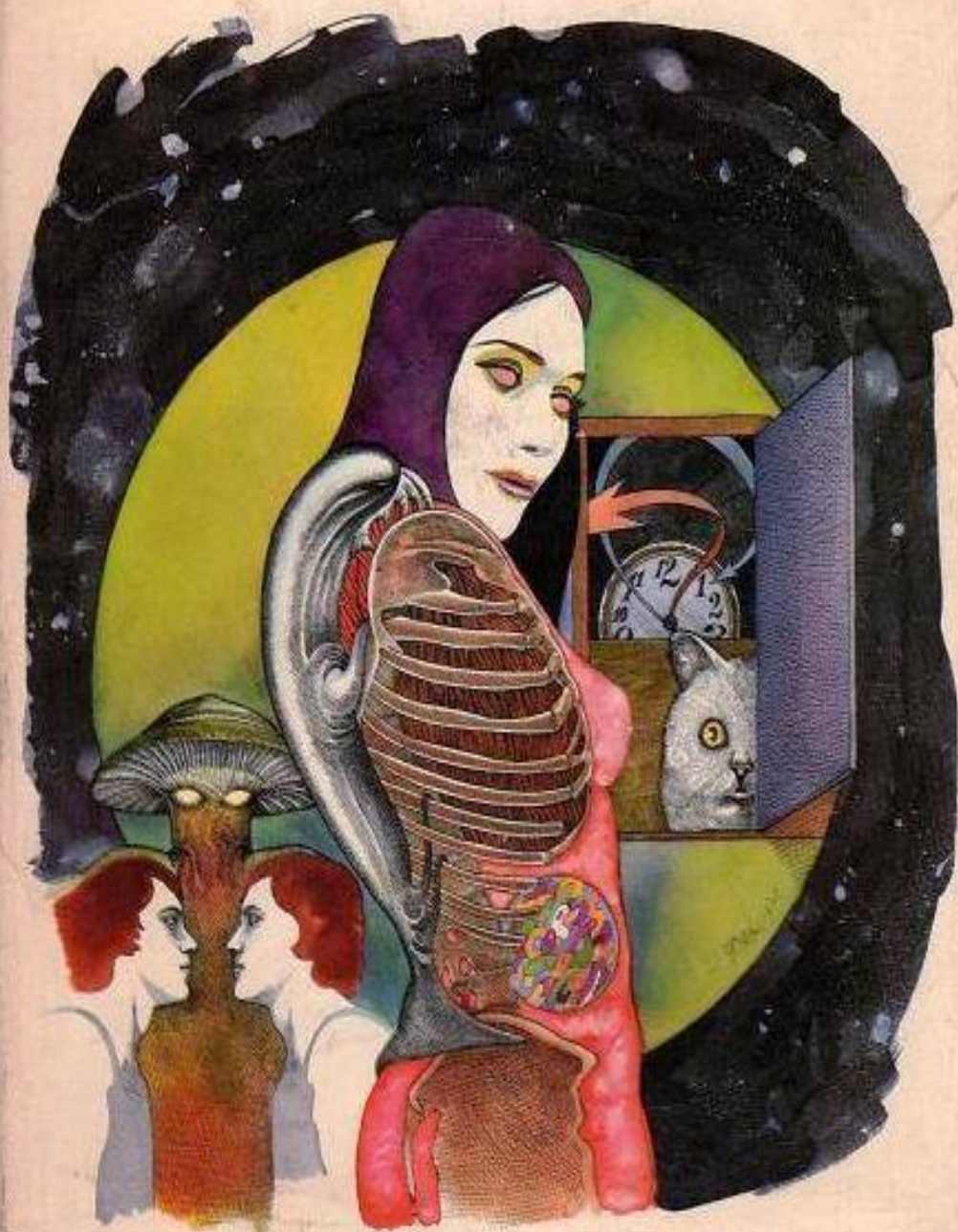


# A HEINLEIN TRIO

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*The Puppet Masters*

*Double Star*

*The Door Into Summer*

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Nelson Doubleday, Inc.

Garden City, New York



**THE PUPPET MASTERS**

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# **THE PUPPET MASTERS**



*to*  
*Lurton Blassingame*



# 1

Were they truly intelligent? By themselves, that is? I don't know and I don't know how we can ever find out.

If they were *not* truly intelligent, I hope I never live to see us tangle with anything at all like them which *is* intelligent. I know who will lose. Me. You. The so-called human race.

For me it started too early on July 12, '07, with my phone shrilling in a frequency guaranteed to peel off the skull. The sort of phone my Section uses is not standard; the audio relay was buried surgically under the skin back of my left ear—bone conduction. I felt around my person, then recalled that I had left it in my jacket across the room. "All right," I growled. "I hear you. Shut off that damned noise."

"Emergency," a voice said in my ear. "Report in person."

I told him what to do with his emergency.

"Report to the Old Man," the voice persisted, "at once."

That was different. "Moving," I acknowledged and sat up with a jerk that hurt my eyeballs. I went into the bath, injected a grain of "Gyro" into my arm, then let the vibro shake me apart while the drug put me together. I stepped out a new man, or at least a good mock-up of one, and got my jacket.

I entered our Section offices through a washroom booth in MacArthur Station. You won't find our offices in the phone lists. In fact, it does not exist. All is illusion. Another route is through a little hole-in-the-wall shop with a sign reading RARE STAMPS & COINS. Don't try that route either—they'll try to sell you a Tu'penny Black.

Don't try any route. I told you we didn't exist, didn't I?



There is one thing no head of a country can know, and that is: how good is his intelligence system? He finds out only by having it fail him. Hence our Section. Suspenders *and* belt. United Nations had never heard of us, nor had Central Intelligence—I think. All I really knew about us was the training I had received and the jobs the Old Man sent me on. Interesting jobs if you don't care where you sleep, what you eat, or how long you live. If I had had any sense, I'd have quit and taken a working job.

The only trouble with that would be that I wouldn't have been working for the Old Man any longer. That made the difference.

Not that he was a soft boss. He was quite capable of saying, "Boys, we need to fertilize this oak tree. Jump in that hole at its base and I'll cover you up."

We'd have done it. Any of us would.

And the Old Man would bury us alive too, if he thought that there was as much as a fifty-three-per-cent probability that it was the Tree of Liberty he was nourishing.

He got up and limped toward me as I came in, with his face split in a wicked smile. His big hairless skull and his strong Roman nose made him look like a cross between Satan and Punch of Punch-and-Judy. "Welcome, Sam," he said. "Sorry to get you out of bed."

The deuce he was sorry! "I was on leave," I answered shortly.

"Ah, but you still are. We're going on a vacation."

I didn't trust his "vacations," so I did not rise to the bait. "So my name is 'Sam,' " I answered. "What's my last name?"

"Cavanaugh. And I'm your uncle Charlie—Charles M. Cavanaugh, retired. Meet your sister Mary."

I had noticed that there was another person in the room, but when the Old Man is present he gets full attention as long as he wants it. Now I looked over my "sister" and then looked her over again. It was worth it.

I could see why he had set us up as brother and sister if we were to do a job together; it would give him a trouble-free pattern. An indoctrinated agent can't break his assumed character any more than a professional actor can intentionally muff his lines. So this one I must treat as my sister—a dirty trick if I ever met one!

A long, lean body but pleasingly mammalian. Good legs. Broad shoulders for a woman. Flaming, wavy red hair and the real red-headed saurian bony structure to her skull. Her face was hand-



some rather than beautiful; she looked me over as if I were a side of beef.

I wanted to drop one wing and run in circles. It must have shown, for the Old Man said gently, "Tut tut, Sammy. Your sister dotes on you and you are extremely fond of your sister, but in a healthy, clean-cut, sickeningly chivalrous, All-American-Boy sort of way."

"As bad as that?" I asked, still looking at my "sister."

"Worse."

"Oh well. Howdy, Sis. Glad to know you."

She stuck out a hand. It was firm and seemed as strong as mine. "Hi, Bud." Her voice was deep contralto, which was all I needed. Damn the Old Man!

"I might add," the Old Man went on, "that you are so devoted to your sister that you would gladly die to protect her. I dislike to tell you so, Sammy, but your sister is a leetle more valuable, for the present at least, to the organization than you are."

"Got it," I acknowledged. "Thanks for the polite qualification."

"Now, Sammy——"

"She's my favorite sister; I protect her from dogs and strange men. Okay, when do we start?"

"Better stop over in Cosmetics; they have a new face for you."

"Make it a whole new head. See you. 'By, Sis."

They did not quite do that, but they did fit my personal phone under the back of my skull and then cemented hair over it. They dyed my hair to the same shade as that of my newly acquired sister, bleached my skin, and did things to my cheekbones and chin. The mirror showed me to be as good a redhead as Sis. I looked at my hair and tried to recall what its natural shade had been, way back when. Then I wondered if Sis were what she seemed to be along those lines. I rather hoped so.

I put on the kit they gave me and somebody handed me a jump bag already packed. The Old Man had evidently been in Cosmetics, too; his skull was now covered by crisp curls of a shade between pink and white. They had done something to his face—I could not tell just what—but we were all three clearly related by blood and were all of that curious sub-race, the redheads.

"Come, Sammy," he said. "I'll brief you in the car." We went up by a route I had not known about and ended up on the North-



side launching platform, high above New Brooklyn and overlooking Manhattan Crater.

I drove while the Old Man talked. Once we were out of local control he told me to set it automatic on Des Moines, Iowa. I then joined Mary and "Uncle Charlie" in the lounge. He gave us our personal histories up to date. "So here we are," he concluded, "a merry family party—tourists. And if we should happen to run into unusual events, that is how we will behave, as nosy and irresponsible tourists."

"But what is the problem?" I asked. "Or do we play this one by ear?"

"Mmmm—possibly."

"Okay. But when you're dead, it's nice to know why. Eh, Mary?"

"Mary" did not answer. She had that quality, rare in babes, of not talking when she had nothing to say. The Old Man looked me over; presently he said, "Sam, you've heard of 'flying saucers.'"

"Huh?"

"You've studied history. Come now!"

"You mean *those*? The flying-saucer craze, 'way back before the Disorders? I thought you meant something recent and real; those were mass hallucinations."

"Were they?"

"Well, I haven't studied much statistical abnormal psychology, but I seem to remember an equation. That whole period was psychopathic; a man with all his gaskets tight would have been locked up."

"This present day is sane, eh?"

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say that." I pawed back through my mind and found the answer I wanted. "I remember that equation now—Digby's evaluating integral for second and higher order data. It gave a 93.7 per cent certainty that the flying-saucer myth, after elimination of explained cases, was hallucination. I remember it because it was the first case of its type in which the instances had been systematically collected and evaluated. A government project, God knows why."

The Old Man looked benign. "Brace yourself, Sammy. We are going to inspect a flying saucer today. Maybe we'll even saw off a souvenir, like true tourists."



## 2

"Seventeen hours"—the Old Man glanced at his finger watch and added—"and twenty-three minutes ago an unidentified space ship landed near Grinnell, Iowa. Type, unknown. Approximately disk shaped and about one hundred and fifty feet across. Origin, unknown, but——"

"Didn't they track a trajectory on it?" I interrupted.

"They did not," he answered. "Here is a photo of it taken after landing by Space Station Beta."

I looked it over and passed it to Mary. It was as unsatisfactory as a telephoto taken from five thousand miles out usually is. Trees looking like moss . . . a cloud shadow that loused up the best part of the pic . . . and a gray circle that might have been a disk-shaped ship and could just as well have been an oil tank or a water reservoir.

Mary handed the pic back. I said, "Looks like a tent for a camp meeting. What else do we know?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? After seventeen hours! We ought to have agents pouring out of their ears!"

"We did have. Two within reach and four that were sent in. They failed to report back. I dislike losing agents, Sammy, especially with no results."

I had a sudden cold realization that the situation must be so serious that the Old Man had chosen to bet his own brain against the loss of the organization—for he *was* the Section. I suddenly felt chilly. Ordinarily an agent has a duty to save his own neck—in order to complete his mission and report back. On this job it was the Old Man who must come back—and after him, Mary. I was as expendable as a paper clip. I didn't like it.

"One agent made a partial report," the Old Man went on. "He went in as a casual bystander and reported by phone that it must be a space ship. He then reported that the ship was opening and that he was going to try to get closer, past the police lines. The



last thing he said was, 'Here they come. They are little creatures, about——' Then he shut off."

"Little men?"

"He said creatures."

"Peripheral reports?"

"Plenty. The Des Moines stereocasting station sent mobile units in for spot cast. The pictures they sent out were all long shots, taken from the air. They showed nothing but a disk-shaped object. Then, for about two hours, no pictures and no news, followed later by close-ups and a new news slant."

The Old Man shut up. I said, "Well?"

"The thing was a hoax. The 'space ship' was a sheet-metal-and-plastic fraud, built by two farm boys, in woods near their home. The fake reports originated with an announcer who had put the boys up to it to make a story. He has been fired and the latest 'invasion from outer space' turns out to be a joke."

I squirmed. "So it's a hoax—but we lose six men. We're going to look for them?"

"No, for we would not find them. We are going to try to find out why triangulation of this photograph"—he held up the teleshot taken from the space station—"doesn't quite jibe with the news reports—and why the Des Moines stereo station shut up for a while."

Mary spoke up for the first time. "I'd like to talk with those farm boys."

I roaded the car five miles this side of Grinnell and we started looking for the McLain farm—the news reports had named Vincent and George McLain as the culprits. It wasn't hard to find. At a fork in the road was a big sign: THIS WAY TO THE SPACE SHIP. Shortly the road was parked on both sides with duos and ground-cars and triphibs. A couple of stands dispensed cold drinks and souvenirs at the turnoff into the McLain place. A state cop was directing traffic.

"Pull up," directed the Old Man. "Might as well see the fun, eh?"

"Right, Uncle Charlie," I agreed.

The Old Man bounced out, swinging his cane. I handed Mary out and she snuggled up to me, grasping my arm. She looked up at



me, managing to look both stupid and demure. "My, but you're strong, Buddy."

I wanted to slap her. That poor-little-me routine—from one of the Old Man's agents. A smile from a tiger.

"Uncle Charlie" buzzed around, bothering state police, buttonholing people, stopping to buy cigars at a stand, and giving a picture of a well-to-do, senile old fool, out for a holiday. He turned and waved his cigar at a state sergeant. "The inspector says it is a fraud, my dears—a prank thought up by boys. Shall we go?"

Mary looked disappointed. "No space ship?"

"There's a space ship, if you want to call it that," the cop answered. "Just follow the suckers. It's 'sergeant,' not 'inspector.'"

We set out, across a pasture and into some woods. It cost a dollar to get through the gate and many turned back. The path through the woods was rather deserted. I moved carefully, wishing for eyes in the back of my head instead of a phone. Uncle Charlie and Sis walked ahead, Mary chattering like a fool and somehow managing to be both shorter and younger than she had been on the trip out. We came to a clearing and there was the "space ship."

It was more than a hundred feet across, but it was whipped together out of light-gauge metal and sheet plastic, sprayed with aluminum. It was the shape of two pie plates, face to face. Aside from that, it looked like nothing in particular. Nevertheless, Mary squealed, "Oh, how exciting."

A youngster, eighteen or nineteen, with a permanent sunburn and a pimply face, stuck his head out of a hatch in the top of the monstrosity. "Care to see inside?" he called out. He added that it would be fifty cents apiece more, and Uncle Charlie shelled out.

Mary hesitated at the hatch. Pimple face was joined by what appeared to be his twin and they started to hand her down in. She drew back and I moved in fast, intending to do any handling myself. My reasons were ninety-nine per cent professional; I could feel danger all through the place.

"It's dark," she quavered.

"It's safe," the second young man said. "We've been taking sight-seers through all day. I'm Vinc McLain. Come on, lady."

Uncle Charlie peered down the hatch, like a cautious mother hen. "Might be snakes in there," he decided. "Mary, I don't think you had better go in."



"Nothing to fear," the first McLain said insistently. "It's safe."

"Keep the money, gentlemen." Uncle Charlie glanced at his finger. "We're late. Let's go, my dears."

I followed them back up the path, my hackles up the whole way.

We got back to the car. Once we were rolling, the Old Man said sharply, "Well? What did you see?"

I countered with, "Any doubts about that first report? The one that broke off?"

"None."

"That thing wouldn't have fooled an agent, even in the dark. This wasn't the ship he saw."

"Of course not. What else?"

"How much would you say that fake cost?—new sheet metal, fresh paint, and, from what I saw through the hatch, probably a thousand feet of lumber to brace it."

"Go on."

"Well, the McLain place had 'mortgage' spelled out all over it. If the boys were in on the gag, they didn't foot the bill."

"Obviously. You, Mary?"

"Uncle Charlie, did you notice how they treated me?"

"Who?" I said sharply.

"The state sergeant and the two boys. When I use the sweet-little-bundle-of-sex routine, something should happen. Nothing did."

"They were all attentive," I objected.

"You don't understand—but I *know*. I always know. Something was wrong with them. They were dead inside. Harem guards, if you know what I mean."

"Hypnosis?" asked the Old Man.

"Possibly. Or drugs perhaps." She frowned and looked puzzled.

"Hmm—" he answered. "Sammy, take the next turn to the left. We're investigating a point two miles south of here."

"The triangulated location by the pic?"

"What else?"

But we didn't get there. First it was a bridge out and I didn't have room enough to make the car hop it, quite aside from traffic regulations for a duo on the ground. We circled south and came in again, the only remaining route. We were stopped by a highway cop. A brush fire, he told us; go any further and we would proba-



bly be impressed into fire fighting. He didn't know but what he ought to send me up to the fire lines anyhow.

Mary waved her lashes at him and he relented. She pointed out that neither she nor Uncle Charlie could drive, a double lie.

After we pulled away, I asked her, "How about that one?"

"What about him?"

"Harem guard?"

"Oh my, no! A most attractive man."

Her answer annoyed me.

The Old Man vetoed taking to the air and making a pass over the spot. He said it was useless. We headed for Des Moines. Instead of parking at the toll gates we paid to take the car into the city and ended up at the studios of Des Moines stereo. "Uncle Charlie" blustered our way into the office of the general manager. He told several lies—or perhaps "Charles M. Cavanaugh" was actually a big wheel with the Federal Communications Authority.

Once inside, he continued the Big Brass act. "Now, sir, what is this nonsense about a space-ship hoax? Speak plainly, sir: your license may depend on it."

The manager was a little round-shouldered man, but he did not seem cowed, merely annoyed. "We've made full explanation over the channels," he said. "We were victimized. The man has been discharged."

"Hardly adequate, sir."

The little man—Barnes, his name was—shrugged. "What do you expect? Shall we string him up by his thumbs?"

Uncle Charlie pointed his cigar at him. "I warn you, sir. I am not to be trifled with. I am not convinced that two farm louts and a junior announcer could have pulled off this preposterous business. There was money in it, sir. Yes, sir—money. Now tell me, sir, just what did you—"

Mary had seated herself close by Barnes's desk. She had done something to her costume and her pose put me in mind of Goya's *Disrobed Lady*. She made a thumbs-down signal to the Old Man.

Barnes should not have caught it; his attention appeared to be turned to the Old Man. But he did. He turned toward Mary and his face went dead. He reached for his desk.

"Sam! Kill him!" the Old Man rapped.

I burned his legs off and his trunk fell to the floor. It was a poor shot; I had intended to burn his belly.



I stepped in and kicked his gun away from still-groping fingers. I was about to give him *coup de grâce*—a man burned that way is dead, but it takes a while to die—when the Old Man snapped, "Don't touch him! Mary, stand back!"

He sidled toward the body, like a cat investigating the unknown. Barnes gave a long sigh and was quiet. The Old Man poked him gently with his cane.

"Boss," I said, "time to git, isn't it?"

Without looking around he answered, "We're as safe here as anywhere. This building may be swarming with them."

"Swarming with what?"

"How would I know? Swarming with whatever *he* was." He pointed at Barnes's body. "That's what I've got to find out."

Mary gave a choked sob and gasped, "He's still breathing. Look!"

The body lay face down; the back of the jacket heaved as if the chest were rising. The Old Man looked and poked at it with his cane. "Sam. Come here."

I came. "Strip it," he went on. "Use gloves. And be careful."

"Booby trap?"

"Shut up. Use care."

He must have had a hunch that was close to truth. I think the Old Man's brain has a built-in integrator which arrives at logical necessity from minimum facts the way a museum johnny reconstructs an animal from a single bone. First pulling on gloves—agent's gloves; I could have stirred boiling acid, yet I could feel a coin in the dark and call heads or tails—once gloved, I started to turn him over to undress him.

The back was still heaving; I did not like the look of it—unnatural. I placed a palm between the shoulder blades.

A man's back is bone and muscle. This was soft and undulating. I snatched my hand away.

Without a word Mary handed me a pair of scissors from Barnes's desk. I took them and cut the jacket away. Underneath, the body was dressed in a light singlet. Between this and the skin, from the neck half-way down the back, was something which was not flesh. A couple of inches thick, it gave the corpse a round-shouldered, or slightly humped, appearance.

It pulsed.

As we watched, it slid slowly off the back away from us. I



reached out to peel up the singlet; my hand was knocked away by the Old Man's cane. "Make up your mind," I said and rubbed my knuckles.

He did not answer but tucked his cane under the shirt and worried it up the trunk. The thing was uncovered.

Grayish, faintly translucent, and shot through with darker structure, shapeless—but it was clearly alive. As we watched, it flowed down into the space between Barnes's arm and chest, filled it and stayed there, unable to go further.

"The poor devil," the Old Man said softly.

"Huh? *That?*"

"No—Barnes. Remind me to see that he gets the Purple Heart, when this is over. If it ever is over." The Old Man straightened up and stumped around the room, as if he had forgotten completely the thing nestling in the crook of Barnes's arm.

I drew back and continued to stare at it, my gun ready. It could not move fast; it obviously could not fly; but I did not know what it could do. Mary moved and pressed her shoulder against mine, as if for human comfort. I put my free arm around her.

On a side table there was a stack of cans, the sort used for stereo tapes. The Old Man took one, spilled out the reels and came back with it. "This will do, I think." He placed the can on the floor, near the thing, and began chivvying it with his cane, trying to irritate it into crawling into the can.

Instead it oozed back until it was almost entirely under the body. I grabbed the free arm and heaved Barnes away; the thing clung, then flopped to the floor. Under dear old Uncle Charlie's directions, Mary and I used our guns at lowest power to force it, by burning the floor close to it, into the can. We got it in, a close fit, and I slapped the cover on.

The Old Man tucked the can under his arm. "On our way, my dears."

On the way out he paused in the door to call out a parting, then after closing the door, stopped at the desk of Barnes's secretary. "I'll be seeing Mr. Barnes tomorrow," he told her. "No, no appointment. I'll phone."

Out we went, slow march, the Old Man with the can full of thing under his arm and me with my ears cocked for alarums. Mary played the silly little moron, with a running monologue. The



Old Man even paused in the lobby, bought a cigar, and inquired directions, with bumbling, self-important good nature.

Once in the car, he gave directions, then cautioned me against driving fast. The directions led us into a garage. The Old Man sent for the manager and said, "Mr. Malone wants this car—immediately." It was a signal I had had occasion to use myself; the duo would cease to exist in about twenty minutes, save as anonymous spare parts in the service bins.

The manager looked us over, then answered quietly, "Through that door over there." He sent the two mechanics in the room away and we ducked through the door.

We ended up in the apartment of an elderly couple; there we became brunets and the Old Man got his bald head back. I acquired a mustache; Mary looked as well dark as she had as a redhead. The "Cavanaugh" combination was dropped; Mary got a nurse's costume and I was toggged out as a chauffeur, while the Old Man became our elderly, invalid employer, complete with shawl and tantrums.

A car was waiting for us. The trip back was no trouble; we could have remained the carrot-topped Cavanaughs. I kept the screen tuned to Des Moines, but if the cops had turned up the late Mr. Barnes, the newsboys hadn't heard about it.

We went straight to the Old Man's office and there we opened the can. The Old Man sent for Dr. Graves, head of the Section's bio lab, and the job was done with handling equipment.

What we needed were gas masks, not handling equipment. A stink of decaying organic matter filled the room and forced us to slap the cover on and speed up the blowers. Graves wrinkled his nose. "What in the world was that?" he demanded.

The Old Man was swearing softly. "You are to find out," he said. "Work it in suits, in a germ-free compartment, and *don't* assume that it is dead."

"If that is alive, I'm Queen Anne."

"Maybe you are, but don't take chances. It's a parasite, capable of attaching itself to a host, such as a man, and controlling the host. It is almost certainly extraterrestrial in origin and metabolism."

The lab boss sniffed. "Extraterrestrial parasite on a terrestrial host? Ridiculous! The body chemistries would be incompatible."



The Old Man grunted. "Damn your theories. When we captured it, it was living on a man. If that means it has to be a terrestrial organism, show me where it fits into the scheme of things and where to look for its mates. And quit jumping to conclusions; I want facts."

The biologist stiffened. "You'll get them!"

"Get going. And don't persist in the silly assumption that the thing is dead; that perfume may be a protective weapon. That thing, if alive, is fantastically dangerous. If it gets one of your laboratory men, I'll almost certainly have to kill him."

The lab director left without some of his cockiness.

The Old Man settled back in his chair, sighed, and closed his eyes. After five minutes or so he opened his eyes and said, "How many mustard plasters the size of that thing can arrive in a space ship as big as that fraud we looked at?"

"Was there a space ship?" I asked. "The evidence seems slim."

"Slim but utterly incontrovertible. There was a ship. There still is."

"We should have examined the site."

"That site would have been our last sight. The other six boys weren't fools. Answer my question."

"How big the ship was doesn't tell me anything about its payload, when I don't know it's propulsion method, the jump it made, or what the passengers require. How long is a piece of rope? If you want a guess, I'd say several hundred, maybe several thousand."

"Mmm . . . yes. So there are maybe several thousand zombies in Iowa tonight. Or harem guards, as Mary puts it." He thought for a moment. "But how am I to get past them to the harem? We can't go around shooting every round-shouldered man in Iowa; it would cause talk." He smiled feebly.

"I'll put you another question," I said. "If one space ship landed in Iowa yesterday, how many will land in North Dakota tomorrow? Or Brazil?"

"Yes." He looked still more troubled. "I'll tell you how long is your piece of rope."

"Huh?"

"Long enough to choke you. You kids go enjoy yourselves; you may not have another chance. Don't leave the offices."

I went back to Cosmetics, got my own skin color back and re-



sumed my normal appearance, had a soak and a massage, and then went to the staff lounge in search of a drink and company. I looked around, not knowing whether I was looking for a blonde, brunette, or redhead, but fairly sure that I could spot the chassis.

It was a redhead. Mary was in a booth, sucking on a drink and looking much as she had looked at first.

"Hi, Sis," I said, sliding in beside her.

She smiled and answered, "Hello, Bud. Drag up a rock," while moving to make room for me.

I dialed for bourbon and water and then said, "Is this your *real* appearance?"

She shook her head. "Not at all. Zebra stripes and two heads. What's yours?"

"My mother smothered me with a pillow, so I never got a chance to find out."

She again looked me over with that side-of-beef scrutiny, then said, "I can understand her actions, but I am more hardened than she was. You'll do, Bud."

"Thanks." I went on. "Let's drop this Bud-and-Sis routine; it gives me inhibitions."

"Hmm . . . I think you need inhibitions."

"Me? Never any violence with me; I'm the 'Barkis-is-willing' type." I might have added that, if I laid a hand on her and she happened not to like it, I'd bet that I would draw back a bloody stump. The Old Man's kids are never sissies.

She smiled. "So? Well, Miss Barkis is *not* willing, not this evening." She put down her glass. "Drink up and reorder."

We did so and continued to sit there, feeling warm and good. There aren't many hours like that in our profession; it makes one savor them.

While we sat there, I got to thinking how well she would look on the other side of a fireplace. My job being what it was, I had never thought seriously about getting married. And after all, a babe is just a babe; why get excited? But Mary was an agent herself; talking to her would not be like shouting off Echo Mountain. I realized that I had been lonely for one hell of a long time.

"Mary——"

"Yes?"

"Are you married?"



"Eh? Why do you ask? As a matter of fact, I'm not. But what business—I mean, why does it matter?"

"Well, it might," I persisted.

She shook her head.

"I'm serious," I went on. "Look me over. I've got both hands and feet, I'm fairly young, and I don't track mud in the house. You could do worse."

She laughed, but her laugh was kindly. "And you could work up better lines. I am sure they must have been extemporaneous."

"They were."

"And I won't hold them against you. Listen, wolf, your technique is down; just because a woman turns you down is no reason to lose your head and offer her a contract. Some women would be mean enough to hold you to it."

"I mean it," I said peevishly.

"So? What salary do you offer?"

"Damn your pretty eyes! If you want that type of contract, I'll go along; you can keep your pay and I'll allot half of mine to you—unless you want to retire."

She shook her head. "I'd never insist on a settlement contract, not with a man I was willing to marry in the first place—"

"I didn't think you would."

"I was just trying to make you see that you yourself were not serious." She looked me over. "But perhaps you are," she added in a warm, soft voice.

"I am."

She shook her head again. "Agents should not marry."

"Agents shouldn't marry anyone but agents."

She started to answer, but stopped suddenly. My own phone was talking in my ear, the Old Man's voice, and I knew she was hearing the same thing. "Come into my office," he said.

We both got up without saying anything. Mary stopped me at the door and looked up into my eyes. "*That* is why it is silly to talk about marriage. We've got this job to finish. All the time we've been talking, you've been thinking about the job and so have I."

"I have not."

"Don't play with me! Sam—suppose you were married and you woke up to find one of those things on your wife's shoulders,



possessing her." There was horror in her eyes as she went on. "Suppose I found one of them on *your* shoulders."

"I'll chance it. And I won't let one get to you."

She touched my cheek. "I don't believe you would."

We went on into the Old Man's office.

He looked up to say, "Come along. We're leaving."

"Where?" I answered. "Or shouldn't I ask?"

"White House. See the President. Shut up."

I shut.

### 3

At the beginning of a forest fire or an epidemic there is a short time when a minimum of correct action will contain and destroy. What the President needed to do the Old Man had already figured out—declare a national emergency, fence off the Des Moines area, and shoot anybody who tried to slip out. Then let them out one at a time, searching them for parasites. Meantime, use the radar screen, the rocket boys, and the space stations to spot and smash any new landings.

Warn all the other nations, ask for their help—but don't be fussy about international law, for this was a fight for racial survival against an outside invader. It did not matter where they came from—Mars, Venus, the Jovian satellites, or outside the system entirely. Repel the invasion.

The Old Man's unique gift was the ability to reason logically with unfamiliar, hard-to-believe facts as easily as with the commonplace. Not much, eh? Most minds stall dead when faced with facts which conflict with basic beliefs; "I-just-can't-believe-it" is all one word to highbrows and dimwits alike.

But not to the Old Man—and he had the ear of the President.

The Secret Service guards gave us the works. An X-ray went *beep!* and I surrendered my heater. Mary turned out to be a walking arsenal; the machine gave four beeps and a hiccough, although you would have sworn she couldn't hide a tax receipt. The Old Man surrendered his cane without waiting to be asked.



Our audio capsules showed up both by X-ray and by metal detector, but the guards weren't equipped for surgical operations. There was a hurried conference and the head guard ruled that anything embedded in the flesh need not be classed as a weapon. They printed us, photographed our retinas, and ushered us into a waiting room. The Old Man was whisked out and in to see the President alone.

After a while we were ushered in. The Old Man introduced us and I stammered. Mary just bowed. The President said he was glad to see us and turned on that smile, the way you see it in the stereocasts—and he made us feel that he *was* glad to see us. I felt warm inside and no longer embarrassed.

The Old Man directed me to report all that I had done and seen and heard on this assignment. I tried to catch his eye when it came to the part about killing Barnes, but he wasn't having any—so I left out the Old Man's order to shoot and made it clear that I had shot to protect another agent—Mary—when I saw Barnes reach for his gun. The Old Man interrupted me. "Make your report complete."

So I filled in the Old Man's order to shoot. The President threw the Old Man a glance, the only expression he showed. I went on about the parasite thing, on up to that present moment, as nobody told me to stop.

Then it was Mary's turn. She fumbled in trying to explain to the President why she expected to get a response out of normal men—and had not gotten it out of the McLain boys, the state sergeant, and Barnes. The President helped her—by smiling warmly and saying, "My dear young lady, I quite believe it."

Mary blushed. The President listened gravely while she finished, then sat still for several minutes. Presently he spoke to the Old Man. "Andrew, your Section has been invaluable. Your reports have sometimes tipped the balance in crucial occasions in history."

The Old Man snorted. "So it's 'no,' is it?"

"I did not say so."

"You were about to."

The President shrugged. "I was going to suggest that your young people withdraw. Andrew, you are a genius, but even geniuses make mistakes."

"See here, Tom, I anticipated this; that's why I brought



witnesses. They are neither drugged nor instructed. Call in your psych crew; try to shake their stories."

The President shook his head. "I'm sure you are cleverer about such things than anyone whom I could bring in to test them. Take this young man—he was willing to risk a murder charge to protect you. You inspire loyalty, Andrew. As for the young lady—really, Andrew, I can't start what amounts to war on a woman's intuition."

Mary took a step forward. "Mr. President," she said very earnestly, "I do know. I know every time. I can't tell you how I know—but *those were not normal male men.*"

He answered, "You have not considered an obvious explanation—that they actually were, ah, 'harem guards.' Pardon me, miss. There are always such unfortunates. By the laws of chance you ran across four in one day."

Mary shut up. The Old Man did not. "God damn it, Tom—" I shuddered; you don't talk to the President that way. "—I knew you when you were an investigating senator and I was a key man in your investigations. You know I wouldn't bring you this fairy tale if there were any way to explain it away. How about that space ship? What was in it? Why couldn't I even reach the spot where it landed?" He hauled out the photograph taken by Space Station Beta and shoved it under the President's nose.

The President seemed unperturbed. "Ah yes, facts. Andrew, you and I have a passion for facts. But I have sources of information other than your Section. Take this photo. You made a point of it when you phoned. The metes and bounds of the McLain farm as recorded in the local county courthouse check with the triangulated latitude and longitude of this object on this photograph." The President looked up. "Once I got lost in my own neighborhood. You weren't even in your own neighborhood, Andrew."

"Tom—"

"Yes, Andrew?"

"You did not trot out there and check those courthouse maps yourself?"

"Of course not."

"Thank God—or you would be carrying three pounds of pulsing tapioca between your shoulders—and God save the United States! Be sure of this: the courthouse clerk and whatever agent was



sent, both are hagridden this very moment. Yes, and the Des Moines chief of police, editors around there, dispatchers, cops—all sorts of key people. Tom, I don't know what we are up against, but *they* know what *we* are, and they are pinching off the nerve cells of our social organism before true messages can get back—or they cover up true reports with false, just as they did with Barnes. Mr. President, you must order an immediate, drastic quarantine of the area. There is no other hope!”

“‘Barnes,’” the President repeated softly. “Andrew, I had hoped to spare you this, but——” He flipped a key at his desk. “Get me stereo station WDES, Des Moines, the manager’s office.”

Shortly a screen lighted on his desk; he touched another switch and a solid display in the wall lighted up. We were looking into the room we had been in a few hours before.

Looking into it past a man who filled most of the screen—Barnes.

Or his twin. When I kill a man, I expect him to stay dead. I was shaken, but I still believed in myself—and my heater.

The man said, “You asked for me, Mr. President?” He sounded as if he were dazzled by the honor.

“Yes, thank you. Mr. Barnes, do you recognize these people?”

He looked surprised. “I’m afraid not. Should I?”

The Old Man interrupted. “Tell him to call in his office force.”

The President looked quizzical but did so. They trooped in, girls mostly, and I recognized the secretary who sat outside the door. One of them squealed, “Ooh—it’s the *President*.”

None of them identified us—not surprising with the Old Man and me, but Mary’s appearance was just as it had been, and I will bet that Mary’s looks would be burned into the mind of any woman who had ever seen her.

But I noticed one thing about them—every one of them was round-shouldered.

The President eased us out. He put a hand on the Old Man’s shoulder. “Seriously, Andrew, the Republic won’t fall—we’ll worry it through.”

Ten minutes later we were standing in the wind on the Rock Creek platform. The Old Man seemed shrunken and old.

“What now, Boss?”



"Eh? For you two, nothing. You are both on leave until recalled."

"I'd like to take another look at Barnes's office."

"Stay out of Iowa. That's an order."

"Mmm—what are you going to do, if I may ask?"

"I am going down to Florida and lie in the sun and wait for the world to go to hell. If you have any sense, you'll do the same. There's damned little time."

He squared his shoulders and stumped away. I turned to speak to Mary, but she was gone. I looked around but could not spot her. I trotted off and overtook the Old Man. "Excuse me, Boss? Where did Mary go?"

"Huh? On leave, no doubt. Don't bother me."

I considered trying to relay to her through the Section circuit, when I remembered that I did not know her right name, or her code, or her I.D. number. I thought of trying to bull it through by describing her, but that was foolishness. Only Cosmetics Records knows the original appearance of an agent—and they won't talk. All I knew was that she had twice appeared as a redhead—and that, for my taste, she was "why men fight." Try punching that into a phone!

Instead I found a room for the night.

## 4

I woke up at dusk and looked out as the capital came to life for the night. The river swept away in a wide band past the memorial; they were adding fluorescin to the water above the District so the river stood out in curving sweeps of glowing rose and amber and emerald and shining fire. Pleasure boats cut through the colors, each filled, I had no doubt, with couples up to no good and enjoying it.

On the land, here and there among older buildings, bubble domes were lighting up, giving the city a glowing fairyland look. To the east, where the bomb had landed, there were no old buildings at all, and the area was an Easter basket of color—giant eggs, lighted from within.



I've seen the capital at night oftener than most and had never thought much about it. But tonight I had that "last ride together" feeling. It was not its beauty that choked me up; it was knowing that down under those warm lights were people, alive and individual, going about their lawful occasions, making love or having spats, whichever suited them—doing whatever they damn well pleased, each under his own vine and fig tree, as it says, with nobody to make him afraid.

I thought about all those gentle, kindly people—each with a gray slug clinging to his neck, twitching his legs and arms, making his voice say what the slug wished, going where the slug wanted to go.

I made myself a solemn promise: if the parasites won, I'd be dead before I would let one of those things ride me. For an agent it would be simple; just bite my nails—or, if your hands happen to be off, there are other ways. The Old Man planned for all professional necessities.

But the Old Man had not planned such arrangements for such a purpose and I knew it. It was his business—and mine—to keep those people down there safe, not to run out when the going got tough.

I turned away. There was not a confounded thing I could do about it now; I decided that what I needed was company. The room contained the usual catalogue of "escort bureaus" and "model agencies" that you'll find in almost any big hotel. I thumbed through it, then slammed it shut. I didn't want a whoopee girl; I wanted one particular girl—one who would as soon shoot as shake hands. And I did not know where she had gone.

I always carry a tube of "tempus fugit" pills, as one never knows when giving your reflexes a jolt will get you through a tight spot. Despite the scare propaganda, tempus pills are not habit-forming, not the way hashish is.

Nevertheless, a purist would say I was addicted, for I took them occasionally to make a twenty-four-hour leave seem like a week. I enjoyed the mild euphoria which the pills induced. Primarily, though, they just stretch your subjective time by a factor of ten or more—chop time into finer bits so that you live longer for the same amount of clock-and-calendar. Sure, I know the horrible example of the man who died of old age in a month through taking the pills steadily, but I took them only once in a while.



Maybe he had the right idea. He lived a long and happy life—you can be sure it was happy—and died happy at the end. What matter that the sun rose only thirty times? Who is keeping score and what are the rules?

I sat there, staring at my tube of pills and thinking that I had enough to keep me hopped up for what would be, to me, at least two "years." I could crawl in my hole and pull it in after me.

I took out two pills and got a glass of water. Then I put them back in the tube, put on my gun and phone, left the hotel and headed for the Library of Congress.

On the way I stopped in a bar and looked at a newscast. There was no news from Iowa, but when is there any news from Iowa?

At the library I went to the catalogue, put on blinkers and started scanning for references. "Flying Saucers" led to "Flying Disks," then to "Project Saucer," then "Lights in the Sky," "Fireballs," "Cosmic Diffusion Theory of Life Origins," and two dozen blind alleys and screwball branches of literature. I needed a Geiger counter to tell me what was pay dirt, especially as what I wanted was certain to carry a semantic-content key classing it between Aesop's fables and the Lost Continent myths.

Nevertheless, in an hour I had a handful of selector cards. I handed them to the vestal virgin at the desk and waited while she fed them into the hopper. Presently she said, "Most of the films you want are in use. The rest will be delivered to study room 9-A. Take the escalator, puhlease."

Room 9-A had one occupant, who looked up and said, "Well! The wolf in person. How did you pick me up? I could swear I gave you a clean miss."

I said, "Hello, Mary."

"Hello," she answered, "and now, good-by, Miss Barkis still ain't willin' and I've got work to do."

I got annoyed. "Listen, you conceited twerp, odd as it may seem, I did not come here looking for your no-doubt beautiful body. I occasionally do some work myself. When my spools arrive, I'll get the hell out and find another study room—a stag one!"

Instead of flaring back, she immediately softened. "I beg your pardon, Sam. A woman hears the same thing so many thousand times. Sit down."

"No," I answered, "thanks, but I'll leave. I really want to work."



"Stay," she insisted. "Read that notice. If you remove spools from the room to which they are delivered, you will not only cause the sorter to blow a dozen tubes, but you'll give the chief reference librarian a nervous breakdown."

"I'll bring them back when I'm through."

She took my arm and warm tingles went up it. "Please, Sam. I'm sorry."

I sat down and grinned. "Nothing could persuade me to leave. I don't intend to let you out of sight until I know your phone code, your home address, and the true color of your hair."

"Wolf," she said softly. "You'll never know any of them." She made a great business of fitting her head back into her study machine while ignoring me.

The delivery tube went *thunk!* and my spools spilled into the basket. I stacked them on the table by the other machine. One rolled over against the ones Mary had stacked up and knocked them down. I picked up what I thought was my spool and glanced at the end—the wrong end, as all it held was the serial number and that pattern of dots the selector reads. I turned it over, read the label, and placed it in my pile.

"Hey!" said Mary. "That's mine."

"In a pig's eye," I said politely.

"But it is. It's the one I want next."

Sooner or later, I can see the obvious. Mary wouldn't be there to study the history of footgear. I picked up others of hers and read the labels. "So that's why nothing I wanted was in," I said. "But you didn't do a thorough job." I handed her my selection.

Mary looked them over, then pushed all into a single pile. "Shall we split them, or both of us see them all?"

"Fifty-fifty to weed out the junk, then we'll both go over the remainder," I decided. "Let's get busy."

Even after having seen the parasite on poor Barnes's back, even after being assured by the Old Man that a "flying saucer" had in fact landed, I was not prepared for the pile of evidence to be found buried in a public library. A pest on Digby and his evaluating formula! The evidence was unmistakable; Earth had been visited by ships from outer space not once but many times.

The reports long antedated our own achievement of space travel; some ran back into the seventeenth century—earlier than that, but it was impossible to judge reports dating back to a time



when "science" meant an appeal to Aristotle. The first systematic data came from the nineteen forties and fifties; the next flurry was in the nineteen eighties. I noticed something and started to hit a cycle at about thirty-year intervals. A statistical analyst might make something of it.

"Flying saucers" were tied in with "mysterious disappearances," not only through being in the same category as sea serpents, bloody rain, and suchlike wild data, but also because, in well-documented instances, pilots had chased "saucers" and never came back, or down, anywhere, i.e., officially classed as crashed in wild country and not recovered—an "easy out" explanation.

I got another wild hunch and tried to see whether or not there was a thirty-year cycle in mysterious disappearances and, if so, did it match the objects-in-the-sky cycle? I could not be sure—too much data and not enough fluctuation; there are too many people disappearing every year for other reasons. But vital records had been kept for a long time and not all were lost in the bombings. I noted it down to farm out for professional analysis.

Mary and I did not exchange three words all night. Eventually we got up and stretched, then I lent Mary change to pay the machine for the spools of notes she had taken (*why* don't women carry change?) and got my wires out of hock too. "Well, what's the verdict?" I asked.

"I feel like a sparrow who has built a nice nest in a rain spout."

I recited the old jingle. "And we'll do the same—refuse to learn and build again in the spout."

"Oh no! Sam, we've got to do something! It makes a full pattern; this time they are moving in to stay."

"Could be. I think they are."

"Well, what do we *do*?"

"Honey chile, you are about to learn that in the Country of the Blind the one-eyed man is in for a hell of a rough ride."

"Don't be cynical. There isn't time."

"No, there isn't. Let's get out of here."

Dawn was on us and the library was almost deserted. I said, "Tell you what—let's find a barrel of beer, take it to my hotel room, bust in the head, and talk this over."

She shook her head. "Not to your room."

"Damn it, this is business."



"Let's go to my apartment. It's only a couple of hundred miles away; I'll fix breakfast there."

I recalled my purpose in life in time to leer. "That's the best offer I've had all night. Seriously—why not the hotel? We'd save a half hour's travel."

"You don't want to come to my apartment? I won't bite you."

"I was hoping you would. No, I was wondering why the sudden switch?"

"Well—perhaps I wanted to show you the bear traps around my bed. Or perhaps I wanted to prove to you I could cook." She dimpled.

I flagged a taxi and we went to her apartment.

When we got inside she made a careful search of the place, then came back and said, "Turn around. I want to feel your back."

"Why do—"

"Turn around!"

I shut up. She gave it a good knuckling, then said, "Now you feel mine."

"With pleasure!" Nevertheless I did a proper job, for I saw what she was driving at. There was nothing under her clothes but girl and assorted items of lethal hardware.

She turned around and let out a sigh. "That's why I didn't want to go to your hotel. Now I *know* we are safe for the first time since I saw that *thing* on the station manager's back. This apartment is tight; I turn off the air and leave it sealed like a vault every time I leave it."

"Say, how about the air-conditioning ducts?"

"I didn't turn on the conditioner system; I cracked one of the air-raid reserve bottles instead. Never mind; what would you like to eat?"

"Any chance of a steak, just warmed through?"

There was. While we chomped, we watched the newscast. Still no news from Iowa.



## 5

I did not get to see the bear traps; she locked her bedroom door. Three hours later she woke me and we had a second breakfast. Presently we struck cigarettes and I switched off the newscast. It was principally a display of the entries for "Miss America." Ordinarily I would have watched with interest, but since none of the babes was round-shouldered and their contest costumes could not possibly have concealed humps, it seemed to lack importance.

I said, "Well?"

Mary said, "We've got to arrange the facts and rub the President's nose in them."

"How?"

"We've got to see him again."

I repeated, "How?"

She had no answer.

I said, "We've got only one route—through the Old Man."

I put in the call, using both our codes so that Mary could hear. Presently I heard, "Chief Deputy Oldfield, for the Old Man. Shoot."

"It's got to be the Old Man."

There was a pause, then, "Is this official or unofficial?"

"Uh, I guess you'd call it unofficial."

"Well, I won't put you through for anything unofficial. And anything official I am handling."

I switched off before I used any bad language. Then I coded again. The Old Man has a special code which is guaranteed to raise him up out of his coffin—but God help the agent who uses it unnecessarily.

He answered with a burst of profanity.

"Boss," I said, "on the Iowa matter——"

He broke off short. "Yes?"

"Mary and I spent all night digging data out of the files. We want to talk it over."

The profanity resumed. Presently he told me to turn it in for



analysis and added that he intended to have my ears fried for a sandwich.

"Boss!" I said sharply.

"Eh?"

"If you can run out, so can we. Mary and I are resigning right now. That's official!"

Mary's eyebrows went up but she said nothing. There was a long silence, then he said, in a tired voice, "Palmglade Hotel, North Miami Beach."

"Right away." I sent for a taxi and we went up on the roof. I had the hackie swing out over the ocean to avoid the Carolina speed trap; we made good time.

The Old Man lay there, looking sullen and letting sand dribble through his fingers while we reported. I had brought along a buzz box so that he could get it directly off the wire.

