not possible for you to speak before the Glow!"

"Not possible? Why, Walter, after all the sugar I've given you!" Three Fnits advanced on her. She stopped scolding the translator and only shook her head ruefully. "These Fnits," she said disapprovingly.

The Glow began to speak, and the sound was like the magnified voice of crickets in a summer night. He paused and the interpreter Miss Garney had named Walter said:

"You are to die for abducting the para-wife of the Glow.

Is it of interest to you what the manner of your death may be?"

"Oh, very much," piped up General Glick, wriggling in his chain-mail mummy shroud. "You aborigines are always terribly clever about that sort of thing, aren't you? Why, once we lost a subaltern to the Pathans and when they returned his body, it was—"

"Silence!" twittered the Fnit again. "Hear your death. It is fit that you should serve the One you abducted. Since she is a para-female, a receiver of eggs, you shall receive the grubs from her eggs, until they hatch."

Redfern, with horrid recollections of bloated beetles bearing the young of digger wasps on Earth, croaked: "Wait a minute! Let's talk business. You can't kill us; you'd never find the—the para-wife, or whatever you call her."

Colloquy between the translator and the Glow; the translator broke into English to say: "It is not so, we correct you. We know the para-female is in the great ship, and we know that you walked from the great ship to here, and thus it must be near. We have only to look for her."

"But it's night!" cried Redfern. "You know how we Earthmen are—we go about in the night and when it's cold and all the time. Why, our ships are as cold as the air outside at night; she'll freeze. It won't do you any good to find her if she freezes, will it?"

His comment caused a frenzy of chirping. It disturbed the Glow; he rose on all eight legs and rasped horrendously at the captives. The translator said:

"You have spoken the truth. If the para-female is exposed to the night air, she will perish. Therefore we shall kill you immediately."

"Hold it!" Redfern yelled as the Glow twittered at the Fnit guards. "Don't you want to save her?"

"It is impossible," the translator explained. "You have said that she will freeze, and it will do us no good to find her when she is frozen. We cannot go out to rescue her, and if we could, she would not survive the trip back to the city." He made a motion with his mandibles, the Fnit equivalent of a

philosophical shrug. "It would have been more useful to have you receive the grubs," he said regretfully, "but without the para-female, that is impossible, too, and so—" He beckoned meaningfully to the guards.

"But we can save her!"

The interpreter asked curiously, "How?"

"We can heat our ship if we wish, you know. Just allow us to go back to the ship and we'll warm it up. In the morning, you can come and get her."

The translator made the equivalent of a nod. "Very interesting," he said. "No."

"But why?" Redfern demanded.

"The Glow in his wisdom sees that you will escape. It is better that the para-female should die than that you should escape. There are other para-females."

"We promise we won't escape," Redfern said. "We—"

He stopped short, mouth open.

"Well?" asked the Fnit after a moment.

Redfern swallowed. "May I—may I talk to the Glow for a moment? Alone?"

"It is not possible," said the translator. "The Glow does not speak English, you see, so that if you—"

"I mean alone except for you. Without the other humans."

Miss Garney warned: "Mr. Redfern, I certainly hope you aren't trying to sell us out."

Redfern didn't have to answer that, because the Glow rose majestically on all of his legs and twittered in a commanding tone. The Fnit guards picked up Miss Garney and the men and bore them, chains clanking, outside.

The translator said: "You may speak."

It had been a lie, of course; the ship's heaters kept it well above the temperature of the ambient air. But Redfern was shivering by the time he got there and he turned them up a notch.

The Fnit para-female chittered furiously at him. He said: "Don't worry about a thing. The old man will be here in the morning."

He shucked the parka and gloves and stared moodily at the control board. Nothing could stop him from kicking the Fnit out of the baselock, warming up the Golightly drive and lifting gently off the surface of Capella XII in a gentle cat's-cradle of magnetic force lines. Less than three weeks and he'd be home . . .

He sighed and contemplated without much confidence the gullibility of the Fnits. If only Miss Garney, ethereal and adorable Miss Garney, were here with him! But the Glow had refused to let anyone else come along to "rescue" the Fnit para-female; he wanted the others as hostages.

Redfern stretched out on the padded navigator's couch. He was so keyed up, he realized dismally, that it would be impossible for him to get to sleep; he would no doubt spend the whole long Capellan night worrying and brooding and . . .

He woke up with the clatter of insectoid feet in the baselock scratching at his eardrums. A Fnit face peered curiously into the ship, disappeared, and was replaced by the whitely gleaming face of the Glow himself. The Glow sprang to the side of his para-bride, and there was a mad chittering and clattering of fondly caressing arthropod limbs as the lovers were reunited.

Redfern breathed again. Behind the Glow were other Fnits, and with them were the general, the major, Mr. Cowper—and last, and emphatically complaining, Miss Garney. The Fnit Glow had kept his word. Redfern began to feel slightly happier as he stood up and rustily began to walk toward the newcomers.

