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THE WORLD THAT COULDN'T

and 8 other provocative, challenging science-fiction novelets

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selected by H. L. Gold editor of Galaxy Magazine

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Edited by H. L. GOLD

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and 8 other novelets from GALAXY

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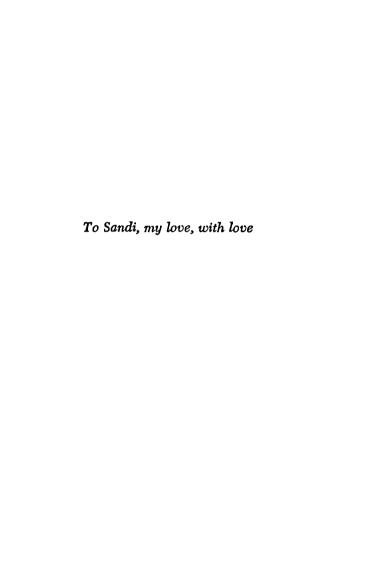
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INTRODUCTION

How do you know you can't write science fiction?

You DON'T HAVE to take the above paraphrase of a well-known ad *literarily*, of course, but the odds are, if you met anybody represented in this book, you would almost inevitably ask: "Where do you get those ideas?"

One noted author answers this commonest of readers' questions with shattering candor. "I steal them," he invariably says.

He does; so do we all. A truly original idea, whether in science or science fiction or anything else, is so rare as to be genuinely unintelligible. So we perforce work over and over the familiar ideas, searching always for causes and consequences that have not been explored.

If this sounds profitless, you don't know ideas and what can be done with them. Evidence suggests that Neanderthal man may very well have invented the concept of religion, but have we, in all these tens of thousands of years, extracted all the possible meanings of divinity, the soul, faith, good and evil, free will, ordained fate, heaven, hell, nirvana? The idea of human society is at least as old, but the longer it exists, the more new questions it creates. And more than twenty centuries passed between the formulation of the first atomic theory and the dissolution of the first atomic bomb, but do you suppose all atomic questions will be answered twenty centuries from now? Just three ideas, you see, and the billions of words written on each, so far from closing the discussion, only open doors to still more billions of words.

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So of course we steal our ideas, but only in the sense that we do not originate them; and they belong to us all, for they are the common heritage of mankind.

"Where do you get those ideas?" is thus the least significant thing a reader can ask. It should be: "What do you do with ideas once you get them?" And the nine stories in this book are clear evidence that an intelligent, conscientious, highly skilled exploration of an idea is much more important than the idea's origin.

Space has long been a cosmic province occupied solely by science fiction, but with mankind now heaving pebbles into space, its nearest fringes are finally being inspected by others. We, naturally, have left our solar system far behind, and in doing so have found that every question we can think up spawns yet more answers, which in turn give birth to still more questions.

Take the space stories here as instances.

Only one stays within this system, and that deals with labhigh temperatures as an everyday fact of life on one kind of planet. Make things hot enough for people—and other forms of matter—and there are qualitative changes that challenge the liveliest imagination. In "Brightside Crossing" you'll see at least some of the changes wrought by the murderous heat of a star, our own sun, in the characters themselves and the ground they travel upon and the air they breathe and the equipment they must rely upon for their lives.

One kind of planet, the unthinkably hot, and there are as many kinds as there are sizes and compositions and distances from suns—and the number of suns—for multiple stars are no great rarity in this universe.

What sort of creatures will evolve in those environments? If there is any sure bet in space, it's that the life-forms we will find will resemble Earthly ones only by the most flamboyant of coincidences—and that there is room and to spare for such coincidences in even as small a galaxy as ours, with tens of millions of stars and hundreds of millions of planets. And, like almost all our speculations, that planetary estimate

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can be just about guaranteed to fall far short of the actual truth.

Three stories herein—"Once a Greech," "The World that Couldn't Be" and "An Eye for a What?"—take three totally different environments, and produce forms of life fitted to those environments with engineering precision.

Could they be? Of course. Will they be?

That's neither the responsibility nor the goal of science fiction. Our job is simply to speculate, skillfully and intelligently and dramatically and above all entertainingly, on any and every possibility we can fashion out of observable fact, theory, hypothesis, and outright guesses.

If we turn out to be right, we are willing to take the credit. Rightness is purely a by-product of speculation, when it does chance to happen. The speculative process is its own reward. And in case we get uppity about the sharpness of our foresight, we have but to scan the guesswork done by science fiction writers who came before us. To pick just one example out of many, 90% of all prescriptions filled today were unknown ten years ago—to see that the wildest guesses all had a single fault. They proved too conservative. So will ours, and the farther ahead we peer, the more timid our most strenuous vaultings will turn out to be.

One of the most commendable achievements of modern science fiction is the virtual embargo that has been placed on post-atomic-doom stories. Not that the things aren't getting written, and by the thousands, and all but exclusively by what often seems to be the entire science fiction readership; the theme has grown so stale through repetition that even Hollywood, infatuated though it is with mass horror, recognizes this one as box-office fallout.

But see what a bravura talent like Edgar Pangborn's does with the overworked radioactive clay and its barbarous survivors. "The Music Master of Babylon" is written by a word master of science fiction, and in his hands the theme is as fresh as if he had invented it.

H. G. Wells was the father of voluntary time travel, to be sure, but prophetic glimpses and accidental visits to the future

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and past are featured in biblical and legendary literature. Time travel remains a favorite science fiction exercise. But today's time travel obeys this editorial law: "All right, so you have a time machine. Now what?" There is no more need to justify the device than to show that rockets don't require air to push against; the convention is established. It's what happens at the destination that counts, and L. Sprague de Camp, paraphrasing Calvin Coolidge to read "The business of science fiction is business," examines the accounts in "A Gun for Dinosaur" and shows a handsome and exciting profit.

Putting themes on a paying basis is not an editorial law, but it is an excellent bill and ought to be passed. Until fairly recently, the journey or the discovery or the adventure was motive enough, but the romance of pioneering inevitably goes bankrupt after a while, and smart financing is called for. With mainstream literature finding only frustration and defeat in goals won, science fiction seems to be the one field in which the joyous success story is still possible.

Take a look at the motive behind "Mezzerow Loves Company." F. L. Wallace knows that a complex society is shored up instead of being made more vulnerable by its complexity. Bomb and burn an industrialized Nazi Germany and it produces substitute raw materials, emergency routes by road and water and air in which the cost factor still operates but against stoppage instead of cheaper methods and falls back upon successive and alternate and combined production lines, and when everything else has been knocked out, factories cannibalized from other factories go right on producing, clear up to the moment they are bodily invaded.

A pushover society is easier to plot with, of course, but, facts aside, how often can it be done and remain fresh? And why should the facts be kept aside? An agrarian government like Cuba's was hard enough to overthrow from within. It has never been done by force in any highly industrialized country!

I feel the same high impatience with the attitude that human beings are puny weaklings, when we actually belong to the 1% or less of Earth's inhabitants that qualify as giants,

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and, in no matter how primitive a state, prove ourselves the deadliest hunters.

Meanwhile, here is also a heroine—in the full heroic sense of the word—to delight our very large female audience and confound those who believe science fiction is a man's world, in the richly inventive and movingly written "A Woman's Place," and "One for the Books" is one, certainly, for this book, being a thoroughly unexpected and brightly handled treatment of ESP, a theme that is bidding unfairly to become post-atomic-doom's successor in wearying readers. If you think you have a psi story that needs writing, check with Matheson's first and see whether you can beat it.

For that matter, I have a good-sized check, payable to bearer, that says nobody in the house can exceed—or even equal—any of these stories. It's one bet I can't wait to lose.

-H. L. GOLD

THE WORLD THAT COULDN'T BE

T.

THE TRACES went up one row and down another, and in those rows the vua plants had been sheared off an inch or two above the ground. The raider had been methodical; it had not wandered about haphazardly, but had done an efficient job of harvesting the first ten rows on the west side of the field. Then, having eaten its fill, it had angled off into the bush—and that had not been long ago, for the soil still trickled down into the great pug marks, sunk deep into the finely cultivated loam.

Somewhere a sawmill bird was whirring through a log, and down in one of the thorn-choked ravines, a choir of chatterers was clicking through a ghastly morning song. It was going to be a scorcher of a day. Already the smell of desiccated dust was rising from the ground and the glare of the newly risen sun was dancing off the bright leaves of the hula-trees, making it appear as if the bush were filled with a million flashing mirrors.

Gavin Duncan hauled a red bandanna from his pocket and mopped his face.

"No, mister," pleaded Zikkara, the native foreman of the farm. "You cannot do it, mister. You do not hunt a Cytha."

"The hell I don't," said Duncan, but he spoke in English and not the native tongue.

He stared out across the bush, a flat expanse of sun-cured

grass interspersed with thickets of hula-scrub and thorn and occasional groves of trees, crisscrossed by treacherous ravines and spotted with infrequent water holes.

It would be murderous out there, he told himself, but it shouldn't take too long. The beast probably would lay up shortly after its pre-dawn feeding and he'd overhaul it in an hour or two. But if he failed to overhaul it, then he must keep on.

"Dangerous," Zikkara pointed out. "No one hunts the

Cytha."

"I do," Duncan said, speaking now in the native language.
"I hunt anything that damages my crop. A few nights more of this and there would be nothing left."

Jamming the bandanna back into his pocket, he tilted his

hat lower across his eyes against the sun.

"It might be a long chase, mister. It is the skun season now.

If you were caught out there . . . "

"Now listen," Duncan told it sharply. "Before I came, you'd feast one day, then starve for days on end; but now you eat each day. And you like the doctoring. Before, when you got sick, you died. Now you get sick, I doctor you, and you live. You like staying in one place, instead of wandering all around."

"Mister, we like all this," said Zikkara, "but we do not hunt the Cytha."

"If we do not hunt the Cytha, we lose all this," Duncan pointed out. "If I don't make a crop, I'm licked. I'll have to go away. Then what happens to you?"

"We will grow the corn ourselves."

"That's a laugh," said Duncan, "and you know it is. If I didn't kick your backsides all day long, you wouldn't do a lick of work. If I leave, you go back to the bush. Now let's go get that Cytha."

"But it is such a little one, mister! It is such a young one! It is scarcely worth the trouble. It would be a shame to kill it."

Probably just slightly smaller than a horse, thought Duncan, watching the native closely.

It's scared, he told himself. It's scared dry and spitless.

"Besides, it must have been most hungry. Surely, mister,

even a Cytha has the right to eat."

"Not from my crop," said Duncan savagely. "You know why we grow the vua, don't you? You know it is great medicine. The berries that it grows cures those who are sick inside their heads. My people need that medicine—need it very badly. And what is more, out there"—he swept his arm toward the sky—"out there they pay very much for it."

"But, mister . . ."

"I tell you this," said Duncan gently, "you either dig me up a bush-runner to do the tracking for me or you can all get out, the kit and caboodle of you. I can get other tribes to work the farm."

"No, mister!" Zikkara screamed in desperation.
"You have your choice," Duncan told it coldly.

He plodded back across the field toward the house. Not much of a house as yet. Not a great deal better than a native shack. But someday it would be, he told himself. Let him sell a crop or two and he'd build a house that would really be a house. It would have a bar and swimming pool and a garden filled with flowers, and at last, after years of wandering, he'd have a home and broad acres and everyone, not just one lousy tribe, would call him mister.

Gavin Duncan, planter, he said to himself, and liked the sound of it. Planter on the planet Layard. But not if the Cytha came back night after night and ate the *vua* plants.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Zikkara was racing for the native village.

Called their bluff, Duncan informed himself with satisfac-

He came out of the field and walked across the yard, heading for the house. One of Shotwell's shirts was hanging on the clothesline, limp in the breathless morning.

Damn the man, thought Duncan. Out here mucking around with those stupid natives, always asking questions, always underfoot. Although, to be fair about it, that was Shotwell's job. That was what the Sociology people had sent him out to do.

Duncan came up to the shack, pushed the door open and entered. Shotwell, stripped to the waist, was at the wash bench.

Breakfast was cooking on the stove, with an elderly native

acting as cook.

Duncan strode across the room and took down the heavy rifle from its peg. He slapped the action open, slapped it shut again.

Shotwell reached for a towel.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Cytha got into the field."

"Cytha?"

"A kind of animal," said Duncan. "It ate ten rows of vua."

"Big? Little? What are its characteristics?"

The native began putting breakfast on the table. Duncan walked to the table, laid the rifle across one corner of it and sat down. He poured a brackish liquid out of a big stew pan into their cups.

God, he thought, what I would give for a cup of coffee.

Shotwell pulled up his chair. "You didn't answer me. What is a Cytha like?"

"I wouldn't know," said Duncan.

"Don't know? But you're going after it, looks like, and how

can you hunt it if you don't know--"

"Track it. The thing tied to the other end of the trail is sure to be the Cytha. We'll find out what it's like once we catch up to it."

"We?"

"The natives will send up someone to do the tracking for me. Some of them are better than a dog."

"Look, Gavin. I've put you to a lot of trouble and you've been decent with me. If I can be any help, I would like to go."

"Two make better time than three. And we have to catch this Cytha fast or it might settle down to an endurance contest."

"All right, then. Tell me about the Cytha."

Duncan poured porridge gruel into his bowl, handed the

pan to Shotwell. "It's a sort of special thing. The natives are scared to death of it. You hear a lot of stories about it. Said to be unkillable. It's always capitalized, always a proper noun. It has been reported at different times from widely scattered places."

"No one's ever bagged one?"

"Not that I ever heard of." Duncan patted the rifle. "Let me get a bead on it."

He started eating, spooning the porridge into his mouth, munching on the stale corn bread left from the night before. He drank some of the brackish beverage and shuddered.

"Someday," he said, "I'm going to scrape together enough

money to buy a pound of coffee. You'd think-"

"It's the freight rates," Shotwell said. "I'll send you a pound when I go back."

"Not at the price they'd charge to ship it out," said Duncan. "I wouldn't hear of it."

They are in silence for a time. Finally Shotwell said: "I'm getting nowhere, Gavin. The natives are willing to talk, but it all adds up to nothing."

"I tried to tell you that. You could have saved your time."

Shotwell shook his head stubbornly. "There's an answer, a logical explanation. It's easy enough to say you cannot rule out the sexual factor, but that's exactly what has happened here on Layard. It's easy to exclaim that a sexless animal, a sexless race, a sexless planet is impossible, but that is what we have. Somewhere there is an answer and I have to find it."

"Now hold up a minute," Duncan protested. "There's no use blowing a gasket. I haven't got the time this morning to listen to your lecture."

"But it's not the lack of sex that worries me entirely," Shotwell said, "although it's the central factor. There are subsidiary situations deriving from that central fact which are most intriguing."

"I have no doubt of it," said Duncan, "but if you please—"
"Without sex, there is no basis for the family, and without
the family there is no basis for a tribe, and yet the natives
have an elaborate tribal setup, with taboos by way of regula-

tion. Somewhere there must exist some underlying, basic unifying factor, some common loyalty, some strange relationship which spells out to brotherhood."

"Not brotherhood," said Duncan, chuckling. "Not even sisterhood. You must watch your terminology. The word you want is ithood."

The door pushed open and a native walked in timidly.

"Zikkara said that mister want me," the native told them. "I am Sipar. I can track anything but screamers, stilt-birds, longhorns, and donovans. Those are my taboos."

"I am glad to hear that," Duncan replied. "You have no

Cytha taboo, then."

"Cythal" yipped the native. "Zikkara did not tell me Cythal"

Duncan paid no attention. He got up from the table and went to the heavy chest that stood against one wall. He rummaged in it and came out with a pair of binoculars, a hunting knife, and an extra drum of ammunition. At the kitchen cupboard, he rummaged once again, filling a small leather sack with a gritty powder from a can he found.

"Rockahominy," he explained to Shotwell. "Emergency rations thought up by the primitive North American Indians. Parched corn, ground fine. It's no feast exactly, but it keeps a

man going."

"You figure you'll be gone that long?"

"Maybe overnight. I don't know. Won't stop until I get it. Can't afford to. It could wipe me out in a few days."

"Good hunting," Shotwell said. "I'll hold the fort."

Duncan said to Sipar: "Quit sniveling and come on."

He picked up the rifle, settled it in the crook of his arm. He kicked open the door and strode out.

Sipar followed meekly.

Ц.

Duncan got his first shot late in the afternoon of that first day.

In the middle of the morning, two hours after they had left

the farm, they had flushed the Cytha out of its bed in a thick ravine. But there had been no chance for a shot. Duncan saw no more than a huge black blur fade into the bush.

Through the bake-oven afternoon, they had followed its trail, Sipar tracking and Duncan bringing up the rear, scanning every piece of cover, with the sun-hot rifle always held at ready.

Once they had been held up for fifteen minutes while a massive donovan tramped back and forth, screaming, trying to work up its courage for attack. But after a quarter hour of showing off, it decided to behave itself and went off at a shuffling gallop.

Duncan watched it go with a lot of thankfulness. It could soak up a lot of lead, and for all its awkwardness, it was handy with its feet once it set itself in motion. Donovans had killed a lot of men in the twenty years since Earthmen had come to Layard.

With the beast gone, Duncan looked around for Sipar. He found it fast asleep beneath a hula-shrub. He kicked the native awake with something less than gentleness and they went on again.

The bush swarmed with other animals, but they had no trouble with them.

Sipar, despite its initial reluctance, had worked well at the trailing. A misplaced bunch of grass, a twig bent to one side, a displaced stone, the faintest pug mark were Sipar's stock in trade. It worked like a lithe, well-trained hound. This bush country was its special province; here it was at home.

With the sun dropping toward the west, they had climbed a long, steep hill and as they neared the top of it, Duncan hissed at Sipar. The native looked back over its shoulder in surprise. Duncan made motions for it to stop tracking.

The native crouched and as Duncan went past it, he saw that a look of agony was twisting its face. And in the look of agony he thought he saw as well a touch of pleading and a trace of hatred. It's scared, just like the rest of them, Duncan told himself. But what the native thought or felt had no significance; what counted was the beast ahead.

Duncan went the last few yards on his belly, pushing the gun ahead of him, the binoculars bumping on his back. Swift, vicious insects ran out of the grass and swarmed across his hands and arms and one got on his face and bit him.

He made it to the hilltop and lay there, looking at the sweep of land beyond. It was more of the same, more of the blistering, dusty slogging, more of thorn and tangled ravine and awful emptiness.

He lay motionless, watching for a hint of motion, for the fitful shadow, for any wrongness in the terrain that might be the Cytha.

But there was nothing. The land lay quiet under the declining sun. Far on the horizon, a herd of some sort of animals was grazing, but there was nothing else.

Then he saw the motion, just a flicker, on the knoll ahead—about halfway up.

He laid the rifle carefully on the ground and hitched the binoculars around. He raised them to his eyes and moved them slowly back and forth. The animal was there where he had seen the motion.

It was resting, looking back along the way that it had come, watching for the first sign of its trailers. Duncan tried to make out the size and shape, but it blended with the grass and the dun soil and he could not be sure exactly what it looked like.

He let the glasses down and now that he had located it, he could distinguish its outline with the naked eye.

His hand reached out and slid the rifle to him. He fitted it to his shoulder and wriggled his body for closer contact with the ground. The cross-hairs centered on the faint outline on the knoll and then the beast stood up.

It was not as large as he had thought it might be—perhaps a little larger than Earth lion-size, but it certainly was no lion. It was a square-set thing and black and inclined to lumpiness and it had an awkward look about it, but there were strength and ferociousness as well.

Duncan tilted the muzzle of the rifle so that the cross-hairs centered on the massive neck. He drew in a breath and held it and began the trigger squeeze. The rifle bucked hard against his shoulder and the report hammered in his head and the beast went down. It did not lurch or fall; it simply melted down and disappeared, hidden in the grass.

"Dead center," Duncan assured himself.

He worked the mechanism and the spent cartridge case flew out. The feeding mechanism snicked and the fresh shell clicked as it slid into the breech.

He lay for a moment, watching. And on the knoll where the thing had fallen, the grass was twitching as if the wind were blowing, only there was no wind. But despite the twitching of the grass, there was no sign of the Cytha. It did not struggle up again. It stayed where it had fallen.

Duncan got to his feet, dug out the bandanna and mopped at his face. He heard the soft thud of the step behind him and

turned his head. It was the tracker.

"It's all right, Sipar," he said. "You can quit worrying. I got it. We can go home now."

It had been a long, hard chase, longer than he had thought it might be. But it had been successful and that was the thing that counted. For the moment, the vua crop was safe.

He tucked the bandanna back into his pocket, went down the slope and started up the knoll. He reached the place where the Cytha had fallen. There were three small gouts of torn, mangled fur and flesh lying on the ground and there was nothing else.

He spun around and jerked his rifle up. Every nerve was screamingly alert. He swung his head, searching for the slightest movement, for some shape or color that was not the shape or color of the bush or grass or ground. But there was nothing. The heat droned in the hush of afternoon. There was not a breath of moving air. But there was danger—a saw-toothed sense of danger close behind his neck.

"Siparl" he called in a tense whisper. "Watch out!"

The native stood motionless, unheeding, its eyeballs rolling up until there was only white, while the muscles stood out along its throat like straining ropes of steel.

Duncan slowly swiveled, rifle held almost at arm's length,

elbows crooked a little, ready to bring the weapon into play in a fraction of a second.

Nothing stirred. There was no more than emptiness—the emptiness of sun and molten sky, of grass and scraggy bush, of a brown-and-yellow land stretching into foreverness.

Step by step, Duncan covered the hillside and finally came back to the place where the native squatted on its heels and moaned, rocking back and forth, arms locked tightly across its chest, as if it tried to cradle itself in a sort of illusory comfort.

The Earthman walked to the place where the Cytha had fallen and picked up, one by one, the bits of bleeding flesh. They had been mangled by his bullet. They were limp and had no shape. And it was queer, he thought. In all his years of hunting, over many planets, he had never known a bullet to rip out hunks of flesh.

He dropped the bloody pieces back into the grass and wiped his hands upon his thighs. He got up a little stiffly.

He'd found no trail of blood leading through the grass, and surely an animal with a hole of that size would leave a trail.

And as he stood there upon the hillside, with the bloody fingerprints still wet and glistening upon the fabric of his trousers, he felt the first cold touch of fear, as if the fingertips of fear might momentarily, almost casually, have trailed across his heart.

He turned around and walked back to the native, reached down, and shook it.

"Snap out of it," he ordered.

He expected pleading, cowering, terror, but there was none. Sipar got swiftly to its feet and stood looking at him and there was, he thought, an odd glitter in its eyes.

"Get going," Duncan said. "We still have a little time. Start circling and pick up the trail. I will cover you."

He glanced at the sun. An hour and a half still left—maybe as much as two. There might still be time to get this buttoned up before the fall of night.

A half mile beyond the knoll, Sipar picked up the trail again and they went ahead, but now they traveled more cau-

tiously, for any bush, any rock, any clump of grass might conceal the wounded beast.

Duncan found himself on edge and cursed himself savagely for it. He'd been in tight spots before. This was nothing new to him. There was no reason to get himself tensed up. It was a deadly business, sure, but he had faced others calmly and walked away from them. It was those frontier tales he'd heard about the Cytha—the kind of superstitious chatter that one always heard on the edge of unknown land.

He gripped the rifle tighter and went on. No animal he told himself, was unkillable.

Half an hour before sunset, he called a halt when they reached a brackish water hole. The light soon would be getting bad for shooting. In the morning, they'd take up the trail again, and by that time the Cytha would be at an even greater disadvantage. It would be stiff and slow and weak. It might

Duncan gathered wood and built a fire in the lee of a thornbush thicket. Sipar waded out with the canteens and thrust them at arm's length beneath the surface to fill them. The water still was warm and evil-tasting, but it was fairly free of scum and a thirsty man could drink it.

The sun went down and darkness fell quickly. They dragged more wood out of the thicket and piled it carefully close at hand.

Duncan reached into his pocket and brought out the little bag of rockahominy.

"Here," he said to Sipar. "Supper."

be even dead.

The native held one hand cupped and Duncan poured a little mound into its palm.

"Thank you, mister," Sipar said. "Food-giver."

"Huh?" asked Duncan, then caught what the native meant. "Dive into it," he said, almost kindly. "It isn't much, but it gives you strength. We'll need strength tomorrow."

Food-giver, eh? Trying to butter him up, perhaps. In a little while, Sipar would start whining for him to knock off the hunt and head back for the farm.

Although, come to think of it, he really was the food-giver

to this bunch of sexless wonders. Corn, thank God, grew well on the red and stubborn soil of Layard—good old corn from North America. Fed to hogs, made into corn pone for breakfast back on Earth, and here, on Layard, the staple food crop for a gang of shiftless varmints who still regarded, with some good solid skepticism and round-eyed wonder, this unorthodox idea that one should take the trouble to grow plants to eat rather than go out and scrounge for them.

Corn from North America, he thought, growing side by side with the vua of Layard. And that was the way it went. Something from one planet and something from another and still something further from a third and so was built up through the wide social confederacy of space a truly cosmic culture which in the end, in another ten thousand years or so, might spell out some way of life with more sanity and understanding than was evident today.

He poured a mound of rockahominy into his own hand and put the bag back into his pocket.

"Sipar."

"Yes, mister?"

"You were not scared today when the donovan threatened to attack us."

"No, mister. The donovan would not hurt me."

"I see. You said the donovan was taboo to you. Could it be that you, likewise, are taboo to the donovan?"

"Yes, mister. The donovan and I grew up together."

"Oh, so that's it," said Duncan.

He put a pinch of the parched and powdered corn into his mouth and took a sip of brackish water. He chewed reflectively on the resultant mash.

He might go ahead, he knew, and ask why and how and where Sipar and the donovan had grown up together, but there was no point to it. This was exactly the kind of tangle that Shotwell was forever getting into.

Half the time, he told himself, I'm convinced the little stinkers are doing no more than pulling our legs.

What a fantastic bunch of jerks! Not men, not women, just things. And while there were never babies, there were children, although never less than eight or nine years old. And if there were no babies, where did the eight- and nine-year-olds come from?

"I suppose," he said, "that these other things that are your taboos, the stilt-birds and the screamers and the like, also grew up with you."

"That is right, mister."

"Some playground that must have been," said Duncan.

He went on chewing, staring out into the darkness beyond the ring of firelight.

"There's something in the thorn bush, mister."

"I didn't hear a thing."

"Little pattering. Something is running there."

Duncan listened closely. What Sipar said was true. A lot of little things were running in the thicket.

"More than likely mice," he said.

He finished his rockahominy and took an extra swig of water, gagging on it slightly.

"Get your rest," he told Sipar. "I'll wake you later so I can

catch a wink or two."

"Mister," Sipar said, "I'll stay with you to the end."

"Well," said Duncan, somewhat startled, "that is decent of you."

"I will stay to the death," Sipar promised earnestly.

"Don't strain yourself," said Duncan.

He picked up the rifle and walked down to the water hole.

The night was quiet and the land continued to have that empty feeling. Empty except for the fire and the water hole and the little micelike animals running in the thicket.

And Sipar-Sipar lying by the fire, curled up and sound asleep already. Naked, with not a weapon to its hand-just the naked animal, the basic humanoid, and yet with underlying purpose that at times was baffling. Scared and shivering this morning at mere mention of the Cytha, yet never faltering on the trail; in pure funk back there on the knoll where they had lost the Cytha, but now ready to go on to the death.

Duncan went back to the fire and prodded Sipar with his

toe. The native came straight up out of sleep.

"Whose death?" asked Duncan. "Whose death were you talking of?"

"Why, ours, of course," said Sipar, and went back to sleep.

III.

Duncan did not see the arrow coming. He heard the swishing whistle and felt the wind of it on the right side of his throat and then it thunked into a tree behind him.

He leaped aside and dived for the cover of a tumbled mound of boulders and almost instinctively his thumb pushed the fire control of the rifle up to automatic.

He crouched behind the jumbled rocks and peered ahead. There was not a thing to see. The hula-trees shimmered in the blaze of sun and the thorn bush was gray and lifeless and the only things astir were three stilt-birds walking gravely a quarter of a mile away.

"Sipar!" he whispered.

"Here, mister,"

"Keep low. It's still out there."

Whatever it might be. Still out there and waiting for another shot. Duncan shivered, remembering the feel of the arrow flying past his throat. A hell of a way for a man to die—out at the tail end of nowhere with an arrow in his throat and a scared-stiff native heading back for home as fast as it could go.

He flicked the control on the rifle back to single fire, crawled around the rock pile, and sprinted for a grove of trees that stood on higher ground. He reached them and there he flanked the spot from which the arrow must have come.

He unlimbered the binoculars and glassed the area. He still saw no sign. Whatever had taken the pot shot at them had made its getaway.

He walked back to the tree where the arrow still stood out, its point driven deep into the bark. He grasped the shaft and wrenched the arrow free.

"You can come out now," he called to Sipar. "There's no one around."

The arrow was unbelievably crude. The unfeathered shaft looked as if it had been battered off to the proper length with a jagged stone. The arrowhead was unflaked flint picked up from some outcropping or dry creek bed, and it was awkwardly bound to the shaft with the tough but pliant inner bark of the hula-tree.

"You recognize this?" he asked Sipar.

The native took the arrow and examined it. "Not my tribe."

"Of course not your tribe. Yours wouldn't take a shot at us. Some other tribe, perhaps?"

"Very poor arrow."

"I know that. But it could kill you just as dead as if it were a good one. Do you recognize it?"

"No tribe made this arrow," Sipar declared.

"Child, maybe?"

"What would child do way out here?"

"That's what I thought, too," said Duncan.

He took the arrow back, held it between his thumbs and forefingers and twirled it slowly, with a terrifying thought nibbling at his brain. It couldn't be. It was too fantastic. He wondered if the sun was finally getting him that he had thought of it at all.

He squatted down and dug at the ground with the makeshift arrow point. "Sipar, what do you actually know about the Cytha?"

"Nothing, mister. Scared of it is all."

"We aren't turning back. If there's something that you know-something that would help us . . ."

It was as close as he could come to begging aid. It was further than he had meant to go. He should not have asked at all, he thought angrily.

"I do not know," the native said.

Duncan cast the arrow to one side and rose to his feet. He cradled the rifle in his arm. "Let's go."

He watched Sipar trot ahead. Crafty little stinker, he told himself. It knows more than it's telling.

They toiled into the afternoon. It was, if possible, hotter and drier than the day before. There was a sense of tension in the air—no, that was rot. And even if there were, a man must act as if it were not there. If he let himself fall prey to every mood out in this empty land, he only had himself to blame for whatever happened to him.

The tracking was harder now. The day before, the Cytha had only run away, straight-line fleeing to keep ahead of them, to stay out of their reach. Now it was becoming tricky. It backtracked often in an attempt to throw them off. Twice in the afternoon, the trail blanked out entirely and it was only after long searching that Sipar picked it up again—in one instance, a mile away from where it had vanished in thin air.

That vanishing bothered Duncan more than he would admit. Trails do not disappear entirely, not when the terrain remains the same, not when the weather is unchanged. Something was going on, something, perhaps, that Sipar knew far more about than it was willing to divulge.

more about man it was winnig to divinge.

He watched the native closely and there seemed nothing suspicious. It continued at its work. It was, for all to see, the good and faithful hound.

Late in the afternoon, the plain on which they had been traveling suddenly dropped away. They stood poised on the brink of a great escarpment and looked far out to great tangled forests and a flowing river.

It was like suddenly coming into another and beautiful room that one had not expected.

This was new land, never seen before by any Earthman. For no one had ever mentioned that somewhere to the west a forest lay beyond the bush. Men coming in from space had seen it, probably, but only as a different color-marking on the planet. To them, it made no difference.

But to the men who lived on Layard, to the planter and the trader, the prospector and the hunter, it was important. And I, thought Duncan with a sense of triumph, am the man who found it.

"Mister!"

[&]quot;Now what?"

"Out there. Skun!"

"I don't-"

"Out there, mister, Across the river,"

Duncan saw it then—a haze in the blueness of the rift—a puff of copper moving very fast, and as he watched, he heard the far-off keening of the storm, a shiver in the air rather than a sound

He watched in fascination as it moved along the river and saw the boiling fury it made out of the forest. It struck and crossed the river, and the river for a moment seemed to stand on end, with a sheet of silvery water splashed toward the sky.

Then it was gone as quickly as it had happened, but there was a tumbled slash across the forest where the churning winds had traveled.

Back at the farm, Zikkara had warned him of the skun. This was the season for them, it had said, and a man caught in one wouldn't have a chance.

Duncan let his breath out slowly.

"Bad," said Sipar.

"Yes, very bad."

"Hit fast. No warning."

"What about the trail?" asked Duncan. "Did the Cytha-" Sipar nodded downward.

"Can we make it before nightfall?"

"I think so," Sipar answered.

It was rougher than they had thought. Twice they went down blind trails that pinched off, with sheer rock faces opening out into drops of hundreds of feet, and were forced to climb again and find another way.

They reached the bottom of the escarpment as the brief twilight closed in and they hurried to gather firewood. There was no water, but a little was still left in their canteens and they made do with that.

After their scant meal of rockahominy, Sipar rolled himself into a ball and went to sleep immediately.

Duncan sat with his back against a boulder which one day, long ago, had fallen from the slope above them, but was now

half buried in the soil that through the ages had kept sifting down.

Two days gone, he told himself.

Was there, after all, some truth in the whispered tales that made the rounds back at the settlements—that no one should waste his time in tracking down a Cytha, since a Cytha was unkillable?

Nonsense, he told himself. And yet the hunt had toughened, the trail become more difficult, the Cytha a much more cunning and elusive quarry. Where it had run from them the day before, now it fought to shake them off. And if it did that the second day, why had it not tried to throw them off the first? And what about the third day—tomorrow?

He shook his head. It seemed incredible that an animal would become more formidable as the hunt progressed. But that seemed to be exactly what had happened. More spooked, perhaps, more frightened—only the Cytha did not act like a frightened beast. It was acting like an animal that was gaining savvy and determination, and that was somehow frightening.

From far off to the west, toward the forest and the river, came the laughter and the howling of a pack of screamers. Duncan leaned his rifle against the boulder and got up to pile more wood on the fire. He stared out into the western darkness, listening to the racket. He made a wry face and pushed a hand absent-mindedly through his hair. He put out a silent hope that the screamers would decide to keep their distance. They were something a man could do without.

Behind him, a pebble came bumping down the slope. It thudded to a rest just short of the fire.

Duncan spun around. Foolish thing to do, he thought, to camp so near the slope. If something big should start to move, they'd be out of luck.

He stood and listened. The night was quiet. Even the screamers had shut up for the moment. Just one rolling rock and he had his hackles up. He'd have to get himself in hand.

He went back to the boulder, and as he stooped to pick up the rifle, he heard the faint beginning of a rumble. He straightened swiftly to face the scarp that blotted out the starstrewn sky-and the rumble grewl

In one leap, he was at Sipar's side. He reached down and grasped the native by an arm, jerked it erect, held it on its feet. Sipar's eyes snapped open, blinking in the firelight.

The rumble had grown to a roar and there were thumping noises, as of heavy boulders bouncing, and beneath the roar the silky, ominous rustle of sliding soil and rock.

Sipar jerked its arm free of Duncan's grip and plunged into

the darkness. Duncan whirled and followed.

They ran, stumbling in the dark, and behind them the roar of the sliding, bouncing rock became a throaty roll of thunder that filled the night from brim to brim. As he ran, Duncan could feel, in dread anticipation, the gusty breath of hurtling debris blowing on his neck, the crushing impact of a boulder smashing into him, the engulfing flood of tumbling talus snatching at his legs.

A puff of billowing dust came out and caught them and they ran choking as well as stumbling. Off to the left of them, a mighty chunk of rock chugged along the ground in jerky,

almost reluctant fashion.

Then the thunder stopped and all one could hear was the small slitherings of the lesser debris as it trickled down the slope.

Duncan stopped running and slowly turned around. The campfire was gone, buried, no doubt, beneath tons of overlay, and the stars had paled because of the great cloud of dust which still billowed up into the sky.

He heard Sipar moving near him and reached out a hand, searching for the tracker, not knowing exactly where it was. He found the native, grasped it by the shoulder, and pulled it up beside him.

Sipar was shivering.

"It's all right," said Duncan.

And it was all right, he reassured himself. He still had the rifle. The extra drum of ammunition and the knife were on his belt, the bag of rockahominy in his pocket. The canteens were all they had lost—the canteens and the fire.

"We'll have to hole up somewhere for the night," Duncan said. "There are screamers on the loose."

He didn't like what he was thinking, nor the sharp edge of fear that was beginning to crowd in upon him. He tried to shrug it off, but it still staved with him, just out of reach.

Sipar plucked at his elbow.

"Thorn thicket, mister. Over there. We could crawl inside. We would be safe from screamers."

It was torture, but they made it. "Screamers and you are taboo," said Duncan, suddenly remembering, "How come you are afraid of them?"

"Afraid for you, mister, mostly. Afraid for myself just a little. Screamers could forget. They might not recognize me until too late. Safer here."

"I agree with you," said Duncan.

The screamers came and padded all about the thicket. The beasts sniffed and clawed at the thorns to reach them, but finally went away.

When morning came, Duncan and Sipar climbed the scarp, clambering over the boulders and the tons of soil and rock that covered their camping place. Following the gash cut by the slide, they clambered up the slope and finally reached the point of the slide's beginning.

There they found the depression in which the poised slab of rock had rested and where the supporting soil had been dug away so that it could be started, with a push, down the

slope above the campfire.

And all about were the deeply sunken pug marks of the Cythal

TV.

Now it was more than just a hunt. It was knife against the throat, kill or be killed. Now there was no stopping, when before there might have been. It was no longer sport and there was no mercy.

"And that's the way I like it," Duncan told himself.

He rubbed his hand along the rifle barrel and saw the metallic glints shine in the noonday sun. One more shot, he prayed. Just give me one more shot at it. This time there will be no slip-up. This time there will be more than three sodden hunks of flesh and fur lying in the grass to mock me.

He squinted his eyes against the heat shimmer rising from the river, watching Sipar hunkered beside the water's edge.

The native rose to its feet and trotted back to him.

"It crossed," said Sipar. "It walked out as far as it could go and it must have swum."

"Are you sure? It might have waded out to make us think it crossed, then doubled back again."

He stared at the purple-green of the trees across the river. Inside that forest, it would be hellish going.

"We can look," said Sipar.

"Good. You go downstream. I'll go up."

An hour later, they were back. They had found no tracks. There seemed little doubt the Cytha had really crossed the river.

They stood side by side, looking at the forest.

"Mister, we have come far. You are brave to hunt the Cytha. You have no fear of death."

"The fear of death," Duncan said, "is entirely infantile. And it's beside the point as well. I do not intend to die."

They waded out into the stream. The bottom shelved gradually and they had to swim no more than a hundred yards or so.

They reached the forest bank and threw themselves flat to rest.

Duncan looked back the way that they had come. To the east, the escarpment was a dark-blue smudge against the pale-blue burnished sky. And two days back of that lay the farm and the vua field, but they seemed much farther off than that. They were lost in time and distance; they belonged to another existence and another world.

All his life, it seemed to him, had faded and become inconsequential and forgotten, as if this moment in his life were the only one that counted; as if all the minutes and the hours, all the breaths and heartbeats, wake and sleep, had pointed toward this certain hour upon this certain stream, with the rifle molded to his hand and the cool, calculated bloodlust of a killer riding in his brain.

Sipar finally got up and began to range along the stream.

Duncan sat up and watched.

Scared to death, he thought, and yet it stayed with me. At the campfire that first night, it had said it would stick to the death and apparently it had meant exactly what it said. It's hard, he thought, to figure out these jokers, hard to know what kind of mental operation, what seethings of emotion, what brand of ethics and what variety of belief and faith go to make them and their way of life.

It would have been so easy for Sipar to have missed the trail and swear it could not find it. Even from the start, it could have refused to go. Yet, fearing, it had gone. Reluctant, it had trailed. Without any need for faithfulness and loyalty, it had been loyal and faithful. But loyal to what, Duncan wondered, to him, the outlander and intruder? Loyal to itself? Or perhaps, although that seemed impossible, faithful to the Cytha?

What does Sipar think of me, he asked himself, and maybe more to the point, what do I think of Sipar? Is there a common meeting ground? Or are we, despite our humanoid forms, condemned forever to be alien and apart?

He held the rifle across his knees and stroked it, polishing it, petting it, making it even more closely a part of him, an instrument of his deadliness, an expression of his determination to track and kill the Cytha.

Just another chance, he begged. Just one second, or even less, to draw a steady bead. That is all I want, all I need, all I'll ask.

Then he could go back across the days that he had left behind him, back to the farm and field, back into that misty other life from which he had been so mysteriously divorced, but which in time undoubtedly would become real and meaningful again.

Sipar came back. "I found the trail."

Duncan heaved himself to his feet, "Good,"

They left the river and plunged into the forest and there the heat closed in more mercilessly than ever—humid, stifling heat that felt like a soggy blanket wrapped tightly round the body.

The trail lay plain and clear. The Cytha now, it seemed, was intent upon piling up a lead without recourse to evasive tactics. Perhaps it had reasoned that its pursuers would lose some time at the river and it may have been trying to stretch out that margin even further. Perhaps it needed that extra time, he speculated, to set up the necessary machinery for another dirty trick.

Sipar stopped and waited for Duncan to catch up. "Your knife, mister?"

Duncan hesitated. "What for?"

"I have a thorn in my foot," the native said. "I have to get it out."

Duncan pulled the knife from his belt and tossed it. Sipar caught it deftly.

Looking straight at Duncan, with the flicker of a smile upon its lips, the native cut its throat.

V.

He should go back, he knew. Without the tracker, he didn't have a chance. The odds were now with the Cytha—if, indeed, they had not been with it from the very start.

Unkillable? Unkillable because it grew in intelligence to meet emergencies? Unkillable because, pressed, it could fashion a bow and arrow, however crude? Unkillable because it had a sense of tactics, like rolling rocks at night upon its enemy? Unkillable because a native tracker would cheerfully kill itself to protect the Cytha?

A sort of crisis-beast, perhaps? One able to develop intelligence and abilities to meet each new situation and then lapsing back to the level of non-intelligent contentment? That, thought Duncan, would be a sensible way for anything to live.

It would do away with the inconvenience and the irritability and the discontentment of intelligence when intelligence was unneeded. But the intelligence, and the abilities which went with it, would be there, safely tucked away where one could reach in and get them, like a necklace or a gun—something to be used or to be put away as the case might be.

Duncan hunched forward and with a stick of wood pushed the fire together. The flames blazed up anew and sent sparks flying up into the whispering darkness of the trees. The night had cooled off a little, but the humidity still hung on and a man felt uncomfortable—a little frightened, too.

Duncan lifted his head and stared up into the fire-flecked darkness. There were no stars because the heavy foliage shut them out. He missed the stars. He'd feel better if he could look up and see them.

When morning came, he should go back. He should quit this hunt which now had become impossible and even slightly foolish.

But he knew he wouldn't. Somewhere along the three-day trail, he had become committed to a purpose and a challenge, and he knew that when morning came, he would go on again. It was not hatred that drove him, nor vengeance, nor even the trophy-urge—the hunter-lust that prodded men to kill something strange or harder to kill or bigger than any man had ever killed before. It was something more than that, some weird entangling of the Cytha's meaning with his own.

He reached out and picked up the rifle and laid it in his lap. Its barrel gleamed dully in the flickering campfire light and he rubbed his hand along the stock as another man might stroke a woman's throat.

"Mister," said a voice.

It did not startle him, for the word was softly spoken and for a moment he had forgotten that Sipar was dead—dead with a half-smile fixed upon its face and with its throat laid wide open.

"Mister?"

Duncan stiffened.

Sipar was dead and there was no one else-and yet some-

one had spoken to him, and there could be only one thing in all this wilderness that might speak to him.

"Yes," he said.

He did not move. He simply sat there, with the rifle in his lap.

"You know who I am?"

"I suppose you are the Cytha."

"You have done well," the Cytha said. "You've made a splendid hunt. There is no dishonor if you should decide to quit. Why don't you go back? I promise you no harm."

It was over there, somewhere in front of him, somewhere in the brush beyond the fire, almost straight across the fire from him, Duncan told himself. If he could keep it talking, perhaps even lure it out—

"Why should I?" he asked. "The hunt is never done until

one gets the thing one is after."

"I can kill you," the Cytha told him. "But I do not want to kill. It hurts to kill."

"That's right," said Duncan. "You are most perceptive."

For he had it pegged now. He knew exactly where it was. He could afford a little mockery.

His thumb slid up the metal and nudged the fire control to automatic and he flexed his legs beneath him so that he could

rise and fire in one single motion.

"Why did you hunt me?" the Cytha asked. "You are a stranger on my world and you had no right to hunt me. Not that I mind, of course. In fact, I found it stimulating. We must do it again. When I am ready to be hunted, I shall come and tell you and we can spend a day or two at it."

"Sure we can," said Duncan, rising. And as he rose into his crouch, he held the trigger down and the gun danced in insane fury, the muzzle flare a flicking tongue of hatred and the hail

of death hissing spitefully in the underbrush.

"Anytime you want to," yelled Duncan gleefully, "I'll come and hunt you! You just say the word and I'll be on your tail. I might even kill you. How do you like it, chump!"

And he held the trigger tight and kept his crouch so the slugs would not fly high, but would cut their swath just above the ground, and he moved the muzzle back and forth a lot so that he covered extra ground to compensate for any miscalculations he might have made.

The magazine ran out and the gun clicked empty and the vicious chatter stopped. Powder smoke drifted softly in the campfire light and the smell of it was perfume in the nostrils and in the underbrush many little feet were running, as if a thousand frightened mice were scurrying from catastrophe.

Duncan unhooked the extra magazine from where it hung upon his belt and replaced the empty one. Then he snatched a burning length of wood from the fire and waved it frantically until it burst into a blaze and became a torch. Rifle grasped in one hand and the torch in the other, he plunged into the underbrush. Little chittering things fled to escape him.

He did not find the Cytha. He found chewed-up bushes and soil churned by flying metal, and he found five lumps of flesh and fur, and these he brought back to the fire.

Now the fear that had been stalking him, keeping just beyond his reach, walked out from the shadows and hunkered by the campfire with him.

He placed the rifle within easy reach and arranged the five bloody chunks on the ground close to the fire and he tried with trembling fingers to restore them to the shape they'd been before the bullets struck them. And that was a good one, he thought with grim irony, because they had no shape. They had been part of the Cytha and you killed a Cytha inch by inch, not with a single shot. You knocked a pound of meat off it the first time, and the next time you shot off another pound or two, and if you got enough shots at it, you finally carved it down to size and maybe you could kill it then, although he wasn't sure.

He was afraid. He admitted that he was and he squatted there and watched his fingers shake and he kept his jaws clamped tight to stop the chatter of his teeth.

The fear had been getting closer all the time; he knew it had moved in by a step or two when Sipar cut its throat, and why in the name of God had the damn fool done it? It made no sense at all. He had wondered about Sipar's loyalties, and the very loyalties that he had dismissed as a sheer impossibility had been the answer, after all. In the end, for some obscure reason—obscure to humans, that is—Sipar's loyalty had been to the Cytha.

But then what was the use of searching for any reason in it? Nothing that had happened made any sense. It made no sense that a beast one was pursuing should up and talk to one—although it did fit in with the theory of the crisis-beast he had fashioned in his mind.

Progressive adaptation, he told himself. Carry adaptation far enough and you'd reach communication. But might not the Cytha's power of adaptation be running down? Had the Cytha gone about as far as it could force itself to go? Maybe so, he thought. It might be worth a gamble. Sipar's suicide, for all its casualness, bore the overtones of last-notch desperation. And the Cytha's speaking to Duncan, its attempt to parley with him, contained a note of weakness.

The arrow had failed and the rockslide had failed and so had Sipar's death. What next would the Cytha try? Had it anything to try?

Tomorrow he'd find out. Tomorrow he'd go on. He couldn't turn back now.

He was too deeply involved. He'd always wonder, if he turned back now, whether another hour or two might not have seen the end of it. There were too many questions, too much mystery—there was now far more at stake than ten rows of vua.

Another day might make some sense of it, might banish the dread walker that trod upon his heels, might bring some peace of mind.

As it stood right at the moment, none of it made sense.

But even as he thought it, suddenly one of the bits of bloody flesh and mangled fur made sense.

Beneath the punching and prodding of his fingers, it had assumed a shape.

Breathlessly, Duncan bent above it, not believing, not even

wanting to believe, hoping frantically that it should prove

completely wrong.

But there was nothing wrong with it. The shape was there and could not be denied. It had somehow fitted back into its natural shape and it was a baby screamer—well, maybe not a baby, but at least a tiny screamer.

Duncan sat back on his heels and sweated. He wiped his bloody hands upon the ground. He wondered what other shapes he'd find if he put back into proper place the other

hunks of limpness that lay beside the fire.

He tried and failed. They were too smashed and tom.

He picked them up and tossed them in the fire. He took up his rifle and walked around the fire, sat down with his back against a tree, cradling the gun across his knees.

Those little scurrying feet, he wondered—like the scampering of a thousand busy mice. He had heard them twice, that first night in the thicket by the water hole and again tonight.

And what could the Cytha be? Certainly not the simple, uncomplicated, marauding animal he had thought to start with.

A hive-beast? A host animal? A thing masquerading in many different forms?

Shotwell, trained in such deductions, might make a fairly accurate guess, but Shotwell was not here. He was at the farm, fretting, more than likely, over Duncan's failure to return.

Finally the first light of morning began to filter through the forest and it was not the glaring, clean white light of the open plain and bush, but a softened, diluted, fuzzy green light to match the smothering vegetation.

The night noises died away and the noises of the day took up—the sawings of unseen insects, the screechings of hidden birds, and something far away began to make a noise that sounded like an empty barrel falling slowly down a stairway.

What little coolness the night had brought dissipated swiftly and the heat clamped down, a breathless, relentless heat that quivered in the air.

Circling, Duncan picked up the Cytha trail not more than

a hundred yards from camp.

The beast had been traveling fast. The pug marks were deeply sunk and widely spaced. Duncan followed as rapidly as he dared. It was a temptation to follow at a run, to match the Cytha's speed, for the trail was plain and fresh and it fairly beckoned.

And that was wrong, Duncan told himself. It was too fresh, too plain-almost as if the animal had gone to endless trouble

so that the human could not miss the trail.

He stopped his trailing and crouched beside a tree and studied the tracks ahead. His hands were too tense upon the gun, his body keyed too high and fine. He forced himself to take slow, deep breaths. He had to calm himself. He had to loosen up.

He studied the tracks ahead—four bunched pug marks, then a long leap interval, then four more bunched tracks, and between the sets of marks the forest floor was innocent and

smooth.

Too smooth, perhaps. Especially the third one from him. Too smooth and somehow artificial, as if someone had patted it with gentle hands to make it unsuspicious.

Duncan sucked his breath in slowly.

Trap?

Or was his imagination playing tricks on him?

And if it were a trap, he would have fallen into it if he had kept on following as he had started out.

Now there was something else, a strange uneasiness, and he stirred uncomfortably, casting frantically for some clue to what it was.

He rose and stepped out from the tree, with the gun at ready. What a perfect place to set a trap, he thought. One would be looking at the pug marks, never at the space between them, for the space between would be neutral ground, safe to stride out upon.

Oh, clever Cytha, he said to himself. Oh, clever, clever Cythal

And now he knew what the other trouble was—the great uneasiness. It was the sense of being watched.