He looked up when we came to the point about thirty-year cycles, but he let it ride until my later query about possible similar cycles in disappearances, whereupon he called the Section. "Get me Analysis. Hello—Peter? This is the boss. I want a curve on unexplained disappearances, starting with 1800. Huh? Smooth out known factors and discount steady load. What I want is humps and valleys. When? Two hours ago; what are you waiting for?"

He struggled to his feet, let me hand him his cane and said, "Well, back to the jute mill."

"To the White House?" Mary asked eagerly.

"Eh? Be your age. You two have picked up nothing that would change the President's mind."

"Oh. Then what?"

"I don't know. Keep quiet unless you have a bright idea."

The Old Man had a car and I drove us back. After I turned it over to block control I said, "Boss, I've got a caper that might convince the President."

He grunted. "Like this," I went on. "Send two agents in, me and one other. The other agent carries a portable scanning rig and keeps it trained on me. You get the President to watch."

"Suppose nothing happens?"

"I'll make it happen. I am going where the space ship landed, bull my way through. We'll get a close-up pix of the real ship, piped into the White House. Then I'll go to Barnes's office and in-



investigate those round shoulders. I'll tear shirts off right in front of the camera. There won't be any finesse; I'll just bust things wide open."

"You realize you have the same chance as a mouse at a cat convention."

"I'm not so sure. As I see it, these things haven't superhuman powers. I'll bet they are limited to whatever the human being they are riding can do. I don't plan on being a martyr. In any case, I'll get you pix."

"Hmmm—"

"It might work," Mary put in. "I'll be the other agent. I can—"

The Old Man and I said "No," together—and then I flushed; it was not my prerogative. Mary went on, "I was going to say that I am the logical one, because of the, uh, talent I have for spotting a man with a parasite."

"No," the Old Man repeated. "Where he's going they'll all have riders—assumed so until proved otherwise. Besides, I am saving you for something."

She should have shut up, but did not. "For what? This is important."

The Old Man said quietly, "So is the other job. I'm planning to make you a Presidential bodyguard."

"Oh." She thought and answered, "Uh, Boss—I'm not certain I could spot a woman who was possessed. I'm not, uh, equipped for it."

"So we take his women secretaries away from him. And, Mary—you'll be watching him too."

She thought that over. "And suppose I find that one has gotten to him, in spite of everything?"

"You take necessary action, the Vice-President succeeds to the chair, and you get shot for treason. Now about this mission. We'll send Jarvis with the scanner and include Davidson as hatchet man. While Jarvis keeps the pickup on you, Davidson can keep his eyes on Jarvis—and you can try to keep one eye on him."

"You think it will work, then?"

"No—but any plan is better than no plan. Maybe it will stir up something."

While we headed for Iowa—Jarvis, Davidson, and I—the Old Man went to Washington. Mary cornered me as we were about to



leave, grabbed me by the ears, kissed me firmly and said, "Sam—come back."

I got all tingly and felt like a fifteen-year-old.

Davidson roaded the car beyond the place where I had found a bridge out. I was navigating, using a map on which the landing site of the real space ship had been pin-pointed. The bridge gave a precise reference point. We turned off the road two tenths of a mile due east of the site and jeeped through the scrub to the spot.

Almost to the spot, I should say. We ran into burned-over ground and decided to walk. The site shown by the space-station photograph was in the brush-fire area—and there was no "flying saucer." It would have taken a better detective than I to show that one had ever landed. The fire had destroyed any traces.

Jarvis scanned everything, anyhow, but I knew that the slugs had won another round. As we came out we ran into an elderly farmer; following doctrine, we kept a wary distance.

"Quite a fire," I remarked, sidling away.

"Sure was," he said dolefully. "Killed two of my best milch cows, the poor dumb brutes. You fellows reporters?"

"Yes," I agreed, "but we've been sent on a wild goose chase." I wished Mary were along. Probably this character was naturally round-shouldered. But assuming that the Old Man was right about the space ship—and he *had* to be right—then this too-innocent bumpkin must know about it and was covering up. Ergo, he was hagridden.

I had to do it. The chances of capturing a parasite and getting its picture on channels to the White House were better here than they were in a crowd. I threw a glance at my team mates; they were alert and Jarvis was scanning.

As the farmer turned I tripped him. He went down with me on his back, clawing at his shirt. Jarvis moved in and got a close-up. I had his back bare before he got his wind.

And it was *bare*—no parasite, no sign of one. Nor any place on his body, which I made sure of.

I helped him and brushed him off; his clothes were filthy with ashes. "I'm terribly sorry," I said.

He was trembling with anger. "You young—" He couldn't find a word bad enough for me. He looked at us and his mouth quivered. "I'll have the law on you. If I were twenty years younger I'd lick all three of you."



"Believe me, old-timer, it was a mistake."

"Mistake!" His face broke and I thought he was going to cry. "I come back from Omaha and find my place burned, half my stock gone, and my son-in-law no place around. I come out to find out why strangers are snooping around my land and I like to get torn to pieces. 'Mistake'! What's the world coming to?"

I thought I could answer that last one, but I did not try. I did try to pay him for the indignity but he slapped my money to the ground. We tucked in our tails and got out.

When we were rolling again, Davidson said, "Are you sure you know what you are up to?"

"I can make a mistake," I said savagely, "but have you ever known the Old Man to?"

"Mmm—no. Where next?"

"WDES main station. This one won't be a mistake."

At the tollgates into Des Moines the gatekeeper hesitated. He glanced at a notebook and then at our plates. "Sheriff has a call out for this car," he said. "Pull over to the right." He left the barrier down.

"Right it is," I agreed, backed up thirty feet and gunned her. The Section's cars are beefed up and hopped up—a good thing, for the barrier was stout. I did not slow down on the far side.

"This," said Davidson dreamily, "is interesting. Do you still know what you are doing?"

"Cut the chatter," I snapped. "Get this, both of you: we aren't likely to get out. *But we are going to get those pix.*"

"As you say, Chief."

I was running ahead of any pursuit. I slammed to a stop in front of the station and we poured out. None of "Uncle Charlie's" indirect methods—we swarmed into the first elevator and punched for Barnes's floor. When we got there I left the door of the car open. As we came into the outer office the receptionist tried to stop us, but we pushed on by. The girls looked up, startled. I went straight to Barnes's inner door and tried it; it was locked. I turned to his secretary. "Where's Barnes?"

"Who is calling, please?" she said, polite as a fish.

I looked down at her shoulders. Humped. By God, I said to myself, this one *has* to be. She was here when I killed Barnes.

I bent over and pulled up her sweater.



I was right. I had to be right. For the second time I stared at one of the parasites.

She struggled and clawed and tried to bite. I judo-cut her neck, almost getting my hand in the mess, and she went limp. I gave her three fingers in the pit of her stomach, then swung her around. "Jarvis," I yelled, "get a close-up."

The idiot was fiddling with his gear, his big hind end between me and the pickup. He straightened up. "School's out," he said. "Blew a tube."

"Replace it—*hurry!*"

A stenographer stood up on the other side of the room and fired, at the scanner. Hit it, too—and Davidson burned her down. As if it had been a signal, about six of them jumped Davidson. They did not seem to have guns; they just swarmed over him.

I hung onto the secretary and shot from here I was. I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye and turned to find Barnes—"Barnes number two"—standing in his doorway. I shot him through the chest to get the slug I knew was on his back. I turned back to the slaughter.

Davidson was up again. A girl crawled toward him; she seemed wounded. He shot her in the face and she stopped. His next bolt was just past my ear. I said, "Thanks! Let's get out of here. Jarvis—come on!"

The elevator was open; we rushed in, me still burdened with Barnes's secretary. I slammed the door and started it. Davidson was trembling and Jarvis was white. "Buck up," I said, "you weren't shooting people, but *things*. Like this." I held the girl up and looked down at her back.

Then I almost collapsed. My specimen, the one I had grabbed to take back alive, was gone. Slipped to the floor, probably, and oozed away during the ruckus. "Jarvis," I said, "did you get *anything*?" He shook his head.

The girl's back was covered with a rash like a million pinpricks, where the thing had ridden her. I settled her on the floor against the wall of the car. She was still unconscious, so we left her in the car. There was no hue and cry as we went through the lobby to the street.

A policeman had his foot on our car while making out a ticket. He handed it to me and said, "You can't park in this area, Mac."

I said, "Sorry," and signed his copy. Then I gunned the car



away, got as clear as I could of traffic—and blasted off, right from a city street. I wondered whether he added that to the ticket. When I had her at altitude I switched license plates and identification code. The Old Man thinks of everything.

But he did not think much of me. I tried to report on the way in but he cut me short and ordered us into the Section offices. Mary was there with him. He let me report, interrupting with only an occasional grunt. "How much did you see?" I asked when I had finished.

"Transmission cut off when you hit the toll barrier," he informed me. "The President was not impressed by what he saw."

"I suppose not."

"He told me to fire you."

I stiffened. "I am perfectly well——" I started out.

"Pipe down!" the Old Man snapped. "I told him that he could fire me, but not my subordinates. You are a thumb-fingered dolt," he went on quietly, "but you can't be spared now."

"Thanks."

Mary had been wandering around the room. I tried to catch her eye, but she was not having any. Now she stopped back of Jarvis's chair—and gave the Old Man the sign she had given about Barnes.

I hit Jarvis in the head with my heater and he sagged out of his chair.

"Stand back, Davidson!" the Old Man rapped. His gun was out and pointed at Davidson's chest. "Mary, how about him?"

"He's all right."

"And him."

"Sam's clean."

The Old Man's eyes moved over us and I have never felt closer to death. "Peel off your shirts," he said sourly.

We did—and Mary was right. I had begun to wonder whether I would know it if I *did* have a parasite on me. "Now him," the Old Man ordered. "Gloves."

We stretched Jarvis out and carefully cut his clothing away. We had our live specimen.



I felt myself ready to retch. The thought of that *thing* right behind me all the way from Iowa was more than my stomach could stand. I'm not squeamish—but you don't know what the sight of one can do unless you yourself have seen one while knowing what it was.

I swallowed and said, "Let's work it off. Maybe we can still save Jarvis." I did not really think so; I had a deep-down hunch that anyone who had been ridden by one of those things was spoiled, permanently.

The Old Man waved us back. "Forget Jarvis!"

"But—"

"Stow it! If he can be saved, a bit longer won't matter. In any case—" He shut up and so did I. I knew what he meant; we were expendable; the people of the United States were not.

The Old Man, gun drawn and wary, continued to watch the thing on Jarvis's back. He said to Mary, "Get the President. Special code zero zero zero seven."

Mary went to his desk. I heard her talking into the muffler, but my own attention was on the parasite. It made no move to leave its host.

Presently Mary reported, "I can't get him, sir. One of his assistants is on the screen. Mr. McDonough."

The Old Man winced. McDonough was an intelligent, likable man who hadn't changed his mind on anything since he was housebroken. The President used him as a buffer.

The Old Man bellowed, not bothering with the muffler.

No, the President was not available. No, he could not be reached with a message. No, Mr. McDonough was not exceeding his authority; the Old Man was not on the list of exceptions—if there was such a list. Yes, Mr. McDonough would be happy to make an appointment; that was a promise. How would next Friday do? Today? Out of the question. Tomorrow? Impossible.

The Old Man switched off and seemed about to have a stroke. Then he took two deep breaths, his features relaxed, and he said,



"Dave, ask Dr. Graves to step in, The rest of you keep your distance."

The head of the biological lab came in shortly. "Doc," said the Old Man, "there is one that isn't dead."

Graves looked closely at Jarvis's back. "Interesting," he said. He dropped to one knee.

"Stand back!"

Graves looked up. "But I must have an opportunity——"

"You and my half-wit aunt! I want you to study it, yes, but first you've got to keep it alive. Second, you've got to keep it from escaping. Third, you've got to protect yourself."

Graves smiled. "I'm not afraid of it. I——"

"Be afraid of it! That's an order."

"I was about to say that I must rig up an incubator to care for it after we remove it from the host. It is evident that these things need oxygen—not free oxygen, but oxygen from its host. Perhaps a large dog would suffice."

"No," snapped the Old Man. "Leave it where it is."

"Eh? Is this man a volunteer?"

The Old Man did not answer. Graves went on, "Human laboratory subjects must be volunteers. Professional ethics, you know."

These scientific laddies never do get broken to harness; the Old Man said quietly, "Dr. Graves, every agent in this Section is a volunteer for whatever I find necessary. Please carry out my orders. Get a stretcher in here. Use care."

After they had carted Jarvis away, Davidson and Mary and I went to the lounge for a drink or four. We needed them. Davidson had the shakes. When the first drink failed to fix him I said, "Look, Dave, I feel as bad about those girls as you do—but it could not be helped. Get that through your head."

"How bad was it?" asked Mary.

"Pretty bad. I don't know how many we killed. There was no time to be careful. We weren't shooting people; we were shooting parasites." I turned to Davidson. "Don't you see that?"

"That's just it. They weren't human." He went on, "I think I could shoot my own brother if the job required it. But these things aren't human. You shoot and they keep coming toward you. They don't——" He broke off.

All I felt was pity. After a bit he left and Mary and I talked awhile, trying for answers and getting nowhere. Then she an-



nounced that she was sleepy and headed for the women's dormitory. The Old Man had ordered all hands to sleep in that night, so I went to the boys' wing and crawled in a sack.

The air-raid alarm woke me. I stumbled into clothes as blowers sighed off, then the inter-com bawled in the Old Man's voice, "Anti-gas and anti-radiation procedures! Seal everything! All hands gather in the conference hall. Move!"

Being a field agent, I had no local duties. I shuffled down the tunnel to the offices. The Old Man was in the big hall, looking grim. I wanted to ask what was up, but there were a dozen clerks, agents, stenos, and such there before me. After a bit the Old Man sent me out to get the door tally from the guard on watch. The Old Man called the roll and presently it was clear that every person listed on the door tally was now inside the hall, from old Miss Haines, the Old Man's secretary, down to the steward of the lounge—except the door guard and Jarvis. The tally had to be right; we keep track of who goes in and out a bit more carefully than a bank keeps track of money.

I was sent out again for the door guard. It took a call back to the Old Man before he would leave his post; he then threw the bolt switch and followed me. When we got back Jarvis was there, attended by Graves and a lab man. He was wrapped in a hospital robe, apparently conscious, but dopey.

I began to have some notion of what it was all about. The Old Man was facing the assembled staff and keeping his distance; now he drew a gun. "One of the invading parasites is loose among us," he said. "To some of you that means too much. To the rest of you I will have to explain, as the safety of all of us—of our whole race—depends on complete cooperation and utter obedience." He went on to explain briefly but with ugly exactness what a parasite was, what the situation was. "In short," he concluded, "the parasite is almost certainly in this room. One of us looks human but is an automaton, moving at the will of our deadliest enemy."

There was a murmur. People stole glances at each other. Some tried to draw away. A moment before we had been a team; now we were a mob, each suspicious of the other. I found myself edging away from the man closest to me—Ronald the lounge steward; I had known him for years.

Graves cleared his throat. "Chief," he started in, "I took every reasonable——"



"Stow it. Bring Jarvis out in front. Take his robe off." Graves shut up and he and his assistant complied. Jarvis seemed only partly aware of his surroundings. Graves must have drugged him.

"Turn him around," the Old Man ordered. Jarvis let himself be turned; there was the mark of the slug, a red rash on shoulders and neck. "You can see," the Old Man went on, "where the thing rode him." There had been whispers and one embarrassed giggle when Jarvis had been stripped; now there was a dead hush.

"Now," said the Old Man, "we are going to get *that slug!* Furthermore, we are going to capture it alive. You have all seen where a parasite rides a man. I'm warning you; if the parasite gets burned, I'll burn the man who did it. If you have to shoot to catch it, shoot low. Come here!" He pointed his gun at me.

He halted me halfway between the crowd and himself. "Graves! Sit Jarvis down behind me. No, leave his robe off." The Old Man turned back to me. "Drop your gun on the floor."

The Old Man's gun was pointed at my belly; I was very careful how I drew mine. I slid it six feet away from me. "Take off all your clothes."

That is an awkward order to carry out. The Old Man's gun overcame my inhibitions. It did not help to have some of the girls giggling as I got down to the buff. One of them whispered, "Not bad!" and another one replied, "Knobby, I'd say." I blushed.

After he looked me over the Old Man told me to pick up my gun. "Back me up," he ordered, "and keep an eye on the door. You! Dotty Something-or-other—you're next."

Dotty was a girl from the clerical pool. She had no gun, of course, and she was dressed in a floor-length negligee. She stepped forward, stopped, but did nothing more.

The Old Man waved his gun. "Come on—get 'em off!"

"You really mean it?" she said incredulously.

"Move!"

She almost jumped. "Well!" she said, "no need to take a person's head off." She bit her lip and then unfastened the clasp at her waist. "I ought to get a bonus for this," she said defiantly, then threw the robe from her.

"Over against the wall," the Old Man said savagely. "Ren-frew!"

After my ordeal the men were businesslike though some were embarrassed. As to the women, some giggled and some blushed,



but none of them objected too much. In twenty minutes there were more square yards of goose flesh exposed than I had ever seen before, and the pile of guns looked like an arsenal.

When Mary's turn came, she took her clothes off quickly and without a fuss. She made nothing of it, and wore her skin with quiet dignity. She added considerably to the pile of hardware. I decided she just plain liked guns.

Finally we were all skinned and quite evidently free of parasites, except the Old Man and his old-maid secretary. I think he was a bit in awe of Miss Haines. He looked distressed and poked about in the pile of clothing with his cane. Finally he looked up at her. "Miss Haines—if you please."

I thought to myself, Brother, this time you are going to have to use force.

She stood there, facing him down, a statue of offended modesty. I moved closer and said, out of the corner of my mouth, "Boss—how about yourself? Take 'em off."

He looked startled. "I mean it," I said. "It's you or she. Might be either. Out of those duds."

The Old Man can relax to the inevitable. He said, "Have her stripped." He began fumbling at his zippers, looking grim. I told Mary to take a couple of women and peel Miss Haines. When I turned back the Old Man had his trousers at half mast—and Miss Haines made a break for it.

The Old Man was between us; I couldn't get in a clean shot—and every other agent in the place was disarmed! I don't think it was accident; the Old Man did not trust them not to shoot. He wanted that slug—alive.

She was out the door and running down the passage by the time I could get organized. I could have winged her in the passageway, but I was inhibited. First, I could not shift gears emotionally that fast. I mean to say, she was still Old Lady Haines, secretary to the boss, the one who bawled me out for poor grammar in my reports. In the second place, if she was carrying a parasite, I did not want to risk burning it.

She ducked into a room; again I hesitated—sheer habit: it was the ladies' room.

But only a moment. I slammed the door open and looked around, gun ready.



Something hit me back of my right ear.

I can give no clear account of the next few moments. I was out cold, for a time at least. I remember a struggle and some shouts: "Look out!" "Damn her—she's bitten me!" "Watch your hands!" Then somebody said quietly, "By her hands and feet—careful." Somebody said, "How about him?" and someone answered, "Later, he's not hurt."

I was still practically out as they left, but I began to feel a flood of life stirring back into me. I sat up, feeling extreme urgency about something. I got up, staggering, and went to the door. I looked out cautiously; nobody was in sight. I trotted down the corridor, away from the conference hall.

At the outer door, I realized with a shock that I was naked, and tore on down the hallway to the men's wing. There I grabbed the first clothes I could find and pulled them on. The shoes were much too small for me; it did not seem to matter.

I ran back to the exit, found the switch; the door opened.

I thought I had made a clean escape, but somebody shouted, "Sam!" just as I was going out. I plunged on out. At once I had my choice of six doors and then three more beyond the one I picked. The warren we called the offices was served by a spaghetti-like mess of tunnels. I came up finally inside a subway fruit-and-bookstall, nodded to the proprietor and swung the counter gate up and mingled with the crowd.

I caught the up-river jet express and got off at the first station. I crossed over to the down-river, waited around the change window until a man came up who displayed quite a bit of money as he bought his counter. I got on the same train and got off when he did. At the first dark spot I rabbit-punched him. Now I had money and was ready to operate. I did not know why I had to have money, but I knew that I needed it for what I was about to do.

## 7

I saw things around me with a curious double vision, as if I stared through rippling water—yet I felt no surprise and no curios-



ity. I moved like a sleepwalker, unaware of what I was about to do—but I was wide awake, aware of who I was, where I was, what my job at the Section had been. And, although I did not know what I was about to do, I was always aware of what I was doing and sure that each act was the necessary act at that moment.

I felt no emotion most of the time, except the contentment that comes from work which needs to be done. That was on the conscious level; someplace, more levels down than I understand about, I was excruciatingly unhappy, terrified, and filled with guilt, but that was down, 'way down, locked, suppressed; I was hardly aware of it and not affected by it.

I knew that I had been seen to leave. That shout of "Sam!" was for me; two persons only knew me by that name and the Old Man would have used my right name. So Mary had seen me leave. It was a good thing, I thought, that she had let me find out where her apartment was. It would be necessary to booby-trap it against her next use of it. In the meantime I must get on with work and keep from being picked up.

I was moving through a warehouse district, all my training at work to avoid notice. Shortly I found a satisfactory building; there was a sign: LOFT FOR LEASE—SEE RENTAL AGENT ON GROUND FLOOR. I scouted it, noted the address, then doubled back to a Western Union booth two squares back. There I took a vacant machine and sent this message: EXPEDITE TWO CASES TINY TOTS TALKY TALES SAME DISCOUNT CONSIGNED JOEL FREEMAN, and added the address of the loft. I sent it to Roscoe & Dillard, Jobbers and Manufacturers Agents, Des Moines, Iowa.

As I left the booth the sight of one of the Kwikfede restaurants reminded me that I was hungry, but the reflex cut off and I thought no more about it. I returned to the warehouse, found a dark corner in the rear, and settled back to wait for dawn and business hours.

I have a dim recollection of ever-repeating, claustrophobic nightmares.

At nine o'clock I met the rental agent as he unlocked his office, and leased the loft, paying him a fat squeeze for immediate possession. I went up to the loft, unlocked it, and waited.

About ten-thirty my crates were delivered. After the expressmen were gone, I opened a crate, took out one cell, warmed it, and got it ready. Then I found the rental agent again and said,



"Mr. Greenberg, could you come up for a moment? I want to see about making changes in the lighting."

He fussed, but did so. When we entered the loft I closed the door and led him to the open crate. "Here," I said, "if you will lean over there, you will see what I mean. If I could just——"

I got him with a grip that cut off his wind, ripped his jacket and shirt up, and, with my free hand, transferred a master from the cell to his bare back, then held him tight until he relaxed. I let him up, tucked his shirt in and dusted him off. When he caught his breath, I said, "What news from Des Moines?"

"What do you want to know?" he asked. "How long have you been out?"

I started to explain, but he interrupted with, "Let's have direct conference and not waste time." I skinned up my shirt; he did the same; and we sat down on the unopened crate, back to back, so that our masters could be in contact. My own mind was blank; I have no idea how long it went on. I watched a fly droning around a dusty cobweb.

The building superintendent was our next recruit. He was a large Swede and it took both of us. After that Mr. Greenberg called up the owner and insisted that he had to come down and see some mishap that had occurred to the structure—just what, I don't know; I was busy with the super, opening and warming more cells.

The owner of the building was a prize and we all felt pleased, including, of course, himself. He belonged to the Constitution Club, the membership of which read like Who's Who in Finance, Government, and Industry.

It was pushing noon; we had no time to lose. The super went out to buy clothes and a satchel for me and sent the owner's chauffeur up to be recruited as he did so. At twelve-thirty we left, the owner and I, in his town car; the satchel contained twelve masters, in their cells but ready.

The owner signed *J. Hardwick Potter & Guest*. A flunky tried to take my bag, but I insisted that I needed it to change my shirt before lunch. We fiddled in the washroom until we had it to ourselves, save for the attendant—whereupon we recruited him and sent him with a message to the manager that a guest had taken ill in the washroom.

After we took care of the manager he obtained a white coat and



I became another washroom attendant. I had only ten masters left, but the cases would be picked up from the loft and delivered to the club shortly. The regular attendant and I used up the rest of those I had before the lunch-hour rush was over. One guest surprised us while we were busy and I had to kill him. We stuffed him into the mop closet. There was a lull after that, as the cases had not yet arrived. Hunger reflex nearly doubled me over, then it dropped off but persisted; I told the manager, who had me served lunch in his office. The cases arrived as I was finishing.

During the drowsy period in the midafternoon we secured the place. By four o'clock everyone in the building—members, staff, and guests—were with us; from then on we processed them in the lobby as the doorman passed them in. Later in the day the manager phoned Des Moines for more cases. Our big prize came that evening—the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury. We saw a real victory; the Treasury Department is charged with the safety of the President.

## 8

The capture of a high key official was felt by me with absent-minded satisfaction, then I thought no more about it. We—the human recruits, I mean—hardly thought at all; we knew what we were to do, but we knew it only at the moment of action, as a “high school” horse gets his orders, responds to them, and is ready for the next signal from his rider.

High school horse and rider is a good comparison, but it does not go nearly far enough. The masters had at their disposal not only our full intelligences, they were also able to tap directly our memory and experiences. We communicated for them between masters too; sometimes we knew what we were talking about; sometimes not. Spoken words went through the servant, but we the servants had no part in more important, direct, master-to-master conferences. During these we sat quietly and waited until our riders were through, then straightened out clothing and did what was necessary.

I had no more to do with words spoken by me for my master



than has a telephone. I was a communication instrument, nothing more. Some days after I was recruited I gave the club manager instructions about shipments of masters' carrying cells. I was fleetingly aware, as I did so, that three more ships had landed, but my overt knowledge was limited to a single address in New Orleans.

I thought nothing about it; I went on with my work. I was a new "special assistant to Mr. Potter" and spent the days in his office—and the nights too. Actually, the relationship may have reversed; I frequently gave oral instructions to Potter. Or perhaps I understand the social organization of the parasites as little now as I did then.

I knew—and my master knew—that it was well for me to stay out of sight. Through me, my master knew as much as I did; it knew that I was one human known to the Old Man to have been recruited—and my master knew, I am sure, that the Old Man would not cease to search for me, to recapture me or kill me.

It seems odd that it did not change bodies and kill mine; we had many more recruits available than we had masters. It could not have felt anything parallel to human squeamishness; masters newly delivered from their transit cells frequently damaged their hosts; we always destroyed the host and found a new one. On the other hand, would a skilled cowhand have destroyed a well-trained work horse in favor of an untried, strange mount? That may have been why I was hidden and saved.

After a time the city was "secured" and my master started taking me out on the streets. I do not mean that every inhabitant wore a hump—no; the humans were very numerous and the masters still very few—but the key positions in the city were held by our own recruits, from the cop on the corner to the mayor and the chief of police, not forgetting ward bosses, church ministers, board members, and any and all in public communication and news. The majority continued their usual affairs, not only undisturbed by the masquerade but unaware of it.

Unless, of course, one of them happened to be in the way of some purpose of a master—in which case he was disposed of.

One of the disadvantages our masters worked under was the difficulty of long-distance communication. It was limited to what human hosts could say in human speech over ordinary channels, and was further limited, unless the channel was secured throughout, to code messages such as the one I had sent ordering the first



shipment of masters. Such communications through servants was almost certainly not adequate to the purposes of the masters; they seemed to need frequent body-to-body conference to co-ordinate their actions.

I was sent to New Orleans for such a conference.

I went out on the street as usual one morning, then went to the uptown launching platform and ordered a cab. After a wait my cab was lifted to the loading ramp and I started to get in—as an old gentleman hustled up and climbed into it ahead of me.

I received an order to dispose of him, which order was immediately countermanded by one telling me to go slow and be careful. I said, "Excuse me, sir, but this cab is taken."

"Quite," the elderly man replied, "I've taken it."

"You will have to find another," I said reasonably. "Let's see your queue ticket."

I had him; the cab carried the launching number shown on my ticket, but he did not stir. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

"New Orleans," I answered and learned for the first time my destination.

"Then you can drop me off in Memphis."

I shook my head. "It's out of the way."

"All of fifteen minutes!" He seemed to have difficulty controlling his temper. "You cannot pre-empt a public vehicle unreasonably." He turned from me. "Driver! Explain the rules to this person."

The driver stopped picking his teeth. "It's nothing to me. I pick 'em up, I take 'em, I drop 'em. Settle it yourselves or I'll ask the dispatcher for another fare."

I hesitated, not yet having been instructed. Then I found myself climbing inside. "New Orleans," I said, "with stop at Memphis." The driver shrugged and signaled the control tower. The other passenger snorted and paid me no attention.

Once in the air, he opened his brief case and spread papers across his knees. I watched him with disinterest. I found myself shifting position to let me get at my gun easily. The man shot out a hand, grabbed my wrist. "Not so fast, son," he said, and his features broke into the satanic grin of the Old Man himself.

My reflexes are fast, but I was at the disadvantage of having everything routed from me to my master, passed on by it, and action routed back to me. How much delay is that? I don't know. As I



was drawing, I felt the bell of a gun against my ribs, "Take it easy."

With his other hand he thrust something against my side; I felt a prick, and then through me spread the warm tingle of a jolt of "Morpheus" taking hold. I made one more attempt to pull my gun free and sank forward.

I was vaguely aware of voices. Someone was handling me roughly and someone was saying, "Watch out for that ape!" Another voice replied, "It's all right; his tendons are cut," to which the first retorted, "He's still got *teeth*, hasn't he?"

Yes, I thought fretfully, and if you get close I'll bite you with them. The remark about cut tendons seemed to be true; none of my limbs would move, but that did not worry me as much as being called an ape. It was a shame, I thought, to call a man names when he couldn't protect himself.

I wept a little and then fell into a stupor.

"Feeling better, son?"

The Old Man was leaning over the end of my bed, staring thoughtfully. His chest was bare and covered with grizzled hair.

"Unh," I said, "pretty good, I guess." I started to sit up and found I could not.

The Old Man came around to the side. "We can take those restraints off," he said, fiddling with clasps. "Didn't want you hurting yourself. There!"

I sat up, rubbing myself. "Now," said the Old Man, "how much do you remember? Report."

"Remember?"

"They caught you. Do you remember anything after the parasite got to you?"

I felt a sudden wild fear and clutched at the bed. "Boss! They know where this place is! *I told them.*"

"No, they don't," he answered quietly, "because these aren't the offices you remember. I had the old offices evacuated. They don't know about this hangout—I think. So you remember?"

"Of course I remember. I got out of here—I mean out of the old offices and went up—" My thoughts raced ahead; I had a sudden image of holding a live master in my bare hand, ready to place it on the rental agent.



I threw up. The Old Man wiped my mouth and said gently, "Go ahead."

I swallowed and said, "Boss—they're all around. They've got the city."

"I know. Same as Des Moines. And Minneapolis, St. Paul, New Orleans, and Kansas City. Maybe more, I don't know—I can't be everywhere." He scowled and added, "It's like fighting with your feet in a sack. We're losing, fast. We can't even clamp down on the cities we know about."

"Good grief! Why not?"

"You should know. Because 'older and wiser heads' are still unconvinced. Because when they take over a city, everything goes on as before."

I stared. "Never mind," he said gently. "You are the first break we've had. You're the first victim to be recaptured alive—and now we find you remember what happened. That's important. And your parasite is the first one we've managed to capture and keep alive. We'll have a chance to——"

My face must have been a mask of terror; the notion that my master was still alive—and might get to me again—was more than I could stand.

The Old Man shook me. "Take it easy," he said mildly. "You are still pretty weak."

"Where is it?"

"Eh? The parasite? Don't worry about it. It's living off your opposite number, a red orangutan, name of Napoleon. It's safe."

"Kill it!"

"Hardly. We need it alive, for study."

I must have gone to pieces, for he slapped me. "Take a brace," he said. "I hate to bother you when you are sick, but I've got to. We've got to get everything you remember down on wire. So level off and fly right."

I pulled myself together and started making a careful report of all that I could remember. I described renting the loft and recruiting my first victim, then how we moved on to the Constitution Club. The Old Man nodded. "Logical. You were a good agent, even for *them*."

"You don't understand," I objected. "I didn't do any thinking. I knew what was going on, but that was all. It was as if, uh, as if——" I paused, stuck for words.



"Never mind. Get on."

"After we recruited the club manager the rest was easy. We took them as they came in and——"

"Names?"

"Oh, certainly. M. C. Greenberg, Thor Hansen, J. Hardwick Potter, his chauffeur Jim Wakeley, a little guy called 'Jake' who was washroom attendant, but he had to be disposed of later—his master would not let him take time out for necessities. Then there was the manager; I never did get his name." I paused, letting my mind run back, trying to make sure of each recruit. "Oh my God!"

"What is it?"

"The Assistant Secretary of the *Treasury*."

"You got *him*?"

"Yes. The first day. How long has it been? God, Chief, the Treasury Department *protects the President!*"

But there was just a hole in the air where the Old Man had been.

I lay back exhausted. I started sobbing into my pillow. After a while I went to sleep.

## 9

I woke up with my mouth foul, head buzzing, and a sense of impending disaster. Nevertheless I felt fine, by comparison. A cheerful voice said, "Feeling better?"

A small brunette creature was bending over me. She was a cute little bug and I was well enough to appreciate the fact, faintly. She was dressed in an odd costume: white shorts, a wisp of stuff that restrained her breasts, and a sort of metal carapace that covered the neck, shoulders, and spine.

"Better," I admitted, making a face.

"Mouth taste unpleasant?"

"Like a Balkan cabinet meeting."

"Here." She gave me some stuff in a glass; it burned a little and washed away the bad taste. "No," she went on, "don't swallow it. Spit it out and I'll get you water." I obeyed.



"I'm Doris Marsden," she went on, "your day nurse."

"Glad to know you, Doris," I answered and stared at her. "Say—why the getup? Not that I don't like it, but you look like a refugee from a comic book."

She giggled. "I feel like a chorus girl. But you'll get used to it—I did."

"I like it. But why?"

"Old Man's orders."

Then I knew why, and I started feeling worse again. Doris went on, "Now for supper." She got a tray.

"I don't want anything to eat."

"Open up," she said firmly, "or I'll rub it in your hair."

Between gulps, taken in self-defense, I managed to get out, "I feel pretty good. One jolt of Gyro and I'll be on my feet."

"No stimulants," she said flatly, still shoveling it in. "Special diet and lots of rest, with a sleeping pill later. That's what the man says."

"What's wrong with me?"

"Exhaustion, starvation, and incipient scurvy. As well as scabies and lice—but we got those whipped. Now you know—and if you tell the doctor, I'll call you a liar to your face. Turn over."

I did so and she started changing dressings; I appeared to be spotted with sores; I thought about what she had told me and tried to remember how I had lived under my master.

"Stop trembling," she said. "Having a bad one?"

"I'm all right," I told her. As near as I could remember I had not eaten oftener than every second or third day. Bathing? Let me see. Why, I hadn't bathed at all! I had shaved every day and put on a clean shirt; that was necessary to the masquerade and the master knew it.

On the other hand, I had never taken off my shoes from the time I had stolen them until the Old Man had recaptured me—and they had been too tight to start with. "What shape are my feet in?" I asked.

"Don't be nosy," Doris advised me.

I like nurses; they are calm and earthy and tolerant. Miss Briggs, my night nurse, was not the cute job that Doris was; she had a face like a horse. She wore the same musical-comedy rig that Doris sported, but she wore it with a no-nonsense air and



walked like a grenadier. Doris, bless her heart, jiggled pleasantly as she walked.

Miss Briggs refused me a second sleeping pill when I woke up in the night and had the horrors, but she did play poker with me and skinned me out of half a month's pay. I tried to find out from her about the President matter, but she wasn't talking. She would not admit that she knew anything about parasites, flying saucers, or whatnot—and she herself dressed in a costume that could have only one purpose!

I asked her what the public news was, then. She maintained that she had been too busy to look at a 'cast. So I asked to have a stereo box moved into my room. She said I would have to ask the doctor; I was on the "quiet" list. I asked when I was going to see this so-called doctor. About then her call bell sounded and she left.

I fixed her. While she was gone, I cold-decked the deal, so that she got a pat hand—then I wouldn't bet against her.

I got to sleep later on and was awakened by Miss Briggs slapping me in the face with a washcloth. She got me ready for breakfast, then Doris relieved her and brought it to me. While I was chomping I tackled her for news—with the same score I had made with Miss Briggs. Nurses run a hospital as if it were a nursery for backward children.

Davidson came to see me after breakfast. "Heard you were here," he said. He was wearing shorts and nothing else, except that his left arm was covered by a dressing.

"More than I've heard," I complained. "What happened to you?"

"Bee stung me."

If he didn't want to tell me how he had got burned, that was his business. I went on, "The Old Man was in here yesterday and left very suddenly. Seen him since?"

"Yep."

"Well?" I answered.

"Well, how about *you*? Have the psych boys cleared you for classified matters, or not?"

"Is there any doubt about it?"

"You're darn tootin' there is. Poor old Jarvis never did pull out of it."

"Huh?" I hadn't thought about Jarvis. "How is he now?"



"He isn't. Dropped into a coma and died—the day after you left. I mean the day after you were captured." Davidson looked me over. "You must be tough."

I did not feel tough. Tears of weakness welled up again and I blinked them back. Davidson pretended not to see and went on, "You should have seen the ruckus after you gave us the slip. The Old Man took out after you wearing nothing but a gun and a look of grim determination. He would have caught you, but the police picked him up and we had to get him out of hock," Davidson grinned.

I grinned feebly. There was something both gallant and silly about the Old Man charging out to save the world in his birthday suit. "Sorry I missed it. What else has happened—lately?"

Davidson looked me over, then said, "Wait a minute." He stepped out and was gone a short time. When he came back, he said, "The Old Man says okay. What do you want to know?"

"Everything! What happened yesterday?"

"That's how I got this." He waved his damaged wing at me. "I was lucky," he added. "Three agents were killed. Quite a fracas."

"But how about the President? Was he—"

Doris bustled in. "Oh, there you are!" she said to Davidson. "I told you to stay in bed. You're due at Mercy Hospital right now. The ambulance has been waiting ten minutes."

He stood up, grinned, and pinched her with his good hand. "The party can't start until I get there."

"Well, hurry!"

"Coming."

I called out, "Hey! How about the *President*?"

Davidson looked back over his shoulder. "Oh, him? He's all right—not a scratch." He went on.

Doris came back a few minutes later, fuming. "Patients!" she said, like a swear word. "I should have had twenty minutes for his injection to take hold; as it was I gave it to him when he got into the ambulance."

"Injection for what?"

"Didn't he tell you?"

"No."

"Well—no reason not to tell you. Amputation and graft, lower left arm."

"Oh." Well, I thought, I won't hear the end of the story from



Davidson; grafting on a new limb is a shock. They keep the patient hopped up for at least ten days. I tackled Doris again. "How about the Old Man? Was he wounded? Or would it be against your sacred rules to tell me?"

"You talk too much," she answered. "It's time for morning nourishment and your nap." She produced a glass of milky slop.

"Speak up, wench, or I'll spit it in your face."

"The Old Man? You mean the Chief of Section?"

"Who else?"

"*He's* not on the sick list." She made a face. "I wouldn't want *him* as a patient."

## 10

For two or three more days I was kept in bed and treated like a child. I didn't care; it was the first real rest I had had in years. The sores got better and presently I was encouraged—"required" I should say—to take light exercise around the room.

The Old Man called on me. "Well," he said, "still malingering."

I flushed. "Damn your black, flabby heart," I told him. "Get me some pants and I'll show you who is malingering."

"Slow down." He took my chart and looked it over. "Nurse," he said, "get this man a pair of shorts. I'm restoring him to duty."

Doris faced up to him like a banty hen. "You may be the big boss, but you can't give orders here. The doctor will—"

"Stow it!" he said, "and get those drawers."

"But—"

He picked her up, swung her around, paddled her behind, and said, "Get!"

She went out, squawking and sputtering, and came back with the doctor. The Old Man said mildly, "Doc, I sent for pants, not for you."

The medico said stiffly, "I'll thank you not to interfere with my patients."

"He's not your patient. I'm restoring him to duty."



"Yes? Sir, if you do not like the way I run my department, you may have my resignation."

The Old Man answered, "I beg your pardon, sir. Sometimes I become too preoccupied to remember to follow correct procedure. Will you do me the favor of examining this patient? If he can be restored to duty, it would help me to have his services at once."

The doctor's jaw muscles were jumping, but he said, "Certainly, sir!" He went through a show of studying my chart, then tested my reflexes. "He needs more recuperation time—but you may have him. Nurse—fetch clothing for this man."

Clothing consisted of shorts and shoes. But everybody else was dressed the same way, and it was comforting to see all those bare shoulders with no masters clinging to them. I told the Old Man so. "Best defense we've got," he growled, "even if it does make the joint look like a summer colony. If we don't win this set-to before winter weather, we're licked."

He stopped at a door with a sign: BIOLOGICAL LABORATORY—STAY OUT!

I hung back. "Where are we going?"

"To take a look at your twin, the ape with your parasite."

"That's what I thought. Not for me—no, thanks!" I could feel myself tremble.

"Now look, son," he said patiently, "get over your panic. The best way is to face up to it. I know it's hard—I've spent hours staring at the thing, getting used to it."

"You don't know—you *can't* know!" I had the shakes so badly that I had to steady myself by the door frame.

"I suppose it's different," he said slowly, "when you've actually had it. Jarvis—" He broke off.

"You're darn right it's different! You're not going to get *me* in *there*!"

"No, I guess not. Well, the doctor was right. Go on back, son, and turn yourself in at the infirmary." He started into the laboratory.

He had gotten three or four steps away before I called out, "Boss!"

He stopped and turned, his face expressionless. "Wait," I added, "I'm coming."

"You don't have to."

"I'll do it. It—it just takes—a while—to get your nerve back."



As I came alongside him he grasped my upper arm, warmly and affectionately, and continued to hold it as we walked. We went on in, through another locked door and into a room conditioned warm and moist. The ape was there, caged.

His torso was supported and restrained by a strap-metal framework. His arms and legs hung limply, as if he had no control over them. He looked up and at us with eyes malevolent and intelligent; then the fire died out and they were merely the eyes of a dumb brute, a brute in pain.

"Around to the side," the Old Man said softly. I would have hung back, but he still had me by the arm. The ape followed us with his eyes, but his body was held by the frame. From the new position I could see—it.

My master. The thing that had ridden my back for an endless time, spoken with my mouth—thought with my brain. My master.

"Steady," the Old Man said softly. "You'll get used to it. Look away for a bit. It helps."

I did so and it did help. I took a couple of deep breaths and managed to slow my heart down. I made myself stare at it.

It is not the appearance of a parasite which arouses horror. Nor is the horror entirely from knowing what they can do, for I felt the horror the first time I saw one, before I knew what it was. I tried to tell the Old Man so. He nodded, his eyes on the parasite. "It's the same with everybody," he said. "Unreasoned fear, like a bird with a snake. Probably its prime weapon." He let his eyes drift away, as if too long a sight was too much even for his rawhide nerves.

I stuck with him, trying to get used to it and gulping at my breakfast. I kept telling myself that it couldn't harm *me*. I looked away again and found the Old Man's eyes on me. "How about it?" he said. "Getting hardened?"

I looked back at it. "A little." I went on savagely, "All I want is to kill it! I want to kill all of them—I could spend my life killing them and killing them." I began to shake again.

The Old Man studied me. "Here," he said, and handed me his gun.

It startled me. I was unarmed, having come straight from bed. I took it but looked at him questioningly. "Huh? What for?"

"You want to kill it. If you have to—go ahead. Kill it. Right now."



"Huh? But—Boss, you told me you needed this one for study."

"I do. But if you feel that you have to kill, do so. This particular one is your baby. If you need to kill it, to make you a whole man again, go ahead."

"To make me a whole man again—'" The thought rang through my head. The Old Man knew what medicine it would take to cure me. I was no longer trembling; the gun was cradled in my hand, ready to spit and kill. My master. . . .

If I killed *this* one I would be a free man, but I would never be free as long as *it* lived. I wanted to kill every one of them, search them out, burn them—but *this* one above all.

My master . . . still my master unless I killed it. I had a dark and certain thought that if I were alone with it, I would be able to do nothing, that I would freeze while it crawled up me and settled again between my shoulder blades, searched out my spinal column, took possession of my brain and my very self.

But now I could kill it!

No longer frightened but fiercely exultant, I raised the gun.

The Old Man watched me.

I lowered the gun and said uncertainly, "Boss, suppose I do. You've got others?"

"No."

"But you need it."

"Yes."

"Well, but— For the love o' God, why did you give me the gun?"

"You know why. If you have to, go ahead. If you can pass it up, then the Section will use it."

I *had* to. Even if we killed all the others, while this one was alive I would crouch and tremble in the dark. As for others—why, we could capture a dozen at the Constitution Club. With this one dead I'd lead the raid myself. Breathing rapidly, I raised the gun again.

Then I turned and chucked the gun to the Old Man; he plucked it out of the air. "What happened?" he said.

"Uh? I don't know. When I got to it, it was enough to know that I could."

"I figured it would be."

I felt warm and relaxed, as if I had just killed a man or had a woman—as if I had just killed *it*. I was able to turn my back on it. I



was not even angry with the Old Man for what he had done. "I know you did, damn you. How does it feel to be a puppet master?"

He did not take the jibe as a joke. He answered soberly, "Not me. The most I ever do is to lead a man on the path he wants to follow. *There* is the puppet master."

I looked around at it. "Yes," I agreed softly, "'the puppet master.' You think you know what you mean—but you don't. And, Boss . . . I hope you never do."

"I hope so too," he answered seriously.

I could look now without trembling. Still staring at it, I went on, "Boss, when you are through with it, then I'll kill it."

"That's a promise."

We were interrupted by a man bustling in. He was dressed in shorts and a lab coat; it made him look silly. It was not Graves; I never saw Graves again; I imagine the Old Man ate him for lunch.

"Chief," he said, "I didn't know you were in here. I—"

"Well, I am," the Old Man cut in. "Why are you wearing a coat?" The Old Man's gun was out and pointed at him.

The man stared at the gun as if it were a bad joke. "Why, I was working. There is always a chance of splattering one's self. Some of our solutions are rather——"

"Take it off!"

"Eh?"

The Old Man wagged his gun. To me he said, "Get ready to take him."

The man took his coat off. His shoulders were bare, nor was there the telltale rash. "Take that damned coat and burn it," the Old Man told him. "Then get back to work."

The man hurried away, his face red, then stopped and said, "Chief, are you ready for that, uh, procedure?"

"Shortly. I'll let you know."

He left. The Old Man wearily put his gun away. "Post an order," he muttered. "Read it aloud. Make them initial it. Tattoo it on their narrow little chests—some smart aleck thinks it doesn't mean him. Scientists!"

I turned back to my former master. It still revolted me, but there was a gusty feeling of danger, too, that was not totally unpleasant. "Boss," I asked, "what are you going to do with this thing?"



"I plan to interview it."

"To what? But how? What I want to say is—the ape, I mean——"

"No, the ape can't talk. We'll have to have a volunteer—a human volunteer."

When I began to visualize what he meant the horror struck me again almost full force. "You can't mean that. You wouldn't do that—not to anybody."

"I could and I will. What needs to be done will be done."

"You won't get any volunteers!"

"I've got one."

"You have? Who?"

"But I don't want to use the one I've got. I'm still looking for the right man."

I was disgusted and showed it. "You ought not to be looking for anyone, volunteer or not. If you've got one, you won't find another; there can't be two people that crazy."

"Possibly," he agreed. "But I still don't want the one I've got. The interview is a 'must,' son; we are fighting with a total lack of military intelligence. We don't know our enemy. We can't negotiate with him, we don't know where he comes from, nor what makes him tick. We've got to find out; our existence depends on it. The *only* way to talk to these critters is through a human. So it will be done. But I'm still looking for a volunteer."

"Don't look at me!"

"I *am* looking at you."

My answer had been half wisecrack; his answer startled me speechless. I managed to splutter, "You're crazy! I should have killed it when I had your gun. I would have if I had known why you wanted it. But as for volunteering to let you put that thing—No! I've had it."