"—know that I am absolutely *no* good in the morning without my tea," Miss Garney was telling everyone within earshot. "And still they drag me, utterly *drag* me, here, without even a decent word!" She caught sight of Redfern and her tone from hot rage became ice. "Ah! Your little scheme didn't work, eh? Couldn't manipulate the Golightly controls, is that it? So you were not able to make your escape at our expense after all, were you?"

Redfern had incredulously opened his mouth to answer and

then remembered the Fnits. He turned to the translator. "Everything all right?"

The translator said: "It so appears. You are sure you do not wish to change your mind? There will be many grubs and this para-female is small . . ."

"Thanks, no. Let's get on with it."

The translator said philosophically: "Then let it be as you request. Come, the Glow will accompany us to watch the spectacle of your burning."

"Burning?" cried Miss Garney. "But I thought—they've got the Fnit back—I mean—"

"Burning," said the translator. "Let us go to the pyre."

Redfern led the way, well out of range of Miss Garney's complaining voice. Beside him, the translator twittered unendingly, but Redfern was hardly listening. They came to the cleft in the hills where his own old rocket was nestled on its tail-pads and he scrambled aboard, the translator following awkwardly.

It was like being home again. He touched the walls and battered control panel lovingly. He ran his fingers over the jet keys and patted the familiar navigational books in the lockshelf over the controls. There was the gray cover of *Hypertrails,* giving course settings for every star; the *Rocket Engineer's Handbook;* the *Digest of Interstellar Law; Higgins' Astronauts' Companion.*

He took down the gold-embossed volume of Higgins sentimentally and let it fall open. There were the remembered pin-ups, just as he had last seen them—full-color stereoscopic views of the most delectable beauties of the Solar System. How wise of the Astrogational Board to make Higgins required equipment for solitary navigators! And yet how these great beauties palled into insignificance, Redfern thought fondly, compared with the flesh-and-blood loveliness of—

He swallowed and took a closer look at the pinups, just as the rest of the party came panting and arguing into the airlock. He glanced up at Miss Garney and unbelievingly again at the pinups.

Something was wrong somewhere, he thought in horror. It

didn't occur to Redfern that he had been fifteen months in space and that even the Wicked Witch of the North would have looked attractive to his woman-starved eyes. He had forgotten how much more attractive the soft, supple flesh of youth might be than the set, determined lines of Miss Garney's face.

All he knew was that here were the pinups, and here was Miss Garney, and somehow he had made a terrible mistake.

The translator was chittering: "It is complete. You will now combust yourselves according to our pact."

Redfern ignored the yelps from the rest of the human party. "All right, let's get at it."

"One moment," chirped the Fnit. "The Glow has asked that I remind you of your undertakings. Firstly, you have stated that it would be inconvenient to you to die as we proposed—that is, with the grubs of the Glow's female in your flesh."

"Very inconvenient," Redfern agreed.

"And secondly, that you undertake to burn yourselves to death, complete with this structure in which we are presently talking."

"Right," said Redfern.

"It is strange to the Glow that this metal should burn. He does not doubt your word, but he must protect himself. You have promised to go up in flame for him, and if you do not do so, there will be steps taken."

"Oh, we'll go up in flame, all right," promised Redfern.

"But," insisted the translator, "if you do not, then, thirdly, the Glow reminds you that there are twenty-six other humans on the planet. If you should cheat our justice, it is they who will receive the grubs in your place. All of them. Now you may proceed." And the Fnit clambered backward out of the lock.

Redfern slammed the lock and dogged it. General Glick protested: "See here, this ship won't burn, sir! If you think we will be a party to—"

"Drop dead," said Redfern moodily. "But strap yourselves in first." He didn't even look over his shoulder to see if they

had done so. Let them get banged around a bit, he thought savagely, and put his fingers on the main-drive rocket controls.

There was a cough and a roar and a rumbling scream, and every movable object in the cabin shook and slid about as they drove up from the surface of Capella XII.

Forty minutes later, they were orbiting around the planet and Redfern began coaxing his ancient auxiliaries to ease them into hyperspace for the long trip home.

The four others in the cramped cabin rubbed their bruises and screamed at him, singly and in chorus. Redfern gave them the silence of his back.

General Glick's bass roar, rumbling under the voices of the others, was raging: "—most disgraceful conduct I have ever observed in my life, sir! Didn't you hear what the Fnit said? Our fellow human beings! Betrayed! Left to perish most foully! What will they say at the Club? For make no mistake, sir, this will be found out. Massacred, every human being on Capella XII, to save your craven skin! And then we flee like cowardly babes in this rattletrap, when our own ship is thrice as big and faster and—"

"Don't even talk to him, Sir Vivian," Miss Garney advised coldly. "He isn't worth it."

"Eh," said the general after a pause. "I suppose you're right. But just to think," he went on morosely, from his hammock, "that *my* name, the name of General Sir Vivian Mowgli-Glick, should be linked with a pusillanimous, chicken-hearted, black deed like that!"

Mr. Cowper said: "Newborns, General. What can you expect?"