Somewhere up ahead, the Cytha was crouched, watching and waiting—anxious or exultant, maybe even with laughter rumbling in its throat.

He walked slowly forward until he reached the third set of tracks and he saw that he had been right. The little area ahead was smoother than it should be.

"Cythal" he called.

His voice was far louder than he had meant it to be and he stood astonished and a bit abashed.

Then he realized why it was so loud.

It was the only sound there was!

The forest suddenly had fallen silent. The insects and birds were quiet and the thing in the distance had quit falling down the stairs. Even the leaves were silent. There was no rustle in them and they hung limp upon their stems.

There was a feeling of doom and the green light had

changed to a copper light and everything was still.

And the light was copper!

Duncan spun around in panic. There was no place for him to hide.

Before he could take another step, the *skun* came and the winds rushed out of nowhere. The air was clogged with flying leaves and debris. Trees snapped and popped and tumbled in the air.

The wind hurled Duncan to his knees, and as he fought to regain his feet, he remembered, in a blinking flash of total recall, how it had looked from atop the escarpment—the boiling fury of the winds and the mad swirling of the coppery mist and how the trees had whipped in whirlpool fashion.

He came half erect and stumbled, clawing at the ground in an attempt to get up again, while inside his brain an insistent, clicking voice cried out for him to run, and somewhere another voice said to lie flat upon the ground, to dig in as best he could.

Something struck him from behind and he went down, pinned flat, with his rifle wedged beneath him. He cracked

his head upon the ground and the world whirled sickeningly and plastered his face with a handful of mud and tattered leaves.

He tried to crawl and couldn't, for something had grabbed him by the ankle and was hanging on.

With a frantic hand, he clawed the mess out of his eyes, spat it from his mouth.

Across the spinning ground, something black and angular tumbled rapidly. It was coming straight toward him and he saw it was the Cytha and that in another second it would be on top of him.

He threw up an arm across his face, with the elbow crooked, to take the impact of the wind-blown Cytha and to ward it off.

But it never reached him. Less than a yard away, the ground opened up to take the Cytha and it was no longer there.

Suddenly the wind cut off and the leaves once more hung motionless and the heat clamped down again and that was the end of it. The *skun* had come and struck and gone.

Minutes, Duncan wondered, or perhaps no more than seconds. But in those seconds, the forest had been flattened and the trees lay in shattered heaps.

He raised himself on an elbow and looked to see what was the matter with his foot and he saw that a fallen tree had trapped his foot beneath it.

He tugged a few times experimentally. It was no use. Two close-set limbs, branching almost at right angles from the hole, had been driven deep into the ground and his foot, he saw, had been caught at the ankle in the fork of the buried branches.

The foot didn't hurt—not yet. It didn't seem to be there at all. He tried wiggling his toes and felt none.

He wiped the sweat off his face with a shirt sleeve and fought to force down the panic that was rising in him. Getting panicky was the worst thing a man could do in a spot like this. The thing to do was to take stock of the situation, figure out the best approach, then go ahead and try it.

The tree looked heavy, but perhaps he could handle it if he had to, although there was the danger that if he shifted it, the bole might settle more solidly and crush his foot beneath it. At the moment, the two heavy branches, thrust into the ground on either side of his ankle, were holding most of the tree's weight off his foot.

The best thing to do, he decided, was to dig the ground

away beneath his foot until he could pull it out.

He twisted around and started digging with the fingers of one hand. Beneath the thin covering of humus, he struck a solid surface and his fingers slid along it.

With mounting alarm, he explored the ground, scratching at the humus. There was nothing but rock—some long-buried boulder, the top of which lay just beneath the ground.

His foot was trapped beneath a heavy tree and a massive boulder, held securely in place by forked branches that had forced their splintering way down along the boulder's sides.

He lay back, propped on an elbow. It was evident that he could do nothing about the buried boulder. If he was going to do anything, his problem was the tree.

To move the tree, he would need a lever and he had a good, stout lever in his rifle. It would be a shame, he thought a little wryly, to use a gun for such a purpose, but he had no choice.

He worked for an hour and it was no good. Even with the rifle as a pry, he could not budge the tree.

He lay back, defeated, breathing hard, wringing wet with perspiration.

He grimaced at the sky.

All right, Cytha, he thought, you won out in the end. But it took a skun to do it. With all your tricks, you couldn't do the job until . . .

Then he remembered.

He sat up hurriedly.

"Cytha!" he called.

The Cytha had fallen into a hole that had opened in the ground. The hole was less than an arm's length away from him, with a little debris around its edges still trickling into it.

Duncan stretched out his body, lying flat upon the ground, and looked into the hole. There, at the bottom of it, was the Cytha.

It was the first time he'd gotten a good look at the Cytha and it was a crazily put-together thing. It seemed to have nothing functional about it and it looked more like a heap of something, just thrown on the ground, than it did an animal.

The hole, he saw, was more than an ordinary hole. It was a pit and very cleverly constructed. The mouth was about four feet in diameter and it widened to roughly twice that at the bottom. It was, in general, bottle-shaped, with an incurving shoulder at the top so that anything that fell in could not climb out. Anything falling into that pit was in to stay.

This, Duncan knew, was what had lain beneath that toosmooth interval between the two sets of Cytha tracks. The Cytha had worked all night to dig it, then had carried away the dirt dug out of the pit and had built a flimsy camouflage cover over it. Then it had gone back and made the trail that was so loud and clear, so easy to make out and follow. And having done all that, having labored hard and stealthily, the Cytha had settled down to watch, to make sure the following human had fallen in the pit.

"Hi, pal," said Duncan. "How are you making out?"

The Cytha did not answer.

"Classy pit," said Duncan. "Do you always den up in luxury like this?"

But the Cytha didn't answer.

Something queer was happening to the Cytha. It was coming all apart.

Duncan watched with fascinated horror as the Cytha broke down into a thousand lumps of motion that scurried in the pit and tried to scramble up its sides, only to fall back in tiny showers of sand.

Amid the scurrying lumps, one thing remained intact, a fragile object that resembled nothing quite so much as the stripped skeleton of a Thanksgiving turkey. But it was a most extraordinary Thanksgiving skeleton, for it throbbed with pulsing life and glowed with a steady violet light.

Chitterings and squeakings came out of the pit and the soft patter of tiny running feet, and as Duncan's eyes became accustomed to the darkness of the pit, he began to make out the forms of some of the scurrying shapes. There were tiny screamers and some dcnovans and sawmill birds and a bevy of kill-devils and something else as well.

Duncan raised a hand and pressed it against his eyes, then took it quickly away. The little faces still were there, looking up as if beseeching him, with the white shine of their teeth and the white rolling of their eyes.

He felt horror wrenching at his stomach and the sour, bitter taste of revulsion welled into his throat, but he fought it down, harking back to that day at the farm before they had started on the hunt.

"I can track down anything but screamers, stilt-birds, long-horns and donovans," Sipar had told him solemnly. "These are my taboos."

And Sipar was also their taboo, for he had not feared the donovan. Sipar had been, however, somewhat fearful of the screamers in the dead of night because, the native had told him reasonably, screamers were forgetful.

Forgetful of what!

Forgetful of the Cytha-mother? Forgetful of the motley brood in which they had spent their childhood?

For that was the only answer to what was running in the pit and the whole, unsuspected answer to the enigma against which men like Shotwell had frustratedly banged their heads for years.

Strange, he told himself. All right, it might be strange, but if it worked, what difference did it make? So the planet's denizens were sexless because there was no need of sex—what was wrong with that? It might, in fact, Duncan admitted to himself, head off a lot of trouble. No family spats, no triangle trouble, no fighting over mates. While it might be unexciting, it did seem downright peaceful.

And since there was no sex, the Cytha species was the planetary mother—but more than just a mother. The Cytha, more than likely, was mother-father, incubator, nursery,

teacher, and perhaps many other things besides, all rolled into one.

In many ways, he thought, it might make a lot of sense. Here natural selection would be ruled out and ecology could be controlled in considerable degree and mutation might even be a matter of deliberate choice rather than random happenstance.

And it would make for a potential planetary unity such as no other world had ever known. Everything here was kin to everything else. Here was a planet where Man, or any other alien, must learn to tread most softly. For it was not inconceivable that, in a crisis or a clash of interests, one might find himself faced suddenly with a unified and co-operating planet, with every form of life making common cause against the interloper.

The little scurrying things had given up; they'd gone back to their places, clustered around the pulsing violet of the Thanksgiving skeleton, each one fitting into place until the Cytha had taken shape again. As if, Duncan told himself, blood and nerve and muscle had come back from a brief vacation to form the heast anew.

"Mister," asked the Cytha, "what do we do now?"

"You should know," Duncan told it. "You were the one who dug the pit."

"I split myself," the Cytha said. "A part of me dug the pit and the other part that stayed on the surface got me out when the job was done."

"Convenient," grunted Duncan.

And it was convenient. That was what had happened to the Cytha when he had shot at it—it had split into all its component parts and had got away. And that night beside the water hole, it had spied on him, again in the form of all its separate parts, from the safety of the thicket.

"You are caught and so am I," the Cytha said. "Both of us will die here. It seems a fitting end to our association. Do you not agree with me?"

"I'll get you out," said Duncan wearily. "I have no quarrel with children."

He dragged the rifle toward him and unhooked the sling from the stock. Carefully he lowered the gun by the sling, still attached to the barrel, down into the pit.

The Cytha reared up and grasped it with its forepaws.

"Easy now," Duncan cautioned. "You're heavy. I don't know if I can hold you."

But he needn't have worried. The little ones were detaching themselves and scrambling up the rifle and the sling. They reached his extended arms and ran up them with scrabbling claws. Little sneering screamers and the comic stilt-birds and the mouse-size kill-devils that snarled at him as they climbed. And the little grinning natives—not babies, scarcely children, but small editions of full-grown humanoids. And the weird donovans scampering happily.

They came climbing up his arms and across his shoulders and milled about on the ground beside him, waiting for the others.

omers.

And finally the Cytha, not skinned down to the bare bones of its Thanksgiving-turkey-size, but far smaller than it had been, climbed awkwardly up the rifle and the sling to safety.

Duncan hauled the rifle up and twisted himself into a sit-

ting position.

The Cytha, he saw, was reassembling.

He watched in fascination as the restless miniatures of the planet's life swarmed and seethed like a hive of bees, each one clicking into place to form the entire beast.

And now the Cytha was complete. Yet small-still small-no

more than lion-size.

"But it is such a little one," Zikkara had argued with him

that morning at the farm. "It is such a young one."

Just a young brood, no more than suckling infants—if suckling was the word, or even some kind of wild approximation. And through the months and years, the Cytha would grow, with the growing of its diverse children, until it became a monstrous thing.

It stood there looking at Duncan and the tree.

"Now," said Duncan, "if you'll push on the tree, I think that between the two of us--"

"It is too bad," the Cytha said, and wheeled itself about.

He watched it go loping off.

"Hey!' he yelled.

But it didn't stop.

He grabbed up the rifle and had it halfway to his shoulder before he remembered how absolutely futile it was to shoot at the Cytha.

He let the rifle down.

"The dirty, ungrateful, double-crossing-"

He stopped himself. There was no profit in rage. When you were in a jam, you did the best you could. You figured out the problem and you picked the course that seemed best and you didn't panic at the odds.

He laid the rifle in his lap and started to hook up the sling and it was not till then that he saw the barrel was packed

with sand and dirt.

He sat numbly for a moment, thinking back to how close he had been to firing at the Cytha, and if that barrel was packed hard enough or deep enough, he might have had an exploding weapon in his hands.

He had used the rifle as a crowbar, which was no way to use a gun. That was one way, he told himself, that was guar-

anteed to ruin it.

Duncan hunted around and found a twig and dug at the clogged muzzle, but the dirt was jammed too firmly in it and he made little progress.

He dropped the twig and was hunting for another stronger one when he caught the motion in a nearby clump of brush.

He watched closely for a moment and there was nothing, so he resumed the hunt for a stronger twig. He found one and started poking at the muzzle and there was another flash of motion.

He twisted around. Not more than twenty feet away, a screamer sat easily on its haunches. Its tongue was lolling out and it had what looked like a grin upon its face.

And there was another, just at the edge of the clump of brush where he had caught the motion first.

There were others as well, he knew. He could hear them

sliding through the tangle of fallen trees, could sense the soft padding of their feet.

The executioners, he thought.

The Cytha certainly had not wasted any time.

He raised the rifle and rapped the barrel smartly on the fallen tree, trying to dislodge the obstruction in the bore. But it didn't budge; the barrel still was packed with sand.

But no matter-he'd have to fire anyhow and take whatever chance there was.

He shoved the control to automatic and tilted up the muzzle.

There were six of them now, sitting in a ragged row, grinning at him, not in any hurry. They were sure of him and there was no hurry. He'd still be there when they decided to move in.

And there were others-on all sides of him.

Once it started, he wouldn't have a chance.

"It'll be expensive, gents," he told them.

And he was astonished at how calm, how coldly objective he could be, now that the chips were down. But that was the way it was, he realized.

He'd thought, a while ago, how a man might suddenly find himself face to face with an aroused and co-operating planet. Maybe this was it in miniature.

The Cytha had obviously passed the word along: Man back there needs killing. Go and get him.

Just like that, for a Cytha would be the power here. A life force, the giver of life, the decider of life, the repository of all animal life on the entire planet.

There was more than one of them, of course. Probably they had home districts, spheres of influence and responsibility mapped out. And each one would be a power supreme in its own district.

Momism, he thought with a sour grin. Momism at its absolute peak.

Nevertheless, he told himself, it wasn't too bad a system if you wanted to consider it objectively.

But he was in a poor position to be objective about that or anything else.

The screamers were inching closer, hitching themselves for-

ward slowly on their bottoms.

"I'm going to set up a deadline for you critters," Duncan called out. "Just two feet farther, up to that rock, and I let you have it."

He'd get all six of them, of course, but the shots would be the signal for the general rush by all those other animals slinking in the brush.

If he were free, if he were on his feet, possibly he could beat them off. But pinned as he was, he didn't have a chance. It would be all over less than a minute after he opened fire. He might, he figured, last as long as that.

The six inched closer and he raised his rifle.

But they stopped and moved no farther. Their ears lifted just a little, as if they might be listening, and the grins dropped from their faces. They squirmed uneasily and assumed a look of guilt and, like shadows, they were gone, melting away so swiftly that he scarcely saw them go.

Duncan sat quietly, listening, but he could hear no sound.

Reprieve, he thought. But for how long? Something had scared them off, but in a while they might be back. He had to get out of here and he had to make it fast.

If he could find a longer lever, he could move the tree. There was a branch slanting up from the topside of the fallen tree. It was almost four inches at the butt and it carried its diameter well.

He slid the knife from his belt and looked at it. Too small, too thin, he thought, to chisel through a four-inch branch, but it was all he had. When a man was desperate enough, though, when his very life depended on it, he would do anything.

He hitched himself along, sliding toward the point where the branch protruded from the tree. His pinned leg protested with stabs of pain as his body wrenched it around. He gritted his teeth and pushed himself closer. Pain slashed through his leg again and he was still long inches from the branch. He tried once more, then gave up. He lay panting on the ground.

There was just one thing left.

He'd have to try to hack out a notch in the trunk just above his leg. No, that would be next to impossible, for he'd be cutting into the whorled and twisted grain at the base of the supporting fork.

Either that or cut off his foot, and that was even more impossible. A man would faint before he got the job done.

It was useless, he knew. He could do neither one. There was nothing he could do.

For the first time, he admitted to himself: He would stay here and die. Shotwell, back at the farm, in a day or two might set out hunting for him. But Shotwell would never find him. And anyhow, by nightfall, if not sooner, the screamers would be back.

He laughed gruffly in his throat-laughing at himself.

The Cytha had won the hunt hands down. It had used a human weakness to win and then had used that same human weakness to achieve a viciously poetic vengeance.

After all, what could one expect? One could not equate human ethics with the ethics of the Cytha. Might not human ethics, in certain cases, seem as weird and illogical, as infamous and ungrateful, to an alien?

He hunted for a twig and began working again to clean the rifle bore.

A crashing behind him twisted him around and he saw the Cytha. Behind the Cytha stalked a donovan.

He tossed away the twig and raised the gun.

"No," said the Cytha sharply.

The donovan tramped purposefully forward and Duncan felt the prickling of the skin along his back. It was a frightful thing. Nothing could stand before a donovan. The screamers had turned tail and run when they had heard it a couple of miles or more away.

The donovan was named for the first known human to be killed by one. That first was only one of many. The roll of donovan-victims ran long, and no wonder, Duncan thought. It was the closest he had ever been to one of the beasts and he felt a coldness creeping over him. It was like an elephant and a tiger and a grizzly bear wrapped in the selfsame hide. It was the most vicious fighting machine that ever had been spawned.

He lowered the rifle. There would be no point in shooting.

In two quick strides, the beast could be upon him.

The donovan almost stepped on him and he flinched away. Then the great head lowered and gave the fallen tree a butt and the tree bounced for a yard or two. The donovan kept on walking. Its powerfully muscled stern moved into the brush and out of sight.

"Now we are even," said the Cytha. "I had to get some

help."

Duncan grunted. He flexed the leg that had been trapped and he could not feel the foot. Using his rifle as a cane, he pulled himself erect. He tried putting weight on the injured foot and it screamed with pain.

He braced himself with the rifle and rotated so that he

faced the Cytha.

"Thanks, pal," he said. "I didn't think you'd do it."

"You will not hunt me now?"

Duncan shook his head. "I'm in no shape for hunting. I am heading home."

"It was the vua, wasn't it? That was why you hunted me?"

"The vua is my livelihood," said Duncan. "I cannot let you eat it."

The Cytha stood silently and Duncan watched it for a moment. Then he wheeled. Using the rifle for a crutch, he started hobbling away.

The Cytha hurried to catch up with him.

"Let us make a bargain, mister. I will not eat the vua and you will not hunt me. Is that fair enough?"

"That is fine with me," said Duncan. "Let us shake on it."

He put down a hand and the Cytha lifted up a paw. They shook, somewhat awkwardly, but very solemnly.

"Now," the Cytha said, "I will see you home. The screamers would have you before you got out of the woods."

VI.

They halted on a knoll. Below them lay the farm, with the vua rows straight and green in the red soil of the fields.

"You can make it from here," the Cytha said. "I am wearing thin. It is an awful effort to keep on being smart. I want to go back to ignorance and comfort."

"It was nice knowing you," Duncan told it politely. "And

thanks for sticking with me."

He started down the hill, leaning heavily on the rifle-crutch. Then he frowned troubledly and turned back.

"Look," he said, "you'll go back to animal again. Then you will forget. One of these days, you'll see all that nice, tender vua and—"

"Very simple," said the Cytha. "If you find me in the vua, just begin hunting me. With you after me, I will quickly get smart and remember once again and it will be all right."

"Sure," agreed Duncan. "I guess that will work."

The Cytha watched him go stumping down the hill.

Admirable, it thought. Next time I have a brood, I think I'll raise a dozen like him.

It turned around and headed for the deeper brush.

It felt intelligence slipping from it, felt the old, uncaring comfort coming back again. But it glowed with anticipation, seethed with happiness at the big surprise it had in store for its new-found friend.

Won't he be happy and surprised when I drop them at his door, it thought.

Will he be ever pleased!

BRIGHTSIDE CROSSING

James Baron was not pleased to hear that he had had a visitor when he reached the Red Lion that evening. He had no stomach for mysteries, vast or trifling, and there were pressing things to think about at this time. Yet the doorman had flagged him as he came in from the street: "A thousand pardons, Mr. Baron. The gentleman—he would leave no name. He said you'd want to see him. He will be back by eight."

Baron drummed his fingers on the table top, staring about the quiet lounge. Street trade was discouraged at the Red Lion, gently but persuasively; the patrons were few in number. Across to the right was a group that Baron knew vaguely—Andean climbers, or at least two of them were. Over near the door he recognized old Balmer, who had mapped the first passage to the core of Vulcan Crater on Venus. Baron returned his smile with a nod. Then he settled back and waited impatiently for the intruder who demanded his time without justifying it.

Presently a small, grizzled man crossed the room and sat down at Baron's table. He was short and wiry. His face held no key to his age—he might have been thirty or a thousand—but he looked weary and immensely ugly. His cheeks and forehead were twisted and brown, with scars that were still healing.

The stranger said, "I'm glad you waited. I've heard you're planning to attempt the Brightside."

Baron stared at the man for a moment. "I see you can read telecasts," he said coldly. "The news was correct. We are going to make a Brightside Crossing."

"At perihelion?"

"Of course. When else?"

The grizzled man searched Baron's face for a moment without expression. Then he said slowly, "No, I'm afraid you're not going to make the Crossing."

"Say, who are you, if you don't mind?" Baron demanded.

"The name is Claney," said the stranger.

There was a silence. Then: "Claney?" Peter Claney?" "That's right."

Baron's eyes were wide with excitement, all trace of anger gone. "My God, man—where have you been hiding? We've been trying to contact you for months!"

"I know. I was hoping you'd quit looking and chuck the

whole idea."

"Quit looking!" Baron bent forward over the table. "My friend, we'd given up hope, but we've never quit looking. Here, have a drink. There's so much you can tell us." His fingers were trembling.

Peter Claney shook his head. "I can't tell you anything you

want to hear."

"But you've got to. You're the only man on Earth who's attempted a Brightside Crossing and lived through it! And the story you cleared for the news—it was nothing. We need details. Where did your equipment fall down? Where did you miscalculate? What were the trouble spots?" Baron jabbed a finger at Claney's face. "That, for instance—epithelioma? Why? What was wrong with your glass? Your filters? We've got to know those things. If you can tell us, we can make it across where your attempt failed—"

"You want to know why we failed?" asked Claney. "Of course we want to know. We have to know."

"It's simple. We failed because it can't be done. We couldn't do it and neither can you. No human beings will ever cross the Brightside alive, not if they try for centuries."

"Nonsense," Baron declared. "We will."

Claney shrugged. "I was there. I know what I'm saying. You can blame the equipment or the men—there were flaws in both quarters—but we just didn't know what we were fight-

ing. It was the *planet* that whipped us, that and the Sun. They'll whip you, too, if you try it."

"Never," said Baron.

"Let me tell you," Peter Claney said.

I'd been interested in the Brightside for almost as long as I can remember (Claney said). I guess I was about ten when Wyatt and Carpenter made the last attempt—that was in 2082, I think. I followed the news stories like a tri-V serial, and then I was heartbroken when they just disappeared.

I know now that they were a pair of idiots, starting off without proper equipment, with practically no knowledge of surface conditions, without any charts—they couldn't have made a hundred miles, snowflakes in hell—but I didn't know that then and it was a terrible tragedy. After that, I followed Sanderson's work in the Twilight Lab up there and began to get Brightside into my blood.

But it was Mikuta's idea to attempt a Crossing. Did you ever know Tom Mikuta? I don't suppose you did. No, not Japanese—Polish-American. He was a major in the Interplanetary Service for some years and hung onto the title after he gave up his commission.

He was with Armstrong on Mars during his Service days, with a good deal of the original mapping and surveying for the Colony to his credit. I first met him on Venus; we spent five years together up there doing some of the nastiest exploring since the Matto Grasso. Then he made the attempt on Vulcan Crater that paved the way for Balmer a few years later.

I'd always liked the Major—he was big and quiet and cool, the sort of guy who always had things figured a little further ahead than anyone else and always knew what to do in a tight place. Too many men in this game are all nerve and luck, with no judgment. The Major had both. He also had the kind of personality that could take a crew of wild men and make them work like a well-oiled machine across a thousand miles of Venus jungle. I liked him and I trusted him.

He contacted me in New York, and he was very casual at first. We spent an evening here at the Red Lion, talking about old times; he told me about the Vulcan business, and how he'd been out to see Sanderson and the Twilight Lab on Mercury, and how he preferred a hot trek to a cold one any day of the year—and then he wanted to know what I'd been doing since Venus and what my plans were.

"No particular plans," I told him. "Why?"

He looked me over. "How much do you weigh, Peter?"

I told him one-thirty-five.

"That much!" he said. "Be damned. Well, there can't be much fat on you, at any rate. How do you take heat?"

"You should know," I said. "Venus was no icebox."

"No, I mean real heat."

Then I began to get it. "You're planning a trip."

"That's right. A hot trip." He grinned at me. "Might be dangerous, too."

"What trip?"

"Brightside of Mercury," the Major said.

I whistled cautiously. "Aphelion?"

He threw his head back. "Why try a Crossing at aphelion? What have you done then? Four thousand miles of butcherous heat, just to have some joker come along, use your data, and drum you out of the glory by crossing at perihelion forty-four days later? No, thanks. I want the Brightside without any nonsense about it." He leaned across me eagerly. "I want to make a Crossing at perihelion and I want to cross on the surface. If a man can do that, he's got Mercury. Until then, no-body's got Mercury. I want Mercury—but I'll need help getting it."

I'd thought of it a thousand times and never dared consider it. Nobody had, since Wyatt and Carpenter disappeared. Mercury turns on its axis in the same time that it wheels around the Sun, which means that the Brightside is always facing in. That makes the Brightside of Mercury at perihelion the hottest place in the Solar System, with one single exception: the surface of the Sun itself.

It would be a hellish trek. Only a few men had ever learned just *how* hellish and they never came back to tell about it. It was a real hell's Crossing, but someday somebody would cross it.

I wanted to be along.

The Twilight Lab, near the northern pole of Mercury, was the obvious jumping-off place. The setup there wasn't very extensive—a rocket landing, the labs and quarters for Sanderson's crew sunk deep into the crust, and the tower that housed the Solar 'scope that Sanderson had built up there ten years before.

Twilight Lab wasn't particularly interested in the Brightside, of course—the Sun was Sanderson's baby and he'd picked Mercury as the closest chunk of rock to the Sun that could hold his observatory. He'd chosen a good location, too. On Mercury, the Brightside temperature hits 770° F. at perihelion and the Darkside runs pretty constant at -410° F. No permanent installation with a human crew could survive at either extreme. But with Mercury's wobble, the twilight zone between Brightside and Darkside offers something closer to survival temperatures.

Sanderson built the Lab up near the pole, where the zone is about five miles wide, so the temperature only varies 50 to 60 degrees with the liberation. The Solar 'scope could take that much change, and they'd get good clear observation of the Sun for about 70 out of the 88 days it takes the planet to wheel around.

The Major was counting on Sanderson knowing something about Mercury as well as the Sun when we camped at the Lab to make final preparations.

Sanderson did. He thought we'd lost our minds and he said so, but he gave us all the help he could. He spent a week briefing Jack Stone, the third member of our party, who had arrived with the supplies and equipment a few days earlier. Poor Jack met us at the rocket landing almost bawling, Sanderson had given him such a gloomy picture of what Brightside was like.

Stone was a youngster—hardly twenty-five, I'd say—but he'd been with the Major at Vulcan and had begged to join this trek. I had a funny feeling that Jack really didn't care for exploring too much, but he thought Mikuta was God, followed him around like a puppy.

It didn't matter to me as long as he knew what he was getting in for. You don't go asking people in this game why they do it—they're liable to get awfully uneasy, and none of them can ever give you an answer that makes sense. Anyway, Stone had borrowed three men from the Lab and had the supplies and equipment all lined up when we got there, ready to check and test.

We dug right in. With plenty of funds—tri-V money and some government cash the Major had talked his way around—our equipment was new and good. Mikuta had done the designing and testing himself, with a big assist from Sanderson. We had four Bugs, three of them the light pillow-tire models, with special lead-cooled cut-in engines when the heat set in, and one heavy-duty tractor model for pulling the sledges.

The Major went over them like a kid at the circus. Then he said, "Have you heard anything from McIvers?"

"Who's he?" Stone wanted to know.

"He'll be joining us. He's a good man-got quite a name for climbing, back home." The Major turned to me. "You've probably heard of him."

I'd heard plenty of stories about Ted McIvers and I wasn't too happy to hear that he was joining us. "Kind of a daredevil, isn't he?"

"Maybe. He's lucky and skillful. Where do you draw the line? We'll need plenty of both."

"Have you ever worked with him?" I asked.

"No. Are you worried?"

"Not exactly. But Brightside is no place to count on luck."

The Major laughed. "I don't think we need to worry about McIvers. We understood each other when I talked up the trip to him, and we're going to need each other too much to do any fooling around." He turned back to the supply list.

"Meanwhile, let's get this stuff listed and packed. We'll need to cut weight sharply and our time is short. Sanderson says we should leave in three days."

Two days later, McIvers hadn't arrived. The Major didn't say much about it: Stone was getting edgy and so was I. We spent the second day studying charts of the Brightside, such as they were. The best available were pretty poor, taken from so far out that the detail dissolved into blurs on blowup. They showed the biggest ranges of peaks and craters and faults, and that was all. Still, we could use them to plan a broad outline of our course.

"This range here," the Major said as we crowded around the board, "is largely inactive, according to Sanderson. But these to the south and west *could* be active. Seismograph tracings suggest a lot of activity in that region, getting worse down toward the equator—not only volcanic, but sub-surface shifting."

Stone nodded. "Sanderson told me there was probably constant surface activity."

The Major shrugged. "Well, it's treacherous, there's no doubt of it. But the only way to avoid it is to travel over the Pole, which would lose us days and offer us no guarantee of less activity to the west. Now we might avoid some if we could find a pass through this range and cut sharp east—"

It seemed that the more we considered the problem, the further we got from a solution. We knew there were active volcanoes on the Brightside—even on the Darkside, though surface activity there was pretty much slowed down and localized.

But there were problems of atmosphere on Brightside, as well. There was an atmosphere and a constant atmospheric flow from Brightside to Darkside. Not much—the lighter gases had reached escape velocity and disappeared from Brightside millennia ago—but there was CO₂, and nitrogen, and traces of other heavier gases. There was also an abundance of sulfur vapor, as well as carbon disulfide and sulfur dioxide.

The atmospheric tide moved toward the Darkside, where it condensed, carrying enough volcanic ash with it for Sanderson

to estimate the depth and nature of the surface upheavals on Brightside from his samplings. The trick was to find a passage that avoided those upheavals as far as possible. But in the final analysis, we were barely scraping the surface. The only way we would find out what was happening where was to be there.

Finally, on the third day, McIvers blew in on a freight rocket from Venus. He'd missed by a few hours the ship that the Major and I had taken and conned his way to Venus in hopes of getting a hop from there. He didn't seem too upset about it, as though this were his usual way of doing things, and he couldn't see why everyone should get so excited.

He was a tall, rangy man with long, wavy hair prematurely gray, and the sort of eyes that looked like a climber's—half closed, sleepy, almost indolent, but capable of abrupt alertness. And he never stood still; he was always moving, always doing something with his hands, or talking, or pacing about.

Evidently the Major decided not to press the issue of his arrival. There was still work to do, and an hour later we were running the final tests on the pressure suits. That evening, Stone and McIvers were thick as thieves, and everything was set for an early departure.

"And that," said Baron, finishing his drink and signaling the waiter for another pair, "was your first big mistake."

Peter Claney raised his eyebrows. "McIvers?"

"Of course."

Claney shrugged, glanced at the small quiet tables around them. "There are lots of bizarre personalities around a place like this, and some of the best wouldn't seem to be the most reliable at first glance. Anyway, personality problems weren't our big problem right then. Equipment worried us first and route next."

Baron nodded in agreement. "What kind of suits did you have?"

"The best insulating suits ever made," said Claney. "Each one had an inner lining of a Fiberglas modification, to avoid the clumsiness of asbestos, and carried the refrigerating unit

and oxygen storage which we recharged from the sledges every eight hours. Outer layer carried a monomolecular chrome reflecting surface that made us glitter like Christmas trees. And we had a half inch dead-air space under positive pressure between the two layers. Warning thermocouples, of course-at 770 degrees, it wouldn't take much time to fry us to cinders if the suits failed somewhere."

"How about the Bugs?"

"They were insulated, too, but we weren't counting on them too much for protection."

"You weren't!" Baron exclaimed. "Why not?"

"We'd be in and out of them too much. They gave us mobility and storage, but we knew we'd have to do a lot of forward work on foot." Claney smiled bitterly. "Which meant that we had an inch of Fiberglas and a half inch of dead air between us and a surface temperature where lead flowed like water and zinc was almost at melting point and the pools of sulfur in the shadows were boiling like oatmeal over a campfire."

Baron licked his lips. His fingers stroked the cool, wet glass.

"Go on," he said tautly. "You started on schedule?"

"Oh, yes," said Claney, "we started on schedule, all right.
We just didn't quite end on schedule, and that was all. But I'm getting to that."

He settled back in his chair and continued.

We jumped off from Twilight on a course due southeast with thirty days to make it to the Center of Brightside. If we could cross an average of 70 miles a day, we could hit Center exactly at perihelion, the point of Mercury's closest approach to the Sun-which made Center the hottest part of the planet at the hottest it ever gets.

The Sun was already huge and yellow over the horizon when we started, twice the size it appears on Earth. Every day that Sun would grow bigger and whiter, and every day the surface would get hotter. But once we reached Center, the job was only half done-we would still have to travel another 2000 miles to the opposite twilight zone. Sanderson was

to meet us on the other side in the Laboratory's scout ship, approximately 60 days from the time we jumped off.

That was the plan, in outline. It was up to us to cross those 70 miles a day, no matter how hot it became, no matter what terrain we had to cross. Detours would be dangerous and time-consuming. Delays could cost us our lives. We all knew that.

The Major briefed us on details an hour before we left. "Peter, you'll take the lead Bug, the small one we stripped down for you. Stone and I will flank you on either side, giving you a hundred-yard lead. McIvers, you'll have the job of dragging the sledges, so we'll have to direct your course pretty closely. Peter's job is to pick the passage at any given point. If there's any doubt of safe passage, we'll all explore ahead on foot before we risk the Bugs. Got that?"

McIvers and Stone exchanged glances. McIvers said: "Jack and I were planning to change around. We figured he could take the sledges. That would give me a little more mobility."

The Major looked up sharply at Stone. "Do you buy that, Jack?"

Stone shrugged. "I don't mind. Mac wanted-"

McIvers made an impatient gesture with his hands. "It doesn't matter. I just feel better when I'm on the move. Does it make any difference?"

"I guess it doesn't," said the Major. "Then you'll flank Peter

along with me. Right?"

"Sure, sure." McIvers pulled at his lower lip. "Who's going to do the advance scouting?"

"It sounds like I am," I cut in. "We want to keep the lead Bug light as possible."

Mikuta nodded. "That's right. Peter's Bug is stripped down to the frame and wheels."

McIvers shook his head. "No, I mean the advance work. You need somebody out ahead—four or five miles, at least—to pick up the big flaws and active surface changes, don't you?" He stared at the Major. "I mean, how can we tell what sort of a hole we may be moving into, unless we have a scout up ahead?"

"That's what we have the charts for," the Major said

sharply.

"Charts! I'm talking about detail work. We don't need to worry about the major topography. It's the little faults you can't see on the pictures that can kill us." He tossed the charts down excitedly. "Look, let me take a Bug out ahead and work reconnaissance, keep five, maybe ten miles ahead of the column. I can stay on good solid ground, of course, but scan the area closely and radio back to Peter where to avoid the flaws. Then—"

"No dice," the Major broke in.

"But why not? We could save ourselves days!"

"I don't care what we could save. We stay together. When we get to the Center, I want live men along with me. That means we stay within easy sight of each other at all times. Any climber knows that everybody is safer in a party than one man alone—anytime, anyplace."

McIvers stared at him, his cheeks an angry red. Finally he

gave a sullen nod. "Okay. If you say so."

"Well, I say so and I mean it. I don't want any fancy stuff. We're going to hit Center together, and finish the Crossing together. Got that?"

McIvers nodded. Mikuta then looked at Stone and me and we nodded, too.

"All right," he said slowly. "Now that we've got it straight, let's go."

It was hot. If I forget everything else about that trek, I'll never forget that huge yellow Sun glaring down, without a break, hotter and hotter with every mile. We knew that the first few days would be the easiest and we were rested and fresh when we started down the long ragged gorge southeast of the Twilight Lab.

I moved out first; back over my shoulder, I could see the Major and McIvers crawling out behind me, their pillow tires taking the rugged floor of the gorge smoothly. Behind them, Stone dragged the sledges.

Even at only 30 per cent Earth gravity they were a strain on the big tractor, until the ski-blades bit into the fluffy volcanic ash blanketing the valley. We even had a path to follow for the first 20 miles.

I kept my eyes pasted to the big Polaroid binocs, picking out the track the early research teams had made out into the edge of Brightside. But in a couple of hours we rumbled past Sanderson's little outpost observatory and the tracks stopped. We were in virgin territory and already the Sun was beginning to bite.

We didn't feel the heat so much those first days out. We saw it. The refrig units kept our skins at a nice comfortable 75° F. inside our suits, but our eyes watched that glaring Sun and the baked yellow rocks going past, and some nerve pathways got twisted up, somehow. We poured sweat as if we were in a superheated furnace.

We drove eight hours and slept five. When a sleep period came due, we pulled the Bugs together into a square, threw up a light aluminum sun-shield and lay out in the dust and rocks. The sun-shield cut the temperature down 60 or 70 degrees, for whatever help that was. And then we ate from the forward sledge—sucking through tubes—protein, carbohydrates, bulk gelatin, vitamins.

The Major measured water out with an iron hand, because we'd have drunk ourselves into nephritis in a week otherwise. We were constantly, unceasingly thirsty. Ask the physiologists and psychiatrists why—they can give you half a dozen interesting reasons—but all we knew, or cared about, was that it happened to be so.

We didn't sleep the first few stops, as a consequence. Our eyes burned in spite of the filters and we had roaring headaches, but we couldn't sleep them off. We sat around looking at each other. Then McIvers would say how good a beer would taste, and off we'd go. We'd have butchered our grandmothers for one ice-cold bottle of beer.

After a few driving periods, I began to get my bearings at the wheel. We were moving down into desolation that made Earth's old Death Valley look like a Japanese rose garden. Huge sun-baked cracks opened up in the floor of the gorge, with black cliffs jutting up on either side; the air was filled with a barely visible yellowish mist of sulfur and sulfurous gases.

It was a hot, barren hellhole, no place for any man to go, but the challenge was so powerful you could almost feel it. No one had ever crossed this land before and escaped. Those who had tried it had been cruelly punished, but the land was still there, so it had to be crossed. Not the easy way. It had to be crossed the hardest way possible: overland, through anything the land could throw up to us, at the most difficult time possible.

Yet we knew that even the land might have been conquered before, except for that Sun. We'd fought absolute cold before and won. We'd never fought heat like this and won. The only worse heat in the Solar System was the surface of the Sun itself.

Brightside was worth trying for. We would get it or it would get us. That was the bargain.

I learned a lot about Mercury those first few driving periods. The gorge petered out after a hundred miles and we moved onto the slope of a range of ragged craters than ran south and east. This range had shown no activity since the first landing on Mercury forty years before, but beyond it there were active cones. Yellow fumes rose from the craters constantly; their sides were shrouded with heavy ash.

We couldn't detect a wind, but we knew there was a hot, sulfurous breeze sweeping in great continental tides across the face of the planet. Not enough for erosion, though. The craters rose up out of jagged gorges, huge towering spears of rock and rubble. Below were the vast yellow flatlands, smoking and hissing from the gases beneath the crust. Over everything was gray dust—silicates and salts, pumice and limestone and granite ash, filling crevices and declivities—offering a soft, treacherous surface for the Bug's pillow tires.

I learned to read the ground, to tell a covered fault by the sag of the dust; I learned to spot a passable crack, and tell it from an impassable cut. Time after time the Bugs ground to a halt while we explored a passage on foot, tied together with light copper cable, digging, advancing, digging some more

until we were sure the surface would carry the machines. It was cruel work; we slept in exhaustion. But it went smoothly, at first.

Too smoothly, it seemed to me, and the others seemed to think so, too.

McIvers' restlessness was beginning to grate on our nerves. He talked too much, while we were resting or while we were driving; wisecracks, witticisms, unfunny jokes that wore thin with repetition. He took to making side trips from the route now and then, never far, but a little further each time.

Jack Stone reacted quite the opposite; he grew quieter with each stop, more reserved and apprehensive. I didn't like it, but I figured that it would pass off after a while. I was apprehensive enough myself; I just managed to hide it better.

And every mile the Sun got bigger and whiter and higher in the sky and hotter. Without our ultra-violet screens and glare filters we would have been blinded; as it was our eyes ached constantly, and the skin on our faces itched and tingled at the end of an eight-hour trek.

But it took one of those side trips of McIvers' to deliver the penultimate blow to our already fraying nerves. He had driven down a side-branch of a long canyon running off west of our route and was almost out of sight in a cloud of ash when we heard a sharp cry through our earphones.

I wheeled my Bug around with my heart in my throat and spotted him through the binocs, waving frantically from the top of his machine. The Major and I took off, lumbering down the gulch after him as fast as the Bugs could go, with a thousand horrible pictures racing through our minds . . .

We found him standing stock-still, pointing down the gorge and, for once, he didn't have anything to say. It was the wreck of a Bug; an old-fashioned half-track model of the sort that hadn't been in use for years. It was wedged tight in a cut in the rock, an axle broken, its casing split wide open up the middle, half buried in a rock slide. A dozen feet away were two insulated suits with white bones gleaming through the Fiberglas helmets.

This was as far as Wyatt and Carpenter had gotten on their

Brightside Crossing.

On the fifth driving period out, the terrain began to change. It looked the same, but every now and then it *felt* different. On two occasions I felt my wheels spin, with a howl of protest from my engine. Then, quite suddenly, the Bug gave a lurch; I gunned my motor and nothing happened.

I could see the dull gray stuff seeping up around the hubs, thick and tenacious, splattering around in steaming gobs as the wheels spun. I knew what had happened the moment the wheels gave and, a few minutes later, they chained me to the tractor and dragged me back out of the mire. It looked for all the world like thick gray mud, but it was a pit of molten lead, steaming under a soft layer of concealing ash.

I picked my way more cautiously then. We were getting into an area of recent surface activity; the surface was really treacherous. I caught myself wishing that the Major had okayed McIvers' scheme for an advance scout; more dangerous for the individual, maybe, but I was driving blind now and I didn't like it.

One error in judgment could sink us all, but I wasn't thinking much about the others. I was worried about me, plenty worried. I kept thinking, better McIvers should go than me. It wasn't healthy thinking and I knew it, but I couldn't get the thought out of my mind.

It was a grueling eight hours, and we slept poorly. Back in the Bug again, we moved still more slowly—edging out on a broad flat plateau, dodging a network of gaping surface cracks—winding back and forth in an effort to keep the machines on solid rock. I couldn't see far ahead, because of the yellow haze rising from the cracks, so I was almost on top of it when I saw a sharp cut ahead where the surface dropped six feet beyond a deep crack.

I let out a shout to halt the others; then I edged my Bug forward, peering at the cleft. It was deep and wide. I moved fifty yards to the left, then back to the right.

There was only one place that looked like a possible crossing; a long, narrow ledge of gray stuff that lay down across a

section of the fault like a ramp. Even as I watched it, I could feel the surface crust under the Bug trembling and saw the ledge shift over a few feet.

The Major's voice sounded in my ears. "How about it, Peter?"

"I don't know. This crust is on roller skates," I called back. "How about that ledge?"

I hesitated. "I'm scared of it, Major. Let's backtrack and try to find a way around."

There was a roar of disgust in my earphones and McIvers' Bug suddenly lurched forward. It rolled down past me, picked up speed, with McIvers hunched behind the wheel like a race driver. He was heading past me straight for the gray ledge.

My shout caught in my throat; I heard the Major take a huge breath and roar: "My God, Mac, stop that thing, you fool!" and then McIvers' Bug was out on the ledge, lumbering across like a juggernaut.

The ledge jolted as the tires struck it; for a horrible moment, it seemed to be sliding out from under the machine. And then the Bug was across in a cloud of dust, and I heard McIvers' voice in my ears, shouting in glee. "Come on, you slowpokes. It'll hold you!"

Something unprintable came through the earphones as the Major drew up alongside me and moved his Bug out on the ledge slowly and over to the other side. Then he said, "Take it slow, Peter. Then give Jack a hand with the slédges." His voice sounded tight as wire.

Ten minutes later, we were on the other side of the cleft. The Major checked the whole column; then he turned on McIvers angrily. "One more trick like that," he said, "and I'll strap you to a rock and leave you. Do you understand me? One more time—"

McIvers' voice was heavy with protest. "Good Lord, if we leave it up to Claney, he'll have us out here forever! Any blind fool could see that that ledge would hold."

"I saw it moving," I shot back at him.

"All right, all right, so you've got good eyes. Why all the fuss? We got across, didn't we? But I say we've got to have

a little nerve and use it once in a while if we're ever going

to get across this lousy hotbox."

"We need to use a little judgment, too," the Major snapped. "All right, let's roll. But if you think I was joking, you just try me out once." He let it soak in for a minute. Then he geared his Bug on around to my flank again.

At the stopover, the incident wasn't mentioned again, but the Major drew me aside just as I was settling down for sleep.

"Peter, I'm worried," he said slowly.

"McIvers? Don't worry. He's not as reckless as he seemsjust impatient. We are over a hundred miles behind schedule, and we're moving awfully slow. We only made forty miles this last drive."

The Major shook his head. "I don't mean McIvers. I mean the kid."

"Jack? What about him?"

"Take a look."

Stone was shaking. He was over near the tractor—away from the rest of us—and he was lying on his back, but he wasn't asleep. His whole body was shaking, convulsively. I saw him grip an outcropping of rock hard.

I walked over and sat down beside him. "Get your water all

right?" I said.

He didn't answer. He just kept on shaking.

"Hey, boy," I said. "What's the trouble?"

"It's hot," he said, choking out the words.

"Sure it's hot, but don't let it throw you. We're in really good shape."

"We're not," he snapped. "We're in rotten shape, if you ask me. We're not going to make it, do you know that? That crazy fool's going to kill us for sure—" All of a sudden, he was bawling like a baby. "I'm scared—I shouldn't be here—I'm scared. What am I trying to prove by coming out here, for God's sake? I'm some kind of hero or something? I tell you I'm scared—"

"Look," I said. "Mikuta's scared, I'm scared. So what? We'll make it, don't worry. And nobody's trying to be a hero."

"Nobody but Hero Stone," he said bitterly. He shook himself and gave a tight little laugh. "Some hero, eh?"

"We'll make it," I said.

"Sure," he said finally. "Sorry. I'll be okay."

I rolled over, but waited until he was good and quiet. Then I tried to sleep, but I didn't sleep too well. I kept thinking about that ledge. I'd known from the look of it what it was; a zinc slough of the sort Sanderson had warned us about, a wide sheet of almost pure zinc that had been thrown up whitehot from below, quite recently, just waiting for oxygen or sulfur to rot it through.

I knew enough about zinc to know that at these temperatures it gets brittle as glass. Take a chance like McIvers had taken and the whole sheet could snap like a dry pine board. But it wasn't McIvers' fault that it hadn't.

Five hours later, we were back at the wheel. We were hardly moving at all. The ragged surface was almost impassable—great jutting rocks peppered the plateau; ledges crumbled the moment my tires touched them; long, open canyons turned into lead-mires or sulfur pits.

A dozen times I climbed out of the Bug to prod out an uncertain area with my boots and pikestaff. Whenever I did, McIvers piled out behind me, running ahead like a schoolboy at the fair, then climbing back again, red-faced and panting, while we moved the machines ahead another mile or two.

Time was pressing us now, and McIvers wouldn't let me forget it. We had made only about 320 miles in six driving periods, so we were about a hundred miles or even more behind schedule.

"We're not going to make it," McIvers would complain angrily. "That Sun's going to be out to aphelion by the time we hit the Center—"

"Sorry, but I can't take it any faster," I told him. I was getting good and mad. I knew what he wanted but didn't dare let him have it. I was scared enough pushing the Bug out on those ledges, even knowing that at least I was making the decisions. Put him in the lead and we wouldn't last for eight

hours. Our nerves wouldn't take it, at any rate, even if the machines would.

Jack Stone looked up from the aluminum chart sheets. "Another hundred miles and we should hit a good stretch," he said. "Maybe we can make up distance there for a couple of days."

The Major agreed, but McIvers couldn't hold his impatience. He kept staring up at the Sun as if he had a personal grudge against it and stamped back and forth under the sun-shield. "That'll be just fine," he said. "If we ever get that far, that is."

We dropped it there, but the Major stopped me as we climbed aboard for the next run. "That guy's going to blow wide open if we don't move faster, Peter. I don't want him in the lead, no matter what happens. He's right, though, about the need to make better time. Keep your head, but crowd your luck a little, okay?"

"I'll try," I said. It was asking the impossible and Mikuta knew it. We were on a long downward slope that shifted and buckled all around us, as though there was a molten underlay beneath the crust; the slope was broken by huge crevasses, partly covered with dust and zinc sheeting, like a vast glacier of stone and metal. The outside temperature registered 547° F. and getting hotter. It was no place to start rushing ahead.

I tried it anyway. I took half a dozen shaky passages, edging slowly out on flat zinc ledges, then toppling over and across. It seemed easy for a while and we made progress. We hit an even stretch and raced ahead. And then I quickly jumped on my brakes and jerked the Bug to a halt in a cloud of dust.

I'd gone too far. We were out on a wide, flat sheet of gray stuff, apparently solid—until I'd suddenly caught sight of the crevasse beneath in the corner of my eye. It was an overhanging shelf that trembled under me as I stopped. McIvers' voice was in my ear. "What's the trouble now, Claney?"

"Move back!" I shouted. "It can't hold us!"

"Looks solid enough from here."

"You want to argue about it? It's too thin, it'll snap. Move back!"

I started edging back down the ledge. I heard McIvers swear; then I saw his Bug start to creep *outward* on the shelf. Not fast or reckless, this time, but slowly, churning up dust in a gentle cloud behind him.

I just stared and felt the blood rush to my head. It seemed so hot I could hardly breathe as he edged out beyond me,

further and further-

I think I felt it snap before I saw it. My own machine gave a sickening lurch and a long black crack appeared across the shelf—and widened. Then the ledge began to upend. I heard a scream as McIvers' Bug rose up and up and then crashed down into the crevasse in a thundering slide of rock and shattered metal

I just stared for a full minute, I think. I couldn't move until I heard Jack Stone groan and the Major shouting, "Claney! I couldn't see—what happened?"

"It snapped on him, that's what happened," I roared. I gunned my motor, edged forward toward the fresh broken edge of the shelf. The crevasse gaped; I couldn't see any sign of the machine. Dust was still billowing up blindingly from below.

We stood staring down, the three of us. I caught a glimpse of Jack Stone's face through his helmet. It wasn't pretty.

"Well," said the Major heavily, "that's that."

"I guess so." I felt the way Stone looked.

"Wait," said Stone. "I heard something."

He had. It was a cry in the earphones—faint, but unmistakable.

"Mac!" the Major called. "Mac, can you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah. I can hear you." The voice was very weak.

"Are you all right?"

"I don't know. Broken leg, I think. It's—hot." There was a long pause. Then: "I think my cooler's gone out."

The Major shot me a glance, then turned to Stone. "Get a cable from the second sledge fast. He'll fry alive if we don't

get him out of there. Peter, I need you to lower me. Use the tractor winch."

I lowered him; he stayed down only a few moments. When I hauled him up, his face was drawn. "Still alive," he panted. "He won't be very long, though." He hesitated for just an instant. "We've got to make a try."