He plowed on as if he had not heard me. "It can't be just anyone; it has to be a man who can take it. Jarvis wasn't stable enough, nor tough enough. We know you are."

"Me? All you know is that I lived through it once. I—I couldn't *stand* it again."

"Well," he answered calmly, "it is less likely to kill you than someone else. You are proved and salted; with anyone else I run more risk of losing an agent."

"Since when did you worry about risking an agent?" I said bitterly.



"Always, believe me. I am giving you one more chance, son: are you going to do this, knowing that it has to be done and that you stand the best chance of anybody—and can be of most use to us, because you *are* used to it—or are you going to let some other agent risk his reason and his life in your place?"

I started to try to explain how I felt. I could not stand the thought of dying while possessed by a parasite. Somehow I felt that to die so would be to die already consigned to an endless unbearable hell. Even worse was the prospect of *not* dying once the slug touched me. But I could not find words for it.

I shrugged. "You can have my appointment back. There is a limit to what one man can go through. I won't do it."

He turned to the inter-com on the wall. "Laboratory," he called out, "we'll start now. Hurry up!"

I recognized the voice of the man who had walked in on us. "Which subject?" he asked.

"The original volunteer."

"The smaller rig?" the voice asked doubtfully.

"Right. Get it in here."

I started for the door. The Old Man snapped, "Where are you going?"

"Out," I snapped back. "I want no part of this."

He grabbed me and spun me around. "No, you don't. You know about these creatures; your advice could help."

"Let go of me."

"You'll stay!" he said savagely, "strapped down or free to move. I've made allowance for your illness, but I've had enough of your nonsense."

I was too weary to buck him. "You're the boss."

The lab people wheeled in a sort of chair, more like a Sing Sing special than anything else. There were clamps for ankles and knees and for wrists and elbows. There was a corselet to restrain the waist and chest, but the back was cut away so that the shoulders of the victim would be free.

They placed it beside the ape's cage, then removed the side of the cage nearest the "chair." The ape watched with intent, aware eyes, but his limbs still dangled helplessly. Nevertheless, I became still more disturbed at the cage being opened. Only the Old Man's



threat of restraint kept me there. The technicians stood back, apparently ready. The outer door opened and several people came in, among them Mary.

I was caught off balance; I had been wanting to see her and had tried several times to get word to her through the nurses, but they either could not identify her or had received instructions. Now I saw her under *these* circumstances. I cursed the Old Man to myself—it was no sort of a show to bring a woman to, even a woman agent. There ought to be decent limits somewhere.

Mary looked surprised and nodded. I let it go at that; it was no time for small talk. She was looking good, though very sober. She was dressed in the costume the nurses had worn, but she did not have the ludicrous helmet and back plate. The others were men, loaded with recording and stereo equipment as well as other apparatus.

“Ready?” inquired the lab chief.

“Get going,” answered the Old Man.

Mary walked straight to the “chair” and sat down. Two technicians knelt and started fastening the clamps. I watched in a frozen daze. Then I grabbed the Old Man and literally threw him aside and I was by the chair, kicking the technicians out of the way. “Mary!” I screamed, “get up from there!”

Now the Old Man had his gun on me. “Away from her,” he ordered. “You three—grab him and tie him.”

I looked at the gun, then down at Mary. She did not move; her feet were already bound. She simply looked at me with compassionate eyes. “Get up, Mary,” I said dully, “I want to sit down.”

They removed the chair and brought in a larger one. I could not have used hers; both were tailored to size. When they finished clamping me I might as well have been cast into concrete. My back began to itch unbearably, although nothing, as yet, had touched it.

Mary was no longer in the room; I had not seen her leave and it did not seem to matter. After I had been prepared the Old Man laid a hand on my arm and said quietly, “Thanks, son.” I did not answer.

I did not see them handle the parasite as it took its place behind my back. I was not interested enough to look, even if I had been



able to turn my head, which I couldn't. Once the ape barked and screamed and someone shouted, "Watch it!"

There was silence, as if everyone was holding his breath—then something moist touched my neck and I fainted.

I came out of it with the same tingling energy I had experienced before. I knew I was in a tight spot, but I was warily determined to *think* my way out. I was not afraid; I was contemptuous and sure that I could outwit them.

The Old Man said sharply, "Can you hear me?"

I answered, "Quit shouting."

"Do you remember what we are here for?"

I said, "You want to ask questions. What are you waiting for?"

"*What are you?*"

"That's a silly question. I'm six feet one, more muscle than brain, and I weigh——"

"Not you. You know to whom I am talking—*you*."

"Guessing games?"

The Old Man waited before replying, "It's no good to pretend that I don't know what you are——"

"Ah, but you don't."

"You know that I have been studying you all the time you have been living on the body of that ape. I know things which give me an advantage. One——" He started ticking them off.

"You can be killed.

"Two, you can be hurt. You don't like electric shock and you can't stand the heat even a man can stand.

"Three, you are helpless without your host. I could have you removed and you would die.

"Four, you have no powers except those you borrow—and your host is helpless. Try your bonds. You must co-operate—or die."

I had already been trying my bonds, finding them, as I expected, impossible to escape. This did not worry me; I was oddly contented to be back with my master, to be free of troubles and tensions. My business was to serve; the future would take care of itself. One ankle strap seemed less tight than the other; possibly I might drag my foot through it. I checked on the arm clamps; perhaps if I relaxed completely . . .

An instruction came at once—or I made a decision; the words mean the same. There was no conflict between my master and me;



we were one. Instruction or decision, I knew it was not time to risk an escape. I ran my eyes around the room, trying to figure who was armed. It was my guess that only the Old Man was; that bettered the chances.

Somewhere, deep down, was that ache of guilt and despair never experienced by any but the servants of the masters, but I was much too busy to be troubled by it.

"Well?" the Old Man went on. "Do you answer questions, or do I punish you?"

"What questions?" I asked. "Up to now you've been talking nonsense."

The Old Man turned to a technician. "Give me the tickler."

I felt no apprehension, being still busy checking my bonds. If I could tempt him into placing his gun within reach—assuming that I could get one arm free—then I might . . .

He reached past my shoulders with a rod. I felt a shocking pain; the room blacked out as if a switch had been thrown. I was split apart; for the moment I was masterless.

The pain left, leaving only searing memory behind. Before I could think coherently the splitting away had ended and I was again safe in the arms of my master. But for the first and only time in my service to him I was not myself free of worry; some of his own wild fear and pain was passed on to me.

"Well," asked the Old Man, "how did you like the taste?"

The panic washed away; I was again filled with unworried well-being, albeit wary and watchful. My wrists and ankles, which had begun to pain me, stopped hurting. "Why did you do that?" I asked. "Certainly, you can hurt me—but why?"

"Answer my questions."

"Ask them."

"*What are you?*"

The answer did not come at once. The Old Man reached for the rod; I heard myself saying, "We are the people."

"What people?"

"The only people. We have studied you and we know your ways. We—" I stopped suddenly.

"Keep talking," the Old Man said grimly, and gestured with the rod.

"We come," I went on, "to bring you—"

"To bring us what?"



I wanted to talk; the rod was terrifyingly close. But there was some difficulty with words. "To bring you peace," I blurted out.

The Old Man snorted.

"Peace," I went on, "and contentment—and the joy of—of surrender." I hesitated again; "surrender" was not the word. I struggled the way one struggles with a foreign language. "The joy," I repeated, "the joy of . . . *nirvana*." The word fitted. I felt like a dog being patted for fetching a stick; I wriggled with pleasure.

"Let me get this," the Old Man said. "You are promising the human race that, if we will just surrender, you will take care of us and make us happy. Right?"

"Exactly!"

The Old Man studied this while looking past my shoulders. He spat on the floor. "You know," he said slowly, "me and my kind, we have often been offered that bargain. It never worked out worth a damn."

"Try it yourself," I suggested. "It can be done quickly—then you will *know*."

He stared this time in my face. "Maybe I should. Maybe I owe it to—somebody, to try it. Maybe I will, someday. But right now," he went on briskly, "you have questions to answer. Answer quick and proper and stay healthy. Be slow and I'll step up the current." He brandished the rod.

I shrank back, feeling dismay and defeat. For a moment I had thought he was going to accept and had been planning the possibilities of escape. "Now," he went on, "where do you come from?"

No answer. I felt no urge to answer.

The rod came closer. "Far away!" I burst out.

"That's no news. Where's your home base, your own planet?"

The Old Man waited, then said, "I'll have to touch up your memory." I watched dully, thinking nothing. He was interrupted by an assistant. "Eh?" said the Old Man.

"There may be a semantic difficulty," the other repeated. "Different astronomical concepts."

"Why?" asked the Old Man. "That slug knows what his host knows; we've proved that." But he turned back and started a different tack. "See here. You savvy the solar system. Is your planet inside it or outside?"

I hesitated, then answered, "All planets are ours."



The Old Man pulled at his lip. "I wonder," he mused, "what you mean." He went on: "Never mind, you can claim the whole damned universe. Where is your nest? Where do your ships come from?"

I could not have told him; I sat silent.

Suddenly he reached behind me; I felt one smashing blow. "Talk, damn you! What planet? Mars? Venus? Jupiter? Saturn? Uranus? Neptune? Pluto?" As he ticked them off, I saw them—and I have never been as far off Earth as the space stations. When he came to the right one, I knew—and the thought was instantly snatched from me.

"Speak up," he went on, "or feel the whip."

I heard myself saying, "None of them. Our home is much farther away."

He looked past my shoulders and then into my eyes. "You are lying. You need some juice to keep you honest."

"No, no!"

"No harm to try." Slowly he thrust the rod behind me. I knew the answer again and was about to give it when something grabbed my throat. Then the pain started.

It did not stop. I was being torn apart; I tried to talk—anything to stop the pain, but the hand still clutched my throat.

Through a blur of pain I saw the Old Man's face, shimmering and floating. "Had enough?" he asked. I started to answer, but choked and gagged. I saw him reach out again with the rod.

I burst into pieces and died.

They were leaning over me. Someone said, "He's coming around."

The Old Man's face was over mine. "You all right, son?" he asked anxiously. I turned my face away.

"One side, please," another voice said. "Let me give him the injection." The speaker knelt by me and gave me a shot. He stood up, looked at his hands, then wiped them on his shorts.

Gyro, I thought absently, or something like it. Whatever it was, it was pulling me back together. Shortly I sat up, unassisted. I was still in the cage room, directly in front of that damnable chair. I started to get to my feet; the Old Man gave me a hand. I shook him off. "Don't touch me!"



"Sorry," he answered, then snapped, "Jones! You and Ito—get the litter. Take him to the infirmary. Doc, you go along."

"Certainly." The man who had given me the shot started to take my arm. I drew back. "Keep your hands off me!"

The doctor looked at the Old Man, who shrugged, then motioned them all back. Alone, I went to the door and on out through the outer door into the passageway. I paused there, looked at my wrists and ankles and decided that I might as well go to the infirmary. Doris would take care of me and then maybe I could sleep. I felt as if I had gone fifteen rounds and lost them all.

"Sam, Sam!"

I knew that voice. Mary hurried up and was standing before me, looking at me with great sorrowful eyes. "Oh, Sam! What have they done to you?" Her voice was so choked that I could hardly understand her.

"You should know," I answered and had strength enough left to slap her.

"Bitch," I added.

My room was still empty, but I did not find Doris. I closed the door, then lay face down on the bed and tried to stop thinking or feeling. Presently I heard a gasp, and opened one eye; there was Doris. "What in the world?" she exclaimed. I felt her gentle hands on me. "Why, you poor, poor baby!" Then she added, "Stay there, don't move. I'll get the doctor."

"No!"

"But you've got to have the doctor."

"I won't see him. You help me."

She did not answer. Presently I heard her go out. She came back shortly—I think it was shortly—and started to bathe my wounds. I wanted to scream when she touched my back. But she dressed it quickly and said, "Over easy, now."

"I'll stay face down."

"No," she denied, "I want you to drink something, that's a good boy."

I turned over, with her doing most of the work, and drank what she gave me. After a bit I went to sleep.

I seem to remember being awakened, seeing the Old Man and cursing him. The doctor was there too—or it could have been a dream.



Miss Briggs woke me, and Doris brought me breakfast; it was as if I had never been off the sick list. I wasn't in too bad shape. I felt as if I had gone over Niagara Falls in a barrel; there were dressings on both arms and both legs where I had cut myself on the clamps, but no bones were broken. Where I was sick was in my soul.

Don't misunderstand me. The Old Man could send me into a dangerous spot. That I had signed up for. But I had not signed up for what he had done to me. He knew what made me tick and he had used it to force me into something I would never have done willingly. Then after he had gotten me where he wanted me, he had used me unmercifully. Oh, I've slapped men around to make them talk. Sometimes you have to. This was different. Believe me.

It was the Old Man that really hurt. Mary? After all, what was she? Just another babe. True, I was disgusted with her for letting herself be used as bait. It was all right for her to use her femaleness as an agent; the Section had to have female operatives. There have always been female spies, and the young and pretty ones have always used the same tools.

But she should not have agreed to use them against a fellow agent—at least, she should not have used them against *me*.

Not very logical, is it? It was logical to me. I'd had it; they could go ahead with "Operation Parasite" without me, I owned a cabin in the Adirondacks; I had stuff there in deep freeze to carry me a year, anyhow. I had plenty of tempus pills; I would go up there and use them—and the world could save itself, or go to hell, without me.

If anyone came within a hundred yards, he would either show a bare back or be burned down.

## 11

I had to tell somebody about it and Doris was the goat. She was indignant. Shucks, she was sore as a boiled owl. She had dressed what they had done to me. Being a nurse, she had dressed a lot



worse, but this had been done *by our own people*. I blurted out how I felt about Mary's part in it.

"Do I understand that you wanted to *marry* this girl?"

"Correct. Stupid, ain't I?"

"Then she knew what she could do to you. It wasn't fair." She stopped massaging me, her eyes snapping. "I've never met your redhead—but if I do, I'll scratch her face!"

I smiled at her. "You're a good kid, Doris. I believe you would play fair with a man."

"Oh, I've pulled some fast ones. But if I did anything halfway like that, I'd have to break every mirror I own. Turn and I'll get the other leg."

Mary showed up. The first I knew was hearing Doris say angrily, "You can't come in."

Mary's voice answered, "I'm going in."

Doris squealed "Get back—or I'll pull that hennaed hair out by the roots!"

There were sounds of a scuffle—and the *smack* of someone getting slapped. I yelled, "Hey! What goes on?"

They appeared in the doorway together. Doris was breathing hard and her hair was mussed. Mary managed to look dignified, but there was a bright red patch on her cheek the size of Doris's hand.

Doris caught her breath and said, "You get out. He doesn't want to see you."

Mary said, "I'll hear that from him."

I looked at them both, then said, "Oh, what the hell. She's here and I've got some things to tell her. Thanks for trying, Doris."

Doris said, "You're a fool!" and flounced out.

Mary came over to the bed. "Sam," she said. "Sam."

"My name isn't 'Sam.'"

"I've never known your right name."

It was no time to explain that my parents had burdened me with "Elihu." I answered, "What of it? 'Sam' will do."

"Sam," she repeated. "Oh, Sam, my dear."

"I am not your 'dear.'"

She inclined her head. "Yes, I know. I don't know why. Sam, I came to find out why you hate me. Perhaps I can't change it, but I must know."



I made a sound of disgust. "After what you did, you don't know why? Mary, you may be a cold fish, but you aren't stupid."

She shook her head. "Just backwards, Sam. I'm not cold, but I'm frequently stupid. Look at me, please. I know what they did to you. I know that you let it be done to save me from it. I know and I'm deeply grateful. But I don't know why you hate me. I did not ask you to do it and I did not want you to do it."

I didn't answer; presently she said, "You don't believe me?"

I reared up on one elbow. "I believe you have yourself convinced that that is how it was. Now I'll tell *you* how it was."

"Do, please."

"You sat down in that trick chair knowing that I would never let you go through with it. You *knew* that, whether your devious female mind admitted it or not. The Old Man could not have forced me, not with a gun, not even with drugs. *You* could. You did. You forced me to do something which I would rather have been dead than touch—a thing that leaves me dirty and spoiled. You did it."

She grew steadily whiter, until her face was almost green against her hair. She caught her breath and said, "You believe that, Sam?"

"What else?"

"Sam, that is not the way it was. I did not know you were going to be there. I was terribly startled. But I had to go through with it; I had promised."

"Promised," I repeated. "That covers everything, a schoolgirl promise."

"Hardly a schoolgirl promise."

"No matter. And it doesn't matter whether you are telling the truth about knowing that I would be in there. The point is: *you* were there and *I* was there—and you could figure what would happen if you did what you did."

"Oh." She waited, then went on, "That's the way it looks to you, and I can't dispute the facts."

"Hardly."

She stood very still for a long time. I let her. Finally she said, "Sam—once you said something about wanting to marry me."

"That was another day."

"I didn't expect you to renew the offer. But there was a sort of corollary. Sam, no matter what you think of me, I want to tell you



that I am deeply grateful for what you did for me. Uh—Miss Bar-kis is willing, Sam. You understand me?"

I grinned at her. "Honest, so help me, the workings of the female mind delight and astound me. You always think you can cancel the score and start over with that one trump play." I continued to grin while she turned red. "It won't work. I shan't inconvenience you by taking up your generous offer."

She came back at me in a steady voice, "I let myself in for that. Nevertheless, I meant it. That—or anything else I can ever do for you."

I sank back and lay down. "Sure, you can do something for me."

Her face lit up. "What?"

"Quit bothering me. I'm tired."

I turned my face away.

The Old Man put his head in late that afternoon. My immediate response was pleasure; the Old Man's personality is hard to shake off. Then I remembered and went cold.

"I want to talk to you," he started in.

"I don't want to talk to you. Get out."

He ignored it, and came in. "Mind if I sit?"

"You seem to be doing so."

He ignored that too. "You know, son, you are one of my best boys, but sometimes you are hasty."

"Don't let that worry you," I answered. "As soon as the doctor lets me up, I'm through."

He was not hearing anything that he did not choose to hear. "You jump to conclusions. Now take this girl Mary——"

"Mary who?"

"You know who I mean; you know her as 'Mary Cavanaugh.'"

"*You* take her."

"You jumped all over her without knowing the score. You've got her all upset. You may have ruined a good agent for me."

"Humph! I'm in tears."

"Listen, you young snot, you didn't have any call to be rough on her. You don't know the facts."

I did not answer; explanations are a poor defense.

"Oh, I know what you think," he went on. "You think she let



herself be used as bait. Well, you've got it slightly wrong. She was being used, but *I* was using *her*. I planned it that way."

"I know you did."

"Then why blame her?"

"Because you couldn't have carried it out without her co-operation. It's big of you, you no-good, heartless bastard, to take all the blame—but you can't."

He did not hear my profanity either. He went on, "You understand everything but the key point, which is—the girl *didn't know*."

"Hell's bells, she was *there*."

"So she was. Son, did I ever lie to you?"

"No," I admitted, "but I don't think you would hesitate."

He answered, "Maybe I deserve that. I'd lie to one of my own people if the country's safety depended on it. I haven't found it necessary, because I've been choosy about who works for me. But this time the country's welfare doesn't depend on it and I'm not lying and you'll just have to test it for yourself and make up your mind whether or not I'm lying. That girl didn't know. She didn't know you were going to be in that room. She didn't know why you were there. She didn't know that there was any question about who was going to sit in that chair. She didn't have the faintest suspicion that I didn't mean for her to go through with it, or that I had already decided that you were the only party who would suit me, even if I had to have you tied down and forced—which I would have done, if I hadn't had a double whammy up my sleeve to trick you into volunteering. Hell's bells yourself, son; she didn't even know you were off the sick list."

I wanted to believe it, so I did my damndest not to. As to whether he would bother to lie—well, getting two prime agents back into the groove might be something he would class, just now, as involving the country's safety. The Old Man had a complex mind.

"Look at me!" he added. "There is something I want to rub your nose in. First off, everybody—including me—appreciates what you did regardless of motives. I'm putting in a letter, and no doubt you'll get a medal. That stands, whether you stay with the Section or not."

He went on. "But don't give yourself airs like a little tin hero——"

"I won't!"



"—because that medal is going to the wrong person. Mary ought to get it.

"Now hush up; I'm not through. You had to be forced into it. No criticism; you had been through plenty. But Mary was a real, simon-pure volunteer. When she sat down in that chair, she didn't expect any last-minute reprieve, and she had every reason to believe that, if she got up alive, her mind would be gone, which is worse. But she did it—because she is a hero, which you miss by a couple of points."

He went on without waiting for me to reply: "Listen, son—most women are damn fools and children. But they've got more range than we've got. The brave ones are braver, the good ones are better—and the vile ones are viler. What I'm trying to tell you is: this one is more of a man than you are, and you've done her a serious wrong."

I was so churned up that I could not judge whether he was telling the truth, or manipulating me again. I said, "Maybe I lashed out at the wrong person. But if what you say is true——"

"It is."

"—it doesn't make what you did any sweeter; it makes it worse."

He took it without flinching. "Son, I'm sorry if I've lost your respect. But I can't be choosy any more than can a commander in battle. Less, because I fight with different weapons. I've always been able to shoot my own dog. Maybe that's bad—but that is what my job takes. If you are ever in my shoes, you'll have to do it too."

"I'm not likely to be."

"Why don't you rest up, and think about it?"

"I'll take leave—terminal leave."

"Very well."

He started to leave. I said, "Wait——"

"Yes?"

"You made me one promise and I'm holding you to it. About that parasite—you said I could kill it, personally. Are you through with it?"

"Yes, but——"

I started to get up. "No 'buts.' Give me your gun; I'll do it now."

"You can't. It's already dead."



"What! You *promised* me."

"I know. But it died while we were trying to force you—force *it*—to talk."

I started to shake with laughter. I got started and could not stop.

The Old Man shook me. "Snap out of it! You'll get yourself sick. I'm sorry about it, but there's nothing to laugh at."

"Ah, but there is," I answered, sobbing and chuckling. "It's the funniest thing that ever happened. All that—and for nothing. You dirtied yourself and you loused up me and Mary—and all for no use."

"Huh? What gave you that idea?"

"Eh! I *know*. You didn't even get small change out of it—out of us. You didn't learn anything you didn't know before."

"The hell we didn't!"

"The hell you did."

"It was a bigger success than you'd ever guess, son. True, we didn't squeeze anything out of it directly, before it died—but we got something out of you."

"Me?"

"Last night. We put you through it last night. You were doped, psyched, brain-waved, analyzed, wrung out and hung out to dry. The parasite spilled things to you and they were still there for the hypno-analysts to pick up after you were free of it."

"What?"

"Where they live. We know where they come from and can fight back—Titan, sixth satellite of Saturn."

When he said it, I felt a gagging constriction of my throat—and I knew that he was right.

"You certainly fought before we could get it," he went on reminiscently. "We had to hold you down to keep you from hurting yourself—more."

He threw his game leg over the edge of the bed and struck a cigarette. He seemed anxious to be friendly. As for me, I did not want to fight with him; my head was spinning and I had things to get straight. Titan—that was a long way out. Mars was the farthest men had ever been, unless the Seagraves Expedition, the one that never came back, got out to the Jovian moons.

Still, we could get there if there were a reason to go. We would burn out their nest!



Finally he got up to go. He had limped to the door when I stopped him. "Dad—"

I had not called him that in years. He turned, his expression surprised and defenseless. "Yes, son?"

"Why did you and Mother name me 'Elihu'?"

"Eh? Why, it was your maternal grandfather's name."

"Oh. Not enough reason, I'd say."

"Perhaps not." He turned and again I stopped him.

"Dad—what sort of a person was my mother?"

"Your mother? I don't know exactly how to tell you. Well—she was much like Mary. Yes, sir, a great deal like her." He stumped out without giving me further chance to talk.

I turned my face to the wall. After a while I steadied down.

## 12

When the doctor released me I went looking for Mary. I still had nothing but the Old Man's word, but I had more than a suspicion that I had made a big hairy thing of myself. I did not expect her to be glad to see me, but I had to speak my piece.

You would think that a tall, handsome redhead would be as easy to find as flat ground in Kansas. But field agents come and go, and the resident staff are encouraged to mind their own business. The personnel office gave me the bland brush off. They referred me to Operations, meaning the Old Man. That did not suit me.

I met with even more suspicion when I tried the door tally; I began to feel like a spy in my own Section.

I went to the bio lab, could not find its chief, and talked to an assistant. He did not know anything about a girl in connection with "Project Interview"; he went back to scratching himself and shuffling reports. I left and went to the Old Man's office. There seemed to be no choice.

There was a new face at Miss Haines's desk. I never saw Miss Haines again, nor did I ask what had become of her; I did not want to know. The new secretary passed in my I.D. code, and, for a wonder, the Old Man was in and would see me.

"What do you want?" he said grumpily.



I said, "Thought you might have some work for me," which was not at all what I intended to say.

"Matter of fact, I was just fixing to send for you. You've loafed long enough." He barked something at his desk phone, stood up and said, "Come!"

I felt suddenly at peace. "Cosmetics?" I asked.

"Your own ugly face will do. We're headed for Washington." Nevertheless we did stop in Cosmetics, but only for street clothes. I drew a gun and had my phone checked.

The door guard made us bare our backs before he would let us approach and check out. We went on up, coming out in the lower levels of New Philadelphia. "I take it this burg is clean?" I said to the Old Man.

"If you do, you are rusty in the head," he answered. "Keep your eyes peeled."

There was no opportunity for more questions. The presence of so many fully clothed humans bothered me; I found myself drawing away and watching for round shoulders. Getting into a crowded elevator to go up to the launching platform seemed downright reckless. When we were in our car and the controls set, I said so. "What in the devil do the authorities think they are doing? I could swear that one cop we passed was wearing a hump."

"Possibly. Even probably."

"Well, for crying in church! I thought you had this job taped and were fighting back on all fronts."

"What would you suggest?"

"Why, it's obvious. Even if it were freezing cold, we ought not to see a back covered up anywhere, not until we know they are all dead."

"That's right."

"Well, then—— Look, the President knows the score, doesn't he?"

"He knows it."

"What's he waiting for? He should declare martial law and get action."

The Old Man stared down at the countryside. "Son, are you under the impression that the President runs the country?"

"Of course not. But he is the only man who can act."

"Mmmm—they sometimes call Premier Tsvetkov 'the Prisoner



of the Kremlin.' True or not, the President is the prisoner of Congress."

"You mean Congress *hasn't acted*?"

"I have spent the past several days—ever since we stopped the attempt on the President—trying to help the President convince them. Ever been worked over by a Congressional committee, son?"

I tried to figure it out. Here we sat, as stupid as dodoes—yes, and *homo sapiens* would be as extinct as the dodo if we did not move. Presently the Old Man said, "It's time you learned the political facts of life. Congresses have refused to act in the face of dangers more obvious than this. This one isn't obvious. The evidence is slim and hard to believe."

"But how about the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury? They can't ignore that."

"Can't they? The Assistant Secretary had one snatched off his back, right in the East Wing, and we killed two of his Secret Service guards. And now the honorable gent is in Walter Reed with a nervous breakdown and can't recall what happened. The Treasury Department gave out that an attempt to assassinate the President had been foiled. True, but not the way they meant it."

"And the President held still for that?"

"His advisers told him to wait. His majority is uncertain—and there are men in both houses who want his head on a platter. Party politics is a rough game."

"Good lord, partisanship doesn't figure in a case like this!"

The Old Man cocked an eyebrow. "You think not, eh?"

I finally managed to ask him the question I had come into his office to ask: where was Mary?

"Odd question from you," he grunted. I let it ride; he went on, "Where she should be. Guarding the President."

We went first to a closed session of a joint special committee. When we got there they were running stereos of my anthropoid friend, Napoleon—shots of him with the titan on his back, then close-ups of the titan. One parasite looks like another; but I knew which one this was and I was deeply glad it was dead.

The ape gave way to myself. I saw myself being clamped into the chair. I hate to admit how I looked; real funk is not pretty. I saw them lift the titan off the ape and onto my own bare back.



Then I fainted in the picture—and almost fainted again. I won't describe it; it upsets me to tell about it.

But I saw the thing *die*. That was worth sitting through the rest.

The film ended and the chairman said, "Well, gentlemen?"

"Mr. Chairman!"

"The gentleman from Indiana is recognized."

"Speaking without prejudice to the issue, I have seen better trick photography from Hollywood." They tittered and someone called out, "Hear! Hear!"

The head of our bio lab testified, then I found myself called to the stand. I gave my name, address, and occupation, then perfunctorily was asked about my experiences under the titans. The questions were read from a sheet. The thing that got me was that they did not *want* to hear my answers. Two of them were reading newspapers.

There were only two questions from the floor. One senator said to me, "Mr. Nivens—your name *is* Nivens?"

I agreed. "Mr. Nivens," he went on, "you say that you are an investigator?"

"Yes."

"F.B.I., no doubt?"

"No, my chief reports directly to the President."

The senator smiled. "*Just* as I thought. Now, Mr. Nivens, as a matter of fact you are an actor, are you not?" He seemed to be consulting notes.

I tried to tell too much. I wanted to say that I had once acted one season of summer stock but that I was, nevertheless, a real, live, sure-enough investigator. I got no chance. "That will *do*, Mr. Nivens. Thank you."

The other question was put by an elderly senator who wanted to know my views on using tax money to arm other countries—and he used the questions to express his own views. My views on that subject are mixed, but I did not get to express them. The next thing I knew the clerk was saying, "Stand down, Mr. Nivens."

I sat tight. "Look here," I said. "It's evident that you think this is a put-up job. Well, for the love of heaven, bring in a lie detector! Or use the sleep test. This hearing is a joke."

The chairman banged his gavel. "Stand down, Mr. Nivens."

I stood.

The Old Man had told me that the purpose of the meeting was



to report out a joint resolution declaring total emergency and vesting war powers in the President. We were ejected before the vote. I said to the Old Man, "It looks bad."

"Forget it," he said. "The President knew this gambit had failed when he heard the names of the committee."

"Where does that leave us? Do we wait for the slugs to take over Congress too?"

"The President goes right ahead with a message to Congress requesting full powers."

"Will he get them?"

The Old Man simply scowled.

The joint session was secret, but we were present—direct orders of the President. The Old Man and I were on that little balcony business back of the Speaker's rostrum. They opened with full rigmarole and then went through the ceremony of notifying the President. He came in at once, escorted by the delegation. His guards were with him, but they were all our men.

Mary was with him too. Somebody set up a folding chair for her, right by the President. She fiddled with a notebook and handed papers to him, pretending to be a secretary. But the disguise ended there; she looked like Cleopatra on a warm night—and as out of place as a bed in church. She got as much attention as the President.

I caught her eye—and she gave me a long, sweet smile. I grinned like a collie pup until the Old Man dug me in the ribs. Then I settled back and tried to behave.

The President made a reasoned explanation of the situation. It was as straightforward and rational as an engineering report, and about as moving. He simply stated facts. He put aside his notes at the end. "This is such a strange and terrible emergency, so totally beyond any previous experience, that I must ask broad powers to cope with it. In some areas, martial law must be declared. Grave invasions of civil guarantees will be necessary, for a time. The right of free movement must be abridged. The right to be secure from arbitrary search and seizure must give way to the right of safety for everyone. Because any citizen, no matter how respected or loyal, may be the unwilling servant of these secret enemies, all citizens must face some loss of rights and personal dignities until this plague is killed.



"With utmost reluctance, I ask that you authorize these necessary steps." With that he sat down.

You can feel a crowd. They were uneasy, but he did not carry them. The President of the Senate looked at the Senate majority leader; it had been programmed for him to propose the resolution.

I don't know whether the floor leader shook his head or signaled, but he did not take the floor. Meanwhile the delay was awkward and there were cries of, "Mr. President!" and "Order!"

The Senate President passed over several others and gave the floor to a member of his party—Senator Gottlieb, a wheel horse who would vote for his own lynching if it were on his party's program. He started out by yielding to none in his respect for the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and, probably, the Grand Canyon. He pointed modestly to his long service and spoke well of America's place in history. I thought he was stalling while the boys worked out a new shift—when I suddenly realized that his words were adding up to meaning: he was proposing to suspend the order of business and get on with the impeachment and trial of the President of the United States!

I tumbled to it as quickly as anyone; the senator had his proposal so decked out in ritualistic verbiage that it was hard to tell what he was saying. I looked at the Old Man.

The Old Man was looking at Mary.

She was looking back at him with an expression of extreme urgency.

The Old Man snatched a pad from his pocket, scrawled something, wadded it up, and threw it down to Mary. She caught it and read it—and passed it to the President.

He was sitting, relaxed and easy—as if one of his oldest friends were not tearing his name to shreds and, with it, the safety of the Republic. He read the note, then glanced unhurriedly at the Old Man. The Old Man nodded.

The President nudged the Senate President, who, at the President's gesture, bent over him. They exchanged whispers.

Gottlieb was still rumbling along. The Senate President banged his gavel. "If the senator please!"

Gottlieb looked startled and said, "I do not yield."

"The senator is not asked to yield. Because of the importance of what you are saying, the senator is asked to come to the rostrum to speak."



Gottlieb looked puzzled but walked slowly toward the front of the house. Mary's chair blocked the steps up to the rostrum. Instead of getting out of the way, she bumbled around, turning and picking up the chair, so that she got even more in the way. Gottlieb stopped and she brushed against him. He caught her arm, as much to steady himself as her. She spoke to him and he to her, but no one else could hear the words. Finally he went on to the front of the rostrum.

The Old Man was quivering like a dog in point. Mary looked up and nodded. The Old Man said, "Take him!"

I was over that rail in a flying leap and landed on Gottlieb's shoulders. I heard the Old Man shout, "Gloves, son! Gloves!" I did not stop for them. I split the senator's jacket with my bare hands and I could see the slug pulsing under his shirt. I tore the shirt away and anybody could see it.

Six stereo cameras could not have recorded what happened in the next few seconds. I slugged Gottlieb to stop his thrashing. Mary was sitting on his legs. The President was standing over me and shouting, "There! There! Now you can *all* see." The Senate President was standing stupefied, wagging his gavel. Congress was a mob, yelling and women screaming. Above me the Old Man was shouting orders to the Presidential guards.

Between the guns of the guards and pounding of the gavel some order was restored. The President started to talk. He told them that fortune had given them a chance to see the nature of the enemy and he suggested that they file past and see for themselves one of the titans from Saturn's largest moon. Without waiting for consent, he pointed to the front row and told them to come up.

They came.

Mary stayed on the platform. About twenty had filed by and a female congressman had gotten hysterics when I saw Mary signal the Old Man. This time I was a hair ahead of his order. I might have had quite a fight if two of the boys had not been close by; this one was young and tough, an ex-marine. We laid him beside Gottlieb.

Then it was "inspection and search" whether they liked it or not. I patted the women on the back as they came by and caught one. I thought I had caught another, but it was an embarrassing mistake; she was so blubber fat that I guessed wrong. Mary spotted two more, then there was a long stretch, three hundred or



more, with no jackpots. It was evident that some were hanging back.

Eight men with guns were not enough—eleven, counting the Old Man, Mary, and me. Most of the slugs would have gotten away if the Whip of the House had not organized help. With their assistance, we caught thirteen, ten alive. Only one of the hosts was badly wounded.

## 13

So the President got the authority and the Old Man was his *de facto* chief of staff; at last we could move. The Old Man had a simple campaign in mind. It could not be the quarantine he had proposed when the infection was limited to the Des Moines area; before we could fight, we had to locate them. But government agents couldn't search two hundred million people; the people had to do it themselves.

"Schedule Bare Back" was to be the first phase of "Operation Parasite." The idea was that everybody—*everybody*—was to peel to the waist and stay peeled, until all titans were spotted and killed. Oh, women could have halter strings across their backs; a parasite could not hide under a bra string.

We whipped up a display to go with the stereocast speech the President would make to the nation. Fast work had saved seven of the parasites we had flushed in the sacred halls of Congress; they were alive on animal hosts. We could show them and the less grisly parts of the film taken of me. The President himself would appear in shorts, and models would demonstrate what the Well-Undressed Citizen Would Wear This Season, including the metal head-and-spine armor which was intended to protect a person even when asleep.

We got it ready in one black-coffee night. The smash finish was to show Congress in session, discussing the emergency, and every man, woman, and page boy showing a bare back.

With twenty-eight minutes left until stereocast time the President got a call from up the street. I was present; the Old Man had been with the President all night and had kept me around for



chores. We were all in shorts; Schedule Bare Back had already started in the White House. The President did not bother to cut us out of his end of the conversation. "Speaking," he said. Presently he added, "You feel certain? Very well, John, what do you advise? . . . I see. No, I don't think that would work. . . . I had better come up the street. Tell them to be ready." He pushed back the phone and turned to an assistant. "Tell them to hold up the stereocast." He turned to the Old Man. "Come, Andrew, we must go to the Capitol."

He sent for his valet and retired into a dressing room adjoining his office; when he came out, he was formally dressed for a state occasion. He offered no explanation. The rest of us stayed in our gooseflesh specials and so we went to the Capitol.

It was a joint session—and I got that no-pants-in-church nightmare feeling, for the congressmen and senators were dressed as usual. Then I saw that the page boys were in shorts without shirts and felt better.

Apparently some people would rather be dead than lose dignity, with senators high on the list. Congressmen too. They had given the President the authority he asked for; Schedule Bare Back itself had been discussed and approved—but they did not see that it applied to them. After all, they had been searched and cleaned out. Maybe some saw holes in the argument, but not one wanted to be first in a public strip tease. They sat tight, fully dressed.

When the President took the rostrum, he waited until he got dead silence. Then slowly, calmly, he started taking off clothes. He stopped when he was bare to the waist. He then turned around, lifting his arms. At last he spoke.

"I did that," he said, "so that you might see that your Chief Executive is not a prisoner of the enemy." He paused.

"But how about *you*?" That last word was flung at them.

The President punched a finger at the junior Whip. "Mark Cummings—are you a loyal citizen—or are you a zombie spy? Get your shirt off!"

"Mr. President—" It was Charity Evans, from the state of Maine, looking like a pretty schoolteacher. She stood and I saw that, while she was fully dressed, she was in evening dress. Her gown reached to the floor, but was cut as deep as could be above. She turned like a mannequin; in back the dress ended at the base of her spine. "Is that satisfactory, Mr. President?"



"Quite satisfactory, madam."

Cummings was fumbling at his jacket; his face was scarlet. Someone stood up in the middle of the hall—Senator Gottlieb. He looked as if he should have been in bed; his cheeks were gray and sunken; his lips showed cyanosis. But he held himself erect and, with incredible dignity, followed the President's example. Then he, too, turned all the way around; on his back was the scarlet mark of the parasite.

He spoke. "Last night I stood here and said things I would rather have been flayed alive than utter. Last night I was not my own master. Today I am. Can you not see that Rome is burning?" Suddenly he had a gun in his hands. "Up on your feet, you ward heelers, you courthouse loafers. Two minutes to show a bare back—then I shoot!"

Men close to him tried to grab his arm, but he swung the gun around like a fly swatter, smashing one of them in the face. I had my own out, ready to back his play, but it was not necessary. They could see that he was as dangerous as an old bull; they backed away.

It hung in balance, then they started shucking clothes like Doukhobors. One man bolted for a door; he was tripped. No, he was not wearing a parasite. But we did catch three. After that the show went on the channels ten minutes late and Congress started the first of its "bare back" sessions.

## 14

**"LOCK YOUR DOORS!"**

**"CLOSE THE DAMPERS ON YOUR FIREPLACES!"**

**"NEVER ENTER A DARK PLACE!"**

**"BE WARY OF CROWDS!"**

**"A MAN WEARING A COAT IS AN ENEMY—SHOOT!"**

In addition to a steady barrage of propaganda the country was being quartered and sectioned from the air, searched for flying saucers on the ground. Our radar screen was on full alert for unidentified blips. Military units, from airborne troops to guided-rocket stations, were ready to smear any that landed.



In the uncontaminated areas people took off their shirts, willingly or reluctantly, looked around them and found no parasites. They watched their newscasts and wondered and waited for the government to tell them that the danger was over. But nothing happened, and both laymen and local officials began to doubt the necessity of running around the streets in sunbathing costumes.

The contaminated areas? The reports from the contaminated areas were *not materially different from the reports from other areas*.

Back in the days of radio it could not have happened; the Washington station where the 'cast originated could have blanketed the country. But stereo-video rides wave lengths so short that horizon-to-horizon relay is necessary, and local channels must be squirted out of local stations; it's the price we pay for plenty of channels and high-resolution pictures.

In the infected areas *the slugs* controlled the local stations; the people never heard the warning.

But in Washington, we had every reason to believe that they *had* heard the warning. Reports came back from—well, Iowa, for example, just like those from California. The governor of Iowa was one of the first to send a message to the President, promising full co-operation. There was even a relayed stereo of the governor addressing his constituents, bare to the waist. He faced the camera and I wanted to tell him to turn around. Then they cut to another camera and we had a close up of a bare back, while the governor's voice continued. We listened to it in a conference room off the President's office. The President had kept the Old Man with him. I tagged along, and Mary was still on watch. Secretary of Security Martinez was there, as well as the Supreme Chief of Staff, Air Marshal Rexton.

The President watched the 'cast and turned to the Old Man. "Well, Andrew? I thought Iowa was a place we would have to fence off."

The Old Man grunted.

Marshal Rexton said, "As I figure it—mind you, I have not had much time—they have gone underground. We may have to comb every inch of every suspicious area."

The Old Man grunted again. "Combing Iowa, corn shock by corn shock, does not appeal to me."

"How else would you tackle it, sir?"



"Figure your enemy! He can't go underground. He can't live without a host."

"Very well—assuming that is true, how many parasites would you say there are in Iowa?"

"Damn it, how should I know? They didn't take me into their confidence."

"Suppose we make a top estimate. If—"

The Old Man interrupted him. "You've got no basis for an estimate. Can't you folks see that the titans have won another round?"

"Eh?"

"You just heard the governor; they let us look at his back—or somebody's back. Did you notice that he didn't turn around in front of the camera?"

"But he did," someone said. "I saw him."

"I certainly had the impression that I saw him turn," said the President slowly. "You are suggesting that Governor Packer is himself possessed?"

"Correct. You saw what you were meant to see. There was a camera cut just before he was fully turned; people hardly ever notice them. Depend on it, Mr. President; every message out of Iowa is faked."

The President looked thoughtful. Secretary Martinez said, "Impossible! Granted that the governor's message could have been faked—a clever character actor could have faked it. But we've had our choice of dozens of 'casts from Iowa. How about that street scene in Des Moines? Don't tell me that you can fake hundreds of people dashing around stripped to their waists—or do your parasites practice mass hypnotic control?"

"They can't that I know of," conceded the Old Man. "If they can, we might as well throw in the towel. But what made you think that that 'cast came from Iowa?"

"Eh? Why, damn it, sir, it came over the Iowa channel."

"Proving what? Did you read any street signs? It looked like any typical street in a downtown retail district. Never mind what city the announcer *told* you it was; what city was it?"

The Secretary let his mouth hang open. I've got fairly close to the "camera eye" that detectives are supposed to have; I let that picture run through my mind—and I not only could not tell what city, I could not even place the part of the country. It could have



been Memphis, Seattle, or Boston—or none of them. Most downtown districts in American cities are as standardized as barbershops.

"Never mind," the Old Man went on. "I couldn't tell and I was looking for landmarks. The explanation is simple; the Des Moines station picked up a Schedule Bare Back street scene from some city not contaminated and rechanneled it under their own commentary. They chopped out anything that would localize it—and we swallowed it. Gentlemen, this enemy knows us. This campaign has been planned in detail and they are ready to outwit us in almost any move we can make."

"Aren't you being an alarmist, Andrew?" said the President. "There is another possibility, that the titans have moved somewhere else."

"They are still in Iowa," the Old Man said flatly, "but you won't prove it with that thing." He gestured at the stereo tank.

Secretary Martinez squirmed. "This is ridiculous! You are saying that we can't get a correct report out of Iowa, as if it were occupied territory."

"That is what it is."

"But I stopped off in Des Moines two days ago. Everything was normal. Mind you, I grant the existence of your parasites, though I haven't seen one. But let's find them where they are and root them out, instead of dreaming up fantasies."

The Old Man looked tired. Finally he replied, "Control the communications of a country and you control the country. You had better move fast, Mr. Secretary, or you won't have any communications left."

"But I was merely——"

"*You* root 'em out!" the Old Man said rudely. "I've told you they are in Iowa—and in New Orleans, and a dozen other spots. My job is finished." He stood up and said, "Mr. President, I've had a long pull for a man my age; when I lose sleep I lose my temper. Could I be excused?"

"Certainly, Andrew." He had not lost his temper and I think the President knew it. He doesn't lose his temper; he makes other people lose theirs.

Secretary Martinez interrupted. "Wait a moment! You've made some flat-footed statements. Let's check up." He turned to the Chief of Staff. "Rexton!"



"Uh—yes, sir."

"That new post near Des Moines, Fort something-or-other, named after what's-his-name."

"Fort Patton."

"That's it, that's it. Well, let's not dally; get them on the command circuit——"

"With visual," put in the Old Man.

"With visual, of course, and we'll show this—I mean we'll get the true situation in Iowa."

The air marshal handed a by-your-leave-sir to the President, went to the stereo tank and patched in with Security General Headquarters. He asked for the officer of the watch at Fort Patton, Iowa.

Shortly thereafter the tank showed the inside of a communications center. Filling the foreground was a young officer. His rank and corps showed on his cap, but his chest was bare. Martinez turned triumphantly to the Old Man. "You see?"

"I see."

"Now to make certain. Lieutenant!"

"Yes, sir!" The young fellow looked awestruck and kept glancing from one famous face to another. Reception and bi-angle were in synch; the eyes of the image looked where they seemed to look.

"Stand up and turn around," Martinez continued.

"Uh? Why, certainly, sir." He seemed puzzled, but did so—and it took him almost out of scan. We could see his bare back up the short ribs—no higher.

"Confound it!" shouted Martinez. "*Sit down* and turn around."

"Yessir!" The youth seemed flustered. He added, "Just a moment while I widen the view angle, sir."

The picture melted and rippling rainbows chased across the tank. The young officer's voice was still coming over the audio channel. "There—is that better, sir?"

"Damn it, we can't see a thing!"

"You can't? Just a moment, sir."

Suddenly the tank came to life and I thought for a moment that we were back at Fort Patton. But it was a major in the screen this time and the place looked larger. "Supreme Headquarters," the image announced. "Communications officer of the watch, Major Donovan."



"Major," Martinez said in controlled tones, "I was hooked in with Fort Patton. What happened?"

"Yes, sir; I was monitoring it. We've had a slight technical difficulty. We'll put your call through again in a moment."

"Well, hurry!"

"Yes, sir." The tank rippled and went empty.

The Old Man stood up. "Call me when you've cleared up that 'slight technical difficulty.' I'm going to bed."

## 15

If I have given the impression that Secretary Martinez was stupid, I am sorry. Everyone had trouble at first believing what the slugs could do. You have to see one—then you believe in the pit of your stomach.

There were no flies on Marshal Rexton, either. The two worked all night, after convincing themselves by more calls to known danger spots that "technical interruptions" do not occur so conveniently. They called the Old Man about 4 A.M. and he called me.

They were in the same room, Martinez, Rexton, a couple of his brass, and the Old Man. The President came in, wearing a bathrobe and followed by Mary, as I arrived. Martinez started to speak, but the Old Man cut in. "Let's see your back, Tom!"

Mary signaled that everything was okay, but the Old Man chose not to see her. "I mean it," he persisted.

The President said quietly, "Perfectly correct, Andrew," and slipped the robe off his shoulders. His back was clean. "If I don't set an example, how can I expect others to co-operate?"

Martinez and Rexton had been shoving pins into a map, red for bad, green for good, and a few amber ones. Iowa looked like measles; New Orleans and the Teche country were as bad. So was Kansas City. The upper end of the Missouri-Mississippi system, from Minneapolis and St. Paul down to St. Louis, was clearly enemy territory. There were fewer red pins from there down to New Orleans—but no green ones. There was a hot spot around El Paso and two on the east coast.