"I suppose that's it," the general agreed moodily. "Takes time to develop a real code, what? Let him live a half dozen lives or so, like you and me and Miss—"

"General!" cried the girl.

"Oh, sorry," mumbled the general. They went on like that and Redfern, doggedly busy with his auxiliaries, smiled coldly to himself. So she was as ancient as the general, was she? Thank heaven, he told himself virtuously, that he had known

from the first she wasn't worth pursuing. The impudent nerve of these zombies! Taking up space that later generations deserved to have—and blaspheming him for saving the lives they had no right to!

There was a *clunk* and the wavering lines of force came into phase. The stars winked out in the viewplate and they were in featureless hyperspace.

Redfern sighed, and set course, and turned to face his guests.

"We're on our way," he told them. "Now do you want to listen to what I have to say?"

"No!" said the general, the major and Mr. Cowper. What Miss Garney said was: "Beast!"

"Suit yourself," Redfern told them. "But you're on my ship and I'll thank you to mind your manners."

"On your ship, are we?" shrieked Miss Garney. "And whose fault is that, I'd like to know? Why couldn't we have taken our own ship—I mean assuming we were going to leave the other Earthmen to that horrible death?"

Redfern said, with the last bit of his patience: "We couldn't take your ship because I didn't want to leave the others to a horrible death."

At least he had their interest. They glared at him and Major Di Candia said: "Do you suppose the fellow means anything by that?"

"Of course not!" said Miss Garney. "It's only a cheap lie to make us forgive him—not that we ever will."

"Ah, why do I waste my time talking to you?" Redfern asked disgustedly. "Look, what kind of drive did your ship have?"

"Full Golightly," Miss Garney said proudly. "Magnetic warp throughout, even for planetside landings. It cost nearly—"

"Never mind what it cost." Redfern rapped the hull of his own ship. "This one's a rocket. Now do you see the difference?"

"Certainly I see the difference," snapped Miss Garney. "It will take us twice as long to get home—to say nothing of the

fact that the five of us will be huddled in this little rathole of a cabin the whole way!"

"No," said Redfern. "The difference is that yours was *not* a rocket. I arranged with the Glow for us to incinerate ourselves, as you perhaps heard the Fnit translator say. It was the only thing we could do; would you have preferred to take the place of the Fnit para-female you so cleverly kidnaped—" they didn't even have the grace to blush, he saw unbelievingly—"and have baby Fnits hatching in your bodies? Maybe you would, but I wouldn't."

"But the Earthmen, sir!" snapped Sir Vivian. "You've betrayed them!"

Redfern sighed. "I promised the Glow he could watch us go up in flame. And what did he see?"

"Why—he saw us escaping."

"No!" said Redfern. "He saw the wash of flame from our rockets. He's just a Fnit, remember, and they've never seen a rocket land—mine is the only one on the whole planet and I landed at night, when the Fnits are tucked away. So he saw us go up in flame—literally! We're burned up—as far as they know. The Glow is satisfied. The humans are safe. We're on our way home. And now—" he added—"if you will kindly form a single line and pucker up, ladies first, I shall extend my left foot."

They might not be bright, he thought to himself admiringly, but they certainly were good and stubborn. It was nearly an hour before they all got it straight that the remaining Earthmen on Capella XII would *not* be massacred, and they themselves were safe enough, and somebody could even go back and pick up their ship, sooner or later, so that all they had lost was their time. And then each one of them manfully apologized.

"Good show, really," burbled the general, the last to get the thing straight in his mind. He dragged his hammock closer to Redfern's. "Brilliant," he went on, tying the rope-end into position for a nice, comfortable chat. "Made it look like a blasted suttee, what? I've not seen the like of it since

the old days in India. Reminds me of a time in Hyderabad—'86, it must have been."

"Excuse me," Redfern interrupted. "Got to check the auxiliaries." It looked as if it was going to be a long voyage, he thought drearily, staring at the perfectly automatic controls of the auxiliaries and wishing his father had got enough money from the bank for a larger ship.

"Mr. Redfern?"

He turned with a start. The voice was meltingly sweet; Miss Garney was smiling dewily.

"Dear boy," she said, "I—I just wanted to say that you were perfectly *splendid.* I do hope you'll forgive us for the terrible way we acted. And," she added archly, "I certainly hope you won't pay too much attention to—well, what Sir Vivian said. You know, about—uh—age."

"Of course not," Redfern said glassily, watching her as a bird might watch a python.

She reached daintily across him to pick up the volume of Higgins. She glanced at it, tittered, and looked coyly at Redfern.

"Naughty," she reproved and, before he could stop her, dropped the book of pinups into the disposal chute. "You won't need these, dear boy. We'll be together for a good long time, won't we? And, really, don't you think that it never hurts if a woman is just the *teensiest* bit older? Especially for a man as *experienced* as you?"

Fifty-six days, he calculated, staring at the chugging auxiliaries. Fifty-six days with the general, the major, Mr. Cowper . . . and Miss Garney.

It was going to be a *very* long voyage.

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