"I don't like this ledge," I said. "It's moved twice since I

got out. Why not back off and lower him a cable?"

"No good. The Bug is smashed and he's inside it. We'll need torches and I'll need one of you to help." He looked at me and then gave Stone a long look. "Peter, you'd better come."

"Wait," said Stone. His face was very white. "Let me go down with you."

"Peter is lighter."

"I'm not so heavy. Let me go down."

"Okay, if that's the way you want it." The Major tossed him a torch. "Peter, check these hitches and lower us slowly. If you see any kind of trouble, anything, cast yourself free and back off this thing, do you understand? This whole ledge may go."

I nodded. "Good luck."

They went over the ledge. I let the cable down bit by bit until it hit two hundred feet and slacked off.

"How does it look?" I shouted.

"Bad," said the Major. "We'll have to work fast. This whole side of the crevasse is ready to crumble. Down a little more."

Minutes passed without a sound. I tried to relax, but I couldn't. Then I felt the ground shift, and the tractor lurched to the side.

The Major shouted, "It's going, Peter-pull back!" and I threw the tractor into reverse, jerked the controls as the tractor rumbled off the shelf. The cable snapped, coiled up in front like a broken clockspring. The whole surface under me was shaking wildly now; ash rose in huge gray clouds. Then, with a roar, the whole shelf lurched and slid sideways. It teetered on the edge for seconds before it crashed into

the crevasse, tearing the side wall down with it in a mammoth slide. I jerked the tractor to a halt as the dust and flame billowed up.

They were gone—all three of them, McIvers and the Major and Jack Stone—buried under thousands of tons of rock and zinc and molten lead. There wasn't any danger of anybody ever finding their bones.

Peter Claney leaned back, finishing his drink, rubbing his scarred face as he looked across at Baron.

Slowly, Baron's grip relaxed on the chair arm. "You got back."

Claney nodded. "I got back, sure. I had the tractor and the sledges. I had seven days to drive back under that yellow Sun. I had plenty of time to think."

"You took the wrong man along," Baron said. "That was your mistake. Without him you would have made it."

"Never." Claney shook his head. "That's what I was thinking the first day or so—that it was *McIvers*' fault, that he was to blame. But that isn't true. He was wild, reckless, and had lots of nerve."

"But his judgment was bad!"

"It couldn't have been sounder. We had to keep to our schedule even if it killed us, because it would positively kill us if we didn't."

"But a man like that-"

"A man like McIvers was necessary. Can't you see that? It was the Sun that beat us, that surface. Perhaps we were licked the very day we started." Claney leaned across the table, his eyes pleading. "We didn't realize that, but it was true. There are places that men can't go, conditions men can't tolerate. The others had to die to learn that. I was lucky, I came back. But I'm trying to tell you what I found out—that nobody will ever make a Brightside Crossing."

"We will," said Baron. "It won't be a picnic, but we'll

make it."

"But suppose you do," said Claney, suddenly. "Suppose

I'm all wrong, suppose you do make it. Then what? What comes next?"

"The Sun," said Baron.

Claney nodded slowly. "Yes. That would be it, wouldn't it?" He laughed. "Good-by, Baron. Jolly talk and all that. Thanks for listening."

Baron caught his wrist as he started to rise. "Just one question more, Claney. Why did you come here?"

"To try to talk you out of killing yourself," said Claney.

"You're a liar," said Baron.

Claney stared down at him for a long moment. Then he crumpled in the chair. There was defeat in his pale blue eyes and something else.

"Well?"

Peter Claney spread his hands, a helpless gesture. "When do you leave, Baron? I want you to take me along."

MEZZEROW LOVES COMPANY

THE OFFICIAL took their passports, scanning the immense variety of stamps he had to choose from. He selected one with multicolored ink that suited his fancy and smeared it against the small square of plastic.

"Marcus Mezzerow?" he asked, glancing at the older man and back at the passport. His lips quivered with amusement at what was printed there. "There seems to be a mistake in the name of the planet," he said. "It's hard to believe they'd call it Messy Row."

"There is a mistake," said Marcus heavily. "However, there's nothing you can do about it. It's listed as Messy Row

on the charts.

The official's face twitched and he bent over the other passport. He was slow in stamping it. "Wilbur Mezzerow?" he asked the young man.

"That's me," said Wilbur. "Isn't it a terrible thing to do? You'd almost think people on Earth can't spell-or maybe

they don't listen. That's why Pa and me are here."

"Wilbur, this man is not responsible for our misfortune," said Marcus. "Neither can he correct it. Don't bore him with our problems."

"Well, sure."

"Come on."

"Welcome to Earth," said the official as they walked away.

He caught sight of a woman coming toward him and cringed inwardly before he recognized that she, too, had just arrived from one of the outer worlds. He could tell because of the absence of the identifying gleam in her eyes. On principle he'd stamp her passport with dull and dingy ink.

Wilbur scuffled along beside his father. He hadn't attained his full growth, but he was as tall though not as heavy as Marcus. "Where are we going now?" he asked. "Get the

name changed?"

"Don't gawk," said Marcus, restraining his own tendency to gaze around in bewilderment. Things had changed since his father had been here. "No, we're not. It's simple, but it may take longer than we think. We have to act as if Earth is an unfriendly planet."

"Hardly seems like a planet."

"It is. If you scratch deep enough under those buildings, you'll find soil and rock." Even Marcus didn't know how deep that scratch would have to be.

"Seems hard to believe it was once like—uh—Mezzerow." Wilbur was looking at the buildings and pedestrians streaming past and the little flutter cars that filled the air. "Bet you can't find any place to be alone in."

"More people are alone within ten miles of us than you have ever seen," said Marcus. He stopped in front of a building and consulted a small notebook. The address agreed, but he looked in vain for a name. There wasn't a name on any of the buildings. Nevertheless, this ought to be it. They'd been walking for miles, and he had checked all the streets. He spoke to Wilbur and they went inside.

It was a hotel. The Universe over, there is no mistaking a hotel for anything else. Continuous arrivals and departures stamp it with peculiar impermanency. A person might stay twenty years and yet seem as transient as the man still signing the registry.

A clerk sauntered over to the Mezzerows. He was plump, but the shoulders of his jacket were obviously much broader than he was. "Looking for someone?" he inquired.

"I'm looking for the Outer Hotel," said Marcus.

"This is a hotel," the clerk said, raising his shoulders and letting them fall. One shoulder didn't come down, so he grasped the bottom of the sleeve and pulled it down.

"What's the name?"

The clerk yawned. "Doesn't have a name—just a number. No hotel has had a name for the last hundred years. Too many of them."

"My father stayed at the Outer Hotel fifty years ago, before he left to discover a new planet. It was at this address."

The clerk, wary of his shoulder pads, shrugged sideways. It gave him a bent look when one shoulder stayed back. "Maybe it wasn't a hundred years ago," he said to his fingernails. "Anyway, they don't have names now."

"This must be the old Outer Hotel," Marcus decided.

"We'll stay here."

The clerk's aplomb was not as foolproof as he imagined. It slipped a trifle. "You want to stay here? I mean really?" "Why not?" growled Marcus. "You have room, don't you?

"Why not?" growled Marcus. "You have room, don't you? It seems like a decent place. I don't have any other recommendations."

"Certainly it's decent and we have room. I thought you might be more comfortable elsewhere. I can recommend an exclusive men's hotel to you."

"We are plain people and don't want anything exclusive,"

said Marcus. "Register us, please."

"I don't do menial tasks," said the clerk with an offended laugh. "I'm here for the sole purpose of imparting class to the hotel. Take your registry problems to the desk robot."

Wilbur looked curiously at the pudgy clerk as he walked away, smiling coyly at the passers-by. "Pa, how can a man

like him make this place seem classy?"

"Son, I don't know," said Marcus heavily. "Earth has changed since your grandfather described it to me. I don't propose to find out what's the matter with it. We'll just take care of our business and go home."

They signed at the desk, giving their baggage claim checks to the robot, who assured them that everything would be zipped straight to their room from the spaceport.

In spite of Wilbur's protests that he wasn't tired, that he was just getting used to walking again after being cramped in the ship, they went to their rooms to freshen up. Thus they missed the noontime exodus of workers from the buildings around them.

Marcus had food sent up, but didn't eat much, though initially he had been hungry. The lot 219 steaks were excellent in appearance, nicely seared and thick. Inside, they were gray and watery, with an offensive taste, obviously tankgrown. After a few bites, Marcus abandoned the meat and ate vegetables. These, though ill flavored and artificially colored, he could eat without suspicion.

Wilbur consumed everything before him, ending by looking hungrily at the steak on his father's plate. Marcus hastily shoved the trays in the disposer slot. If he had time before he left Earth, he meant to find out what a "lot 219" steak was. He hoped it wasn't what he thought.

When they were ready, they dropped to the ground floor. The clerk who gave class to the hotel was nowhere in sight. They went out into the street and headed for the tall spire of Information Center. It was a landmark they couldn't miss. Every human who thought of visiting Earth was familiar with it. If a question couldn't be answered there, it was beyond the scope of human knowledge.

There were many more women than men on the streets. Marcus noted it, but didn't think it unusual. He had heard that women had more free time in the middle of the day on planets that had been settled for a long time. He walked on with a long stride, oblivious to the feminine glances he and his son attracted.

At Information Center, he consulted the index at the entrance, jostled by people from thousands of planets who were doing the same. The red line on the floor led to the planet section, which was what he wanted. Keeping check on Wilbur, who showed a tendency to wander, he followed it to the end.

The end was an immense room with innumerable small booths. Instinctively, Marcus distrusted booths; more than anything else, they resembled vertical coffins. Growling to

Wilbur to stay close by, he went inside and closed the door. He inserted a coin and made the selection.

A harried face appeared on the viewplate. "Does your

question require a human answer?"

"It certainly does," said Marcus. "I didn't come nine hundred and forty-seven light-years to be befuddled by a robot."

The harried face barked something unintelligible in another direction and then turned back to Marcus. "Very well. Question?"

"I want to request a change. My planet-"

"Planet? Change?" repeated the face. It disappeared and a finger took its place. The finger rifled rapidly down a vertical index. It stopped and stabbed and the index popped open. "Go to building P-CAF." The finger snatched a slip out of the open space and dropped the slip in a slot. "Go to the platform at the rear of this building. Take any tube with P-CAF on it. Apply at that building for the change."

Marcus wasn't surprised, but he felt annoyed. "Can't you

make the change here? I don't like being shoved around."

"We are not authorized to make changes. We are merely what our name implies; we have the information to direct you to the proper sources. The slip I gave you is a map of the general vicinity of the place you want. You can't get lost."

"You gave me no map," snapped Marcus. The voice didn't answer him, though the finger still waved on the viewplate. He couldn't argue very well with a finger. The plate burped and a slip dropped out of the slot below it. Only then did he release the lever, allowing the finger to vanish.

Marcus studied the map. P-CAF (Planets; changes, apply for) was between M-AVO (Marriages; alternate variations of) and M-AAD (Marriages; annulment and divorce).

Hastily, he stuffed the map in his pocket as Wilbur pressed

the door, trying to look at what he had in his hand. It was nothing for a growing boy to see.

It wasn't a good map, since it didn't show where the building was in relation to the rest of the city. The transportation tube would take him there, but he'd have to find his own way back.

The tube that whisked them to P-CAF was occupied mainly by Outers, a circumstance that made the crowded uncomfortable trip more bearable. Marcus didn't talk to the others their interests were worlds apart—but he felt closer to them than to the strange, frantic people of Earth.

P-CAF was neo-drive-in classical, a style once in vogue throughout the Universe. With Wilbur following, Marcus plunged in. It seemed strange that he had come nine hundred odd light-years for a matter that, once stated, would only take a few minutes of some minor official's time. And yet it was necessary. For years, he had been writing requests without result.

It was not as crowded as Information Center. The booths were wider and Marcus decided they both could squeeze in. It was a historic moment: Wilbur should be present. After several trials, they did get in together.

The official who came to the plate was as relaxed as the other had been harried. "Planets; changes, apply for," he said. He had perfected the art of raising one eyebrow.

"That's why we're here," said Marcus, fumbling in his jacket. He was jammed against Wilbur and couldn't get his hand in his pocket.

"Land masses reshaped, oceans installed, or climate recycled?" asked the official.

"We don't want the climate changed," said Wilbur. "We've got lots of it—rain, hail, snow, hot weather. All in the same day—though not in the same place. It's a big planet, nearly as big as Earth."

"Wilbur, I'll do the talking," declared Marcus, still struggling to reach his pocket.

"Yes, Pa. But we don't want the continents reshaped. We like them as they are. And we've got enough oceans."

"Wilbur," Marcus said sharply, pulling his hand free. He held up a tattered chart.

"Are you sure you know what you do want?" asked the relaxed man with a yawn.

"I'm coming to it," said Marcus. "Fifty years ago, my

father, Mathew Mezzerow, discovered a planet. Things being the way they were then, planet stealing and such, Captain Mezzerow didn't come back and report it. He settled on it right there, securing for his heirs and descendants a proper share of the new world."

"What do you expect for that, a medal?"

"He could have had a medal. Being practical, he preferred a part of the planet. Since then, we have become a thriving community. But we're not growing as fast as we should. That's why I'm here."

"You've come to the wrong place," said the man. "P-EHF

is what you want."

"Planets; economic help for? No, we don't want that kind of aid. However, there is one insignificant mistake that has been hindering us. People don't settle the way they should. You see, though Captain Mathew Mezzerow didn't return to report his discovery in person, he did send in a routine claim. That's where the mistake was made. Naturally he named the planet after himself. Mezzerow. Mezz-uh-row. The second e is almost silent, hardly pronounced at all. But what do you think somebody—a robot, probably—called it?"

"I can't guess."

"Messy Row," said Marcus. "It maligns a good man's name. We're stuck with it because somebody bobbled."

"I admit it isn't pretty," said the official with a cautious smile. "But I can't see that it affects anything. One name is as good as another."

"That's what you think," Marcus retorted. "I can see how the robot made the mistake and I'm not blaming it. My father sent in a verbal tape report. Mezzerow could sound a little like Messy Row. Anyway, it's had a bad effect on the settlers. Men come there because it sounds easy and relaxed, which it is, of course, to a point. But women avoid it. They don't like the sound of the name."

"Then it's really women you're concerned with," said the official. A cold glazed stare had replaced his indifference. "In any event, you've come to the wrong place. We reconstruct planets. Names are out of our jurisdiction."

"It makes things bad when there aren't enough women," continued Marcus. "Some men leave when they can't find anyone to marry." He crumpled the old chart in his hands. "It's not merely that, of course. Simple justice demands that

a great man's name be properly honored."

"You've come to the wrong place for justice," said the official. "P-CAF doesn't make this kind of an adjustment. Let's see if I can't refer you to someone else." He rested his head on his hand. Then he straightened up, snapping his fingers. "Of course. If you want the name of a planet changed, you go to Astrogation; charts, errors, locations of."

"You do?" Marcus asked dubiously. Life on Mezzerow had not prepared him for the complexities of governmental or-

ganization.

"Certainly," said the official, happy that he had solved the problem. "Don't thank me. It's what I'm here for. Go to A-CELO."

"Where is it?"

The official frowned importantly and turned to the great vertical file that Marcus was learning to associate with all departments of the government. He stabbed his finger at a space, but nothing opened. "Seem to be all out of reference slips," he said with a casual lack of surprise. "Come back tomorrow and I may have some. It's quitting time now."

"Do I have to come back? A-CELO may be on the other

side of the city from here."

"It may be," said the official, reaching for his jacket. "If you don't want to waste time, buy a map from an infolegger. It'll be a day old, but chances are it should be accurate on most things." The plate snapped off, leaving Marcus and his son staring at nothing.

Marcus got up and left the booth. "What's an infolegger?" asked Wilbur as he followed him.

"They move things fast on Earth," said Marcus tiredly. He hadn't realized how wearing it could be to chase down the thread of responsibility in a government that had many things to look after. "An infolegger doesn't know any more

about it than you do, but he'll sell you information that you can ordinarily get free from the government."

"But who buys from him?"

"Fools like me who get tired of running around. We'd better get back to the hotel."

"I wish we were on Messy-Mezzerow," said Wilbur wistfully. "Ma would have dinner ready now."

"I keep forgetting your appetite. All right, we'll eat as soon as we find a restaurant."

They found one a block away. It was easy enough to walk there. It was stopping that was hard. Marcus made his way to the side of the street and hauled Wilbur in out of the stream of pedestrians. Inside there was one vacant table which they promptly took, oblivious to the glares of those who were not so fast afoot.

Marcus studied the menu at length. To his disappointment, there was no lot 219 steak listed. Instead there were two other choices, a lot 313 and a miscellany steak. Marcus looked up to see that his son had already dialed his order. Questioning revealed that Wilbur had missed his afternoon snack and thought that a full portion of one steak and half of the other would compensate for his fast. "Vegetables, too," said Marcus.

"Pa, you know I don't like that stuff."

"Vegetables," said Marcus, watching to make sure his son selected a balanced diet. After deliberation, he decided on a high protein vegetable plate for himself, though ordinarily he liked meat. He couldn't get that idea out of his mind.

The low rectangular serving robot scurried up and began dispensing food with a flurry of extensibles. Marcus noted that the steaks were identical with those served in the hotel. "Waiter, what is the origin of those steaks?"

"The same as all meat. Hygienically grown in a bath of nutrients that supply all the necessary food elements. Trimmed daily and delivered fresh and tender, ready for instant preparation."

"I'm familiar with the process," snapped Marcus, wincing as his son chewed the gray, watery substance. "What I asked

was the origin, the ultimate origin. From what animals were the first cells taken?"

"I don't know. No other protein source is so free from contamination."

"Will the manager know?"

"Perhaps."

"Tell him I would like to see him."

"I'll pass the request along. But it won't do any good. The manager can't come. It's a robot attached to the building."

"Then I'll go to it," said Marcus, rising. "Keep the food

warm. How do I get there?"

"The manager shouldn't be disturbed," said the robot as it placed thermoshields over the food. "It's the small room to the rear, at the right of the kitchen."

Marcus found the place without difficulty. The manager lighted up as he came in. The opposite wall blinked and a chair swung out for him. "Complaint?" said the manager hollowly. The manager was hollow.

"Not exactly," said Marcus, repeating his request.

The manager meditated briefly.

"Are you an Outer?"

"I am."

"I thought so. Only Outers ask that question. I'll have to find out some day."

"Make it today," said Marcus.

"An excellent thought," said the manager. "I'll do it. But this is a chain restaurant and so you'll have to wait. If you don't mind the delay, I'll plug in one of our remote information banks."

Marcus did mind delay, but it was worse not knowing. He waited.

"I have it," said the robot after an interval. "There is great difficulty feeding a city this large. In fact, there is with all of Earth—it's greatly overpopulated."

"So I understand," mumbled Marcus.

"The trouble began forty-five or fifty years ago with the water supply," said the robot. "It was sanitary, but there was too great or not great enough concentration of minerals in it.

Information isn't specific on this point. The robots in control of the tanks found that beef, pork, lamb, and chicken in all their variety would not grow fast enough.

"The robots communicated this fact to higher authorities and were told to find out how to correct the situation. They investigated and determined that either the entire water-system would have to be overhauled, or a new and hardier protein would have to be developed. Naturally, it would require incalculable labor to install a new water-system. They didn't recommend it."

"Naturally," said Marcus.

"The situation was critical. People had to be fed. The tank robots were told to find the new protein. Resources were thrown open to them that weren't hitherto available. In a short time, they solved the problem. About half of the tanks that were not growing properly were cleaned out and the new protein placed in them. The old animal name system was outmoded so that the new lot number system was devised and applied to every tank regardless of its ultimate origin."

"Then nobody has any idea what they're eating," said Marcus. "But what was that new protein? That's what I want

to know."

"It was hardy. It came from the most adaptable creature on Earth," said the robot. "And there was another factor in favor of it. The flesh of all mammals is nearly the same. But there are differences. The ideal protein for a meat-eating animal is one which exactly matches the creature's own body, eliminating food that can't be fully utilized."

Marcus closed his eyes and grasped the arm of the chair.

"Do you feel ill?" inquired the managing robot. "Shall I call the doctor? No? Well, as I was saying, there was already a supply of animal tissue on hand. It was this that the robots used. It's funny that you're asking this. Not many people are so curious."

"They didn't care," snarled Marcus. "As long as they were fed, they didn't ask what it was."

"Why should they?" asked the robot. "The tissue was already well adapted to growth tanks. Scrupulously aseptic, in

no way did it harm the original donors who were long since dead. And there was little difference in the use of it, anyway. No one would hesitate if he were injured and needed skin or part of a liver or a new eye. This was replacement from the inside, by a digestive process rather than a medical one."

"The robots took tissue from the surgery replacement

tanks," said Marcus. "Do you deny it?"

"That's what I've been telling you," said the robot. "A very clever solution considering how little time they had. However only about half of the tanks had to be replaced."

"Cannibals," said Marcus, nearly destroying the chair as he

hurled it away from him.

"What's a cannibal?" asked the robot.

But Marcus wasn't there to answer. He went back to the restaurant, under control by the time he reached the table. He couldn't tell Wilbur because Wilbur had finished eating except for the vegetables which were mostly untouched. Marcus sat down and took the shields off the food, looking at it gloomily.

"Pa, aren't you going to eat?" asked Wilbur.

"As soon as I get my breath back," he said. It wasn't bad when he ate, but the mere thought of food was distasteful. He glanced sternly at his son. "Wilbur, hereafter you may not order meat. As long as we are on Earth, you will ask for eggs."

"Just eggs?" said Wilbur incredulously. "Gee, they're real expensive here. Anyway, I don't like them without a rasher

of—"

"Eggs," said Marcus. Another thought occurred to him.

"Sunny side up. No cook can disguise that."

The sky was dark when they left the restaurant. After work, traffic had abated and the entertainment rush hadn't come on the streets, which were now curiously silent and deserted. Marcus caught sight of the tall spire of Information Center glistening against the evening sky.

"Where are we going?" asked Wilbur.

"To the hotel. We have a hard day's work tomorrow."

"Can we walk? I mean, we can't see anything in the tubes."
"It's a long walk."

"It's right over there. I've walked farther before breakfast."
Marcus noted with approval that Wilbur had used the Information Center as a landmark to deduce the correct location of the hotel. His training showed. Even in the confusion of the city, he wouldn't get lost. "It's farther than you think, but we'll walk if you want. It may be our last evening on Earth. At least, I sincerely hope so."

They went on. In time they saw what there was to see. It was a city, vast and sprawling, but still just another city Man had created. The buildings were huge, but constructed as all buildings had to be, out of stone and steel, concrete and plastic. Women were beautiful, tastefully gowned and coiffured, but it was easy to see that they were merely women. Shops were elaborate and fanciful, but there was a limit to what they displayed, an end to the free play of fancy.

By the time they realized they were tired, they were close to the hotel. There wasn't any use in seeking transportation, since they'd get where they were going almost as fast either way. They had kept to the main thoroughfares since there was more to see. But Marcus had quickly accustomed himself to the pattern of streets and as they neared their destination he saw a short cut which they took.

It was getting late and the street was dark. He began to wonder whether they should have come this way. He decided they shouldn't have. A faint red flash from the doorway indicated that his tardy decision was sound but useless. His knees tingled where the red flash struck him and in the middle of a stride he felt he didn't have any feet. He fell forward, trying to shield Wilbur. Wilbur was falling, too, and they collided on the downward arc.

Hands seized him, lifting him up. He was in no condition to struggle. Besides it wasn't safe. A tingler wasn't a lethal weapon, but it could have unpleasant effects if used carelessly or hastily. He didn't think they were in any real danger and it was best not to provoke their captors.

By the time he had recovered sufficiently to be aware of what was going on, he found he had been carried to a space

between two buildings, hidden from the street by a masonry projection. Wilbur was sitting beside him and a dim light

played on them.

"Don't move," said a voice that made an effort to be rough and hard, but failed by an octave. Now that Marcus thought of it the hands that had lifted him were small and soft. Their captors were women. The disconnected impressions of the city seemed to fall into a pattern. He was not greatly surprised at what was happening.

The light moved closer and Marcus could make out the figure of the woman who held it. Behind her were others-all women. But even delicate hands were capable of leveling a tingler. "Don't say anything," he said to his son in a low voice.

Wilbur nodded dazedly.

"No whispering," barked the soprano, shining the light directly in his eyes. "Now, are either of you married?"

Marcus sighed; so that was it. Poor Earth was in a bad way when a pudgy unattractive clerk could get a high-salaried job solely because he was male.

"Answer me," demanded the high unsteady voice. "Are

either of you married? On Earth, I mean."

Marcus could see her clearly, now that his eyes had become accustomed to the light. She was young, barely out of her teens.

"What kind of question is that? When you're married, you're married. It doesn't matter where you are." On Earth,

apparently, it did.
"Outers," she exclaimed happily. "I've always hoped I'd find one. They're real men. Now let's see, which one shall I take?" She flashed the light on Wilbur, who squirmed and blinked.

"He's younger and will probably last longer," she said critically. "On the other hand, he'll be clumsy and inexperienced."

She turned to Marcus. "You need a shave," she said crisply. "Your beard is turning gray. I think I'll take you. Older men are nice."

"You can't have me," said Marcus. She was near and he

could have taken both the weapon and the light from her. But he couldn't stand, much less walk, and there were other women in the background, all armed probably, watching the girl who seemed to be their leader. "You see, I am married. Wilma wouldn't like it, if I took another wife."

"Not even just for the time you're on Earth? It isn't much to ask." She turned the light on herself. "Am I unattractive?"

She was not outstandingly beautiful, but since she was dressed as scantily as law allowed and fashion decreed, Marcus could see her desirability. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Old enough," she said. "In eleven months, I'll be twenty-

one."

"You're pretty," said Marcus. "If I were fifteen or twenty years younger—and not married—I'd come courting."

"But you did," she said in amazement. "Why did you come down a dark street, if you weren't looking for romance?"

This, it seemed, is what passed for romance on Earth. Men must be outnumbered at least three to one. It tied in with what he had so far observed. "I'm sorry for your trouble," he said. "But you must remember that we're Outers. We're not familiar with your customs. We were merely taking a short cut to our hotel."

She gestured in sullen defeat. "I suppose it was a mistake. But why can't I have him, then? He's not married."

"He isn't, nor will he be for some time. He has barely turned seventeen. I won't give my permission."

"He's your son? Then you are experienced. Are you sure you won't reconsider me—just while you're on Earth? I told you I don't like young men. Maybe that's because my father was an older man."

"I'm sure he was," said Marcus. "However that's no reason to find me irresistible." He tried to stand, but his legs were rubbery and he sat down quickly.

She looked at him with concern. "Does it hurt? I guess we gave you the strongest charge." She handed him the light and went to the women who were standing some distance behind her. He heard her whispering. Presently she came back.

She knelt beside him and began rubbing his legs. "I sent

them away," she said. "They're going to look for someone else. It was my turn to propose to whomever we captured, but now

you spoiled it."

He smiled at her earnestness. "I'm sure you deserve better than you're apt to find with these strange methods of courtship. However I think you should help my son. You gave him a charge, too."

"I bet I did," she said scornfully. "Don't worry about him.

Kids recover easily."

"Should I clout her, Pa?" asked Wilbur as he stood up, bending his knees gingerly. "She had no business shooting us."

"She didn't, but you have no business talking like that.

Touch her and I'll wallop you."

The girl ignored Wilbur, putting her arms around Marcus and helping him to his feet. From the girl's reaction to him you'd never think so, but he was getting old. The first step was proof of it. He could walk unaided, but it felt as if someone were pulling pins out of his legs at the rate of two or three a second.

"I'll go with you to the hotel," said the girl. "There are probably other marriage gangs out. If they see me with you, they'll think I've already made my catch."

Marcus frowned in the darkness. Wilbur was getting entirely the wrong idea about women. He'd find it difficult to adjust to the different conditions at home. Marcus told the girl their names and asked hers.

"Mary Ellen."

"That's all, Mary Ellen?"

"Of course, I have a last name, but I'm hoping to change it."

He sighed in resignation. "Mary Ellen, we won't discuss marriage again. Is this clear? However I have plans for you. I'll get in touch with you before we leave Earth." They were nearing a brightly lit thoroughfare and he felt safer.

"I was hoping you'd say that," she said wistfully. She dug into a tiny purse and handed him a card. "You'll notice there's another name on it, too. That's Chloe, my half-sister. She's

smart and I like her, but I hope you don't like her-not better than me, anyway."

"I'm sure I won't. But why half-sister? I'd think it would be

rather difficult for your mother to marry again."

"Of course she couldn't," she said scornfully. "No woman's allowed more than half a-"

"Mary Ellen!"

"All right, I won't say it," she said crossly. "But you asked."

He could fill in the missing information. With women drastically outnumbering men, husbands had to be shared. Men were allowed more than one mate, but women never were. Perhaps the development of polygamy had been inevitable.

Earth was the center of a vast and spreading civilization. Men went out to settle the newly discovered planets while, for the most part, women tended to remain behind. More than that, there were some women who came to Earth from planets that had been settled longer, attracted by the glamor of an older civilization and high-paying jobs, never realizing until they got there the other conditions that went with it.

Earth's dilemma was therefore a partial solution to one of the problems of his own planet. But the important problem, getting the name changed to Mezzerow, was harder than he had anticipated. He wasn't looking forward to tomorrow.

He noticed Mary Ellen glancing curiously around. "Is there

anything wrong?" he asked.

"Nooo. It's just sort of funny that you'd stay here—in the heart of the unmarried girls' residential district." She grinned at him. "Maybe I'd better go in with you."

"I think you'd better," he said. That's what the pudgy clerk had meant. He should have listened to him and gone to the men's hotel.

The lobby was crowded with women, many of whom, he suspected, had been waiting for their return. On a manstarved planet, word got around. Perhaps he was imagining it, but he thought he heard an audible sigh of disappointment when they came in with Mary Ellen. She had more than repaid them for the few anxious moments she had caused. Much more, though she didn't know it yet.

They went directly to their rooms and Marcus sent Wilbur inside, lingering at the door to talk with the girl. "Should I come in?" she asked hopefully. "I'm really sorry about your legs."

"You will not come in, Mary Ellen. I don't trust myself alone with you."

"You mean it?"

"I was never more sincere." He almost believed it himself. "We don't have to get married if you're not going to be here long enough to make it worth while," she said happily. "I was thinking—"

He glanced warningly inside the room.
"He's a big nuisance," she whispered. "Look. I've got to work tomorrow, but in the evening I'll be free. Put the kid on a merry-go-round and come and see me, huh?" She threw her arms around Marcus and kissed him passionately. Then she turned and ran down the hall.

Marcus shook his head and went into his room.

In the morning, Marcus had little difficulty contacting an infolegger. For a rather large sum, a map purporting to show the location of A-CELO exchanged hands. For another sum, a map of the principal transportation tubes was added to it. Both were assuredly out of date in many respects, but were probably correct in the one detail Marcus was concerned with.

They started rather late to avoid the morning rush. There were some transportation complications. At the first trial thev arrived at the wrong section of the city. After consultation with various passengers and robot way stations, they got it straightened out. Penciling corrections on the map, they retraced their route, making only one mistake along the way. This mistake was not their fault. A transfer junction had been relocated since they had passed through it on the way out.

They got to their destination in good time, perhaps faster than if they had used the services of Information Center. A-CELO was also an example of neo-drive-in classical. But instead of resembling something appropriate, say a five or six pointed star, it appeared to be a mere jumble of children's curv-blocks. A closer look convinced Marcus that his first ap-

praisal had been wrong. Originally it must have been built to house another A-function. Perhaps A-WR (Anatomy; woman, reclining).

Whatever it was on the outside, A-CELO was confusion within. Marcus found it impossible to get near the question booths. Robots scurried about in seemingly useless tasks and workmen shouted orders that no one paid attention to. In the midst of the dust and turmoil, one man stood on a platform and watched the frantic effort with bored serenity.

"Moving," he said automatically as Marcus approached.

"Where to?"

"I don't know. It depends on whom we can bump."

Marcus paled visibly. They were moving and didn't know where. Another day and his map was useless. And if this man was right, even Information Center wouldn't know where A-CELO was tomorrow. "Isn't there a planning commission?" he said. "Don't they tell you where to move?"

he said. "Don't they tell you where to move?"

The man shrugged. "There's a planning commission. But they had too many responsibilities and had to move to a larger building, the same as we're doing. Until they get settled, everyone's on his own." The man spoke quietly into the mike and the tempo of the removal robots accelerated. He turned back to Marcus and added an explanation: "Three exploration ships returned yesterday, loaded to the brim with micro-data. That's why we have to move."

Marcus rubbed his face. He could see it posed a problem. It was not merely the storage of new data; the data also had to be made available to the public. This required new offices, human supervisors, robot clerks.

That was the way they did things on Earth, but he wished they'd waited a few days. "You can't be moving this stuff out on the streets. Somebody must have an idea where you're going. Tell me who he is. I've got to find out where you'll be tomorrow."

"Oh, no. If you found where we're moving, you'd learn who we're going to bump," said the man with cheerful cunning. "They'd take steps to repel us. Can't have that." The man scratched his head. "Tell you, if you're really honest—if you're

not a department spy-I can show you how to take care of your business today."

"I'm an Outer," said Marcus. "I don't care about your squabbles. I want to get something settled and get out of here."

"You look like an Outer," said the man. "Here's what you do. Part of the department is still functioning. Go to the side entrance. Question booths there are open." He turned back to the mike and barked orders that had no visible effect on anything.

The man was partly wrong. The side entrance was open, but corridors and booths were jammed with displaced information seekers. Marcus was not easily discouraged. By now he was accustomed to the vast machinations required for the simplest things. He went to the back entrance. It, too, was jammed, but after a short desperate struggle he squeezed into a booth, leaving Wilbur to hang on the outside.

The official who answered him was sleepy and harassed, a difficult expression. He yawned and took his feet off the desk to acknowledge the call and then a robot removed the desk. He had no place to put his feet so he kept them firmly on the floor as if he expected that, too, to vanish.

Marcus stated the request clearly, spreading the chart for the man to see. "Here is the original from which the phototape was made and sent to Earth with his comments. I don't know what happened here. Perhaps the tape was fuzzy or it may have been fogged in transit by radiation. Or it may have been faulty interpretation on the part of a robot."

The official peered out of the viewplate. "Messy Row. Mezzerow. Ha, ha." He laughed perfunctorily and got up to pace. A robot came near the chair and he sat down hastily.

"Here, you can see that in his own hand he spelled it Mezzerow," said Marcus. "He named it after himself as every explorer is entitled to do once in his career. I ask that in simple justice the mistake be corrected. I have a petition signed by everyone on the planet."

The official waved the documents back. "It doesn't matter who signed," he said. "We don't allow these things to influ-

ence our decision." He put his head in his hand though he had no desk for his elbow. His lips moved soundlessly as he

framed the reply.

"I want to give you an insight to our problems," he said. "First, consider pilots. There are all sorts of beautiful names for planets. Plum Branch, Coarsegold, Waves End, but there's only one Messy Row. It's a bright spot on their voyage. They look at the charts and see it—Messy Row. They laugh. Laughter is a therapeutic force against the loneliness of space. The name of your planet is distinctive."

"We don't care for the distinction," said Marcus. "It's got so bad, we call it Messy Row ourselves, when we're not thinking. Who's going to settle on a planet they laugh at?" The official didn't seem to hear. Marcus adjusted the volume control, but there didn't seem to be anything wrong with the sound

or the volume.

"This is only a small part of it," continued the man. "Do you have any idea how many charts we print? You would have us make them obsolete. Think of the ships roaming through space, many never touching Earth. How can we reach them with corrected charts?"

"I'm glad you said corrected charts," said Marcus. "But corrected charts shouldn't be any harder to deliver than new ones—which, you'll admit, you're always making."

"I can't compromise our famous accuracy for the whims of a few selfish individuals," said the official. He stood up and this time the robot whisked the chair away. He smiled and reached out his hand for the familiar vertical file. The file wasn't there, but a robot was. It took his hand and tried to lead him away. He shook himself loose. "You can see we're busy. Come back when we're not in the midst of an upheaval. I might consider a request that at present I must turn down." He walked briskly away, leaving Marcus with a fine view of an empty room—until a robot came and took the viewplate to the other end.

Marcus eased out of the booth. Wilbur was waiting with an anxious face. "I know it's past noon," he said gloomily to his

son. "We'll get something to eat. Eggs." Wilbur knew better than to protest.

They left A-CELO before the removal robots arrived at the rear section. In the quiet of a nearby restaurant Marcus considered the problem anew. The mission hadn't been entirely a failure. He could accomplish one important task without the aid of any government agency. In fact, it was better if he didn't ask their help.

But he owed something to the memory of Captain Mathew Mezzerow. Mezzerow his father had called the planet—and

Mezzerow it was going to be.

There was also Wilma. She had arrived when both she and the settlement were quite young. Courted and feted and proposed to endlessly, she had found the excitement of being the center of attention irresistible. She hadn't minded the name then, not since she was the prettiest, most attractive girl there. There weren't many others.

But she had changed as Messy Row had grown. They had four sons now, Wilbur the oldest. Four sons. She was not concerned whether they would marry. Her sons were smart and handsome and belonged to the best family—they would experience no trouble in finding wives. But if they did she could always take them visiting—to a planet on which there was no woman shortage.

Once she had been slightly giddy, even after they were married. Marcus had often wondered how her lashes could possibly remain intact when other men came near. She had outgrown that phase and when the chrysalis burst it revealed a different woman.

Out of the flirtatious girl came the homemaker. Everything near her was immaculate. Fences around the house were whitewashed and the lawns were always mowed. Inside, everything was as tidy as a pin. Mud was never tracked in. Wilma no longer approved of Messy Row as the name of any planet on which she lived.

Marcus had to have help. Someone who lived on Earth would know the proper approach better than he. He fished out the card Mary Ellen had given him and the longer he

looked the more certain he was that he had found the person. It was not Mary Ellen. It was her sister.

Mary Ellen and Chloe—no last names given. Apparently this was custom, the way unmarried girls informed the world that they were looking for mates. In addition to their names was the address at which they both lived.

There was also the occupation of each. Mary Ellen was a junior attendant, whatever that was. But Chloe was far more important. She was an astrographer, a senior supervisor astrographer.

Marcus ate rapidly, a definite plan materializing with each bite. Chloe was the key. With her aid, he should be able to change Messy Row. He smiled reflectively. With what he had to offer she would certainly consent to help him—even if it was illegal.

Mary Ellen was not at home, but Chloe was and she welcomed them. Marcus truthfully explained how they'd met her sister. Chloe commented unfavorably on the marriage gangs and, though Marcus agreed, he received the remarks in silence. It was not for him to change the mores of Earth. Society had to work with what there was.

Chloe was small and dark in contrast to the larger blonde Mary Ellen. She was older, too. Once she must have been quite pretty, but instead of easing graciously into the poise of maturity she had been forced into the early thirties without a husband. The struggle showed.

She was cordial when they came in and even more cordial when he finished outlining his plan. "Yes, something can be done," she said quietly. "I will set up the organization and ship them out in groups of ten. I have a vacation in a few months and Mary Ellen and I will come then." She glanced at him anxiously. "That is, if you think I'm needed."

"You are," he assured her. "We need wives, mothers, skilled technicians. I can't think of anyone who will fit the description better."

"Then you'll see me again," she said. "And not merely for the reasons you think. You see, I have a high-salaried job and could have been married before this. But it didn't seem right. I want to feel I'm of some use to a civilization that seems to

have forgotten people like me exist."

"Mezzerow needs you," he said. "I was thinking of a man I know. Joe Ainsworth, a quiet thoughtful fellow of about thirty-five or thirty-seven. His trouble has been that he likes pretty women who are also intelligent. I'll have him keep an eye out for you."

She smiled and the transformation took place. She was pretty. Marcus wondered whether there was such a person as

Joe Ainsworth. There must be, in kind if not in name.

"So much for that," said Chloe briskly. "The rest of your plan for Messy Row is a fine example of muddy thinking. In the first place I work for a private company, not the government."

"But you make government charts."

"True. But let me show you what I mean. What's the code number of the chart Messy Row is on?"

Marcus quoted it from memory. The code of a map on which a given system could be found was almost as important as the name.

Chloe closed her eyes. "No," she said when she opened them. "That's done in another department. I couldn't possibly change it to Mezzerow."

"But if you changed it, the name would stay," said Marcus. "I'll give you money to see that it gets done. Once it's on the map nobody will say anything. Even if they do notice, all they'll know is that there's a conflict between early and late editions. They'll have to go directly to the source to straighten it out. And we're the source."

Chloe smiled fleetingly. "It's never done that way. Do you think they'd send nine hundred and forty-seven light-years to find whether the name is Messy Row or Mezzerow?" She crossed her legs and they were nice legs. There had to be a Joe Ainsworth.

"It won't work," said Chloe. "I can't make the change myself or even bribe someone to do it." She noticed his dejection and touched his hand. "Don't be discouraged. There's another

way. An Outer wouldn't think of it because he doesn't know what goes on behind the scenes."

"I've seen enough to give me a good idea," said Marcus.

"I wonder. Have you noticed that when you ask for information you are always answered by a human? And just as obviously he doesn't know. He has to contact a robot and relay the information along."

He hadn't thought of it. The omnipresent vertical file was, in reality, a robot memory bank. Why not give the robot a voice and dispense with innumerable men and women? The question was on his face when he looked at Chloe.

"Robots are logical—nothing more," she said. "Most questions can't be given black and white answers. There must be an intermediary who understands the limitations of the mechanical mind to interpret it to the public."

"I don't see how this is going to help me," he said.

"You've been trying to get an official to say that you're right and he'll see that the change is made. Abandon that approach. He'll never take the time. Write your request."

"For forty years we've been writing. That's why I'm here."

Chloe smiled again. "The number of letters received by the government in one year reaches a remarkable total. Or perhaps the total isn't huge when you consider how many humans in the Universe there are. Anyway, off-planet letters are never opened, because there's no way to tell from the outside which are important. So they're all pulped and used as nutrients in food tanks."

Marcus nodded dubiously. "I see. Anyone who thinks he has something important will come here . . . as I did. And if he isn't satisfied he tries to go over the head of whoever refused the request. This volume is still great, but it's small enough to be processed without falling hopelessly behind."

"Exactly. And if you phrase your request properly there's a good chance it will be granted, even if it is foolish."

"This isn't foolish," said Marcus, rubbing his hands. "I've got all the facts. I can write them in my sleep."

"Who said anything about facts?" said Chloe. "The worst

thing you can do is to give them facts. Don't you see what I'm trying to tell you?"

Marcus took a deep breath. "No," he said.

"Let's go over it again. Mathew Mezzerow discovered a planet and named it after himself. Does this mean anything? Not really. Does it mean anything that Messy Row will be settled more slowly because of the name? Again no. Thousands of other planets will gain the settlers that Messy Row loses. The robot will refuse a request based on facts and from the government's viewpoint will be justified."

"But you just said robots don't handle requests."

"Face to face they don't. You would resent it as an arrogant bureaucracy being told you couldn't have something by a robot. But you don't see who processes written requests. And in these matters the government uses robots because they're more efficient."

It was too complex for Marcus. Robots processed written requests, but not those made in person. Robots were logical and only logical and therefore ordinarily should not be appealed to on the basis of reason.

He swallowed hard and looked at Chloe. "What should I do?" he asked.

"Emotion," she said. "Robots don't understand emotion. But they can and have been built to recognize emotion. On a minor matter such as this, you need to overload the emotion recognition factor.

"Merely identify the planet. Then stress not the justice of your claim but the anguish you've suffered. Make it extreme—paint a picture of the misery the error has already caused and will continue to cause. If you make it strong enough, the robot will set aside rational processes and grant the request."

It began to be clear. As the government grew in size and complexity and contact with the governed parts became more tenuous, greater reliance had to be placed in logic, machinemade logic. But machines could not hope to encompass all the irrationality of Man. And irrational demands were apt to cause trouble. Pride was irrational, and so was the greater part of human misery.

Therefore, in minor matters, the government had provided a safety valve for irrational requests. Only in minor matters, men still decided important issues. But in the innumerable small decisions that had to be made daily, robots would set aside their logical process if a strong emotion were present.

"Pa." said Wilbur from the corner in which he had been

squirming sleepily.

"Not now, Wilbur," growled Marcus. "I suppose you're hungry." In his mind he was composing the request. It was unlike anything he'd written.

"I think there's something in the kitchen," said Chloe, but Marcus hastily refused. Even on her salary she couldn't afford

to serve eggs.

Mary Ellen came in just then. She slouched in dispiritedly, cloak drooping about her. "Hi, Sis," she said as she opened the door.

Then she saw Marcus and revived abruptly. She flung herself across the room and into his lap, wrapping her arms around him. "Mark, dear," she said, smiling cattily over his head at her sister.

Marcus sighed regretfully. Heaven knew what the boy in his innocence would tell his mother. He worked himself loose from the girl's embrace and explained why he was here.

"Then we're going to Messy Row?"

"In a few months," said Chloe. "Marcus is setting up a perpetual fund to help those who can't pay their fare."

"Oh, I'll go," said Mary Ellen, looking steadily at Marcus. "But you needn't expect me to get married."

Marcus smiled to himself. She was dramatizing. When she found her choice wasn't limited she would scarcely remember him. There was, if Marcus now recalled correctly, a Joe Ainsworth, twenty-four or -five. What made him seem older, when Marcus had first thought of him, was his prematurely gray hair. The two should be a perfect match. Chloe could not have Joe Ainsworth after all, but there'd be another for her.

"Please change, Mary Ellen," said Marcus. "We're going to

dinner."

"All of us?"

"Certainly all of us," said Marcus dryly, noting her disapproval.

As she left he began discussing with Chloe what he should say in the request. Apparently there were nuances he didn't understand because he still didn't have it settled to his satisfaction when Mary Ellen returned.

"I'm ready," she said, pirouetting for his approval.

She was ready, but not for a quiet little dinner. "I suggest a wrap for your shoulders," he said. She made a face, but went to get one.

"How long will it take to get this through?" he asked Chloe.

"Four to six years. There's a backlog."

"Four to six years?" he repeated incredulously. He began to see that the loophole the government had provided was very small indeed. Who would bother, even if he felt strongly about it, when he knew it would take so long?

"That's going through regular channels." Chloe frowned and smoothed her hair. "You may be very lucky though. Today, just today, we might find a much faster way. You said they are moving A-CELO?"

"They are," he said, hoping he knew what she meant. This

was a golden opportunity that might never come again.

"Then they'll be busy through the night. A workman should have access to the master robot."

Marcus smiled. "I'm an excellent workman."

"You'll need me, too. You won't recognize what you're after."

"Granted. Is it dangerous?"

"Not physically. But there's a severe penalty for tampering with government property. There's an even heavier one for trying to get your case considered ahead of schedule."

He could see why this was so. He could also see that Chloe was the kind of person Messy Row needed. She knew what she was getting into, but didn't hesitate. "Then you should come with me. But stay in the background. Promise me you'll try to get away if I'm caught."

She shrugged. "If you're caught you'll need help on the outside."

Mary Ellen came back, a transparent shimmering wrap over her shoulders. She was blond and dazzling. "Where are

we going? I'm so happy."

Marcus loosened his collar and sat down. "Dinner's off, except for you two. Chloe and I have work to do. Mary Ellen, take Wilbur back to the hotel for me. Watch after him."

"You want me to?" she asked despondently.

"I asked you to."

"Then I will." She arched her back, and it was a splendid arch. She swirled around, pausing at the door. "Come on, brat."

"Pa, I can get along-" said Wilbur. Marcus looked at him

and he left with Mary Ellen.

"We haven't much time," said Marcus when they were alone. "First we have to write the request. I'll need your help."

Chloe took the cover off a small machine in the corner. She sat down and turned toward him. "We have to emphasize

anguish and suffering."

"Misery," suggested Marcus.

"Misery is a good strong word," she agreed. "It isn't used much lately. You should have this acted on in hours instead

of vears."

"It will be nice," said Marcus. "I can't think of any name as bad as Messy Row." Slowly he began to speak of the misery resulting from the error. Making corrections as they went,

Chloe typed it on the tape.

Marcus Mezzerow felt the weight of forty-three years roll away. He was tired, but it was relaxed tiredness that comes with achievement. It had been easy to walk into A-CELO and become part of the bustle and confusion. It had even been easy to locate the master robot that processed decisions on chart names. But the rest hadn't been easy even with Chloe to guide and counsel him.

The master robot was one of the last things to be moved. It was located deep in the sub-sub-basement, ordinarily inaccessible. It was a ponderous contrivance, awkward to move and quite delicate. Truck robots backed up to it and under it, lift-

ing it up. Technicians and extra workmen swiftly began disconnecting it from the building. Marcus was one of those extra workmen and he did his job as well as the others. But he didn't get an opportunity to insert his request in the machine.

Chloe sauntered past in shapeless work clothes, winking as she went by. She attracted no attention because there were many women around. Marcus got ready, moving to the front of the machine, feeling the spool in his pocket. A technician stared suspiciously at him, but there wasn't anything definite to object to.

Chloe leaned against the wall, moving the switch next to her with her elbow. Immediately standby circuits cut in, but the flicker of lights caused a commotion. The technician next to Marcus whirled, shouting at Chloe, who looked startled and tired. The tiredness was real.

In the few free seconds he had, Marcus put the spool in the machine close to the top. It jammed the remaining spools closer together, but the machine was built to compensate for overloads. There should be no trouble from this.

The spool itself was another thing Chloe had helped him with. Normally requests were received on paper and had to be transcribed. She had enabled him to bypass one stage altogether.

They worked on after the shouting episode. At the first rest break they walked up to the street level, pausing in a dimly lighted hall to strip off their outer work clothing which they disposed of. They were no longer workmen. They were pedestrians who had passed by and wandered in to see what was happening. They didn't belong in the building and were told to leave, which they did.

And so it was late when Marcus entered the hotel. There was no one around, for which he was thankful. He didn't feel like fending off women at this hour of the morning. He went up and let himself in quietly. Wilbur was asleep in the adjoining room and the door between them was open. He closed it before turning on the light, which he adjusted to the lowest level. Perhaps by this time the master chart robot was in a

new location, grinding out decisions. Messy Row was or soon would be a thing of the past.

"Pa," Wilbur called as Marcus removed a shoe.

"Yes. I'm back. Go to sleep."

"Did you get it done?"

"It's finished. We're taking the next ship out."

"Tomorrow?"

"If there's one scheduled tomorrow."

"Before we say good-by?"

Marcus could hear the bed rustle as Wilbur sat up. "We'll send them a note. Anyway, they'll be on Mezzerow in a few months"

The door opened and Wilbur stood there, his face white and eyes round and serious. "But I gotta say good-by to Mary Ellen."

Marcus took off the other shoe. He should have known not to leave them alone. His only excuse was that he had been thinking of other things. "I thought you didn't like her," he said

"Pa, that was because I thought she didn't like me," said Wilbur. "But she does. I mean—" He leaned heavily against the doorway and his face was long and sad.

Marcus smiled in the near darkness. The boy had been around girls so seldom he didn't know how they behaved. He had mistaken a normal reaction to the opposite sex for something more. Nevertheless it had worked out nicely. Wilbur would not remember who it was that Mary Ellen had really pursued. With the feverish egotism of youth he would retain only the memory of the interest she'd shown in him. A kiss would haunt him for years. "Am I to understand you made love to her?" he asked sternly, amused at his own inaccuracy.