The President looked it over. "We shall need the help of Canada and Mexico," he said. "Any reports?"

"None that mean anything, sir."

"Canada and Mexico," the Old Man said seriously, "will be just a start. You're going to need the whole world."

Rexton said, "We will, eh? How about Russia?"

Nobody had an answer to that one. Too big to occupy and too big to ignore, World War III had not settled the Russian problem, and no war ever would. The parasites might feel right at home there.

The President said, "We'll deal with that when we come to it." He drew a finger across the map. "Any trouble getting messages to the Coast?"

"Apparently not, sir," Rexton told him. "They don't seem to interfere with straight-through relay. But all military communications I have shifted to relay through the space stations." He glanced at his watch finger. "Station Gamma, at the moment."

"Hmmm—" said the President. "Andrew, could these things storm a space station?"

"How would I know?" the Old Man answered testily. "I don't know whether their ships are built for it or not. More probably they would do it by infiltration, through the supply rockets."

There was discussion as to whether the space stations could already have been taken over; Schedule Bare Back did not apply to the stations. Although we had built them and paid for them, they were technically United Nations territory.

"Don't worry about it," Rexton said suddenly.

"Why not?" the President asked.

"I am probably the only one here who has done duty in a space station. Gentlemen, the costume we are wearing is customary in a station. A man fully dressed would stand out like an overcoat on the beach. But we'll see." He gave orders to an assistant.

The President resumed studying the map. "So far as we know," he said, pointing to Grinnell, Iowa, "All this derives from a single landing, here."

The Old Man answered, "So far as we know."

I said, "Oh no!"

They all looked at me. "Go ahead," said the President.

"There were at least three more landings—I *know* there were—before I was rescued."



The Old Man looked dumfounded. "Are you sure, son? We thought we had wrung you dry."

"Of course I'm sure."

"Why didn't you mention it?"

"I never thought of it before." I tried to explain how it feels to be possessed, how you know what is going on, but everything seems dreamy, equally important and equally unimportant. I grew quite upset. I am not the jittery type, but being ridden by a master does something to you.

The Old Man said, "Steady down, son," and the President gave me a reassuring smile.

Rexton said, "The point is: where did they land? We might still capture one."

"I doubt it," the Old Man answered. "They did a cover-up on the first one in a matter of hours. If it was the first," he added thoughtfully.

I went to the map and tried to think. Sweating, I pointed to New Orleans. "I'm pretty sure one was about here." I stared at the map. "I don't know where the others landed."

"How about here?" Rexton asked, pointing to the east coast.

"I don't know. I don't know."

"Can't you remember anything else?" Martinez said testily. "Think, man!"

"I just don't know. We never knew what they were up to, not really." I thought until my skull ached, then pointed to Kansas City. "I sent several messages here, but I don't know whether they were shipment orders, or not."

Rexton looked at the map. "We'll assume a landing near Kansas City. The technical boys can do a problem on it. It may be subject to logistic analysis; we might derive the other landing."

"Or landings," added the Old Man.

"Eh? 'Or landings.' Certainly." He turned back to the map and stared at it.

## 16

Hindsight is confoundingly futile. At the moment the first saucer landed the menace could have been stamped out by one bomb. At



the time Mary, the Old Man, and I reconnoitered around Grinnell we three alone might have killed every slug had we known where they all were.

Had Schedule Bare Back been ordered during the first week it alone might have turned the trick. But it was quickly clear that Schedule Bare Back had failed as an offensive measure. As a defense it was useful; the uncontaminated areas could be kept so. It had even had mild success in offense; areas contaminated but not "secured" were cleaned up—Washington itself, and New Philadelphia. New Brooklyn, too. There I had been able to give specific advice. The entire east coast turned from red to green.

But as the middle of the country filled in on the map, it filled in red. The infected areas stood out in ruby light now, for the wall map studded with pins had been replaced by a huge electronic military map, ten miles to the inch, covering one wall of the conference room. It was a repeater map, the master being down in the sublevels of the New Pentagon.

The country was split in two, as if a giant had washed red pigment down the central valley. Two amber paths bordered the band held by the slugs; these were the only areas of real activity, places where line-of-sight reception was possible both from stations held by the enemy and from stations still in the hands of free men. One started near Minneapolis, swung west of Chicago and east of St. Louis, then meandered through Tennessee and Alabama to the Gulf. The other cut a path through the Great Plains and came out near Corpus Christi. El Paso was the center of a ruby area unconnected with the main body.

I wondered what was going on in those border strips. I was alone; the Cabinet was meeting and the President had taken the Old Man with him. Rexton and his brass had left earlier. I stayed because I hesitated to wander around in the White House. So I fretted and watched amber lights blink red and much less frequently, red lights blink amber or green.

I wondered how a visitor with no status managed to get breakfast. I had been up since four and so far I had had one cup of coffee, served by the President's valet. Even more urgently I wanted to find a washroom. At last I got desperate enough to try doors. The first two were locked; the third was what I wanted. It was not marked "Sacred to the Chief," so I used it.

When I came back, Mary was there.



I looked at her stupidly. "I thought you were with the President."

She smiled. "I got chased out. The Old Man took over."

I said, "Say, Mary, I've been wanting to talk with you and this is the first chance I've had. I guess I— Well, anyway, I shouldn't have—I mean, according to the Old Man—" I stopped, my carefully rehearsed speech in ruins. "Anyhow, I shouldn't have said what I did," I concluded miserably.

She put a hand on my arm. "Sam. Sam, my very dear, do not be troubled. What you said and what you did was fair enough from what you knew. The important thing, *to me*, is what you did *for me*. The rest does not matter—except that I am happy again to know that you don't despise me."

"Well, but— Damn it, don't be so noble! I can't stand it!"

She gave me a merry smile, not at all like the gentle one with which she had greeted me. "Sam, I think you *like* your women to be a bit bitchy. I warn you, I can be so." She went on, "You are still worried about that slap too. All right, I'll pay it back." She reached up and patted me gently on the cheek. "There, it's paid and you can forget it."

Her expression suddenly changed. She swung on me—and I thought my head was coming off. "And that," she said in a tense whisper, "pays you back the one I got from your girl friend!"

My ears were ringing and my eyes did not want to focus. I could have sworn that she had used at least a two-by-four. She looked at me, wary and defiant—angry, if dilated nostrils meant anything. I raised a hand and she tensed, but I just wanted to touch my stinging cheek. "She's not my girl friend," I said lamely.

We eyed each other and simultaneously burst out laughing. She put her hands on my shoulders and let her head collapse on my right one, still laughing. "Sam," she managed to say, "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done it—not to you, Sam. At least I shouldn't have slapped you so hard."

"The devil you're sorry," I growled, "but you shouldn't have put english on it. You damn near took the hide off."

"Poor Sam!" She touched it; it hurt. "She's really not your girl friend?"

"No, worse luck. But not from lack of my trying."

"I'm sure it wasn't. Who is your girl friend, Sam?"

"You are, you vixen!"



"Yes," she said comfortably. "I am—if you'll have me. I told you that before. Bought and paid for."

She was waiting to be kissed; I pushed her away. "Confound it, woman, I don't want you 'bought and paid for.'"

It did not faze her. "I put it badly. Paid for—but not bought. I'm here because I want to be. Now will you kiss me, please?"

She had kissed me once before; this time she *kissed* me. I felt myself sinking into a warm golden haze and I did not ever want to come up. Finally I had to break, and gasped, "I think I'll sit down for a minute."

She said, "Thank you, Sam," and let me.

"Mary," I said presently, "Mary, my dear, there is something you possibly could do for me."

"Yes?" she said eagerly.

"Tell me how in the name of Ned a person gets breakfast around here? I am starved."

She looked startled, but she answered, "Why, certainly!"

I don't know how she did it; she may have butted into the White House pantry and helped herself. But she returned in a few minutes with sandwiches and two bottles of beer. I was cleaning up my third corned-beef on rye when I said, "Mary, how long do you figure that meeting will last?"

"Oh, I'd give it a minimum of two hours. Why?"

"In that case," I said, swallowing the last bite, "we have time to duck out, find a registry office, get married and get back before the Old Man misses us."

She did not answer. Instead she stared at the bubbles in her beer. "Well?" I insisted.

She raised her eyes. "I'll do it if you say so. I'm not welshing. But I would rather we didn't."

"You don't want to marry me?"

"Sam, I don't think you are ready to get married."

"Speak for yourself!"

"Don't be angry, my dear. You can have me with or without a contract—anywhere, anyhow, any way. But you don't know me yet. Get acquainted with me; you might change your mind."

"I'm not in the habit of changing my mind."

She glanced up, then looked away sadly. I felt my face get hot. "That was a very special circumstance," I protested. "It couldn't



happen to us again in a hundred years. That wasn't me talking; it was——"

She stopped me. "I know, Sam. But you don't have to prove anything. I won't run out on you and I don't mistrust you. Take me away on a week end; better yet, move into my apartment. If I wear well, there's always time to make me what great-grandmother called an 'honest woman,' heaven knows why."

I must have looked sullen. She put a hand on mine and said seriously, "Look at the map, Sam."

I turned my head. Red as ever, or more so—the danger zone around El Paso had increased. She went on, "Let's get this cleaned up first, dear. Then, if you still want to, ask me again. In the meantime, you can have the privileges without the responsibilities."

What could be fairer than that? The trouble was it was not the way I wanted it. Why will a man who has been avoiding marriage like plague suddenly decide that nothing less will suit him?

When the meeting was over, the Old Man collared me and took me for a walk. Yes, a walk, though we went only as far as the Baruch Memorial Bench. There he sat down, fiddled with his pipe, and scowled. The day was as muggy as only Washington can get; the park was almost deserted.

He said, "'Schedule Counter Blast' starts at midnight."

Presently he added, "We swoop down on every relay station, broadcast station, newspaper office, and Western Union office in 'Zone Red.'"

"Sounds good," I answered. "How many men?"

He did not answer; instead he said, "I don't like it a little bit."  
"Huh?"

"See here, bub—the President went on channels and told everybody to peel off their shirts. We find that the message did not reach infected territory. What's the next development?"

I shrugged. "Schedule Counter Blast, I suppose."

"That hasn't happened yet. Think—it has been more than twenty-four hours: what should have happened and hasn't?"

"Should I know?"

"You should, if you are ever going to amount to anything on your own. Here"—he handed me a combo key—"scoot out to Kansas City and take a look-see. Stay away from com stations, cops, and—shucks, you know their ways. Stay away from *them*. Look at



everything else. And don't get caught." He looked at his finger and added, "Be back here a half hour before midnight. Get going."

"A lot of time you allow to case a whole city," I complained. "It will take three hours just to drive to Kansas City."

"More than three hours," he answered. "Don't attract attention by picking up a ticket."

"You know darn well I'm a careful driver."

"Move!"

So I moved. The combo was to the car we had come down in; I picked it up at Rock Creek Park platform. Traffic was light and I commented on it to the dispatcher. "Freight and commercial carriers are grounded," he answered. "The emergency— You got a military clearance?"

I could get one by phoning the Old Man, but bothering him about minutiae does not endear one to him. I said, "Check the combo."

He shrugged and slipped it in his machine. My hunch had been right; his eyebrows shot up. "How you rate!" he commented. "You must be the President's fair-haired boy."

Once launched, I set the controls for Kansas City at legal max and tried to think. The transponder beeped as radar beams hit it each time I slid from one control block into the next, but no faces appeared on the screen. Apparently the Old Man's combo was good for the route, emergency or not. I began to wonder what would happen when I slipped over into the red areas—and then realized what he had meant by "the next development."

One tends to think of communications as meaning the line-of-sight channels and nothing else. But "communications" means *all* traffic, even dear old Aunt Mamie, headed for California and stuffed with gossip. The slugs had seized the channels—but news can't be stopped that easily; such measures merely slow it down. Ergo, if the slugs expected to retain control where they were, seizing the channels would be just their first step.

What would they do next? They would do something and I, being a part of "communications" by definition, had better be prepared for evasive action if I wanted to save my pretty pink skin. The Mississippi River and Zone Red were sliding closer by the minute. I wondered what would happen the first time my recognition signal was picked up by a station controlled by masters.



I judged that I was probably safe in the air—but that I had better not let them spot me landing. Elementary.

“Elementary” in the face of a traffic-control net which was described as the No-Sparrow-Shall-Fall plan. They boasted that a butterfly could not make a forced landing anywhere in the United States without alerting the search and rescue system. Not quite true—but I was no butterfly.

On foot I will make a stab at penetrating any security screen, mechanical, manned, electronic, or mixed. But how can you use misdirection in a car making westing a full degree every seven minutes? Or hang a stupid, innocent look on the nose of a duo? If I went in on foot the Old Man would get his report come next Michaelmas; he wanted it before midnight.

Once, in a rare mellow mood, the Old Man told me that he did not bother agents with detailed instructions—give a man a mission; let him sink or swim. I said his method must use up a lot of agents.

“Some,” he had admitted, “but not as many as the other way. I believe in the individual and I try to pick individuals who are survivor types.”

“And how in the hell,” I had asked, “do you pick a ‘survivor type’?”

He had grinned wickedly. “A survivor type is one who comes back.”

Elihu, I said to myself, you are about to find out which type you are—and damn his icy heart!

My course would take me toward St. Louis, swing me around the city loop, and on to Kansas City. But St. Louis was in Zone Red. The map had shown Chicago as green; the amber line had zigzagged west somewhere above Hannibal, Missouri—and I wanted very badly to cross the Mississippi while still in Zone Green. A car crossing that mile-wide river would make a radar blip as sharp as a desert star.

I signaled block control for permission to descend to local-traffic level, then did so without waiting, resuming manual control and cutting my speed. I headed north.

Short of the Springfield loop I headed west, staying low. When I reached the river I crossed slowly, close to the water, with my transponder shut down. Sure, you can’t shut off your radar recog-



nition signal in the air—but the Section's cars were not standard. I had hopes, if local traffic were being monitored while I crossed, that my blip would be mistaken for a boat on the river.

I did not know certainly whether the next block-control station across the river was Zone Red or Zone Green. I was about to cut in the transponder again on the assumption that it would be safer to get back into the traffic system when I noticed the shore line opening up ahead. The map did not show a tributary; I judged it to be an inlet, or a new channel not yet mapped. I dropped almost to water level and headed into it. The stream was narrow, meandering, and almost overhung by trees, and I had no more business taking a sky car into it than a bee has of flying down a trombone—but it afforded perfect radar “shadow”; I could get lost in it.

In a few minutes I *was* lost—lost myself, right off the map. The channel switched and turned and cut back and I was so busy bucking the car by hand that I lost all track of navigation. I swore and wished that the car were a triphib so that I could land on water. The trees suddenly broke; I saw a stretch of level land, kicked her over and squatted her in with a deceleration that nearly cut me in two against my safety belt. But I was down and no longer trying to play catfish in a muddy stream.

I wondered what to do. No doubt there was a highway close by. I had better find it and stay on the ground.

But that was silly—there was not time for ground travel; I *must* get back into the air. But I did not dare until I knew positively whether traffic here was being controlled by free men, or by slugs.

I had not turned on the stereo since leaving Washington. Now I did so, hunting for a newscast, but not finding one. I got (a) lecture by Myrtle Doolightly, Ph.D., on *Why Husbands Grow Bored*, sponsored by the Uth-a-gen Hormone Company; (b) a trio of girl hepsters singing “If You Mean What I Think You Mean, What Are We Waiting For?”; (c) an episode in *Lucretia Learns about Life*.

Dear Dr. Myrtle was fully dressed. The trio were dressed the way one would expect, but they did not turn their backs to the camera. Lucretia alternated between having her clothes torn off and taking them off willingly, but the camera always cut or the lights went out just before I could check on whether or not her back was bare—of slugs, that is.



And none of it meant anything. Those programs could have been taped months before the President announced Schedule Bare Back. I was still switching channels, trying to find a newscast, when I found myself staring at the unctuous smile of an announcer. He was fully dressed.

Shortly I realized that it was one of those silly give-away shows. He was saying: "—and some lucky little woman sitting by her screen right this minute is about to receive, absolutely free, a General Atomics Six-in-One Automatic Home Butler. Who will it be? You? You? Or lucky *you*?" He turned away from scan; I could see his shoulders. They were covered by a jacket and distinctly rounded, almost humped. I was inside Zone Red.

When I switched off I realized that I was being watched—by a male about nine years old. He was wearing only shorts—at his age it meant nothing. I threw back the wind screen. "Hey, bub, where's the highway?"

He answered, "Road to Macon's up yonder. Say, mister, that's a Cadillac Zipper, ain't it?"

"Sure thing. Where yonder?"

"Give me a ride, huh, will you?"

"Haven't got time."

"Take me along and I'll show you."

I gave in. While he climbed in, I opened my kit, got out shirt, trousers, and jacket. I said, "Maybe I shouldn't put this on. Do people around here wear shirts?"

He scowled. "Of course they do. Where do you think you are, mister; Arkansas?"

I asked again about the road. He said, "Can I punch the button when we take off, huh?"

I explained that we were going to stay on the ground. He was annoyed, but condescended to point a direction. I drove cautiously, as the car was heavy for unpaved countryside. Presently he said to turn. Quite a bit later I stopped and said, "Are you going to show me that road, or am I going to wallop you?"

He opened the door and slid out. "Hey!" I yelled.

He looked back. "Over that way," he admitted. I turned the car, not expecting to find a highway, but finding one, nevertheless, fifty yards away. The brat had caused me to drive around three sides of a square.

If you could call it a highway—there was not an ounce of rubber



in the paving. Still, it was a road; I followed it to the west. All in all, I had wasted an hour.

Macon, Missouri, seemed too normal to be reassuring; Schedule Bare Back obviously had not been heard of. I gave serious thought to checking this town, then beating back the way I had come, while I could. Pushing further into country which I knew to be controlled by the masters made me jittery; I wanted to run.

But the Old Man had said "Kansas City." I drove the belt around Macon and pulled into a landing flat on the west. There I queued up for local traffic launching and headed for Kansas City in a mess of farmers' 'copters and local craft. I would have to hold local speeds across the state, but that was safer than getting into the hot pattern with my transponder identifying my car to every block control. The field was automatically serviced; it seemed probable that I had managed to enter the Missouri traffic pattern without arousing suspicion.

## 17

Kansas City had not been hurt in the bombings, except on the east where Independence used to be. Consequently it had never been rebuilt. From the southeast you can drive as far as Swope Park before having to choose between parking or paying toll to enter the city proper. Or one can fly in and make another choice: land in the landing flats north of the river and take the tunnels into the city, or land on the downtown platforms south of Memorial Hill.

I decided not to fly in; I did not want to have to pick the car up through a checking system. I do not like tunnels in a pinch—nor launching-platform elevators. A man can be trapped in such. Frankly, I did not want to go into the city at all.

I roaded the car on Route 40 and drove into the Meyer Boulevard tollgate. The line waiting was quite long; I began to feel hemmed in as soon as another car filled in behind me. But the gatekeeper took my toll without glancing at me. I glanced at him, all right, but could not tell whether or not he was being ridden.

I drove through the gate with a sigh of relief—only to be



stopped just beyond. A barrier dropped in front of me and I just managed to stop the car, whereupon a cop stuck his head in. "Safety check," he said. "Climb out."

I protested. "The city is having a safety drive," he explained. "Here's your car check. Pick it up just beyond the barrier. Get out and go in that door." He pointed to a building near the curb.

"What for?"

"Eyesight and reflexes. You're holding up the line."

In my mind's eye I saw the map, with Kansas City glowing red. That the city was "secured" I was sure; therefore this mild-mannered policeman was almost surely hagridden. But, short of shooting him and making an emergency take-off, there was nothing to do but comply. I got out, grumbling, and walked slowly toward the building. It was a temporary job with an old-style unpowered door. I pushed it open with a toe and glanced both sides and up before I entered. There was an empty anteroom with door beyond. Someone inside called, "Come in." Still wary, I went in. There were two men in white coats, one with a doctor's speculum strapped to his head. He said briskly, "This won't take a minute. Step over here." He closed the door I had entered; I heard the lock click.

It was a sweeter setup than we had worked out for the Constitution Club. Spread out on a table were transit cells for masters, already opened and warmed. The second man had one ready—for me, I knew—and was holding it toward him, so that I could not see the slug. The transit cells would not arouse alarm in the victims; medical men always have odd things at hand.

As for the rest, I was being invited to place my eyes against the goggles of an ordinary visual acuity tester. The "doctor" would keep me there, blindfolded without knowing it and reading test figures, while his "assistant" fitted me with a master. No violence, no slips, no protests.

It was not necessary, as I had learned during my own "service," to bare the victim's back. Just touch the master to the bare neck, then let the recruit himself adjust his clothing to cover his master.

"Over here," the "doctor" repeated. "Place your eyes against the eyepieces."

Moving quickly, I went to the bench on which was mounted the acuity tester. Then I turned suddenly around.

The assistant had moved in, the cell ready in his hands. As I



turned he tilted it away from me. "Doctor," I said, "I wear contact lenses. Should I take them off?"

"No, no," he snapped. "Let's not waste time."

"But, Doctor," I protested, "I want you to see how they fit. I've had a little trouble with this left one——" I lifted both hands and pulled back the lids of my left eye. "See?"

He said angrily, "This is not a clinic. Now, if you please——" They were both in reach; lowering my arms in a mighty bear hug, I got them both—and grabbed at the spot between each set of shoulder blades. With each hand I struck something soft under the coats and felt revulsion shake me.

Once I saw a cat struck by a ground car; the poor thing leapt straight up with its back arched the wrong way and all limbs flying. These two unlucky men did the same thing; they contorted every muscle in a grand spasm. I could not hold them; they jerked out of my arms and flopped to the floor. But there was no need; after that first convulsion they went limp, possibly dead.

Someone was knocking. I called out, "Just a moment. The doctor is busy." I stopped. I made sure the door was locked, then bent over the "doctor" and pulled up his coat to see what I had done to his master.

The thing was a ruptured mess. So was the one on the other man—which facts pleased me heartily, as I was determined to burn the slugs if they were not already dead and I was not sure that I could do so without killing the hosts. I left the men, to live or die—or be seized again by titans. I had no way to help them.

The masters waiting in their cells were another matter. With a fan beam and max charge I burned them all. There were two large crates against the wall; I beamed them also until the wood charred.

The knocking resumed. I looked around hastily for somewhere to hide the two men, but there was nowhere, so I decided to run for it. As I was about to go out the exit, I felt that something was missing. I looked around again.

There seemed to be nothing suited to my purpose. I could use clothing from the "doctor" or his helper, but I did not want to. Then I noticed the dust cover for the acuity tester. I loosened my jacket, snatched up the cover, wadded it and stuffed it under my shirt between my shoulders. With my jacket zipped it made a bulge of the proper size.



Then I went out, “. . . a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made.”

As a matter of fact, I was feeling pretty cocky.

Another cop took my car check. He glanced sharply at me, then motioned me to climb in. I did and he said, “Go to police headquarters, under the City Hall.”

“‘Police headquarters, the City Hall,’” I repeated and gunned her ahead. I started in that direction and turned onto Nichols Freeway. I came to a stretch where traffic thinned out and punched the button to shift license plates. It seemed possible that there was already a call out for the plates I had been showing at the gate. I wished that I had been able to change the car’s colors and body lines as well.

Before the Freeway reached McGee Traffic Way, I turned down a ramp and stuck thereafter to side streets. It was eighteen hundred, zone six time, and I was due in Washington in four and one-half hours.

## 18

The city did not look right. It did not have the right flavor, as if it were a clumsily directed play. I tried to put my finger on the fault; it kept slipping away.

Kansas City has many neighborhoods made up of family units a century old or more. Kids roll on lawns and householders sit on their front porches, just as their great-grandparents did. If there are bomb shelters around, they do not show. The queer old bulky houses, fitted together by guildsmen long since dead, make those neighborhoods feel like enclaves of security. I cruised through along such streets, dodging dogs and rubber balls and toddlers, and tried to get the feel of the place. It was the slack of the day, time for a drink, for watering lawns, for neighborly chatting. I saw a woman bending over a flower bed. She was wearing a sun suit and her back was bare; clearly she was not wearing a master, nor were the two kids with her. What could be wrong?

It was a very hot day; I began to look for sun-suited women



and men in shorts. Kansas City is in the Bible Belt; people there do not strip to the weather with the unanimity of Laguna Beach or Coral Gables. An adult fully covered up is never conspicuous. So I found people dressed both ways—but the proportions were wrong. Sure, there were plenty of kids dressed for the weather, but in several miles of driving I saw the bare backs of only five women and two men.

I should have seen more like five hundred.

Cipher it out. While some jackets undoubtedly did *not* cover masters, by simple proportion *well over ninety per cent of the population must be possessed*.

This city was not "secured"; it was saturated. The masters did not simply hold key points and key officials; the masters *were* the city.

I felt a blind urge to blast off and streak out of Zone Red at emergency maximum. They knew that I had escaped the gate trap; they would be looking for me. I might be the only free man driving a car in the entire city—and they were all around me!

I fought it down. An agent who gets the wind up is no use and is not likely to get out of a tight spot. But I had not recovered from what it had done to me to be possessed; it was hard to be calm.

I counted ten and tried to figure it. It seemed that I must be wrong; there could not possibly be enough masters to saturate a city with a million population. I remembered my own experiences, recalling how we picked our recruits and made each new host count. Of course that had been a secondary invasion depending on shipments, whereas Kansas City almost certainly had had a saucer land nearby. Still it did not make sense; it would take a dozen saucers or more to carry enough masters to saturate Kansas City. If there had been that many, surely the space stations would have radar-tracked their landing orbits.

Could it be that they had no trajectories to track? We did not know what the masters were capable of in engineering and it was not safe to judge their limitations by our own.

But the data I had led to a conclusion which contradicted common logic; therefore I must check before I reported. One thing seemed sure: if the masters had in fact almost saturated this city, they were nevertheless still keeping up the masquerade, permitting



the city to look like a city of free human beings. Perhaps I was not as conspicuous as I feared.

I moseyed along another mile or so, going nowhere. I found myself heading into the retail district around the Plaza. I swung away; where there are crowds, there are cops. In so doing, I passed a public swimming pool. I observed it and filed what I had seen. I was several blocks away before I reviewed the swimming pool datum; it had not been much: it carried a sign—CLOSED FOR THE SEASON.

A swimming pool closed down during the hottest part of the summer? It meant nothing; swimming pools have gone out of business before and will again. But it was contrary to the logic of economics to close such an enterprise during the season of greatest profit except through utter necessity. The odds against it were long. But a swimming pool was one place where the masquerade could not possibly be maintained. A closed pool was less conspicuous than a pool unpatronized in hot weather. The masters always noted and followed the human point of view in their maneuvers. Shucks, I had been there!

Item: a trap at the city's tollgates; item: too few sun suits; item: a closed swimming pool.

Conclusion: the slugs were incredibly more numerous than anyone had dreamed.

Corollary: Schedule Counter Blast was based on a mistaken estimate; it would work as well as hunting rhinoceroses with a slingshot.

Counter argument: what I thought I saw was impossible. I could hear Secretary Martinez's restrained sarcasm tearing my report to shreds. I needed proof strong enough to convince the President over the reasonable objections of his official advisers—and I had to have it *now*. Breaking all traffic laws, I could not clip much off two and a half hours' running time back to Washington.

What should I do? Go downtown, mingle with crowds, and then tell Martinez that I was sure that almost every man I passed was possessed? How could I prove it? For that matter, how could I myself be certain? As long as the titans kept up the farce of "business as usual" the telltales would be subtle, a superabundance of round shoulders, a paucity of bare ones.

I had some notion of how the city had been saturated, granting a large enough supply of slugs. I felt sure that I would encounter



another tollgate trap on the way out and that there would be others on launching platforms and at every entrance and exit to the city proper. Every person leaving would be a new agent; every person entering would be a new slave.

I had noticed a vendo-printer for the Kansas City *Star* on the last corner I had passed. Now I swung around the block, pulled up to it and got out. I shoved a dime in the slot and waited nervously for my paper to be printed.

The *Star's* format had its usual dull respectability—no excitement, no mention of an emergency, no reference to Schedule Bare Back. The lead story was headed PHONE SERVICE DISRUPTED BY SUNSPOT STORM, with a subhead: *City Semi-Isolated by Solar Static*. There was a three-column, semi-stereo trukolor of the sun, its face disfigured by cosmic acne. It was a convincing and unexciting explanation of why Mamie Schultz, herself free of parasites, could not get her call through to Grandma in Pittsburgh.

I tucked the paper under my arm to study later and turned back to my car—just as a police car glided silently up and cramped in across the nose of it. A police car seems to condense a crowd out of air. A moment before the corner had been deserted. Now there were people all around and the cop was coming toward me. My hand crept toward my gun; I would have dropped him had I not been sure that most of those around me were equally dangerous.

He stopped in front of me. "Let me see your license," he said pleasantly.

"Certainly, Officer," I agreed. "It's clipped to the instrument board of my car." I stepped past him, letting it be assumed that he would follow. I could feel him hesitate, then take the bait. I led him around between my car and his. This let me see that he did not have a mate in his car, a most welcome variation from human practice. More important, it placed my car between me and the too-innocent bystanders.

"There," I said, pointing inside, "it's fastened down." Again he hesitated, then looked—long enough for me to use the technique I had developed through necessity. My left hand slapped his shoulders and I clutched with all my strength.

His body seemed to explode, so violent was the spasm. I was in the car and gunning it almost before he hit the pavement.

None too soon. The masquerade broke as it had in Barnes's outer office; the crowd closed in. One woman clung by her nails to



the outside of the car for fifty feet or more before she fell off. By then I was making speed and still accelerating. I cut in and out of traffic, ready to take to the air but lacking space.

A street showed up on the left; I slammed into it. It was a mistake; trees arched over it and I could not take off. The next turn was even worse. Of necessity I slowed down. Now I was cruising at conservative speed, still watching for some boulevard wide enough for an illegal take-off. My thoughts began to catch up and I realized that there was no sign of pursuit.

My knowledge of the masters came to my aid. Except for "direct conference," a titan lives in and through his host; he sees what the host sees; receives and passes on information through whatever organs and by whatever means are available to the host. It was unlikely that any of the slugs at that corner had been looking for that particular car other than the one possessing the body of a policeman—and I had settled with it! Now, of course, the other parasites present would be on the lookout for me, too—but they had only the bodily abilities and facilities of their hosts. I decided that I need treat them with no more respect than I would give to any casual crowd of witnesses, i.e., ignore them; change neighborhoods and forget it.

For I had barely thirty minutes left and I had decided on what I needed as proof—a prisoner, a man who had been possessed and could tell what had happened to the city. I had to rescue a host.

I had to capture one without hurting him, kill or remove his rider, and kidnap him back to Washington. I had no time to make plans: I must act *now*. Even as I decided, I saw a man walking in the block ahead, stepping along like a man who sees home and supper. I pulled alongside him and said, "Hey!"

He stopped. "Eh?"

I said, "I've just come from City Hall. No time to explain—slide in and we'll have a direct conference."

He answered, "City Hall? What are you talking about?"

I said, "Change in plans. Don't waste time. Get in!"

He backed away. I jumped out and grabbed at his hunched shoulders.

Nothing happened—save that my hand struck bony human flesh, and the man began to yell.

I jumped into the car and got out of there fast. When I was blocks away I slowed and thought it over. Could it be that my



nerves were so overwrought that I saw signs of titans where there were none?

*No!* For the moment I had the Old Man's indomitable will to face facts. The tollgate, the sun suits, the swimming pool, the cop at the vendo-printer—those facts I *knew*, and this last fact simply meant that I had picked the one man in ten, or whatever the odds were, who was not yet recruited. I speeded up, looking for a new victim.

He was a middle-aged man watering his lawn, a figure so normal looking that I was half a mind to pass him by. But I had no time left—and he wore a sweater which bulged suspiciously. Had I seen his wife on the veranda I would have gone past, for she was dressed in halter and skirt and so could not have been possessed.

He looked up as I stopped. "I've just come from City Hall," I repeated. "You and I need a direct conference right away. Get in."

He said quietly, "Come in the house. That car is too public."

I wanted to refuse but he was already heading for the house. As I came up he whispered, "Careful. The woman is not of us."

"Your wife?"

"Yes."

We stopped on the porch and he said, "My dear, this is Mr. O'Keefe. We have business to discuss. We'll be in the study."

She smiled and answered, "Certainly, my love. Good evening, Mr. O'Keefe. Sultry, isn't it?"

I agreed and she went back to her knitting. We went inside and the man ushered me into his study. Since we were keeping the masquerade, I went in first, as befitted an escorted visitor. I did not like turning my back on him. For that reason I was half expecting it; he hit me near the base of the neck. I rolled with it and went down almost unhurt. I continued to roll and fetched up on my back.

In training school they used to slap us with sandbags for trying to get up, once down. So I stayed down and was threatening him with my heels as soon as I hit. He danced out of range. Apparently he did not have a gun and I could not get at mine. But there was a real fireplace in the room, complete with poker, shovel, and tongs; he circled toward it. There was a small table just out of my reach. I lunged, grabbed a leg and threw it. It caught him in the face as he grabbed the poker. Then I was on him.



His master was dying in my fingers and he himself was convulsing under its last, terrible command when I became aware of his wife, screaming in the doorway. I bounced up and let her have one. She went down in mid-scream and I returned to her husband.

A limp man is amazingly hard to lift, and he was heavy. Fortunately I am a big husky; I managed a lumbering dog trot toward the car. I doubt if our fight disturbed anyone but his wife, but her screams must have aroused half that end of town. There were people popping out of doors on both sides of the street. So far, none of them was near, but I was glad that I had left the car door open.

Then I was sorry; a brat like the one who had given me trouble earlier was inside fiddling with the controls. Cursing, I dumped my prisoner in the lounge circle and grabbed the kid. He struggled, but I tore him loose and threw him out—into the arms of the first of my pursuers. He was still untangling himself as I slammed into the seat and shot forward without bothering with door or safety belt. As I took the first corner the door swung shut and I almost went out of my seat; I then held a straight course long enough to fasten the belt. I cut sharp another corner, nearly ran down a ground car, and went on.

I found a wide boulevard—the Paseo, I think—and jabbed the take-off key. Possibly I caused several wrecks; I had no time to worry. Without waiting to reach altitude I wrestled her to course east and continued to climb as I made easting. I kept her on manual across Missouri and expanded every launching unit in her racks to give more speed. That reckless, illegal action may have saved my neck; somewhere over Columbia, just as I fired the last one, I felt the car shake to concussion. Someone had launched an interceptor and the pesky thing had fused where I had just been.

There were no more shots, which was good, as I would have been a duck on water from then on. My starboard impeller began to run hot, possibly from the near miss or perhaps simply from abuse. I let it heat, praying that it would not fly apart, for another ten minutes. Then, with the Mississippi behind me and the indicator 'way up into "danger" I cut it out and let the car limp along on the port unit. Three hundred was the best she would do—but I was out of Zone Red.

I had not had time to give my passenger more than a glance. He lay sprawled on the floor pads, unconscious or dead. Now that I



was back among men and no longer had power for illegal speeds there was no reason not to go automatic. I flipped the transponder, signaled a request for a block assignment, and put the controls on automatic without waiting for permission. I then swung around into the lounge and looked my man over.

He was still breathing. There was a welt on his face, but no bones seemed broken. I slapped his face and dug thumbnails into his ear lobes but I could not rouse him. The dead slug was beginning to stink but I had no way to dispose of it. I left him and went back to the control seat.

The chronometer read twenty-one thirty-seven Washington time—and I still had better than six hundred miles to go. Allowing nothing for landing, for tearing over to the White House and finding the Old Man, I would reach Washington a few minutes after midnight. So I was already late and the Old Man was sure as the devil going to make me stay in after school for it.

I tried to start the starboard impeller. No dice—it was probably frozen solid. Perhaps just as well, as anything that goes that fast can be explosively dangerous if it gets out of balance—so I desisted and tried to raise the Old Man by phone.

The phone would not work. Perhaps I had jiggered it in one of the spots of exercise I had been forced to take. I put it back, feeling that this was one of those days when it was just not worth while to get out of bed. I turned to the car's communicator and punched the emergency tab. "Control," I called out. "Control!"

The screen lighted up and I was looking at a young man. He was, I saw with relief, bare to the waist. "Control answering—Block Fox Eleven. What are you doing in the air? I've been trying to raise you ever since you entered my block."

"Never mind!" I snapped. "Patch me into the nearest military circuit. This is crash priority!"

He looked uncertain, but the screen flickered and shortly another picture built up showing a military message center—and that did my heart good, as everyone in sight was stripped to the waist. In the foreground was a young watch officer; I could have kissed him. Instead I said, "Military emergency—patch me through the Pentagon and there to the White House."

"Who are you?"

"No time, no time! I'm a civil agent and you wouldn't recognize my I.D. Hurry!"



I might have talked him into it but he was shouldered out of scan by a wing commander. "Land at once!" was all that he said.

"Look, Skipper," I said. "This is a military emergency; you've got to put me through. I——"

"*This* is a military emergency," he interrupted. "Civil craft have been grounded the past three hours. Land at once."

"But I've got to——"

"Land or be shot down. We are tracking; I am about to launch an interceptor to burst a half mile ahead of you. Make any maneuver but landing, and the next will burst on you."

"Will you *listen*, please? I'll land, but I've got to get——" He switched off, leaving me pumping air.

The first burst seemed short of a half mile ahead; I landed.

I cracked up, but without hurting myself or my passenger. I did not have long to wait. They had me flare-lighted and were swooping down before I had satisfied myself that the boat wouldn't mope. They took me in and I met the wing commander personally. He even put my message through after his psych squad got through giving me the antidote for the sleep test. By then it was one-thirteen, zone five—and Schedule Counter Blast had been under way one hour and thirteen minutes.

The Old Man listened to a summary, grunted, then told me to see him in the morning.

## 19

Schedule Counter Blast was the worst wet firecracker in military history. The drops were made just at midnight, zone five, on over ninety-six hundred communication points—newspaper offices, block controls, relay stations, and so forth. The raiding squads were the cream of our sky-borne forces, plus technicians to put each communication point back into service.

Whereupon the President's speech was to go out from each local station; Schedule Bare Back would take effect all through the infected territory; and the war would be over, save for mopping up.



By twenty-five minutes after midnight reports started coming in that such-and-such points were secured. A little later there were calls for help from other points. By one in the morning most of the reserves had been committed, but the operation seemed to be going well—so well, indeed, that unit commanders were landing and reporting from the ground.

That was the last anybody ever heard of them.

Zone Red swallowed up the task force as if it had never existed—over eleven thousand craft, more than a hundred and sixty thousand fighting men and technicians, seventy-one group commanders and—why go on? The United States had received its worst military setback since Black Sunday. I am not criticizing Martinez, Rexton, and the General Staff, nor those poor devils who made the drop. The program was based on what appeared to be a true picture, and the situation called for fast action with the best we had.

It was nearly daylight, so I understand, before Martinez and Rexton got it through their heads that the messages they had gotten back about successes were actually faked, fakes sent by their own men—*our* own men—but hagridden, possessed, and brought into the masquerade. After my report, more than an hour too late to stop the raids, the Old Man had tried to get them not to send in any more men, but they were flushed with success and anxious to make a clean sweep.

The Old Man asked the President to insist on visual checks, but the operation was being controlled by relay through Space Station Alpha and there just aren't enough channels to parallel audio with video through a space station. Rexton had said, "Quit worrying. As fast as we get local stations back in our hands, our boys will patch into the ground-relay net and you will have all the visual evidence you want."

The Old Man had pointed out that by then it would be too late. Rexton had burst out, "Confound it, man! Do you want a thousand men to be killed just to quiet your jitters?"

The President had backed him up.

By morning they had their visual evidence. Stations in the central valley were giving out with the same old pap: *Rise and Shine with Mary Sunshine*, *Breakfast with the Browns*, and such junk. There was not a station with the President's stereocast, not one that conceded that anything had happened. The military dis-



patches tapered off around four o'clock and Rexton's frantic calls were not answered. Task Force Redemption ceased to exist—*spurlos versenkt*.

I did not get to see the Old Man until nearly eleven the next morning. He let me report without comment, and without bawling me out, which was worse.

He was about to dismiss me when I put in, "How about my prisoner? Didn't he confirm my conclusions?"

"Oh, him? Still unconscious. They don't expect him to live."

"I'd like to see him."

"You stick to things you understand."

"Well—have you got something for me to do?"

"I think you had better—no, do this: trot down to the zoo. You'll see things that put a different light on what you picked up in Kansas City."

"Huh?"

"Look up Dr. Horace, the assistant director. Tell him I sent you."

Horace was a nice little guy who looked like one of his own baboons; he turned me over to a Dr. Vargas, who was a specialist in exotic biologies—the same Vargas who was on the Second Venus Expedition. He showed me what had happened. If the Old Man and I had gone to the National Zoological Gardens instead of sitting around in the park, it would not have been necessary for me to go to Kansas City. The ten titans we had captured in Congress, plus two the next day, had been sent to the zoo to be placed on anthropoids—chimps and orangutans, mostly. No gorillas.

The director had had the apes locked up in the zoo's hospital. Two chimpanzees, Abelard and Heloise, were caged together; they had always been mates and there seemed no reason to separate them. That sums up our psychological difficulty in dealing with the titans; even the men who transplanted the slugs still thought of the result as apes, rather than as titans.

The next treatment cage held a family of tuberculous gibbons. They were not used as hosts, since they were sick, and there was no communication between cages. They were shut one from another by sliding panels, and each cage had its own air-conditioning. The next morning the panel had been slid back and the gibbons and the chimps were together. Abelard or Heloise had found



some way to pick the lock. The lock was supposed to be monkey-proof, but it was not ape-cum-titan proof.

Five gibbons, plus two chimps plus two titans—but the next morning there were seven apes ridden by *seven* titans.

This was discovered two hours before I left for Kansas City, but the Old Man had not been notified. Had he been, he would have *known* that Kansas City was saturated. I might have figured it out myself. Had the Old Man known about the gibbons, Schedule Counter Blast would not have taken place.

"I saw the President's stereocast," Dr. Vargas said to me. "Weren't you the man who—I mean, weren't you the——"

"Yes, I was 'the man who,'" I agreed shortly.

"Then you can tell us a great deal about these phenomena."

"Perhaps I should be able to," I admitted slowly, "but I can't."

"Do you mean that no cases of fission reproduction took place while you were, uh, their prisoner?"

"That's right." I thought about it. "At least I think that's right."

"I was given to understand that, uh, victims have full memory of their experiences?"

"Well, they do and they don't." I tried to explain the odd detached frame of mind of a servant of the masters.

"I suppose it could happen while you sleep."

"Maybe. Besides sleep, there is another time, or rather times, which are difficult to remember. During conference."

"Conference?"

So I explained. His eyes lit up, "Oh, you mean 'conjugation.'"

"No, I mean 'conference.'"

"We mean the same thing. Don't you see? Conjugation and fission—they reproduce at will, whenever the supply of hosts permits. Probably one contact for each fission; then, when opportunity exists, fission—two adult daughter parasites in a matter of hours . . . less, possibly."

If that were true—and, looking at the gibbons, I could not doubt it—then why had we depended on shipments at the Constitution Club? Or had we? I did not know; I did what my master wanted done and saw only what came under my eyes. But it was clear how Kansas City had been saturated. With plenty of "live stock" at hand and a space ship loaded with transit cells to draw from, the titans had reproduced to match the human population.

Assume a thousand slugs in that space ship, the one we believed



to have landed near Kansas City; suppose that they could reproduce when given opportunity every twenty-four hours.

First day, one thousand slugs.

Second day, two thousand.

Third day, four thousand.

At the end of the first week, the eighth day, that is—a *hundred and twenty-eight thousand slugs*.

After two weeks, *more than sixteen million slugs*.

But we did not know that they were limited to spawning once a day. Nor did we know that a flying saucer could lift only a thousand transit cells; it might be ten thousand—or more—or less. Assume ten thousand as breeding stock with fission every twelve hours. In two weeks the answer comes out—

**MORE THAN TWO AND A HALF TRILLION! ! !**

The figure did not mean anything; it was cosmic. There aren't anything like that many people on the whole globe, not even counting in apes.

We were going to be knee-deep in slugs—and that before long. I felt worse than I had in Kansas City.

Dr. Vargas introduced me to a Dr. McIlvaine of the Smithsonian Institution; McIlvaine was a comparative psychologist, the author, so Vargas told me, of *Mars, Venus, and Earth: A Study in Motivating Purposes*. Vargas seemed to expect me to be impressed, but I had not read it. Anyhow, how can anyone study the motives of Martians when they were all dead before we swung down out of trees?

They started swapping trade talk; I continued to watch the gibbons. Presently McIlvaine asked me, "Mr. Nivens, how long does a conference last?"

"Conjugation," Vargas corrected him.

"Conference," McIlvaine repeated. "It's the more important aspect."

"But, Doctor," Vargas insisted, "conjugation is the means of gene exchange whereby mutation is spread through—"

"Anthropocentrism, Doctor! You do not know that this life form has genes."

Vargas turned red. "You will allow me gene equivalents?" he said stiffly.

"Why should I? I repeat, sir, that you are reasoning by uncer-



tain analogy. There is only one characteristic common to all life forms and that is the drive to survive."

"And to reproduce," insisted Vargas.

"Suppose the organism is immortal and has no need to reproduce?"

"But—" Vargas shrugged. "We know that they reproduce." He gestured at the apes.

"And I am suggesting," McIlvaine came back, "that this is not reproduction, but a single organism availing itself of more space. No, Doctor, it is possible to get so immersed in the idea of the zygote-gamete cycle that one forgets that there may be other patterns."

Vargas started out, "But throughout the entire system—"

McIlvaine cut him short, "Anthropocentric, terrocentric, solo-centric—it is a provincial approach. These creatures may be from outside the solar system entirely."

I said, "Oh no!" I had had a sudden flash picture of the planet Titan and with it a choking sensation.

Neither one noticed. McIlvaine continued, "Take the amoeba—a more basic, and much more successful life form than ours. The motivational psychology of the amoeba—"

I switched off my ears; free speech gives a man the right to talk about the "psychology" of an amoeba, but I don't have to listen.

They did some direct experimentation, which raised my opinion of them a little. Vargas had a baboon wearing a slug placed in the cage with the gibbons and chimps. As soon as the newcomer was dumped in they gathered in a ring facing outwards and went into direct conference, slug to slug. McIlvaine jabbed his finger at them. "You see? Conference is *not* for reproduction, but for exchange of memory. The organism, temporarily divided, has now re-identified itself."

I could have told him the same thing without the double talk; a master who has been out of touch always gets into direct conference as soon as possible.

"Hypothecation!" Vargas snorted. "They had no opportunity to reproduce just now. George!" He ordered the boss of the handling crew to bring in another ape.

"Little Abe?" asked the crew boss.

"No, I want one without a parasite. Let me see—make it Old Red."



The crew boss said, "Cripes, Doc, don't pick on Old Red."

"This won't hurt him."

"How about Satan? He's a mean bastard anyway."

"All right, but hurry it up."

So they brought in Satan, a coal-black chimp. He may have been aggressive elsewhere; he was not so here. They dumped him inside; he shrank back against the door and began to whine. It was like watching an execution. I had had my nerves under control—a man can get used to anything—but the ape's hysteria was contagious. I wanted to run.

At first the hagridden apes simply stared at him like a jury. This went on for a long while. Satan's whines changed to low moans and he covered his face. Presently Vargas said, "Doctor! Look!"

"Where?"

"Lucy—the old female. There." He pointed.

It was the matriarch of consumptive gibbons. Her back was toward us; the slug thereon had humped itself together. An iridescent line ran down the center of it.

It began to split as an egg splits. In a few minutes only, the division was complete. One new slug centered itself over her spine; the other flowed down her back. She was squatting almost to the floor; it slithered off and plopped gently on the concrete. It crept slowly toward Satan. The ape screamed hoarsely—and swarmed up into the top of the cage.

So help me, they sent a squad to arrest him—two gibbons, a chimp, and the baboon. They tore him loose and hauled him down and held him face down on the floor.