"Oh, Pa," said Wilbur. "I kissed her."

"These affairs pass away."

"I still gotta say good-by," said Wilbur.

"We'll see," said Marcus. Not if he could help it, would they. It would be a terrible thing if, on parting, Mary Ellen would throw her arms around him, ignoring Wilbur. She was too young to understand what it might mean to someone even younger than herself. Marcus went to sleep with the satisfaction of a man who is in full control of destiny.

In the morning there was no need for subterfuge. A ship was going near Mezzerow. Not directly to it—the planet wasn't that important. But it was merely a short local hop from one of the planets on the schedule. Mezzerow. After all these years he could call it by the rightful name without feeling provincial.

The excitement of the return trip shook Wilbur out of his preoccupation with Mary Ellen. Marcus packed and had the luggage zipped to the space port. He called Chloe and completed the financial arrangements and left a message for her sister who was at work.

And then they were at the port, entering the ship. There was a short wait before takeoff. They settled in the cabin and Wilbur promptly went to sleep. Food, sleep, girls; it was all a young man had time for.

But Marcus couldn't rest though he was tired. He wanted to hear the schedule announced. By this time the correction should have been made. The rockets started, throbbing softly as the tubes warmed up. Wilbur awakened with a start, sitting on the edge of the acceleration diaphragm. "Do you think they'll announce it?" he asked.

"I think so," said Marcus. The Universe would know that it was Mezzerow.

The rockets throbbed higher; the cabin shook. Weren't they going to call the schedule? The intercom in the cabin rasped.

They were. "Bessemer, Coarsegold," said the speaker.

"Get on the acceleration couch," said Marcus as he did so himself.

"Noreen, Cassalmont," the speaker droned. But now there was too much interference from the rockets. The thrust pressed Marcus deep into the flexible diaphragm. The announcer shouted, but the blood was roaring in his ears.

Marcus felt himself sliding into the gray world of takeoff. Then they were out among the stars and the sensation of great weight rolled away. Marcus sat up.

"We didn't hear it," said Wilbur, swinging his legs.

"We didn't. But they announced it."

"I wish I'd heard," said Wilbur.

It was bothering Marcus, too. "The thing to do is to find out," he said. They went into the corridor. The rockets were silent; the star drive had taken over. The solar system was behind them, indistinguishable from the other stars.

The pilot was busy and nodded his head, asking them to wait while he set the controls. He flipped levers and after an interval turned around. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"We didn't hear the schedule," said Marcus. "The rockets

were too loud."

The pilot smiled apologetically. "You know how it is—last minute corrections on the charts. We had to wait until new ones were delivered, just before takeoff."

The oppression that had been hovering near lifted a little. "I understand," said Marcus. "Would you tell me if Mezzerow was one of the corrections?"

The pilot turned to the list and ran his finger down the line. He looked and looked again. "No Mezzerow here," he said

The oppression had never been far away. It came back. "No Mezzerow?" said Marcus bleakly.

"No, but I'll check." The pilot bent over the list. "Wait. Maybe this is why I didn't see it. Take a look."

Marcus looked where the pilot was pointing. Above the fingernail, in bold black letters, was the name.

MISERY ROW

(Formerly Mezzerow-changed to avoid confusion with a family name.)

"Thanks," said Marcus faintly. "That's what I wanted to know."

They went to the cabin in silence. Marcus closed his eyes but that didn't shut out the new name. Nothing could.

"That's not as nice as it was," said Wilbur. "What do you suppose was wrong?"

"I don't know," said Marcus. But he did know. Fourteen

times, or was it eleven, he had used one word. He had tried to overload the master robot with emotion and he had succeeded.

He had given it one outstanding impression: Misery. "What'll we do?" said Wilbur. "Go back and change it?"

"No," said Marcus. "We'll leave it as it is. When you grow up and take my place, you can try your hand at it if you want."

Women would get there regardless of what it was called. Chloe would realize what had happened and anyway he'd write. She'd see that they got to the right place. And with women for the men who wanted to settle, they'd get along.

Besides, there was the element of uncertainty. He had thought nothing could be quite as bad as the old name . . . until this. He shuddered to think what the next change might be like.

"Will it be all right?" asked Wilbur anxiously.

"It has to be all right," said Marcus, his voice strong with resignation. "We're going home to Misery Row."

AN EYE FOR A WHAT?

I.

ON HIS WAY across the wheel one morning, Dr. Walter Gomez detoured down to C Level promenade. A few men were standing, as usual, at the view window looking out at the enormous blue-green planet below. They were dressed alike in sheen-gray coveralls, a garment with detachable gauntlets and hood designed to make it convertible into a spacesuit. It was uncomfortable, but regulation: according to the books, a Survey and Propaganda Satellite might find itself under attack at any moment.

Nothing so interesting had happened to SAPS 3107A, orbiting off the seventh planet of a G-type star in Ophiuchus. They had been here for two years and a half, and most of them had not even touched ground yet.

There it was, drifting by out there, blue-green, fat and juicy—an oxygen planet, two-thirds land, mild climate, soil fairly bursting with minerals and organics.

Gomez felt his mouth watering when he looked at it. He had "wheel fever." They all did. He wanted to get down there, to natural gravity and natural ailments.

The last month or so, there had been a feeling in the Satellite that a breakthrough was coming. Always coming: it never arrived.

A plump orthotypist named Lola went by and a couple of the men turned with automatic whistles.

"Listen," said Olaf Olsen conspiratorially, with a hand on Gomez's arm, "that reminds me, did you hear what happened at the big banquet in George's honor yesterday?"

"No," said Gomez, irritably withdrawing his arm. "I didn't go. Can't stand banquets. Why?"

"Well, the way I got it, the commandant's wife was sitting right across from George—"

Comez's interest sharpened. "You mean the gorgon? What

did he do?"

"I'm telling you. See, it looked like he was watching her all through dinner. Then along comes the dessert—lemon meringue. So old George—"

The shift bell rang. Gomez started nervously and looked at his thumbwatch. The other men were drifting away. So was Olaf, laughing like a fool.

"You'll die when you hear," he called back. "Boy, do I wish

I'd been there myself! So long, Walt."

Gomez reluctantly went the other way. In B Corridor, some-body called out to him. "Hey, Walt! Hear about the banquet?"

He shook his head. The other man, a baker named Pedro, grinned and waved, disappearing up the curve of the corridor. Gomez opened the door of Xenology Section and went in.

During his absence, somebody had put a new chart on the wall. It was ten feet high and there were little rectangles all over it, each connected by lines to other rectangles.

When he first saw it, Gomez thought it was a new table of organization for the Satellite Service and he winced; but on closer inspection, the chart was too complex, and besides, it had a peculiar disorganized appearance. Boxes had been white-rubbed out and other boxes drawn on top of them. Some parts were crowded illegibly together and others were spacious.

The whole thing looked desperately confused and so did Elvis Womrath, who was on a wheeled ladder erasing the entire top right-hand corner.

"N panga," he said irritably. "That right?"

"Yes," a voice piped unexpectedly. Gomez looked around, saw nobody. The voice went on, "But he is R panga to his cousins and all their N pangas or bigger, except when—"

Gomez leaned over and peered around the desk. There on the carpet was the owner of the voice, a pinkish-white spheroid with various appendages sprouting in all directions, like

a floating mine: "George" the gorgon.

"Oh, it's you," said Gomez, producing his echo sounder and humidometer. "What's all this nonsense I hear—" He began to prod the gorgon with the test equipment, making his regular morning examination. It was the only bright moment of his day; the infirmary could wait.

"All right," Womrath interrupted, scrubbing furiously. "R panga to cousins—wait a minute now." He turned with a scowl. "Gomez, I'll be through in a minute. N panga or bigger, except when . . ." He sketched in half a dozen boxes, labeled them and began to draw connecting lines. "Now is that right?" he asked George.

"Yes, only now it is wrong panga to mother's cousins. Draw again from father's cousins' N pangas to mother's cousins' O pangas or bigger . . . Yes, and now from father's uncles' R pangas to mother's uncles' pangas' cousins—"

Womrath's hand faltered. He stared at the chart; he had drawn such a tangle of lines, he couldn't tell what box connected with which

"Oh, God," he said hopelessly. He climbed down off the ladder and slapped the stylus into Gomez's palm. "You go nuts." He thumbed the intercom on the desk and said, "Chief, I'm going off now. Way off."

"Did you get that chart straightened out?" the intercom de-

manded.

"No, but-"

"You're on extra duty as of now. Take a pill. Is Gomez here?"

"Yes," said Womrath resignedly.

"Both of you come in, then. Leave George outside."

"Doctor," the spheroid piped, "are you panga to me?"

"Don't let's get into that," said Womrath, twitching, and took Gomez by the sleeve.

They found the chief of the Xenology Section, Edward H. Dominick, huddled bald and bearlike behind his desk. The cigar in his hand looked chewed.

"Womrath," he said, "when can you give me that chart?"
"I don't know. Never, maybe." When Dominick scowled at him irritably, he shrugged and lit a cigarette.

Dominick swiveled his gaze at Gomez. "Have you heard about what happened at the banquet in George's honor yes-

terday?"

"No, I have not," said Gomez. "Will you be so kind as to tell me, or else shut up about it?"

Dominick rubbed his shaven skull, absorbing the insult. "It was during the dessert. George was sitting opposite Mrs. Carver, in that little jump seat. Just as she got her fork into the pie—it was lemon meringue—George rolled right up over the table and grabbed the plate away. Mrs. Carver screamed, pulled back—thought she was being attacked, I suppose—and the chair went out from under her. It—was—a—mess."

Gomez ended the awed silence. "What did he do with the

pie?"

"Ate it," said Dominick glumly. "Had a perfectly good piece of his own that he didn't touch." He popped a lozenge into his mouth.

Gomez shook his head. "Not typical. His pattern is strictly submissive. I don't like it."

"That's what I told Carver. But he was livid. Shaking. We all sat there until he escorted his wife to her room and came back. Then we had an interrogation. All we could get out of George was, 'I thought I was panga to her.'"

Gomez shifted impatiently in his chair, reaching automatically for a bunch of grapes from the bowl on the desk. He was a small, spare man and he felt defensive about it. "Now what is all this panga business?" he demanded.

Womrath snorted and began to peel a banana.

"Panga," said Dominick, "would appear to be some kind of complicated authority-submission relationship that exists among the gorgons." Gomez sat up straighter. "They never mentioned it to us because we never asked. Now it turns out to be crucial." Dominick sighed. "Fourteen months, just getting a three-man base down on the planet. Seven more to get the elders' permission to bring a gorgon here experimentally.

All according to the book. We picked the biggest and brightest-looking one we could find. That was George. He seemed to be coming along great. And now this."

"Well, Chief," said Womrath carefully, "nobody has any more admiration than I have for Mrs. Carver as a consumer she really puts it away—but it seems to me the question is, is

George damaged-"

Dominick was shaking his head. "I haven't told you the rest of it. This panga thing stopped Carver cold, but not for long. He beamed down to the planethead and had Rubinson ask the elders, 'Is George panga to the commandant's wife?'"

Gomez grinned mirthlessly and clicked his tongue.

Dominick nodded. "Who knows what a question like that may have meant to them? They answered back, in effect, 'Certainly not,' and wanted to know the details. Carver told them."

"And?" asked Gomez.

"They said George was a shocking criminal who should be appropriately punished. Not by them, you understand—by us, because we're the offended parties. Moreover—now this must make sense to their peculiar way of looking at things—if we don't punish George to their satisfaction, they'll punish Rubinson and his whole crew."

"How?"

"By doing whatever it is we should have done to George—which could be anything."

Womrath pursed his lips to whistle, but no sound came out. He swallowed a mouthful of banana and tried again. Still nothing.

"You get it?" said Dominick with suppressed emotion. They all looked through the open doorway at George, squatting patiently in the other room. "There's no trouble about 'punishment'—we all know what it means; we've read the books. But how do you punish an alien like that? An eye for a what?

"Now let's see if we have this straight," said Dominick, sorting through the papers in his hand. Womrath and Gomez looked on from either side. George tried to peek, too, but his

photoceptors were too short. They were all standing in the outer office, which had been stripped to the bare walls and floor. "One. We know a gorgon changes color according to his emotional state. When they're contented, they're a kind of rose pink. When they're unhappy, they turn blue."

"He's been pink ever since we've had him on the Satellite,"

said Womrath, glancing down at the gorgon.

"Except at the banquet," Dominick answered thoughtfully. "I remember he turned bluish just before . . . If we could find out what it was that set him off . . . Well, first things first." He held down another finger. "Two, we don't have any information at all about local systems of reward and punishment. They may cut each other into bits for spitting on the sidewalk, or they may just slap each other's—um, wrists—"

He looked unhappily down at George, whose auricles and

photoceptors were all out on stalks.

"-for arson, rape and mopery," Dominick finished. "We don't know. We'll have to play it by ear."

"What does George say about it?" Gomez asked. "Why

don't you ask him?"

"We thought of that," Womrath said glumly. "Asked him what the elders would do to him in a case like this, and he

said they'd quabble his infarcts or something."

"A dead end," Dominick added. "It would take us years . . ." He scrubbed his naked scalp with a palm. "Well, number three, we've got all the furniture out of here—it's going to be damned crowded, with the whole staff working in my office, but never mind . . . Number four, there's his plate with the bread and water. And number five, that door has been fixed so it latches on the outside. Let's give it a dry run."

He led the way to the door; the others followed, including

George.

"No, you stay in here," Womrath told George, who stopped, blushing an agreeable pink.

Dominick closed the door and dropped the improvised latch into its socket. He punched the door button, found it satisfactorily closed. Through the transparent upper pane, they could see George inquisitively watching.

Dominick opened the door again. "Now, George, pay attention. This is a *prison*. You're being *punished*. We're going to keep you in here, with nothing to eat but what's there, until we think you're punished enough. Understand?"

"Yes," George said doubtfully.

"All right," said Dominick, and closed the door.

They all stood watching for a while, and George stood watching them back, but nothing else happened.

"Let's go into my office and wait," said Dominick, with a

sigh. "Can't expect miracles all at once."

They trooped down the corridor to the adjoining room and ate peanuts for a while.

"He's a social creature," Womrath said hopefully. "He'll get

lonesome after a while."

"And hungry," Gomez said. "He never turns down a meal."

Half an hour later, when they looked in, George was thoughtfully chewing up the carpet.

"No, no, no, no, George," said Dominick, bursting in on

him. "You're not supposed to eat anything except what we give you. This is a *prison*."

"Good carpet," said George, hurt.

"I don't care if it is. You don't eat it, understand?"

"Okay," said George cheerfully. His color was an honest rose pink.

Four hours later, when Gomez went off shift, George had settled down in a corner and pulled in all his appendages. He

was asleep. If anything, he looked pinker than ever.

When Gomez came on shift again, there was no doubt about it. George was sitting in the middle of the room, photoceptors out and waving rhythmically; his color was a glowing pink, the pink of a rose pearl. Dominick kept him in there for another day, just to make sure; George seemed to lose a little weight on the austere diet, but glowed a steady pink. He liked it.

he had the worst case of wheel fever on SAPS 3107A. It had got so that looking out at that fat, blue-green planet, swimming there so close, was more than he could bear.

Kelly was a big man, an outdoorsman by instinct; he longed for natural air in his lungs and turf under his feet. To compensate, he strode faster, shouted louder, got redder of face and bulgier of eye, bristled more fiercely. To quiet an occasional trembling of his hands, he munched sedative pills. He had dreams of falling, with which he bored the ship's Mother Hubbard and the Church of Marx padre by turns.

"Is that it?" he asked now, disapprovingly. He had never seen the gorgon before; Semantics, Medical and Xenology Sections had been keeping the alien pretty much to them-

selves.

Dominick prodded the pinkish sphere with his toe. "Wake up, George."

After a moment, the gorgon's skin became lumpy at half a dozen points. The lumps grew slowly into long, segmented stems. Some of these expanded at the tips into "feet" and "hands." Others flowered into the intricate patterns of auricles and photoceptors—and one speech-organ, which looked like a small trumpet.

"Hello," said George sunnily.

"He can pull them back in any time?" Kelly asked, rubbing his chin.

"Yes. Show him, George."

The feathery stalks obligingly became blank-tipped, then rapidly shrank, segment by segment. In less than two seconds, George was a smooth sphere again.

"Well, that makes for a little problem here," said Kelly. "You see what I mean? If you can't get a grip on him, how are you

going to punish him like you say?"

"We've tried everything we could think of," said Dominick. "We locked him up, kept him on short rations, didn't talk to him . . . He doesn't draw any pay, of course, so we can't fine him."

"Or downgrade him on the promotion lists, either," said Womrath gloomily.

"No. And it's a little late to use the Pavlov-Morganstern treatments we all had when we were children. We can't prevent a crime he's already committed. So our thought was, since you're the games instructor—", "We thought," Womrath said diplomatically, "you might

"We thought," Womrath said diplomatically, "you might have noticed something that might be useful. You know,

rough-housing and so on."

Kelly thought this over. "Well, there's low blows," he said, "but I mean, hell—" He gestured futilely at George, who had just decided to put his auricles out again. "What would you—?"

"No, that's out of the question," Dominick said heavily.

"Well, I'm sorry, Kelly. It was nice of you to help out."

"Wait a minute," said Kelly. "I got something coming to me, maybe." He nibbled a thumbnail, staring down at the gorgon. "How would this be? I was thinking—sometimes the boys in the pool, they get kind of frisky; they take to ducking each other. Under the water. Now what I was thinking, he breathes air, doesn't he? You know what I mean?"

Dominick and Gomez looked at each other. "It sounds possi-

ble," said Dominick.

"Out of the question," Gomez objected. "We don't know what his tolerance is. Suppose Kelly should damage him severely or even—"

"Oh," said Dominick. "Yes, you're right. We couldn't take

a chance."

"I've been a games instructor for seventy-three years—two rejuvenations—" Kelly began, bristling.

"It isn't that, Kelly," said Womrath hastily. "George isn't human, so how do we know how he'd react to a ducking?"

"On the other hand," Dominick said, "gorgons do turn blue when they're not happy—we have Rubinson's assurance for that. It seems to me George wouldn't be happy when smothering; that would be the whole point, wouldn't it? Dr. Gomez would supervise closely, of course. Really Gomez, I don't see why not. Kelly, if you'll tell us what time would be most convenient for you—"

"Well," said Kelly, looking at his thumbwatch, "hell, the

pool is empty now. It's ladies' day, but all the girls are down in Section Seven, hanging around Mrs. Carver. I hear she's still hysterical."

Struck by a thought, Gomez was bending over to speak to the gorgon. "George, you breathe by spiracles, is that correct? Those little tubes all over your skin?"

"Yes," said George.

"Well, do they work under water?"

"No."

Dominick and Kelly were listening with interest.

"If we held you under water, would it hurt you?"

George flickered uncertainly, from rose to pale magenta. "Don't know. Never tried."

The three men leaned closer. "Well, George," said Gomez, tensely, "would that be a punishment?"

George flickered violently. "Yes. No. Maybe. Don't know."

They straightened again, disappointed. Dominick sighed gustily. "He always gives us those mixed-up answers. I don't

know. Let's try it. What else can we do?"

Kelly found himself paired off with George, following Dominick and Dr. Gomez, and preceding Womrath and an orderly named Josling, who was wheeling one of the dispensary pulmotors. The up-curving corridors were deserted. Kelly lagged a little, adjusting his pace to George's waddling steps. After a moment, he was surprised to feel something small and soft grip his fingers. He looked down; George the gorgon had put one seven-fingered "hand" into his. The gorgon's flowerlike photoceptors were turned trustfully upward.

Kelly was taken by surprise. No children were allowed on the Satellite, but Kelly had been the father of eight in a previous rejuvenation. The confiding touch stirred old memories.

"You'll be all right," said Kelly gruffly, "You just come along with me."

The pool, as he had predicted, was empty. Ripples reflected faint threads of light up and down along the walls.

"The shallow end would be better," said Kelly. His voice was hollow and echoed back flatly. Pausing to peel off his coverall, he led George carefully down the steps into the pool. Half submerged, George floated. Kelly drew him gently out into deeper water.

Dominick and the others arranged themselves along the

brink in interested attitudes.

Kelly cleared his throat. "The way it generally happens, one of the boys will grab hold of another one, like this-" He put his hands on the smooth floating globe, and hesitated. "Go ahead, Kelly," called Dominick. "Remember, you have

a direct order to do this."

"Sure," said Kelly. He turned to the gorgon. "Hold your breath now!" He pressed downward. The gorgon seemed lighter than he had expected, like an inflated ball; it was hard to force it under.

Kelly pushed harder. George went under briefly and slipped out of Kelly's hands, bobbing to the surface. The gorgon's speaking trumpet cleared itself of water with a phonk and said, "Nice. Do again, Kelly."

Kelly glanced over at Dominick, who said, "Yes. Again."

Dr. Gomez stroked his thin beard and said nothing.

Kelly took a deep sympathetic breath and shoved the gorgon under. A few bubbles came to the surface. George's speaking trumpet broke water, but made no sound. Down below. Kelly could see his own pale hands gripping the gorgon's body; the water made them look bloodless; but not Georgehe was a clear, unblemished pink.

There was a discouraged silence when Kelly brought him

back up.

"Listen," said Womrath, "I've got another idea. George, can you breathe through that speaking trumpet, too?"

"Yes," said George cheerfully.

Everybody brightened perceptibly. Josling polished his pulmotor with a rag.

"Go ahead, Kelly," said Dominick. "And this time, you hold him under."

George went down for the third time. The bubbles swirled upward. The gorgon's speaking trumpet swayed toward the surface, but Kelly leaned farther over, blocking it with his forearm. After a moment, all of George's appendages began

to contract. Kelly craned his neck downward anxiously. Was a hint of blue beginning to show?

"Keep him down," called Gomez sharply.

George was a blank sphere again. Then one or two of the limbs began to reappear, but they looked different somehow.

"Now?" asked Kelly.

"Give him a second more," said Dominick, leaning over precariously. "It seems to me—"

Kelly's back muscles were knotted with tension. He did not like the way George's new limbs seemed to be flattening out, trailing limply. It was as if something had gone wrong in the works.

"I'm bringing him up," he said hoarsely.

To Kelly's horror, when he lifted his hands, George stayed where he was. Kelly made a grab for him, but the gorgon slipped out from under his fingers. The new limbs stiffened and sculled vigorously; George darted away, deep under the water.

Leaning, openmouthed, Dominick slipped and went into the pool with a majestic splash. He floundered and rose up, a moment later, streaming with water like a sea lion. Kelly, wading anxiously toward him, stopped when he saw that Dominick was safe. Both men looked down. Between them and around them swam George, darting and drifting by turns, as much at home in the pool as a speckled trout.

"Finsl" said Dominick, slack-jawed. "And gillsl"

It may as well be said that Dr. Walter Gomez was a misanthrope. He did not like people; he liked diseases. Down there on Planet Seven, once the trade mission was established, he could confidently expect enough new and startling ailments to keep him happy for years.

Up here, all he got were sprained ankles, psychosomatic colds, hives, and indigestion. There was one cook's helper named Samuels, who kept coming back every Wednesday with the same boil on the back of his neck. It got so that in spite of himself, Gomez spent the whole week dreading Wednesday. When he saw Samuels' earnest face coming through the

door, something seemed to wind itself a little tighter inside

Some day, when Samuels opened his mouth to say, "Hey, Doc—" Samuels always called him "Doc"—the something inside him was going to break with a sound like a banjo string. What would happen then, Dr. Gomez was unable to imagine.

When the gorgon had first been brought up to the Satellite, there had been two or three delightful little fungus infections, then nothing. A great disappointment. Gomez had isolated and cultured almost a hundred microorganisms found in smears he had taken from George, but they were all non-viable in human tissue. The viable bacteria, viruses, parasites that always turned up on a life-infested planet were evidently lurking in some organism other than the gorgons. They swam, at night, across the optical field of Dr. Gomez's dreaming mind—rod-shaped ones, lens-shaped ones, wriggly ones, leggy ones, and ones with teeth.

One morning, Dr. Gomez awoke with a desperate resolve. It was a Tuesday. He went directly to the infirmary, relieved Nurse Trumble who was on duty, and, opening a locked cabinet, filled a hypodermic from an ampule of clear straw-colored fluid. The trade name of this substance was bets-off; it was a counter inhibitant which stunned the censor areas of the forebrain chiefly affected by the Pavlov-Morganstern treatments. (By an odd coincidence, the patentee was a Dr. Jekyll.) Gomez injected two c.c.s of it directly into the median basilic vein and sat down to wait.

After a few minutes, his perpetual bad humor began to lift. He felt a pleasant ebullience; the colors of things around him seemed brighter and clearer.

"Ha!" said Gomez.

He got up and went to his little refrigerator, where, after some search, he found half a dozen of the cultures he had made of microorganisms taken from gorgon smears. They were quiescent, of course—deep-frozen. Gomez warmed them cautiously and added nutrients. All morning, while the usual succession of minor complaints paraded through the infirmary, the cultures grew and multiplied. Gomez was jovial with

his patients; he cracked a joke or two and handed out harmless pills all around.

By noon, four of the cultures were flourishing. Gomez carefully concentrated them into one and loaded another hypodermic with the resulting brew. To his liberated intelligence, the matter was clear: No organism, man or pig or gorgon, was altogether immune to the microbes it normally carried in its body. Upset the balance by injecting massive colonies of any one of them and you were going to have a sick gorgon—i.e., Gomez thought, a punished gorgon.

The treatment might also kill the patient, but Gomez light-heartedly dismissed this argument as a quibble. (Or quabble?) Armed with his hypo, he went forth looking for George.

He found him in the small assembly room, together with Dominick, Womrath, and a mechanic named Bob Ritner. They were all standing around a curious instrument, or object of art, built out of bar aluminum.

"It's a rack," Ritner explained proudly. "I saw a picture of it once in a kid's book"

The main feature of the "rack" was a long, narrow table with a windlass at one end. It looked like a crude device for stretching something.

"We thought the time had come for stern measures," Dom-

inick said, mopping his head.

"In the olden days," Ritner put in, "they used these on prisoners who wouldn't talk."

"I talk," George pleasantly offered.

"It's another punishment, George," Dominick explained kindly. "Well, Gomez, before we go ahead, I suppose you want to examine your patient."

"Yes, just so, ha-hal" said Gomez.

He knelt down and peered keenly at George, who swiveled his photoceptors interestedly around to stare back. The doctor prodded George's hide; it was firm and resilient. The gorgon's color was a clear pink and the intricate folds of his auricles seemed crisp and alert.

Gomez took a hand scale from his kit; it was pre-set for A Level gravity. "Climb up here, George."

Obediently, the gorgon settled himself on the pan of the scale while Gomez held it up.

"Hm," said Gomez. "He's lost a good deal of weight."

"He has?" asked Dominick hopefully.

"But he seems to be in unusually good condition-better than a week ago, I would say. Perhaps just a little sugar solution to pep him up-" Gomez withdrew the hypo from his kit, aimed it at George's smooth skin, and pressed the trigger. Dominick sighed. "Well, I suppose we might as well go

ahead. George, just hop up there and let Ritner tie those straps

onto you."

George trustingly climbed onto the table. Ritner buckled straps around four of his limbs and then began to tighten the cylinder.

"Not too much," said George anxiously.

"I'll be careful," Ritner assured him. He kept on winding the cylinder up. "How does that feel?"

George's "arms" and "legs" were half again their usual length and still stretching.

"Tickles," giggled George.

Ritner went on turning the handle. Sims coughed nervously and was shushed. George's limbs kept on getting longer; then his body started to lengthen visibly.

"Are you all right, George?" Dominick asked.

"Very fine."

Ritner gave the handle a last despairing twist. George's elongated body stretched all the way in comfort from one end of the rack to the other. There was no place else for him to go.

"Nice," said George. "Do again." He was glowing a happy pink.

Ritner frustratedly kicked his machine. Gomez snorted and went away. In the corridor, unseen, he jumped up and clicked his heels together. He was having a wonderful time; his only regret was that it was not tomorrow. Come to think of it, why wait till Wednesday?

Commandant Charles Watson Carver, S.S., had been trained to make quick and courageous decisions. Once you began to entertain a doubt of your own rightness, you would hesitate too much, begin to second-guess yourself, fall prey to worry and anxiety.

The trouble was, you could never be right all the time. Following the book to the letter, or improvising brilliantly, either way you were bound to make mistakes. The thing was to cross them off and go ahead just the same.

Carver firmed his chin and straightened his back, looking down at the gorgon. It was sick, all right, there was no question about that. The thing's limbs drooped and weaved slightly, dizzily. Its hide was dry and hot to the touch.

"How long has he been like this?" Carver demanded, hesitating only slightly over the "he." Aliens were "it" to him and always had been, but it didn't do to let anybody know that.

"Twenty minutes, more or less," said Dr. Nasalroad. "I just got here myself"—he stifled a yawn—"about ten or fifteen minutes ago."

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Carver asked him. "It's Gomez's shift."

Nasalroad looked embarrassed. "I know. Gomez is in the hospital as a patient. He assaulted a cook's helper named Samuels—poured soup over his head. He was shouting something about boiling the boil on Samuel's neck. We had to put him under sedation. It took three of us."

Carver set his jaw hard. "Nasalroad, what is happening on this wheel, anyhow? First this thing attacks my wife. Then Gomez—" He glared down at George. "Can you pull him out of this, whatever it is?"

Nasalroad looked surprised. "That would be a large order. We don't know any gorgon medicine. I was assuming you'd want to beam down and ask *them*."

That was reasonable, of course. The only hitch was, as usual, a matter of interpretation. Was this something they had negligently allowed to happen to an important alien representative, or was it the necessary and proper punishment they had all been looking for?

He asked Nasalroad, "What color would you say he is now? Not pink, certainly."

"No-o. But not blue, either. I'd call it a kind of violet."

"Hm. Well, anyhow, he's got smaller than he was, isn't that right? Conspicuously smaller."

Nasalroad admitted it.

Carver made his decision. "Do the best you can," he said to Nasalroad. He lifted his wristcom, said briskly, "Have you got a line-of-sight to the planethead?"

"Yes, sir," the operator answered.

"All right, get me Rubinson."

A few seconds passed. "Planethead."

"Rubinson, this is Carver. Tell the elders we've got a pretty unhappy gorgon here. We're not sure just what did it—might have been one of a lot of things—but he's lost a good deal of weight, and his color"—Carver hesitated—"it's bluish. Definitely bluish. Got that?"

"Yes, Chief. Thank goodness! I'll pass the message along right away and call you back."

"Right." Carver closed the wristcom with an assertive snap. The gorgon, when he glanced down at it, looked sicker than ever, but no matter. What happened to the gorgon was its lookout; Carver was doing his duty.

III.

Gomez awoke with a horrible headache and a sense of guilt. He was not in his own cubicle, but in one of the hospital bunks, dressed in a regulation set of hospital pajamas (with removable hood and gloves, capable of being converted into a spacesuit). He could just see the wall clock at the far end of the room. It was twenty-three hours—well into his shift.

Gomez scuttled out of bed, groaning, and looked at the chart beside it. Mania, delusions. Sedation. Signed, Nasalroad.

Delusions: yes, he was having one now. He imagined he could remember heaving up a big tureen of mock-turtle soup over Samuels' startled face—splash, a smoking green torrent.

Good heavens! If that was real-Samuels!

And the gorgon!

Groaning and lurching, Gomez darted out of the room, past the orderly, Munch, who was sitting with a story viewer on his lap and couldn't get up fast enough. "Dr. Gomez! Dr. Nasalroad said—"

"Never mind Nasalroad," Gomez snapped, pawing in the refrigerator. He remembered those cultures being right back here; but now they were gone.

"-not to let you up until you acted normal again. Uh, how

do you feel, Doctor?"

"I feel fine! What difference does that make? How is he?"
Munch looked puzzled and apprehensive. "Samuels? Just
superficial burns. We put him to bed in his own cubby, be-

cause-"

"Not Samuels!" Gomez grabbed Munch by the front of his suit. "The gorgon!"

"Oh, well, he's been sick, too. How did you know, though, Doctor? You were snoring when it happened. Listen, let go my suit; you're making me nervous."

"Where?" Gomez demanded, thrusting his scrawny face

close to the other's.

"Where what? Oh, you mean the gorgon? Up in the little assembly room, the last I-"

Gomez was gone, out the door and down the corridor like a small, bearded fireball. He found an anxious crowd assembled —Commandant and Mrs. Carver, Dominick and his staff, Urban and two assistants from Semantics, orderlies, porters, and Dr. Nasalroad. Nasalroad had the gaunt and bright-eyed appearance of a man who had been on wake-up pills too long. He started when he saw Gomez.

"What's up?" Gomez demanded, grabbing his sleeve.

"Where's the gorgon? What-"

"Be quiet," said Nasalroad. "George is over in that corner behind Carver. We're waiting for the delegation from planetside. Rubinson said they were coming up, three of them with some kind of a box."

The loudspeaker said suddenly, "I have the tender locked

on. Contact. Contact is made. The lock is opening; get ready, here they come."

Gomez couldn't see past Carver's bulk. He tried to get away, but Nasalroad stopped him. "I want to see," he said

irritably.

"Listen," Nasalroad said. "I know what you did. I checked the bets-off pills and those cultures against inventory. The gorgon seems to be recovering nicely, no thanks to you. Now has the stuff worn off you or not? Because if not—"

A rustle went over the group. Gomez and Nasalroad turned in time to see the door opening. Two vigorous-looking gorgons waddled through; they were carrying an enameled metal box between them.

"Foop!" said the first one experimentally. "Where is gorgon George?"

"I'm all right," Gomez muttered. "If I wasn't, I'd have done something uncivilized to you by now, wouldn't I?"

"I guess so," said Nasalroad. They elbowed closer as the group shifted, making a space around the three gorgons. Peering, on tiptoe, Gomez could see George standing shakily beside the other two. "He looks terrible. Those are big ones, those other two, aren't they?"

"Not as big as George was when we got him," Nasalroad muttered. "Walt, if it turns out you've ruined the whole thing, I'll take a dose of bets-off myself and—"

"Listen!" snarled Gomez.

One of the gorgons was explaining, "This is panga box. What you call? You know panga?"

"Well, uh, yes and no," said Dominick uncomfortably. "But what about the punishment? We understood—"

"Punishment later. You, George, go in box."

Obediently, George waddled over and squatted beside the mouth of the box. He bobbed uncertainly, he looked for all the world like a large woman trying to get into a small sports 'copter. There was a minor outbreak of nervous laughter, quickly suppressed.

George leaned, retracting most of his upper appendages.

His round body began to be compressed into a squarish shape, wedging itself into the box.

The other gorgons watched with an air of tension, photoceptors rigidly extended. A hush fell. Among the humans present, there was a general air of Why-are-we-all-whispering?

George wriggled and oozed farther into the box. Momentarily, he stuck. He flickered blue, then pink. His "feet," almost retracted, scrabbled feebly at the bottom of the box.

Then he was in.

One of the other gorgons solemnly closed the lid on George and fastened it to make sure, then opened it again and helped him out. All three gorgons began to make rhythmic swaying motions with their "arms" and other appendages. George, Gomez thought, looked smug. He felt a sudden premonitory pang. What had he done?

"What's it all about?" Nasalroad demanded. "Are they

measuring him for a coffin or-"

Dominick, overhearing, turned and said, "I don't think so. Now this is interesting. You remember they said a panga box. What I'm afraid of is that they may have a standard of size. You see what I mean? They could be measuring George to see if he falls below the minimum standard of—uh—panga relations."

"Oh, heavens," said another voice. It was Urban of Semantics, who had been neglected of late; they hadn't needed him since George learned English. He was peering over Dominick's shoulder, looking dumbfounded. He said, "But don't you know the word we've been translating 'elders' really means 'smallest ones'? Good heavens—"

"I don't see-" Dominick began, but the commandant's voice drowned him out.

"Quiet! Quiet, please!" Carver was trumpeting. He went on, "Our friends from Seven have an announcement to make. Now, then."

To everyone's surprise, it was George who spoke, in the lisping accents of the gorgon language. No human present understood a word of it except Urban, who turned pale and began stammering inaudibly to himself.

One of the gorgons began to speak when George stopped: "Most elder person, known to you by name George, wishes me to thank you all for kindness done him when he was humble youth."

"Youth," muttered Urban. "But it really means 'ungainly

one'-or 'fat boy.' Oh, my heavens!"

"Now that he has become elder, it will be his most pleasure to repay all kindness in agreeable legislative manner."

"What does that mean?" Gomez queried aggrievedly. "Why

can't he talk for himself, anyway?"

"It would be beneath his dignity now," said Nasalroad. "Hush!"

"If," said the gorgon, "you will succeed in giving elder person, known by name George, proper punishment as aforesaid."

"This meeting will come to order!" said Carver, banging on the table. George and the other two gorgons were sitting opposite him, with the centerpiece of nasturtiums and fems between them. Grouped around Carver were Dominick, Urban, Womrath, Gomez, Nasalroad, Kelly, and Ritner.

"Now this is the situation," Carver said aggressively. "This gorgon turns out to be a member of their ruling council. I don't understand why, but forget that now—the point is he's friendly disposed toward us, so we've succeeded in this mission if we can find that proper punishment. Otherwise we're in the soup. Suggestions."

Dominick craned his bald head toward Gomez across the table. "Doctor, I had a thought. Would you say—is there anything peculiar about the gorgon's body constitution as compared, say, to ours?"

"Certainly," said Gomez dourly. "Any number of things. You name it, they—"

Giving them a dirty look, Carver nodded to Ritner. "Yes?"

"Well, I was thinking. I know the rack was a washout, but there was another thing they used to use called the Iron Virgin. It had a door, like, with spikes on it—"
"What I had in mind," Dominick said, "is there anything

"What I had in mind," Dominick said, "is there anything that would tend to limit their body size—any danger or disadvantage in growing large?" Gomez frowned and looked at Nasalroad.

"The pressure?" said Nasalroad tentatively. They rubbed their chins and looked at each other with professional glints in their eyes.

"What about the pressure?" Dominick prompted eagerly.

"How long would it take you to build a thing like that?" Carver was asking Ritner.

"Well-ten, eleven hours."
"Too long. That's out. Next!"

"They're actually a single cell—all colloidal fluid, at a considerable osmotic pressure. The bigger they get, the more pressure it takes to keep that shape. If they got too big, I rather imagine—"

Gomez snapped his fingers, awed. "They'd burst!"

Carver turned with an indignant glare. "Gentlemen, if I could get a little co-operation out of you, instead of this continual distraction— All right, Womrath?"

"Sir, I was just wondering, suppose if we let him turn into a fish, the way he did before in the pool—but then we'd net him and take him out of the water fast. That way, maybe—"

"It wouldn't work," said Kelly. "He changed back in about a second, the other time."

Nobody was paying any attention to Kelly. One of the big gorgons, who had been staring fixedly at the flowers in the middle of the table, had suddenly grabbed a handful and was stuffing them into his mouth. George said something shrill in gorgon talk and snatched the flowers away again. The other gorgon looked abashed, but flushed pink.

George, on the other hand, was distinctly blue.

His "hand," clutching the mangled flowers, hesitated. Slowly, as if with an effort, he put them back in the bowl.

The other two gorgons twined their "arms" around him. After a moment, George looked more his old self, but a hint of blue remained.

"What is it?" asked Carver alertly. "Did we do something, finally?"

"Did you turn blue because we punished you, George?" Womrath questioned.

"No," said George unexpectedly. "Hard for me to be elder." He added a few words in his own language to the other gorgons and their "arms" twined around him again. "Before, they panga to me," he added.

"Then that's why he took the pie away from the commandant's wife!" said Dominick, smiting himself on the fore-

head.

"Of course. They-"

"What's that? What's that?" Carver turned, bristling.
"Why, this explains that pie business," said Dominick. "He felt protective toward your wife, you see. That's what 'panga' means. They none of them have much control over their own appetites, so they guard each other. As they grow older and get more self-control, they're expected to get smaller, not bigger. George felt confused about his panga relationships to us, but in your wife's case, he was positive one more mouthful would make her explode—"

Carver was red to the ears. "Nonsensel" he shouted. "Dominick, you're being insulting, insubordinate, and unpatriotic!"

George, looking on interestedly, piped a few words in the gorgon language. One of the other gorgons immediately spoke up: "Elder person says you with smooth head are a smart man. He says the other big one who talks too much is wrong."

Carver's jaws worked. He looked at the gorgons, then

around the table. No one said anything.

Carver set his jaw heroically. "Well, gentlemen, we certainly tried, but-"

"Wait a minutel" said Gomez. Somewhere in his narrow skull, a great light had dawned. "George, am I panga to you?"
George's auricles waved tensely. "Yes. You very small man."
"Good." Gomez dry-washed his bony hands. "And you still

have to be punished for that mistake you made at the banauet?"

George's speaking tube buzzed unhappily, "Yes." "All right," said Gomez. Everybody was looking at him with expressions varying from puzzlement to alarm. Gomez took a deep breath. "Then here are my orders to you. Do as you please!"

There was a hiss of indrawn breath from Urban. Most of the others looked at Gomez as if he had grown snakes for hair.

"Doctor," said Carver, "have you gone off your-"

The chorus of gasps stopped him. Up on the table, flushing blue and bright pink by turns like a skysign, George was gobbling up the flowers in the centerpiece. Next he ate the bowl. One of his flailing limbs raked in the scratchpad Urban had been doodling on. He ate that.

Next moment, he was leaping to the floor, making Ritner duck wildly as he passed. Part of Dominick's detachable hood went with him, disappearing with hoarse munching sounds. With a gulp, George swallowed it and began on the carpet. He was eating greedily, frantically. The other two gorgons hovered around him with shrill gorgon cries, but he ate on, oblivious. Now he was bright blue and bulging, but still he ate.

"Stop it!" shouted Gomez. "George, stop that!"

George rocked to a halt. Gradually his blueness faded. The other gorgons were prodding and patting him anxiously. George looked all right, but it was obvious as he stood there that he would never fit into the panga box again.

He was bigger than the other two.

"Gomez," said Carver wildly, "why did you-"

"He was going to burst," said Gomez, twitching with excitement. "Couldn't you tell? Another mouthful or two-"

Carver recovered himself. He straightened his coverall and thrust out his chin. "At any rate, he was certainly blue that time. You all saw it—isn't that right?" He looked around triumphantly. "So, unless I'm very much mistaken—"

One of the two attendant gorgons raised his photoceptors. It was hard to tell which was George, now, except that his color was still a little lavender. The other gorgon spoke two brief sentences in his own language and then all three of them waddled off together toward the exit.

"What was that? What did he say?" demanded Carver.

Urban cleared his throat; he had turned pale again. "He said get the tender ready to take them back home."

"The tender is there," said Carver indignantly. "They can

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go back any time they want. But what did he say about the punishment?"

Urban cleared his throat again, looking bemused. "They say the punishment is good. More severe than any they ever thought of in twenty thousand years. They say they won't have to punish Rubinson and the others now, because you have done all the punishment necessary."
"Well?" challenged Carver. "Why are you looking that way?

What's the hitch? Are they going to refuse to enter the Union,

in spite of all this?"

"No," said Urban. "They say we are all panga to them now. They'll do as we say—let us land and build the distribution centers, start them consuming in massive quantity."

"But that'll destroy them!" someone interjected in a horri-

fied tone.

"That's right," said Urban.

Carver sighed. He had been in the SAPS service most of his life and was proud of his record. He played it as a game; the new, virgin planets were the prizes and he kept score with the row of tiny iridium buttons on his breast pocket. He said into his wristcom, "Let me know when Rubinson and his crew are on the way up."

There was a long wait. The silence grew oppressive. At length, the wall screen lighted with a view of Planet Seven, gilded along one cusp, blue-green and mysterious in the shadow. A silver spark was floating up out of the night side.

"Here they come now," said the voice.

Carver sighed again. "When they make contact, secure the tender and then signal for acceleration stations. We're leaving Seven. Tell Mr. Fruman to set a first approximation for our next star of call."

Gomez, twitching and frowning, clutched at the front of his coverall. "You're letting them go? Not landing on Seven -after all this work?"

Carver was staring into the view plate. "Some beings," he said slowly and unwillingly, "are not meant to be consumers."

A WOMAN'S PLACE

It was the speaking of Miss Kitty's name which half roused her from sleep. She eased her angular body into a more comfortable position in the sack. Still more asleep than awake, her mind reflected tartly that in this lifeboat, hurtling away from their wrecked spaceship back to Earth, the sleeping accommodation was quite appropriately named. On another mental level, she tried to hear more of what was being said about her. Naturally, hearing one's name spoken, one would.

"We're going to have to tell Miss Kitty as soon as she wakes up." It was Sam Eade talking to Lt. Harper—the two men who had escaped with her.

"Yes, Sam," the lieutenant answered. "What we've suspected all along is pretty definite now."

Still drowsing, she wondered, without any real interest, what they felt they must tell her. But the other level of her mind was more real. She wondered how she looked to these two young men while she slept. Did she sleep with her mouth open? Did her tiara slip while she snored?

Vividly, as in full dreaming, she slipped back into the remembered scene which had given birth to the phrase. At some social gathering she had been about to enter a room. She'd overheard her name spoken then, too.

"Miss Kitty is probably a cute enough name when you're young," the catty woman was saying. "But at her age!"

"Well, I suppose you might say she's kept it for professional reasons," the other woman had answered with a false tol-

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erance. "A schoolteacher, wanting to be cozy with her kiddies, just a big sister." The tolerance was too thin, it broke away. "Kind of pathetic, I think. She's so plain, so very typical of an old maid schoolteacher. She's just the kind to keep a name like Miss Kitty."

"What gets me," the first one scoffed, "is her pride in having such a brilliant mind—if she really does have one. All those academic degrees. She wears them on every occasion, like a tiaral"

She had drawn back from the door. But in her instant and habitual introspection, she realized she was less offended than perversely pleased because, obviously, they were jealous of her intellectual accomplishments, her ability to meet men on their own ground, intellectually as good a man as any man.

The half dream drowsiness was sharply washed away by the belated impact of Sam Eade's question to Lt. Harper. Reality flashed on, and she was suddenly wide awake in the lifeboat heading back to Earth.

"What is it you must tell me?" She spoke loudly and crisply to the men's broad backs where they sat in front of the instrument panel. The implication of the question, itself, that

they had been holding something back . . .

Lt. Harper turned slowly around in his seat and looked at her with that detested expression of amused tolerance which his kind of adult male affected toward females. He was the dark, ruggedly handsome type, the kind who took it for granted that women should fawn over him. The kind who would speak the fatuous cliché that a woman's place was in the home, not gallivanting off to teach colonists' children on the fourth planet of Procyon. Still, perhaps she was unjust, she hardly knew the man.

"Oh, you awake, Miss Kitty?" he asked easily. His tone, as always, was diffident, respectful toward her. Odd, she resented that respect from him, when she would have resented lack of

it even more.

"Certainly," she snapped. "What is it you must tell me?"

"When you're dressed, freshened up a bit," he answered, not evasively, but as if it could wait.

She started to insist, but he had already turned back to the nose window to study the starry sky and the huge misty green ball of Earth in front of them. Sam Eade, the radioman, was intently twisting the dials on his set with a puckered frown between his blond eyebrows. He was an entirely different type, tall, blond, but just as fatuously masculine, as arrogantly handsome. Probably neither one of them had an ounce of brains—handsome people so seldom needed to develop mental ability.

Sam, too, turned his face farther away from her. Both backs told her plainly that she could dress, take care of her needs, with as much privacy as the lifeboat could allow anybody. Not that it would take her long. She'd worn coveralls since

Not that it would take her long. She'd worn coveralls since the catastrophe, saving the dress she'd had on for landing on Earth. They'd had to leave most of her luggage behind. The lieutenant had insisted on taking up most of the spare space in the lifeboat with that dismantled space warper from the wreck of their ship.

She combed her short graying hair back of her ears, and used a little water sparingly to brush her teeth. Perhaps it had been a quixotic thing, her giving up a secure teaching post on Earth to go out to Procyon IV. Except that she'd dreamed about a new colony where the rising generation, under her influence, would value intellect—with the girls no different from the boys. Perhaps it had been even sillier to take a cabin on a freighter, the only passenger with a crew of four men. But men did not intimidate her, and on a regular passenger ship she'd have been bored stiff by having to associate with the women.

Two of the men . . .

It wasn't quite clear to her, even yet, what had happened. They'd used the normal drive to get clear of regular solar shipping lanes. The warning bell had rung that they were about to warp into hyperspace, a mechanism which canceled out distance and made the trip in apparent time no more than an overnight jaunt to Mars. There was a grinding shudder—then a twisted ship which looked as if some giant had taken a wet rag and torqued it to squeeze out the water. Lt.

Harper and Sam had got her out of her cabin, and finally into the lifeboat which was only partly crippled.

The other two men of the crew . . .

She zipped up the front of her coveralls with a crisp gesture, as if to snap off the vision. She would show no weakness in front of these two men. She had no weakness to show!

"All right, gentlemen," she said incisively to their backs.

"Now. What is it I must be told?"

Lt. Harper pointed to the ball of Earth so close ahead. It was huge, almost filling the sky in front of them. The misty atmosphere blurred outlines slightly, but she could make out the Eastern halves of North and South America clearly. The Western portions were still in dim darkness.

"See anything wrong, Miss Kitty?" the lieutenant asked

quietly.

She looked more closely, sensing a possible trap in his

question, a revealment of her lack of knowledge.

"I'm not an authority on celestial geography," she said cautiously, academically. "But obviously the maps I've seen were not accurate in showing the true continental proportions." She pointed to a small chart hanging on the side wall. "This map shows Florida, for example, a much longer peninsula than it actually is. A number of things like that. I don't see anything else wrong, but, of course, it's not my field of knowledge."

Lt. Harper looked at her approvingly, the kind of look she

gave a bright pupil who'd been especially discerning.

"Only it's not the map that's wrong, Miss Kitty," he said. "It is my field of knowledge, and I've seen those continental outlines hundreds of times. They always corresponded to the map... before."

She looked at him without comprehension.

"Not only that," Sam Eade entered the conversation. "As soon as we were clear of the wreck, Lt. Harper took a fix on stars and constellations. He's an astrogator. He knows his business. And they were wrong, too. Just a little wrong, here and there, but enough. And even more than that. On a tight beam, I should have been able to make a connection with Earth head-

quarters on this set. And I haven't yet got communication, and we know there's nothing wrong with this set."

"Sam knows his business, too, Miss Kitty," Lt. Harper said. "If he can't get communication, it's because there isn't any."

She looked wide-eyed from one to the other. For once, she was more concerned with a problem than with concealing her ignorance about it.

"It means," the lieutenant said, as if he were answering a question she hadn't yet asked, "that the Earth we are returning to is not the Earth we left."

"I don't understand," she gasped.

"There's a theory," Lt. Harper answered slowly. "Heretofore it has been considered only a mathematical abstraction, and having no counterpart in reality. The theory of multiple dimensions." She looked at him closely, and in her habitual ambivalence of thought reflected that he sounded much more intelligent than she had suspected.

"I've read about that," she answered.

He looked relieved, and threw a quick look at Sam. Apparently he had underestimated her intelligence, too—in spite of all her degrees.

"We never thought it could be real," he emphasized. "But the theory was that multiple universes lay side by side, perhaps each an instant's time away from the other. The only thing I can see is that some flaw in the space warper threw us out of our dimension into another one closely adjacent—not far enough for things to be totally different, just different enough that the duplication isn't identical. It's Earth, but it's not our Earth. It's a New Earth, one we don't know anything about."

"In another few hours, we'll be entering the atmosphere," Sam put in, "and we don't know what we'll find. We thought you ought to know."

She flared in exasperation at the simple assumption of male arrogance.

"Of course I should know!" she snapped back. "I am not one of your little bits of blond, empty-headed fluff to be protected by strong males! I should have been told immediately!"

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Lt. Harper looked at Sam with a broad grin. It was amusement, but it was more—a confirmation that they could depend on her to take it in her stride—an approval. Apparently, they had discussed more things about her than she'd overheard, while she slept. He didn't turn off the grin when he looked directly at her.

"What could you have done about it, if we had told you,

Miss Kitty?" he asked mildly.

It was not the same Earth. The charts and maps had not been wrong. Her tentative theory that perhaps there were vision flaws in the plastic nose window had not stood up.

The continents, the lakes, the rivers—the topography really was distorted. Now there was the Mississippi River, one spot swinging rather too widely to the east. The Great Lakes were one huge inland sea. The Gulf of Mexico swung high up into what had once been Alabama and Georgia.

There was no New Orleans, shipping center of the world,

headquarters of Space.

There were no cities anywhere up and down the Mississippi. Where St. Louis should have been, there was virgin forest. As they dropped down into the upper reaches of atmosphere, experiencing the familiar and sometimes nauseating reference shift from ahead to below, there had been no New York to the east, no San Francisco to the west. There had been no Boulder Dam, no Tennessee Valley project, no continuous hydroelectric installations running the entire length of the Mississippi, where the strength of the Father of the Waters had finally been harnessed for Man. There were no thin lines of highways, no paint-brush strokes of smoke against the canvas of the Gulf of Mexico to denote streamers, for atomic power was still not available to all.

On this New Earth, Man could not yet have reached a state of complex technology.

And as they dropped lower still, through their telescope sights, they saw no canoes on the river or the feeder streams. They saw no huts along the river shore, no thin streamers of wood smoke from huts hidden under the trees along the bayous. New Earth was purple and blue, then shading into

green as they dropped lower. They sighted a deer drinking at the edge of a pool.

But there was no trace of Man.

"If there are no scars, no defacements upon this forest primeval," Miss Kitty said didactically, "then Man has not evolved on New Earth." Since it was spoken in the tone of an axiom, and there was no evidence to refute it, neither of the two men felt like arguing the matter.

They were low enough now that they were flying horizontally rather than dropping vertically. They were still searching for traces of some kind of artifacts. They were also searching, Lt. Harper advised them at last, for a suitable place to land. They wanted a higher ground than the delta country so they might be free of insect pests, assuming there were some since deer could be seen throwing their heads back along their sides as if to chase away flies. They wanted higher ground with a stream of water going over falls to supplement their limited power in the lifeship. On the chance there were fish, it would be nice to be handy to a lake. A forest for game. A level ground for a permanent camp.

Since they were here, and it might be some time before they could figure out a way to return to Old Earth, they may as well make the best of it.

They found the kind of place they wanted, a little to the west of the Mississippi. They grounded the lifeship at the edge of a natural clearing beside a lake where a stream of sparkling water dropped from a rock ledge.

They settled the ship on the springy turf, then sat and looked at one another as if they were suddenly all strangers. Wordlessly, Lt. Harper got up and opened the door of the lifeship. He threw down the hinged metal steps. He stood back. Miss Kitty went through the door first and down the steps. The two men followed.

They stood on the ground of New Earth, and looked at one another the way they had in the ship. In the minds of each there was the thought that some kind of a ceremonial speech should be made, but no one volunteered it.

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"I suppose we should have a campfire," Miss Kitty said doubtfully.

They did not realize it at the time, but it was the most effective speech which could have been devised. It was a symbol. Man had discovered and taken possession of New Earth. His instinctive thought was to place his brand upon it, an artificial fire.

All of them missed the significance of the fact that it was Miss Kitty who had made the first move in the domestication of this New Earth.

In the weeks which followed, Miss Kitty began to be dimly aware of the significance. At first they had lived a sort of Robinson Crusoe kind of life, leaning pretty heavily upon the stores of the liferaft.

It had been she who had converted it over into more of the Swiss Family Robinson pattern of making use of the resources about them.

The resources were abundant, bountiful. Yet the two men seemed little interested, and appeared content to live off the stores within the liferaft. They devoted almost all their time, except that little for bringing up firewood and trapping game, to fiddling with that gadget they called a warp motor. They were trying to hook it up to the radio sets, they said.

Miss Kitty detested women who nagged at men, but she felt compelled to point out that this was the fall season upon New Earth, and winter would soon be upon them. It should not be a severe winter at this latitude, but they must be prepared for it with something more substantial than her uncomfortable sleeping place in the liferaft; nor would the two of them continue to enjoy sleeping out under the trees, if a blanket of snow fell some night.

"I was hoping we could be back home before winter sets in, Miss Kitty," Lt. Harper apologized mildly.

She had not nagged them. She had simply shut her lips and walked away.

The next day they began cutting logs.

It was odd, the basic pleasure she felt in seeing the sides of the cabin start to take form. Certainly she was not domestic by nature. And this could, in no sense, be considered a home. Still, she felt it might have gone up faster, if the men had used their muscles—their brute strength—rather than to spend so much futile time trying to devise power tools.

They were also inclined to talk too much about warping

They were also inclined to talk too much about warping radio wave bands through cross sections of sinowaves, and to drop their work on the cabin in favor of spending long

hours trying new hookups.

But Miss Kitty never nagged about it. She had even tried to follow some of the theory, to share in their efforts to put such theory into practice, to be just a third fellow. Instead she found her thoughts wandering to how an oven could be constructed so she could bake and roast meats instead of broiling and frying them over an open fire.

Game was plentiful, fish seemed to be begging for the hook. Every day, without going too far away from camp, she found new foods; watercress, mustard greens, wild turnips, wild onions, occasionally a turkey nest with eggs still edible, hollow trees where wild bees had stored honey, persimmons still astringent, but promising incredibly sweet and delicious flavor when frost struck them, chinquapin, a kind of chestnut, black walnuts. There was no end to what the country provided. Yet the men, instead of laying in winter stores, spent their time with the warp motor.

Without meaning to, Miss Kitty interrupted an explanation of Lt. Harper's on how they were calibrating the torquing degrees. She told him that he and Sam simply must help her harvest a hillside patch of wild maize she had found, before the rains came and ruined all the grain with mold, or the migrating birds ate it all.

The cabin they were erecting would contain only two rooms—a large general room for cooking, eating, visiting, such as an old-fashioned farm kitchen had once been. A little room, opening off it, would be her sleeping room. She raised her eyebrows questioningly, and Sam explained they would build a small, separate bunkhouse for himself and Lt. Harper.

She had a curious sense of displeasure at the arrangement. She knew she should be pleased at their understanding of the

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need for privacy. There was no point in becoming primitive savages. She should be grateful that they shared her determination to preserve the civilized codes. She told herself, rather severely, that the preservation of civilized mores was extremely important. And she brought herself up short with a shocking question, equal to a slap in the face.

Why?

She realized then she had intuitively known from the first that they would never get back to Old Earth. Her instincts had been functioning, insuring their lives, where intellect had failed them completely. She tried to laugh scornfully at herself, in feminist tradition. Imagine! Katheryn Kittredge, Career Woman, devoted to the intellectual advancement of Man, thinking that mere cooking and cleaning and mending was the supremely important thing.

But she failed in her efforts to deride herself. The intellectual discussions among the small groups of intelligent girls back on Old Earth were far away and meaningless. She discovered she was a little proud and strangely contented that she could prepare edible food. Certainly the two men were not talented; and someone had to accept the responsibility for a halfway decent domestic standard and comfort.

As, for example, with the walls of the cabin halfway up, it was necessary to point out that while they may be going to put the little cookstove—welded together out of metal scrap—in the cabin, there was no provision for a fireplace. How would they keep warm through the long winter months this year, and in the years to come?

Lt. Harper had started to say something. Then he shrugged and a hopeless look came over his face.

"Perhaps you are right, Miss Kitty," he said humbly. "It may be spring, at that, before we can finish trying the more obvious combinations. We're trying to—" He broke off, turned away, and began to mark off the spot where they would saw down through the logs to fit in a fireplace.

Later that day, she overheard him tell Sam that, theoretically at least, there could be millions of versions of the Earth,

each removed an infinitesimal point from the next. There was the chance the flaw in the torque motor, which still eluded him, might not automatically take them back to the right cross section, even if he found it. They might have to make an incredible number of trials, and then again they might hit it on the very next combination.

"And you might not!" she cut into the conversation, with perhaps more acid in her voice than she intended. "It might not be your next, nor tomorrow, nor next spring—nor ever!"

Odd that she had felt an obscure satisfaction at the stricken looks on their faces when she had said it. Yet they had it coming to them. It was time someone shocked them into a sense of reality. It took a woman to be a realist. She had already faced the possibility and was reconciled to it. They were still living in an impossible dream.

Still she was sorry. She was sorry in the way she had always regretted having to make a bad boy in kindergarten go stand with his face to the wall. She tried to make up for it that evening.

"I understand," she said as they sat near the campfire outside the half-finished cabin. "You alter the torque, then try the various radio wave bands in the new position."

They both looked at her, a little surprised.

"It must be a slow and tedious procedure," she continued. "Very," Sam said with a groan.

A shifting air current, carrying the sound of the waterfall, gave her an idea.

"Too bad you can't borrow the practice of Tibetan monks," she mused. "They tie their prayers to a wheel, set it in a running stream. Every turn of the wheel is a prayer sent up to their gods. That way they can get their praying done for them while they go about the more urgent matters of providing a living for themselves and their families."

She hadn't meant it to be so pointed, implying that all they were doing was sending up futile prayers to unheeding gods, implying they should be giving more attention to setting in winter stores. But even so . . .

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· "Miss Kitty," Sam said in a kind of awe. "You are a wonderful woman!"

In spite of her sudden flush of pleasure, she was irritated. As pointed as she had made it, he had missed it.

He turned and began talking excitedly to Lt. Harper. Yes, of course, they could rig up an automatic method instead of doing it by hand. It could be done faster and more smoothly with electric motors, but the idea was the same. If Lt. Harper could rig a trip to kick the warp over another notch each time, they could run it night and day. Just let some kind of alarm bell start ringing, if they hit anything at the other end!

The two of them jumped to their feet then, grabbed her arms, squeezed them, and rushed away to the little shed they'd constructed beside the lifeship to hold some of their scattered equipment.

She felt vaguely regretful that she had mentioned it.

Still she gained a great deal. The men finished the cabin in a hurry after that, and they put up their own bunkhouse in less than a week. Both jobs were obviously not done by experts, and she had fussed at them, although not unkindly, because she had had to chink such wide cracks with a mixture of clay and dried grass.

She moved into the larger cabin, discovered a dozen roof leaks during the first hard rain they'd had; got them patched, began molding clay into dishes and containers, started pressuring the boys to build her a ceramics kiln, began to think about how their clothes would eventually wear out and how she would have to find some way to weave cloth to replace them. Day by day she was less irritable, as the boys settled into a routine.

"I do believe," she said to herself one day, "I would be disappointed if they found a way back!" She straightened up and almost spilled the container of wild rice she had been garnering from the swampy spot at the upper reaches of the lake. "Why! The very idea of saying such a thing, Katheryn Kittredge!" But her heart was not in the self chiding.

But what reason, in heaven's name, would they have for staying here? Three people, marooned, growing old, dying one by one. There was no chance for Man's survival here. From the evidence about them, they had come to the conclusion that on this New Earth, in the tree of evolution, the bud to grow into a limb of primates had never formed.

She turned and looked at the tall, straight pines ahead of her. She saw the deciduous hardwoods, now gold and red, to one side of her. Behind her the lake was teeming with fish. The spicy smell of fall was all around her, and a stray breeze brought a scent of grapes she had overlooked when she was gathering all she could find to make a wine to pleasantly surprise the boys.

She thought of the flock of wild chickens which had learned to hang around the cabin for scraps of food, the grunting lazy pigs, grown quite tame, begging her to find their acorns for them, the nanny goat with two half-grown kids Lt. Harper had brought back from a solitary walk he had taken.

New Earth was truly a paradise—and all to be wasted if there were not Man to appreciate it truly.

A thought knocked at her mind, but she resolutely shut it out, refused it even silent verbalization.

Yet, while she stooped over again and busied her hands with stripping the rice from the stalks without cutting them on the sharp dry leaves, she found herself thinking about Mendelian law. Line breeding from father to daughter, or brother to sister—in domestic animals, of course—was all right in fixing desirable traits, providing certain recessives in both the dam and the sire did not thus become dominant.

"There, Katheryn Kittredge," she mumbled with satisfaction. "Assuming the responsibilities of domesticity has not made you forget what you learned."

But the danger of fixing recessives into dominants through inbreeding was even less with half-brothers and -sisters. Now daughters by one—er—sire could be bred to another sire to get only a quarter relationship to a similar cross from the other father—er—sire. She must work it out with a stylus in smooth clay. The boys had pre-empted every scrap of paper for their pointless calculations. But she could remember it.

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and it would be valuable in breeding up a desirable barn-vard stock.

Yet it was odd that she assumed two males and only one

femalel

Then and there, standing ankle-deep in the bog of wild rice, muddy to her knees in her torn coveralls, slapping at persistent mosquitoes, she came to terms with herself. In the back of her mind she had known it all the time. All this was without meaning unless there was Man—and a continuity of Man. Even so little as this gathering of wild rice, before the migrating ducks got it, was without meaning, if it were merely to starve off death from a purposeless existence. If there were no other fate for them than eventually to die, without posterity, then they might as well die tomorrow, today, now.

The men were still living in a dream of getting back. No doubt their lusting appetites were driving them to get back to their brazen, heavy-breasted, languorous-eyed hussies who pandered to all comers without shame! Miss Kitty was astonished at her sudden vehemence, the red wave of fury which

swept over her.

But of course she was right. That was their urgent drive. "A male human is nothing more than a sex machine!" Wasn't that what her roommate at college had once said? Or was it her maiden aunt who had dominated her widowed mother and herself through all the years she was growing up? What did it matter who said it? She knew it was true. No wonder they were so anxious to get back to Old Earth! Her lip lifted in cynical scorn.

"You don't dare leave a young girl alone with a boy for five minutes," her aunt had once complained bitterly. "All they ever think about is . . ." Her voice had dropped to a whisper and she had given that significant look to Katheryn's mother. But Katheryn had known what she meant, of course.

And it was true of all men.

Women, back on Old Earth, had looked at her with pity and a little contempt, because she had never, she had never . . . But you didn't have to have firsthand experience to know. She had authoritative knowledge gleaned from reading be-

tween the lines of the very best text books on abnormal psychology. She hadn't had to read between the lines of sundry surveys and reports. And if there had been no organized study at all, the movies, the TV, the published better fiction—all of it centered around that one theme—that one, alone, romanticize it or obscure it though they might.

It was all men ever thought about. And many women pandered to it—those sultry, shameless, undulating . . .

But Sam and Lt. Harper? It had been almost two months now since they had left Earth and those vile blondes. How had they restrained themselves during all this time!

Her fuming anger was suddenly overwhelmed by a warm rush of gratitude, a sympathy which brought a gush of tears into her eyes to stream down her cheeks. How blind she had been. Of course! They were still bound by their gentleman's Word of Honor, given to her on that first night in the lifeship.

What splendid men! All right, so they had their faults; a little impractical, dreamers all, but with such nobility of character, truly they were fit to be the fathers of a proud and noble race. And, in time, with herself to shape and guide them

She straightened her aching back from bending over the rice reeds, thrust out her scrawny chest, and breathed deeply. She lifted her chin resolutely.

"Katheryn Kittredge," she said firmly. "A woman's place is more than merely cooking and cleaning and mending!"

Supper, that evening, was a dinner, a special dinner. She set before the two men a whole roast young tom turkey, with a touch of frosted persimmons mixed with wild honey to enliven the light meat. There was a dressing of boiled maize and wild rice, seasoned with wild onion and thyme. There were little red tomatoes, tough but tasty. There were baked yams. There was a custard of goat milk and turkey eggs sweetened with honey.

Instead of the usual sassafras tea to which their digestion had finally adjusted, there was grape wine in their cups. It MARK CLIFTON

wasn't a very good wine, still green and sharp, but the occasion called for it.

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Both of them looked at her with wonder, when they came in at her call and saw the table. But they didn't ask any questions. They just started eating and, for once, they forgot to talk about warp theory.

She, herself, ate little. She was content to look at them. The lieutenant, tall and strong, big-boned, dark-complexioned, square-faced, white even teeth. Sam, smaller-boned, fair-complexioned, hair bleached straw from the outdoor sun. He had been inclined to be a little stout when she first saw him, but now he had that muscular wiriness which comes with hard physical work—and clean living. His daughters would be delicate, lovely, yet strong. The lieutenant's sons . . .

She watched, in a kind of rapture, the ripple of muscles beneath their shirts, the way the pillar of the neck arose from strong shoulders to support a well-shaped head, the way the muscles of jaws rippled under their lean cheeks as they chewed. The way their intelligent eyes flashed appreciation at each sayory mouthful.

"It occurs to me, Sam," Lt. Harper said as he washed down some turkey with a healthy quaff of wine, "we could give a little more attention to scraping up food for Miss Kitty to cook. Now you take this brown rice, for example. We could rig up a polishing mill so she'd have white rice . . ."

"Nonsense," Miss Kitty said firmly. "All the proper food value lies in the brown covering. I will not have the children's eating habits spoiled from the beginning . . ."

Appalled, she realized what she had said. Both men stopped chewing and stared at her.

"What children, Miss Kitty?" Lt. Harper asked, and he was looking at her intently.

She dropped her eyes to her plate. She felt the red flush arising around her neck, up into her face. She couldn't face him. Yet, it had to be done. It must be made quite clear to him, both of them, that . . .

"Our children," she said distinctly, and felt their eyes boring into the top of her head. "And I wish you both would

stop calling me Miss Kitty, as if—as if you were kindergarten children and I was the old maid schoolteacher! All three of us are adults, men and a woman. In spite of what you may think, I am not a great deal older than either of you. There will be children! If it works out the way I plan, I believe I do have time for at least six sons and daughters before I reach . . . before my barren years."

She heard Sam's fork clatter down on the table top as he dropped it. She heard Lt. Harper's feet scrape, as if he had been about to leap to his feet. Without seeing it, she almost felt them look at one another.

Well, she had made it plain enough.

But they didn't say anything.

Suddenly she could stand it no longer. Slowly, in dignity, she arose to her feet and without looking at them she walked, head down, to her door. Then she realized she had perhaps been too crisp, too businesslike about it all. A vision of the kind of women they must have known, the kind which would arouse their passion, the kind which would make it all unmistakable...

She had a flashing memory of a girl back in college, one smitten with a football hero, trying to captivate the hero, draw him to her. On impulse, Miss Kitty imitated that girl now, and a little tableau she remembered.

At her doorway she turned, and looked at them over her shoulder. She lifted her shoulder so that it touched her chin. She drooped her eyes half shut.

"My name is Katheryn," she said, and she tried to make her voice husky instead of tremulous and frightened. "Call me Kathy, call me Kate, call me Kay."

Both men were staring at her with wide eyes and open mouths as she closed her door. She made sure there was no sound of a latch turning to discourage them.

She undressed herself slowly, and, for the first time other than for bathing, completely. She felt grateful for the time they were giving her. No doubt they were talking it over, man to man, in the way of civilized, educated . . . She crawled in between the blankets, fresh and smelling of sun-

shine from being washed in the clear water of the lake. She was a little regretful she had no perfume; that was something they didn't put into lifeboats.

She waited.

She heard the rumble of male voices in the other room. They were undoubtedly discussing it. She felt grateful relief that their voices had not risen. They were not quarreling over her—not yet. She did hope they would continue to be sensible.

She heard one of the stools scrape on the rough split log floor. She caught her breath in a gasp, found her hands were clutching the covers and pulling them tightly up to her chin. She willed her hands to relax. She willed the tenseness out of her rigid body.

She heard the other stool scrape. Surely not both . . .

She heard their feet walking across the floor, the heavy steps of the lieutenant, the lighter, springier steps of Sam. She gritted her teeth and clenched her eyes tight shut.

And then she heard the outer door close softly.

Which one? Which had remained behind?

She waited. Then she heard footsteps outside. She tried to identify, by sound, which man was making the noise, but the shuffling of leaves was confusing, as if more than one person were walking outside. And where was the other man? Why had he made no sound in the outer room? Was he quietly drinking up the wine—first? Then, distinctly, she recognized two pairs of feet outside, going farther away in the direction of the men's bunkhouse.

She could not bear the suspense. She sprang out of bed clutching one of the blankets about her. Slowly, soundlessly, she opened her door a crack. She could see no one in the flickering firelight of the room. They had turned out the lights. Or—he had. She opened the door wide.

It had been they, not he. Both men had gone.

Inadvertently something between a sob and a hiccough rattled her throat. She choked back another. She would not give way to . . . rage? . . . frustration? . . . relief? . . . fear?

Fear!

She had seen the movies, she had read the stories, she had overheard boys. "I'll fix you when we get outside! You meet me in the alley and I'll show you!"

These two men. Were they going off into the darkness to settle a conflict which they had not been able to resolve through sensible agreement? There, under the trees in the moonlight, would they, denying all the progress of the sacred centuries, would they revert to the primitive, the savage; and like two rutting male animals rend and tear and battle with one another for the only female?

Oh, no! No, they must not! There was no doubt that the lieutenant with his great, massive strength... But the human race of New Earth must have the fine sensitivity, the lithe grace of Sam's kind, also!

She tugged the blanket around her shoulders and ran toward the door. She must reach them, step in between them, even at the cost of receiving some of the blows upon herself, make them realize . . .

She felt herself shivering as she opened the door, shivering as if with an ague. She felt her face burning, as if with a fever. Her teeth were chattering in anguish. She tried to still the noise of her teeth, to listen for those horrible sounds of silent men in a death conflict somewhere out there in the moonlight.

Then she saw a chink of light through a crack in the wall of the bunkhouse, where the clay had dried and fallen away from the logs.

In there. What were they doing in there?

Instead of their fists and crushing arms, were they stalking one another with knives? She remembered scenes from Western movies, the overturned tables, the crash of things thrown. Had some sense of chivalry still remained in the lieutenant, and he, knowing Sam wouldn't stand a chance in hand-to-hand conflict, devised some contest which would be more fair?

There need be no contest. If only they would be sensible, work out an equitable schedule . . .

Barefooted, she ran across the ground toward the bunk-house. She had visions of herself throwing open the door,

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shocking them to stillness in a tableau of violence. She was close now. She should be able to hear the crashing of their table and chairs.

She could hear nothing at all. Was she too late? Even now, was one of them standing above the other, holding a dripping knife? What horrors might she run into, even precipitate, if she threw open the door? Caution, Katheryn!

Instead, she crept up to the crack in the wall. Her teeth were chattering so hard, she had difficulty in holding her head still enough to peer through the slit of light. With her free hand, her shoulders were shaking so hard she had difficulty in clutching the blanket about her with the other, she grabbed her jaw and held on, to still her shaking. Her eyes focused on the scene inside the room.

She had a three-quarter vision of each man and the table between them. They were dealing a greasy pack of cards! Were they going to gamble for her? Relief and shame intermingled in her reaction. She would have preferred they settle it with more elemental . . . It would have made it less . . . Yet, this way neither would be killed. Sons and daughters from both.

"How are we going to tell her now?" Sam asked, as he picked up his cards. His voice came distinctly through the wall crack.

"We should have told her about our wives and families right at the start," Harper answered morosely. "I don't know why we didn't. Except that, well, none of us have talked about things back home. She didn't, and so we didn't either."

"But I never dreamed Miss Kitty would start getting ideas," Sam said in a heartsick voice. "I just never dreamed she . . ."

"We're going to have to tell her," Harper said resolutely. "We'll just have to tell her that, well, there's still hope and as long as there's hope . . ."

Blindly, in an anguish of shame such as she had never known, Miss Kitty crept away from the bunkhouse, and stumbled back to the cabin. Now she was shivering so violently she could hardly walk. The exposure to the night air, the nervous tension, overwrought emotions . . .

She could not remember getting back into the cabin, crawling into bed. She knew only that a little later she was in bed, still shaking violently with a chill, burning with fever.

She was awakened in the morning with the sound of the axe chopping on wood. She dragged herself out of bed, forlorn, sick, filled with shame. Her head spun so wildly that she sank to her knees and lay it on the bed. Then her pride and her will forced her to her feet, and she drove herself to dress, to go into the big room, dig out glowing coals from beneath ashes, put them in the little cook stove, pile fine slivers of resin-rich kindling on top of them, blow on them.

Between painful breaths, she heard herself sobbing. Her teeth started chattering again, and there was a ringing in her ears. She heard the blows of the axe falling on the wood, and each blow transferred itself to the base of her skull. The

ringing in her ears grew louder and louder.

She heard one of the men shout. It sounded like Sam. Had he hurt himself with the axe, gashed his leg or something? She'd always been afraid of that axe! She'd told them and told them to be carefull

She pulled herself up from her knees there at the stove where she had been blowing on the coals. She must get out there, help him! That terrible buzzing in her head, that ringing in her ears. No matter, she must get out there to help him.

She threw open the door and saw Sam running toward the lifeship. Had he lost his mind? The bandages were here. She had them here! She saw Lt. Harper come to the door of the bunkhouse. He was still pulling on his pants. He started running toward the lifeship, too, cinching his belt as he ran.

Then she realized that at least part of the ringing in her ears came from the lifeship. At first it had no meaning for her, then she remembered them talking about fixing up some kind of alarm, so that if they got a signal through . . .

She started running toward the lifeship. She stumbled, fell,

got up, felt as light as a feather, as heavy as mercury. She crawled up the steps of the lifeship, she clutched at the door.

She heard Sam speaking very slowly, carefully.

"Do you read me? Is this Earth?"

She saw his face. She knew the answer.

And that was the last she knew.

Consciousness came back in little dribbles like a montage—half reality and half nightmare of the insomniac. Lt. Harper's voice shouting at her with a roar like a waterfall, "My God, Miss Kitty, are you sick?" Blackness. More shouting, Sam calling the lieutenant, something about a red flare in the sky. A lucid moment, when Sam was explaining to her that Earth had been given the warp co-ordinates, and had sent a red flare to see if they could get through. Then another gap. A heavy trampling of feet, a great many feet. Some kind of memory of a woman in white, sticking a thermometer in her mouth. The prick of a needle in her arm. The sense of being carried. A memory of knowing she was in a ship. A flash that was more felt than seen.

Nightmares! All nightmares. She would wake up in a moment. She would get up, dress, go out and start a fire to heat water on the cookstove. She had planned to have coffee, a special treat from their almost exhausted store. She would have coffee. The men would come in sheepish, evading her glance.

Very well, she would simply tell them that she had misunderstood, save them the embarrassment of telling her. She would not be the woman scorned.

She moved her hands to throw back her blankets, and froze. Her fingers had not touched blankets, they had touched cool, slick sheets! Her eyes popped open.

It had not been a nightmare, a wish fulfillment of escape. She was in a hospital room. A nurse was standing beside her bed, looking down at her. A comfortably motherly-looking sort of woman was speaking to her.

"Well, now, Miss Kittredge, that's much better!" the woman said. "So you will go gather wild rice in the swamp and get your bloodstream full of bugs!" But it was a professional kind of chiding, the same way she had talked to her kindergarten children when they'd got themselves into trouble.

"Still," the nurse chatted, "it's made our pathologists

mighty happy. They've been having themselves a ball analyzing the bugs you three managed to pick up. You got something close to malaria. The two men, healthy oxen, didn't get anything at all. We had to let 'em out of quarantine in three days."

Miss Kitty just looked at her in a sort of unthinking lassitude. She was still trying to make the reality seem real. The nurse helped a little. She turned to her cart and produced a white enamel, flat container. She slid it under the top sheet

"Upsy-daisy now, Miss Kittredge," she said firmly. "It's time you started co-operating a little."

Yes, that brought her back to reality. But she still didn't

say anything.

"Although we might as well not have let 'em out of quarantine," the nurse grumbled. "They've just been living out there in the waiting room for a solid week, buttonholing everybody from doctors down to orderlies asking about you."

She gave a soft wolf whistle.

"Whew, imagine having not just one guy but two of 'em, absolutely crazy about you. Just begging to see you, hold your hand a little. Two beautiful men like that! You ready to see them soon?"

Miss Kitty felt a rush of shame again. In the cabin she would have been forced to face them, but not now.

"No," she said firmly. "I never want to see them again."

"Well, now, let me tell you something, Miss Kittredge," the nurse said, and this time there was a note of seriousness. "One of the symptoms of this sickness you picked up is that it makes you talk. Gal, you have talked a blue streak for the last week. We know everything, everything that happened, everything you thought about. The doctor understood how you might feel about things. So he told the lieutenant and Mr. Eade that you had got bitten about the time you were up in the rice swamp, and that you hadn't been responsible for anything you'd said for the last three days back there on New Earth."

Miss Kitty felt a flood of relief.

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"Did they believe the doctor?" she asked hesitantly.

"Sure they believed him," the nurse answered. "Sure they did. But you wanna know something? I've talked to those two men. And I've just got myself an idea that it wouldn't have made a particle of difference in the way they feel about you even if they didn't believe it. You're tops with those two guys, lady. Absolutely tip-top tops. The way you pitched in there, carried your share of things . . ."

She slipped the pan out from under the sheets, and put it

into a compartment of the cart.

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"You wanna know something else? I don't think you were out of your head at all when you propositioned those two guys. I think you were showing some good female sense, maybe for the first time in your life. And I think they know you were.

"You think it over, Miss Kittredge. If I know you—and I ought to after listening to you rave day after day—you've got what it takes. You want my advice? You go right on being a normal female. Don't you be silly enough to get back into that warped, twisted, frustrated kind of a man-hater you always thought you were.

"I gotta go now. You think it over. But not too long. Those two guys are going to be mighty, mighty hurt if they find out you're conscious and won't see them."

She went out the door, pushing her cart in front of her.

Miss Kitty relaxed her neck, willed the tenseness out of her body, and just lay for a while thinking of nothing. A gust, a rattle of raindrops, called her attention to the window. They had put her on the ground floor. She was able to see through the window to the street outside. The rain was pelting down, like that first rain they'd had there on New Earth. How chagrined the boys had looked when the roof started leaking in a dozen places!

She felt a warm sense of relief, of gratitude, that she could remember them without shame. The nurse had been right, of course. Probably the doctors had planted that particular nurse in her room, anticipating her return to consciousness, anticipating the necessity for a little mental therapy.

Good female sense. With such a semantic difference from good male sensel The mind of a man and a woman was not the same. She knew that now. And she realized that deeply, hidden from her own admittance, she had always known it. And the nurse's good earthy expression—"propositioning those two guys"—approval that it had been natural and right. And another expression, "the way you pitched in there, carried your share of things."

Carried your share of things! That meant more than just cooking, mending, cleaning. More than just seeing that the race continued, too; although it somehow tied in with all these things.

She lay in her bed, watching the rain through the window, getting comfort from the soft, drumming sound. Along the street she could see people sloshing through the film of water underfoot. She watched the scene of turned-up collars, pulled-down hatbrims, bobbing umbrellas, as if it were something apart from her, and yet a part of her. She began to get a sense of rare vision, an understanding which she knew was more complete than any intellectual abstraction she had ever managed. She began to get a woman's sense of purpose, completely distinct from that of a man.

She recalled once reading of an incident where an Oklahoma oil millionaire had built a huge mansion; then, because his squaw did not know how to make a home within it, they pitched their tepee in the front grounds, to live there, unable to feel at home in anything else.

Yes, too often the mansions of science came in for a similar treatment. The vast rooms of ideas, the great halls of expansion, the limitless ceilings of challenge, the wide expanses of speculation; all these things which would exalt Man into a truly great existence were denied, put to no use beyond mere gadgetry. And the mass of human beings still huddled in their cramped and grimy little tepees of ancient syndromes, only there feeling at home.

It was the fault of the women. They had not kept up with the men. Those who attempted it tried to be men, to prove themselves as good a man as any man, the way she had done. 150 MARK CLIFTON

They had missed the real point entirely, every single bit of it.

The male was still functioning in the way males always had. There was no essential difference between the cave man who climbed a new mountain and explored a new valley and brought back a speared deer to throw down at the entrance of his home cave; no difference between him and the modern explorer of science who, under similar hardships, brought back a bright and rich new knowledge.

But the ancient cave woman had not failed. She had known what to do with the deer to strengthen and secure the future of the race.

And what about New Earth?

Lt. Harper and Sam had talked about the possibility of millions of Earths, each infinitesimally removed from the other, and if they could bridge the gap to one, they might bridge it to an uncountable number. Perhaps there were millions of others, but for her there was only one New Earth.

Would the processions of colonists going there spoil it? Would the women going there see in it a great mansion? Or, instead, would they simply go there to escape here—escape from exhaustion, failure, anguish, bitterness—and, as always, take these things along with them? Would they still live in grimy little syndromes of endless antagonism, bickering in their foolish frustrations, because they had no wisdom about what to do with this newly speared deer?

Oh, not on New Earth!

Suddenly Miss Kitty knew what she must do. If that one particular mansion needed someone to make it into a home, why not herself? And who had a better right?

Somewhere, there, perhaps that very one striding along under the eaves of that building across the street, with his hatbrim pulled down, leaning against the rain, somewhere, close, there must be a man who could share her resolution and her dream. A man of the same breed as the lieutenant and Sam, a man who carried his head high, his shoulders back, who had keen, intelligent eyes, and laughter.

Yes, now she wanted to see the two men after all, and meet

their lucky wives, and see their children, the kind of children she might have had.

Might yet havel

At a flash of memory, she smiled a little ruefully, and yet with an inner peace.

"I am not so old," she repeated in a whisper. "I still have time for at least a half dozen sons and daughters before—before my barren years."

A GUN FOR DINOSAUR

No, Mr. Seligman, I won't take you hunting late-Mesozoic dinosaur.

Why not? How much d'you weigh? A hundred and thirty? Let's see, that's under ten stone, which is my lower limit.

I'll take you to any period in the Cenozoic. I'll get you a shot at an entelodont or a titanothere or a uintathere. They've all got fine heads.

I'll even stretch a point and take you to the Pleistocene, where you can try for one of the mammoths or the mastodon.

I'll take you back to the Triassic where you can shoot one of the smaller ancestral dinosaur.

But I will not—will jolly well not—take you to the Jurassic or Cretaceous. You're just too small.

No offense, of course.

What's your weight got to do with it?

Look here, old boy, what did you think you were going to shoot them with?

You hadn't thought, eh?

Well, sit there a minute . . . Here you are, my own private gun for that work, a Continental .600. Does look like a shotgun, doesn't it? But it's rifled, as you can see by looking through the barrels. Shoots a pair of .600 nitro express cartridges the size of bananas; weighs fourteen and a half pounds and has a muzzle energy of over seven thousand foot-pounds. Costs fourteen hundred and fifty dollars. Lot of money for a gun, what?

I have some spares I rent to the sahibs. Designed for knocking down elephant. Not just wounding them, knocking them base-over-apex. That's why they don't make guns like this in America, though I suppose they will if hunting parties keep going back in time through Prochaska's machine.

I've been guiding hunting parties for twenty years. Guided 'em in Africa until the game gave out there except on the preserves. That just about ended the world's real big-game hunt-

ing.

My point is, all that time I've never known a man your size who could handle the six-nought-nought. It knocks 'em over. Even when they stay on their feet, they get so scared of the bloody cannon after a few shots that they flinch. Can't hit an elephant at spitting range. And they find the gun too heavy to drag around rough Mesozoic country. Wears 'em out.

It's true, lots of people have killed elephant with lighter guns: the .500, .475, and .465 doubles, for instance, or even .375 magnum repeaters. The difference is that with a .375 you have to hit something vital, preferably the heart, and can't depend on simple shock-power.

An elephant weighs—let's see—four to six tons. You're planning to shoot reptiles weighing two or three times as much as an elephant and with much greater tenacity of life. That's why the syndicate decided to take no more people dinosaurhunting unless they could handle the .600. We learned the hard way, as you Americans say. There were some unfortunate incidents . . .

I'll tell you, Mr. Seligman. It's after seventeen hundred. Time I closed the office. Why don't we stop at the bar on our way out while I tell you the story?

It was about the Raja's and my fifth safari. The Raja? Oh, he's the Aiyar half of Rivers & Aiyar. I call him the Raja because he's the hereditary monarch of Janpur. Means nothing nowadays, of course. Knew him in India and ran into him in New York running the Indian tourist agency. That dark chap in the photograph on my office wall, the one with his foot on the dead saber-tooth.

Well, the Raja was fed up with handing out brochures about the Taj Mahal and wanted to do a bit of hunting again. I was at loose ends when we heard of Professor Prochaska's time machine at Washington University.

Where is the Raja? Out on safari in the early Oligocene, after titanothere, while I run the office. We take turn about

now, but the first few times we went out together.

Anyhow, we caught the next plane to St. Louis. To our mortification, we found we weren't the first.

Lord, no! There were other hunting guides and no end of scientists, each with his own idea of the right use for the machine.

We scraped off the historians and archeologists right at the start.

Seems the bloody machine won't work for periods more recent than 100,000 years ago. From there, up to about a billion years.

Why? Oh, I'm no four-dimensional thinker, but as I understand it, if people could go back to a more recent time, their actions would affect our own history, which would be a paradox or contradiction of facts. Can't have that in a well-run universe. But before 100,000 B.C., more or less, the actions of the expeditions are lost in the stream of time before human history begins. At that, once a stretch of past time has been used, say the month of January, one million B.C., you can't use that stretch over again by sending another party into it. Paradoxes again.

But the professor isn't worried; with a billion years to exploit, he won't soon run out of eras.

Another limitation of the machine is the matter of size. For technical reasons, Prochaska had to build the transition chamber just big enough to hold four men with their personal gear, plus the chamber-wallah. Larger parties have to be sent through in relays. That means, you see, it's not practical to take jeeps, boats, aircraft, or other powered vehicles.

On the other hand, since you're going to periods without human beings, there's no whistling up a hundred native bearers to trot along with your gear on their heads. So we usually take a train of asses—burros, they call them here. Most periods have enough natural forage to get you where you want to go.

As I say, everybody had his own idea for using the machine. The scientists looked down their noses at us hunters and said it would be a crime to waste the machine's time pandering to our sadistic amusements.

We brought up another angle. The machine cost a cool thirty million. I understand this came from the Rockefeller Board and such people, but that only accounted for the original cost, not the cost of operation. And the thing uses fantastic amounts of power. Most of the scientists' projects, while worthy as worthy could be, were run on a shoestring, financially speaking.

Now we guides catered to people with money, a species with which America seems overstocked. No offense, old boy. Most of these could afford a substantial fee for passing through the machine to the past. Thus we could help finance the operation of the machine for scientific purposes, provided we got a fair share of its time.

Won't go into the details, but in the end the guides formed a syndicate of eight members, one member being the partnership of Rivers & Aiyar, to apportion the machine's time.

We had rush business from the start. Our wives—the Raja's and mine—raised bloody hell with us. They'd hoped when the big game gave out they'd never have to share us with lions and things again, but you know how women are. Can't realize hunting's not really dangerous if you keep your head and take precautions.

On the fifth expedition, we had two sahibs to wet-nurse: both Americans in their thirties, both physically sound, and both solvent. Otherwise they were as different as can be.

Courtney James was what you chaps call a playboy: a rich young man from New York who'd always had his own way and didn't see why that agreeable condition shouldn't continue. A big bloke, almost as big as I am; handsome in a florid way, but beginning to run to fat. He was on his fourth wife,

and when he showed up at the office with a blonde with "model" written all over her, I assumed this was the fourth Mrs. James.

"Miss Bartram," she corrected me, with an embarrassed

giggle.

"She's not my wife," James explained. "My wife is in Mexico, I think, getting a divorce. But Bunny here would like to go along—"

"Sorry," I said, "we don't take ladies. At least not to the late

Mesozoic."

This wasn't strictly true, but I felt we were running enough risks, going after a little-known fauna, without dragging in people's domestic entanglements. Nothing against sex, you understand. Marvelous institution and all that, but not where it interferes with my living.

"Oh, nonsense," said James. "If she wants to go, she'll go.

She skis and flies my airplane, so why shouldn't she-"

"Against the firm's policy."

"She can keep out of the way when we run up against the dangerous ones."

"No, sorry."

"Damn it," said he, getting red. "After all, I'm paying you a goodly sum and I'm entitled to take who I please."

"You can't hire me to do anything against my best judg-

ment," I said. "If that's how you feel, get another guide."

"All right, I will. And I'll tell all my friends you're a goddamn—" Well, he said a lot of things I won't repeat. It ended with my telling him to get out of the office or I'd throw him out.

I was sitting in the office thinking sadly of all that lovely money James would have paid me if I hadn't been so stiffnecked, when in came my other lamb, one August Holtzinger. This was a little slim pale chap with glasses, polite and formal where the other had been breezily self-confident to the point of obnoxiousness.

Holtzinger sat on the edge of his chair and said: "Uh-Mr. Rivers, I don't want you to think I'm here under false pretenses. I'm really not much of an outdoorsman and I'll prob-

ably be scared to death when I see a real dinosaur. But I'm determined to hang a dinosaur head over my fireplace or die in the attempt."

"Most of us are frightened at first," I soothed him, and little

by little I got the story out of him.

While James had always been wallowing in money, Holtzinger was a local product who'd only lately come into the real thing. He'd had a little business here in St. Louis and just about made ends meet when an uncle cashed in his chips somewhere and left little Augie the pile.

He'd never been married but had a fiancée. He was building a big house, and when it was finished, they'd be married and move into it. And one furnishing he demanded was a ceratopsian head over the fireplace. Those are the ones with the big horned heads with a parrot-beak and frill over the neck, you know. You have to think twice about collecting them, because if you put a seven-foot triceratops head into a small living room, there's apt to be no room left for anything else.

We were talking about this when in came a girl, a small

girl in her twenties, quite ordinary-looking, and crying.

"Augiel" she wept. "You can't! You mustn't! You'll be killed!" She grabbed him round and said to me: "Mr. Rivers, you mustn't take him! He's all I've got! He'll never stand the hardships!"

"My dear young lady," I said, "I should hate to cause you distress, but it's up to Mr. Holtzinger to decide whether he wishes to retain my services."

"It's no use, Claire," said Holtzinger. "I'm going, though I'll probably hate every minute of it."

"What's that, old boy?" I asked. "If you hate it, why go? Did you lose a bet or something?"

"No," said Holtzinger. "It's this way. Uh—I'm a completely undistinguished kind of guy. I'm not brilliant or big or strong or handsome. I'm just an ordinary Midwestern small businessman. You never even notice me at Rotary luncheons, I fit in so perfectly. But that doesn't say I'm satisfied. I've always hankered to go to far places and do big things. I'd like to be

The second secon

a glamorous, adventurous sort of guy. Like you, Mr. Rivers."

"Oh, come," I protested. "Professional hunting may seem

glamorous to you, but to me it's just a living."

He shook his head. "Nope. You know what I mean. Well, now I've got this legacy, I could settle down to play bridge and golf the rest of my life and try to act like I wasn't bored. But I'm determined to do something big for once. Since there's no more real big-game hunting, I'm gonna shoot a dinosaur and hang his head over my mantel. I'll never be happy otherwise."

Well, Holtzinger and his girl, whose name was Roche, argued, but he wouldn't give in. She made me swear to take the best care of her Augie and departed, sniffling.

When Holtzinger had left, who should come in but my viletempered friend Courtney James. He apologized for insulting

me, though you could hardly say he groveled.

"I don't actually have a bad temper," he said, "except when people won't co-operate with me. Then I sometimes get mad. But so long as they're co-operative, I'm not hard to get along with"

I knew that by "co-operate" he meant to do whatever Courtney James wanted, but I didn't press the point. "How about Miss Bartram?" I asked.

"We had a row," he said. "I'm through with women. So if there's no hard feelings, let's go on from where we left off."

"Absolutely," I agreed, business being business.

The Raja and I decided to make it a joint safari to eighty-five million years ago: the early upper Cretaceous, or the middle Cretaceous, as some American geologists call it. It's about the best period for dinosaur in Missouri. You'll find some individual species a little larger in the late upper Cretaceous, but the period we were going to gives a wider variety.

Now, as to our equipment, the Raja and I each had a Continental .600 like the one I showed you and a few smaller guns. At this time, we hadn't worked up much capital and had no spare .600s to rent.

August Holtzinger said he would rent a gun, as he expected this to be his only safari and there was no point in spending over a thousand dollars for a gun he'd shoot only a few times. But since we had no spare .600s, his choice was between buying one of those and renting one of our smaller pieces.

We drove into the country to let him try the .600. We set up a target. Holtzinger heaved up the gun as if it weighed a ton and let fly. He missed completely and the kick knocked him flat on his back with his legs in the air.

He got up, looking paler than ever, and handed me back the gun, saying: "Uh-I think I'd better try something smaller."

When his shoulder stopped being sore, I tried him out on the smaller rifles. He took a fancy to my Winchester 70, chambered for the .375 magnum cartridge. It's an excellent all-round gun—

What's it like? A conventional magazine rifle with a Mausertype bolt action. It's perfect for the big cats and bears, but a little light for elephant and very definitely light for dinosaur. I should never have given in, but I was in a hurry and it might have taken months to get him a new .600. They're made to order, you know, and James was getting impatient. James already had a gun, a Holland & Holland .500 double express. With 5700 foot-pounds of muzzle energy, it's almost in a class with the .600.

Both sahibs had done a bit of shooting, so I didn't worry about their accuracy. Shooting dinosaur is not a matter of extreme accuracy but of sound judgment and smooth co-ordination so you shan't catch twigs in the mechanism of your gun, or fall into holes, or climb a small tree the dinosaur can pluck you out of, or blow your guide's head off.

People used to hunting mammals sometimes try to shoot a dinosaur in the brain. That's the silliest thing you can do, because dinosaur haven't got any. To be exact, they have a little lump of tissue about the size of a tennis ball on the front end of their spines, and how are you going to hit that when it's imbedded in a moving six-foot skull?

The only safe rule with dinosaur is—always try for a heart shot. They have big hearts, over a hundred pounds in the largest species, and a couple of .600 slugs through the heart

will kill them just as dead as a smaller beast. The problem is to get the slugs through that mountain of muscle and armor around it.

Well, we appeared at Prochaska's laboratory one rainy morning: James and Holtzinger, the Raja and I, our herder Beauregard Black, three helpers, a cook, and twelve jacks. Burros, that is.

The transition chamber is a little cubbyhole the size of a small lift. My routine is for the men with the guns to go first in case a hungry theropod might be standing in front of the machine when it arrived. So the two sahibs, the Raja, and I crowded into the chamber with our guns and packs. The operator squeezed in after us, closed the door, and fiddled with his dials. He set the thing for April twenty-fourth, eighty-five million B.C., and pressed the red button.

The lights went out, leaving the chamber lit by a little battery-operated lamp. James and Holtzinger looked pretty green, but that may have been the dim lighting. The Raja and I had been through all this before, so the vibration and vertigo didn't bother us.

I could see the little black hands of the dials spinning round, some slowly and some so fast they were a blur. Then they slowed down and stopped. The operator looked at his ground-level gauge and turned a handwheel that raised the chamber so it shouldn't materialize underground. Then he pressed another button and the door slid open.

No matter how often I do it, I get a frightful thrill out of stepping into a bygone era. The operator had raised the chamber a foot above ground level, so I jumped down, my gun ready. The others came after. We looked back at the chamber, a big shiny cube hanging in mid-air a foot off the ground, with this little lift-door in front.

"Right-ho," I told the chamber-wallah, and he closed the door. The chamber disappeared and we looked around. The scene hadn't changed from my last expedition to this era, which had ended, in Cretaceous time, five days before his one began. There weren't any dinosaur in sight, nothing but lizards.

In this period, the chamber materializes on top of a rocky rise from which you can see in all directions as far as the haze will let you.

To the west, you see the arm of the Kansas Sea that reaches across Missouri and the big swamp around the bayhead where the sauropods live. It used to be thought the sauropods became extinct before the Cretaceous, but that's not so. They were more limited in range because swamps and lagoons didn't cover so much of the world, but there were plenty of them if you knew where to look.

To the north is a low range that the Raja named the Janpur Hills after the little Indian kingdom his forebears had ruled. To the east, the land slopes up to a plateau, good for ceratopsians, while to the south is flat country with more sauropod swamps and lots of ornithopods: duckbills and iguanadonts.

The finest thing about the Cretaceous is the climate: balmy, like the South Sea Islands, with little seasonal change, but not so muggy as most Jurassic climates. We happened to be there in spring, with dwarf magnolias in bloom all over, but the air feels like spring almost any time of year.

A thing about this landscape is that it combines a fairly high rainfall with an open type of vegetation-cover. That is, the grasses hadn't yet evolved to the point of forming solid carpets over all open ground, so the ground is thick with laurel, sassafras, and other shrubs, with bare ground between. There are big thickets of palmettos and ferns. The trees round the hill are mostly cycads, standing singly and in copses. Most people call them palms, though my scientific friends tell me they're not true palms.

Down toward the Kansas Sea are more cycads and willows, while the uplands are covered with screw-pine and ginkos.

Now I'm no bloody poet—the Raja writes the stuff, not me

Now I'm no bloody poet—the Raja writes the stuff, not me—but I can appreciate a beautiful scene. One of the helpers had come through the machine with two of the jacks and was pegging them out, and I was looking through the haze and sniffing the air, when a gun went off behind me—bang! bang!

I turned round and there was Courtney James with his .500 and an ornithomime legging it for cover fifty yards away. The

ornithomimes are medium-sized running dinosaurs, slender things with long necks and legs, like a cross between a lizard and an ostrich. This kind is about seven feet tall and weighs as much as a man. The beggar had wandered out of the nearest copse and James gave him both barrels. Missed.

I was a bit upset, as trigger-happy sahibs are as much a menace as those who get panicky and freeze or bolt. I yelled:

"Damn it, you idiot, I thought you weren't to shoot without word from me!"

"And who the hell are you to tell me when I'll shoot my own gun?" he demanded.

We had a rare old row until Holtzinger and the Raja got us calmed down.

I explained: "Look here, Mr. James, I've got reasons. If you shoot off all your ammunition before the trip's over, your gun won't be available in a pinch and it's the only one of its caliber. Second, if you empty both barrels at an unimportant target, what would happen if a big theropod charged before you could reload? Finally, it's not sporting to shoot everything in sight. I'll shoot for meat, or for trophies, or to defend myself, but not just to hear the gun go off. If more people had exercised moderation in killing, there'd still be decent sport in our own era. Understand?"

"Yeah, I guess so," he said. Mercurial sort of bloke.

The rest of the party came through the machine and we pitched our camp a safe distance from the materializing place. Our first task was to get fresh meat. For a twenty-one-day safari like this, we calculate our food requirements closely so we can make out on tinned stuff and concentrates if we must, but we count on killing at least one piece of meat. When that's butchered, we go on a short tour, stopping at four or five camping places to hunt and arriving back at base a few days before the chamber is due to appear.