The slug slithered closer.

It was a good two feet away when it grew a pseudopod—slowly, at first—a stalk that weaved around like a cobra. Then it lashed out and struck the ape on a foot. The others promptly let go of him, but Satan did not move.

The titan seemed to pull itself in by the extension it had formed, and attached itself to Satan's foot. From there it crawled up; when it reached the base of his spine Satan sat up. He shook himself and joined the others.

Vargas and McIlvaine started talking excitedly, apparently unmoved. I wanted to smash something—for me, for Satan, for the whole simian race.

McIlvaine maintained that we were seeing something new to



our concepts, an intelligent creature so organized as to be immortal and continuous in its personal identity—or its group identity; the argument grew confused. He theorized that it would have continuous memory back to its racial beginning. He described the slugs as a four-dimensional worm in space-time, intertwined as a single organism, and the talk grew so esoteric as to be silly.

As for me, I did not know and did not care; the only way I cared about slugs was to kill them.

## 20

For a wonder, when I got back the Old Man was available—the President had left to address a secret session of the United Nations. I told the Old Man what I had seen and added my opinion of Vargas and McIlvaine. “Boy scouts,” I complained, “comparing stamp collections. They don’t realize it’s serious.”

The Old Man shook his head. “Don’t sell them short, son,” he advised me. “They are more likely to come up with the answer than are you and I.”

“Humph!” I said, or something stronger. “They are more likely to let those slugs escape.”

“Did they tell you about the elephant?”

“What elephant? They damn near didn’t tell me anything; they got interested in each other and ignored me.”

“You don’t understand scientific detachment. About the elephant: an ape with a rider got out, somehow. Its body was found trampled to death in the elephant house. And one of the elephants was gone.”

“You mean there is an elephant loose *with a slug on him*?” I had a horrid vision—something like a tank with a cybernetic brain.

“Her,” the Old Man corrected me. “They found her over in Maryland, quietly pulling up cabbages. No parasite.”

“Where did the slug get to?” Involuntarily I glanced around.

“A duo was stolen in the adjoining village. I’d say the slug is somewhere west of the Mississippi.”

“Anybody missing?”

He shrugged again. “How can you tell, in a free country? At



least, the titan can't hide on a human host anywhere short of Zone Red."

His comment made me think of something I had seen at the zoo and had not reasoned through. Whatever it was, it eluded me. The Old Man went on, "It's taken drastic action to make the bare-shoulders order stick, though. The President has had protests on moral grounds, not to mention the National Association of Haberdashers."

"Huh?"

"You would think we were trying to sell their daughters down to Rio. There was a delegation in, called themselves the Mothers of the Republic, or some such nonsense."

"The President's time is being wasted like *that*, at a time like *this*?"

"McDonough handled them. But he roped me in on it." The Old Man looked pained. "We told them that they could not see the President unless they stripped naked. That stopped 'em."

The thought that had been bothering me came to the surface. "Say, Boss, you might have to."

"Have to what?"

"Make people strip naked."

He chewed his lip. "What are you driving at?"

"Do we know, as a certainty, that a slug can attach itself only near the base of the brain?"

"You should know."

"I thought I did, but now I'm not sure. That's the way we always did it, when I was, uh, with them." I recounted in more detail what I had seen when Vargas had had poor old Satan exposed to a slug. "That ape moved as soon as the thing reached the base of his spine. I'm sure they prefer to ride up near the brain. But maybe they could ride down inside a man's pants and just put out an extension to the end of his spinal cord."

"Hmm . . . you'll remember, son, that the first time I had a crowd searched I made everybody peel to the buff. That was not accidental."

"I think you were justified. They might be able to conceal themselves anywhere on the body. Take those droopy drawers you've got on. One could hide in them and it would just make you look a bit satchel-fannied."

"Want me to take 'em off?"



"I can do better than that; I'll give you the Kansas City Clutch." My words were joking but I was not; I grabbed at the bunchiness of his pants and made sure he was clean. He submitted with good grace; then gave me the same treatment.

"But we can't," he complained as he sat down, "go around slapping women on the rump. It won't do."

"You may have to," I pointed out, "or make everybody strip."

"We'll run some experiments."

"How?" I asked.

"You know that head-and-spine armor deal? It's not worth much, except to give the wearer a feeling of security. I'll tell Dr. Horace to take an ape, fit such an armor so that a slug can't reach anything but his legs, say—and see what happens. We'll vary the areas too."

"Uh, yes. But don't use an ape, Boss."

"Why not?"

"Well—they're too human."

"Damn it, bub, you can't make an omelet—"

"—without breaking eggs. Okay, but I don't have to like it."

## 21

I spent the next several days lecturing to brass, answering fool questions about what titans ate for lunch, explaining how to tackle a man who was possessed. I was billed as an "expert," but half the time my pupils seemed sure that they knew more about slugs than I did.

The titans continued to hold Zone Red, but they could not break out without being spotted—we hoped. And we did not try to break in again because every slug held one of our own people as hostage. The United Nations was no help. The President wanted a Schedule Bare Back on a global scale, but they hemmed and hawed and sent the matter to committee for investigation. The truth was they did not believe us; that was the enemy's great advantage—only the burned believed in the fire.

Some nations were safe through their own customs. A Finn who did not climb into a steam bath in company every day or so would



have been conspicuous. The Japanese too were casual about undressing. The South Seas were relatively safe, as were large parts of Africa. France had gone enthusiastically nudist, on week ends at least, right after World War III—a slug would have a tough time hiding. But in countries where the body-modesty taboo meant something, a slug could stay hidden until his host began to stink. The United States itself, Canada, England—most particularly England.

They flew three slugs (with apes) to London; I understand that the King wanted to set an example as the President had, but the Prime Minister, egged on by the Archbishop of Canterbury, would not let him. The Archbishop had not even bothered to look; moral behavior was more important than mundane peril. Nothing about this appeared in the news, and the story may not be true, but English skin was not exposed to the cold stares of neighbors.

The Russian propaganda system began to blast us as soon as they had worked out a new line. The whole thing was an "American Imperialist fantasy." I wondered why the titans had not attacked Russia first; the place seemed tailor-made for them. On second thought, I wondered if they had. On third thought, I wondered what difference it would make.

I did not see the Old Man during this period; I got my assignments from Oldfield, his deputy. Consequently I did not know it when Mary was relieved from special duty with the President. I ran into her in the lounge of the Section offices. "Mary!" I yelped and fell over my feet.

She gave me that slow, sweet smile and moved over. "Hello, darling!" she whispered. She did not ask what I had been doing, nor scold me that I had not been in touch with her, nor even comment on how long it had been. Mary let water over the dam take care of itself.

Not me—I babbled. "This is wonderful! I thought you were still tucking the President into his beddy-bye. How long have you been here? When do you have to go back? Say, can I dial you a drink? No, you've got one." I started to dial one for myself; it popped out into my hand. "Huh? How'd this get here?"

"I ordered it when you came in the door."

"Mary, did I tell you that you are wonderful?"

"No."



"Very well, then, I will: You're wonderful."

"Thank you."

I went on, "How long are you free? Say, couldn't you possibly get some leave? They can't expect you to be on duty twenty-four hours a day, week after week, with no time off. I'm going straight to the Old Man and tell him——"

"I'm on leave, Sam."

"—just what I think of—— Huh?"

"I'm on leave now."

"You *are*? For how long?"

"Subject to call. All leaves read that way now."

"But—how long have you been on leave?"

"Since yesterday. I've been sitting here, waiting for you."

"Yesterday!" I had spent yesterday giving kindergarten lectures to brass hats who did not want them. I stood up. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

I rushed over to the operations office. Oldfield looked up when I came in and said in a surly tone, "What do *you* want?"

"Chief, that series of bedtime stories I'm scheduled to tell: better cancel them."

"Why?"

"I'm a sick man; I've rated sick leave for a long time. Now I've got to take it."

"You're sick in the head."

"That's right; I'm sick in the head. I hear voices. People have been following me around. I keep dreaming I'm back with the titans." That last point was true.

"But since when has being crazy been any handicap in this Section?" He waited for me to argue the point.

"Look—do I get leave or don't I?"

He fumbled through papers, found one and tore it up. "Okay. Keep your phone handy; you're subject to recall. Get out."

I got. Mary looked up when I came in and gave me the soft warm treatment again. I said, "Grab your things; we're leaving."

She did not ask where; she simply stood up. I snatched my drink, gulped some and spilled the rest. We were up on the pedestrian level of the city before we spoke. Then I asked, "Now—where do you want to get married?"

"Sam, we discussed that before."

"Sure we did and now we are going to do it. Where?"



"Sam, my very dear—I will do what you say. But I am still opposed to it."

"Why?"

"Sam, let's go to my apartment. I'd like to cook dinner for you."

"Okay, you can cook dinner—but not there. And we get married first."

"Please, Sam!"

Somebody said, "Keep pitching, kid. She's weakening," I looked around and found that we were playing to a gallery.

I swept an arm wide and shouted irritably, "Haven't you people got anything to do? Go get drunk!"

Somebody else said, "I'd say he ought to take her offer."

I grabbed Mary's arm and did not say another word until I had gotten her into a cab. "All right," I said gruffly, "why not? Let's have your reasons."

"Why get married, Sam? I'm yours; you don't need a contract."

"Why? Because I love you, damn it!"

She did not answer for quite a while; I thought I had offended her. When she did I could hardly hear her. "You hadn't mentioned that before, Sam."

"Hadn't I? Oh, I must have."

"No, I'm quite sure that you haven't. Why didn't you?"

"Uh, I don't know. An oversight, I guess. I'm not right sure what the word 'love' means."

"Neither am I," she said softly, "but I love to hear you say it. Say it again, please."

"Huh? Okay. I love you. I love you, Mary."

"Oh, Sam!"

She snuggled against me and began to tremble. I shook her a little. "How about *you*?"

"Me? Oh, I do love you, Sam. I've loved you ever since——"

"Ever since what?"

I expected her to say that she had loved me ever since I took her place in Project Interview; what she said was, "I've loved you ever since you slapped me."

Is that logic?

The driver was cruising slowly along the Connecticut coast; I had to wake him before I could get him to land in Westport. We went to the city hall. I stepped up to a counter in the bureau of



sanctions and licenses and said to a clerk, "Is this where we get married?"

"That's up to you," he answered. "Hunting licenses on the left, dog licenses on the right. This is the happy medium—I hope."

"Good," I said stiffly. "Will you oblige by issuing a license?"

"Sure. Everybody ought to get married at least once; that's what I tell my old lady." He got out a form. "Let's have your serial numbers."

We gave them to him. "Now—are either of you married in any other state?" We said we weren't; he went on, "You're sure? If you don't tell me, so I can put on a rider showing other contracts, this contract ain't valid."

We told him again that we weren't married anywhere. He went on, "Term, renewable, or lifetime? If it's over ten years, the fee is the same as for lifetime; if it's under six months, you don't need this; you get the short form from that vendo machine over there."

Mary said in a small voice, "Lifetime."

The clerk looked surprised. "Lady, are you sure you know what you're doing? The renewable contract, with the automatic option clause, is just as permanent and you don't have to go through the courts if you change your mind."

I said, "You heard the lady!"

"Okay, okay—either party, mutual consent, or binding?"

"Binding," I answered, and Mary nodded.

"Binding it is," he agreed, stroking the typer. "Now the meat of the matter: who pays and how much? Salary or endowment?"

I said, "Salary"; I didn't own enough to set up a fund.

In a firm voice Mary said, "Neither."

The clerk said, "Huh?"

"Neither," Mary repeated. "This is not a financial contract."

The clerk stopped completely. "Lady, don't be foolish," he said reasonably. "You heard the gentleman say that he was willing to do the right thing."

"No."

"Hadn't you better talk with your lawyer before you go ahead? There's a public communicator in the hall."

"No!"

"Well, I'm darned if I see what you need a license for."

"Neither do I," Mary told him.

"You mean you don't want this?"



"No! Put it down the way I told you to. 'No salary.'"

The clerk looked helpless but bent over the typer. "I guess that's all," he said finally. "You've kept it simple, I'll say that. 'Do-you-both-solemnly-swear-that-the-above-facts-are-true-to-the-best-of-your-knowledge-and-belief-that-you-are-entering-into-this-agreement-uninfluenced-by-drugs-or-other-illegal-inducements-and-that-there-exists-no-undisclosed-covenants-nor-other-legal-impediments-to-the-execution-and-registration-of-the-above-contract?'"

We both said that we did and we were and it was and there weren't. He pulled it out of the typer. "Let's have your thumb prints. Okay, that'll be ten dollars, including federal tax." I paid him and he shoved the form into the copier and threw the switch. "Copies will be mailed to you," he announced, "at your serial-number addresses. Now—what type of ceremony are you looking for? Maybe I can help."

"We don't want a religious ceremony," Mary told him.

"Then I've got just what you want. Old Dr. Chamleigh. Non-sectarian, best stereo accompaniment in town, all four walls and full orchestra. He gives you the works, fertility rites and everything, but dignified. And he tops it off with a fatherly straight-from-the-shoulder word of advice. Makes you feel *married*."

"No." This time I said it.

"Oh, come now!" the clerk said to me. "Think of the little lady. If she sticks by what she just swore to, she'll never have another chance. Every girl is entitled to a formal wedding. Honest—I don't get much of a commission."

I said, "You can marry us, can't you? Go ahead. Get it over with!"

He looked surprised. "Didn't you know? In this state you marry yourself. You've *been* married, ever since you thumb-printed the license."

I said, "Oh." Mary didn't say anything. We left.

I hired a duo at the landing flat north of town; the heap was ten years old but it had full automatic and that was all that mattered. I looped around the city, cut across Manhattan Crater, and set the controls. I was happy but terribly nervous—and then Mary put her arm around me. After a long time I heard the *BEEEEEP! beeb-beep BEEEEEP!* of the beacon at my shack, whereupon I unwound myself and landed. Mary said sleepily, "Where are we?"



"At my cabin in the mountains," I told her.

"I didn't know you had a cabin in the mountains. I thought you were headed for my apartment."

"What, and risk those bear traps? Anyhow, it's not mine; it's ours."

She kissed me again and I loused up the landing. She slid out ahead of me while I was securing the board; I found her staring at the shack. "Sweetheart, it's beautiful!"

"You can't beat the Adirondacks," I agreed. There was a slight haze with the sun low in the west, giving that wonderful, depth upon depth, stereo look.

She glanced at it and said, "Yes, yes—but I didn't mean that. I meant your—our cabin. Let's go inside, right now."

"Suits," I agreed, "but it's really just a simple shack." Which it was—not even an indoor pool. I had kept it that way; when I came up here I didn't want to feel that I had brought the city with me. The shell was conventional steel-and-fiber-glass, but I had had it veneered in durolabs which looked like real logs. The inside was just as simple—a big living room with a real fireplace, deep rugs and plenty of low chairs. The services were in a Kompacto special, buried under the foundation—air-conditioner, power pack, cleansing system, sound equipment, plumbing, radiation alarm, servos—everything but deep-freeze and the other kitchen equipment, out of sight and mind. Even the stereo screens would not be noticed unless in use. It was about as near as a man could get to a real log cabin and still have inside plumbing.

"I think it's lovely," Mary said seriously. "I wouldn't want an ostentatious place."

"You and me both." I worked the combo and the door dilated; Mary was inside at once. "Hey! Come back!" I yelled.

She did so. "What's the matter, Sam? Did I do something wrong?"

"You sure did." I dragged her out, then swung her up in my arms and carried her across the threshold, kissing her as I put her down. "There. Now you are in your own house, properly."

The lights came on as we entered. She looked around, then turned and threw her arms around my neck. "Oh, darling, darling!"

We took time out. Then she started wandering around, touching



things. "Sam, if I had planned it myself, it would have been just this way."

"It hasn't but one bathroom," I apologized. "We'll have to rough it."

"I don't mind. I'm glad; now I know you didn't bring any of those women of yours up here."

"What women?"

"You know darn well. If you had been planning this as a nest, you would have included a woman's bathroom."

"You know too much."

She did not answer but wandered out into the kitchen. I heard her squeal. "What's the matter?" I asked, following her out.

"I never expected to find a real kitchen in a bachelor's lodge."

"I'm not a bad cook. I wanted a kitchen so I bought one."

"I'm so glad. Now I *will* cook you dinner."

"It's your kitchen; suit yourself. But don't you want to wash up? You can have first crack at the shower. Tomorrow we'll get a catalogue and you can pick out a bathroom of your own. We'll have it flown in."

"You take first shower," she said. "I want to start dinner."

Mary and I slipped into domesticity as if we had been married for years. Oh, not that our honeymoon was humdrum, nor that there weren't a thousand things we still had to learn about each other—the point was that we already seemed to know the necessary things about each other that made us married. Especially Mary.

I don't remember those days too clearly. I was happy; I had forgotten what it was like, had not known that I was not happy. Interested, I used to be—yes. Diverted, entertained, amused—but not happy.

We did not turn on a stereo, we did not read a book. We saw no one and spoke to no one—except that on the second day we walked down to the village; I wanted to show Mary off. On the way back we passed the shack of John the Goat, our local hermit. John did what little caretaking I required. Seeing him, I waved.

He waved back. He was dressed as usual, stocking cap, an old army blouse, shorts, and sandals. I thought of warning him about the bare-to-the-waist order, but decided against it. Instead I cupped my hands and shouted, "Send up the Pirate!"



"Who's the Pirate, darling?" Mary asked.

"You'll see."

Which she did; as soon as we got back the Pirate came in, for I had his little door keyed to his own *meeow*—the Pirate being a large and rakish tomcat. He strutted in, told me what he thought of people who stayed away so long, then head-bumped my ankle in forgiveness. I roughed him up, then he inspected Mary. She dropped to her knees and made the sounds used by people who understood cat protocol, but the Pirate looked her over suspiciously. Suddenly he jumped into her arms and commenced to buzz, while bumping her under the chin.

"That's a relief," I announced. "For a moment I didn't think I was going to be allowed to keep you."

Mary looked up and smiled. "You need not have worried. I'm two-thirds cat myself."

"What's the other third?"

"You'll find out."

From then on the cat was with us—or with Mary—almost all the time, except when I shut him out of our bedroom. That I would not stand for, though both Mary and the Pirate thought it small of me.

Mary never borrowed trouble. She did not like digging into the past. Oh, she would let me talk about mine but not about her own. Once when I started quizzing her she changed the subject by saying, "Let's go look at the sunset."

"Sunset?" I answered. "Can't be—we just finished breakfast." The mix-up about the time of day jerked me back to reality. "Mary, how long have we been up here?"

"Does it matter?"

"You're darn right it matters. It's been more than a week, I'm sure. One of these days our phones will start screaming and then it's back to the treadmill."

"In the meantime what difference does it make?"

I still wanted to know what day it was. I could have found out by switching on a stereo, but I would probably have bumped into a newscast—and I did not want that; I was still pretending that Mary and I were away in a different world, where titans did not exist. "Mary," I said fretfully, "how many tempus pills have you?"



"None."

"Well, I've got enough for us both. Let's stretch it out. Suppose we have just twenty-four more hours; we could fine it down into a month, subjective time."

"No."

"Why not? Let's *carpe* that old *diem*."

She put a hand on my arm and looked up into my eyes. "No, darling, it's not for me. I must live each moment and not let it be spoiled by worrying about the moment ahead." I looked stubborn; she went on, "If you want to take them, I won't mind, but please don't ask me to."

"Confound it, I'm not going on a joy ride alone." She did not answer, which is the damndest way of winning an argument I know of.

Not that we argued. If I tried to start one Mary would give in and somehow it would work out that I was mistaken. I did try several times to find out more about her; it seemed to me that I ought to know *something* about the woman I was married to. To one question she looked thoughtful and answered, "I sometimes wonder whether I ever did have a childhood—or was it something I dreamed last night?"

I asked her point-blank what her name was. "Mary," she said tranquilly.

"Mary really is your name?" I had long since told her my right name, but we went on using "Sam."

"Certainly it's my name, dear. I've been 'Mary' since you first called me that."

"Oh. All right, you are my beloved Mary. But what was your name before?"

Her eyes held an odd, hurt look, but she answered steadily, "I was once known as 'Allucquere.'"

"'Allucquere,'" I repeated, savoring it. "Allucquere. What a strange and beautiful name. Allucquere. It has a rolling majesty. My darling Allucquere."

"My name is Mary now." And that was that. Somewhere, some-when, I was convinced, Mary had been hurt, badly hurt. But it seemed unlikely that I was ever going to know about it. Presently I ceased to worry about it. She was what she was, now and forever, and I was content to bask in the warm light of her presence.



I went on calling her "Mary," but the name that she had once had kept running through my mind. Allucquere . . . Allucquere. . . . I wondered how it was spelled.

Then suddenly I knew. My pesky pack-rat memory was pawing away at the shelves in the back of my mind where I keep the useless junk that I am helpless to get rid of. There had been a community, a colony that used an artificial language, even to given names . . .

The Whitmanites, that was it—the anarchist-pacifist cult that got kicked out of Canada, then failed to make a go of it in Little America. There was a book, written by their prophet, *The Entropy of Joy*—I had skimmed it once; it was full of pseudomathematical formulas for achieving happiness.

Everybody is for "happiness," just as they are against "sin," but the cult's practices got them in hot water. They had a curious and very ancient solution to their sexual problems, a solution which produced explosive results when the Whitmanite culture touched any other pattern of behavior. Even Little America had not been far enough away. I had heard somewhere that the remnants had emigrated to Venus—in which case they must all be dead by now.

I put it out of my mind. If Mary were a Whitmanite, or had been reared that way, that was her business. I certainly was not going to let the cult's philosophy cause a crisis now or ever; marriage is not ownership and wives are not property.

## 22

The next time I mentioned tempus pills, she did not argue but suggested that we hold it down to a minimum dose. It was a fair compromise—we could always take more.

I prepared it as injections so that it would take hold faster. Ordinarily I watch a clock after I've taken tempus; when the second hand stops I know that I'm loaded. But my shack has no clocks and neither of us was wearing ring watches. It was sunrise and we had been awake all night, cuddled up on a big low couch by the fireplace.



We continued to lie there, feeling good and dreamy, and I was considering the idea that the drug had not worked. Then I realized that the sun had stopped rising. I watched a bird fluttering past the window. If I stared at him long enough, I could see his wings move.

I looked back from it to my wife. The Pirate was curled up on her stomach, his paws tucked in as a muff. They seemed asleep. "How about breakfast?" I said. "I'm starved."

"You get it," she answered. "If I move, I'll disturb Pirate."

"You promised to love, honor, and fix me breakfast," I replied and tickled her feet. She gasped and drew up her legs; the cat squawked and landed on the floor.

"Oh dear!" she said. "You made me move too fast. I've offended him."

"Never mind the cat, woman; you're married to me." But I knew that I had made a mistake. In the presence of those not under the drug, one should move with great care. I simply hadn't thought about the cat; no doubt he thought we were behaving like drunken jumping jacks. I intentionally slowed down and tried to woo him.

No use—he was streaking toward his door. I could have stopped him, for to me his movement was a molasses crawl, but had I done so I would simply have frightened him more. I let him go and went to the kitchen.

Do you know, Mary was right; *tempus-fugit* drug is no good for honeymoons. The ecstatic happiness I had felt before was masked by the euphoria of the drug. The drug's euphoria is compelling, but the loss was real; I had substituted for the true magic a chemical fake. Nevertheless it was a good day—or month. But I wished that I had stuck to the real thing.

Late that evening we came out of it. I felt the slight irritability which marks the loosening hold of the drug, found my ring watch and timed my reflexes. When they were back to normal I timed Mary's, whereupon she informed me that she had been out of it for twenty minutes or so—pretty accurate matching of dosage.

"Do you want to go under again?" she asked.

I kissed her. "No; frankly, I'm glad to be back."

"I'm so glad."

I had the usual ravenous appetite that one has afterward; I mentioned it. "In a minute," she said. "I want to call Pirate."



I had not missed him that day—or “month”—just past; the euphoria is like that. “Don’t worry,” I told her. “He often stays out all day.”

“He hasn’t before.”

“He has with me,” I answered.

“I think I offended him—I know I did.”

“He is probably down at Old John’s. That is his usual way of punishing me. He’ll be all right.”

“But it’s late at night—I’m afraid a fox might get him. Do you mind, darling? I’ll just step out and call him.” She headed for the door.

“Put something on,” I ordered. “It will be nippy out.”

She went back to the bedroom and got a negligee I had bought for her the day we had gone to the village. She went out; I put wood on the fire and went into the kitchen. While I was trying to make up my mind about a menu, I heard her saying, “Bad, bad cat! You worried Mama,” in that cooing voice suitable for babies and felines.

I called out, “Fetch him in and close the door—and mind the penguins!” She did not answer and I did not hear the door relax, so I went back into the living room. She was just coming in and did not have the cat with her. I started to speak and then caught sight of her eyes. They were staring, filled with unspeakable horror. I said, “Mary!” and started toward her. She seemed to see me and turned back toward the door; her movements were jerky, spasmodic. As she turned I saw her shoulders.

Under the negligee was a hump.

I don’t know how long I stood there. Probably a split second, but it is burned into me as endless. I jumped and grabbed her by the arms. She looked at me and her eyes were no longer wells of horror but merely dead.

She gave me the knee.

I squeezed and managed to avoid the worst of it. Look—you don’t tackle a dangerous opponent by grabbing his arms, but this was my *wife*. I couldn’t come at Mary with a feint-shift-and-kill.

But the slug had no compunctions about me. Mary—or *it*—was giving me everything she had, and I had all I could do to keep from killing her. I had to keep her from killing me—and I had to kill the slug—and I had to keep the slug from getting at me or I would not be able to save her.



I let go with one hand and jabbed her chin. The blow did not even slow her down. I grabbed again, with both arms and legs, trying to encase her in a bear hug to immobilize her without injuring her. We went down, Mary on top. I shoved my head into her face to stop her biting me.

I held her so, curbing her strong body by sheer muscle. Then I tried to paralyze her with nerve pressure, but she knew the key spots as well as I did—and I was lucky that I was not myself paralyzed.

There was one thing left that I could do: clutch the slug itself—but I knew the shattering effect that had on the host. It might kill her; it was sure to hurt her horribly. I wanted to make her unconscious, then remove the slug gently before I killed it . . . drive it off with heat or force it to turn loose with mild shocks.

Drive it off with heat . . .

I was given no time to develop the idea; she got her teeth in my ear. I shifted my right arm and grabbed at the slug.

Nothing happened. Instead of sinking my fingers into it I found that this slug had a leathery covering; it was as if I had clutched a football. Mary jerked when I touched it and took away part of my ear, but there was no bone-crushing spasm; the slug was still alive and in control.

I tried to get my fingers under it; it clung like a suction cup. My fingers would not go under.

In the meantime I was suffering damages other places. I rolled over and got to my knees, still hugging her. I had to let her legs free and that was bad, but I bent her across a knee and struggled to my feet. I dragged and carried her to the fireplace.

She almost got away from me; it was like wrestling a mountain lion. But I got her there, grabbed her mop of hair and slowly forced her shoulders over the fire.

I meant only to singe it, force it to drop off to escape that heat. But she struggled so hard that I slipped, banging my own head against the arch of the opening and dropping her shoulders against the coals.

She screamed and bounded out of the fire, carrying me with her. I struggled to my feet, still dazed by the wallop, and saw her collapsed on the floor. Her hair, her beautiful hair, was burning.

So was her negligee. I slapped at them both with my hands. The slug was no longer on her. Still crushing the flames with my hands



I glanced around and saw it lying on the floor by the fireplace—and the Pirate was sniffing at it.

“Get away from there!” I yelled. “Pirate! Stop that!” The cat looked up inquiringly. I went on doing what I had to do, making certain that the fire was out. When I was sure, I left her; there was not even time to make certain that she was still alive. What I wanted was the fireplace shovel; I did not dare risk touching the thing with my hands. I turned to get it.

But the slug was no longer on the floor; it had gotten Pirate. The cat was standing rigid, feet wide apart, and the slug was settling into place. I dived at Pirate and got him by his hind legs just as he made his first controlled movement.

Handling a frenzied cat with bare hands is reckless at best; controlling one which is already controlled by a titan is impossible. Hands and arms being slashed by claws and teeth at every step, I hurried to the fireplace again. Despite Pirate’s wails and struggles I forced the slug against the coals and held it there, cat fur and my hands alike burning, until the slug dropped off directly into the flames. Then I took Pirate out and laid him on the floor. He was no longer struggling. I made sure that he was no longer burning anywhere and went back to Mary.

She was still unconscious. I squatted down beside her and sobbed.

An hour later I had done what I could for Mary. Her hair was gone from the left side of her head and there were burns on shoulders and neck. But her pulse was strong, her respiration steady though fast and light, and I did not judge that she would lose much body fluid. I dressed her burns—I keep a full stock out there in the country—and gave her an injection to make her sleep. Then I had time for Pirate.

He was still where I had left him and he did not look good. He had gotten it much worse than Mary and probably flame in his lungs as well. I thought he was dead, but he lifted his head when I touched him. “I’m sorry, old fellow,” I whispered. I think I heard him mew.

I did for him what I had done for Mary, except that I was afraid to give him a soporific. After that I went into the bathroom and looked myself over.

The ear had stopped bleeding; I decided to ignore it. My hands were what bothered me. I stuck them under hot water and yelped,



then dried them in the air blast and that hurt too. I couldn't figure out how I could dress them, and, besides, I needed to use them.

Finally I dumped about an ounce of the jelly for burns into each of a pair of plastic gloves and put them on. The stuff included a local anesthetic; I could get by. Then I went to the stereophone and called the village medical man. I explained what had happened and what I had done about it and asked him to come up at once.

"At *night*?" he said. "You must be joking."

I said that I decidedly was not.

He answered, "Don't ask the impossible, man. Yours makes the fourth alarm in this county; nobody goes out at night. I'll stop in and see your wife first thing in the morning."

I told him to go straight to the devil first thing in the morning and switched off.

Pirate died a little after midnight. I buried him at once so that Mary would not see him. Digging hurt my hands, but he did not take a very big hole. I said good-by to him and came back in. Mary was resting quietly; I brought a chair to the bed and watched over her. Probably I dozed from time to time; I can't be sure.

## 23

About dawn Mary began to struggle and moan. I put a hand on her. "There, baby, there. It's all right. Sam's here."

Her eyes opened and for a moment held the same horror. Then she saw me and relaxed. "Sam! Oh, darling, I've had the most terrible dream."

"It's all right," I repeated.

"Why are you wearing gloves?" She became aware of her own dressings; she looked dismayed and said, "It wasn't a dream!"

"No, dearest, it wasn't a dream. But it's all right; I killed it."

"You killed it? You're sure it's dead?"

"Quite sure."

"Oh. Come here, Sam. Hold me tight."

"I'll hurt your shoulders."



"Hold me!" So I did, while trying to be careful of her burns. Presently her trembling stopped. "Forgive me, darling. I'm weak and womanish."

"You should have seen the shape I was in when they got me back."

"I did see. Now tell me what happened. The last I remember you were trying to force me into the fireplace."

"Look, Mary, I couldn't help it; I had to—I couldn't get it off!"

"I know, darling, I know—and thank you for doing it! Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Again I owe you everything."

We both cried and I blew my nose and went on, "You didn't answer when I called, so I went into the living room and there you were."

"I remember. Oh, darling, I tried so hard!"

I stared at her. "I know you did—you tried to leave. But how? Once a slug gets you, that's it. There's no way to fight it."

"Well, I lost—but I tried." Somehow, Mary had forced her will against that of a parasite, and that can't be done. I *know*. I had a sneaking hunch that had Mary not been able to resist the slug by some amount, however slight, I would have lost the struggle, handicapped as I was by what I could not do.

"I should have used a light, Sam," she went on, "but it never occurred to me to be afraid *here*." I nodded; this was the safe place, like crawling into bed or into sheltering arms. "Pirate came at once. I didn't see the thing until I had touched him. Then it was too late." She sat up. "Where is he, Sam? Is he all right? Call him."

So I had to tell her about Pirate. She listened without expression, nodded and never referred to him again. I changed the subject by saying, "Now that you are awake I had better fix you some breakfast."

"*Don't go!*" I stopped. "Don't go out of my sight at all," she went on, "not for any reason. I'll get breakfast."

"The hell you will. You'll stay in that bed, like a good girl."

"Come here and take off those gloves. I want to see your hands." I did not take them off—could not bear to think about them, the anesthesia had worn off. She said grimly, "Just as I thought. You were burned worse than I was."

So she got breakfast. Furthermore, she ate—I wanted nothing but coffee. I did insist that she drink a lot too; large-area burns are



no joke. Presently she pushed aside her plate and said, "Darling, I'm not sorry it happened. Now I know. Now we've both been there." I nodded dumbly. Sharing happiness is not enough. She stood up and said, "Now we must go."

"Yes," I agreed, "I want to get you to a doctor as soon as possible."

"I didn't mean that."

"I know you didn't." There was no need to discuss it; we both knew that the music had stopped and that now it was time to go back to work. The heap we had arrived in was still sitting on my landing flat, piling up rental charges. It took about three minutes to burn the dishes, switch off everything, and get ready.

Mary drove, because of my hands. Once in the air she said, "Let's go straight to the Section offices. We'll get treatment there and find out what has been going on—or are your hands hurting too badly?"

"Suits," I agreed. I wanted to learn the situation, and I wanted to get back to work. I asked Mary to switch on the squawk screen to catch a newscast. But the car's communication equipment was as junky as the rest of it; we could not even pick up audio. Fortunately the remote-control circuits were okay, or Mary would have had to buck traffic by hand.

A thought had been fretting me; I mentioned it to Mary. "A slug would not mount a cat just for the hell of it, would it?"

"I suppose not."

"But *why*? But it *has* to make sense; everything they do makes sense, grisly sense, from their viewpoint."

"But it did make sense. They caught a human that way."

"Yes, I know. But how could they plan it? Surely there aren't enough of them that they can afford to place themselves on cats on the off chance that the cat might catch a human. Or are there?" I remembered Kansas City, saturated, and shivered.

"Why ask me, darling? I don't have an analytical brain."

"Drop the modest little girl act and try this for size: Where did the slug come from? It had to get to the Pirate on the back of another host. What host? I'd say it was Old John—John the Goat. Pirate would not let any human get close to him."

"Old John?" Mary closed her eyes, then opened them. "I can't get any feeling about it. I was never close to him."

"By elimination I think it must be true. Old John wore a coat



when everyone else was complying with the bare-back order. Ergo, he was hagridden before Schedule Bare Back. But why would a slug single out a hermit way up in the mountains?"

"To capture you."

"Me?"

"To recapture you."

It made some sense. Possibly any host that ever escaped them was a marked man; in that case the dozen-odd congressmen we had rescued were in special danger. I'd mark that down to report for analysis.

On the other hand, they might want me in particular. What was special about me? I was a secret agent. More important, the slug that had ridden me must have known what I knew about the Old Man and known that I had access to him. I held an emotional certainty that the Old Man was their principal antagonist; the slug must have known that I thought so; he had full use of my mind.

That slug had even met the Old Man, talked with him. Wait a minute. *That* slug was dead. My theory came tumbling down.

And built up again at once. "Mary," I asked, "have you used your apartment since the morning you and I had breakfast there?"

"No. Why?"

"Don't go back there for any purpose. I recall thinking, while I was with *them*, that I would have to booby-trap it."

"Well, you didn't, did you?"

"No. But it may have been booby-trapped since then. There may be the equivalent of Old John waiting, spider fashion, for you—or me—to return there." I explained to her McIlvaine's "group memory" idea. "I thought at the time he was spinning the dream stuff scientists are so fond of. But now it's the only hypothesis I can think of that covers everything—unless we assume that the titans are so stupid that they would as soon fish in a bathtub as in a brook. Which they aren't."

"Just a moment, dear. By Dr. McIlvaine's theory each slug is really every other slug; is that it? In other words, that *thing* that caught me last night was just as much the one that rode you when you were with them as was the one that actually did ride you—Oh, dear, I'm getting confused. I mean—"

"That's the general idea. Apart, they are individuals; in direct conference they merge memories and Tweedledum becomes exactly like Tweedledee. If that is true, this one last night remembers



everything learned from me, provided it has had direct conference with the slug that rode me, or a slug that had been linked through any number of slugs by direct conference to the slug that had ridden me, after the time it did—which you can bet it did, from what I know of their habits. It would have—the first one, I mean—Wait a minute. Take three slugs; Joe, Moe, and, uh, Herbert. Herbert is the one last night; Moe is the one which—”

“Why give them names if they are not individuals?” Mary asked.

“Just to keep them— No reason; let it lie that if McIlvaine is right there are hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of slugs who know exactly who we are, by name and sight and everything; know where your apartment is, where mine is, and where our cabin is. They’ve got us on a list.”

“But—” She frowned. “That’s a horrid thought, Sam. How would they know when to find us at the cabin? We didn’t tell anybody. Would they simply stake it out and wait?”

“They must have. We don’t know that waiting matters to a slug; time may mean something different to them.”

“Like Venerians,” she suggested. I nodded; a Venerian is as likely as not to “marry” his own great-great-granddaughter—and be younger than she is. It depends on how they estivate, of course.

“In any case,” I went on, “I’ve got to report this, including our guesses, for the boys in the analytical group to play with.”

I was about to go on to say that the Old Man would have to be especially careful, as it was he they were really after. But my phone sounded for the first time since leave had started. I answered and the Old Man’s voice cut in ahead of the talker’s: “Report in person.”

“On our way,” I acknowledged. “About thirty minutes.”

“Make it sooner. You Kay Five; tell Mary to come in by Ell One. Move.” He switched off before I could ask him how he had known that Mary was with me.

“Did you get it?” I asked Mary.

“Yes, I was in the circuit.”

“Sounds as if the party was about to start.”

It was not until we had landed that I began to realize how wildly the situation had changed. We were complying with Sched-



ule Bare Back; we had not heard of "Schedule Sun Tan." Two cops stopped us as we got out. "Stand still!" one of them ordered. "Don't make any sudden moves."

You would not have known they were cops, except for the manner and the drawn guns. They were dressed in gun belts, shoes, and skimpy breech clouts—little more than straps. A second glance showed their shields clipped to their belts. "Now," the same one went on, "off with those pants, buddy."

I did not move quickly enough. He barked, "Make it snappy! Two have been shot trying to escape already today; you may be the third."

"Do it, Sam," Mary said quietly. I did it. It left me dressed in shoes and gloves, feeling like a fool—but I managed to keep my phone and my gun covered as I took off my shorts.

The cop made me turn around. His mate said, "He's clean. Now the other one." I started to put on my shorts; the first cop stopped me.

"Hey! Looking for trouble? Leave 'em off."

I said reasonably, "I don't want to get picked up for indecent exposure."

He looked surprised, then guffawed, and turned to his mate. "You hear that, Ski?"

The second one said patiently, "Listen, you got to co-operate. You know the rules. You can wear a fur coat for all of me—but you won't get picked up for indecent exposure; you'll get picked up D.O.A. The vigilantes are a lot quicker to shoot than we are." He turned to Mary. "Now, lady, if you please."

Without argument Mary started to remove her shorts. The second cop said kindly, "That isn't necessary, lady; not the way those things are built. Just turn around slowly."

"Thank you," Mary said and complied. The policeman's point was well taken; Mary's briefies appeared to have been sprayed on, and her halter too.

"How about those bandages?" the first one commented.

I answered, "She's been badly burned. Can't you see that?"

He looked doubtfully at the sloppy, bulky job I had done on the dressings. "Mmmm . . ." he said, "if she was burned."

"Of course she was burned!" I felt my judgment slipping; I was the perfect heavy husband, unreasonable where my wife was con-



cerned. "Damn it, look at her hair! Would she ruin a head of hair like that just to fool you?"

The first cop said darkly, "One of *them* would."

The more patient one said, "Carl is right. I'm sorry, lady; we'll have to disturb those bandages."

I said excitedly, "You can't do that! We're on our way to a doctor. You'll just——"

Mary said, "Help me, Sam."

I shut up and started to peel up one corner of the dressing, my hands trembling with rage. Presently the older one whistled and said, "I'm satisfied. How about you, Carl?"

"Me, too, Ski. Cripes, girlie, what happened?"

"Tell them, Sam."

So I did. The older cop finally commented, "You got off easy—no offense, madam. So it's cats now, eh? Dogs I knew about. Horses, yes. But you wouldn't think the ordinary cat could carry one." His face clouded. "We got a cat and now we'll have to get rid of it. My kids won't like that."

"I'm sorry," Mary told him.

"It's a bad time for everybody. Okay, folks, you can go."

"Wait a minute," the first one said. "Ski, if she goes through the streets with that thing on her back somebody is likely to burn her."

The older one scratched his chin. "*That's true,*" he said. "We'll just have to dig up a prowler car for you."

Which they did. I had to pay the charges on the rented wreck, then I went along as far as Mary's entrance. It was in a hotel through a private elevator; I got in with her to avoid explanations, then went back up after she got out at a level lower than the obvious controls of the car provided for. I was tempted to go in with her, but the Old Man had ordered me to come in by Kay Five.

I was tempted, too, to put my shorts on. In the prowler car and during a quick march through a side door of the hotel, with police around us to keep Mary from being shot, I had not minded much—but it took nerve to face the world without pants.

I need not have worried. The short distance I had to go was enough to show me that a fundamental custom had gone with last year's frost. Most men were wearing straps as the cops had been, but I was not the only man naked to his shoes. One in particular I remember; he was leaning against a street-roof stanchion



and searching every passer-by with cold eyes. He was wearing nothing but slippers and a brassard lettered "VIG"—and he was cradling an Owens mob gun. I saw three more like him; I was glad that I was carrying my shorts.

Few women were naked, but the rest might as well have been—string brassières, transiucient trunks—nothing that could hide, a slug. Most of the women would have looked better in togas. That was my first impression, but before long even that had worn off. Ugly bodies weren't any more noticeable than ugly taxicabs; the eye ignored them. And so it appeared to be with everybody; those on the streets seemed to have acquired utter indifference. Skin was skin and what of it?

I was let in to see the Old Man at once. He looked up and growled, "You're late."

I answered, "Where's Mary?"

"In the infirmary, getting treated and dictating her report. Let's see your hands."

"I'll show them to the doctor, thanks," I replied. "What's up?"

"If you would ever bother to listen to a newscast," he grumbled, "you would know what was up."

## 24

I'm glad I had not looked at a newscast; our honeymoon would never have gotten to first base. While we had been telling each other how wonderful the other one was the war had almost been lost. My suspicion that the slugs could hide themselves on any part of the body and still control hosts had been correct; it had been proved by experiment before Mary and I had holed up on the mountain, although I had not seen the report. I suppose the Old Man knew it; certainly the President did and the other top V.I.P.s.

So Schedule Sun Tan replaced Schedule Bare Back, and everybody skinned down to the buff.

Like hell they did! The matter was still "top secret" at the time of the Scranton Riot. Don't ask me why; our government has gotten the habit of classifying anything as secret which the all-wise statesmen and bureaucrats decide we are not big enough to know,



a Mother-Knows-Best-Dear policy. The Scranton Riot should have convinced anybody that the slugs were loose in Zone Green, but even that did not bring on Schedule Sun Tan.

The fake air-raid alarm on the east coast took place, as I figure it, the third day of our honeymoon; afterward it took a while to figure out what had happened, even though it was obvious that lighting could not fail by accident in so many different shelters. It gives me horrors to think about it—all those people crouching in the darkness, waiting for the all-clear, while zombies moved among them, slapping slugs on them. Apparently in some air-raid bunkers the recruitment was one hundred per cent.

So there were more riots the next day and we were well into the Terror. Technically, the start of vigilanteism came the first time a desperate citizen pulled a gun on a cop—Maurice T. Kaufman of Albany, and the cop was Sergeant Malcolm MacDonald. Kaufman was dead a half second later and MacDonald followed him, torn to pieces by the mob, along with his titan master. But the vigilantes did not really get going until the air-raid wardens put organization into the movements.

The wardens, being stationed aboveground during raids, largely escaped—but they felt responsible. Not that all vigilantes were wardens—but a stark-naked, armed man on the street was as likely to be wearing a warden's armband as the "VIG" brassard. Either way, you could count on him shooting at any unexplained excrescence on a human body—shoot and investigate afterward.

While my hands were dressed I was brought up to date. The doctor gave me a short shot of tempus and I spent the time—subjective, about three days; objective, less than an hour—studying stereo tapes through an over-speed scanner. This gadget has never been released to the public, though it is bootlegged at some of the colleges around examination week. You adjust the speed to match your subjective rate and use an audio frequency step-down to let you hear what is being said. It is hard on the eyes but it is a big help in my profession.

It was hard to believe that so much could have happened. Take dogs. A vigilante would kill a dog on sight, even though it was not wearing a slug—because it was even money that it would be wearing one before sunrise, that it would attack a man and that the titan would change riders in the dark.



A hell of a world where you could not trust dogs!

Apparently cats were hardly ever used; poor old Pirate was an exception. But in Zone Green dogs were rarely seen now by day. They filtered out of Zone Red at night, traveled in the dark and hid out at dawn. They kept showing up even on the coasts. It made one think of werewolf legends.

I scanned dozens of tapes which had been monitored from Zone Red; they fell into three time groups: the masquerade period, when the slugs had been continuing the "normal" broadcasts; a short period of counterpropaganda during which the slugs had tried to convince citizens in Zone Green that the government had gone crazy; and the current period in which pretense had been dropped.

According to Dr. McIlvaine, the titans have no true culture; they are parasitic even in that and merely adapt the culture they find. Maybe he assumes too much, but that is what they did in Zone Red. The slugs would have to maintain the basic economic activity of their victims, since the slugs would starve if the hosts starved. They continued that economy with variations that we would not use—that business of processing damaged and excess people in fertilizer plants, for example—but in general farmers stayed farmers, mechanics went on being mechanics, and bankers were still bankers. That last seems silly, but experts claim that any "division-of-labor" economy requires an accounting system.

But why did they continue human recreations? Is the desire to be amused a universal need? What they picked from human ideas of fun to keep and "improve on" does not speak well for us, although some of their variations may have merit—that stunt they pulled in Mexico, for example, of giving the bull an even break with the matador.

But most of it just makes one sick and I won't elaborate. I am one of the few who saw even transcriptions on such things; I saw them professionally. I hope that Mary, in her briefing, did not have to look at such, but Mary would never say so if she had.

There was one thing which I saw in the tapes so outrageous, so damnably disgusting that I hesitate to mention it, though I feel I must: there were men and women here and there among the slaves, humans (if you could call them that) without slugs—trusties—renegades . . .



I hate slugs, but I would turn from killing a slug to kill one such.

We were losing ground everywhere; our methods were effective only in stopping their spread, and not fully effective in that. To fight them directly we would have to bomb our own cities, with no certainty of killing the humps. What we needed was a weapon that would kill slugs but not men, or something that would disable humans or render them unconscious without killing and thereby permit us to rescue our compatriots. No such weapon was available, though the scientists were all busy on the problem. A "sleep" gas would have been perfect, but it is lucky that no such gas was known before the invasion, or the slugs could have used it against us. It must be remembered that the slugs then had as much, or more, of the military potential of the United States at their disposal as had the free men.

Stalemate—with time on their side. There were fools who wanted to H-bomb the cities of the Mississippi Valley out of existence, like curing a lip cancer by cutting off the head, but they were offset by their twins who had not seen slugs, did not believe in slugs, and felt that the whole matter was a tyrannical Washington plot. These second sort were fewer each day, not because they changed their minds but because the vigilantes were awfully eager.

Then there was the *tertium quid*, the flexible mind, the "reasonable" man—he favored negotiation; he thought we could "do business" with the titans. One such committee, a delegation from the caucus of the opposition party in Congress, actually tried it. Bypassing the State Department, they got in touch with the Governor of Missouri via a linkage rigged across Zone Amber, and were assured of safe conduct and diplomatic immunity—"guarantees" from a titan, but they accepted them. They went to St. Louis—and never came back. They sent messages back; I saw one such, a rousing speech adding up to, "Come on in; the water is fine!"

Do steers sign treaties with meat packers?

North America was still the only known center of infection. The only action by the United Nations, other than placing the space stations at our disposal, was to move to Geneva. It was voted, with twenty-three nations abstaining, to define our plight as "civil disorder" and to urge each member nation to give such aid



as it saw fit to the legitimate governments of the United States, Mexico, and Canada.

It remained a creeping war, a silent war, with battles lost before we knew they were joined. Conventional weapons were hardly useful except in policing Zone Amber—now a double no man's land from the Canadian forests to the Mexican deserts. It was deserted in the daytime, save for our own patrols. At night our scouts drew back and the dogs came through—and other things.

Only one atom bomb had been used in the entire war and that against a saucer which landed near San Francisco south of Burlingame. Its destruction was according to doctrine, but the doctrine was under criticism; it should have been captured for study. I found my sympathies with those who wanted to shoot first and study later.

By the time the dose of tempus was wearing off I had a picture of the United States in a shape that I had not imagined even when I was in Kansas City—a country undergoing Terror. Friend might shoot friend; wife denounce husband. Rumor of a titan could drum up a mob on any street, with Judge Lynch baying in the van. To rap on a door at night was to invite a blast through the door. Honest folk stayed home; at night the dogs were out.

The fact that most of the rumored discoveries of slugs were baseless made them no less dangerous. It was not exhibitionism which caused many people to prefer outright nudity to the tight and scanty clothing permitted under Schedule Sun Tan; even the skimpiest clothing invited a doubtful second look, a suspicion that might be decided too abruptly. The head-and-spine armor was never worn now; the slugs had faked it and used it almost at once. And there had been the case of a girl in Seattle; she had been dressed in sandals and a big purse, nothing else—but a vigilante who apparently had developed a nose for the enemy followed her and noticed that she never moved the purse from her right hand, even when she opened it to make change.

She lived, for he burned her arm off at the wrist, and I suppose that she had a new one grafted on; the supply of such spare parts was a glut. The slug was alive, too, when the vigilante opened the purse—but not for long.

The drug had worn off by the time I scanned this incident and I mentioned the matter to the nurse. "Mustn't worry," she told me. "It does no good. Now flex the fingers of your right hand, please."



I flexed them, while she helped the doctor spray on surrogate skin. "Wear gloves for rough work," the doctor cautioned, "and come back next week." I thanked them and went to the operations office. I looked for Mary, but she was busy in Cosmetics.

## 25

"Hands all right?" the Old Man asked.

"They'll do. False skin for a week. They do a graft job on my ear tomorrow."

He looked vexed. "There's no time for a graft to heal; Cosmetics will have to fake one."

"The ear doesn't matter," I told him, "but why bother to fake it? Impersonation job?"

"Not exactly. Now that you've been briefed, what do you think of the situation?"

I wondered what answer he was fishing for. "Not good," I conceded. "Everybody watching everybody else. Might as well be in Russia."

"Hmmm . . . speaking of Russia, would you say that it was easier to penetrate and maintain surveillance in Russia or in Zone Red? Which would you rather tackle?"

I eyed him suspiciously. "What's the catch? You don't let a man pick his assignment."

"I asked your professional opinion."

"Mmmm . . . I don't have enough data. Have the slugs infested Russia?"

"That," he answered, "is what I must find out."

I realized suddenly that Mary had been right; agents should not marry. "This time of year," I said, "I think I'd want to enter through Canton. Unless you were figuring on a drop?"

"What makes you think I want you to go there?" he asked. "We might find out quicker and easier in Zone Red."

"Huh?"

"Certainly. If there is infection anywhere but in this continent, the titans in Zone Red must know it. Why go half around the globe to find out?"



I put aside the plans I had been forming to be a Hindu merchant, traveling with his wife, and thought about what he was saying. Could be . . . could be. "How in the devil can Zone Red be penetrated now?" I asked. "Do I wear a plastic imitation slug on my shoulders? They'd catch me the first time I was called on for direct conference."

"Don't be a defeatist. Four agents have gone in already."

"And come back?"

"Well, no, not exactly."

"Have you decided that I've cluttered up the pay roll long enough?"

"I think the others used the wrong tactics——"

"Obviously!"

"The trick is to convince them that you are a renegade. Got any ideas?"

The idea was so overwhelming that I did not answer at once. Finally I burst out, "Why not start me easy? Can't I impersonate a Panama pimp for a while? Or practice being an ax murderer? I have to get in the mood for this."

"Easy," he said. "It may not be practical——"

"*Hmmph!*"

"But you might bring it off. You've had more experience with their ways than any agent I've got. You must be rested up, aside from that little singe on your fingers. Or maybe we should drop you near Moscow and let you take a direct look. Think it over. Don't get into a fret about it for a day or so."

"Thanks. Thank you too much." I changed the subject. "What have you got planned for Mary?"

"Why don't you stick to your own business?"

"I'm married to her."

"Yes."

"Well, for the love of Pete! Don't you even want to wish me luck?"

"It strikes me," he said slowly, "that you have had all the luck one man could ask for. You have my blessing for whatever it's worth."

"Oh. Well, thanks." I am slow. Up to that moment it had not occurred to me that the Old Man might have had something to do with Mary's leave and mine falling together so conveniently. I said, "Look here, Dad——"



"Huh?" It was the second time I had called him that in a month; it put him on the defensive.

"You meant for Mary and me to marry all along. You planned it that way."

"Eh? Don't be ridiculous. I believe in free will, son—and free choices. Both of you were entitled to leave; the rest was accidental."

"Hmm! Accidents don't happen; not around you. Never mind; I'm satisfied with the outcome. Now about the job; give me a bit longer to size up the possibilities. Meantime, I'll see Cosmetics about a rubber ear."

## 26

We finally decided not to attempt to penetrate Zone Red. The evaluation group had advised that there was no chance of impersonating a renegade; the question hinged on, "How does a man get to be a renegade? Why do the titans trust him?" It answers itself: a slug knows its host's mind. If a titan, through possessing a man's mind, *knows* that he is a natural renegade, a man who can be had, then it may suit the slug's purposes to let him be renegade rather than host. But first the slug had to plumb the vileness in the man's mind and be sure of its quality.

We concluded this from logical necessity—human logic, but it had to be slug logic, too, since it fitted what the slugs could and could not do. As for me, it was not possible even under deep hypnotic instruction to pass myself off as a candidate for renegade. So the psycho lads decided—and to which I said, "Amen!"

It may seem illogical that titans would "free" a host even though they knew that the host was the sort who could be owned. But in the renegades the slugs had a supply of "trustworthy" fifth columnists. "Trustworthy" is not the right word, but English has no word for this form of villainy. That Zone Green was being penetrated by renegades was certain, but it is often hard to tell a fifth columnist from a custard head; it made them hard to catch.

So I got ready. I took under hypnosis a refresher in the lan-



guages I would need, with emphasis on the latest shibboleth phrases; I was provided with a personality and given much money. The reporting equipment was a new model and a joy to have, ultramicrowave stuff hardly larger than a loaf of bread and the power pack so well shielded that it would not make a Geiger counter even nervous.

I had to drop through their screen, but it would be under a blanket of anti-radar "window" to give their search technicians fits. Once inside I had to make up my mind whether or not the Russian axis was slug infested, then dictate a report to whatever space station was in sight—in line-of-sight, that is; I can't pick out a space station by eye and I doubt those who say they can. Report made, I was free to walk, ride, crawl, sneak and/or bribe my way out if I could.

But I never had a chance to use these preparations; the Pass Christian saucer landed.

It was only the third to be seen after landing. The Grinnell saucer had been concealed by the slugs and the Burlingame saucer was a radioactive memory. But the Pass Christian saucer was both tracked and seen on the ground.

It was tracked by Space Station Alpha and recorded as an "extremely large meteorite." The mistake was caused by its extreme speed. The primitive radar of sixty-odd years ago had picked up saucers many times, especially when cruising at atmospheric speeds while scouting this planet. But our modern radar has been "improved" to the point where saucers can not be seen; our instruments are too specialized. Traffic block control sees atmospheric traffic only; the defense screen and fire-control radars see only what they are supposed to see. The fine screen "sees" a range from atmospheric speeds up to orbiting missiles at five miles a second; the coarse screen overlaps the fine screen, starting down at the lowest missile speed and carrying on up to about ten miles per second.

There are other selectivities, but none of them see objects at speeds over ten miles per second—with the single exception of space station meteor-count radars—which are not military. Consequently, the "giant meteor" was not associated with flying saucers until later.

But the Pass Christian saucer was seen to land. The submersible cruiser U.N.S. *Robert Fulton*, on patrol of Zone Red out of Mo-



bile, was ten miles off Gulfport with only her receptors showing when the saucer landed. The space ship popped up on the screens of the cruiser as it dropped from outer space speed (around fifty-three miles per second by the space station record) to a speed the cruiser's radar would accept.

It came out of nothing, slowed to zero, and disappeared—but the operator had a fix on the last blip, a few miles away on the Mississippi coast. The cruiser's skipper was puzzled. The track surely could not be a ship; ships don't decelerate at fifty gravities! It did not occur to him that g's might not matter to a slug. He swung his ship over and took a look.

His first dispatch read: SPACE SHIP LANDED BEACH WEST OF PASS CHRISTIAN MISSISSIPPI. His second was: LANDING FORCE BEACHING TO CAPTURE.

If I had not been in the Section offices preparing for my drop I might have been left out of the party. As it was, my phone shrilled; I bumped my head on the study machine and swore. The Old Man said, "Come at once. Move!"

It was the same party we had started with so many weeks—or years?—before, the Old Man, Mary, and myself. We were heading south at emergency maximum before the Old Man told us why.

When he did, I said, "Why the family group? You need a full-scale air task force."

"It will be there," he answered grimly. Then he grinned his old wicked grin. "What do you care? The 'Cavanaughs' are riding again. Eh, Mary?"

I snorted. "If you want that sister-and-brother routine, you had better get another boy."

"Just the part where you protect her from dogs and strange men," he answered soberly. "And I do mean dogs, and I do mean very strange men. This may be the payoff, son."

He went into the operator's compartment, closed the panel, and got busy at the communicator. I turned to Mary. She snuggled up and said, "Howdy, Bud."

I grabbed her. "Don't give me that 'Bud' stuff or somebody's going to get a paddling."



We were almost shot down by our own boys, then we picked up an escort of two Black Angels, who turned us over to the command ship from which Air Marshal Rexton was watching the action. The command ship matched speeds and took us inboard with an anchor loop. I found the maneuver disconcerting.

Rexton wanted to spank us and send us home—but spanking the Old Man is a chore. They finally unloaded us and I squatted our car down on the sea-wall roadway west of Pass Christian—scared silly, I should add; we were buffeted by A.A. on the way down. There was fighting all around and above us, but there was a curious calm near the saucer itself.

The outlander ship loomed up almost over us, not fifty yards away. It was as convincing and as ominous as the plastic-board fake in Iowa had been phony. It was a discus of great size, tilted slightly toward us; it had grounded partly on one of the high-stilted old mansions which line that coast. The saucer was partly supported by the wreckage and by the thick trunk of a tree that had shaded the house.

The ship's canted attitude let us see the upper surface and what was surely its air lock—a metal hemisphere, a dozen feet across, at its center. This hemisphere was lifted out or up from the body of the ship some six or eight feet. I could not see what held it out but I assumed that there must be a central shaft or piston; it came out like a poppet valve. It was easy to see why the saucer had not closed up again and taken off; the air lock was fouled, held open by a “mud turtle,” one of those little amphibious tanks—part of the landing force of the *Fulton*.

Let me place this on record: the tank had been commanded by Ensign Gilbert Calhoun of Knoxville; with him was Powerman 2/C Florence Berzowski and a gunner named Booker T. W. Johnson. They were all dead, of course, before we got there.

The car, as soon as I roaded it, was surrounded by a landing force squad commanded by a pink-cheeked lad who seemed anxious to shoot somebody or anybody. He was less anxious when he



got a look at Mary, but he still refused to let us approach the saucer until he had checked with his tactical commander—who in turn consulted the skipper of the *Fulton*. We got an answer back in a short time, considering that it was probably referred clear back to Washington.

While waiting, I watched the battle and was pleased to have no part of it. Somebody was going to get hurt—a good many had already. There was a male body just behind the car—a boy not more than fourteen. He was still clutching a rocket launcher, and across his shoulders was the mark of the beast. I wondered whether the slug had crawled away and was dying, or whether, perhaps, it had managed to transfer to the person who had bayoneted the boy.

Mary had walked west on the highway with the downy young naval officer while I was examining the corpse. The notion of a slug, possibly still alive, being around caused me to hurry to her. "Get back into the car," I said.

She continued to look west along the road. "I thought I might get in a shot or two," she answered, her eyes bright.

"She's safe here," the youngster assured me. "We're holding them, well down the road."

I ignored him. "Listen, you bloodthirsty little hellion," I snapped, "get back in the car before I break every bone in your body!"

"Yes, Sam." She turned and did so.

I looked back at the young salt. "What are you staring at?" I demanded. The place smelled of slugs and the wait was making me nervous.

"Nothing much," he said, looking me over. "In my part of the country we don't speak to ladies that way."

"Then why in the hell don't you go back where you come from?" I answered and stalked away. The Old Man was missing too; I did not like it.

An ambulance, coming back from the west, ground to a halt beside me. "Has the road to Pascagoula been opened?" the driver called out.

The Pascagoula River, thirty miles east of where the saucer had landed, was roughly Zone Amber for that area; the town of that name was east of the river's mouth and in Zone Green—while sixty or seventy miles west of us on the same road was New Orleans, the heaviest concentration of titans south of St. Louis. Our oppo-



sition came from New Orleans, while our nearest base was in Mobile.

"I haven't heard," I told the driver.

He chewed a knuckle. "Well—I made it through; maybe I'll make it back." His turbines whined and he was away. I continued to look for the Old Man.

Although the ground fighting had moved away from the site, the air fighting was all around us. I was watching vapor trails and trying to figure out who was what and how they could tell, when a big transport streaked into the area, put on the brakes with a burst of ratio units, and spilled a platoon of sky boys. Again I wondered; it was too far away to tell whether they wore slugs or not. At least it came in from the east.

I spotted the Old Man talking with the landing-force commander. I went up and interrupted. "We ought to get out of here, Boss. This place is due to be atom-bombed ten minutes ago."

The commander answered. "Relax," he said blandly, "the concentration does not merit even a pony bomb."

I was about to ask him sharply how he knew that the slugs would figure it that way, when the Old Man interrupted. "He's right, son." He took my arm and walked me back toward the car. "He's right, but for the wrong reasons."

"Huh?"

"Why haven't *we* bombed the cities *they* hold? They don't want to damage that ship; they want it back. Go on back to Mary. Dogs and strange men—remember?"

I shut up, unconvinced. I expected us all to be clicks in a Geiger counter any second. Slugs fought with gamecock recklessness—perhaps because they were really not individuals. Why should they be more cautious about one of their ships? They might be more anxious to keep it out of our hands than to save it.

We had just reached the car and spoken to Mary when the still-damp snottie came trotting up. He saluted the Old Man. "The commander says that you are to have anything you want, sir—anything at all!"

From his manner I gathered that the answering dispatch had been spelled out in flaming letters, accompanied by ruffles and flourishes. "Thank you, sir," the Old Man said mildly. "We merely want to inspect the captured ship."



"Yes, sir. Come with me, sir." He came with us instead, having difficulty deciding whether to escort the Old Man or Mary. Mary won. I followed, keeping my mind on watching out and ignoring the presence of the youngster. The country on that coast, unless gardened, is practically jungle; the saucer lapped over into a brake of that sort and the Old Man took a short cut through it. The kid said, "Watch out, sir. Mind where you step."

I said, "Slugs?"

He shook his head. "Coral snakes."

At that point a poisonous snake would have seemed as pleasant as a honey bee, but I must have been paying some attention to his warning for I was looking down when the next thing happened.

I first heard a shout. Then, so help me, a Bengal tiger was charging us.

Probably Mary got in the first shot. Mine was not behind that of the young officer; it might even have been ahead. The Old Man shot last. Between us we cut that beast so many ways that it would never make a rug. And yet the slug on it was untouched; I fired it with my second bolt. The young fellow looked at it without surprise. "Well," he said, "I thought we had cleaned up that load."

"What do you mean?"

"One of the first transport tanks they sent out. Regular Noah's Ark. We were shooting everything from gorillas to polar bears. Say, did you ever have a water buffalo come at you?"

"No, and I don't want to."

"Not as bad as the dogs, really. If you ask me, those things don't have much sense." He looked at the slug, quite unmoved.

We got out of there fast and onto the titan ship—which did not make me less nervous, but more. Not that there was anything frightening in the appearance of the ship itself.

But its appearance wasn't *right*. While it was artificial, one knew without being told that it was not made by men. Why? I don't know. Its surface was dull mirror, not a mark on it—not any sort of a mark; there was no way to tell how it had been put together. It was as smooth as a Jo block.

I could not tell of what it was made. Metal? Of course, it *had* to be metal. But was it? You would expect it to be either bitterly cold—or possibly intensely hot from its landing. I touched it and it was not anything at all, neither cold nor hot. I noticed another thing presently: a ship that size, landing at high speed, should



have blasted a couple of acres. There was no blast area at all; the brake around it was green and rank.

We went up to the parasol business, the air lock, if that is what it was. The edge was jammed down on the little mud turtle; the armor of the tank was crushed in, as one might crush a pasteboard box with the hand. Those mud turtles are built to launch five hundred feet deep in water; they are *strong*.

Well, I suppose this one was strong. The parasol arrangement had damaged it, but the air lock had not closed. On the other hand, the metal, or whatever the space-ship's door was made of, was unmarked by the exchange.

The Old Man turned to me. "Wait here with Mary."

"You're not going in there by yourself?"

"Yes. There may be very little time."

The kid spoke up. "I'm to stay with you, sir. That's what the commander said."

"Very well, sir," the Old Man agreed. "Come along." He peered over the edge, then knelt and lowered himself by his hands. The kid followed him. I felt burned up, but had no desire to argue the arrangements.

They disappeared into the hole. Mary turned to me and said, "Sam, I don't like this. I'm afraid."

She startled me. I was afraid myself—but I had not expected her to be. "I'll take care of you."

"Do we have to stay? He did not say so, quite."

I considered it. "If you want to go back to the car I'll take you back."

"Well—no, Sam, I guess we have to stay. Come closer to me." She was trembling.

I don't know how long it was before they stuck their heads over the rim. The youngster climbed out and the Old Man told him to stand guard. "Come on," he said to us, "it's safe—I think."

"The hell it is," I told him, but I went because Mary was already starting. The Old Man helped her down.

"Mind your head," he said. "Low bridge all the way."

It is a platitude that unhuman races produce unhuman works, but very few humans have ever been inside a Venerian labyrinth, and still fewer have seen the Martian ruins—and I was not one of the few. I don't know what I expected. Superficially the inside of



the saucer was not, I suppose, too startling, but it was strange. It had been thought out by unhuman brains, which did not depend on human ideas in fabricating, brains which had never heard of the right angle and the straight line or which regarded them as unnecessary or undesirable. We found ourselves in a small oblate chamber, and from there we crawled through a tube about four feet thick, a tube which seemed to wind down into the ship and which glowed from all its surface with a reddish light.

The tube held an odd and somewhat distressing odor, as if of marsh gas, and mixed with it faintly was the reek of dead slugs. That and the reddish glow and the total lack of heat response from the wall of the tube as my palms pressed against it gave me the unpleasant fancy that I was crawling through the gut of some unearthly behemoth rather than exploring a strange machine.

The tube branched like an artery and there we came across our first Titanian androgyne. He—let me call it “he”—was sprawled on his back, like a child sleeping, his head pillowed on his slug. There was a suggestion of a smile on the little rosebud mouth; at first I did not realize that he was dead.

At first sight the similarities between the Titanian people and ourselves are more noticeable than the differences; we impress what we expect to see on what we do see. Take the pretty little “mouth,” for example; how was I to know that it was an organ for breathing solely?

But despite the casual similarities of four limbs and a headlike protuberance, we are less like them than is a bullfrog like a bull pup. Nevertheless, the general effect is pleasing and faintly human. “Elfin” I should say—the elves of Saturn’s moons.

When I saw the little fellow I managed to draw my gun. The Old Man turned and said, “Take it easy. It’s dead. They’re all dead, smothered in oxygen when the tank ruined their air seal.”

I still had my gun out. “I want to burn the slug,” I insisted. “It may still be alive.” It was not covered by the shell we had lately come to expect, but was naked and ugly.

He shrugged. “Suit yourself. It can’t possibly hurt you. That slug can’t live on an oxygen breather.” He crawled across the little body, giving me no chance to shoot had I decided to. Mary had not drawn but had shrunk against my side and was breathing in sharp sobbing gasps. The Old Man stopped and said patiently, “Coming, Mary?”



She choked and then gasped, "Let's go back! Let's get out of here!"

I said, "She's right. This is no job for three people; this is something for a research team and proper equipment."

He paid no attention to me. "It has to be done, Mary. You know that. And you have to be the one to do it."

"Why does she have to do it?" I demanded angrily.

Again he ignored me. "Well, Mary?"

From somewhere inside she called on reserves. Her breathing became normal, her features relaxed, and she crawled across the slug-ridden elfin body with the serenity of a queen going to the gallows. I lumbered after, still hampered by my gun and trying not to touch the body.

We came at last to a large chamber which may have been the control room; there were many of the dead little elfin creatures in it. Its inner surface was cavitated and picked out with lights much brighter than the reddish illumination, and the space was festooned with processes as meaningless to me as the convolutions of a brain. I was troubled again with the thought—completely wrong—that the ship itself was a living organism.

The Old Man paid no mind but crawled through and into another ruddy-glowing tube. We followed its contortions to where it widened out to ten feet or more with a "ceiling" almost tall enough to let us stand erect. But that was not what caught our eyes; the walls were no longer opaque.

On each side of us, beyond transparent membranes, were thousands on thousands of slugs, swimming, floating, writhing in some fluid which sustained them. Each tank had an inner diffuse light of its own, and I could see back into the palpitating mass. I wanted to scream.

I still had my gun out. The Old Man placed his hand over the bell of it. "Don't," he warned me. "You don't want to let *that* loose in *here*. Those are for us."

Mary looked at them with a face too calm. I doubt that she was fully conscious in the ordinary sense. I looked at her, glanced back at the walls of that ghoulish aquarium, and said urgently, "Let's get out of here if we can—then just bomb it out of existence."

"No," he said quietly, "there is more. Come." The tube narrowed in again, then enlarged and we were in a somewhat smaller



chamber. Again there were transparent walls; again there were things floating beyond them.

I had to look twice before I could believe what I saw.

Floating just beyond the wall, face down, was the body of a man—a human, Earth-born man—about forty or fifty years old. His arms were curved across his chest and his knees were drawn up, as if he were sleeping.

I watched him, thinking terrible thoughts. He was not alone; there were more beyond him, male and female, young and old, but he got my attention. I was sure that he was dead; it did not occur to me to think otherwise. Then I saw his mouth working—and I wished he were dead.

Mary was wandering around as if she were drunk—no, not drunk but preoccupied and dazed. She went from one wall to the other, peering into the crowded, half-seen depths. The Old Man looked only at her. “Well, Mary?” he said softly.

“I can’t find them!” she said piteously in a voice like a little girl’s. She ran back to the other side.

The Old Man grasped her arm. “You’re not looking for them in the right place,” he said firmly. “Go back where they are. Remember?”

Her voice was a wail. “*I can’t remember!*”

“You must remember. This is what you can do for them. You must return to where they are and look for them.”

Her eyes closed and tears started leaking from them. She gasped and choked. I pushed myself between them and said, “Stop this! What are you doing to her?”

He pushed me away. “No, son,” he whispered fiercely. “Keep out of this—you *must* keep out.”

“But—”

“No!” He let go of Mary and led me to the entrance. “Stay there. And, as you love your wife, as you hate the titans, do not interfere. I shan’t hurt her—I promise.”

“What are you going to do?” But he had turned away. I stayed, unwilling but afraid to tamper with what I did not understand.

Mary had sunk to the floor and now squatted on it like a child, face covered with hands. The Old Man knelt down and touched her arm. “Go back,” I heard him say. “Back to where it started.”

I could barely hear her answer. “No—no.”



"How old were you? You seemed to be about seven or eight when you were found. It was before that?"

"Yes—yes, it was before that." She sobbed and collapsed to the floor. "Mama! Mama!"

"What is your mama saying?" he asked gently.

"She doesn't say anything. She's looking at me so queerly. There's something on her back. I'm afraid, I'm afraid!"

I hurried toward them, crouching to keep from hitting the low ceiling. Without taking his eyes off Mary the Old Man motioned me back. I stopped, hesitated. "Go back," he ordered. "Way back."

The words were directed at me and I obeyed them—but so did Mary. "There was a ship," she muttered, "a big shiny ship—" He said something; if she answered I could not hear it. I stayed back this time. Despite my vastly disturbed emotions, I realized that something important was going on, something big enough to absorb the Old Man's full attention in the presence of the enemy.

He continued to talk soothingly but insistently. Mary quieted, seemed to sink into lethargy, but I could hear that she answered him. After a while she was talking to the monotonous logorrhea of emotional release. Only occasionally did he prompt her.

I heard something crawling along the passage behind me, turned and drew my gun, with a wild feeling that we were trapped. I almost shot him before I recognized the ubiquitous young officer we had left outside. "Come out!" he said urgently. He pushed past me into the chamber and repeated the demand to the Old Man.

The Old Man looked exasperated beyond endurance. "Shut up and don't bother me," he said.

"You've *got* to, sir," the youngster insisted. "The commander says that you must come out at once. We're falling back; the commander says he may have to use demolition at any moment. If we are still inside—*blooie!* That's it."

"Very well," the Old Man agreed calmly. "Go tell your commander that he must hold off until we get out; I have vitally important information. Son, help me with Mary."

"Aye aye, sir!" the youngster acknowledged. "But hurry!" He scrambled away. I picked up Mary and carried her to where the chamber narrowed into a tube; she seemed almost unconscious. I put her down.

"We'll have to drag her," the Old Man said. "She may not



come out of this soon. Here—let me get her up on your back; you can crawl with her.”

I paid no attention but shook her. “Mary!” I shouted. “Mary! Can you hear me?”

Her eyes opened, “Yes, Sam?”

“Darling, we’ve got to get out of here—*fast!* Can you crawl?”

“Yes, Sam.” She closed her eyes again.

I shook her again. “Mary!”

“Yes, darling? What is it? I’m so tired.”

“Listen, Mary, you’ve got to crawl out of here. If you don’t the slugs will get us. Do you understand?”

“All right, darling.” Her eyes stayed open but were vacant. I got her headed up the tube and came after her. Whenever she faltered I slapped at her. I lifted and dragged her through the chamber of slugs and again through the control room, if such it was. When we came to where the tube was partly blocked by the dead elfin creature she stopped; I wormed past her and stuffed it into the branching tube. There was no doubt, this time, that its slug was dead. Again I had to slap her into co-operation.

After an endless nightmare of leaden-limbed striving we reached the outer door; the young officer was there and helped us lift her out, him pulling and the Old Man and me lifting and pushing. I gave the Old Man a leg up, jumped out myself, and took her away from the youngster. It was quite dark.

We went back past the crushed house, avoiding the brake, and thence down to the road. Our car was no longer there. We were hurried into a “mud turtle” tank—none too soon, for the fighting was almost on top of us. The tank commander buttoned up and the craft lumbered into the water. Fifteen minutes later we were inside the *Fulton*.

And an hour later we disembarked at the Mobile base. The Old Man and I had had coffee and sandwiches in the wardroom of the *Fulton*; some of the Wave officers had cared for Mary in the women’s quarters. She joined us as we left and seemed normal. I said, “Mary, are you all right?”

She smiled. “Of course, darling. Why shouldn’t I be?”

A command ship and escort took us out of there. I had supposed that we were headed back to the Section offices, or to Washington. The pilot put us into a mountainside hangar in one of those egg-on-a-plate maneuvers that no civilian craft can ac-



comply—in the sky at high speed, then in a cave and stationary. “Where are we?” I asked.

The Old Man did not answer but got out; Mary and I followed. The hangar was small, just parking space for a dozen craft, an arresting platform, and a single launching rack. Guards directed us on back to a door set in living rock; we went through and found ourselves in an anteroom. A loudspeaker told us to strip. I hated to part with my gun and phone.

We went on in and were met by a young fellow whose clothing was an armband showing three chevrons and crossed retorts. He turned us over to a girl who was wearing less, only two chevrons. Both of them noticed Mary, each with typical response. I think the corporal was glad to pass us on to the captain who received us.

“We got your message,” the captain said. “Dr. Steelton is waiting.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” the Old Man answered. “Where?”

“Just a moment,” she said, went to Mary and felt through her hair. “We have to be sure,” she said apologetically. If she was aware of the falseness of much of Mary’s hair, she did not mention it. “All right,” she decided, “let’s go.” Her own hair was cut mannishly short.

“Right,” agreed the Old Man. “No, son, this is as far as you go.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you darn near loused up the first try,” he explained briefly. “Now pipe down.”

The captain said, “The officers’ mess is down the first passageway to the left. Why not wait there?”

So I did. I passed a door decorated primly in red skull-and-crossbones and stenciled with: WARNING—LIVE PARASITES BEYOND THIS DOOR; *Qualified Personnel Only—Use Procedure “A.”* I gave it a wide berth.

The officers’ mess had three or four men and two women lounging in it. I found an unoccupied chair, sat down and wondered who you had to be to get a drink around there. After a time I was joined by a large male extrovert wearing a colonel’s insignia on a neck chain. “Newcomer?” he asked.

I admitted it. “Civilian expert?” he went on.

“I don’t know about ‘expert,’” I replied. “I’m a field operative.”



"Name? Sorry to be officious," he apologized, "but I'm the security officer around here. My name's Kelly."

I told him mine. He nodded. "Matter of fact, I saw you coming in. Now, Mr. Nivens, how about a drink?"

I stood up. "Whom do I have to kill to get it?"

"—though as far as I can see," Kelly went on later, "this place needs a security officer the way a horse needs roller skates. We should publish our results as fast as we get them."

I commented that he did not sound like a brass hat. He laughed. "Believe me, son, not all brass hats are as they are pictured—they just seem to be."

I remarked that Air Marshal Rexton struck me as a pretty sharp citizen.

"You know him?" the colonel asked.

"Not exactly, but my work has thrown me in his company a bit. I last saw him earlier today."

"Hmm—" said the colonel. "I've never met the gentleman. You move in more rarefied strata than I do, sir."

I explained that it was mere happenstance, but from then on he showed me more respect. Presently he was telling me about the work the laboratory did. "By now we know more about those foul creatures than does Old Nick himself. But do we know how to kill them without killing their hosts? We do not."

"Of course," he went on, "if we could lure them one at a time into a room and douse them with anesthetics, we could save the hosts—but that is like the old saw about how to catch a bird: it's no trouble if you can sneak up close enough to put salt on its tail. I'm not a scientist—just a cop under a different tag—but I've talked to the scientists here. This is a biological war. We need a bug, one that will bite the slug and not the host. Doesn't sound too hard, does it? We know a hundred things that will kill the slug—smallpox, typhus, syphilis, encephalitis lethargica, Obermayer's virus, plague, yellow fever, and so on. They all kill the host."

"Couldn't they use something that everyone is immune to?" I asked. "Everybody has typhoid shots. And almost everybody is vaccinated for smallpox."

"No good. If the host is immune, the parasite doesn't get exposed to it. Now that the slugs have developed this outer cuticle the parasite's environment is the host. No, we need something the



host will catch and that will kill the slug, but won't give the host more than a mild fever."

I started to answer when I saw the Old Man in the doorway. I excused myself and went to him. "What was Kelly grilling you about?" he asked.

"He wasn't grilling me," I answered.

"That's what you think. You know what Kelly that is?"

"Should I?"

"You should. Or perhaps not; he never lets his picture be taken. That's B. J. Kelly, the greatest scientific criminologist of our generation."

"*That* Kelly! But he's not in the Army."

"Reserve, probably. But you can guess how important this lab is. Come on."

"Where's Mary?"

"You can't see her now. She's recuperating."

"Is she—hurt?"

"I promised you she would not be. Steelton is the best in his line. But we had to go down deep, against great resistance. That's always rough on the subject."

I thought about it. "Did you get what you were after?"

"Yes and no. We aren't through."

"What were you after?"

We had been walking along one of the place's endless underground passageways. Now he turned us into a small office and sat down. The Old Man touched the desk communicator and said, "Private conference."

"Yes, sir," a voice answered. "We will not record." A green light came on in the ceiling.

"Not that I believe them," the Old Man complained, "but it may keep anyone but Kelly from playing it back. Now, son, about what you want to know; I'm not sure you are entitled to it. You are married to the girl, but you don't own her soul—and this stuff comes from down so deep that she did not know she had it."

I said nothing; he went on in worried tones, "It might be better to tell you enough to make you understand. Otherwise you would bother her to find out. I don't ever want that to happen. You might throw her into a bad wingding. I doubt if she'll remember anything—Steelton is a very gentle operator—but you could stir up things."



I took a deep breath. "You'll have to judge."

"Well, I'll tell you a bit and answer your questions—some of them—in exchange for a solemn promise never to bother your wife with it. You don't have the skill."

"Very well, sir. I promise."

"Well, there was a group of people, a cult, you might call them, that got into disrepute."

"I know—the Whitmanites."

"Eh? How did you know? From Mary? No, she couldn't have; she didn't know herself."

"No, not from Mary. I figured it out."

He looked at me with odd respect. "Maybe I've underestimated you, son. As you say, the Whitmanites. Mary was one, as a kid in Antarctica."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "They left Antarctica in"—the wheels buzzed and the number came up—"in 1974."

"Surely."

"But that would make Mary around forty years old!"

"Do you care?"

"Huh? Why, no—but she can't be."

"She is and she isn't. Chronologically her age is about forty. Biologically she is in her middle twenties. Subjectively she is even younger, because she doesn't consciously remember anything earlier than about 1990."

"What do you mean? That she doesn't remember, I can understand—she never *wants* to remember. But what do you mean by the rest?"

"What I said. She is no older than she is because—you know that room where she started to remember? She spent ten years or more in suspended animation in just such a tank as that."

## 28

As I get older, I don't get tougher; I get softer. The thought of my beloved Mary swimming in that artificial womb, neither dead nor alive but preserved like a pickled grasshopper, was too much for me.



I heard the Old Man saying, "Take it easy, son. She's all right."  
I said, "Go ahead."

Mary's overt history was simple, though mystifying. She had been found in the swamps near Kaiserville at the north pole of Venus—a little girl who could give no account of herself and who knew only her name—Allucquere. Nobody spotted the significance of the name, and a child of her apparent age could not be associated with the Whitmanite debacle in any case; the 1980 supply ship had not been able to find any survivor of their "New Zion" colony. Ten years of time and more than two hundred miles of jungle separated the little waif of Kaiserville from the God-struck colonists of New Zion.

In 1990 an unaccounted-for earth child on Venus was incredible, but there was no one around with the intellectual curiosity to push the matter. Kaiserville was made up of miners, doxies, company representatives of Two Planets Corporation—and nothing else. Shoveling radioactive mud in the swamps would not leave much energy for wonder.

She grew up using poker chips for toys and calling every woman in crib row "mother" or "auntie." They shortened her name to "Lucky." The Old Man did not say who paid her way back to Earth; the real question was where she had been from the time New Zion was eaten up by the jungle, and just what had happened to the colony.

But the only record was buried in Mary's mind, locked tight with terror and despair.

Some time before 1980—about the time of the flying-saucer reports from Russo-Siberia, or a year or so earlier—the titans had discovered New Zion colony. If you place it one Saturn year earlier than the invasion of Earth, the times fit fairly well. The titans probably were not looking for earthmen on Venus; more likely they were scouting Venus as they had long scouted Earth. Or they may have known where to look; we know that they kidnapped earthmen over the course of two or more centuries; they may have captured someone whose brain could tell them where to find New Zion. Mary's dark memories could contain no clue to that.

Mary saw the colony captured, saw her parents turned into zombies who no longer cared for her. Apparently she herself was not possessed, or she may have been possessed and turned loose,



the titans finding a weak and ignorant young girl an unsuitable slave. In any case, for what was to her baby mind an endless time, she hung around, unwanted, uncared for, but unmolested, scavenging like a mouse. The slugs were moving in to stay; their principal slaves were Venerians, and the colonists were only incidental. It is sure that Mary saw her parents being placed in suspended animation—for later use in the invasion of Earth? Possible.

In due course she herself was placed in the tanks. Inside a titan ship? At a base on Venus? More probably the latter, as when she woke, she was still on Venus. There are many gaps. Were the slugs that rode the Venerians identical with the slugs which rode the colonists? Possible—both Earth and Venus have oxy-carbon economy. The slugs seem endlessly protean, but they have to adapt themselves to the biochemistry of their hosts. Had Venus an oxy-silicon economy like Mars, or a fluorine economy, the same parasite type could not have fed on both.

But the gist of the matter lay in the situation as it was when Mary was removed from the artificial incubator. The titan invasion of Venus had failed, or was failing. She was possessed as soon as they removed her from the tank—but Mary had outlived the slug that possessed her.

Why had the slugs died? Why had the invasion of Venus failed? It was for clues to these questions that the Old Man and Dr. Steelton had gone fishing in Mary's brain.

I said, "Is that all?"

He answered, "Isn't that enough?"

"It raises as many questions as it answers," I complained.

"There is a great deal more," he told me. "But you aren't a Venerian expert, nor a psychologist. I've told you what I have so that you will know why we have to work on Mary and won't question her about it. Be good to her, boy; she's had more than her share of grief."

I ignored the advice; I can get along or not get along with my own wife without help, thank you. "What I can't see," I answered, "is why you had Mary linked up with flying saucers in the first place? I can see now that you took her along on that first trip on purpose. You were right—but why? And don't give me any malarky."



The Old Man looked puzzled. "Son, do you ever have hunches?"

"Lord, yes!"

"What is a 'hunch'?"

"Eh? It's a belief that something is so, or isn't so, without evidence."

"I'd call a hunch the result of automatic reasoning below the conscious level on data you did not know you possessed."

"Sounds like the black cat in the coal cellar at midnight. You didn't have any data. Don't tell me that your unconscious mind works on data you are going to get next week."

"Ah, but I did have data."

"Huh?"

"What's the last thing that happens to a candidate before he is certified as an agent?"

"The personal interview with you."

"No, no!"

"Oh—the trance analysis." I had forgotten hypno-analysis for the simple reason that the subject never remembers it. "You mean you had this data on Mary then. It wasn't a hunch at all."

"No again. I had a very little of it—Mary's defenses are strong. And I had forgotten what little I knew. But I knew that Mary was the agent for this job. Later I played back her hypno interview; then I *knew* that there must be more. We tried for it—and did not get it. But I knew that there had to be more."

I thought it over. "You sure put her over the bumps to get it."

"I had to. I'm sorry."

"Okay, okay." I waited a moment, then said, "Look—what was there in *my* hypno record?"

"That's not a proper question."

"Nuts."

"And I couldn't tell you if I would. I have never listened to your analysis, son."

"Huh?"

"I had my deputy play it. He said there wasn't anything I needed to know, so I never played it."

"So? Well—thanks."

He merely grunted. Dad and I have always managed to embarrass each other.



The slugs had died from something they contracted on Venus; that much we thought we knew. We weren't likely to get another chance in a hurry to collect direct information, as a dispatch came in while the Old Man and I were talking, saying that the Pass Christian saucer had been bombed to keep it from being recaptured. The Old Man had hoped to get at those human prisoners in that ship, revive them, and question them.

That chance was gone. What they could dig out of Mary had better be the answer. If some infection peculiar to Venus was fatal to slugs but not fatal to humans—at least Mary had lived through it—then the next step was to test them all and determine which one. Just dandy! It was like examining every grain of sand on a beach. The list of diseases native to Venus which are not fatal but merely nastily annoying is very long. From the standpoint of a Venerian bug we must be too strange a diet to suit his taste. If a Venerian bug has a viewpoint, which I doubt, McIlvaine's silly ideas notwithstanding.

The problem was made harder by the fact that diseases native to Venus which were represented by living cultures on Earth were strictly limited in number. Such an omission could be repaired—in a century or so of exploration and research on a strange planet.

In the meantime there was a breath of frost in the air; Schedule Sun Tan could not go on forever.

They had to go back where they hoped the answer was—into Mary's brain. I did not like it, but I could not stop it. She did not appear to know why she was being asked to submit, over and over again, to hypnotics. She seemed serene, but the strain showed—circles under her eyes, things like that. Finally I told the Old Man that it had to stop. "You know better than that, son," he said mildly.

"The hell I do! If you haven't gotten what you want by now, you'll never get it."

"Do you know how long it takes to search *all* a person's memories, even if you limit it to a particular period? Exactly as long as



the period itself. What we need—if it's there at all—may be subtle."

"If it's there at all," I repeated. "You don't know that it is. See here—if Mary miscarries as a result of this, I'll break your neck personally."

"If we don't succeed," he answered gently, "you'll wish to heaven that she had. Or do you want to raise up kids to be hosts to titans?"

I chewed my lip. "Why didn't you send me to Russia, instead of keeping me here?"

"Oh, that. I want you here, with Mary, keeping her morale up, instead of acting like a spoiled brat! In the second place, it isn't necessary."

"Huh? What happened? Some other agent report in?"

"If you would ever show a grown-up interest in the news, you would know."

I hurried out and brought myself up to date. This time I had managed to miss the first news of the Asiatic plague, the second biggest news story of the century, the only continent-wide epidemic of Black Death since the seventeenth century.

I could not understand it. Russians are crazy, granted. But their public-health measures were fairly good; they were carried out "by the numbers" and no nonsense tolerated. A country has to be literally lousy to spread plagues—rats, lice, and fleas, the historical vectors. The Russian bureaucrats had even cleaned up China to the point where bubonic plague and typhus were endemic rather than epidemic.

Now both plagues were spreading across the whole Sino-Russo-Siberian axis, to the point where the government had broken down and pleas were being sent out for U.N. help. What had happened?

I put the pieces together and looked up at the Old Man again. "Boss—there *were* slugs in Russia."

"Yes."

"You know? Well, for cripes sake, we'd better move fast, or the whole Mississippi Valley will be in the shape that Asia is in. Just one little rat—" The titans did not bother about human sanitation. I doubted if there had been a bath taken between the Canadian border and New Orleans since the slugs dropped the masquerade. Lice . . . Fleas . . .

"You might as well bomb them, if that's the best we have to offer. It's a cleaner way to die."



"So it is." The Old Man sighed. "Maybe that's the best solution. Maybe it's the only one. But you know we won't. As long as there is a chance we'll keep on trying."

I mulled it over at length. We were in still another race against time. Fundamentally the slugs must be too stupid to keep slaves; perhaps that was why they moved from planet to planet—they spoiled what they touched. After a while their hosts would die and then they needed new hosts.

Theory, just theory. But one thing was sure: Zone Red would be plague-ridden unless we found a way to kill the slugs, and that mighty soon! I made up my mind to do something I had considered before—force myself into the mind-searching sessions. If there were something in Mary's hidden memories which could be used to kill slugs, I might see it where others had failed. In any case I was going in, whether Steelton and the Old Man liked it or not. I was tired of being treated like a cross between a prince consort and an unwelcome child.

## 30

Mary and I had been living in a cubicle intended for one officer; we were as crowded as a plate of *smörgåsbord*, but we did not care. I woke up first the next morning and made my usual quick check to be sure that a slug had not gotten to her. While I was doing so, she opened her eyes and smiled drowsily. "Go back to sleep," I said.

"I'm awake now."

"Mary, do you know the incubation period for bubonic plague?"

She answered. "Should I know? One of your eyes is slightly darker than the other."

I shook her. "Pay attention, wench. I was in the lab library last night, doing some figuring. As I get it, the slugs must have moved in on the Russians at least three months before they invaded us."

"Yes, of course."

"You know? Why didn't you say so?"

"Nobody asked me."

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Let's get up; I'm hungry."



Before we left I said, "Guessing games at the usual time?"

"Yes."

"Mary, you never talk about what they ask you."

She looked surprised. "But I never know."

"That's what I gathered. Deep trance with a 'forgetter' order, eh?"

"I suppose so."

"Hmm . . . well, there'll be some changes made. Today I am going with you."

All she said was, "Yes, dear."

They were gathered as usual in Dr. Steelton's office, the Old Man, Steelton himself, a Colonel Gatsby who was chief of staff, a lieutenant colonel, and an odd lot of sergeant technicians, j.o.s. and flunkies. In the Army it takes an eight-man working party to help a brass hat blow his nose.

The Old Man's eyebrows shot up when he saw me but he said nothing. A sergeant tried to stop me. "Good morning, Mrs. Nivens," he said to Mary, then added, "I don't have you on the list."

"I'm putting myself on the list," I announced, and pushed on past him.

Colonel Gatsby glared and turned to the Old Man with a Hrrumph-hrrumph-what's-all-this? noise. The rest looked frozen-faced—except one Wac sergeant who could not keep from grinning.

The Old Man said to Gatsby, "Just a moment, Colonel," and limped over to me. In a voice that reached me alone he said, "Son, you promised me."

"And I withdraw it. You had no business exacting a promise from a man about his wife."

"You've no business here, son. You are not skilled in these matters. For Mary's sake, get out."

Up to that moment it had not occurred to me to question the Old Man's right to stay, but I found myself announcing my decision as I made it. "You are the one with no business here. *You* are not an analyst. So get out."

The Old Man glanced at Mary. Nothing showed in her face. The Old Man said slowly, "You been eating raw meat, son?"



I answered, "It's my wife who is being experimented on; from here on I make the rules."

Colonel Gibsy butted in with, "Young man, are you out of your mind?"

I said, "What's your status?" I glanced at his hands and added, "That's a V.M.I. ring, isn't it? Have you any other qualifications? Are you an M.D.? Or a psychologist?"

He drew himself up. "You seem to forget that this is a military reservation."

"You forget that my wife and I aren't military personnel!" I added, "Come, Mary. We're leaving."

"Yes, Sam."

I added to the Old Man, "I'll tell the offices where to send our mail." I started for the door with Mary following.

The Old Man said, "Just a moment, as a favor to me." I stopped and he went on to Gibsy. "Colonel, will you step outside with me? I'd like a word in private."

Colonel Gibsy gave me a general court-martial look but he went. We all waited. The juniors continued to be poker-faced, the lieutenant colonel looked perturbed, and the little sergeant seemed about to burst. Steelton was the only one who appeared unconcerned. He took papers out of his "incoming" basket and commenced to work quietly.

Ten or fifteen minutes later a sergeant came in. "Dr. Steelton, the commanding officer says to go ahead."

"Very well, Sergeant," he acknowledged, then looked at me and said, "Let's go into the operating room."

I said, "Not so fast. Who are these others? How about him?" I indicated the lieutenant colonel.

"Eh? He's Dr. Hazelhurst—two years on Venus."

"Okay, he stays." I caught the eye of the sergeant with the grin and said, "What's your job, sister?"

"Me? Oh, I'm sort of chaperon."

"I'm taking over the chaperon business. Now, Doctor, suppose you sort out the spare wheels from the people you actually need."

"Certainly, sir."

It turned out that he really wanted no one but Colonel Hazelhurst. We went inside—Mary, myself, and the two specialists.

The operating room contained a psychiatrist's couch surrounded by chairs. The double shout of a tri-dim camera poked



out of the overhead. Mary went to the couch and lay down; Dr. Steelton got out an injector. "We'll try to pick up where we left off, Mrs. Nivens."

I said, "Just a moment. You have records of the earlier attempts?"

"Of course."

"Let's play them over first. I want to come up to date."

He hesitated, then answered, "If you wish. Mrs. Nivens, I suggest that you wait in my office. Or suppose I send for you later?"

It was probably the contrary mood that I was in; bucking the Old Man had gotten me hiked up. "Let's find out first if she *wants* to leave."

Steelton looked surprised. "You don't know what you are suggesting. These records would be emotionally disturbing to your wife—even harmful."