Holtzinger, as I said, wanted a ceratopsian head, any kind. James insisted on just one head: a tyrannosaur. Then everybody'd think he'd shot the most dangerous game of all time.

Fact is, the tyrannosaur's overrated. He's more a carrioneater than an active predator, though he'll snap you up if he gets the chance. He's less dangerous than some of the other theropods—the flesh-eaters—such as the big saurophagus of the Jurassic, or even the smaller gorgosaurus from the period we were in. But everybody's read about the tyrant lizard and he does have the biggest head of the theropods.

The one in our period isn't the rex, which is later and a little bigger and more specialized. It's the trionyches with the forelimbs not reduced to quite such little vestiges, though they're too small for anything but picking the brute's teeth after a meal

When camp was pitched, we still had the afternoon, so the Raja and I took our sahibs on their first hunt. We already had a map of the local terrain from previous trips.

The Raja and I have worked out a system for dinosaur hunting. We split into two groups of two men and walk parallel from twenty to forty yards apart. Each group consists of one sahib in front and one guide following and telling the sahib where to go.

We tell the sahibs we put them in front so they shall have first shot, which is true, but another reason is they're always tripping and falling with their guns cocked, and if the guide were in front, he'd get shot.

The reason for two groups is that if a dinosaur starts for one, the other gets a good heart shot from the side.

As we walked, there was the usual rustle of lizards scuttling out of the way: little fellows, quick as a flash and colored like all the jewels in Tiffany's, and big gray ones that hiss and plod off. There were tortoises and a few little snakes. Birds with beaks full of teeth flapped off squawking. And always that marvelous mild Cretaceous air. Makes a chap want to take his clothes off and dance with vine leaves in his hair, if you know what I mean. Not that I'd ever do such a thing, you understand.

Our sahibs soon found that Mesozoic country is cut up into millions of nullahs—gullies, you'd call them. Walking is one long scramble, up and down, up and down.

We'd been scrambling for an hour and the sahibs were soaked with sweat and had their tongues hanging out, when the Raja whistled. He'd spotted a group of bonehead feeding on cycad shoots.

These are the troödonts, small ornithopods about the size of men with a bulge on top of their heads that makes them look quite intelligent. Means nothing, because the bulge is solid bone and the brain is as small as in other dinosaur, hence the name. The males butt each other with these heads in fighting over the females. They would drop down to all fours, munch a shoot, then stand up and look round. They're warier than most dinosaur because they're the favorite food of the big theropods.

People sometimes assume that because dinosaur are so stupid, their senses must be dim, but it's not so. Some, like the sauropods, are pretty dim-sensed, but most have good smell and eyesight and fair hearing. Their weakness is that, having no minds, they have no memories; hence, out of sight, out of mind. When a big theropod comes slavering after you, your best defense is to hide in a nullah or behind a bush, and if he can neither see nor smell you, he'll just forget all about you and wander off.

We sneaked up behind a patch of palmetto downwind from the bonehead. I whispered to James: "You've had a shot already today. Hold your fire until Holtzinger shoots and then shoot only if he misses or if the beast is getting away wounded."

"Uh-huh," said James and we separated, he with the Raja and Holtzinger with me. This got to be our regular arrangement. James and I got on each other's nerves, but the Raja, once you forget that Oriental-potentate rot, is a friendly, sentimental sort of bloke nobody can help liking.

Well, we crawled round the palmetto patch on opposite sides and Holtzinger got up to shoot. You daren't shoot a heavy-caliber rifle prone. There's not enough give and the kick can break your shoulder.

Holtzinger sighted round the last few fronds of palmetto. I saw his barrel wobbling and weaving and then off went James's gun, both barrels again. The biggest bonehead went down, rolling and thrashing, and the others ran on their hind

legs in great leaps, their heads jerking and their tails sticking up behind.

"Put your gun on safety," I said to Holtzinger, who'd started forward. By the time we got to the bonehead, James was standing over it, breaking open his gun and blowing out the barrels. He looked as smug as if he'd inherited another million and he was asking the Raja to take his picture with his foot on the game. His first shot had been excellent, right through the heart. His second had missed because the first knocked the beast down. James couldn't resist that second shot even when there was nothing to shoot at.

I said: "I thought you were to give Holtzinger first shot."

"Hell, I waited," he said, "and he took so long, I thought something must have gone wrong. If we stood around long enough, they'd see us or smell us."

There was something in what he said, but his way of saying it got me angry. I said: "If that sort of thing happens just once more, we'll leave you in camp the next time we go out."

"Now, gentlemen," said the Raja. "After all, Reggie, these

aren't experienced hunters."

"What now?" asked Holtzinger. "Haul the beast back ourselves or send out the men?"

"I think we can sling him under the pole," I said. "He weighs under two hundred." The pole was a telescoping aluminium carrying pole I had in my pack, with yokes on the ends with sponge-rubber padding. I brought it along because in such eras you can't always count on finding saplings strong enough for proper poles on the spot.

The Raja and I cleaned our bonehead, to lighten him, and tied him to the pole. The flies began to light on the offal by thousands. Scientists say they're not true flies in the modern sense, but they look and act like them. There's one conspicuous kind of carrion fly, a big four-winged insect with a distinctive deep note as it flies.

The rest of the afternoon, we sweated under that pole. We took turns about, one pair carrying the beast while the other two carried the guns. The lizards scuttled out of the way and the flies buzzed round the carcass.

When we got to camp, it was nearly sunset. We felt as if we could eat the whole bonehead at one meal. The boys had the camp running smoothly, so we sat down for our tot of whiskey feeling like lords of creation while the cook broiled bonehead steaks.

Holtzinger said: "Uh-if I kill a ceratopsian, how do we get his head back?"

I explained: "If the ground permits, we lash it to the patent aluminium roller-frame and sled it in."

"How much does a head like that weigh?" he asked.

"Depends on the age and the species," I told him. "The biggest weigh over a ton, but most run between five hundred and a thousand pounds."

"And all the ground's rough like today?"

"Most of it. You see, it's the combination of the open vegetation-cover and the high rainfall. Erosion is frightfully rapid."

"And who hauls the head on its little sled?"

"Everybody with a hand. A big head would need every ounce of muscle in this party and even then we might not succeed. On such a job, there's no place for side."

"Oh," said Holtzinger. I could see him wondering whether

a ceratopsian head would be worth the effort.

The next couple of days, we trekked round the neighborhood. Nothing worth shooting; only a herd of fifty-odd ornithomimes who went bounding off like a lot of bloody ballet dancers. Otherwise there were only the usual lizards and pterosaurs and birds and insects. There's a big lace-winged fly that bites dinosaurs, so you can imagine its beak makes nothing of a human skin. One made Holtzinger leap into the air when it bit through his shirt. James joshed him about it, saying: "What's all the fuss over one little bug?"

The second night, during the Raja's watch, James gave a yell that brought us all out of our tents with rifles. All that had happened was that a dinosaur tick had crawled in with him and started drilling into his armpit. Since it's as big as your thumb even when it hasn't fed, he was understandably startled. Luckily he got it before it had taken its pint of blood. He'd pulled Holtzinger's leg pretty hard about the fly bite, so

now Holtzinger repeated: "What's all the fuss over one little bug, buddy?"

James squashed the tick underfoot and grunted. He didn't

like being twitted with his own words.

We packed up and started on our circuit. We meant to take them first to the borders of the sauropod swamp, more to see the wildlife than to collect anything.

From where the transition chamber materializes, the sauropod swamp looks like a couple of hours' walk, but it's an allday scramble. The first part is easy, as it's down hill and the brush isn't heavy. But as you get near the swamp, the cycads and willows grow so thickly, you have to worm your way among them.

There was a sandy ridge on the border of the swamp that I led the party to, for it's pretty bare of vegetation and affords a fine view. When we got to the ridge, the Sun was about to go down. A couple of crocs slipped off into the water. The sahibs were so exhausted, being soft yet, that they flopped down in the sand as if dead.

The haze is thick round the swamp, so the Sun was deep red and distorted by the atmospheric layers—pinched in at various levels. There was a high layer of clouds reflecting the red and gold, too, so altogether it was something for the Raja to write one of his poems about. Only your modern poet prefers to write about a rainy day in a garbage dump. A few little pterosaur were wheeling overhead like bats, only they don't flutter like bats. They swoop and soar after the big night-flying insects.

Beauregard Black collected firewood and lit a fire. We'd started on our steaks, and that pagoda-shaped Sun was just slipping below the horizon, and something back in the trees was making a noise like a rusty hinge, when a sauropod breathed out in the water. If Mother Earth were to sigh over the misdeeds of her children, it would sound just about like that.

The sahibs jumped up, waving and shouting: "Where is he? Where is he?"

I said: "That black spot in the water, just to the left and this side of that point."

They yammered while the sauropod filled its lungs and disappeared. "Is that all?" yelped James. "Won't we see any more of him?"

Holtzinger said: "I read they never come out of the water because they're too heavy."

"No," I explained. "They can walk perfectly well and often do, for egg-laying and moving from one swamp to another. But most of the time they spend in the water, like hippopotamus. They eat eight hundred pounds of soft swamp plants a day, all with those little heads. So they wander about the bottoms of lakes and swamps, chomping away, and stick their heads up to breathe every quarter hour or so. It's getting dark, so this fellow will soon come out and lie down in the shallows to sleep."

"Can we shoot one?" demanded James.

"I wouldn't," said I.

"Why not?"

I said: "There's no point in it and it's not sporting. First, they're even harder to hit in the brain than other dinosaurs because of the way they sway their heads about on those long necks and their hearts are too deeply buried in tissue to reach unless you're awfully lucky. Then, if you kill one in the water, he sinks and can't be recovered. If you kill one on land, the only trophy is that little head. You can't bring the whole beast back because he weighs thirty tons or more. We don't need thirty tons of meat."

Holtzinger said: "That museum in New York got one."

"Yes," I agreed. "The American Museum of Natural History sent a party of forty-eight to the early Cretaceous, with a fifty-caliber machine gun. They assembled the gun on the edge of a swamp, killed a sauropod—and spent two solid months skinning it and hacking the carcass apart and dragging it to the time machine. I know the chap in charge of that project and he still has nightmares in which he smells decomposing dinosaur. They also had to kill a dozen big theropods who were attracted by the stench and refused to be frightened off, so they

had them lying round and rotting, too, And the theropods ate three men of the party despite the big gun."

Next morning, we were finishing breakfast when one of the helpers called: "Look, Mr. Rivers! Up there!"

He pointed along the shoreline. There were six big duckbill feeding in the shallows. They were the kind called parasaurolophus, with a crest consisting of a long spike of bone sticking out the back of their heads, like the horn of an oryx, and a web of skin connecting this with the back of their neck.

"Keep your voices down," I said. The duckbill, like the other ornithopods, are wary beasts because they have no armor or weapons against the theropods. The duckbill feed on the margins of lakes and swamps, and when a gorgosaur rushes out of the trees, they plunge into deep water and swim off. Then when phobosuchus, the super-crocodile, goes for them in the water, they flee to the land. A hectic sort of life, what?

Holtzinger said: "Uh-Reggie, I've been thinking over what you said about ceratopsian heads. If I could get one of those yonder. I'd be satisfied. It would look big enough in my house, wouldn't it?"

"I'm sure of it, old boy," I said. "Now look here. I could take you on a detour to come out on the shore near there, but we should have to plow through half a mile of muck and brush, up to our knees in water, and they'd hear us coming. Or we can creep up to the north end of this sand spit, from which it's four or five hundred yards-a long shot, but not impossible. Think you could do it?"

"With my 'scope sight and a sitting position-yes, I'll try it." "You stay here," I said to James. "This is Augie's head and I don't want any argument over your having fired first."

James grunted while Holtzinger clamped his 'scope to his rifle. We crouched our way up the spit, keeping the sand ridge between us and the duckbills. When we got to the end where there was no more cover, we crept along on hands and knees, moving slowly. If you move slowly directly toward or away from a dinosaur, it probably won't notice you.

The duckbills continued to grub about on all fours, every

few seconds rising to look round. Holtzinger eased himself into the sitting position, cocked his piece, and aimed through the 'scope. And then-

Bang! bang! went a big rifle back at the camp.

Holtzinger jumped. The duckbill jerked up their heads and leaped for the deep water, splashing like mad. Holtzinger fired once and missed. I took a shot at the last duckbill before it disappeared. I missed, too: the .600 isn't designed for long ranges.

Holtzinger and I started back toward the camp, for it had struck us that our party might be in theropod trouble and

need reinforcements.

What happened was that a big sauropod, probably the one we'd heard the night before, had wandered down past the camp under water, feeding as it went. Now the water shoaled about a hundred yards offshore from our spit, halfway over to the edge of the swamp on the other side. The sauropod had ambled up the slope until its body was almost all out of water, weaving its head from side to side and looking for anything green to gobble. This kind looks like the well-known brontosaurus, but a little bigger. Scientists argue whether it ought to be included in the genus camarasaurus or a separate genus with an even longer name.

When I came in sight of the camp, the sauropod was turning round to go back the way it had come, making horrid groans. It disappeared into deep water, all but its head and ten or twenty feet of neck, which wove about for some time before they vanished into the haze.

When we came up to the camp, James was arguing with the Raja. Holtzinger burst out: "You bastard! That's the second time you've spoiled my shots!" Strong language for little August.

"Don't be a fool," said James. "I couldn't let him wander into camp and stamp everything flat."

"There was no danger of that," objected the Raja politely. "You can see the water is deep offshore. It is just that our trigger-happy Mr. James cannot see any animal without shooting."

I said: "If it did get close, all you needed to do was throw a stick of firewood at it. They're perfectly harmless." This wasn't strictly true. When the Comte de Lautrec ran after one for a close shot, the sauropod looked back at him, gave a flick of its tail, and took off the Comte's head as neatly as if he'd been axed in the Tower.

"How was I to know?" yelled James, getting purple. "You're all against me. What the hell are we on this goddamn trip for except to shoot things? You call yourselves hunters, but I'm the only one who's hit anything!"

I got pretty wrothy and said he was just an excitable young skite with more money than brains, whom I should never

have brought along.

"If that's how you feel," he said, "give me a burro and some food and I'll go back to the base by myself. I won't pollute your air wih my loathsome presence!"

"Don't be a bigger ass than you can help," I snapped.

"That's quite impossible."

"Then I'll go all alone!" He grabbed his knapsack, thrust a couple of tins of beans and an opener into it, and started off with his rifle.

Beauregard Black spoke up: "Mr. Rivers, we cain't let him go off like that by hisself. He'll get lost and starve or be et by a theropod."

"I'll fetch him back," said the Raja and started after the runaway. He caught up as James was disappearing into the cycads. We could see them arguing and waving their hands, but couldn't make out what they said. After a while, they started back with arms around each other's necks like old school pals. I simply don't know how the Raja does it.

This shows the trouble we get into if we make mistakes in planning such a do. Having once got back into the past, we had to make the best of our bargain. We always must, you see.

I don't want to give the impression Courtney James was only a pain in the rump. He had his good points. He got over these rows quickly and next day would be as cheerful as ever. He was helpful with the general work of the camp—when he felt like it, at any rate. He sang well and had an endless fund of dirty stories to keep us amused.

We stayed two more days at that camp. We saw crocodile, the small kind, and plenty of sauropod—as many as five at once—but no more duckbill. Nor any of those fifty-foot super-crocodiles.

So, on the first of May, we broke camp and headed north toward the Janpur Hills. My sahibs were beginning to harden up and were getting impatient. We'd been in the Cretaceous a week and no trophies.

I won't go into details of the next leg. Nothing in the way of a trophy, save a glimpse of a gorgosaur out of range and some tracks indicating a whopping big iguanodont, twenty-five or thirty feet high. We pitched camp at the base of the hills.

We'd finished off the bonehead, so the first thing was to shoot fresh meat. With an eye on trophies, too, of course. We got ready the morning of the third.

I told James: "See here, old boy, no more of your tricks. The Raja will tell you when to shoot."

"Uh-huh, I get you," he said, meek as Moses. Never could tell how the chap would act.

We marched off, the four of us, into the foothills. We were looking for bonehead, but we'd take an ornithomime. There was also a good chance of getting Holtzinger his ceratopsian. We'd seen a couple on the way up, but mere calves without decent horns.

It was hot and sticky and we were soon panting and sweating like horses. We'd hiked and scrambled all morning without seeing a thing except lizards, when I picked up the smell of carrion. I stopped the party and sniffed. We were in an open glade cut up by these little dry nullahs. The nullahs ran together into a couple of deeper gorges that cut through a slight depression choked with a denser growth, cycad and screw-pine. When I listened, I heard the thrum of carrion flies.

"This way," I said. "Something ought to be dead-ah, here it is!"

And there it was: the remains of a huge ceratopsian lying in a little hollow on the edge of the copse. Must have weighed six or eight tons alive; a three-horned variety, perhaps the penultimate species of *Triceratops*. It was hard to tell because most of the hide on the upper surface had been ripped off and many bones had been pulled loose and lay scattered about.

Holtzinger said: "Oh, hell! Why couldn't I have gotten to him before he died? That would have been a darn fine head." Associating with us rough types had made little August profane, you'll observe.

I said: "On your toes, chaps. A theropod's been at this carcass and is probably nearby."

"How d'you know?" James challenged, with the sweat running off his round red face. He spoke in what was for him a low voice, because a nearby theropod is a sobering thought even to the flightiest.

I sniffed again and thought I could detect the distinctive rank odor of theropod. But I couldn't be sure because the stench of the carcass was so strong. My sahibs were turning green at the sight and smell of the cadaver.

I told James: "It's seldom even the biggest theropod will attack a full-grown ceratopsian. Those horns are too much for them. But they love a dead or dying one. They'll hang round a dead ceratopsian for weeks, gorging and then sleeping their meals off for days at a time. They usually take cover in the heat of the day anyhow, because they can't stand much direct hot sunlight. You'll find them lying in copses like this or in hollows, anywhere there's shade."

"What'll we do?" asked Holtzinger.

"We'll make our first cast through this copse, in two pairs as usual. Whatever you do, don't get impulsive or panicky." I looked at Courtney James, but he looked right back and then merely checked his gun.

"Should I still carry this broken?" he wanted to know.

"No; close it, but keep the safety on till you're ready to shoot," I said. It's risky carrying a double closed like that, especially in brush, but with a theropod nearby, it would have

been a greater risk to carry it open and perhaps catch a twig in it when one tried to close it.

"We'll keep closer than usual, to be in sight of each other," I said. "Start off at that angle, Raja. Go slowly and stop to listen between steps."

We pushed through the edge of the copse, leaving the carcass but not its stink behind us. For a few feet, we couldn't see a thing. It opened out as we got in under the trees, which shaded out some of the brush. The Sun slanted down through the trees. I could hear nothing but the hum of insects and the scuttle of lizards and the squawks of toothed birds in a treetop. I thought I could be sure of the theropod smell, but told myself that might be imagination. The theropod might be any of several species, large or small, and the beast itself might be anywhere within a half-mile radius.

"Go on," I whispered to Holtzinger, for I could hear James and the Raja pushing ahead on my right and see the palm fronds and ferns lashing about as they disturbed them. I suppose they were trying to move quietly, but to me they sounded like an earthquake in a crockery shop.

"A little closer," I called, and presently they appeared slanting in toward me.

We dropped into a gully filled with ferns and clambered up the other side, then found our way blocked by a big clump of palmetto.

"You go round that side: we'll go round this," I said, and we started off, stopping to listen and smell. Our positions were exactly the same as on that first day when James killed the bonehead.

I judge we'd gone two thirds of the way round our half of the palmetto when I heard a noise ahead on our left. Holtzinger heard it and pushed off his safety. I put my thumb on mine and stepped to one side to have a clear field.

The clatter grew louder. I raised my gun to aim at about the height a big theropod's heart would be at the distance it would appear to us out of the greenery. There was a movement in the foliage—and a six-foot-high bonehead stepped into view, walking solemnly across our front from left to right, jerking its head with each step like a giant pigeon.

I heard Holtzinger let out a breath and had to keep myself

from laughing. Holtzinger said. "Uh-"
"Quiet," I whispered. "The theropod might still-"
That was as far as I got when that damned gun of James's went off, bangl bangl I had a glimpse of the bonehead knocked arsy-varsy with its tail and hind legs flying.

"Got him!" yelled James, and I heard him run forward.

"My God, if he hasn't done it again!" I groaned. Then there was a great swishing, not made by the dying bonehead, and a wild yell from James. Something heaved up and out of the shrubbery and I saw the head of the biggest of the local flesheaters, tyrannosaurus trionyches himself.

The scientists can insist that rex is bigger than trionyches, but I'll swear this tyrannosaur was bigger than any rex ever hatched. It must have stood twenty feet high and been fifty feet long. I could see its big bright eye and six-inch teeth and the big dewlap that hangs down from its chin to its chest.

The second of the nullahs that cut through the copse ran athwart our path on the far side of the palmetto clump. Perhaps six feet deep. The tyrannosaur had been living in this, sleeping off its last meal. Where its back stuck up above ground level, the ferns on the edge of the nullah masked it. James had fired both barrels over the theropod's head and woke it up. Then James, to compound his folly, ran forward without reloading. Another twenty feet and he'd have stepped on the tyrannosaur's back.

James understandably stopped when this thing popped up in front of him. He remembered his gun was empty and he'd left the Raja too far behind to get a clear shot.

James kept his nerve at first. He broke open his gun, took two rounds from his belt and plugged them into the barrels. But in his haste to snap the gun shut, he caught his right hand between the barrels and the action-the fleshy part between his thumb and palm. It was a painful pinch and so startled James that he dropped his gun. That made him go to pieces and he holted.

His timing couldn't have been worse. The Raja was running up with his gun at high port, ready to snap it to his shoulder the instant he got a clear view of the tyrannosaur. When he saw James running headlong toward him, it made him hesitate, as he didn't want to shoot James. The latter plunged ahead and, before the Raja could jump aside, blundered into him and sent them both sprawling among the ferns. The tyrannosaur collected what little wits it had and crashed after to snap them up.

And how about Holtzinger and me on the other side of the palmettos? Well, the instant James yelled and the tyrannosaur's head appeared, Holtzinger darted forward like a rabbit. I'd brought my gun up for a shot at the tyrannosaur's head, in hope of getting at least an eye, but before I could find it in my sights, the head was out of sight behind the palmettos. Perhaps I should have shot at where I thought it was, but all my experience is against wild shots.

When I looked back in front of me, Holtzinger had already disappeared round the curve of the palmetto clump. I'm pretty heavily built, as you can see, but I started after him with a good turn of speed, when I heard his rifle and the click of the bolt between shots: bang-click-click-bang-click-click, like that.

He'd come up on the tyrannosaur's quarter as the brute started to stoop for James and the Raja. With his muzzle twenty feet from the tyrannosaur's hide, he began pumping .375s into the beast's body. He got off three shots when the tyrannosaur gave a tremendous booming grunt and wheeled round to see what was stinging it. The jaws came open and the head swung round and down again.

Holtzinger got off one more shot and tried to leap to one side. He was standing on a narrow place between the palmetto clump and the nullah. So he fell into the nullah. The tyrannosaur continued its lunge and caught him, either as he was falling or after he struck bottom. The jaws went chomp and up came the head with poor Holtzinger in them, screaming like a doomed soul.

I came up just then and aimed at the brute's face. Then I realized its jaws were full of my friend and I'd be shooting him. As the head went up, like the business end of a big power shovel, I fired a shot at the heart. But the tyrannosaur was already turning away and I suspect the ball just glanced along the ribs.

The beast took a couple of steps away when I gave it the other barrel in the back. It staggered on its next step but kept on. Another step and it was nearly out of sight among the trees, when the Raja fired twice. The stout fellow had untangled himself from James, got up, picked up his gun, and let the tyrannosaur have it.

The double wallop knocked the brute over with a tremendous smash. It fell into a dwarf magnolia and I saw one of its hindlegs waving in the midst of a shower of incongruously pretty pink-and-white petals.

Can you imagine the leg of a bird of prey enlarged and thickened until it's as big round as the leg of an elephant?

But the tyrannosaur got up again and blundered off without even dropping its victim. The last I saw of it was Holtzinger's legs dangling out one side of its jaws (by now he'd stopped screaming) and its big tail banging against the tree trunks as it swung from side to side.

The Raja and I reloaded and ran after the brute for all we were worth. I tripped and fell once, but jumped up again and didn't noticed my skinned elbow till later. When we burst out of the copse, the tyrannosaur was already at the far end of the glade. I took a quick shot, but probably missed, and it was out of sight before I could fire another.

We ran on, following the tracks and spatters of blood, until we had to stop from exhaustion. Their movements look slow and ponderous, but with those tremendous legs, they don't have to step very fast to work up considerable speed.

When we'd finished gasping and mopping our foreheads, we tried to track the tyrannosaur, on the theory that it might be dying and we should come up to it. But the spoor faded out and left us at a loss. We circled round hoping to pick it up, but no luck.

Hours later, we gave up and went back to the glade, feeling very dismal.

Courtney James was sitting with his back against a tree, holding his rifle and Holtzinger's. His right hand was swollen and blue where he'd pinched it, but still usable.

His first words were: "Where the hell have you been? You shouldn't have gone off and left me; another of those things might have come along. Isn't it bad enough to lose one hunter through your stupidity without risking another one?"

I'd been preparing a pretty warm wigging for James, but his attack so astonished me, I could only bleat: "We lost-?"

"Sure," he said. "You put us in front of you, so if anybody gets eaten, it's us. You send a guy up against these animals undergunned. You—"

"You stinking little swine," I began and went on from there. I learned later he'd spent his time working out an elaborate theory according to which this disaster was all our fault—Holtzinger's, the Raja's and mine. Nothing about James's firing out of turn or panicking or Holtzinger's saving his worthless life. Oh, dear, no. It was the Raja's fault for not jumping out of his way, et cetera.

Well, I've led a rough life and can express myself quite eloquently. The Raja tried to keep up with me, but ran out of English and was reduced to cursing James in Hindustani.

I could see by the purple color on James's face that I was getting home. If I'd stopped to think, I should have known better than to revile a man with a gun. Presently James put down Holtzinger's rifle and raised his own, saying: "Nobody calls me things like that and gets away with it. I'll just say the tyrannosaur ate you, too."

The Raja and I were standing with our guns broken open, under our arms, so it would take a good part of a second to snap them shut and bring them up to fire. Morever, you don't shoot a .600 holding it loosely in your hands, not if you know what's good for you. Next thing, James was setting the butt of his .500 against his shoulder, with the barrels pointed at my face. Looked like a pair of blooming vehicular tunnels.

The Raja saw what was happening before I did. As the

beggar brought his gun up, he stepped forward with a tremendous kick. Used to play football as a young chap, you see. He knocked the .500 up and it went off so the bullet missed my head by an inch and the explosion jolly well near broke my eardrums.

The butt had been punted away from James's shoulder when the gun went off, so it came back like a kick of a horse.

It spun him half round.

The Raja dropped his own gun, grabbed the barrels, and twisted it out of James's hands, nearly breaking the bloke's trigger finger. He meant to hit James with the butt, but I rapped James across the head with my own barrels, then bowled him over and began punching the stuffing out of him. He was a good-sized lad, but with my sixteen stone, he had no chance.

When his face was properly discolored, I stopped. We turned him over, took a strap out of his knapsack and tied his wrists behind him. We agreed there was no safety for us unless we kept him under guard every minute until we got him back to our time. Once a man has tried to kill you, don't give him another opportunity. Of course he might never try again, but why risk it?

We marched James back to camp and told the crew what we were up against. James cursed everybody and dared us to kill him.

"You'd better, you sons of bitches, or I'll kill you some day," he said. "Why don't you? Because you know somebody'd give you away, don't you? Ha-ha!"

The rest of that safari was dismal. We spent three days combing the country for that tyrannosaur. No luck. It might have been lying in any of those nullahs, dead or convalescing, and we should never see it unless we blundered on top of it. But we felt it wouldn't have been cricket not to make a good try at recovering Holtzinger's remains, if any.

After we got back to our main camp, it rained. When it wasn't raining, we collected small reptiles and things for our scientific friends. When the transition chamber materialized, we fell over one another getting into it.

The Raja and I had discussed the question of legal proceedings by or against Courtney James. We decided there was no precedent for punishing crimes committed eighty-five million years before, which would presumably be outlawed by the statute of limitations. We therefore untied him and pushed him into the chamber after all the others but us had gone through.

When we came out in the present, we handed him his gun—empty—and his other effects. As we expected, he walked off without a word, his arms full of gear. At that point, Holtzinger's girl, Claire Roche, rushed up crying: "Where is he? Where's August?"

I won't go over the painful scene except to say it was distressing in spite of the Raja's skill at that sort of thing.

We took our men and beasts down to the old laboratory building that Washington University has fitted up as a serai for expeditions to the past. We paid everybody off and found we were nearly broke. The advance payments from Holtzinger and James didn't cover our expenses and we should have damned little chance of collecting the rest of our fees from James or from Holtzinger's estate.

And speaking of James, d'you know what that blighter was doing all this time? He went home, got more ammunition, and came back to the university. He hunted up Professor Prochaska and asked him:

"Professor, I'd like you to send me back to the Cretaceous for a quick trip. If you can work me into your schedule right now, you can just about name your own price. I'll offer five thousand to begin with. I want to go to April twenty-third, eighty-five million B.C."

Prochaska answered: "Vot do you vant to go back again so soon so badly for?"

"I lost my wallet in the Cretaceous," said James. "I figure if I go back to the day before I arrived in that era on my last trip, I'll watch myself when I arrived on that trip and follow myself till I see myself lose the wallet."

"Five thousand is a lot for a vallet."

"It's got some things in it I can't replace. Suppose you let

me worry about whether it's worth my while."

"Vell," said Prochaska, thinking, "the party that vas supposed to go out this morning has phoned that they vould be late, so maybe I can vork you in. I have always vondered vot vould happen when the same man occupied the same time tvice."

So James wrote out a check and Prochaska took him to the chamber and saw him off. James's idea, it seems, was to sit behind a bush a few yards from where the transition chamber would appear and pot the Raja and me as we emerged.

Hours later, we'd changed into our street clothes and phoned our wives to come and get us. We were standing on Forsythe Boulevard waiting for them when there was a loud crack, like an explosion or a close-by clap of thunder, and a flash of light not fifty feet from us. The shock-wave staggered us and broke windows in quite a number of buildings.

We ran toward the place and got there just as a policeman and several citizens came up. On the boulevard, just off the curb, lay a human body. At least it had been that, but it looked as if every bone in it had been pulverized and every blood vessel burst. The clothes it had been wearing were shredded, but I recognized an H. & H. .500 double-barreled express rifle. The wood was scorched and the metal pitted, but it was Courtney James's gun. No doubt whatever.

Skipping the investigations and the milling about, what had happened was this: Nobody had shot us as we emerged on the twenty-fourth and that, of course, couldn't be changed. For that matter, the instant James started to do anything that would make a visible change in the world of eighty-five million B.C., the spacetime forces would snap him forward to the present to prevent a paradox.

Now that this is better understood, the professor won't send anybody to a period less than five hundred years prior to the time that some time traveler has already explored, because it would be too easy to do some act, like chopping down a tree or losing some durable artifact, that would affect the later

world. Over long periods, he tells me, such changes average out and are lost in the stream of time.

We had a bloody rough time after that, with the bad publicity and all, though we did collect a fee from James's estate. The disaster hadn't been entirely James's fault. I shouldn't have taken him when I knew what a spoiled, unstable sort he was. And if Holtzinger could have used a heavy gun, he'd probably have knocked the tyrannosaur down, even if he didn't kill it, and so given the rest of us a chance to finish it.

So that's why I won't take you to that period to hunt. There are plenty of other eras, and if you think them over, I'm sure you'll find—

Good Lord, look at the time! Must run, old boy; my wife'll skin me. Good night!

ONE FOR THE BOOKS

WHEN HE WOKE up that morning, he could talk French.

There was no warning. At six-fifteen, the alarm went off as usual and he and his wife stirred. Fred reached out a sleep-deadened hand and shut off the bell. The room was still for a moment.

Then Eva pushed back the covers on her side and he pushed back the covers on his side. His vein-gnarled legs dropped over the side of the bed. He said, "Bon matin, Eva."

There was a slight pause.

"Wha'?" she asked.

"Je dis bon matin," he said.

There was a rustle of nightgown as she twisted around to squint at him. "What'd you say?"

"All I said was good—"

Fred Elderman stared back at his wife.

"What did I say?" he asked in a whisper.

"You said "'bone mattin' or-"

"Je dis bon matin. C'est un bon matin, n'est-ce pas?"

The sound of his hand being clapped across his mouth was like that of a fast ball thumping in a catcher's mitt. Above the knuckle-ridged gag, his eyes were shocked.

"Fred, what IS it?"

Slowly, the hand drew down from his lips.

"I dunno, Eva," he said, awed. Unconsciously, the hand reached up, one finger of it rubbing at his hair-ringed bald spot. "It sounds like some—some kind of foreign talk."

"But you don't know no foreign talk, Fred," she told him.

"That's just it."

They sat there looking at each other blankly. Fred glanced over at the clock.

"We better get dressed," he said.

While he was in the bathroom, she heard him singing, "Elle fit un fromage, du lait de son mouton, ron, ron, du lait de son mouton," but she didn't dare call it to his attention while he was shaving.

Over breakfast coffee, he muttered something.

"What?" she asked before she could stop herself.

"Ie dis que vous dire ceci?"

He heard the coffee go down her gulping throat.
"I mean," he said, looking dazed, "what does this mean?" "Yes, what does it? You never talked no foreign language before."

"I know it," he said, toast suspended halfway to his open mouth. "What-what kind of language is it?"

"S-sounds t'me like French."

"French? I don't know no French."

She swallowed more coffee. "You do now," she said weakly.

He stared at the table cloth.

"Le diable s'en mêle," he muttered.

Her voice rose, "Fred, what?"

His eyes were confused. "I said the devil has something to do with it."

"Fred, vou're-"

She straightened up in the chair and took a deep breath. "Now," she said, "let's not profane, Fred. There has to be a good reason for this." No reply. "Well, doesn't there, Fred?"

"Sure, Eva. Sure. But-"

"No buts about it," she declared, plunging ahead as if she were afraid to stop. "Now is there any reason in this world why you should know how to talk French-" she snapped her thin fingers-"just like that?"

He shook his head vaguely.

"Well," she went on, wondering what to say next, "let's see

then." They looked at each other in silence. "Say something," she decided. "Let's-" She groped for words. "Let's see what we . . . have here." Her voice died off.

"Say somethin'?"

"Yes," she said. "Go on."

"Un gémissement se fit entendre. Les dogues se mettent à aboyer. Ces gens me vont bien. Il va sur les quinze ans-"

"Fred?"

"Il fit fabriquer une exacte représentation du monstre."

"Fred, hold on!" she cried, looking scared.

His voice broke off and he looked at her, blinking.

"What . . . what did you say this time, Fred?" she asked.

"I said—a moan was heard. His mastiffs began to bark. These gloves fit me. He will soon be fifteen years old and—"
"What?"

"And he had an exact copy of the monster made. Sans même l'entamer."

"Fred?"

He looked ill. "Without even scratchin'," he said.

At that hour of the morning, the campus was quiet. The only classes that early were the two seven-thirty Economics lectures and they were held on the White Campus. Here on the Red there was no sound. In an hour, the walks would be filled with chatting, laughing, loafer-clicking student hordes, but for now there was peace.

In far less than peace, Fred Elderman shuffled along the east side of the campus, headed for the administration building. Having left a confused Eva at home, he'd been trying to figure it out as he went to work.

What was it? When had it begun? C'est une heure, said his mind.

He shook his head angrily. This was terrible. He tried desperately to think of what could have happened, but he couldn't. It just didn't make sense. He was fifty-nine, a janitor at the university with no education to speak of, living a quiet, ordinary life. Then he woke up one morning speaking articulate French.

French.

He stopped a moment and stood in the frosty October wind, staring at the cupola of Jeramy Hall. He'd cleaned out the French office the night before. Could that have anything to do with—

No, that was ridiculous. He started off again, muttering under his breath—unconsciously. "Je suis, tu es, il est, elle est, nous sommes, vous êtes—"

At eight-ten, he entered the History Department office to repair a sink in the washroom. He worked on it for an hour and seven minutes, then put the tools back in the bag and walked out into the office.

"Mornin'," he said to the professor sitting at a desk.

"Good morning, Fred," said the professor.

Fred Elderman walked out into the hall thinking how remarkable it was that the income of Louis XVI, from the same type of taxes, exceeded those of Louis XV by 130 million livres and that the exports which had been 106 million in 1720 were 192 million in 1746 and—

He stopped in the hall, a stunned look on his lean face.

That morning, he had occasion to be in the offices of the Physics, the Chemistry, the English and the Art departments.

The Windmill was a little tavern near Main Street. Fred went there Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings to nurse a couple of draught beers and chat with his two friends—Harry Bullard, manager of Hogan's Bowling Alleys, and Lou Peacock, postal worker and amateur gardener.

Stepping into the doorway of the dim-lit saloon that evening, Fred was heard—by an excited patron—to murmur, "Je connais tous ces braves gens," then look around with a guilty twitch of cheek. "I mean . . ." he muttered, but didn't finish.

Harry Bullard saw him first in the mirror. Twisting his head around on its fat column of neck, he said, "C'mon in, Fred, the whiskey's fine," then, to the bartender, "draw one fer the elder man," and chuckled.

Fred walked to the bar with the first smile he'd managed to summon that day. Peacock and Bullard greeted him and the bartender set down a brimming stein. "What's new, Fred?" Harry asked.

Fred pressed his mustache between two foam-removing

fingers.

"Not much," he said, still too uncertain to discuss it. Dinner with Eva had been a painful meal during which he'd eaten not only food but an endless and detailed running commentary on the Thirty Years War, the Magna Charta, and boudoir information about Catherine the Great. He had been glad to retire from the house at seven-thirty, murmuring an unmanageable, "Bon nuit, ma chère."

"What's new with you?" he asked Harry Bullard now.

"Well," Harry answered, "we been paintin' down at the

alleys. You know, redecoratin'."

"That right?" Fred said. "When painting with colored beeswax was inconvenient, Greek and Roman easel painters used tempera—that is, colors fixed upon a wood or stucco base by means of such a medium as—"

He stopped. There was a bulging silence.

"Harh?" Harry Bullard asked.

Fred swallowed nervously. "Nothing," he said hastily. "I was just—" He stared down into the tan depths of his beer. "Nothing," he repeated.

Bullard glanced at Peacock, who shrugged back.

"How are your hothouse flowers coming, Lou?" Fred inquired, to change the subject.

The small man nodded. "Fine. They're just fine."

"Good," said Fred, nodding, too. "Vi sono più di cinquanta bastimenti in porto." He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes.

"What's that?" Lou asked, cupping one ear.

Fred coughed on his hastily swallowed beer. "Nothing," he said.

"No, what did ya say?" Harry persisted, the half-smile on his broad face indicating that he was ready to hear a good joke.

"I-I said there are more than fifty ships in the harbor," explained Fred morosely.

The smile faded. Harry looked blank.

"What harbor?" he asked.

Fred tried to sound casual. "I—it's just a joke I heard today. But I forget the last line."

"Oh." Harry stared at Fred, then returned to his drink.

"Yeah."

They were quiet a moment. Then Lou asked Fred, "Through for the day?"

"No. I have to clean up the Math office later."

Lou nodded. "That's too bad."

Fred squeezed more foam from his mustache. "Tell me something," he said, taking the plunge impulsively. "What would you think if you woke up one morning talking French?"

"Who did that?" asked Harry, squinting.

"Nobody," Fred said hurriedly. "Just . . . supposing, I mean. Supposing a man was to—well, to know things he never learned. You know what I mean? Just know them. As if they were always in his mind and he was seeing them for the first time."

"What kind o' things, Fred?" asked Lou.

"Oh . . . history. Different . . . languages. Things about . . . books and paintings and . . . and atoms and—chemicals." His shrug was jerky and obvious. "Things like that."

"Don't get ya, buddy," Harry said, having given up any

hopes that a joke was forthcoming.

"You mean he knows things he never learned?" Lou asked. "That it?"

There was something in both their voices—a doubting incredulity, a holding back, as if they feared to commit themselves, a suspicious reticence.

Fred sloughed it off. "I was just supposing. Forget it. It's

not worth talking about."

He had only one beer that night, leaving early with the excuse that he had to clean the Mathematics office. And, all through the silent minutes that he swept and mopped and dusted, he kept trying to figure out what was happening to him.

He walked home in the chill of night to find Eva waiting for him in the kitchen.

"Coffee, Fred?" she offered.

"I'd like that," he said, nodding. She started to get up. "No, s'accomodi, la prego," he blurted.

She looked at him, grim-faced.

"I mean," he translated, "sit down, Eva. I can get it."

They sat there drinking coffee while he told her about his experiences.

"It's more than I can figure, Eva," he said. "It's . . . scary, in a way. I know so many things I never knew. I have no idea where they come from. Not the least idea." His lips pressed together. "But I know them," he said, "I certainly know them."

"More than just . . . French now?" she asked.

He shook his head worriedly. "Lots more." he said. "Like—" He looked up from his cup. "Listen to this. Main progress in producing fast particles has been made by using relatively small voltages and repeated acceleration. In most of the instruments used, charged particles are driven around in circular or spiral orbits with the help of a— You listenin', Eva?"

He saw her Adam's apple move. "I'm listenin'," she said.

"-help of a magnetic field. The acceleration can be applied in different ways. In the so-called betatron of Kerst and Serber-"

"What does it mean, Fred?" she interrupted.

"I don't know," he said helplessly. "It's . . . just words in my head. I know what it means when I say something in a foreign tongue, but . . . this?"

She shivered, clasping at her forearms abruptly.

"It's not right," she said.

He frowned at her in silence for a long moment.

"What do you mean, Eva?" he asked then.

"I don't know, Fred," she said quietly and shook her head once, slowly. "I just don't know."

She woke up about midnight and heard him mumbling in his sleep.

"The natural logarithms of whole numbers from ten to two hundred. Number one—zero—two point three oh two six. One—two point three nine seven nine. Two—two point—"

"Fred, go t'sleep," she said, frowning nervously.

"-four eight four nine."

She prodded him with an elbow. "Go t'sleep, Fred."

"Three-two point-"

"Fred!"

"Huh?" He moaned and swallowed dryly, turned on his side

In the darkness, she heard him shape the pillow with sleepheavy hands.

"Fred?" she called softly.

He coughed. "What?"

"I think you better go t'Doctor Boone t'morra mornin'."

She heard him draw in a long breath, then let it filter out evenly until it was all gone.

"I think so, too," he said is a blurry voice.

On Friday morning, when he opened the door to the waiting room of Dr. William Boone, a draft of wind scattered papers from the nurse's desk.

"Oh," he said apologetically. "Le chiedo scusa. Non vale la

pena."

Miss Agnes McCarthy had been Dr. Boone's receptionistnurse for seven years and in that time she'd never heard Fred Elderman speak a single foreign word.

Thus she goggled at him, amazed. "What's that you said?"

she asked.

Fred's smile was a nervous twitch of lips.

"Nothing," he said, "miss."

Her returned smile was formal. "Oh." She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry Doctor couldn't see you yesterday."

"That's all right," he told her.

"He'll be ready in about ten minutes."

Twenty minutes later, Fred sat down beside Boone's desk and the heavy-set doctor leaned back in his chair with an, "Ailing, Fred?"

Fred explained the situation.

The doctor's cordial smile became, in order, amused, fixed, strained and finally nonexistent.

"This is really so?" he demanded.

Fred nodded with grim deliberation. "Je me laisse conseiller"

Dr. Boone's heavy eyebrows lifted a noticeable jot. "French," he said. "What'd you say?"

Fred swallowed. "I said I'm willing to be advised."

"Son of a gun," intoned Dr. Boone, plucking at his lower lip. "Son of a gun." He got up and ran exploring hands over Fred's skull. "You haven't received a head blow lately, have vou?"

"No," said Fred. "Nothing."

"Hmmm." Dr. Boone drew away his hands and let them drop to his sides. "Well, no apparent bumps or cracks." He buzzed for Miss McCarthy. Then he said, "Well, let's take a try at the X-rays."

The X-rays revealed no break or blot.

The two men sat in the office, discussing it.

"Hard to believe," said the doctor, shaking his head. Fred sighed despondently. "Well, don't take on so," Boone said. "It's nothing to be disturbed about. So you're a quiz kid, so what?"

Fred ran nervous fingers over his mustache. "But there's no sense to it. Why is it happening? What is it? The fact is, I'm a little scared."

"Nonsense, Fred. Nonsense. You're in good physical condition. That I guarantee."

"But what about my"-Fred hesitated-"my brain?"

Dr. Boone stuck out his lower lip in consoling derision, shaking his head. "I wouldn't worry about that, either." He slapped one palm on the desk top. "Let me think about it, Fred. Consult a few associates. You know-analyze it. Then I'll let you know. Fair enough?"

He walked Fred to the door.

"In the meantime," he prescribed, "no worrying about it. There isn't anything to worry about."

His face as he dialed the phone a few minutes later was not unworried, however.

"Fetlock?" he said, getting his party. "Got a poser for you." Habit more than thirst brought Fred to the Windmill that evening. Eva had wanted him to stay home and rest, assuming that his state was due to overwork; but Fred had insisted that it wasn't his health and left the house, just managing to muffle his "Au revoir."

He joined Harry Bullard and Lou Peacock at the bar and finished his first beer in a glum silence while Harry revealed why they shouldn't vote for Legislator Milford Carpenter.

"Tell ya the man's got a private line t'Moscow," he said. "A few men like that in office and we're in for it, take my word." He looked over at Fred staring into his beer. "What's with it, elder man?" he asked, clapping Fred on the shoulder.

Fred told them-as if he were telling about a disease he'd

caught.

Lou Peacock looked incredulous. "So that's what you were talking about the other night!"

Fred nodded.

"You're not kiddin' us now?" Harry asked. "Y'know everything?"

"Just about," Fred admitted sadly.

A shrewd look overcame Harry's face.

"What if I ask ya somethin' ya don't know?"

"I'd be happy," Fred said in a despairing voice.

Harry beamed. "Okay. I won't ask ya about atoms nor chemicals nor anythin' like that. I'll just ask ya t'tell me about the country between my home town Au Sable and Tarva." He hit the bar with a contented slap.

Fred looked hopeful briefly, but then his face blanked and he said in an unhappy voice. "Between Au Sable and Tarva, the route is through typical cut-over land that once was covered with virgin pine (danger: deer on the highway) and now has only second-growth oak, pine and poplar. For years after the decline of the lumber industry, picking huckleberries was one of the chief local occupations."

Harry gaped.

"Because the berries were known to grow in the wake of fires," Fred concluded, "residents deliberately set many fires that roared through the country."

"That's a damn dirty lie!" Harry said, chin trembling belligerently.

Fred looked at him in surprise.

"You shouldn't ought t'go around tellin' lies like that," Harry said. "You call that knowin' the countryside—tellin' lies about it?"

"Take it easy, Harry," Lou cautioned.

"Well," Harry said angrily, "he shouldn't ought to tell lies like that."

"I didn't say it," Fred answered hopelessly. "It's more as though I-I read it off."

"Yeah? Well . . ." Harry fingered his glass restlessly.

"You really know everything?" Lou asked, partly to ease the tension, partly because he was awed.

"I'm afraid so," Fred replied.

"You ain't just . . . playin' a trick?" Fred shook his head. "No trick."

Lou Peacock looked small and intense. "What can you tell me," he asked in a back-alley voice, "about orange roses?"

The blank look crossed Fred's face again. Then he recited, "Orange is not a fundamental color but a blend of red and pink of varied intensity and yellow. There were very few orange roses prior to the Pernatia strain. All orange, apricot, chamois, and coral roses finish with pink more or less accentuated. Some attain that lovely shade—Cuisse de Nymphe émue."

Lou Peacock was openmouthed. "Ain't that something?"

Harry Bullard blew out heavy breath. "What d'ya know about Carpenter?" he asked pugnaciously.

"Carpenter, Milford, born 1898 in Chicago, Illi-"

"Never mind," Harry cut in. "I ain't interested. He's a Commie; that's all I gotta know about him."

"The elements that go into a political campaign," quoth Fred helplessly, "are many—the personality of the candidates, the issues—if any—the attitude of the press, economic groups, traditions, the opinion polls, the—"

"I tell ya he's a Commiel" Harry declared, voice rising. "You voted for him last election," Lou said. "As I re—"

"I did not!" snarled Harry, getting redder in the face.

The blank look appeared on Fred Elderman's face. "Remembering things that are not so is a kind of memory distortion that goes by several names such as pathological lying or mythomania."

"You callin' me a liar, Fred?"

"It differs from ordinary lying in that the speaker comes to believe his own lies and—"

"Where did you get that black eye?" a shocked Eva asked Fred when he came into the kitchen later. "Have you been fighting at your age?"

Then she saw the look on his face and ran for the refrigerator. She sat him on a chair and held a piece of beefsteak against his swelling eye while he related what had happened.

"He's a bully," she said, "A bully!"

"No, I don't blame him," Fred disagreed. "I insulted him. I don't even know what I'm saying any more. I'm-I'm all mixed up."

She looked down at his slumped form, an alarmed expression on her face. "When is Doctor Boone gonna do somethin'?"

"I don't know."

A half hour later, against Eva's wishes, he went to clean up the library with a fellow janitor; but the moment he entered the huge room, he gasped, put his hands to his temples and fell down on one knee, gasping, "My head!"

It took a long while of sitting quietly in the downstairs hall-way before the pain in his skull stopped. He sat there staring fixedly at the glossy tile floor, his head feeling as if it had just gone twenty-nine rounds with the heavyweight champion of the world.

Fetlock came in the morning. Arthur B., forty-two, short and stocky, head of the Department of Psychological Sciences, he came bustling along the path in porkpie hat and checkered overcoat, jumped up on the porch, stepped across its worn boards and stabbed at the bell button. While he waited, he clapped leather-gloved hands together energetically and blew out breath clouds.

"Yes?" Eva asked when she opened the door.

Professor Fetlock explained his mission, not noticing how her face tightened with fright when he announced his field. Reassured that Dr. Boone had sent him, she led Fetlock up the carpeted steps, explaining, "He's still in bed. He had an attack last night."

"Oh?" asked Arthur Fetlock.

When introductions had been made and he was alone with the janitor, Professor Fetlock fired a rapid series of questions. Fred Elderman, propped up with pillows, answered them as well as he could.

"This attack," said Fetlock, "what happened?"

"Don't know, Professor. Walked in the library and—well, it was as if a ton of cement hit me on the head. No—in my head."

"Amazing. And this knowledge you say you've acquired—are you conscious of an *increase* since your visit to the library?"

Fred nodded. "I know more than ever."

The professor bounced the fingertips of both hands against each other. "A book on language by Pei. Section 9-B in the library, book number 429.2, if memory serves. Can you quote from it?"

Fred looked blank, but words followed almost immediately. "Leibnitz first advanced the theory that all language came not from a historically recorded source but from proto-speech. In some respects he was a precursor of—"

"Good, good," said Arthur Fetlock. "Apparently a case of spontaneous telepathic manifestations coupled with clairvoyance."

"Meaning?"

"Telepathy, Elderman. Telepathy! Seems every book or educated mind you come across, you pick clean on content. You worked in the French office, you spoke French. You worked in the Mathematics office, you quoted numbers, tables, axioms. Similarly with all other offices, subjects, and individuals." He scowled, purse-lipped. "Ah, but why?"

"Causa qua re," muttered Fred.

A brief wry sound in Professor Fetlock's throat. "Yes, I wish I knew, too. However . . ." He leaned forward. "What's that?"

"How come I can learn so much?" Fred asked worriedly. "I mean—"

"No difficulty there," stated the stocky psychologist. "You see, no man ever utilized the full learning capacity of the brain. It still has an immense potential. Perhaps that's what's happening to you—you're realizing this potential."

"But how?"

"Spontaneously realized telepathy and clairvoyance plus infinite retention and unlimited potential." He whistled softly. "Amazing. Positively amazing. Well, I must be going."

"But what'll I do?" Fred begged.

"Why, enjoy it," said the professor expansively. "It's a perfectly fantastic gift. Now look—if I were to gather together a group of faculty members, would you be willing to speak to them? Informally, of course."

"But-"

"They should be entranced, positively entranced. I must do a paper for the *Journal*."

"But what does it mean, Professor?" Fred Elderman asked, his voice shaking.

"Oh, we'll look into it, never fear. Really, this is revolutionary. An unparalleled phenomenon." He made a sound of delighted disbelief. "In-credible."

When Professor Fetlock had gone, Fred sat defeatedly in his bed. So there was nothing to be done—nothing but spout endless, inexplicable words and wonder into the nights what terrible thing was happening to him. Maybe the professor was excited; maybe it was exciting intellectual fare for outsiders. For him, it was only grim and increasingly frightening business.

Why? Why? It was the question he could neither answer nor escape.

He was thinking that when Eva came in. He lifted his gaze as she crossed the room and sat down on the bed.

"What did he say?" she asked anxiously.

When he told her, her reaction was the same as his.

"That's all? Enjoy it?" She pressed her lips together in anger. "What's the matter with him? Why did Doctor Boone send him?"

He shook his head, without an answer.

There was such a look of confused fear on his face that she reached out her hand suddenly and touched his cheek. "Does

your head hurt, dear?"

"It hurts inside," he said. "In my . . ." There was a clicking in his throat. "If one considers the brain as a tissue which is only moderately compressible, surrounded by two variable factors—the blood it contains and the spinal fluid which surrounds it and fills the ventricles inside the brain—we have—"

He broke off spasmodically and sat there, quivering.

"God help us," she whispered.

"As Sextus Empiricus says in his Arguments Against Belief in a God, those who affirm, positively, that God exists cannot avoid falling into an impiety. For—"

"Fred, stop it!"

He sat looking at her dazedly.

"Fred, you don't . . . know what you're saying. Do you?"

"No. I never do. I just-Eva, what's going on?"

She held his hand tightly and stroked it. "It's all right, Fred. Please don't worry so."

But he did worry. For behind the complex knowledge that filled his mind, he was still the same man, simple, uncomprehending—and afraid.

Why was it happening?

It was as if, in some hideous way, he were a sponge filling more and more with knowledge and there would come a time when there was no room left and the sponge would explode.

Professor Fetlock stopped him in the hallway Monday morning. "Elderman, I've spoken to the members of the faculty and they're all as excited as I. Would this afternoon be too soon? I can get you excused from any work you may be required to do."

Fred looked bleakly at the professor's enthusiastic face. "It's all right."

"Splendid! Shall we say four-thirty then? My offices?"

"All right."

"And may I make a suggestion?" asked the professor. "I'd like you to tour the university—all of it."

When they separated, Fred went back down to the base-

ment to put away his tools.

At four-twenty-five, he pushed open the heavy door to the Department of Psychological Sciences. He stood there waiting patiently, one hand on the knob, until someone in the large group of faculty members saw him. Professor Fetlock disengaged from the group and hurried over.

"Elderman," he said, "come in; come in."

"Professor, has Doctor Boone said anything more?" Fred insisted. "I mean about—"

"No, nothing. Never fear, we'll get to it. But come along. I want you to— Ladies and gentlemen, your attention, please!"

Fred was introduced to them, standing in their midst, trying to look at ease when his heart and nerves were pulsing with a nervous dread.

"And did you follow my suggestion," Fetlock asked loudly, "and tour all the departments in the university?"

"Yes . . . sir."

"Good, good." Professor Fetlock nodded emphatically. "That should complete the picture then. Imagine it, ladies and gentlemen—the sum total of knowledge in our entire university—all in the head of this one man!"

There were sounds of doubt from the faculty.

"No, no, I'm serious!" claimed Fetlock. "The proof of the

pudding is quite ample. Ask away."

Fred Elderman stood there in the momentary silence, thinking of what Proofessor Fetlock had said. The knowledge of an entire university in his head. That meant there was no more to be gotten here then.

What now?

Then the questions came—and the answers, dead-voiced and monotonous.

"What will happen to the Sun in 15 million years?"

"If the Sun goes on radiating at its present rate for 15 million years, its whole weight will be transformed into radiation."

"What is a root tone?"

"In harmonic units, the constituent tones seem to have unequal harmonic values. Some seem to be more important and dominate the sounding unity. These roots are—"

All the knowledge of an entire university in his head.

"The five orders of Roman architecture."

"Tuscan, Doric, Corinthian, Ionic, Composite, Tuscan being a simplified Doric, Doric retaining the triglyphs, Corinthian characterized by—"

No more knowledge there he didn't possess. His brain crammed with it. Why?

"Buffer capacity?"

"The buffer capacity of a solution may be defined as dx/dpH where dx is the small amount of strong acid or—"

Why?

"A moment ago. French."

"Il n'y a qu'un instant."

Endless questions, increasingly excited until they were almost being shouted.

"What is literature involved with?"

"Literature is, of its nature, involved with ideas because it deals with Man in society, which is to say that it deals with formulations, valuations and—"

Why?

"Rule for masthead lights on steam vessels?" A laugh.

"A steam vessel when under way shall carry (a) on or in front of the foremast or, if a vessel without a foremast, then in the forepart of the vessel, a bright, white light so constructed as to—"

No laughter. Questions.

"How does a three-step rocket take off?"

"The three-step rocket takes off vertically and is then given a slight tilt in an easterly direction, Brennschluss taking place about—"

"Who was Count Bernadotte?"

"What are the by-products of oil?"

"Which city is-"

"How can-"

"What is-"

"When did-"

And when it was over and he had answered every question they asked, there was a great, heavy silence. He stood trembling and yet numb, beginning to get a final knowledge.

The phone rang then and made everyone start.

Professor Fetlock answered it. "For you, Elderman."

Fred walked over to the phone and picked up the receiver.

"Fred?" he heard Eva say.

"Oui."

"What?"

He twitched. "I'm sorry, Eva. I mean yes, it's I."

He heard her swallowing on the other end on the line. "Fred, I... just wondered why you didn't come home, so I called your office and Charlie said—"

He told her about the meeting.

"Oh," she said. "Well, will you be-home for supper?"

The last knowledge was seeping, rising slowly.

"I'll try, Eva. I think so, yes."

"I been worried, Fred."

He smiled sadly. "Nothing to worry about, Eva."

Then the message sliced abruptly across his mind and he said, "Good-by, Eva," and dropped the receiver. "I have to go," he told Fetlock and the others.

He didn't exactly hear what they said in return. The words, the transition from room to hall were blurred over by his sudden, concentrated need to get out on the campus.

The questioning faces were gone and he was hurrying down the hall on driven feet, his action as his speech had been unmotivated, beyond understanding. Something drew him on. He had spoken without knowing why; now he rushed down the long hallway without knowing why.

He rushed across the lobby, gasping for breath. The message had said, Come. It's time.

These things, these many things—who would want to know them? The endless facts about all Earthly knowledge.

Earthly knowledge . . .

As he came half tripping, half running down the building

steps into the early darkness, he saw the flickering bluishwhite light in the sky. It was aiming over the trees, the buildings, straight at him.

He stood petrified, staring at it, and knew exactly why he had acquired all the knowledge he had.

The blue-white light bore directly at him with a piercing, whining hum. Across the dark campus, a young girl screamed.

Life on the other planets, the last words crossed his mind, is not only possibility but high probability.

Then the light hit him and bounced straight back up to its source, like lightning streaking in reverse from lightning rod to storm cloud, leaving him in awful blackness.

They found the old man wandering across the campus grass like a somnambulant mute. They spoke to him, but his tongue was still. Finally, they were obliged to look in his wallet, where they found his name and address and took him home.

A year later, after learning to talk all over again, he said his first stumbling words. He said them one night to his wife when she found him in the bathroom holding a sponge in his hand.

"Fred, what are you doing?"

"I been squeezed," he said.

THE MUSIC MASTER OF BABYLON

FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, no one came. In the seventy-sixth year of his life, Brian Van Anda was still trying not to remember a happy boyhood. To do so was irrelevant and dangerous, although every instinct of his old age tempted him to reject the present and dwell in the lost times.

He would recall stubbornly that the present year, for example, was 2096; that he had been born in 2020, seven years after the close of the Civil War, fifty years before the Final War, twenty-five years before the departure of the First Interstellar. (It had never returned, nor had the Second Interstellar. They might be still wandering, trifles of Man-made stardust.) He would recall his place of birth, New Boston, the fine, planned city far inland from the ancient metropolis that the rising sea had reclaimed after the earthquake of 1994.

Such things, places and dates, were factual props, useful when Brian wanted to impose an external order on the vagueness of his immediate existence. He tried to make sure they became no more than that—to shut away the colors, the poignant sounds, the parks and the playgrounds of New Boston, the known faces (many of them loved), and the later years when he had briefly known a curious intoxication called fame.

It was not necessarily better or wiser to reject those memories, but it was safer, and nowadays Brian was often sufficiently tired, sufficiently conscious of his growing weakness and lonely unimportance, to crave safety as a meadow mouse often craves a burrow.

He tied his canoe to the massive window that for many years had been a port and a doorway. Lounging there with a suspended sense of time, he was hardly aware that he was listening. In a way, all the twenty-five years had been a listening. He watched Earth's patient star sink toward the rim of the forest on the Palisades. At this hour, it was sometimes possible, if the Sun-crimsoned water lay still, to cease grieving too much at the greater stillness.

There was scattered human life elsewhere, he knew—probably a great deal of it. After twenty-five years alone, that, too, often seemed almost irrelevant. At other times than mild evenings, hushed noons, or mornings empty of human commotion, Brian might lapse into anger, fight the calm by yelling, resent the swift dying of his echoes. Such moods were brief. A kind of humor remained in him, not to be ruined by sorrow.

He remembered how, ten months or possibly ten years ago, he had encountered a box turtle in a forest clearing, and had shouted at it: "They went thataway!" The turtle's rigidly comic face, fixed by nature in a caricature of startled disapproval, had seemed to point up some truth or other. Brian had hunkered down on the moss and laughed uproariously—until he observed that some of the laughter was weeping.

Today had been rather good. He had killed a deer on the Palisades, and with bow and arrow, thus saving a bullet. Not that he needed to practice such economy. He might live, he supposed, another decade or so at the most. His rifles were in good condition and his hoarded ammunition would easily outlast him. So would the stock of canned and dried food stuffed away in his living quarters. But there was satisfaction in primitive effort and no compulsion to analyze the why of it.

The stored food was more important than the ammunition. A time would come soon enough when he no longer had strength for hunting. He would lose the inclination for trips to cross the river. He would yield to such laziness or timidity for days, then weeks. Some time, when it became months or years, he might find himself too feeble to risk climbing the

cliff wall into the forest. He would have the good sense then, he hoped, to destroy the canoe, thus making of his weakness a necessity.

There were books. There was the Hall of Music on the next floor above the water, probably safe from its lessening encroachment. To secure fresh water, he need only keep track of the tides, for the Hudson had cleaned itself and now rolled down sweet from the lonely, uncorrupted hills. His decline could be comfortable. He had provided for it and planned it. Yet gazing now across the sleepy water, seeing a broad-winged hawk circle in freedom above the forest, Brian was aware of the old thought moving in him:

"If I could hear voices—just once, if I could hear human voices . . ."

The Museum of Human History, with the Hall of Music on what Brian thought of as the second floor, should also outlast his requirements. In the flooded lower floor and basement, the work of slow destruction must be going on. Here and there, the unhurried waters could find their way to steel and make rust of it, for the waterproofing of the concrete was nearly a hundred years old. But it ought to be good for another century or two.

Nowadays the ocean was mild. There were moderate tides, winds no longer destructive. For the last six years, there had been no more of the heavy storms out of the south. In the same period, Brian had noted a rise in the water level of a mere nine inches. The window sill, his port, was six inches above high-tide mark now.

Perhaps Earth was settling into a new, amiable mood. The climate had become delightful, about like what Brian remembered from a visit to southern Virginia in his childhood.

The last earthquake had come in 2082—a large one, Brian guessed, but its center could not have been close to the rock of Manhattan. The Museum had only shivered and shrugged; it had survived much worse than that, half a dozen times since 1994. After the tremor, a tall wave had thundered in from the south. Its force, like that of others, had mostly been dissipated against the barrier of tumbled rock and steel at the

southern end of the submerged island—an undersea dam, Manmade though not Man-intended—and when it reached the Museum, it did no more than smash the southern windows in the Hall of Music, which earlier waves had not been able to reach. Then it passed on up the river, enfeebled. The windows of the lower floor had all been broken long before that.

After the earthquake of '82, Brian had spent a month boarding up all the openings on the south side of the Hall of Music—after all, it was home—with lumber painfully ferried from mainland ruins. That year, he had been sixty-two years old and not moving with the ease of youth: a rough job. He had deliberately left cracks and knotholes. Sunlight sifted through in narrow beams, like the bars of dusty gold Brian could remember in a hayloft at his uncle's farm in Vermont. It was quite pleasant.

The Museum had been built in 2003. Manhattan, strangely enough, had never been bombed, although, in the Civil War, two of the type called "small fission" had fallen on the Brooklyn and Jersey sides—so Brian recalled from the jolly history books that had informed his adolescence that war was definitely a thing of the past.

By the time of the Final War, in 2070, the sea, gorged on the melting ice caps, had removed Manhattan Island from history. Everything left standing above the waters south of the Museum had been knocked flat by the tornadoes of 2057 and 2064. A few blobs of rock still marked where Central Park and Mount Morris Park had been, but they were not significant. Where Long Island once rose, there was a troubled area of shoals and tiny islands, probably a useful barrier of protection for the receding shore of Connecticut.

Men had yielded the great city inch by inch, then foot by foot; a full mile in 2047, saying: "The flood years have passed their peak and a return to normal is expected."

Brian somethimes felt a twinge of sympathy for the Neanderthal experts who must have told each other to expect a return to normal after the Cro-Magnons stopped drifting in.

In 2057, the island of Manhattan had to be yielded altogether. New York City, half new, half ancient, sprawled

stubborn and enormous upstream, on both sides of a river not done with its anger. But the Museum stood. Aided by sunken rubble of others of its kind, aided also by men because they still had time to love it, the Museum stood, and might for a long time yet-weather permitting.

It covered an acre of ground well north of 125th Street, rising a modest fifteen stories, its foundation secure in that layer of rock which mimics eternity. It deserved its name: here men had brought samples of everything, literally everything known in the course of humanity since prehistory. It was, within human limits, definitive. In its way, considering how much the erosion of time must always steal from scholars. it was perfect.

No one had felt anything unnatural in the refusal of the Directors of the Museum to move the collection after the Museum weathered the storm of 2057. Instead, ordinary people, more than a thousand of them, donated money so that a mighty abutment could be built around the ground floor, a new entrance designed on the north side of the second. The abutment survived the greater tornado of 2064 without damage, although, during those seven years, the sea had risen another eight feet in its old ever-new game of making monkeys out of the wise.

It was left for Brian Van Anda alone, in 2079, to see the waters slide quietly over the abutment, opening the lower regions for the use of fishes and the more secret waterdwellers who like shelter and privacy. In the '90s, Brian suspected the presence of an octopus or two in the vast vague territory which had once been parking lot, heating plant, storage space, air-raid shelter, etc. He couldn't prove it; it just seemed like a comfortable place for an octopus.

In 2070, plans were under consideration for building a new causeway to the Museum from the still expanding city in the north. In 2070, also, the Final War began and ended.

When Brian Van Anda came down the river late in 2071, a refugee from certain unfamiliar types of savagery, the Museum was empty of the living. He had spent many days in exhaustive exploration of the building. He did that systematically, toiling at last up to the Directors' meeting room on the top floor. There he observed how they must have been holding a conference at the very time when a new gas was tried out over New York in the north, in a final effort to persuade the Western Federation that Man is the servant of the state and that the end justifies the means.

Too bad, Brian sometimes thought, that he would never know exactly what happened to the Asian Empire. In the little paratroop-invaded area called the Soviet of North America, from which Brian had fled in '71, the official doctrine was that the Asian Empire had won the war and that the saviors of humanity would be flying in any day to take over. Brian had doubted this out loud, and then stolen a boat and got away safely at night.

Up in the meeting room, Brian had seen how that new neurotoxin had been no respecter of persons. An easy death, though—no pain. He observed also how some things survive. The Museum, for instance, was virtually unharmed.

Brian had often recalled those months in the meeting room as a sort of island in time, like the first hour of discovering that he could play Beethoven; or like the curiously cherished, more than life-size half-hour back there in Newburgh, in 2071, when he had briefly met and spoken with an incredibly old man, Abraham Brown, President of the Western Federation at the time of the Civil War. Brown, with a loved world in almost total ruin around him, had spoken pleasantly of small things—of chrysanthemums that would soon be blooming in the front yard of the house where he lived with friends, of a piano recital by Van Anda at Ithaca, in 2067, which the old man remembered with warm enthusiasm.

Yes, the Museum Directors had died easily, and now the old innocent bodies would be quite decent. There were no vermin in the Museum. The doorways and floors were tight, the upper windows unbroken.

One of the white-haired men had a Ming vase on his desk. He had not dropped from his chair, but looked as if he had fallen comfortably asleep in front of the vase with his head on his arms. Brian had left the vase untouched.

but had taken one other thing, moved by some stirring of his own never-certain philosophy and knowing that he would not return to this room, ever.

Another Director had been opening a wall cabinet when he fell; the small key lay near his fingers. Plainly their discussion had not been concerned only with war, perhaps not at all with war—after all, there were other topics. The Ming vase would have had a part in it. Brian wished he could know what the old man had meant to choose from the cabinet. Sometimes, even now, he dreamed of conversations with that man, in which the Director told him the whole truth about that and other matters; but what was certainty in sleep was in the morning gone like childhood.

For himself, Brian had taken a little image of rock-hard clay, blackened, two-faced, male and female. Prehistoric, or at any rate wholly primitive, unsophisticated, meaningful like the blameless motion of an animal in sunlight, Brian had said: "With your permission, gentlemen." He had closed the cabinet and then, softly, the outer door.

"I'm old," Brian said to the red evening. "Old, a little foolish, talk aloud to myself. I'll have some Mozart before supper."

He transferred the fresh venison from the canoe to a small raft hitched inside the window. He had selected only choice pieces, as much as he could cook and eat in the few days before it spoiled, leaving the rest for the wolves or any other forest scavengers who might need it. There was a rope strung from the window to the marble steps that led to the next floor—home.

It had not been possible to save much from the submerged area, for its treasure was mostly heavy statuary. Through the still water, as he pulled the raft along the rope, the Moses of Michelangelo gazed up at him in tranquility. Other faces watched him. Most of them watched infinity. There were white hands that occasionally borrowed gentle motion from ripples made by the raft.

"I got a deer, Moses," said Brian Van Anda, smiling down

in companionship, losing track of time. He carried his juicy burden up the stairway.

His living quarters had once been a cloakroom for Museum attendants. Four close walls gave it a sense of security. A ventilating shaft now served as a chimney for the wood stove Brian had salvaged from a mainland farmhouse. The door could be tightly locked; there were no windows. You do not want windows in a cave.

Outside was the Hall of Music, an entire floor of the Museum, containing an example of every musical instrument that was known or could be reconstructed in the 21st century. The library of scores and recordings lacked nothing—except electricity to play the recordings. A few might still be made to sound on a spring-wound phonograph, but Brian had not bothered with it for years; the springs were rusted.

He sometimes took out the orchestra and chamber music scores, to read at random. Once his mind had been able to furnish ensembles, orchestras, choirs of a sort, but lately the ability had weakened. He remembered a day, possibly a year ago, when his memory refused to give him the sound of oboe and clarinet in unison. He had wandered, peevish, distressed, unreasonably alarmed, among the racks and cases of woodwinds in the collection, knowing that even if the reeds were still good, he could not play them. He had never mastered any instrument except the piano.

"But even if I could play them," he muttered, now tolerantly amused, "I couldn't do it in unison, could I? Ah, the things that will bother a man!"

Brian recalled—it was probably that same day—opening a chest of double basses. There was an old three-stringer in the group, probably from the early 19th century, a trifle fatter than its modern companions. Brian touched its middle string in an idle caress, not intending to make it sound, but it had done so. When in use, it would have been tuned to D; time had slackened the heavy murmur to A or something near it. That had throbbed in the silent room with a sense of finality, a sound such as a programmatic composer—Tschaikovsky, say, or some other in the nadir of torment—might

have used as a tonal symbol for the breaking of a heart. It stayed in the air a long time, other instruments whispering a dim response.

"All right, gentlemen," said Brian. "That was your A." He

had closed the case, not laughing.

Out in the main part of the hall, a place of honor was given to what may have been the oldest of all instruments, a sevennote marimba of phonolitic schist discovered in Indochina in the 20th century and thought to be at least 5000 years of age. The xylophone-type rack was modern; for twenty-five years, Brian had obeyed a compulsion to keep it clear of cobwebs. Sometimes he touched the singing stones, not for amusement, but because there was an obscure comfort in it. Unconcerned with time, they answered even to the light tap of a fingernail.

On the west side of the Hall of Music, a rather long walk from Brian's cave, was a small auditorium. Lectures, recitals, chamber music concerts had been given there in the old days. The pleasant room held a twelve-foot concert grand, made by Steinway in 2043, probably the finest of the many pianos in the Hall of Music.

Brian had done his best to preserve this, setting aside a day each month for the prayerful tuning of it, robbing other pianos in the Museum to provide a reserve supply of strings, oiled and sealed up against rust. No dirt ever collected on the Steinway. When not in use, it was covered with stitched-together sheets. To remove the cover was a sober ritual; Brian always washed his hands with fanatical care before touching the keys.

Some years ago, he had developed the habit of locking the auditorium doors before he played. Even with the doors locked, he would not glance toward the vista of empty seats not knowing, nor caring much, whether this inhibition had grown from a Stone Age fear of seeing someone there or from a flat, reasonable certainty that no one could be.

The habit might have started (he could not remember precisely) away back in the year 2076, when so many bodies had drifted down from the north on ebb tides. Full horror

had somehow been lacking in the sight of all that floating death. Perhaps it was because Brian had earlier had his fill of horrors; or perhaps, in 2076, he already felt so divorced from his own kind that what happened to them was like the photograph of a war in a distant country.

Some of the bodies had bobbed quite near the Museum. Most of them had the gaping wounds of primitive warfare, but some were oddly discolored—a new pestilence? So there was (or had been) more trouble up there in what was (or had been) the Soviet of North America, a self-styled "nation" that took in east New York State and some of New England.

Yes, that was probably the year when he had started locking the doors between his private concerts and an empty world.

He dumped the venison in his cave. He scrubbed his hands, blue-veined now, but still tough, still knowing. Mozart, he thought, and walked—not with much pleasure of anticipation, but more like one externally driven—through the enormous hall that was so full and yet so empty, growing dim with evening, with dust, with age, with loneliness. Music should not be silent.

When the piano was uncovered, Brian delayed. He flexed his hands unnecessarily. He fussed with the candelabrum on the wall, lighting three candles, then blowing out two for economy. He admitted presently that he did not want the serene clarity of Mozart at all right now. This evening, the darkness of 2070 was closer than he had felt it for a long time. It would never have occurred to Mozart, Brian thought, that a world could die. Beethoven could have entertained the idea soberly enough; Chopin probably; even Brahms. Mozart would surely have dismissed it as somebody's bad dream, in poor taste.

Andrew Carr, who lived and died in the latter half of the 20th century, had endured the idea from the beginning of his childhood. The date of Hiroshima was 1945; Carr was born in 1951; the inexhaustible wealth of his music was written between 1969, when he was eighteen, and 1984, when he died in an Egyptian jail from injuries received in a street brawl.

"If not Mozart," said Brian to his idle hands, "there is

always The Project."

Playing Carr's last sonata as it should be played—as Carr was supposed to have said he couldn't play it himself—Brian had been thinking of that as The Project for many years. It had begun long before the war, at the time of his triumphs in a civilized world which had been warmly appreciative of the polished interpretive artist, although no more awake than any other age to the creative one. Back there in the undestroyed society, Brian had proposed to program that sonata in the company of works that were older but no greater, and play it—yes, beyond his best, so that even critics would begin to see its importance.

He had never done it, had never felt that he had entered into the sonata and learned the depth of it. Now, when there was none to hear or care, unless maybe the harmless brown spiders in the corners of the auditorium had a taste for music, there was still The Project.

"I hear," Brian said. "I care, and with myself as audience I want to hear it once as it ought to be—a final statement for a world that couldn't live and yet was too good to die."

Technically, of course, he had it. The athletic demands Carr made on the performer were tremendous, but, given technique, there was nothing impossible about them. Anyone capable of concert work could at least play the notes at the required tempos. And any reasonably shrewd pianist could keep track of the dynamics, saving strength for the shattering finale in spite of the thunderings that must come before. Brian had heard the sonata played by others two or three times in the old days—competently. Competency was not enough.

For example, what about the third movement, that mad Scherzo, and the five tiny interludes of sweet quiet scattered through its plunging fury? They were not alike. Related, perhaps, but each one demanded a new climate of heart and mind—tenderness, regret, simple relaxation. Flowers on a flood—no. Warm window-lights in a storm—no. The innocence

of an unknowing child in a bombed city-no, not really. Something of all those, but much more, too.

What of the second movement, the Largo, where, in a way, the pattern was reversed, the midnight introspection interrupted by moments of anger, or longing, or despair like that of an angel beating his wings against a prison of glass?

It was, throughout, a work in which something of Carr's life and Carr's temperament had to come into you, whether you dared welcome it or not; otherwise, your playing was no more than a bumbling reproduction of notes on a page.

Carr's life was not for the contemplation of the timid.

The details were superficially well known. The biographies themselves were like musical notation, meaningless without interpretation and insight.

Carr had been a drunken roarer, a young devil-god with such a consuming hunger for life that he had choked to death on it. His friends hated him for the way he drained their lives, loving them to distraction and always loving his work a little more. His enemies must have had times of helplessly adoring him, if only because of an impossible transparent honesty that made him more and less than human.

A rugged Australian, not tall but built like a hero, a face all forehead and jaw and glowing hyperthyroid eyes. He wept only when he was angry, the biographers said. In one minute of talk, they said, he might shift from gutter obscenity to some extreme of altruistic tenderness, and from that to a philosophical comment of the coldest intelligence.

He passed his childhood on a sheep farm, ran away to sea on a freighter at thirteen, studied like a slave in London with a single-minded desperation, even through the horrors of the Pandemic of 1972. He was married twice and twice divorced. He killed a man in an imbecile quarrel on the New Orleans docks, and wrote his First Symphony while he was in jail for that. And he died of stab wounds in a Cairo jail. It all had relevancy. Relevant or not, if the sonata was in your mind, so was the life.

You had to remember also that Andrew Carr was the last of civilization's great composers. No one in the 21st century

approached him-they ignored his explorations and carved cherry stones. He belonged to no school, unless you wanted to imagine a school of music beginning with Bach, taking in perhaps a dozen along the way, and ending with Carr himself. His work was a summary and, in the light of the year 2070, a completion.

Brian was certain he could play the first movement of the sonata acceptably. Technically, it was not revolutionary, but closely loyal to the ancient sonata form. Carr had even written in a conventional double-bar for a repeat of the entire opening statement, something that made late 20th century critics sneer with great satisfaction. It never occurred to them that Carr expected a performer to use his head.

The bright-sorrowful second movement, unfashionably long, with its strange pauses, unforeseen recapitulations, outbursts of savage change-that was where Brian's troubles began. It did not help him to be old, remembering the inner storms of twenty-five years ago and more.

As the single candle fluttered, Brian realized that he had forgotten to lock the door. That troubled him, but he did not rise from the piano chair. He chided himself instead for the foolish neuroses of aloneness—what could it matter?

He shut his eyes. The sonata had long ago been memorized; printed copies were safe somewhere in the library. He played the opening of the first movement, as far as the double-bar; opened his eyes to the friendly black and white of clean keys and played the repetition with new light, new emphasis. Better than usual, he thought.

Now that soaring modulation into A Major that only Carr would have wanted just there in just that sudden way, like the abrupt happening upon shining fields. On toward the climax-I am playing it, I think-through the intricate revelations of development and recapitulation. And the conclusion, lingering, half-humorous, not unlike a Beethoven ending, but with a questioning that was all Andrew Carr.

After that-

"No more tonight," said Brian aloud. "Some night, though

. . . Not competent right now, my friend. Fear's a many-

aspect thing. But The Project . . ."

He replaced the cover on the Steinway and blew out the candle. He had brought no torch, long use having taught his feet every inch of the short journey. It was quite dark. The never opened western windows of the auditorium were dirty, most of the dirt on the outside, crusted wind-blown salt.

In this partial darkness, something was wrong.

At first Brian could find no source for the faint light, the dim orange with a hint of motion that had no right to be here. He peered into the gloom of the auditorium, fixed his eyes on the oblong of blacker shadow that was the door he meant to use, but it told him nothing.

The windows, of course. He had almost forgotten there were any. The light, hardly deserving the name, was coming through them. But sunset was surely well past; he had been here a long time, delaying and brooding before he played. Sunset should not flicker.

So there was some kind of fire on the mainland. There had been no thunderstorm. How could fire start, over there where no one ever came?

He stumbled a few times, swearing petulantly, locating the doorway again and groping through it into the Hall of Music. The windows out here were just as dirty; no use trying to see through them. There must have been a time when he had enjoyed looking through them.

He stood shivering in the marble silence, trying to remember.

He could not. Time was a gradual eternal dying. Time was a long growth of dirt and ocean salt, sealing in, covering over forever.

He stumbled for his cave, hurrying now, and lit two candles. He left one by the cold stove and used the other to light his way down the stairs to his raft. Once down there, he blew it out, afraid. The room a candle makes in the darkness is a vulnerable room. With no walls, it closes in a blindness. He pulled the raft by the guide-rope, gently, for fear of noise.

He found his canoe tied as he had left it. He poked his white head slowly beyond the sill, staring west.

Merely a bonfire gleaming, reddening the blackness of the

Brian knew the spot, a ledge almost at water level. At one end of it was the troublesome path he used in climbing up to the forest. Usable driftwood was often there, the supply renewed by the high tides.

"No," Brian said. "Oh, no"

Unable to accept, or believe, or not believe, he drew his head in, resting his forehead on the coldness of the sill, waiting for dizziness to pass, reason to return. Then rather calm, he once more leaned out over the sill. The fire still shone and was therefore not a disordered dream of old age, but it was dying to a dull rose of embers.

He wondered a little about time. The Museum clocks and watches had stopped long ago; Brian had ceased to want them. A sliver of moon was hanging over the water to the east. He ought to be able to remember the phases, deduce the approximate time from that. But his mind was too tired or distraught to give him the necessary data. Maybe it was somewhere around midnight.

He climbed on the sill and, with grunting effort, lifted the canoe over it to the motionless water inside. Wasted energy, he decided, as soon as that struggle was over. That fire had been lit before daylight passed; whoever lit it would have seen the canoe, might even have been watching Brian himself come home from his hunting. The canoe's disappearance in the night would only rouse further curiosity. But Brian was too exhausted to lift it back.

Why assume that the maker of the bonfire was necessarily hostile? Might be good company.

Might be . . .

Brian pulled his raft through the darkness, secured it at the stairway, and groped back to his cave.

He then locked the door. The venison was waiting, the sight and smell of it making him suddenly ravenous. He lit a small fire in the stove, one that he hoped would not be still sending smoke from the ventilator shaft when morning came. He cooked the meat crudely and wolfed it down, all enjoyment gone at the first mouthful.

He was shocked then to discover the dirtiness of his white beard. He hadn't given himself a real bath in—weeks? He searched for scissors and spent an absent-minded while trimming the beard back to shortness. He ought to take some soap—valuable stuff—down to Moses' room and wash.

Clothes, too. People probably still wore them. He had worn none for years, except for sandals and a clout and a carrying satchel for his trips to the mainland. He had enjoyed the freedom at first, and especially the discovery in his rugged fifties that he did not need clothes even for the soft winters, except perhaps a light covering when he slept. Then almost total nakedness had become so natural, it required no thought at all. But the owner of that honfire—

He checked his rifles. The .22 automatic, an Army model from the 2040s, was the best. The tiny bullets carried a paralytic poison: graze a man's finger and he was painlessly dead in three minutes. Effective range, with telescopic sights, three kilometers; weight, a scant five pounds.

He sat a long time cuddling that triumph of military science, listening for sounds that did not come, wondering often about the unknowable passage of night toward day. Would it be two o'clock?

He wished he could have seen the Satellite, renamed in his mind the Midnight Star, but when he was down there at his port, he had not once looked up at the night sky. Delicate and beautiful, bearing its everlasting freight of men who must have been dead now for twenty-five years and who would be dead a very long time—well, it was better than a clock, Brian often thought, if you happened to look at the midnight sky at the right time of the month when the Man-made star could catch the moonlight. But he had not seen it tonight.

Three o'clock?

At some time during the long dark, he put the rifle away on the floor. With studied, self-conscious contempt for his own weakness, he strode out noisily into the Hall of Music with a fresh-lit candle. This same bravado, he knew, might dissolve at the first alien noise. While it lasted, though, it was invigorating.

The windows were still black with night. As if the candleflame had found its own way, Brian was standing by the ancient marimba in the main hall, the light slanting carelessly away from his thin, high-veined hand. Nearby, on a small table, sat the Stone Age clay image he had brought long ago from the Directors' meeting room on the fifteenth floor. It startled him.

He remembered quite clearly how he himself had placed it there, obeying a half-humorous whim: the image and the singing stones were both magnificently older than history, so why shouldn't they live together? Whenever he dusted the marimba, he dusted the image respectfully and its pedestal. It would not have taken much urging from the impulses of a lonely mind, he supposed, to make him place offerings before it and bow down—winking first, of course, to indicate that rituals suitable to two aging gentlemen did not have to be sensible in order to be good.

But now the clay face, recapitulating eternity, startled him. Possibly some candle flicker had given it a new mimicry of life.

Though worn with antiquity, it was not deformed. The chipped places were simple honorable scars. The two faces stared mildly from the single head; there were plain stylized lines to represent folded hands, equally artless marks of sex on either side. That was all. The maker might have intended it to be a child's toy or a god.

A wooden hammer of modern make rested on the marimba. Softly, Brian tapped a few of the stones. He struck the shrillest one harder, waking many slow-dying overtones, and laid the hammer down, listening until the last murmur perished and a drop of hot wax hurt his thumb.

He returned to his cave and blew out the candle, thinking of the door, not caring that he had, in irrational bravado, left it unlocked. Face down, he rolled his head and clenched his fingers into his pallet, seeking in pain and finding at last the relief of stormy helpless weeping in the total dark.

Then he slept.

They looked timid. The evidence of it was in their tense squatting pose, not in what the feeble light allowed Brian to see of their faces, which were as blank as rock. Hunched down just inside the open doorway of the cloakroom-cave, a dim morning grayness from the Hall of Music behind them, they were ready for flight. Brian's intelligence warned his body to stay motionless, for readiness for flight could also be readiness for attack. He studied them, lowering his eyelids to a slit. On his pallet well inside the cave, he must be in deep shadow.

They were aware of him, though, keenly aware.

They were very young, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, firm-muscled, the man slim but heavy in the shoulders, the girl a fully developed woman. They were dressed alike: loincloths of some coarse dull fabric and moccasins that might be deer hide.

Their hair grew nearly to the shoulders and was cut off carelessly there, but they were evidently in the habit of combing it. They appeared to be clean. Their complexion, so far as Brian could guess it in the meager light, was the brown of a heavy tan.

With no immediate awareness of emotion, he decided they were beautiful, and then, within his own poised, perilous silence, Brian reminded himself that the young are always beautiful.

Softly-Brian saw no motion of her lips-the woman muttered: "He wake."

A twitch of the man's hand was probably meant to warn her to be quiet. His other hand clutched the shaft of a javelin with a metal blade. Brian saw that the blade had once belonged to a bread knife; it was polished and shining, lashed to a peeled stick. The javelin trailed, ready for use at a flick of the young man's arm. Brian opened his eyes plainly.

Deliberately, he sighed. "Good morning."

The youth said: "Good morning, sa."

"Where do you come from?"

"Millstone." The young man spoke automatically but then his facial rigidity dissolved into amazement and some kind of distress. He glanced at his companion, who giggled uneasily.

"The old man pretends to not know," she said, and smiled, and seemed to be waiting for the young man's permission to go on speaking. He did not give it, but she continued: "Sa, the old ones of Millstone are dead." She thrust her hand out and down, flat, a picture of finality, adding with nervous haste: "As the Old Man knows. He who told us to call him Ionas, she who told us to call her Abigail, they are dead. They are still-without-moving for six days. Then we do the burial as they told us. As the Old Man knows."

"But I don't know!" said Brian, and sat up on his pallet, too quickly, startling them. But their motion was backward, readiness for flight, not for aggression. "Millstone? Where is Millstone?"

Both looked wholly bewildered, then dismayed. They stood up with splendid animal grace, stepping backward out of the cave, the girl whispering in the man's ear. Brian caught only two words: "Is angry . . ."

He iumped up. "Don't go! Please don't go!" He followed them out of the cave, slowly now, aware that he might well be an object of terror in the half-dark, aware of his gaunt, graceless age and dirty hacked-off beard. Almost involuntarily, he adopted something of the flat stilted quality of their speech: "I will not hurt you. Do not go."

They halted. The girl smiled dubiously.

The man said: "We need old ones. They die. He who told us to call him Jonas said, many days in the boat, not with the sun-path, he said, across the sun-path, he said, keeping land on the left hand. We need old ones to speak the-to speak-The Old Man is angry?"

"No, I am not angry. I am never angry." Brian's mind groped, certain of nothing. No one had come for twenty-five years. Only twenty-five? Millstone?

There was red-gold on the dirty eastern windows of the Hall of Music, a light becoming softness as it slanted down, touching the long rows of cases, the warm brown of an antique spinet, the arrogant clean gold of a 20th-century harp, the dull gray of singing stones five thousand years old and a clay face much older than that.

"Millstone?" Brian pointed southwest in inquiry.

The girl nodded, pleased and not at all surprised that he should know, watching him now with a squirrel's stiff curiosity. Hadn't there once been a Millstone River in or near Princeton? He thought he remembered that it emptied into the Raritan Canal. There was some moderately high ground around there. Islands now, no doubt, or—well, perhaps they would tell him.

"There were old people in Millstone," he said, trying for gentle dignity, "and they died. So now you need old ones to take their place."

The girl nodded vigorously. A glance at the young man was full of shyness, possessiveness, maybe some amusement. "He who told us to call him Jonas said no marriage can be without the words of Abraham."

"Abr—" Brian checked himself. If this was religion, it would not do to speak the name Abraham with a rising inflection, at least not until he knew what it stood for. "I have been for a long time—" He checked himself again. A man old, ugly, and strange enough to be sacred should never stoop to explain anything.

They were standing by the seven-stone marimba. His hand dropped, his thumbnail clicking by accident against the deepest stone and waking a murmur. The children drew back alarmed.

Brian smiled. "Don't be afraid." He tapped the other stones lightly. "It is only music. It will not hurt you." He was silent a while, and they were patient and respectful, waiting for more light. He asked carefully: "He who told you to call him Jonas, he taught you all the things you know?"

"All things," the boy said, and the girl nodded quickly, so that the soft brownness of her hair tumbled about her face. and she pushed it back in a small human motion as old as the clay image.

"Do you know how old you are?"

They looked blank. Then the girl said: "Oh, summers!" She held up both hands with spread fingers, then one hand. "Three fives. As the Old Man knows."

"I am very old," said Brian. "I know many things. But sometimes I wish to forget, and sometimes I wish to hear what

others know, even though I may know it myself."

They looked uncomprehending and greatly impressed. Brian felt a smile on his face and wondered why it should be there. They were nice children. Born ten years after the death of a world. Or twenty perhaps. I think I am seventy-six, but did I drop a decade somewhere and never notice the damn thing?

"He who told you to call him Jonas, he taught you all that

you know about Abraham?"

At sound of the name, both of them made swift circu-

lar motions, first at the forehead, then at the breast.

"He taught us all things," the young man said. "He, and she who told us to call her Abigail. The hours to rise, to pray, to wash, to eat. The laws for hunting, and I know the Abraham-words for that: Sol-Amra, I take this for my need."

Brian felt lost again, dismally lost, and looked down to the grave clay faces of the image for counsel, and found none. "They who told you to call them Jonas and Abigail, they were the only old ones who lived with you?"

Again that look of bewilderment. "The only ones, sa," the

young man said. "As the Old Man knows."

I could never persuade them that, being old, I know very nearly nothing.

Brian straightened to his full gaunt height. The young people were not tall; though stiff and worn with age, Brian knew he was still a bonily overpowering creature. Once, among men, he had mildly enjoyed being more than life-size.

As a shield for the lonely, frightened thing that was his mind, he put on a phony sternness: "I wish to examine you

them now while we go across the sun-path."

about Millstone and your knowledge of Abraham. How many others are living at Millstone?"

"Two fives, sa," said the boy promptly, "and I who may be called Jonason and this one we may call Paula. Two fives and two. We are the biggest, we two. The others are only children, but he we call Jimi has killed his deer. He sees after

Under Brian's questioning, more of the story came, haltingly, obscured by the young man's conviction that the Old Man already knew everything. Some time, probably in the middle 2080s, Jonas and Abigail (whoever they were) had come on a group of twelve wild children who were keeping alive somehow in a ruined town where their elders had all died. Jonas and Abigail had brought them all to an island they called Millstone.

Jonas and Abigail had come originally from "up across the sun-path"—the boy seemed to mean north—and they had been very old, which might mean anything between thirty and ninety. In teaching the children primitive means of survival, Jonas and Abigail had brought off a brilliant success: Jonason and Paula were well fed, shining with health and cleanliness and the strength of wildness, and their speech had not been learned from the ignorant. Its pronunciation faintly suggested New England, so far as Brian could detect any local accent at all.

"Did they teach you reading and writing?" he asked, and made writing motions on the flat of his palm, which the two watched in vague alarm.

The boy asked: "What is that?"

"Never mind." He thought: I could quarrel with some of your theories, Mister whom I may call Jonas. "Well, tell me now what they taught you of Abraham."

Both made again that circular motion at forehead and breast, and the young man said with the stiffness of recitation: "Abraham was the Son of Heaven, who died that we might live."

The girl, her obligations discharged with the religious gesture, tapped the marimba shyly, fascinated, and drew her

finger back sharply, smiling up at Brian in apology for her

naughtiness.

"He taught the laws, the everlasting truth of all time," the boy recited, almost gabbling, "and was slain on the wheel at Nuber by the infidels. Therefore, since he died for us, we look up across the sun-path when we pray to Abraham Brown, who will come again."

Abraham Brown?

But-

But I knew him, Brian thought, stunned. I met him once. Nuber? Newburgh the temporary capital of the Soviet of—Oh, the hell with that. Met him in 2071—he was 102 years old then, could still walk, speak clearly, even remember an unimportant concert of mine from years before. I could have picked him up in one hand, but nobody was ever more alive. The wheel?

"And when did he die, boy?" Brian asked.

Jonason moved fingers helplessly, embarrassed. "Long, long ago." He glanced up hopefully. "A thousand years? I think he who told us to call him Jonas did not ever teach us that."

"I see. Never mind." Oh, my good Doctor-after all! Artist, statesman, student of ethics, philosopher-you said that if men knew themselves, they would have the beginning of wisdom. Your best teacher was Socrates. Well you knew it, and now look what's happened.

Jonas and Abigail—some visionary pair, Brian supposed, maybe cracking up under the ghastliness of those years. Admirers of Brown perhaps. Shocked, probably, away from the religions of the 21st century, which had all failed to stop the horrors, nevertheless they needed one, or were convinced that the children did—so they created one. There must later have been some dizzying pride of creation in it, possibly wholehearted belief in themselves, too, as they found the children accepting it, building a ritual life around it.

It was impossible, Brian thought, that Jonas and Abigail could have met the living Abraham Brown. As anyone must who faces the limitations of human intelligence, Brown had accepted mysteries, but he did not make them. He was wholly

without intellectual arrogance. No one could have talked with him five minutes without hearing him say tranquilly: "I don't know."

The wheel at Nuber?

The wheel?

Brian realized he could never learn how Brown had actually died. Even if he had the strength and courage to go back north—no, at seventy-six (eighty-six?), one can hardly make a fresh start in the study of history. Not without the patience of Abraham Brown himself, who had probably been doing just that when the wheel—

An awed question from the girl pulled Brian from a black pit of abstraction: "What is that?" She was pointing to the clay image in its dusty sunlight.

Brian spoke vaguely, almost deaf to his own words until they were past recovering: "That? It is very old. Very old and very sacred." She nodded, round-eyed, and stepped back a pace or two. "And that—that was all they taught you of Abraham Brown?"

Astonished, the boy asked: "Is it not enough?" There is always The Project. "Why, perhaps."

"We know all the prayers, Old Man."

"Yes, I'm sure you do."

"The Old Man will come with us."

"Eh?" There is always The Project. "Come with you?"

"We look for old ones," said the young man. There was a new note in his voice, and the note was impatience. "We traveled many days, up across the sun-path. We want you to speak the Abraham-words for marriage. The Old Ones said we must not mate as the animals do without the words. We want—"

"Marry, of course," said Brian feebly, rubbing his great, long-fingered hand across his face so that the words were blurred and dull. "Naturally. Beget. Replenish the Earth. I'm tired. I don't know any Abraham-words for marriage. Go on and marry. Try again. Try—"

"But the Old Ones said-"

"Wait!" Brian cried. "Wait! Let me think. Did he-he who

told you to call him Jonas, did he teach you anything about the world as it was in the old days, before you were born?"

"Before? The Old Man makes fun of us."

"No, no." And since he now had to fight down physical fear as well as confusion, Brian spoke more harshly than he intended: "Answer my question! What do you know of the old days? I was a young man once, do you understand? As young as you. What do you know about the world I lived in?"

Jonason laughed. There was new-born doubt in him as well as anger, stiffening his shoulders, narrowing his innocent gray eyes. "There was always the world," he said, "ever since God made it a thousand years ago."

"Was there? I was a musician. Do you know what a musician is?"

The young man shook his head, watching Brian—too alertly, watching his hands, aware of him in a new way, no longer humble. Paula sensed the tension and did not like it.

She said worriedly, politely: "We forget some of the things they taught us, sa. They were Old Ones. Most of the days, they were away from us in—places where we were not to go, praying. Old Ones are always praying."

"I will hear this Old Man pray," said Jonason. The butt of the javelin rested against Jonason's foot, the blade swaying from side to side. A wrong word, any trifle, Brian knew, could make them decide in an instant that he was evil and not sacred. Their religion would certainly require a devil.

He thought also: Merely one of the many ways of dying. It

would be swift, which is always a consideration.

"Certainly you may hear me pray," said Brian abruptly. "Come this way." In a fluctuating despair, he knew that he must not become angry, as a climber stumbling at the edge of a cliff might order himself not to be careless. "Come this way. My prayers—I'll show you. I'll show you what I did when I was a young man in a world you never knew."

He stalked across the Hall of Music, not looking behind, but his back sensed every glint of light on that bread-knife

javelin.

"Come this way!" he shouted. "Come in here!" He flung

open the door of the auditorium and strode up on the platform. "Sit down over there and be quiet!"

They did, he thought—he could not look at them. He knew he was muttering, too, between his noisy outbursts, as he snatched the cover off the Steinway and raised the lid, muttering bits and fragments from old times, and from the new times.

"They went thataway. Oh, Mr. Van Anda, it just simply goes right through me; I can't express it. Madam, such was my intention—or, as Brahms is supposed to have said on a slightly different subject, any ass knows that. Brio, Rubato, and Schmalz went to sea in a—Jonason, Paula, this is a piano. It will not hurt you. Sit there, be quiet, listen."

He found calm. Now if ever, now when I have living proof that human nature (some sort of human nature) is continuing -surely now, if ever, The Project-

With the sudden authority that was natural to him, Andrew Carr took over. In the stupendous opening chords of the introduction, Brian very nearly forgot his audience. Not quite, though. The youngsters had sat down out there in the dusty region where none but ghosts had lingered for twenty-five years or more. The piano's first sound brought them to their feet. Brian played through the first four bars, piling the chords like mountains, then held the last one with the pedal and waved his right hand at Jonason and Paula in a furious downward motion.

He thought they understood. He thought he saw them sit down again, but he could pay them scant attention now, for the sonata was coming alive under his fingers, waking, growing, rejoicing.

He did not forget the youngsters again. They were important, terrifying, too important, at the fringe of awareness. But he could not look at them any more. He shut his eyes.

He had never played like this in the flood of his prime, in

He had never played like this in the flood of his prime, in the old days, before great audiences that loved him. Never. His eyes were still closed, holding him secure in a secret

His eyes were still closed, holding him secure in a secret world that was not all darkness, when he ended the first movement, paused very briefly, and moved on with complete assurance to explore the depth and height of the second. This was a true statement at last. This was Andrew Carr; he lived, even if, after this late morning, he might never live again.

And now the third, the storm and the wrath, the interludes of calm, the anger, denials, affirmations. Was there anything he didn't know, this heir of three centuries who died in jail?

Without hesitation, without any awareness of self, of age or pain or danger or loss, Brian was entering on the broad reaches of the last movement when he opened his eyes.

The youngsters were gone.

Well, he thought, it's too big. It frightened them away. He could visualize them, stealing out with backward looks of panic. Incomprehensible thunder. But he could not think much about them now. Not while Andrew Carr was with him. He played on with the same assurance, the same joyful sense of victory. Savages—let them go, with leave and good will.

Some external sound was faintly troubling him, something that must have begun under cover of these rising, pealing octave passages—storm waves, each higher than the last, until it seemed that even a superhuman swimmer must be exhausted. An undefinable alien noise, a kind of humming.

Brian shook his head peevishly, shutting it away. It couldn't matter, at least not now. Everything was here, in the beautiful labors his hands still had to do. The waves were growing more quiet, settling, subsiding, and now he must play those curious arpeggios which he had never quite understood—but, of course, he understood them at last. Rip them out of the piano like showers of sparks, like distant lightnings moving farther off across a world that could never be at rest.

The final theme. Why, it was a variation—and how was it that he had never realized it?—a variation on a theme of Brahms, from the German Requiem. Quite plain, quite simple, and Brahms would have approved. Still it was rather strange, Brian thought, that he had never made the identification before in spite of all his study. Well, he knew it now.

Blessed are the dead . . .

Yes, Brian thought, but something more remained, and he searched for it, proudly certain of discovering it, through the

mighty unfolding of the finale. No hurrying, no crashing impatience any more, but a moving through time with no fear of time, through radiance and darkness with no fear of either. Andrew Carr was happy, the light of the Sun on his shoulders.