Hazelhurst put in, "Very questionable therapy, young man."

I said, "This isn't therapy and you know it. If therapy had been your object you would have used eidetic recall techniques instead of drugs."

Steelton looked worried. "There was not time. We had to use rough methods for quick results. I'm not sure that I can authorize the subject to see the records."

Hazelhurst put in, "I agree with you, Doctor."

I exploded. "Damn it, nobody asked you and you haven't got any authority in the matter. Those records were snatched out of my wife's head and they belong to *her*. I'm sick of you people trying to play God. I don't like it in a slug and I don't like it any better in a human being. She'll make up her own mind. Now *ask her!*"

Steelton said, "Mrs. Nivens, do you wish to see your records?"

Mary answered, "Yes, Doctor, I'd like to very much."

He seemed surprised. "Uh, to be sure. Do you wish to see them by yourself?"

"My husband and I will see them. You and Dr. Hazelhurst are welcome to remain."

Which they did. A stack of tape spools were brought in, each labeled with attributed dates and ages. It would have taken hours to go through them all, so I discarded those which concerned Mary's life after 1991, as they could hardly affect the problem.

We began with her very early life. Each record started with the



subject—Mary—choking and groaning and struggling the way people always do when they are being forced back on a memory track which they would rather not follow; then would come the reconstruction, both in her voice and in others'. What surprised me most was Mary's face—in the tank, I mean. We had the magnification stepped up so that the stereo image was practically in our laps and we could follow every expression.

First her face became that of a little girl. Oh, her features were the same grown-up features, but I knew that I was seeing my darling as she must have been when she was very small. It made me hope that we would have a little girl ourselves.

Then her expression would change to match when other actors out of her memory took over. It was like watching an incredibly able monologist playing many parts.

Mary took it calmly, but her hand stole into mine. When we came to the terrible part when her parents changed, became not her parents but slaves of slugs, she clamped down hard on my fingers. But she controlled herself.

I skipped over the spools marked "period of suspended animation" and proceeded to the group concerned with the time from her resuscitation to her rescue from the swamps.

One thing was certain: she had been possessed by a slug as soon as she was revived. The dead expression was that of a slug not bothering to keep up a masquerade; the stereocasts from Zone Red were full of that look. The barrenness of her memories from that period confirmed it.

Then, rather suddenly, she was no longer hagridden but was again a little girl, very sick and frightened. There was a delirious quality to her remembered thoughts, but, at the last, a new voice came out loud and clear: "Well, skin me alive! Look, Pete—it's a little girl!"

Another voice answered, "Alive?" and the first voice answered, "I don't know."

The tape carried on into Kaiserville, her recovery, and many new voices and memories; presently it ended.

"I suggest," Dr. Steelton said as he took the tape out of the projector, "that we play another of the same period. They are all slightly different and this period is the key to the whole matter."

"Why, Doctor?" Mary wanted to know.

"Eh? Of course you need not if you don't want to, but this pe-



riod is the one which we are investigating. We must build up a picture of what happened to the parasites, why they died. If we could tell what killed the titan which, uh, possessed you before you were found—what killed it and left you alive—we might have the weapon we need.”

“But don’t you *know*?” Mary asked wonderingly.

“Eh? Not yet, but we’ll get it. The human memory is an amazingly complete record.”

“But I thought you knew. It was ‘nine-day fever.’”

“*What?*” Hazelhurst bounced out of his chair.

“Couldn’t you tell from my face? It was utterly characteristic—the mask, I mean. I used to nurse it back ho—back in Kaiserville, because I had had it once and was immune.”

Steelton said, “How about it, Doctor? Have you ever seen a case of it?”

“Seen a case? No, by the time of the second expedition they had the vaccine. I’m acquainted with its clinical characteristics, of course.”

“But can’t you tell from this record?”

“Well,” Hazelhurst answered carefully, “I would say that what we have seen is consistent with it, but not conclusive.”

“What’s not conclusive?” Mary said sharply. “I told you it was ‘nine-day fever.’”

“We must be sure,” Steelton said apologetically.

“How sure can you get? There is no question about it. I was told that I had been sick with it when Pete and Frisco found me. I nursed other cases later and I never caught it. I remember their faces when they were ready to die—just like my own face in the record. Anyone who has ever seen a case could not possibly mistake it for anything else. What more do you want? Fiery letters in the sky?”

I had never seen Mary so close to losing her temper—except once. I said to myself: Look out, gentlemen, better duck!

Steelton said, “I think you have proved your point, dear lady. But tell me: you were believed to have no conscious memory of this period, and my own examination of you confirmed it. Now you speak as if you had.”

Mary looked puzzled. “I remember it now—quite clearly. I haven’t thought about it in many years.”

“I think I understand.” He turned to Hazelhurst. “Well, Doc-



tor? Do we have a culture on it? Have your boys done any work on it?"

Hazelhurst seemed stunned. "Work on it? Of course not! It's out of the question—nine-day fever! We might as well use polio—or typhus. I'd rather treat a hangnail with an ax!"

I touched Mary's arm. "Let's go, darling. I think we have done all the damage we can." She was trembling and her eyes were full of tears. I took her into the messroom for systemic treatment—distilled.

Later on I bedded Mary down for a nap and sat with her until she was asleep. Then I looked up my father in the office they had assigned to him. "Howdy," I said.

He looked at me speculatively. "Well, Elihu, I hear you hit the jackpot."

"I prefer to be called 'Sam,'" I answered.

"Very well, Sam. Success is its own excuse; nevertheless the jackpot appears to be disappointingly small. Nine-day fever—no wonder the colony died out and the slugs as well. I don't see how we can use it. We can't expect everyone to have Mary's indomitable will to live."

I understood him; the fever carried a ninety-eight per cent plus death rate among unprotected earthmen. With those who had taken the shots the rate was an effective zero—but that did not figure. We needed a bug that would just make a man sick—but would kill his slug. "I can't see that it matters," I pointed out. "It's odds-on that you will have typhus or plague—or both—throughout the Mississippi Valley in the next six weeks."

"Or the slugs may have learned a lesson in Asia and will start taking drastic sanitary measures," he answered. The idea startled me so that I almost missed the next thing he said, which was: "No, Sam, you'll have to devise a better plan."

"I'll have to? I just work here."

"You did once, but now you've taken charge of this job."

"Huh? What the devil are you talking about? I'm not in charge of anything—and don't want to be. You're the boss."

He shook his head. "A boss is the man who does the bossing. Titles and insignia come later. Tell me—do you think Oldfield could ever replace me?"

I shook my head; Dad's chief deputy was the executive officer



type, a "Carry-outer," not a "think-upper." "I've never promoted you," he went on, "because I knew that when the time came you would promote yourself. Now you've done it—by bucking my judgment on an important matter, forcing your own on me, and by being justified in the outcome."

"Oh, rats! I got bullheaded and forced one issue. It never occurred to you big brains that you were failing to consult the 'one real Venus expert you had on tap—Mary, I mean. But I didn't expect to find out anything; I had a lucky break."

He shook his head. "I don't believe in luck, Sam. Luck is a tag given by the mediocre to account for the accomplishments of genius."

I placed my hands on the desk and leaned toward him. "Okay, so I'm a genius—but you're not going to make me hold the sack. When this is over Mary and I are going up in the mountains and raise kittens and kids. I don't intend to boss screwball agents."

He smiled gently.

I went on, "I don't *want* your job—understand me?"

"That is what the devil said to the Deity after he displaced Him. Don't take it so hard, Sam. I'll keep the title for the present. In the meantime, what are your plans, sir?"

## 31

The worst of it was, he meant it. I tried to go limp on him, but it did not work. A top-level conference was called that afternoon; I was notified but stayed away. Shortly a polite little Wac came to tell me that the commanding officer was waiting and would I please come at once?

So I went—and tried to stay out of the discussion. But my father had a way of conducting a meeting, even if he is not in the chair, by looking expectantly at the one he wants to hear from. It's a subtle trick, as the group does not know that it is being led.

But *I* knew. With every eye in the room on you, it is easier to voice an opinion than to keep quiet. Particularly as I found that I had opinions.

There was much moaning and groaning about the utter impossi-



bility of using nine-day fever. Admitted that it would kill slugs. It would even kill Venerians, who can be chopped in two and survive. But it was sure death to any human—almost any human; I was married to one who *had* survived—death to the enormous majority. Seven to ten days after exposure, then curtains.

"Yes, Mr. Nivens?" It was the commanding general, addressing me. I hadn't said anything, but Dad's eyes were on me, waiting.

"I think there has been a lot of despair voiced at this session," I said, "and a lot of opinions given that were based on assumptions. The assumptions may not be correct."

"Yes?"

I did not have an instance in mind; I had been shooting from the hip. "Well, I hear constant reference to nine-day fever as if the 'nine-day' part were an absolute fact. It's not."

The boss brass shrugged impatiently. "It's a convenient tag—it averages nine days."

"Yes, but how do you know it lasts nine days—for a slug?"

By the murmur with which it was received I knew that I had hit the jackpot again.

I was invited to explain why I thought the fever might run a different time in slugs, and why it mattered. I bulled on ahead. "As to the first," I said, "in the only case we know about the slug did die in less than nine days—a lot less. Those of you who have seen the records on my wife—and I gather that entirely too many of you have—are aware that her parasite left her, presumably dropped off and died, long before the eighth-day crisis. If experiments confirm this, then the problem is different. A man infected with the fever might be rid of his slug in—oh, call it four days. That gives you five days to catch him and cure him."

The general whistled. "That's a pretty heroic solution, Mr. Nivens. How do you propose to cure him? Or even catch him? I mean to say, suppose we plant an epidemic in Zone Red, it would take incredibly fast footwork—in the face of stubborn resistance, remember—to locate and treat more than fifty million people before they died."

I slung the hot potato right back—and wondered how many "experts" had made their names by passing the buck. "The second question is a logistical and tactical problem—*your* problem. As to the first, there is your expert." I pointed to Dr. Hazelhurst.

Hazelhurst huffed and puffed and I knew how he felt. Insuffi-



cient former art . . . more research needed . . . experiments would be required. . . . He seemed to recall that work had been done toward an antitoxin but the vaccine for immunizing had proven so successful that he was not sure the antitoxin had ever been perfected. He concluded lamely by saying that the study of the exotic diseases of Venus was still in its infancy.

The general interrupted him. "The antitoxin business—how soon can you find out about it?"

Hazelhurst said that there was a man at the Sorbonne he wanted to phone.

"Do so," his commanding officer said. "You are excused."

Hazelhurst came buzzing at our door before breakfast the next morning. I stepped out into the passage to see him. "Sorry to wake you," he said, "but you were right about that antitoxin matter."

"Huh?"

"They are sending me some from Paris; it should arrive any minute. I do hope it's still potent."

"And if it isn't?"

"Well, we have the means to make it. We'll have to, of course, if this wild scheme is used—millions of units of it."

"Thanks for telling me," I said. I started to turn away; he stopped me.

"Uh, Mr. Nivens. About the matter of vectors——"

"Vectors?"

"Disease vectors. We can't use rats or mice or anything like that. Do you know how the fever is transmitted on Venus? By a little flying rotifer, the Venerian equivalent of an insect. But we don't have any such, and that is the *only* way it can be carried."

"Do you mean to say you couldn't give it to me if you tried?"

"Oh, yes—I could inject you. But I can't picture a million paratroopers dropping into Zone Red and asking the parasite-ridden population to hold still while they gave them injections." He spread his hands helplessly.

Something started turning over slowly in my brain. A million men, in a single drop . . . "Why ask me?" I said. "It's a medical problem."

"Uh, yes, of course. I just thought—— Well, you seemed to have a ready grasp——" He paused.



"Thanks." My mind was struggling with two problems at once and having traffic trouble. How many people were there in Zone Red? "Let me get this straight: suppose you had the fever; I could not catch it from you?" The drop could not be medical men; there weren't that many.

"Not easily. If I took a smear and placed it in your throat, you might contract it. If I made a trace transfusion from my veins to yours, you would be sure to be infected."

"Direct contact, eh?" How many people could one paratrooper service? Twenty? Thirty? Or more? "If that is what it takes, you don't have any problem."

"Eh?"

"What's the first thing a slug does when he runs across another he hasn't seen lately?"

"*Conjugation!*"

"'Direct conference,' I've always called it—but I use the sloppy old slug language for it. Do you think that would pass on the disease?"

"Think so? I'm sure of it! We have demonstrated, right in this laboratory, that there is exchange of living protein during conjugation. They could not possibly escape transmission; we can infect the whole colony as if it were one body. Now why didn't I think of that?"

"Don't go off half cocked," I said. "But I suspect that it will work."

"It will, it will!" He started to go, then stopped. "Oh, Mr. Nivens, would you mind very much—I know it's a lot to ask——"

"What is it? Speak up." I was anxious to work out the rest of the other problem.

"Well, would you permit me to announce this method of vectoring? I'll give you full credit, but the general expects so much and this is just what I need to make my report complete." He looked so anxious that I almost laughed.

"Not at all," I said. "It's your department."

"That's decent of you. I'll try to return the favor." He went away happy and so was I; I was beginning to like being a "genius."

I stopped to straighten out in my mind the main features of the big drop. Then I went in. Mary opened her eyes and gave me that long heavenly smile. I reached down and smoothed her hair.



"Howdy, flame top. Did you know that your husband is a genius?"

"Yes."

"You did? You never said so."

"You never asked me."

Hazelhurst referred to it as the "Nivens vector." Then I was asked to comment, though Dad looked my way first.

"I agree with Dr. Hazelhurst," I started out, "subject to experimental confirmation. However, he has left for discussion aspects which are tactical rather than medical. Important considerations of timing—crucial, I should say—" I had worked out my opening speech, even to the hesitations, while eating breakfast. Mary does not chatter at breakfast, thank goodness!

"—require vectoring from many focal points. If we are to save a nominal hundred per cent of the population of Zone Red, it is necessary that all parasites be infected at nearly the same time in order that rescue squads may enter *after* the slugs are no longer dangerous and *before* any host has passed the point where anti-toxin can save him. The problem is susceptible to mathematical analysis—" Sam boy, I said to myself, you old phony, you could not solve it with an electronic integrator and twenty years of sweat. "—and should be turned over to your analytical section. However, let me sketch out the factors. Call the number of vector origins 'X'; call the number of rescue workers 'Y.' There will be an indefinitely large number of simultaneous solutions, with optimum solution depending on logistic factors. Speaking in advance of rigorous mathematical treatment"—I had done my damndest with a slipstick, but I did not mention that—"and basing my opinions on my own unfortunately-too-intimate knowledge of their habits, I would estimate—"

You could have heard a pin drop, if anybody in that bare-skinned crew had had a pin. The general interrupted once when I placed a low estimate on "X"; "Mr. Nivens, I think we can assure you of any number of volunteers for vectoring."

I shook my head. "You can't accept volunteers, General."

"I think I see your objection. The disease would have to be given time to establish in the volunteer and the timing might be dangerously close. But I think we could get around that—a gela-



tine capsule of antitoxin embedded in tissue, or something of the sort. I'm sure the staff could work it out."

I thought they could, too, but my real objection was a deep-rooted aversion to any human soul having to be possessed by a slug. "You *must not* use human volunteers, sir. The slug will know everything that his host knows—and he simply will not go into direct conference; he'll warn the others by word of mouth instead. No, sir, we will use animals—apes, dogs, anything large enough to carry a slug but incapable of speech, and in quantities to infect the whole group before any slug knows that it is sick."

I gave a fast sketch of the final drop, "Schedule Mercy," as I saw it. "The first drop—'Schedule Fever'—can start as soon as we have enough antitoxin for the second drop. In less than a week thereafter there should be no slug left alive on this continent."

They did not applaud, but it felt that way. The general hurried away to call Air Marshal Rexton, then sent his aide back to invite me to lunch. I sent word that I would be pleased provided the invitation included my wife.

Dad waited for me outside the conference room. "Well, how did I do?" I asked him, more anxious than I tried to sound.

He shook his head. "Sam, you wowed 'em. I think I'll sign you up for twenty-six weeks of stereo."

I tried not to show how pleased I was. I had gotten through the whole performance without once stammering; I felt like a new man.

## 32

That ape Satan which had wrung my heart at the National Zoo turned out to be as mean as he was billed, once he was free of his slug. Dad had volunteered to be the test case for the Nivens-Hazelhurst theories, but I put my foot down and Satan drew the short straw. It was neither filial affection nor its neo-Freudian antithesis that caused me to balk him; I was afraid of the combination Dad-cum-slug. I did not want him on their side even under laboratory conditions. Not with his shrewd, tricky mind! People



who have never experienced possession cannot appreciate that the host is *utterly* against us with all his abilities intact.

So we used apes for the experiments. We had on hand not only apes from the National Zoological Gardens but simian citizens from half a dozen zoos and circuses.

Satan was injected with nine-day fever on Wednesday the twelfth. By Friday the fever had taken hold; another chimp-cum-slug was put in with him; the slugs immediately went into direct conference, after which the second ape was removed.

On Sunday the sixteenth Satan's master shriveled up and fell off. Satan was immediately injected with antitoxin. Late Monday the other slug died and its host was dosed.

By Wednesday the nineteenth Satan was well though a bit thin, and the second ape, Lord Fauntleroy, was recovering. To celebrate, I gave Satan a banana, and he took off the first joint of my left index finger and me with no time for a repair job. It was no accident; that ape was nasty.

But a minor injury could not depress me. After I had it dressed I looked for Mary, failed to find her and ended up in the messroom, wanting someone with whom to share a toast.

The place was empty; everyone in the labs was working, mounting Schedule Fever and Schedule Mercy. By order of the President all possible preparations were confined to this one lab in the Smoky Mountains. The apes for vectoring, some two hundred of them, were here; the culture and antitoxin were being "cooked" here; the horses for serum were stalled in an underground handball court.

The million-plus men for Schedule Mercy could not be here, but they would know nothing until alerted just before the drop, at which time each would be issued a hand gun and bandoleers of individual antitoxin injectors. Those who had never parachuted would be pushed, if necessary, by some sergeant with a large foot. Everything was being done to keep the secret close; the only way I could see that we could lose would be for the titans to find out our plans, through a renegade or by some other means. Too many plans have failed because some fool told his wife.

If we failed to keep this secret, our ape vectors would be shot on sight wherever they appeared in the titan nation. Nevertheless, I relaxed over my drink, happy and reasonably sure that the secret would not leak. Traffic was "incoming only" until after Drop



Day, and Colonel Kelly censored or monitored all communication outward.

As for a leak outside, the chances were slight. The general, Dad, Colonel Gibsy, and myself had gone to the White House the week before. There Dad put on an exhibition of belligerence and exasperation that got us what we wanted; in the end even Secretary Martinez was kept in the dark. If the President and Rexton could keep from talking in their sleep for another week, I did not see how we could miss.

A week would be none too soon: Zone Red was spreading. After the battle of Pass Christian the slugs had pushed on and now held the Gulf Coast past Pensacola; there were signs of more to come. Perhaps the slugs were growing tired of our resistance and might decide to waste raw material by A-bombing the cities we still held. If so—well, a radar screen can alert your defenses; it won't stop a determined attack.

But I refused to worry. One more week . . .

Colonel Kelly came in and sat down beside me. "How about a drink?" I suggested. "I feel like celebrating."

He examined the paunch bulging in front of him and said, "I suppose one more beer wouldn't put me in any worse shape."

"Have two beers. Have a dozen." I dialed for him, and told him about the success of the experiments with the apes.

He nodded. "Yes, I had heard. Sounds good."

"'Good,' the man says! Colonel, we are on the one-yard line and goal to go. A week from now we'll have won."

"So?"

"Oh, come now!" I answered, irritated. "Then you'll be able to put your clothes back on and lead a normal life. Or don't you think our plans will work?"

"Yes, I think they will work."

"Then why the crepe-hanging?"

He said, "Mr. Nivens, you don't think that a man with my pot-belly enjoys running around without his clothes, do you?"

"I suppose not. As for myself, I may hate to give it up. It saves time and it's comfortable."

"Don't worry about it. This is a permanent change."

"Huh? I don't get you. You said our plans would work and now you talk as if Schedule Sun Tan would go on forever."



"In a modified way, it will."

I said, "Pardon me? I'm stupid today."

He dialed for another beer. "Mr. Nivens, I never expected to see a military reservation turned into a ruddy nudist camp. Having seen it, I never expected to see us change back—because we *can't*. Pandora's box has a one-way lid. All the king's horses and all the king's men——"

"Conceded," I answered. "Things never go back quite to what they were before. But you are exaggerating. The day the President rescinds Schedule Sun Tan the blue laws will go back into effect and a man without pants will be liable to arrest."

"I hope not."

"Huh? Make up your mind."

"It's made up for me. Mr. Nivens, as long as there exists a possibility that a slug is alive the polite man must be willing to bare his body on request—or risk getting shot. Not just this week and next, but twenty years from now, or a hundred. No, no!" he added, "I am not disparaging your plans—but you have been too busy to notice that they are strictly local and temporary. For example, have you made any plans for combing the Amazonian jungles, tree by tree?"

He went on, "Just a rhetorical inquiry. This globe has nearly sixty million square miles of land; we can't begin to search it for slugs. Shucks, man, we haven't even made a dent in rats, and we've been at that a long time."

"Are you trying to tell me it's hopeless?" I demanded.

"Hopeless? Not at all. Have another drink. I'm trying to say that we are going to have to learn to *live* with this horror, the way we had to learn to live with the atom bomb."

## 33

We were gathered in the same room in the White House; it put me in mind of the night after the President's message many weeks before. Dad and Mary, Rexton and Martinez were there, as well as our own lab general, Dr. Hazelhurst and Colonel Gibsy. Our eyes were on the big map still mounted across one wall; it had



been four and a half days since the drop of Schedule Fever, but the Mississippi Valley still glowed in ruby lights.

I was getting jittery, even though the drop had been an apparent success and we had lost only three craft. According to the equations, every slug within reach of direct conference should have been infected three days ago, with an estimated twenty-three per cent overlap. The operation had been computed to contact about eighty per cent in the first twelve hours, mostly in cities.

Soon slugs would start dying a darn sight faster than flies ever did—if we were right.

I tried to sit still while I wondered whether those ruby lights covered a few million very sick slugs—or merely two hundred dead apes. Had somebody skipped a decimal point? Or blabbed? Or had there been an error in our reasoning so colossal that we could not see it?

Suddenly a light blinked green; everybody sat up. A voice began to come out of the stereo gear, though no picture built up. "This is Station Dixie, Little Rock," a very tired southern voice said. "We need help very badly. Anyone who is listening, please pass on this message: Little Rock, Arkansas, is in the grip of a terrible epidemic. Notify the Red Cross. We have been in the hands of—" The voice trailed off, either from weakness or transmission failure.

I remembered to breathe. Mary patted my hand and I sat back, relaxing consciously. It was joy too great to be pleasure. I saw now that the green light had not been Little Rock, but further west, in Oklahoma. Two more lights blinked green, one in Nebraska and one north of the Canadian line. Another voice came over, a twangy New England voice; I wondered how he had gotten into Zone Red.

"A little like election night, eh, Chief?" Martinez said heartily.

"A little," the President agreed, "but we do not usually get returns from Old Mexico." He pointed to the board; green lights were showing in Chihuahua.

"By George, you're right. Well, I guess 'State' will have some incidents to straighten out when this is over, eh?"

The President did not answer and he shut up, to my relief. The President seemed to be talking to himself; he noticed me, smiled and spoke out loud:



*"Great fleas have little fleas  
Upon their back to bite 'em,  
And little fleas have lesser fleas,  
And so, ad infinitum."*

I smiled to be polite, though I thought the notion was gruesome, under the circumstances. The President looked away and said, "Would anyone like supper? I find that I am hungry, for the first time in days."

By late next afternoon the board was more green than red. Rexton had caused to be set up two annunciators keyed into the command center in the New Pentagon; one showed percentage of completion of the complicated score deemed necessary before the big drop; the other showed projected time of drop. The figures on it changed from time to time. For the past two hours they had been hovering around 17:43, east-coast time.

Rexton stood up. "I'm going to freeze it at seventeen forty-five," he announced. "Mr. President, will you excuse me?"

"Certainly, sir."

Rexton turned to Dad and myself. "If you Don Quixotes are still determined to go, now is the time."

I stood up. "Mary, you wait for me."

She asked, "Where?" It had been settled—and not peacefully!—that she was not to go.

The President interrupted. "I suggest that Mrs. Nivens stay here. After all, she is a member of the family."

I said, "Thank you, sir." Colonel Gibsy got a very odd look.

Two hours later we were coming in on our target and the jump door was open. Dad and I were last in line, after the kids who would do the real work. My hands were sweaty and I stunk with the old curtain-going-up stink. I was scared as hell—I never like to jump.



Gun in my left hand, antitoxin injector ready in my right, I went from door to door in my assigned block. It was an older section of Jefferson City, slums almost, consisting of apartment houses built fifty years ago. I had given two dozen injections and had three dozen to go before it would be time for me to rendezvous at the State House. I was getting sick of it.

I knew why I had come—it was not just curiosity; I wanted to see them *die!* I wanted to watch them die, see them dead, with a weary hate that passed all other needs. But now I had seen them dead and I wanted no more of it; I wanted to go home, take a bath, and forget it.

It was not hard work, just monotonous and nauseating. So far I had not seen one live slug, though I had seen many dead ones. I had burned one skulking dog that appeared to have a hump; I was not sure, as the light had been bad. We had hit shortly before sundown and now it was almost dark.

I finished checking the apartment building I was in, shouted to make sure, and went out into the street. It was almost deserted; with the whole population sick with the fever, we found few on the streets. The lone exception was a man who came weaving toward me, eyes vacant. I yelled, "Hey!"

He stopped. I said, "I've got what you need to get well. Hold out your arm."

He struck at me feebly. I hit him carefully and he went face down. Across his back was the red rash of the slug; I picked a reasonably clean and healthy patch over his kidney and stuck in the injector, bending it to break the point after it was in. The units were gas-loaded; nothing more was needed.

The first floor of the next house held seven people, most of them so far gone that I did not speak but simply gave them their shots and hurried on. I had no trouble. The second floor was like the first.

The top floor had three empty apartments, at one of which I had to burn out the lock to enter. The fourth flat was occupied, in



a manner of speaking. There was a dead woman on the floor of the kitchen, her head bashed in. Her slug was still on her shoulders, but merely resting there, for it was dead too. I left them quickly and looked around.

In the bathroom, sitting in an old-fashioned tub, was a middle-aged man. His head slumped on his chest and his wrist veins were open. I thought he was dead, but he looked up as I bent over him. "You're too late," he said dully. "I killed my wife."

Or too soon, I thought. From the appearance of the bottom of the tub, and judging by his gray face, five minutes later would have been better. I looked at him, wondering whether or not to waste an injection.

He spoke again. "My little girl——"

"You have a daughter?" I said loudly. "Where is she?"

His eyes flickered, but he did not speak. His head slumped forward again. I shouted at him, then felt his jaw line and dug my thumb into his neck, but could find no pulse.

The child was in bed in one of the rooms, a girl of eight or so who would have been pretty had she been well. She roused and cried and called me Daddy. "Yes, yes," I said soothingly, "Daddy's going to take care of you." I gave her the injection in her leg; I don't think she noticed it.

I turned to go, but she called out again, "I'm thirsty. Want a drink of water." So I had to go back into the bathroom again.

As I was giving it to her my phone shrilled and I spilled some of it. "Son! Can you hear me?"

I reached for my belt and switched on my phone. "Yes. What's up?"

"I'm in that little park just north of you. I'm in trouble."

"Coming!" I put down the glass and started to leave—then, caught by indecision, I turned back. I could not leave my new friend to wake up with a parent dead in each room. I gathered her up and stumbled down to the second floor. I entered the first door I came to and laid her on a sofa. There were people in the flat, too sick to bother with her, but it was all I could do.

"Hurry, son!"

"On my way!" I dashed out and wasted no more breath talking, but made speed. Dad's assignment was directly north of mine, paralleling it and fronting on one of those pint-sized downtown parks.



When I got around the block I did not see him at first and ran on past him.

"Here, son, over here—at the car!" This time I could hear him both through the phone and by bare ear. I swung around and spotted the car, a big Cadillac duo much like the Section often used. There was someone inside but it was too dark for me to see. I approached cautiously until I heard him say, "Thank God! I thought you would never come," and knew that it was he.

I had to duck to get in through the door. It was then that he clipped me.

I came to, to find my hands tied and my ankles as well. I was in the second driver's seat of the car, and the Old Man was in the other at the controls. The wheel on my side was latched up out of the way. The realization that the car was in the air brought me fully awake.

He turned and said cheerfully, "Feeling better?" I could see his slug, riding high on his shoulders.

"Some better," I admitted.

"Sorry I had to hit you," he went on, "but there was no other way."

"I suppose not."

"I'll have to leave you tied up for the present. Later on we can make better arrangements." He grinned, his old wicked grin. Most amazingly his own personality came through with every word the slug said.

I did not ask what "better arrangements" were possible; I did not want to know. I concentrated on checking my bonds—but the Old Man had given them his personal attention.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"South." He fiddled with the controls. "'Way south. Give me a moment to lay this heap in the groove and I will explain what's in store for us." He was busy for a few seconds, then said, "There—that will hold her until she levels off at thirty thousand."

The mention of that much altitude caused me to look at the control board. The duo did not merely look like one of the Section's cars; it actually *was* one of our souped-up jobs. "Where did you get this car?" I asked.

"The Section had it cached in Jefferson City. I looked and, sure enough, nobody had found it. Fortunate, wasn't it?"



There could be a second opinion, I thought, but I did not argue. I was still checking the possibilities—and finding them between slim and hopeless. My own gun was gone. He was probably carrying his on the side away from me; it was not in sight.

"But that was not the best of it," he went on; "I had the good luck to be captured by what was almost certainly the only healthy master in the whole of Jefferson City—not that I believe in luck. So we win after all." He chuckled. "It's like playing both sides of a very difficult chess game."

"You didn't tell me where we are going," I persisted. I was getting nowhere fast and talking was the only action open to me.

He considered. "Out of the United States, certainly. My master may be the only one free of nine-day fever in the whole continent, and I don't dare take a chance. I think the Yucatán peninsula would suit us—that's where I've got her pointed. We can hole up there and increase our numbers and work on south. When we do come back—and we will!—we won't make the same mistakes."

I said, "Dad, can't you take these ties off me? I am losing circulation. You know you can trust me."

"Presently, presently—all in good time. Wait until we go full automatic." The car was still climbing; souped up or not, thirty thousand was a long pull for a car that had started out as a family model.

I said, "You seem to forget that I was with the masters a long time. I know the score—and I give you my word of honor."

He grinned. "Don't teach grandma how to steal sheep. If I let you loose now, you'll kill me or I'll have to kill you. And I want you alive. We're going places, son—you and me. We're fast and we're smart and we're just what the doctor ordered."

I didn't have an answer. He went on, "Just the same—about you knowing the score. Why didn't you tell me, son? Why did you hold out on me?"

"Huh?"

"You didn't tell me how it felt. Son, I had no idea that a man could feel such peace and contentment and well-being. This is the happiest I've been in years, the happiest since—" He looked puzzled, then went on, "—since your mother died. But never mind that; this is better. You should have told me."

Disgust suddenly poured over me; I forgot the cautious game I was playing. "Maybe I didn't see it that way. And neither would



you, you old fool, if you didn't have a slug riding you, talking through your mouth, thinking with your brain!"

"Take it easy, son," he said gently—and, so help me, his voice *did* soothe me. "You'll know better soon. Believe me, this is what we were intended for; this is our destiny. Mankind has been divided, warring with himself. The masters will make him whole."

I thought to myself that there were probably custard heads just screwy enough to fall for such a line—surrender their souls willingly for a promise of security and peace. But I didn't say so.

"You needn't wait much longer," he said suddenly, glancing at the board. "I'll nail her down in the groove." He adjusted his dead-reckoner bug, checked his board, and set his controls. "Next stop: Yucatán. Now to work." He got out of the chair and knelt beside me in the crowded space. "Got to be safe," he said, as he strapped the safety belt across my middle.

I brought my knees up in his face.

He reared up and looked at me without anger. "Naughty, naughty. I could resent that—but the masters don't go in for resentment. Now be good." He went ahead, checking my wrists and feet. His nose was bleeding but he did not bother to wipe it. "You'll do," he said. "Be patient; it won't be long."

He went back to the other control seat, sat down and leaned forward, elbows on knees. It brought his master directly into my view.

Nothing happened for some minutes, nor could I think of anything to do other than strain at my bonds. By his appearance, the Old Man was asleep, but I placed no trust in that.

A line formed straight down the middle of the horny brown covering of the slug.

As I watched it, it widened. Presently I could see the opalescent horror underneath. The space between the two halves of the shell widened—and I realized that the slug was fissioning, sucking life and matter out of the body of my father to make two of itself.

I realized, too, with rigid terror, that I had no more than five minutes of individual life left to me. My new master was being born and soon would be ready to mount me.

Had it been possible for flesh and bone to break the ties on me I would have broken them. I did not succeed. The Old Man paid no attention to my struggles. I doubt if he was conscious; the slugs must surely give up some measure of control while occupied with



splitting. It must be that they simply immobilize the slave. As may be—the Old Man did not move.

By the time I had given up, worn out and sure that I could not break loose, I could see the silvery line down the center of the slug proper which means that fission is about to be complete. It was that which changed my line of reasoning, if there were reason left in my churning skull.

My hands were tied behind me, my ankles were tied, and I was belted tight across the middle to the chair. But my legs, even though fastened together, were free from my waist down. I slumped down to get even more reach and swung my legs up high. I brought them down smashing across the board—and set off every launching unit in her racks.

That adds up to a lot of g's. How many, I don't know, for I don't know how full her racks were. But there were plenty. We were both slammed back against the seats, Dad much harder than I was, since I was strapped down. He was thrown against the back of his seat, with his slug, open and helpless, crushed between the two masses.

It splashed.

Dad was caught in that terrible, total reflex, that spasm of every muscle that I had seen three times before. He bounced forward against the wheel, face contorted, fingers writhing.

The car dived.

I sat there and watched it dive, if you can call it sitting when you are held in place only by the belt. If Dad's body had not hopelessly fouled the controls, I might have been able to do something—gotten her headed up again perhaps—with my bound feet. I tried, but with no success at all. The controls were probably jammed as well as fouled.

The altimeter was clicking away busily. We had dropped to eleven thousand feet before I found time to glance at it. Then it was nine . . . seven . . . six—and we entered our last mile.

At fifteen hundred the radar interlock cut in and the nose units fired one at a time. The belt buffeted me across the stomach each time. I was thinking that I was saved, that now the ship would level off—though I should have known better, Dad being jammed up against the wheel as he was.

I was still thinking so as we crashed.



I came to by becoming slowly aware of a gently rocking motion. I was annoyed by it, I wanted it to stop; even a slight motion seemed to cause more pain than I could bear. I managed to get one eye open—the other would not open at all—and looked dully around for the source of my annoyance.

Above me was the floor of the car, but I stared at it for a long time before I placed it as such. By then I was somewhat aware of where I was and what had happened. I remembered the dive and the crash—and realized that we must have crashed not into the ground but into some body of water—the Gulf of Mexico? I did not really care.

With a sudden burst of grief I mourned my father.

My broken seat belt was flapping above me. My hands were still tied and so were my ankles, and one arm seemed to be broken. One eye was stuck shut and it hurt me to breathe; I quit taking stock of my injuries. Dad was no longer plastered against the wheel, and that puzzled me. With painful effort I rolled my head over to see the rest of the car with my one good eye. He was lying not far from me, three feet or so from my head to his. He was bloody and cold and I was sure that he was dead. I think it took me about a half hour to cross that three feet.

I lay face to face with him, almost cheek to cheek. So far as I could tell there was no trace of life, nor, from the odd and twisted way in which he lay, did it seem possible.

"Dad," I said hoarsely. Then I screamed it. "*Dad!*"

His eyes flickered but did not open. "Hello, son," he whispered. "Thanks, boy, thanks——" His voice died out.

I wanted to shake him, but all I could do was shout. "Dad! Wake up! Are you all right?"

He spoke again, as if every word was a painful task. "Your mother—said to tell you—she was—proud of you." His voice died out again and his breathing was labored in that ominous dry-stick sound.

"Dad," I sobbed, "don't die. I can't get along without you."

His eyes opened wide. "Yes, you can, son." He paused and labored, then added, "I'm hurt, boy." His eyes closed again.

I could not get any more out of him, though I shouted and screamed. Presently I laid my face against his and let my tears mix with the dirt and blood.



And now to clean up Titan!

We who are going are all writing these reports; if we do not come back, this is our legacy to free human beings—all that we know of how the titan parasites operate and what must be guarded against. For Kelly was right; there is no getting Humpty-Dumpty together again. In spite of the success of Schedule Mercy, there is no way to be sure that the slugs are all gone. Only last week a Kodiak bear was shot, up Yukon way, wearing a hump.

The human race will have to be always on guard, most especially about twenty-five years from now if we don't come back but the flying saucers do. We don't know why the titan monsters follow the twenty-nine-year-cycle of Saturn's "year," but they do. The reason may be simple; we ourselves have many cycles which match the Earth year. We hope that they are active only at one period of their "year"; if they are, Operation Vengeance may have easy pickings. Not that we are counting on it. I am going out, heaven help us, as an "applied psychologist (exotic)," but I am also a combat trooper, as is every one of us, from chaplain to cook. This is for keeps and we intend to show those slugs that they made the mistake of tangling with the toughest, meanest, deadliest, most unrelenting—and ablest—form of life in this section of space, a critter that can be killed but can't be tamed.

(I have a private hope that we will find some way to save the little elf creatures, the androgynes. I think we could get along with the elves.)

Whether we make it or not, the human race has got to keep up its well-earned reputation for ferocity. The price of freedom is the willingness to do sudden battle, anywhere, any time, and with utter recklessness. If we did not learn that from the slugs, well—"Dinosaurs, move over! We are ready to become extinct!"

For who knows what dirty tricks may be lurking around this universe? The slugs may be simple and open and friendly compared with, let us say, the natives of the planets of Sirius. If this is just the opener, we had better learn from it for the main event. We



thought space was empty and that we were automatically the lords of creation; even after we "conquered" space we thought so, for Mars was already dead and Venus had not really gotten started. Well, if Man wants to be top dog—or even a respected neighbor—he'll have to fight for it. Beat the plowshares back into swords; the other was a maiden aunt's fancy.

Every one of us who is going has been possessed at least once. Only those who have been hagridden can know how tricky the slugs are, how constantly one must be on guard—or how deeply one must hate. The trip, they tell me, will take about twelve years, which will give Mary and me time to finish our honeymoon. Oh yes, Mary is going; most of us are married couples, and the single men are balanced by single women. Twelve years isn't a trip; it's a way of living.

When I told Mary that we were going to Saturn's moons, her single comment was, "Yes, dear."

We'll have time for two or three kids. As Dad says, "The race must go on, even if it doesn't know where."

This report is loose-jointed; it must be revised before it is transcribed. But I have put everything in, as I saw and felt it. War with another race is psychological war, not war of gadgets, and what I thought and felt may be more important than what I did.

I am now finishing this report in Space Station Beta, from which we will transship to U.N.S. *Avenger*. I will not have time to revise; this will have to go as is, for the historians to have fun with. We said good-bye to Dad last night at Pikes Peak Port. He corrected me. "So long, you mean. You'll be back and I intend to hang on, getting crankier and meaner every year, until you do."

I said I hoped so. He nodded. "You'll make it. You're too tough and mean to die. I've got a lot of confidence in you and the likes of you, son."

We are about to transship. I feel exhilarated. Puppet masters—the free men are coming to kill you!

*Death and Destruction!*



**DOUBLE STAR**



*To  
Henry  
and  
Catherine Kuttner*



# 1

If a man walks in dressed like a hick and acting as if he owned the place, he's a spaceman.

It is a logical necessity. His profession makes him feel like boss of all creation; when he sets foot dirtside he is slumming among the peasants. As for his sartorial inelegance, a man who is in uniform nine tenths of the time and is more used to deep space than to civilization can hardly be expected to know how to dress properly. He is a sucker for the alleged tailors who swarm around every spaceport peddling "ground outfits."

I could see that this big-boned fellow had been dressed by Omar the Tentmaker—padded shoulders that were too big to start with, shorts cut so that they crawled up his hairy thighs as he sat down, a ruffled chemise that might have looked well on a cow.

But I kept my opinion to myself and bought him a drink with my last half-Imperial, considering it an investment, spacemen being the way they are about money. "Hot jets!" I said as we touched glasses. He gave me a quick glance.

That was my initial mistake in dealing with Dak Broadbent. Instead of answering, "Clear space!" or, "Safe grounding!" as he should have, he looked me over and said softly, "A nice sentiment, but to the wrong man. I've never been out."

That was another good place to keep my mouth shut. Spacemen did not often come to the bar of Casa Mañana; it was not their sort of hotel and it's miles from the port. When one shows up in ground clothes, seeks a dark corner of the bar, and objects to being called a spaceman, that's *his* business. I had picked that spot myself so that I could see without being seen—I owed a little



money here and there at the time, nothing important but embarrassing. I should have assumed that he had his reasons, too, and respected them.

But my vocal cords lived their own life, wild and free. "Don't give me that, shipmate," I replied. "If you're a ground hog, I'm Mayor of Tycho City. I'll wager you've done more drinking on Mars," I added, noticing the cautious way he lifted his glass, a dead giveaway of low-gravity habits, "than you've ever done on Earth."

"Keep your voice down!" he cut in without moving his lips. "What makes you sure that I am a *voyageur*? You don't know me."

"Sorry," I said. "You can be anything you like. But I've got eyes. You gave yourself away the minute you walked in."

He said something under his breath. "How?"

"Don't let it worry you. I doubt if anyone else noticed. But I see things other people don't see." I handed him my card, a little smugly perhaps. There is only one Lorenzo Smythe, the One-Man Stock Company. Yes, I'm "The Great Lorenzo"—stereo, canned opera, legit—"Pantomimist and Mimicry Artist Extraordinary."

He read my card and dropped it into a sleeve pocket—which annoyed me; those cards had cost me money—genuine imitation hand engraving. "I see your point," he said quietly, "but what was wrong with the way I behaved?"

"I'll show you," I said. "I'll walk to the door like a ground hog and come back the way you walk. Watch." I did so, making the trip back in a slightly exaggerated version of his walk to allow for his untrained eye—feet sliding softly along the floor as if it were deck plates, weight carried forward and balanced from the hips, hands a trifle forward and clear of the body, ready to grasp.

There are a dozen other details which can't be set down in words; the point is you have to *be* a spaceman when you do it, with a spaceman's alert body and unconscious balance—you have to live it. A city man blunders along on smooth floors all his life, steady floors with Earth-normal gravity, and will trip over a cigarette paper, like as not. Not so a spaceman.

"See what I mean?" I asked, slipping back into my seat.

"I'm afraid I do," he admitted sourly. "Did I walk like that?"

"Yes."

"Hmm . . . Maybe I should take lessons from you."



"You could do worse," I admitted.

He sat there looking me over, then started to speak—changed his mind and wiggled a finger at the bartender to refill our glasses. When the drinks came, he paid for them, drank his, and slid out of his seat all in one smooth motion. "Wait for me," he said quietly.

With a drink he had bought sitting in front of me I could not refuse. Nor did I want to; he interested me. I liked him, even on ten minutes' acquaintance; he was the sort of big ugly-handsome galoot that women go for and men take orders from.

He threaded his way gracefully through the room and passed a table of four Martians near the door. I didn't like Martians. I did not fancy having a thing that looks like a tree trunk topped off by a sun helmet claiming the privileges of a man. I did not like the way they grew pseudo limbs; it reminded me of snakes crawling out of their holes. I did not like the fact that they could look all directions at once without turning their heads—if they had had heads, which of course they don't. And I could not *stand* their smell!

Nobody could accuse me of race prejudice. I didn't care what a man's color, race, or religion was. But men were men, whereas Martians were *things*. They weren't even animals to my way of thinking. I'd rather have had a wart hog around me any day. Permitting them in restaurants and bars used by men struck me as outrageous. But there was the Treaty, of course, so what could I do?

These four had not been there when I came in, or I would have whiffed them. For that matter, they certainly could not have been there a few moments earlier when I had walked to the door and back. Now there they were, standing on their pedestals around a table, pretending to be people. I had not even heard the air conditioning speed up.

The free drink in front of me did not attract me; I simply wanted my host to come back so that I could leave politely. It suddenly occurred to me that he had glanced over that way just before he had left so hastily and I wondered if the Martians had anything to do with it. I looked over at them, trying to see if they were paying attention to our table—but how could you tell what a Martian was looking at or what it was thinking? That was another thing I didn't like about them.



I sat there for several minutes fiddling with my drink and wondering what had happened to my spaceman friend. I had hoped that his hospitality might extend to dinner and, if we became sufficiently *simpatico*, possibly even to a small temporary loan. My other prospects were—I admit it!—slender. The last two times I had tried to call my agent his autosecretary had simply recorded the message, and unless I deposited coins in the door, my room would not open to me that night . . . That was how low my fortunes had ebbed: reduced to sleeping in a coin-operated cubicle.

In the midst of my melancholy ponderings a waiter touched me on the elbow. "Call for you, sir."

"Eh? Very well, friend, will you fetch an instrument to the table?"

"Sorry, sir, but I can't transfer it. Booth 12 in the lobby."

"Oh. Thank you," I answered, making it as warm as possible since I was unable to tip him. I swung wide around the Martians as I went out.

I soon saw why the call had not been brought to the table; No. 12 was a maximum-security booth, sight, sound, and scramble. The tank showed no image and did not clear even after the door locked behind me. It remained milky until I sat down and placed my face within pickup, then the opalescent clouds melted away and I found myself looking at my spaceman friend.

"Sorry to walk out on you," he said quickly, "but I was in a hurry. I want you to come at once to Room 2106 of the Eisenhower."

He offered no explanation. The Eisenhower is just as unlikely a hotel for spacemen as Casa Mañana. I could smell trouble. You don't pick up a stranger in a bar and then insist that he come to a hotel room—well, not one of the same sex, at least.

"Why?" I asked.

The spaceman got that look peculiar to men who are used to being obeyed without question; I studied it with professional interest—it's not the same as anger; it is more like a thundercloud just before a storm. Then he got himself in hand and answered quietly, "Lorenzo, there is no time to explain. Are you open to a job?"

"Do you mean a *professional* engagement?" I answered slowly. For a horrid instant I suspected that he was offering me . . . Well,



you know—a *job*. Thus far I had kept my professional pride intact, despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

"Oh, professional, of course!" he answered quickly. "This requires the best actor we can get."

I did not let my relief show in my face. It was true that I was ready for *any* professional work—I would gladly have played the balcony in *Romeo and Juliet*—but it does not do to be eager. "What is the nature of the engagement?" I asked. "My calendar is rather full."

He brushed it aside. "I can't explain over the phone. Perhaps you don't know it, but any scrambler circuit can be unscrambled—with the proper equipment. Shag over here fast!"

He was eager; therefore I could afford not to be eager. "Now really," I protested, "what do you think I am? A bellman? Or an untried juvenile anxious for the privilege of carrying a spear? *I am Lorenzo!*" I threw up my chin and looked offended. "What is your offer?"

"Uh . . . Damn it, I *can't* go into it over the phone. How much do you get?"

"Eh? You are asking my professional salary?"

"Yes, yes!"

"For a single appearance? Or by the week? Or an option contract?"

"Uh, never mind. What do you get by the day?"

"My minimum fee for a one-evening date is one hundred Imperials." This was simple truth. Oh, I have been coerced at times into paying some scandalous kickbacks, but the voucher never read less than my proper fee. A man has his standards. I'd rather starve.

"Very well," he answered quickly, "one hundred Imperials in cash, laid in your hand the minute you show up here. But hurry!"

"Eh?" I realized with sudden dismay that I could as easily have said two hundred, or even two fifty. "But I have not agreed to accept the engagement."

"Never mind that! We'll talk it over when you get here. The hundred is yours even if you turn us down. If you accept—well, call it bonus, over and above your salary. Now will you sign off and get over here?"