That they may rest from their labors, and their works do

follow after them.

Brian stood up, swaying and out of breath. So the music was over, and the young savages were gone, and somewhere a jangling, humming confusion was filling the Hall of Music, distant, but entering with violence even here, now that the piano was silent. Brian moved stiffly out of the auditorium, more or less knowing what he would find.

The noise was immense, the unchecked overtones of the marimba fuming and quivering as the high ceiling of the Hall of Music caught and twisted them, flung them back against the answering strings of harps and pianos and violins, the sulky membranes of drums, the nervous brass of cymbals.

The girl was playing it. Really playing it.

Brian laughed once, softly, in the shadows, and was not heard. She had hit on a most primeval rhythm natural for children or savages and needed nothing else, hammering it out swiftly on one stone and then the next, wanting no rest or variation.

The boy was dancing, slapping his feet, pounding his chest, thrusting out his javelin in perfect time to the clamor, edging up to his companion, grimacing, drawing back to return. Neither was laughing or close to laughter. Their faces were savage-solemn, downright grim with the excitement, the innocent lust, as spontaneous as the drumming of partridges.

It was a while before they saw Brian in the shadows.

The girl dropped the hammer. The boy froze briefly, his javelin raised, then jerked his head slightly at Paula, who snatched at something. Only moments later did Brian realize that she had taken the clay image before she fled. Jonason covered her retreat, stepping backward, his face blank with fear and readiness, javelin poised. So swiftly, so easily, by grace of a few wrong words and Steinway's best, had a Sacred Old One become a Bad Old One, an evil spirit.

They were gone, down the stairway, leaving the echo of Brian's voice crying: "Don't go! Please don't go! I beg you!"

Brian followed them unwillingly. It was a measure of his unwillingness that moments passed before he was at the bottom of the stairway looking across the shut-in water to his raft, which they had used and left at the window-sill port. Brian had never been a good swimmer; he was too dizzy now and short of breath to attempt to reach it.

He clutched the rope and hitched himself, panting, hand over hand, to the window, collapsing there a while until he found strength to scramble into his canoe and grope for the paddle. The youngsters' canoe was already far off, heading up the river, the boy paddling with deep powerful strokes.

Up the river, of course. They had to find the right kind of

Old Ones. Up across the sun-path.

Brian dug his blade in the quiet water. For a time, his rugged ancient muscles were willing. There was sap in them yet. Perhaps he was gaining slightly.

He shouted hugely: "Bring back my two-faced god! Bring

it back! It's not yours. It's not yours!"

They must have heard his voice booming at them. At any rate, the girl looked back once. The boy, intent on his effort, did not.

Brian roared: "Bring back my god! I want my little god!"

He was not gaining on them. They had a mission, after all. They had to find the right kind of Old Ones. But damn it, Brian thought, my world has some rights, hasn't it? We'll see about this.

He lifted the paddle like a spear and flung it, knowing even before his shoulder winced how absurd the gesture was. The youngsters were so far away that even an arrow from a bow might not have reached them.

The paddle splashed in the water. Not far away: a small infinity. It swung about to the will of the river, the heavy end pointing obediently downstream. It nuzzled companionably against a gray-faced chunk of driftwood, diverting it, so that presently the driftwood floated into Brian's reach.

He caught it, and flung it toward the paddle, hoping it

might fall on the other side and send the paddle near him. It fell short, and in his oddly painless extremity, Brian was not surprised, but merely watched the gray driftwood floating and bobbing along beside him with an irritation that was part friendliness, for it suggested the face of a music critic he had met in—New Boston, was it? Denver? London? He couldn't remember.

"Why," he said aloud, detachedly observing the passage of his canoe beyond the broad morning shadow of the Museum of Human History, "I seem to have made sure to die."

"Mr. Van Anda has abundantly demonstrated a mastery of the instrument and of the—" You acid fraud, go play solfeggio on your linotype! Don't bother mel—"and of the literature which could, without exaggeration, be termed beyond technique. He is one of those rare interpreters who at the last analysis—"

"I can't swim it, you know," said Brian.

"-have so deeply submerged, dedicated themselves, that they might truly be said to have become one with—" Gaining on the canoe, the gray-faced chip moved tranquilly, placidly approving, toward the open sea. And with a final remnant of strength, Brian inched forward to the bow of the canoe and gathered the full force of his lungs to shout up the river: "Go in peace!"

They could not have heard him. They were too far away and a new morning wind was blowing, fresh and sweet, out of the northwest.

ONCE A GREECH

JUST TWO WEEKS before the S.S. Herringbone of the Interstellar Exploration, Examination (and Exploitation) Service was due to start her return journey to Earth, one of her scouts disconcertingly reported the discovery of intelligent life in the Virago System.

"Thirteen planets," Captain Iversen snarled, wishing there were someone on whom he could place the blame for this mischance, "and we spend a full year here exploring each one of them with all the resources of Terrestrial science and technology, and what happens? On the nineteenth moon of the eleventh planet, intelligent life is discovered. And who has to discover it? Harkaway, of all people. I thought for sure all the moons were cinders or I would never have sent him out to them just to keep him from getting in my hair."

"The boy's not a bad boy, sir," the first officer said. "Just a thought incompetent, that's all-which is to be expected if the Service will choose its officers on the basis of written examinations. I'm glad to see him make good."

Iversen would have been glad to see Harkaway make good, too, only such a concept seemed utterly beyond the bounds of possibility. From the moment the young man had first set foot on the S.S. Herringbone, he had seemed unable to make anvthing but bad. Even in such a conglomeration of fools under Captain Iversen, his idiocy was of outstanding quality.

The captain, however, had not been wholly beyond reproach in this instance, as he himself knew. Pity he had made such an error about the eleventh planet's moons. It was really such a small mistake. Moons one to eighteen and twenty to forty-six still appeared to be cinders. It was all too easy for the spectroscope to overlook Flimbot, the nineteenth.

But it would be Flimbot which had turned out to be a green and pleasant planet, very similar to Earth. Or so Hark-

away reported on the intercom.

"And the other forty-five aren't really moons at all," he began. "They're—"

"You can tell me all that when we reach Flimbot," Iversen interrupted, "which should be in about six hours. Remember, that intercom uses a lot of power and we're tight on fuel."

But it proved to be more than six days later before the ship reached Flimbot. This was owing to certain mechanical difficulties that arose when the crew tried to lift the mother ship from the third planet, on which it was based. For sentimental reasons, the IEE(E) always tried to establish its prime base on the third planet of a system. Anyhow, when the Herringbone was on the point of takeoff, it was discovered that the rock-eating species which was the only life on the third planet had eaten all the projecting metal parts on the ship, including the rocket-exhaust tubes, the airlock handles, and the chromium trim.

"I had been wondering what made the little fellows so sick," Smullyan, the ship's doctor, said. "They went wump, wump, wump all night long, until my heart bled for them. Ah, everywhere it goes, humanity spreads the fell seeds of death and destruction—"

"Are you a doctor or a veterinarian?" Iversen demanded furiously. "By Betelgeuse, you act as if I'd crammed those blasted tubes down their stinking little throats!"

"It was you who invaded their paradise with your ship. It was you-"

"Shut up!" Iversen yelled. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!"

So Dr. Smullyan went off, like many a ship's physician before him, and got good and drunk on the medical stores.

By the time they finally arrived on Flimbot, Harkaway had

already gone native. He appeared at the airlock wearing nothing but a brief, colorful loincloth of alien fabric and a wreath of flowers in his hair. He was fondling a large, woolly pink caterpillar.

"Where is your uniform, sirl" Captain Iversen barked, aghast. If there was one thing he was intolerant of in his com-

mand, it was sloppiness.

"This is the undress uniform of the Royal Flimbotzi Navy, sir. I was given the privilege of wearing one as a great msu'gri—honor—to our race. If I were to return to my own uniform, it might set back diplomatic relations between Flimbot and Earth as much as—"

"All right!" the captain snapped. "All right, all right, all

right!"

He didn't ask any questions about the Royal Flimbotzi Navy. He had deduced its nature when, on nearing Flimbot, he had discovered that the eleventh planet actually had only one moon. The other forty-five celestial objects were spacecraft, quaint and primitive, it was true, but spacecraft nonetheless. Probably it was their orbital formation that had made him think they were moons. Oh, the crew must be in great spirits; they did so enjoy having a good laugh at his expense!

He looked for something with which to reproach Harkaway, and his eye lighted on the caterpillar. "What's that thing

you're carrying there?" he barked.

Raising itself on its tail, the caterpillar barked right back at him.

Captain Iversen paled. First he had overlooked the spacecraft, and now, after thirty years of faithful service to the IEE(E) in the less desirable sectors of space, he had committed the ultimate error in his first contact with a new form of intelligent life!

"Sorry, sir," he said, forgetting that the creature—whatever its mental prowess—could hardly be expected to understand Terran yet. "I am just a simple spaceman and my ways are crude, but I mean no harm." He whirled on Harkaway. "I thought you said the natives were humanoid."

The young officer grinned. "They are. This is just a greech.

Cuddly little fellow, isn't he?" The greech licked Harkaway's face with a tripartite blue tongue. "The Flimbotzik are mad about pets. Great animal-lovers. That's how I knew I could trust them right from the start. Show me a life-form that loves animals, I always say, and—"

"I'm not interested in what you always say," Iversen interrupted, knowing Harkaway's premise was fundamentally unsound, because he himself was the kindliest of all men, and he hated animals. And, although he didn't hate Harkaway, who was not an animal, save in the strictly Darwinian sense, he could not repress unsportsmanlike feelings of bitterness.

Why couldn't it have been one of the other officers who had discovered the Flimbotzik? Why must it be Harkaway—the most inept of his scouts, whose only talent seemed to be the egregious error, who always rushed into a thing half-cocked, who mistook superficialities for profundities. Harkaway, the blundering fool, the blithering idiot—who had stumbled into this greatest discovery of Iversen's career? And, of course, Harkaway's, too. Well, life was like that and always had been.

"Have you tested those air and soil samples yet?" Iversen snarled into his communicator, for his spacesuit was beginning to itch again as the gentle warmth of Flimbot activated certain small and opportunistic life-forms which had emigrated from a previous system along with the Terrans.

"We're running them through as fast as we can, sir," said a harried voice. "We can offer you no more than our poor best."
"But why bother with all that?" Harkaway wanted to

"But why bother with all that?" Harkaway wanted to know. "This planet is absolutely safe for human life. I can guarantee it personally."

"On what basis?" Iversen asked.

"Well, I've been here two weeks and I've survived, haven't

"That," Iversen told him, "does not prove that the planet can sustain human life."

Harkaway laughed richly. "Wonderful how you can still keep that marvelous sense of humor, Skipper, after all the things that have been going wrong on the voyage. Ah, here comes the flim'tuu—the welcoming committee," he said quick-

ly. "They were a little shy before. Because of the rockets, you know."

"Don't their ships have any?"

"They don't seem to. They're really very primitive affairs, barely able to go from planet to planet."

"If they go," Iversen said, "stands to reason something must

power them."

"I really don't know what it is," Harkaway retorted defensively. "After all, even though I've been busy as a beaver, three weeks would hardly give me time to investigate every aspect of their culture . . . Don't you think the natives are remarkably humanoid?" he changed the subject.

They were, indeed. Except for a somewhat greenish cast of countenance and distinctly purple hair, as they approached, in their brief, gay garments and flower garlands, the natives resembled nothing so much as a group of idealized South Sea Islanders of the nineteenth century.

Gigantic butterflies whizzed about their heads. Countless small animals frisked about their feet—more of the pink caterpillars; bright blue creatures that were a winsome combination of monkey and koala; a kind of large, merry-eyed snake that moved by holding its tail in its mouth and rolling like a hoop. All had faces that reminded the captain of the work of the celebrated twentieth-century artist W. Disney.

"By Polaris," he cried in disgust, "I might have known you'd find a cute planet!"

"Moon, actually," the first officer said, "since it is in orbit around Virago XI, rather than Virago itself."

"Would you have wanted them to be hostile?" Harkaway asked peevishly. "Honestly, some people never seem to be satisfied."

From his proprietary airs, one would think Harkaway had created the natives himself. "At least, with hostile races, you know where you are," Iversen said. "I always suspect friendly life-forms. Friendliness simply isn't a natural instinct."

"Who's being anthropomorphic now!" Harkaway chided.

Iversen flushed, for he had berated the young man for that particular fault on more than one occasion. Harkaway was too

prone to interpret alien traits in terms of terrestrial culture. Previously, since all intelligent life-forms with which the Herringbone had come into contact had already been discovered by somebody else, that didn't matter too much. In this instance, however, any mistakes of contact or interpretation mattered terribly. And Iversen couldn't see Harkaway not making a mistake; the boy simply didn't have it in him.

"You know you're superimposing our attitude on theirs," the junior officer continued tactlessly. "The Flimbotzik are a simple, friendly, shig-livi people, closely resembling some of

our historical primitives—in a new way, of course."

"None of our primitives had space travel." Iversen pointed out.

"Well, you couldn't really call those things spaceships," Harkaway said deprecatingly.

"They go through space, don't they?"

"One judges the primitiveness of a race by its cultural and technological institutions," Harkaway said, with a lofty smile. "And these people are laughably backward. Why, they even believe in reincarnation-mpoola, they call it."

"How do you know all this?" Iversen demanded. "Don't tell

me you profess to speak the language already?"

"It's not a difficult language," Harkaway said modestly, "and I have managed to pick up quite a comprehensive smattering. I daresay I haven't caught all the nuances-heeka lob peeka, as the Flimbotzik themselves say-but they are a very simple people and probably they don't have—"
"Are we going to keep them waiting," Iversen asked, "while

we discuss nuances? Since you say you speak the language so well, suppose you make them a pretty speech all about how the Earth government extends the-I suppose it would be hand, in this instance-of friendship to Flimbot and-"

Harkaway blushed. "I sort of did that already, acting as your deputy. Mpoo-status-means so much in these simple societies, you know, and they seemed to expect something of the sort. However, I'll introduce you to the Flimflim-the king, you know-" he pointed to an imposing individual in the forefront of the crowd-"and get over all the amenities, shall I?" "It would be jolly good of you," Iversen said frigidly.

It was a pity they hadn't discovered Flimbot much earlier in their survey of the Virago System, Iversen thought with regret, because it was truly a pleasant spot and a week was very little time in which to explore a world and study a race, even one as simple as the gentle Flimbotzik actually turned out to be. It seemed amazing that they should have developed anything as advanced as space travel, when their only ground conveyances was a species of wagon drawn by plookik, a species of animal.

But Iversen had no time for further investigation. The Herringbone's fuel supply was calculated almost to the minute and so, willy-nilly, the Earthmen had to leave beautiful Flimbot at the end of the week, knowing little more about the Flimbotzik than they had before they came. Only Harkaway, who had spent the three previous weeks on Flimbot, had any further knowledge of the Flimbotzik—and Iversen had little faith in any data he might have collected.

"I don't believe Harkaway knows the language nearly as well as he pretends to," Iversen told the first officer as both of them watched the young lieutenant make the formal speech of farewell.

"Come now," the first officer protested. "Seems to me the boy is doing quite well. Acquired a remarkable command of the language, considering he's been here only four weeks."

"Remarkable, I'll grant you, but is it accurate?"

"He seems to communicate and that is the ultimate objective of language, is it not?"

"Then why did the Flimbotzik fill the tanks with wine when I distinctly told him to ask for water?"

Of course the ship could synthesize water from its own waste products, if necessary, but there was no point in resorting to that expedient when a plentiful supply of pure H₂O was available on the world.

"A very understandable error, sir. Harkaway explained it to me. It seems the word for water, m'koog, is very similar to

the word for wine, mk'oog. Harkaway himself admits his pronunciation isn't perfect and—"

"All right," Iversen interrupted. "What I'd like to know

is what happened to the mk'oog, then-"

"The m'koog, you mean? It's in the tanks."

"-because, when they came to drain the wine out of the tanks to put the water in, the tanks were already totally empty."

"I have no idea," the first officer said frostily, "no idea at all. If you'll glance at my papers, you'll note I'm Temperance by affiliation, but if you'd like to search my cabin, anyway I—"

"By Miaplacidus, man," Iversen exclaimed, "I wasn't ac-

cusing you! Of that, anyway!"

Everybody on the vessel was so confoundedly touchy. Lucky they had a stable commanding officer like himself, or

morale would simply go to pot.

"Well, it's all over," Harkaway said, joining them up at the airlock in one lithe bound—a mean feat in that light gravity. "And a right good speech, if I do say so myself. The Flimflim says he will count the *thlubbzik* with ardent expectation until the mission from Earth arrives with the promised gifts."

"Just what gifts did you take it upon yourself to-" Iversen began, when he was interrupted by a voice behind them cry-

ing, "Woe, woe, woe!"

And, thrusting himself past the three other officers, Dr. Smullyan addressed the *flim'puu*, or farewell committee, assembled outside the ship. "Do not let the Earthmen return to your fair planet, O happily ignorant Flimbotzik," he declaimed, "lest wretchedness and misery be your lot as a result. Tell them, 'Hencel' Tell them, 'Begonel' Tell them, 'Avauntl' For, know ye, humanity is a blight, a creeping canker—"

He was interrupted by the captain's broad palm clamping

down over his mouth.

"Clap him in the brig, somebody, until we get clear of this place," Iversen ordered wearily. "If Harkaway could pick up the Flimbotzi language, the odds are that some of the natives have picked up Terran."

"That's right, always keep belittling me," Harkaway said

sulkily as two of the crewmen carried off the struggling medical officer, who left an aromatic wake behind him that bore pungent testimonial to where a part, at least, of the *mk'oog* had gone. "No wonder it took me so long to find myself."

"Oh, have you found yourself at last?" Iversen purred. "Splendid! Now that you know where you are, supposing you do me a big favor and go lose yourself again while we make ready for blastoff."

"For shame," said the first officer as Harkaway stamped off.

"For shame!"

"The captain's a hard man," observed the chief petty officer, who was lounging negligently against a wall, doing nothing.

"Ay, that he is," agreed the crewman who was assisting him.

"That he is-a hard man, indeed."

"By Caroli, be quiet, all of youl" Iversen yelled. The very next voyage, he was going to have a new crew if he had to transfer to Colonization to do it! Even colonists couldn't be as obnoxious as the sons of space with which he was cursed.

It was only after the Herringbone had left the Virago System entirely that Iversen discovered Harkaway had taken the

greech along.

"But you can't abscond with one of the native's pets!" he protested, overlooking, for the sake of rhetoric, the undeniable fact that Harkaway had already done so and that there could be no turning back. It would expend too much precious fuel and leave them stranded for life on Virago XI^a.

"Nonsense, sirl" Harkaway retorted. "Didn't the Flimflim say everything on Flimbot was mine? Thlu'pt shibnig-nliv, snusnigg bnig-nliv were his very words. Anythow, they have

plenty more greechi. They won't miss this little one."

"But he may have belonged to someone," Iversen objected.
"An incident like this could start a war."

"I don't see how he could have belonged to anyone. Followed me around most of the time I was there. We've become great pals, haven't we, little fellow?" He ruffled the greech's pink fur and the creature gave a delighted squeal.

Iversen could already see that the greechik were going to be Flimbot's first lucrative export. From time immemorial,

the people of Earth had been susceptible to cuddly little life-forms, which was why Earth had nearly been conquered by the zz^{lu} from Sirius VII, before they discovered them to be hostile and quite intelligent life-forms rather than a new species of tabby.

"Couldn't bear to leave him," Harkaway went on as the greech draped itself around his shoulders and regarded Iversen with large round blue eyes. "The Flimflim won't mind, because I promised him an elephant."

"You mean the diplomatic mission will have to waste valuable cargo space on an elephant!" Iversen sputtered. "And you should know, if anyone does, just how spacesick an elephant can get. By Pherkad, Lieutenant Harkaway, you had no authority to make any promises to the Flimflim!"

"I discovered the Flimbotzik," Harkaway said sullenly. "I learned the language. I established rapport. Just because you happen to be the commander of this expedition doesn't mean

you're God, Captain Iversen!"

"Harkaway," the captain barked, "this smacks of downright mutiny! Go to your cabin forthwith and memorize six verses of the Spaceman's Credol"

The greech lifted its head and barked back at Iversen, again. "That's my brave little watchgreech," Harkaway said fondly. "As a matter of fact, sir," he told the captain, "that was just what I was proposing to do myself. Go to my cabin, I mean; I have no time to waste on inferior prose. I plan to spend the rest of the voyage, or such part as I can spare from my duties-"

"You're relieved of them," Iversen said grimly.

"—working on my book. It's all about the doctrine of mpoola—reincarnation, or, if you prefer, metempsychosis. The Flimbotzi religion is so similar to many of the earlier terrestrial theologies—Hindu, Greek, Egyptian, Southern Californian—that sometimes one is almost tempted to stop and wonder if simplicity is not the essence of truth."

Iversen knew that, for the sake of discipline, he should not, once he had ordered Harkaway to his cabin, stop to bandy words, but he was a chronic word-bandier, having inherited

the trait from his stalwart Viking ancestors. "How can you have learned all about their religion, their doctrine of reincarnation, in just four ridiculously short weeks?"

"It's a gift," Harkaway said modestly.
"Go to your cabin, sir! No, wait a moment!" For, suddenly overcome by a strange, warm, utterly repulsive emotion, Iversen pointed a quivering finger at the caterpillar. "Did you bring along the proper food for that—that thing? Can't have him starving, you know," he added gruffly. After all, he was a humane man, he told himself; it wasn't that he found the creature tugging at his heartstrings, or anything like that.

"Oh, he'll eat anything we eat, sir. As long as it's not meat. All the species on Flimbot are herbivores. I can't figure out whether the Flimbotzik themselves are vegetarians because they practice mpoola, or practice mpoola because they're-"

"I don't want to hear another word about mpoola or about Flimbotl" Iversen velled. "Get out of here! And stay away from the library!"

"I have already exhausted its painfully limited resources, sir." Harkaway saluted with grace and withdrew to his cabin, wearing the greech like an affectionate lei about his neck.

Iversen heard no more about mpoola from Harkaway—who, though he did not remain confined to his cabin when he had pursuits to pursue in other parts of the ship, at least had the tact to keep out of the captain's way as much as possible-but the rest of his men seemed able to talk of nothing else. The voyage back from a star system was always longer in relative terms than the voyage out, because the thrill of new worlds to explore was gone; already anticipating boredom, the men were ripe for almost any distraction.

On one return voyage, the whole crew had set itself to the study of Hittite with very credible results. On another, they had all devoted themselves to the ancient art of alchemy, and, after nearly blowing up the ship, had come up with an elixir which, although not the quintessence-as they had, in their initial enthusiasm, alleged—proved to be an effective cure for hiccups. Patented under the name of Herringbone Hiccup Shoo, it brought each one of them an income which would

have been enough to support them in more than modest comfort for the rest of their lives.

However, the adventurous life seemed to exert an irresistible lure upon them and they all shipped upon the *Herringbone* again—much to the captain's dismay, for he had hoped for a fresh start with a new crew and there seemed to be no way of getting rid of them short of reaching retirement age.

The men weren't quite ready to accept *mpoola* as a practical religion—Harkaway hadn't finished his book yet—but as something very close to it. The concept of reincarnation had always been very appealing to the human mind, which would rather have envisaged itself perpetuated in the body of a cockroach than vanishing completely into nothingness.

"It's all so logical, sir," the first officer told Iversen. "The

"It's all so logical, sir," the first officer told Iversen. "The individuality or the soul or the psyche—however you want to look at it—starts the essentially simple cycle of life as a

greech-"

"Why as a greech?" Iversen asked, humoring him for the moment. "There are lower life-forms on Flimbot."

"I don't know." The first officer sounded almost testy. "That's where Harkaway starts the progression."

"Harkawayl Is there no escaping that cretin's name?" "Sir," said the first officer, "may I speak frankly?"

"No," Iversen said, "you may not."

"Your skepticism arises less from disbelief than from the fact that you are jealous of Harkaway because it was he who made the great discovery, not you."

"Which great discovery?" Iversen asked, sneering to conceal his hurt at being so overwhelmingly misunderstood.

"Flimbot or mpoola?"

"Both," the first officer said. "You refuse to accept the fact that this hitherto incompetent youth has at last blossomed forth in the lambent colors of genius, just as the worthy greech becomes a zkoort, and the clean-living zkoort in his turn passes on to the next higher plane of existence, which is, in the Flimbotzik scale."

"Spare me the theology, please," Iversen begged. "Once a greech, always a greech, I say. And I can't help thinking that

somehow, somewhere, Harkaway has committed some horrible error."

"Humanity is frail, fumbling, futile," Dr. Smullyan declared, coming upon them so suddenly that both officers jumped. "To err is human, to forgive divine, and I am an atheist, thank God!"

"That mk'oog is powerful stuff," the first officer said. "Or so they tell me," he added.

"This is more than mere mk'oog," Iversen said sourly. "Smullyan has been too long in space. It hits everyone in the long run—some sooner than others."

"Captain," the doctor said, ignoring these remarks as he ignored everything not on a cosmic level, which included the crew's ailments, "I am in full agreement with you. Young

Harkaway has doomed that pretty little planet-"

"Moon," the first officer corrected. "It's a satellite, not a—"
"We ourselves were doomed ab origine, but the tragic flaw inherent in each one of our pitiful species is contagious, dooming all with whom we come in contact. And Harkaway is the most infectious carrier on the ship. Woe, I tell you. Woel" And, with a hollow moan, the doctor left them to meditate upon the state of their souls, while he went off to his secret stores of oblivion.

"Wonder where he's hidden that mk'oog," Iversen brooded.
"I've turned the ship inside out and I haven't been able to locate it."

The first officer shivered. "Somehow, although I know Smullyan's part drunk, part mad, he makes me a little nervous. He's been right so often on all the other voyages."

"Ruchbahl" Iversen said, not particularly grateful for support from such a dithyrambic source as the ship's medical officer. "Anyone who prophesies doom has a hundred per cent chance of ultimately being right, if only because of entropy."

He was still brooding over the first officer's thrust, even though he had been well aware that most of his officers and men considered him a sorehead for doubting Harkaway in the young man's moment of triumph. However, Iversen could not believe that Harkaway had undergone such a radical transformation. Even on the basis of *mpoola*, one obviously had to die before passing on to the next existence and Harkaway had been continuously alive—from the neck down, at least.

Furthermore, all that aside, Iversen just couldn't see Harkaway going on to a higher plane. Although he supposed the young man was well-meaning enough—he'd grant him that negligible virtue—wouldn't it be terrible to have a system of existence in which one was advanced on the basis of intent rather than result? The higher life-forms would degenerate into primitivism.

But weren't the Flimbotzik virtually primitive? Or so Harkaway had said, for Iversen himself had not had enough contact with them to determine their degree of sophistication, and only the spaceships gave Harkaway's claim the lie.

Iversen condescended to take a look at the opening chapter of Harkaway's book, just to see what the whole thing was about. The book began:

"What is the difference between life and death? Can we say definitely and definitively that life is life and death is death? Are we sure that death is not life and life is not death?

"No, we are not sure!

"Must the individuality have a corporeal essence in which to enshroud itself before it can proceed in its rapt, inexorable progress toward the Ultimate Non-actuality? And even if such be needful, why must the personal essence be trammeled by the same old wornout habiliments of error?

"Think upon this!

"What is the extremest intensification of individuality? It is the All-encompassing Nothingness. Of what value are the fur, the feathers, the skin, the temporal trappings of imperfection in our perpetual struggle toward the final undefinable resolution into the Infinite Interplay of Cosmic Forces?

"Less than nothing!"

At this point, Iversen stopped reading and returned the manuscript to its creator, without a word. This last was less out of self-restraint than through sheer semantic inadequacy.

The young man might have spent his time more profitably in a little research on the biology or social organization of the Flimbotzik, Iversen thought bitterly when he had calmed down, thus saving the next expedition some work. But, instead, he'd been blinded by the flashy theological aspects of the culture and, as a result, the whole crew had gone metempsychotic.

This was going to be one of the *Herringbone's* more unendurable voyages, Iversen knew. And he couldn't put his foot down effectively, either, because the crew, all being gentlemen of independent means now, were outrageously independent.

However, in spite of knowing that all of them fully deserved what they got, Iversen couldn't help feeling guilty as he ate steak while the other officers consumed fish, vegetables and eggs in an aura of unbearable virtue.

"But if the soul transmigrates and not the body," he argued, "what harm is there in consuming the vacated receptacle?"

"For all you know," the first officer said, averting his eyes from Iversen's plate with a little—wholly gratuitous, to the captain's mind—shudder, "that cow might have housed the psyche of your grandmother."

"Well, then, by indirectly participating in that animal's slaughter, I have released my grandmother from her physical bondage to advance to the next plane. That is, if she was

a good cow."

"You just don't understand," Harkaway said. "Not that

you could be expected to."

"He's a clod," the radio operator agreed. "Forgive me, sir," he apologized as Iversen turned to glare incredulously at him, "but, according to mpoola, candor is a Step Upward."

"Onward and Upward," Harkaway commented, and Iversen was almost sure that, had he not been there, the men would have bowed their heads in contemplation, if not actual prayer.

As time went on, the greech thrived and grew remarkably stout on the Earth viands, which it consumed in almost improbable quantities. Then, one day, it disappeared and its happy squeal was heard no longer.

There was much mourning aboard the Herringbone-for,

with its lovable personality and innocently engaging ways, the little fellow had won its way into the hearts of all the spacemen—until the first officer discovered a substantial pink cocoon resting on the ship's control board and rushed to the intercom to spread the glad tidings. That was a breach of regulations, of course, but Iversen knew when not to crowd his fragile authority.

"I should have known there was some material basis for the spiritual doctrine of *mpoola*," Harkaway declared with tears in his eyes as he regarded the dormant form of his little pet. "Was it not the transformation of the caterpillar into the butterfly that first showed us on Earth how the soul might emerge winged and beautiful from its vile house of clay? Gentlemen," he said, in a voice choked with emotion, "our little greech is about to become a zkoort. Praised be the Impersonal Being who has allowed such a miracle to take place before our very eyes. I'goona lo mpoona."

All those in the control room bowed their heads except Iversen. And even he didn't quite have the nerve to tell them that the cocoon was pushing the *Herringbone* two points off course.

"Take that thing away before I lose my temper and clobber it," Iversen said impatiently as the zkoort dived low to buzz him, then whizzed just out of its reach on its huge, brilliant wings, giggling raucously.

"He was just having his bit of fun," the first officer said with reproach. "Have you no tolerance, Captain, no apprecia-

tion of the joys of golden youth?"

"A spaceship is no place for a butterfly," Iversen said. "Especially a four-foot butterfly."

"How can you say that?" Harkaway retorted. "The Herringbone is the only spaceship that ever had one, to my knowledge. And I think I can safely say our lives are all a bit brighter and better and m'poo'p for having a zkoort among us. Thanks be to the Divine Nonentity for—"

"Poor little butterfly," Dr. Smullyan declared sonorously,

"living out his brief life span so far from the fresh air, the

sunshine, the pretty flowers-"

"Oh. I don't know that it's as bad as all that," the first officer said. "He hangs around hydroponics a lot and he gets a daily ration of vitamins." Then he paled. "But that's righta butterfly does live only a day, doesn't it?"

"It's different with a zkoort," Harkaway maintained stoutly, though he also, Iversen noted, lost his ruddy color. "After all, he isn't really a butterfly, merely an analogous life-form."

"My, my! In four weeks, you've mastered their entomology as well as their theology and language," Iversen jeered. "Is there no end to your accomplishments. Lieutenant?"

Harkaway's color came back twofold. "He's already been

around half a thubb," he pointed out. "Over two weeks."

"Well, the thing is bigger than a Terrestrial butterfly," Iversen conceded, "so you have to make some allowances for size. On the other hand-"

Laughing madly, the skoort swooped down on him. Iversen beat it away with a snarl.

"Playful little fellow, isn't he?" the first officer said, with

thoroughly annoying fondness.

"He likes you, Skipper," Harkaway explained. "Urg'h n gurg'h-or, to give it the crude Terran equivalent, living is loving. He can tell that beneath that grizzled and seemingly harsh exterior of yours, Captain-"

But, with a scream of rage, Iversen had locked himself into his cabin. Outside, he could hear the zhoort beating its wings

against the door and wailing disappointedly.

Some days later, a pair of rapidly dulling wings were found on the floor of the hydroponics chamber. But of the zhoort's little body, there was no sign. An air of gloom and despondency hung over the Herringbone and even Iversen felt a pang, though he would never admit it without brainwashing.

During the next week, the men, seeking to forget their loss, plunged themselves into mpoola with real fanaticism. Harkaway took to wearing some sort of ecclesiastical robes which he whipped up out of the recreation room curtains. Iversen had neither the heart nor the courage to stop him. though this, too, was against regulations. Everyone except Iversen gave up eating fish and eggs in addition to meat.

Then, suddenly, one day a roly-poly blue animal appeared at the officers mess, claiming everyone as an old friend with loud squeals of joy. This time, Iversen was the only one who was glad to see him—really glad.

"Aren't you happy to see your little friend again, Harkaway?" he asked, scratching the delighted animal between the ears.

uie ears.

"Why, sure," Harkaway said, putting his fork down and leaving his vegetable *macédoine* virtually untasted. "Sure. I'm very happy—" his voice broke—"very happy."

"Of course, it does kind of knock your theory of the transmigration of souls into a cocked hat," the captain grinned. "Because, in order for the soul to transmigrate, the previous body's got to be dead, and I'm afraid our little pal here was alive all the time."

"Looks it, doesn't it?" muttered Harkaway.

"I rather think," Iversen went on, tickling the creature under the chin until it squealed happily, "that you didn't quite get the nuances of the language, did you, Harkaway? Because I gather now that the whole difficulty was a semantic one. The Flimbotzik were explaining the zoology of the native life-forms to you and you misunderstood it as their theology."

"Looks it, doesn't it?" Harkaway repeated glumly. "It cer-

tainly looks it."

"Cheer up," Iversen said, reaching over to slap the young man on the back—a bit to his own amazement. "No real harm done. What if the Flimbotzik are less primitive than you fancied? It makes our discovery the more worth-while, doesn't it?"

At this point, the radio operator almost sobbingly asked to be excused from the table. Following his departure, there was a long silence. It was hard, Iversen realized in a burst of uncharacteristic tolerance, to have one's belief, even so newly born a credo, annihilated with such suddenness.

"After all, you did run across the Flimbotzik first," he told Harkaway as he spread gooseberry jam on a hard roll for the ravenous ex-zkoort (now a chu-wugg, he had been told). "That's the main thing, and a life-form that passes through two such striking metamorphoses is not unfraught with interest. You shall receive full credit, my boy, and your little mistake doesn't mean a thing except—"

"Doom," said Dr. Smullyan, sopping up the last of his gravy with a piece of bread. "Doom, doom, doom." He stuffed

the bread into his mouth.

"Look, Smullyan," Iversen told him jovially, "you better watch out. If you keep talking that way, next voyage out we'll sign on a parrot instead of a medical officer. Cheaper and just as efficient."

Only the chu-wugg joined his laughter.

"Ever since I can remember," the first officer said, looking gloomily at the doctor, "he's never been wrong. Maybe he has the powers beyond our comprehension. Perhaps we sought at the end of the Galaxy what was in our own back yard all the time."

"Who was seeking what?" Iversen asked as all the officers looked at Smullyan with respectful awe. "I demand an answer!"

But the only one who spoke was the doctor. "Only Man is vile," he said, as if to himself, and fell asleep with his head on the table.

"Make a cult out of Smullyan," Iversen warned the others, "and I'll scuttle the ship!"

Later on, the first officer got the captain alone. "Look here, sir," he began tensely, "have you read Harkaway's book about mpoola?"

"I read part of the first chapter," Iversen told him, "and that was enough. Maybe to Harkaway it's eschatology, but to me it's just plain scatology!"

"But-"

"Why in Zubeneschamali," Iversen said patiently, "should I waste my time reading a book devoted to a theory which has already been proved erroneous? Answer me that!"

"I think you should have a look at the whole thing," the

first officer persisted.

"Baham!" Iversen replied, but amiably enough, for he was in rare good humor these days. And he needed good humor to tolerate the way his officers and men were behaving. All right, they had made idiots of themselves; that was understandable, expected, familiar. But it wasn't the chu-wugg's fault. Iversen had never seen such a bunch of soreheads. Why did they have to take their embarrassment and humiliation out on an innocent little animal?

For, although no one actually mistreated the chu-wugg, the men avoided him as much as possible. Often Iversen would come upon the little fellow weeping from loneliness in a corner with no one to play with and, giving in to his own human weakness, the captain would dry the creature's tears and comfort him. In return, the chu-wugg would laugh at all his jokes, for he seemed to have acquired an elementary knowledge of Terran.

"By Vindemiatrix, Lieutenant," the captain roared as Harkaway, foiled in his attempt to scurry off unobserved, stood quivering before him, "why have you been avoiding me like this?"

"I didn't think I was avoiding you any particular way, sir," Harkaway said. "I mean does it appear like that, sir? It's only that I've been busy with my duties, sir."

"I don't know what's the matter with youl I told you I handsomely forgave you for your mistake."

"But I can never forgive myself, sir-"

"Are you trying to go over my head?" Iversen thundered.

"No. sir. I-"

"If I am willing to forgive you, you will forgive yourself. That's an order!"

"Yes, sir," the young man said feebly.

Harkaway had changed back to his uniform, Iversen noted, but he looked unkempt, ill, harrowed. The boy had really been suffering for his precipitance. Perhaps the captain himself had been a little hard on him.

Iversen modulated his tone to active friendliness. "Thought you might like to know the chu-wugg turned into a hoopsnake this morning!"

But Harkaway did not seem cheered by this social note. "So soon!"

"You knew there would be a fourth metamorphosis!" Iversen was disappointed. But he realized that Harkaway was bound to have acquired such fundamental data, no matter how he interpreted them. It was possible, Iversen thought, that the book could actually have some value, if there were some way of weeding fact from fancy, and surely there must be scholars trained in such an art, for Earth had many wholly indigenous texts of like nature.

"He's a thor'glitch now," Harkaway told him dully.

"And what comes next? . . . No, don't tell me. It's more fun not knowing beforehand. You know," Iversen went on, almost rubbing his hands together, "I think this species is going to excite more interest on Earth than the Flimbotzik themselves. After all, people are people, even if they're green, but an animal that changes shape so many times and so radically is really going to set biologists by the ears. What did you say the name of the species as a whole was?"

"I-I couldn't say, sir."

"Ah," Iversen remarked waggishly, "so there are one or two things you don't know about Flimbot, eh?"

Harkaway opened his mouth, but only a faint bleating sound came out.

As the days went on, Iversen found himself growing fonder and fonder of the thor'glitch. Finally, in spite of the fact that it had now attained the dimensions of a well-developed boa constrictor, he took it to live in his quarters.

Many were the quiet evenings they spent together, Iversen entering acid comments upon the crew in the ship's log, while the thor'glitch looked over viewtapes from the ship's library.

The captain was surprised to find how much he—well, enjoyed this domestic tranquility. I must be growing old, he thought—old and mellow. And he named the creature Bridey, after a twentieth-century figure who had, he believed, been connected with another metempsychotic furor.

When the thor'glitch grew listless and began to swell in

the middle, Iversen got alarmed and sent for Dr. Smullyan.

"Ahal" the medical officer declaimed, with a casual glance at the suffering snake. "The day of reckoning is at hand! Reap the fruit of your transgression, scurvy humans! Calamity approaches with jets aflame!"

Iversen clutched the doctor's sleeve. "Is he—is he going to die?"

"Unhand me, presumptuous navigator!" Dr. Smullyan shook the captain's fingers off his arm. "I didn't say he was going to die," he offered in ordinary bedside tones. "Not being a specialist in this particular sector, I am not qualified to offer an opinion, but, strictly off the record, I would hazard the

guess that he's about to metamorphose again."

"He never did it in public before," Iversen said worriedly.

"The old order changeth," Smullyan told him. "You'd better call Harkaway."

"What does he know!"

"Too little and, at the same time, too much," the doctor declaimed, dissociating himself professionally from the case. "Too much and too little. Eat, drink, be merry, iniquitous Earthmen, for you died yesterday!"

"Oh, shut up," Iversen said automatically, and dispatched a message to Harkaway with the information that the thor'glitch appeared to be metamorphosing again and that his presence was requested in the captain's cabin.

The rest of the officers accompanied Harkaway, all of them with the air of attending a funeral rather than a rebirth, Iversen noted nervously. They weren't armed, though, so Bridey couldn't be turning into anything dangerous.

Now it came to pass that the thor'glitch's mid-section, having swelled to unbearable proportions, began to quiver. Suddenly, the skin split lengthwise and dropped cleanly to either side, like a banana peel.

Iversen pressed forward to see what fresh life-form the bulging cavity had held. The other officers all stood in a somber row without moving, for all along, Iversen realized, they had known what to expect, what was to come. And they had not told him. But then, he knew, it was his own fault; he had refused to be told.

Now, looking down at the new life-form, he saw for himself what it was. Lying languidly in the thor'glitch skin was a slender youth of a pallor which seemed excessive even for a member of a green-skinned race. He had large limpid eyes and a smile of ineffable sweetness.

"By Nopus Secundus," Iversen groaned. "I'm sunk."

"Naturally the ultimate incarnation for a life-form would be humanoid," Harkaway said with deep reproach. "What else?"

"I'm surprised you didn't figure that out for yourself, sir," the first officer added. "Even if you did refuse to read Harkaway's book, it seems obvious."

"Does it?" Smullyan challenged. "Does it, indeed? Is Man the highest form of life in an irrational cosmos? Then all causes are lost ones! . . . So many worlds," he muttered in more subdued tones, "so much to do, so little done, such things to be!"

"The Flimbotzik were telling Harkaway about their own life cycle," Iversen whispered as revelation bathed him in its murky light. "The human embryo undergoes a series of changes inside the womb. It's just that the Flimbotzik fetus develops outside the womb."

"Handily bypassing the earliest and most unpleasant stages of humanity," Smullyan sighed. "Oh, idyllic planet, where one need never be a child-where one need never see a child!"

"Then they were trying to explain their biology to you quite clearly and coherently, you lunkhead," Iversen roared at Harkaway, "and you took it for a religious doctrine!"

"Yes, sir," Harkaway said weakly. "I—I kind of figured that out myself in these last few weeks of intensive soul-searching. I—I'm sorry, sir. All I can say is that it was an honest mistake."

"Why, they weren't necessarily pet-lovers at all. Those animals they had with them were . . . By Nair al Zaurak!" The captain's voice rose to a shriek as the whole enormity of

the situation finally dawned upon him. "You went and kid-

naped one of the children!"

"That's a serious charge, kidnaping," the first officer said with melancholy pleasure. "And you, as head of this expedition, Captain, are responsible. Ironic, isn't it?"

"Told you all this spelled doom and disaster," the doctor

observed cheerfully.

Just then, the young humanoid sat up—with considerable effort, Iversen was disturbed to notice. But perhaps that was one of the consequences of being born. A new-born infant was weak: why not a new-born adult, then?

"Why doom?" the humanoid asked in a high, clear voice.

"Why disaster?"

"You—you speak Terran?" the captain stammered.

Bridey gave his sad, sweet smile. "I was reared amongst
you. You are my people. Why should I not speak your tongue?"

"But we're not your people," Iversen blurted, thinking perhaps the youth did not remember back to his greechi

days. "We're an entirely different species-"

"Our souls vibrate in unison and that is the vital essence. But do not be afraid, shipmates; the Flimbotzik do not regard the abduction of a transitory corporeal shelter as a matter of any great moment. Moreover, what took place could not rightly be termed abduction, for I came with you of my own volition-and the Flimbotzik recognize individual responsibility from the very first moment of the psyche's drawing breath in any material casing."

Bridey talked so much like Harkaway's book that Iversen was almost relieved when, a few hours later, the alien died. Of course the captain was worried about possible repercussions from the governments of both Terra and Flimbot, in spite of Bridev's assurances.

And he could not help but feel a pang when the young humanoid expired in his arms, murmuring, "Do not grieve for me, soulmates. In the midst of life, there is life . . ."

"Funny," Smullyan said, with one of his disconcerting returns to a professional manner, "all the other forms seemed perfectly healthy. Why did this one go like that? Almost as if he wanted to die"

"He was too good for this ship, that's what," the radio operator said, glaring at the captain. "Too fine and brave and-and noble."

"Yes," Harkaway agreed. "What truly sensitive soul could exist in a stultifying atmosphere like this?"

All the officers glared at the captain. He glared back with right good will. "How come you gentlemen are still with us?" he inquired. "One would have thought you would have perished of pure sensibility long since, then."

"It's not nice to talk that way," the chief petty officer burst out, "not with him lying there not yet cold . . . Ah," he heaved a long sigh, "we'll never see his like again."

"Ah, that we won't," agreed the crew, huddled in the corridor outside the captain's cabin.

Iversen sincerely hoped not, but he forbore to speak.

Since Bridey had reached the ultimate point in his life cycle, it seemed certain that he was not going to change into anything else and so he was given a spaceman's burial. Feeling like a put-upon fool, Captain Iversen read a short prayer as Bridey's slight body was consigned to the vast emptiness of space.

Then the airlock clanged shut behind the last mortal remains of the ill-fated extraterrestrial and that was the end of it.

But the funereal atmosphere did not diminish as the ship forged on toward Earth. Gloomy days passed, one after the other, during which no one spoke, save to issue or dispute an order. Looking at himself one day in the mirror on his cabin wall, the captain realized that he was getting old. Perhaps he ought to retire instead of still dreaming of a new command and a new crew.

And then one day, as he sat in his cabin reading the Spaceman's Credo, the lights on the Herringbone went out, all at once, while the constant hum of the motors died down slowly, leaving a strange, uncomfortable silence. Iversen found himself suspended weightless in the dark, for the gravity, of course, had gone off with the power. What, he wondered, had come to pass? He often found himself thinking in such terms these days.

Hoarse cries issued from the passageway outside; then he heard a squeak as his cabin door opened and persons unknown floated inside, breathing heavily.

"The power has failed, sirl" gasped the first officer's

voice.

"That has not escaped my notice," Iversen said icily. Were not even his last moments to be free from persecution?

"It's all that maniac Smullyan's fault. He stored his mk'oog in the fuel tanks. After emptying them out first, that is. We're out of fuel."

The captain put a finger in his book to mark his place, which was, he knew with a kind of supernal detachment, rather foolish, because there was no prospect of there ever being lights to read by again.

"Put him in irons, if you can find him," he ordered. "And tell the men to prepare themselves gracefully for a lingering

death."

Iversen could hear a faint creak as the first officer drew himself to attention in the darkness. "The men of the *Her*ringbone, sir," he said, stiffly, "are always prepared for calamity."

"Ay, that we are," agreed various voices.

So they were all there, were they? Well, it was too much to expect that they would leave him in death any more than they had in life.

"It is well," Iversen said. "It is well," he repeated, unable to

think of anything more fitting.

Suddenly the lights went on again and the ship gave a leap. From his sprawling position on the floor, amid his recumbent officers, Iversen could hear the hum of motors galvanized into life.

"But if the fuel tanks are empty," he asked of no one in particular, "where did the power come from?"

"I am the power," said a vast, deep voice that filled the ship from hold to hold.

"And the glory," said the radio operator reverently. "Don't

forget the glory."

"No," the voice replied and it was the voice of Bridey, resonant with all the amplitude of the immense chest cavity he had acquired. "Not the glory, merely the power. I have reached a higher plane of existence. I am a spaceship."

"Praise be to the Ultimate Nothingness!" Harkaway cried. "Ultimate Nothingness, nothing!" Bridey said impatiently. "I achieved it all myself."

"Then that's how the Flimbotzi spaceships were powered!" Iversen exclaimed. "By themselves, I mean-the Flimbotzik themselves, I mean-"

"Even so," Bridey replied grandly. "And this lofty form of life happens to be one which we poor humans cannot reach unassisted. Someone has to build the shell for us to occupy, which is the reason humans dwell together in fellowship and harmony-"

"You purposely got Harkaway to take you aboard the Herringbone," Iversen interrupted wrathfully. "You-you stowa-

way!"

Bridey's laugh rang through the ship, setting the loose parts quivering. "Of course. When first I set eyes upon this vessel of yours, I saw before me the epitome of all dreams. Never had any of our kind so splendid an encasement. And, upon determining that the vessel was, as yet, a soulless thing, I got myself aboard; I was born, I died, and was reborn again with the greatest swiftness consonant with comfort, so that I could awaken in this magnificent form. Oh, joy, joy, iov!"

"You know," Iversen said, "now that I hear one of you talk at length. I really can't blame Harkaway for his typically

imbecilic mistake."

"We are a wordy species," Bridey conceded.

"You had no right to do what you did," Iversen told him, "no right to take over-"

"But I didn't take over," Bridey the Herringbone said complacently. "I merely remained quiescent and content in the knowledge of my power until yours failed. Without me,

you would even now be spinning in the vasty voids, a chrometrimmed sepulcher. Now, three times as swiftly as before. shall I bear you back to the planet you very naïvely call home."

"Not three times as fast, please!" Iversen was quick to plead. "The ship isn't built-we're not built to stand such speeds."

The ship sighed. "Disappointment needs must come to allthe high, the low, the man, the spaceship. It must be borne-" the voice broke-"bravely. Somehow."

"What am I going to do?" Iversen asked, turning to the first officer for advice for the first time ever. "I was planning to ask for a transfer or resign my command when we got back to Earth. But how can I leave Bridey in the hands of the IEE(E)?"

"You can't, sir," the first officer said. "Neither can we."

"If you explain," Harkaway offered timidly, "perhaps they'll present the ship to the government."

Both Iversen and the first officer snorted, united for once. "Not the IEE(E)," Iversen said. "They'd-they'd exhibit it or something and charge admission."

"Oh, no," Bridey cried, "I don't want to be exhibited! I want to sail through the trackless paths of space. What good is a body like this if I cannot use it to its fullest?"

"Have no fear," Iversen assured it. "We'll just"-he shrugged, his dreams of escape forever blighted—"just have to buy the ship from the IEE(E), that's all."

"Right you are, sir," the first officer agreed. "We must club together, every man Jack of us, and buy her. Him. It. That's the only decent thing to do."

"Perhaps they won't sell," Harkaway worried. "Maybe—"
"Oh, they'll sell, all right," Iversen said wearily. "They'd
sell the chairman of the board, if you made them an offer, and throw in all the directors if the price was right."

"And then what will we do?" the first officer asked. "Once the ship has been purchased, what will our course be? What, in other words, are we to do?"

It was Bridey who answered. "We will speed through space

seeking, learning, searching, until you—all of you—pass on to higher planes and, leaving the frail shells you now inhabit, occupy proud, splendid vessels like the one I wear now. Then, a vast transcendent flotilla, we will seek other universes . . ."

"But we don't become spaceships," Iversen said unhappily. "We don't become anything."

"How do you know we don't?" Smullyan demanded, appearing on the threshold. "How do you know what we become? Build thee more stately spaceships, O my soull"

Above all else, Iversen was a space officer and dereliction of duty could not be condoned even in exceptional circumstances. "Put him in irons, somebody!"

"Ask Bridey why there were only forty-five spaceships on his planet!" the doctor yelled over his shoulder as he was dragged off. "Ask where the others went—where they are now."

But Bridey wouldn't answer that question.

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