I bowed. "Certainly, sir. Have patience."

Fortunately the Eisenhower is not too far from the Casa, for I



did not even have a minimum for tube fare. However, although the art of strolling is almost lost, I savor it—and it gave me time to collect my thoughts. I was no fool; I was aware that when another man is too anxious to force money on one, it is time to examine the cards, for there is almost certainly something illegal, or dangerous, or both, involved in the matter. I was not unduly fussy about legality *qua* legality; I agreed with the Bard that the Law is often an idiot. But in the main I had stayed on the right side of the street.

But presently I realized that I had insufficient facts, so I put it out of my mind, threw my cape over my right shoulder, and strode along, enjoying the mild autumn weather and the rich and varied odors of the metropolis. On arrival I decided to forego the main entrance and took a bounce tube from the sub-basement to the twenty-first floor, I having at the time a vague feeling that this was not the place to let my public recognize me. My *voyageur* friend let me in. "You took long enough," he snapped.

"Indeed?" I let it go at that and looked around me. It was an expensive suite, as I had expected, but it was littered and there were at least a dozen used glasses and as many coffee cups scattered here and there; it took no skill to see that I was merely the latest of many visitors. Sprawled on a couch, scowling at me, was another man, whom I tabbed tentatively as a spaceman. I glanced inquiringly but no introduction was offered.

"Well, you're here, at least. Let's get down to business."

"Surely. Which brings to mind," I added, "there was mention of a bonus, or retainer."

"Oh, yes." He turned to the man on the couch. "Jock, pay him."

"For what?"

"*Pay him!*"

I now knew which one was boss—although, as I was to learn, there was usually little doubt when Dak Broadbent was in a room. The other fellow stood up quickly, still scowling, and counted out to me a fifty and five tens. I tucked it away casually without checking it and said, "I am at your disposal, gentlemen."

The big man chewed his lip. "First, I want your solemn oath not even to talk in your sleep about this job."

"If my simple word is not good, is my oath better?" I glanced at the smaller man, slouched again on the couch. "I don't believe we have met. I am Lorenzo."



He glanced at me, looked away. My barroom acquaintance said hastily, "Names don't matter in this."

"No? Before my revered father died he made me promise him three things: first, never to mix whisky with anything but water; second, always to ignore anonymous letters; and lastly, never to talk with a stranger who refuses to give his name. Good day, sirs." I turned toward the door, their hundred Imperials warm in my pocket.

"Hold it!" I paused. He went on, "You are perfectly right. My name is——"

"*Skipper!*"

"Stow it, Jock. I'm Dak Broadbent; that's Jacques Dubois glaring at us. We're both *voyageurs*—master pilots, all classes, any acceleration."

I bowed. "Lorenzo Smythe," I said modestly, "jongleur and artist—care of The Lambs Club." I made a mental note to pay my dues.

"Good. Jock, try smiling for a change. Lorenzo, you agree to keep our business secret?"

"Under the rose. This is a discussion between gentlemen."

"Whether you take the job or not?"

"Whether we reach agreement or not. I am human, but, short of illegal methods of questioning, your confidences are safe with me."

"I am well aware of what neodexocaine will do to a man's forebrain, Lorenzo. We don't expect the impossible."

"Dak," Dubois said urgently, "this is a mistake. We should at least——"

"Shut up, Jock. I want no hypnotists around at this point. Lorenzo, we want you to do an impersonation job. It has to be so perfect that no one—I mean *no one*—will ever know it took place. Can you do that sort of a job?"

I frowned. "The first question is not 'Can I?' but 'Will I?' What are the circumstances?"

"Uh, we'll go into details later. Roughly, it is the ordinary doubling job for a well-known public figure. The difference is that the impersonation will have to be so perfect as to fool people who know him well and must see him close up. It won't be just reviewing a parade from a grandstand, or pinning medals on girl scouts." He looked at me shrewdly. "It will take a real artist."



"No," I said at once.

"Huh? You don't know anything about the job yet. If your conscience is bothering you, let me assure you that you will not be working against the interests of the man you will impersonate—nor against anyone's legitimate interests. This is a job that really needs to be done."

"No."

"Well, for Pete's sake, why? You don't even know how much we will pay."

"Pay is no object," I said firmly. "I am an actor, not a double."

"I don't understand you. There are lots of actors picking up spare money making public appearances for celebrities."

"I regard them as prostitutes, not colleagues. Let me make myself clear. Does an author respect a ghost writer? Would you respect a painter who allowed another man to sign his work—for *money*? Possibly the spirit of the artist is foreign to you, sir, yet perhaps I may put it in terms germane to your own profession. Would you, simply for *money*, be content to pilot a ship while some other man, not possessing your high art, wore the uniform, received the credit, was publicly acclaimed as the Master? Would you?"

Dubois snorted. "How much money?"

Broadbent frowned at him. "I think I understand your objection."

"To the artist, sir, kudos comes first. Money is merely the mundane means whereby he is enabled to create his art."

"Hmm . . . All right, so you won't do it just for money. Would you do it for other reasons? If you felt that it had to be done and you were the only one who could do it successfully?"

"I concede the possibility; I cannot imagine the circumstances."

"You won't have to imagine them; we'll explain them to you."

Dubois jumped up off the couch. "Now see here, Dak, you can't—"

"Cut it, Jock! He has to know."

"He doesn't have to know now—and here. And you haven't any right to jeopardize everybody else by telling him. You don't know a thing about him."

"It's a calculated risk." Broadbent turned back to me.

Dubois grabbed his arm, swung him around. "Calculated risk be damned! Dak, I've strung along with you in the past—but this



time before I'll let you shoot off your face, well, one or the other of us isn't going to be in any shape to talk."

Broadbent looked startled, then grinned coldly down at Dubois. "Think you're up to it, Jock old son?"

Dubois glared up at him, did not flinch. Broadbent was a head taller and outweighed him by twenty kilos. I found myself for the first time liking Dubois; I am always touched by the gallant audacity of a kitten, the fighting heart of a bantam cock, or the willingness of a little man to die in his tracks rather than knuckle under . . . And, while I did not expect Broadbent to kill him, I did think that I was about to see Dubois used as a dust rag.

I had no thought of interfering. Every man is entitled to elect the time and manner of his own destruction.

I could see tension grow. Then suddenly Broadbent laughed and clapped Dubois on the shoulder. "Good for you, Jock!" He turned to me and said quietly, "Will you excuse us a few moments? My friend and I must make heap big smoke."

The suite was equipped with a hush corner, enclosing the autograph and the phone. Broadbent took Dubois by the arm and led him over there; they stood and talked urgently.

Sometimes such facilities in public places like hotels are not all that they might be; the sound waves fail to cancel out completely. But the Eisenhower is a luxury house and in this case, at least, the equipment worked perfectly; I could see their lips move but I could hear no sound.

But I could indeed see their lips move. Broadbent's face was toward me and Dubois I could glimpse in a wall mirror. When I was performing in my famous mentalist act, I found out why my father had beaten my tail until I learned the silent language of lips—in my mentalist act I always performed in a brightly lighted hall and made use of spectacles which—but never mind; I could read lips.

Dubois was saying: "Dak, you bloody, stupid, unprintable, illegal and highly improbable obscenity, do you want us both to wind up counting rocks on Titan? This conceited pipsqueak will spill his guts."

I almost missed Broadbent's answer. Conceited indeed! Aside from a cold appreciation of my own genius I felt that I was a modest man.

Broadbent: ". . . doesn't matter if the game is crooked when it's the only game in town. Jock, there is nobody else we can use."



Dubois: "All right, then get Doc Scortia over here, hypnotize him, and shoot him the happy juice. But don't tell him the score—not until he's conditioned, not while we are still on dirt."

Broadbent: "Uh, Scortia himself told me that we could not depend on hypno and drugs, not for the performance we need. We've got to have his co-operation, his intelligent co-operation."

Dubois snorted. "What intelligence? Look at him. Ever see a rooster strutting through a barnyard? Sure, he's the right size and shape and his skull looks a good bit like the Chief—but there is nothing behind it. He'll lose his nerve, blow his top, and give the whole thing away. He can't play the part—he's just a ham actor!"

If the immortal Caruso had been charged with singing off key, he could not have been more affronted than I. But I trust I justified my claim to the mantle of Burbage and Booth at that moment; I went on buffing my nails and ignored it—merely noting that I would someday make friend Dubois both laugh and cry within the span of twenty seconds. I waited a few moments more, then stood up and approached the hush corner. When they saw that I intended to enter it, they both shut up. I said quietly, "Never mind, gentlemen, I have changed my mind."

Dubois looked relieved. "You don't want the job."

"I mean that I accept the engagement. You need not make explanations. I have been assured by friend Broadbent that the work is such as not to trouble my conscience—and I trust him. He has assured me that he needs an actor. But the business affairs of the producer are not my concern. I accept."

Dubois looked angry, but shut up. I expected Broadbent to look pleased and relieved; instead he looked worried. "All right," he agreed, "let's get on with it. Lorenzo, I don't know exactly how long we will need you. No more than a few days, I'm certain—and you will be on display only an hour or so once or twice in that time."

"That does not matter as long as I have time to study the role—the impersonation. But approximately how many days will you need me? I should notify my agent."

"Oh no! Don't do that."

"Well—how long? As much as a week?"

"It will be less than that—or we're sunk."

"Eh?"

"Never mind. Will a hundred Imperials a day suit you?"



I hesitated, recalling how easily he had met my minimum just to interview me—and decided this was a time to be gracious. I waved it aside. “Let’s not speak of such things. No doubt you will present me with an honorarium consonant with the worth of my performance.”

“All right, all right.” Broadbent turned away impatiently. “Jock, call the field. Then call Langston and tell him we’re starting Plan Mardi Gras. Synchronize with him. Lorenzo . . .” He motioned for me to follow and strode into the bath. He opened a small case and demanded, “Can you do anything with this junk?”

“Junk” it was—the sort of overpriced and unprofessional make-up kit that is sold over the counter to stage-struck youngsters. I stared at it with mild disgust. “Do I understand, sir, that you expect me to start an impersonation *now*? Without time for study?”

“Huh? No, no, no! I want you to change your face—on the outside chance that someone might recognize you as we leave here. That’s possible, isn’t it?”

I answered stiffly that being recognized in public was a burden that all celebrities were forced to carry. I did not add that it was certain that countless people would recognize The Great Lorenzo in any public place.

“Okay. So change your phiz so it’s not yours.” He left abruptly.

I sighed and looked over the child’s toys he had handed me, no doubt thinking they were the working tools of my profession—grease paints suitable for clowns, reeking spirit gum, crepe hair which seemed to have been raveled from Aunt Maggie’s parlor carpet. Not an ounce of Silicoflesh, no electric brushes, no modern amenities of any sort. But a true artist can do wonders with a burnt match, or oddments such as one might find in a kitchen—and his own genius. I arranged the lights and let myself fall into creative reverie.

There are several ways to keep a well-known face from being recognized. The simplest is misdirection. Place a man in uniform and his face is not likely to be noticed—do you recall the *face* of the last policeman you encountered? Could you identify him if you saw him next in mufti? On the same principle is the attention-going special feature. Equip a man with an enormous nose, disfigured perhaps with *acne rosacea*; the vulgar will stare in fascination at the nose itself, the polite will turn away—but neither will see the face.



I decided against this primitive maneuver because I judged that my employer wished me not to be noticed at all rather than remembered for an odd feature without being recognized. This is much more difficult; anyone can be conspicuous but it takes real skill not to be noticed. I needed a face as commonplace, as impossible to remember as the true face of the immortal Alec Guinness. Unfortunately my aristocratic features are entirely too distinguished, too handsome—a regrettable handicap for a character actor. As my father used to say, “Larry, you are too damned pretty! If you don’t get off your lazy duff and learn the business, you are going to spend fifteen years as a juvenile, under the mistaken impression that you are an actor—then wind up selling candy in the lobby. ‘Stupid’ and ‘pretty’ are the two worst vices in show business—and you’re *both*.”

Then he would take off his belt and stimulate my brain. Father was a practical psychologist and believed that warming the *glutei maximi* with a strap drew excess blood away from a boy’s brain. While the theory may have been shaky, the results justified the method; by the time I was fifteen I could stand on my head on a slack wire and quote page after page of Shakespeare and Shaw—or steal a scene simply by lighting a cigarette.

I was deep in the mood of creation when Broadbent stuck his face in. “Good grief!” he snapped. “Haven’t you done anything yet?”

I stared coldly. “I assumed that you wanted my best creative work—which cannot be hurried. Would you expect a *cordon bleu* to compound a new sauce on the back of a galloping horse?”

“Horses be damned!” He glanced at his watch finger. “You have six more minutes. If you can’t do anything in that length of time, we’ll just have to take our chances.”

Well! Of course I prefer to have plenty of time—but I had understudied my father in his quick-change creation, *The Assassination of Huey Long*, fifteen parts in seven minutes—and had once played it in nine seconds less time than he did. “Stay where you are!” I snapped back at him. “I’ll be with you at once.” I then put on “Benny Grey,” the colorless handy man who does the murders in *The House with No Doors*—two quick strokes to put dispirited lines into my cheeks from nose to mouth corners, a mere suggestion of bags under my eyes, and Factor’s #5 sallow over all, taking not more than twenty seconds for everything—I could have



done it in my sleep; *House* ran on boards for ninety-two performances before they recorded it.

Then I faced Broadbent and he gasped. "Good God! I don't believe it."

I stayed in "Benny Grey" and did not smile acknowledgment. What Broadbent could not realize was that the grease paint really was not necessary. It makes it easier, of course, but I had used a touch of it primarily because he expected it; being one of the yokels, he naturally assumed that make-up consisted of paint and powder.

He continued to stare at me. "Look here," he said in a hushed voice, "could you do something like that for *me*? In a hurry?"

I was about to say no when I realized that it presented an interesting professional challenge. I had been tempted to say that if my father had started in on him at five he might be ready now to sell cotton candy at a punkin' doin's, but I thought better of it. "You simply want to be sure that you will not be recognized?" I asked.

"Yes, yes! Can you paint me up, or give me a false nose, or something?"

I shook my head. "No matter what we did with make-up, it would simply make you look like a child dressed up for Trick or Treat. You can't act and you can never learn, at your age. We won't touch your face."

"Huh? But with this beak on me—"

"Attend me. Anything I could do to that lordly nose would just call attention to it, I assure you. Would it suffice if an acquaintance looked at you and said, 'Say, that big fellow reminds me of Dak Broadbent. It's not Dak, of course, but looks a little like him.' Eh?"

"Huh? I suppose so. As long as he was sure it wasn't me. I'm supposed to be on . . . Well, I'm not supposed to be on Earth just now."

"He'll be quite sure it is not you, because we'll change your walk. That's the most distinctive thing about you. If your walk is wrong, it cannot possibly be *you*—so it must be some other big-boned, broad-shouldered man who looks a bit like you."

"Okay, show me how to walk."

"No, you could never learn it. I'll force you to walk the way I want you to."



"How?"

"We'll put a handful of pebbles or the equivalent in the toes of your boots. That will force you back on your heels and make you stand up straight. It will be impossible for you to sneak along in that catfooted spaceman's crouch. Mmm . . . I'll slap some tape across your shoulder blades to remind you to keep your shoulders back, too. That will do it."

"You think they won't recognize me just because I'll walk differently?"

"Certain. An acquaintance won't know why he is sure it is not you, but the very fact that the conviction is subconscious and unanalyzed will put it beyond reach of doubt. Oh, I'll do a little something to your face, just to make you feel easier—but it isn't necessary."

We went back into the living room of the suite. I was still being "Benny Grey" of course; once I put on a role it takes a conscious effort of will to go back to being myself. Dubois was busy at the phone; he looked up, saw me, and his jaw dropped. He hurried out of the hush locus and demanded, "Who's *he*? And where's that actor fellow?" After his first glance at me, he had looked away and not bothered to look back—"Benny Grey" is such a tired, negligible little guy that there is no point in looking at him.

"What actor fellow?" I answered in Benny's flat, colorless tones. It brought Dubois' eyes back to me. He looked at me, started to look away, his eyes snapped back, then he looked at my clothes. Broadbent guffawed and clapped him on the shoulder.

"And *you* said he couldn't act!" He added sharply, "Did you get them all, Jock?"

"Yes." Dubois looked back at me, looked perplexed, and looked away.

"Okay. We've got to be out of here in four minutes. Let's see how fast you can get me fixed up, Lorenzo."

Dak had one boot off, his blouse off, and his chemise pulled up so that I could tape his shoulders when the light over the door came on and the buzzer sounded. He froze. "Jock? We expecting anybody?"

"Probably Langston. He said he was going to try to get over here before we left." Dubois started for the door.

"It might not be him. It might be—" I did not get to hear Broadbent say who he thought it might be as Dubois dilated the



door. Framed in the doorway, looking like a nightmare toadstool, was a Martian.

For an agony-stretched second I could see nothing but the Martian. I did not see the human standing behind him, nor did I notice the life wand the Martian cradled in his pseudo limb.

Then the Martian flowed inside, the man with him stepped in behind him, and the door relaxed. The Martian squeaked, "Good afternoon, gentlemen. Going somewhere?"

I was frozen, dazed, by acute xenophobia. Dak was handicapped by disarranged clothing. But little Jock Dubois acted with a simple heroism that made him my beloved brother even as he died'. . . He flung himself at that life wand. Right at it—he made no attempt to evade it.

He must have been dead, a hole burned through his belly you could poke a fist through, before he hit the floor. But he hung on and the pseudo limb stretched like taffy—then snapped, broken off a few inches from the monster's neck, and poor Jock still had the life wand cradled in his dead arms.

The human who had followed that stinking, reeking thing into the room had to step to one side before he could get in a shot—and he made a mistake. He should have shot Dak first, then me. Instead he wasted his first one on Jock and he never got a second one, as Dak shot him neatly in the face. I had not even known Dak was armed.

Deprived of his weapon, the Martian did not attempt to escape. Dak bounced to his feet, slid up to him, and said, "Ah, Rrringriil. I see you."

"I see you, Captain Dak Broadbent," the Martian squeaked, then added, "you will tell my nest?"

"I will tell your nest, Rrringriil."

"I thank you, Captain Dak Broadbent."

Dak reached out a long bony finger and poked it into the eye nearest him, shoving it on home until his knuckles were jammed against the brain case. He pulled it out and his finger was slimed with green ichor. The creature's pseudo limbs crawled back into its trunk in reflex spasm but the dead thing continued to stand firm on its base. Dak hurried into the bath; I heard him washing his hands. I stayed where I was, almost as frozen by shock as the late Rrringriil.

Dak came out, wiping his hands on his shirt, and said, "We'll



have to clean this up. There isn't much time." He could have been speaking of a spilled drink.

I tried to make clear in one jumbled sentence that I wanted no part of it, that we ought to call the cops, that I wanted to get away from there before the cops came, that he knew what he could do with his crazy impersonation job, and that I planned to sprout wings and fly out the window. Dak brushed it all aside. "Don't jitter, Lorenzo. We're on minus minutes now. Help me get the bodies into the bathroom."

"Huh? Good God, man! Let's just lock up and run for it. Maybe they will never connect us with it."

"Probably they wouldn't," he agreed, "since neither one of us is supposed to be here. But they would be able to see that Rrringriil had killed Jock—and we can't have *that*. Not now we can't."

"Huh?"

"We can't afford a news story about a Martian killing a human. So shut up and help me."

I shut up and helped him. It steadied me to recall that "Benny Grey" had been the worst of sadistic psychopaths, who had enjoyed dismembering his victims. I let "Benny Grey" drag the two human bodies into the bath while Dak took the life wand and sliced Rrringriil into pieces small enough to handle. He was careful to make the first cut below the brain case so the job was not messy, but I could not help him with it—it seemed to me that a dead Martian stank even worse than a live one.

The oubliette was concealed in a panel in the bath just beyond the bidet; if it had not been marked with the usual radiation trefoil it would have been hard to find. After we had shoved the chunks of Rrringriil down it (I managed to get my spunk up enough to help), Dak tackled the messier problem of butchering and draining the human corpses, using the wand and, of course, working in the bath tub.

It is amazing how much blood a man holds. We kept the water running the whole time; nevertheless, it was bad. But when Dak had to tackle the remains of poor little Jock, he just wasn't up to it. His eyes flooded with tears, blinding him, so I elbowed him aside before he sliced off his own fingers and let "Benny Grey" take over.

When I had finished and there was nothing left to show that there had ever been two other men and a monster in the suite, I



sluiced out the tub carefully and stood up. Dak was in the doorway, looking as calm as ever. "I've made sure the floor is tidy," he announced. "I suppose a criminologist with proper equipment could reconstruct it—but we are counting on no one ever suspecting. So let's get out of here. We've got to gain almost twelve minutes somehow. Come on!"

I was beyond asking where or why. "All right. Let's fix your boots."

He shook his head. "It would slow me up. Right now speed is more essential than not being recognized."

"I am in your hands." I followed him to the door; he stopped and said, "There may be others around. If so, shoot first—there's nothing else you can do." He had the life wand in his hand, with his cloak drawn over it.

"Martians?"

"Or men. Or both."

"Dak? Was Rrringriil one of those four at the Mañana bar?"

"Certainly. Why do you think I went around Robinson's barn to get you out of there and over here? They either tailed you, as we did, or they tailed me. Didn't you recognize him?"

"Heavens, no! Those monsters all look alike to me."

"And *they* say *we* all look alike. The four were Rrringriil, his conjugate-brother Rrringlath, and two others from his nest, of divergent lines. But shut up. If you see a Martian, shoot. You have the other gun?"

"Uh, yes. Look, Dak, I don't know what this is all about. But as long as those beasts are against you, I'm with you. I despise Martians."

He looked shocked. "You don't know what you are saying. We're not fighting Martians; those four are renegades."

"Huh?"

"There are lots of good Martians—almost all of them. Shucks, even Rrringriil wasn't a bad sort in most ways—I've had many a fine chess game with him."

"What? In that case, I'm——"

"Stow it. You're in too deep to back out. Now quick-march, straight to the bounce tube. I'll cover our rear."

I shut up. I was in much too deep—that was unarguable.

We hit the sub-basement and went at once to the express tubes. A two-passenger capsule was just emptying; Dak shoved me in so



quickly that I did not see him set the control combination. But I was hardly surprised when the pressure let up from my chest and I saw the sign blinking JEFFERSON SKYPORT—*All Out*.

Nor did I care what station it was as long as it was as far as possible from Hotel Eisenhower. The few minutes we had been crammed in the vactube had been long enough for me to devise a plan—sketchy, tentative, and subject to change without notice, as the fine print always says, but a plan. It could be stated in two words: Get lost!

Only that morning I would have found the plan very difficult to execute; in our culture a man with no money at all is baby-helpless. But with a hundred slugs in my pocket I could go far and fast. I felt no obligation to Dak Broadbent. For reasons of his own—not *my* reasons!—he had almost got me killed, then had crowded me into covering up a crime, made me a fugitive from justice. But we had evaded the police, temporarily at least, and now, simply by shaking off Broadbent, I could forget the whole thing, shelve it as a bad dream. It seemed most unlikely that I could be connected with the affair even if it were discovered—fortunately a gentleman always wears gloves, and I had had mine off only to put on make-up and later during that ghastly house cleaning.

Aside from the warm burst of adolescent heroics I had felt when I thought Dak was fighting Martians I had no interest in his schemes—and even that sympathy had shut off when I found that he liked Martians in general. His impersonation job I would not now touch with the proverbial eleven-foot pole. To hell with Broadbent! All I wanted out of life was money enough to keep body and soul together and a chance to practice my art; cops-and-robbers nonsense did not interest me—poor theater at best.

Jefferson Port seemed handmade to carry out my scheme. Crowded and confused, with express tubes spiderwebbing from it, in it, if Dak took his eyes off me for half a second I would be half-way to Omaha. I would lie low a few weeks, then get in touch with my agent and find out if any inquiries had been made about me.

Dak saw to it that we climbed out of the capsule together, else I would have slammed it shut and gone elsewhere at once. I pretended not to notice and stuck close as a puppy to him as we went up the belt to the main hall just under the surface, coming out between the Pan-Am desk and American Skylines. Dak headed



straight across the waiting-room floor toward Diana, Ltd., and I surmised that he was going to buy tickets for the Moon shuttle—how he planned to get me aboard without passport or vaccination certificate I could not guess but I knew that he was resourceful. I decided that I would fade into the furniture while he had his wallet out; when a man counts money there are at least a few seconds when his eyes and attention are fully occupied.

But we went right on past the Diana desk and through an archway marked *Private Berths*. The passageway beyond was not crowded and the walls were blank; I realized with dismay that I had let slip my best chance, back there in the busy main hall. I held back. "Dak? Are we making a jump?"

"Of course."

"Dak, you're crazy. I've got no papers, I don't even have a tourist card for the Moon."

"You won't need them."

"Huh? They'll stop me at 'Emigration.' Then a big, beefy cop will start asking questions."

A hand about the size of a cat closed on my upper arm. "Let's not waste time. Why should you go through 'Emigration,' when officially you aren't leaving? And why should I, when officially I never arrived? Quick-march, old son."

I am well muscled and not small, but I felt as if a traffic robot were pulling me out of a danger zone. I saw a sign reading MEN and I made a desperate attempt to break it up. "Dak, half a minute, please. Got to see a man about the plumbing."

He grinned at me. "Oh, yes? You went just before we left the hotel." He did not slow up or let go of me.

"Kidney trouble——"

"Lorenzo old son, I smell a case of cold feet. Tell you what I'll do. See that cop up ahead?" At the end of the corridor, in the private berths station, a defender of the peace was resting his big feet by leaning over a counter. "I find I have a sudden attack of conscience. I feel a need to confess—about how you killed a visiting Martian and two local citizens—about how you held a gun on me and forced me to help you dispose of the bodies. About——"

"You're crazy!"

"Almost out of my mind with anguish and remorse, shipmate."

"But—you've got nothing on me."

"So? I think my story will sound more convincing than yours. I



know what it is all about and you don't. I know all about you and you know nothing about me. For example . . ." He mentioned a couple of details in my past that I would have sworn were buried and forgotten. All right, so I did have a couple of routines useful for stag shows that are not for the family trade—a man has to eat. But that matter about Bebe; that was hardly fair, for I certainly had not known that she was underage. As for that hotel bill, while it is true that bilking an "innkeeper" in Miami Beach carries much the same punishment as armed robbery elsewhere, it is a very provincial attitude—I would have paid if I had had the money. As for that unfortunate incident in Seattle—well, what I am trying to say is that Dak did know an amazing amount about my background but he had the wrong slant on most of it. Still . . .

"So," he continued, "let's walk right up to yon gendarme and make a clean breast of it. I'll lay you seven to two as to which one of us is out on bail first."

So we marched up to the cop and on past him. He was talking to a female clerk back of the railing and neither one of them looked up. Dak took out two tickets reading, GATE PASS—MAINTENANCE PERMIT—Berth K-127, and stuck them into the monitor. The machine scanned them, a transparency directed us to take an upper-level car, code King 127; the gate let us through and locked behind us as a recorded voice said, "Watch your step, please, and heed radiation warnings. The Terminal Company is not responsible for accidents beyond the gate."

Dak punched an entirely different code in the little car; it wheeled around, picked a track, and we took off out under the field. It did not matter to me, I was beyond caring.

When we stepped out of the little car it went back where it came from. In front of me was a ladder disappearing into the steel ceiling above. Dak nudged me. "Up you go." There was a scuttle hole at the top and on it a sign: RADIATION HAZARD—Optimax 13 Seconds. The figures had been chalked in. I stopped. I have no special interest in offspring but I am no fool. Dak grinned and said, "Got your lead britches on? Open it, go through at once and straight up the ladder into the ship. If you don't stop to scratch, you'll make it with at least three seconds to spare."

I believe I made it with five seconds to spare. I was out in the sunlight for about ten feet, then I was inside a long tube in the ship. I used about every third rung.



The rocket ship was apparently small. At least the control room was quite cramped; I never got a look at the outside. The only other spaceships I had ever been in were the Moon shuttles *Evangeline* and her sister ship the *Gabriel*, that being the year in which I had incautiously accepted a lunar engagement on a co-op basis—our impresario had had a notion that a juggling, tightrope, and acrobatic routine would go well in the one-sixth gee of the Moon, which was correct as far as it went, but he had not allowed rehearsal time for us to get used to low gravity. I had to take advantage of the Distressed Travelers Act to get back and I had lost my wardrobe.

There were two men in the control room; one was lying in one of three acceleration couches fiddling with dials, the other was making obscure motions with a screw driver. The one in the couch glanced at me, said nothing. The other one turned, looked worried, then said past me, "What happened to Jock?"

Dak almost levitated out of the hatch behind me. "No time!" he snapped. "Have you compensated for his mass?"

"Yes."

"Red, is she taped? Tower?"

The man in the couch answered lazily, "I've been recomputing every two minutes. You're clear with the tower. Minus forty-, uh, seven seconds."

"Out of that bunk! Scram! I'm going to catch that tick!"

Red moved lazily out of the couch as Dak got in. The other man shoved me into the copilot's couch and strapped a safety belt across my chest. He turned and dropped down the escape tube. Red followed him, then stopped with his head and shoulders out. "Tickets, please!" he said cheerfully.

"Oh, cripes!" Dak loosened a safety belt, reached for a pocket, got out the two field passes we had used to sneak aboard, and shoved them at him.

"Thanks," Red answered. "See you in church. Hot jets, and so forth." He disappeared with leisurely swiftness; I heard the air lock close and my eardrums popped. Dak did not answer his farewell; his eyes were busy on the computer dials and he made some minor adjustment.

"Twenty-one seconds," he said to me. "There'll be no run-down. Be sure your arms are inside and that you are relaxed. The first step is going to be a honey."



I did as I was told, then waited, for *hours* in that curtain-going-up tension. Finally I said, "Dak?"

"Shut up!"

"Just one thing: where are we going?"

"Mars." I saw his thumb jab at a red button and I blacked out.

## 2

What is so funny about a man being dropsick? Those dolts with cast-iron stomachs always laugh—I'll bet they would laugh if Grandma broke both legs.

I was spacesick, of course, as soon as the rocket ship quit blasting and went into free fall. I came out of it fairly quickly as my stomach was practically empty—I'd eaten nothing since breakfast—and was simply wanly miserable the remaining eternity of that awful trip. It took us an hour and forty-three minutes to make rendezvous, which is roughly equal to a thousand years in purgatory to a ground hog like myself.

I'll say this for Dak, though: he did not laugh. Dak was a professional and he treated my normal reaction with the impersonal good manners of a flight nurse—not like those flat-headed, loud-voiced jackasses you'll find on the passenger list of a Moon shuttle. If I had my way, those healthy self-panickers would be spaced in mid-orbit and allowed to laugh themselves to death in vacuum.

Despite the turmoil in my mind and the thousand questions I wanted to ask we had almost made rendezvous with a torchship, which was in parking orbit around Earth, before I could stir up interest in anything. I suspect that if one were to inform a victim of spacesickness that he was to be shot at sunrise his own answer would be, "Yes? Would you hand me that sack, please?"

But I finally recovered to the point where instead of wanting very badly to die the scale had tipped so that I had a flickering, halfhearted interest in continuing to live. Dak was busy most of the time at the ship's communicator, apparently talking on a very tight beam for his hands constantly nursed the directional control like a gunner laying a gun under difficulties. I could not hear what he said, or even read his lips, as he had his face pushed into the



rumble box. I assumed that he was talking to the long-jump ship we were to meet.

But when he pushed the communicator aside and lit a cigarette I repressed the stomach retch that the mere sight of tobacco smoke had inspired and said, "Dak, isn't it about time you told me the score?"

"Plenty of time for that on our way to Mars."

"Huh? Damn your arrogant ways," I protested feebly. "I don't want to go to Mars. I would never have considered your crazy offer if I had known it was on Mars."

"Suit yourself. You don't have to go."

"Eh?"

"The air lock is right behind you. Get out and walk. Mind you close the door."

I did not answer the ridiculous suggestion. He went on, "But if you can't breathe space the easiest thing to do is to go to Mars—and I'll see that you get back. The *Can Do*—that's this bucket—is about to rendezvous with the *Go For Broke*, which is a high-gee torchship. About seventeen seconds and a gnat's wink after we make contact the *Go For Broke* will torch for Mars—for we've got to be there by Wednesday."

I answered with the petulant stubbornness of a sick man. "I'm not going to Mars. I'm going to stay right in this ship. Somebody has to take it back and land it on Earth. You can't fool me."

"True," Broadbent agreed. "But you won't be in it. The three blokes who are supposed to be in this ship—according to the records back at Jefferson Field—are in the *Go For Broke* right now. This is a three-man ship, as you've noticed. I'm afraid you will find them stuffy about giving up a place to you. And besides, how would you get back through 'Immigration'?"

"I don't care! I'd be back on ground."

"And in jail, charged with everything from illegal entry to mopey and dopey in the spaceways. At the very least they would be sure that you were smuggling and they would take you to some quiet back room and run a needle in past your eyeball and find out just what you were up to. They would know what questions to ask and you wouldn't be able to keep from answering. But you wouldn't be able to implicate me, for good old Dak Broadbent hasn't been back to Earth in quite a spell and has unimpeachable witnesses to prove it."



I thought about it sickly, both from fear and the continuing effects of spacesickness. "So you would tip off the police? You dirty, slimy—" I broke off for lack of an adequately insulting noun.

"Oh no! Look, old son, I might twist your arm a bit and let you think that I would cry copper—but I never would. But Rrringriil's conjugate-brother Rrringlath certainly knows that old 'Gril' went in that door and failed to come out. He will tip off the noises. Conjugate-brother is a relationship so close that we will never understand it, since we don't reproduce by fission."

I didn't care whether Martians reproduced like rabbits or the stork brought them in a little black bag. The way he told it I could never go back to Earth, and I said so. He shook his head. "Not at all. Leave it to me and we will slide you back in as neatly as we slid you out. Eventually you will walk off that field or some other field with a gate pass which shows that you are a mechanic who has been making some last-minute adjustment—and you'll have greasy coveralls and a tool kit to back it up. Surely an actor of your skill can play the part of a mechanic for a few minutes?"

"Eh? Why, certainly! But—"

"There you are! You stick with ol' Doc Dak; he'll take care of you. We shuffled eight guild brothers in this current caper to get me on Earth and both of us off; we can do it again. But you would not stand a chance without *voyageurs* to help you." He grinned. "Every *voyageur* is a free trader at heart. The art of smuggling being what it is, we are all of us always ready to help out one another in a little innocent deception of the port guards. But a person outside the lodge does not ordinarily get such co-operation."

I tried to steady my stomach and think about it. "Dak, is this a smuggling deal? Because—"

"Oh no! Except that we are smuggling *you*."

"I was going to say that I don't regard smuggling as a crime."

"Who does? Except those who make money off the rest of us by limiting trade. But this is a straight impersonation job, Lorenzo, and you are the man for it. It wasn't an accident that I ran across you in the bar; there had been a tail on you for two days. As soon as I hit dirt I went where you were." He frowned. "I wish I could be sure our honorable antagonists had been following *me*, and not you."

"Why?"



"If they were following me they were trying to find out what I was after—which is okay, as the lines were already drawn; we knew we were mutual enemies. But if they were following *you*, then they *knew* what I was after—an actor who could play the role."

"But how could they know that? Unless you told them?"

"Lorenzo, this thing is big, much bigger than you imagine. I don't see it all myself—and the less you know about it until you must, the better off you are. But I can tell you this: a set of personal characteristics was fed into the big computer at the System Census Bureau at The Hague and the machine compared them with the personal characteristics of every male professional actor alive. It was done as discreetly as possible but somebody might have guessed—and talked. The specifications amounted to identification both of the principal and the actor who could double for him, since the job had to be *perfect*."

"Oh. And the machine told you that I was the man for it?"

"Yes. You—and one other."

This was another good place for me to keep my mouth shut. But I could not have done so if my life had depended on it—which in a way it did. I just had to know who the other actor was who was considered competent to play a role which called for my unique talents. "This other one? Who is he?"

Dak looked me over; I could see him hesitate. "Mmm—fellow by the name of Orson Trowbridge. Know him?"

"*That* ham!" For a moment I was so furious that I forgot my nausea.

"So? I hear that he is a very good actor."

I simply could not help being indignant at the idea that anyone should even think about that oaf Trowbridge for a role for which I was being considered. "That arm-waver! That word-mouther!" I stopped, realizing that it was more dignified to ignore such colleagues—if the word fits. But that popinjay was so conceited that—well, if the role called for him to kiss a lady's hand, Trowbridge would fake it by kissing his own thumb instead. A narcissist, a poseur, a double fake—how could such a man *live* a role?

Yet such is the injustice of fortune that his sawings and rantings had paid him well while real artists went hungry.

"Dak, I simply cannot see why you considered him for it."

"Well, we didn't want him; he is tied up with some long-term



contract that would make his absence conspicuous and awkward. It was lucky for us that you were—uh, 'at liberty.' As soon as you agreed to the job I had Jock send word to call off the team that was trying to arrange a deal with Trowbridge."

"I should think so!"

"But—see here, Lorenzo, I'm going to lay it on the line. While you were busy whooping your cookies after *Brennschluss* I called the *Go For Broke* and told them to pass the word down to get busy on Trowbridge again."

"What?"

"You asked for it, shipmate. See here, a man in my racket contracts to herd a heap to Ganymede, that means he will pilot that pot to Ganymede or die trying. He doesn't get fainthearted and try to welsh while the ship is being loaded. You told me you would take this job—no 'ifs' or 'ands' or 'buts'—you took the job. A few minutes later there is a fracas; you lose your nerve. Later you try to run out on me at the field. Only ten minutes ago you were screaming to be taken back dirtside. Maybe you are a better actor than Trowbridge. I wouldn't know. But I know we need a man who can be depended on not to lose his nerve when the time comes. I understand that Trowbridge is that sort of bloke. So if we can get him, we'll use him instead, pay you off and tell you nothing and ship you back. Understand?"

Too well I understood. Dak did not use the word—I doubt if he would have understood it—but he was telling me that I was not a trouper. The bitter part about it was that he was justified. I could not be angry; I could only be ashamed. I had been an idiot to accept the contract without knowing more about it—but I had agreed to play the role, without conditions or escape clauses. Now I was trying to back out, like a rank amateur with stage fright.

"The show must go on" is the oldest tenet of show business. Perhaps it has no philosophical verity, but the things men live by are rarely subject to logical proof. My father had believed it—I had seen him play two acts with a burst appendix and then take his bows before he had let them rush him to a hospital. I could see his face now, looking at me with the contempt of a trouper for a so-called actor who would let an audience down.

"Dak," I said humbly, "I am very sorry. I was wrong."

He looked at me sharply. "You'll do the job?"

"Yes." I meant it sincerely. Then I suddenly remembered a fac-



tor which could make the part as impossible for me as the role of Snow White in *The Seven Dwarfs*. "That is—well, *I want to*. But——"

"But what?" he said scornfully. "More of your damned temperament?"

"No, no! But you said we were going to Mars. Dak, am I going to be expected to do this impersonation with Martians around me?"

"Eh? Of course. How else on Mars?"

"Uh . . . But, Dak, I can't *stand* Martians! They give me the heebie jeebies. I wouldn't want to—I would try not to—but I might fall right out of the characterization."

"Oh. If that is all that is worrying you, forget it."

"Huh? But I can't forget it. I can't help it. I——"

"I said, 'Forget it.' Old son, we knew you were a peasant in such matters—we know all about you. Lorenzo, your fear of Martians is as childish and irrational as a fear of spiders or snakes. But we had anticipated it and it will be taken care of. So forget it."

"Well—all right." I was not much reassured, but he had flicked me where it hurt. "Peasant"—why, "*peasants*" were the audience! So I shut up.

Dak pulled the communicator to him, did not bother to silence his message with the rumble box: "Dandelion to Tumbleweed—cancel Plan Inkblot. We will complete Mardi Gras."

"Dak?" I said as he signed off.

"Later," he answered. "I'm about to match orbits. The contact may be a little rough, as I am not going to waste time worrying about chuck holes. So pipe down and hang on."

And it *was* rough. By the time we were in the torchship I was glad to be comfortably back in free fall again; surge nausea is even worse than everyday dropsickness. But we did not stay in free fall more than five minutes; the three men who were to go back in the *Can Do* were crowding into the transfer lock even as Dak and I floated into the torchship. The next few moments were extremely confused. I suppose I am a ground hog at heart for I disorient very easily when I can't tell the floor from the ceiling. Someone called out, "Where is he?" Dak replied, "Here!" The same voice replied, "Him?" as if he could not believe his eyes.

"Yes, yes!" Dak answered. "He's got make-up on. Never mind, it's all right. Help me get him into the cider press."



A hand grabbed my arm, towed me along a narrow passage and into a compartment. Against one bulkhead and flat to it were two bunks, or "cider presses," the bathtub-shaped, hydraulic, pressure-distribution tanks used for high acceleration in torchships. I had never seen one before but we had used quite convincing mock-ups in the space opus *The Earth Raiders*.

There was a stenciled sign on the bulkhead behind the bunks: *WARNING!!! Do Not Take More than Three Gravities without a Gee Suit. By Order of—* I rotated slowly out of range of vision before I could finish reading it and someone shoved me into one cider press. Dak and the other men were hurriedly strapping me against it when a horn somewhere near by broke into a horrid hooting. It continued for several seconds, then a voice replaced it: "Red warning! Two gravities! Three minutes! Red warning! Two gravities! Three minutes!" Then the hooting started again.

Through the racket I heard Dak ask urgently, "Is the projector all set? The tapes ready?"

"Sure, sure!"

"Got the hypo?" Dak squirmed around in the air and said to me, "Look, shipmate, we're going to give you a shot. It's all right. Part of it is Nullgrav, the rest is a stimulant—for you are going to have to stay awake and study your lines. It will make your eyeballs feel hot at first and it may make you itch, but it won't hurt you."

"Wait, Dak, I—"

"No time! I've got to smoke this scrap heap!" He twisted and was out the door before I could protest. The second man pushed up my left sleeve, held an injection gun against the skin, and I had received the dose before I knew it. Then he was gone. The hooting gave way to: "Red warning! Two gravities! Two minutes!"

I tried to look around but the drug made me even more confused. My eyeballs did feel hot and my teeth as well and I began to feel an almost intolerable itching along my spine—but the safety straps kept me from reaching the tortured area—and perhaps kept me from breaking an arm at acceleration. The hooting stopped again and this time Dak's self-confident baritone boomed out, "Last red warning! Two gravities! One minute! Knock off those pinochle games and spread your fat carcasses—we're goin' to smoke!" The hooting was replaced this time by a recording of Arkezian's *Ad Astra*, opus 61 in C major. It was the controversial



London Symphony version with the 14-cycle "scare" notes buried in the timpani. Battered, bewildered, and doped as I was, they seemed to have no effect on me—you can't wet a river.

A mermaid came in the door. No scaly tail, surely, but a mermaid is what she looked like. When my eyes refocused I saw that it was a very likely looking and adequately mammalian young woman in singlet and shorts, swimming along head first in a way that made clear that free fall was no novelty to her. She glanced at me without smiling, placed herself against the other cider press, and took hold of the hand grips—she did not bother with safety belts. The music hit the rolling finale and I felt myself grow very heavy.

Two gravities is not bad, not when you are floating in a liquid bed. The skin over the top of the cider press pushed up around me, supporting me inch by inch; I simply felt heavy and found it hard to breathe. You hear these stories about pilots torching at ten gravities and ruining themselves and I have no doubt that they are true—but two gravities, taken in the cider press, simply makes one feel languid, unable to move.

It was some time before I realized that the horn in the ceiling was speaking to me. "Lorenzo! How are you doing, shipmate?"

"All right." The effort made me gasp. "How long do we have to put up with this?"

"About two days."

I must have moaned, for Dak laughed at me. "Quit bellyaching, chum! My first trip to Mars took thirty-seven weeks, every minute of it free fall in an elliptical orbit. You're taking the luxury route, at a mere double gee for a couple of days—with a one-gee rest at turnover, I might add. We ought to charge you for it."

I started to tell him what I thought of his humor in scathing green-room idiom, then recalled that there was a lady present. My father had taught me that a woman will forgive any action, up to and including assault with violence, but is easily insulted by language; the lovelier half of our race is symbol-oriented—very strange, in view of their extreme practicality. In any case, I have never let a taboo word pass my lips when it might offend the ears of a lady since the time I last received the back of my father's hard hand full on my mouth . . . Father could have given Professor Pavlov pointers in reflex conditioning.

But Dak was speaking again. "Penny! You there, honey chile?"



"Yes, Captain," the young woman with me answered.

"Okay, start him on his homework. I'll be down when I have this firetrap settled in its groove."

"Very well, Captain." She turned her head toward me and said in a soft, husky, contralto voice, "Dr. Capek wants you simply to relax and look at movies for several hours. I am here to answer questions as necessary."

I sighed. "Thank goodness someone is at last going to answer questions!"

She did not answer, but raised an arm with some difficulty and passed it over a switch. The lights in the compartment died out and a sound and stereo image built up in front of my eyes. I recognized the central figure—just as any of the billions of citizens of the Empire would have recognized him—and I realized at last how thoroughly and mercilessly Dak Broadbent had tricked me.

It was Bonforte.

*The* Bonforte, I mean—the Right Honorable John Joseph Bonforte, former Supreme Minister, leader of the loyal opposition, and head of the Expansionist coalition—the most loved (and the most hated!) man in the entire Solar System.

My astonished mind made a standing broad jump and arrived at what seemed a logical certainty. Bonforte had lived through at least three assassination attempts—or so the news reports would have us believe. At least two of his escapes had seemed almost miraculous. Suppose they were not miraculous? Suppose they had all been successful—but dear old Uncle Joe Bonforte had always been somewhere else at the time?

You could use up a lot of actors that way.

### 3

I had never meddled in politics. My father had warned against it. "Stay out of it, Larry," he had told me solemnly. "The publicity you get that way is bad publicity. The peasants don't like it." I had never voted—not even after the amendment of '98 made it easy for the floating population (which includes, of course, most members of the profession) to exercise franchise.



However, insofar as I had political leanings of any sort, they certainly did not lean toward Bonforte. I considered him a dangerous man and very possibly a traitor to the human race. The idea of standing up and getting killed in his place was—how shall I put it?—distasteful to me.

But—*what* a role!

I had once played the lead in *L'Aiglon* and I had played Caesar in the only two plays about him worthy of the name. But to play such a role *in life*—well, it is enough to make one understand how a man could go to the guillotine in another man's place—just for the chance to play, even for a few moments, the ultimately exacting role, in order to create the supreme, the perfect, work of art.

I wondered who my colleagues had been who had been unable to resist that temptation on those earlier occasions. They had been artists, that was certain—though their very anonymity was the only tribute to the success of their characterizations. I tried to remember just when the earlier attempts on Bonforte's life had taken place and which colleagues who might have been capable of the role had died or dropped out of sight at those times. But it was useless. Not only was I not too sure of the details of current political history but also actors simply fade out of view with depressing frequency; it is a chancy profession even for the best of us.

I found that I had been studying closely the characterization.

I realized I could play it. Hell, I could play it with one foot in a bucket and a smell of smoke backstage. To begin with, there was no problem of physique; Bonforte and I could have swapped clothes without a wrinkle. These childish conspirators who had shanghaied me had vastly overrated the importance of physical resemblance, since it means nothing if not backed up by art—and need not be at all close if the actor is competent. But I admit that it does help and their silly game with the computer machine had resulted (quite by accident!) in selecting a true artist, as well as one who was in measurements and bony structure the twin of the politician. His profile was much like mine; even his hands were long, narrow, and aristocratic like mine—and hands are harder than faces.

That limp, supposedly the result of one of the attempts on his life—nothing to it! After watching him for a few minutes I knew that I could get up from that bed (at one gravity, that is) and walk in precisely the same way and never have to think about it.



The way he had of scratching his collarbone and then brushing his chin, the almost imperceptible tic which preceded each of his sentences—such things were no trouble; they soaked into my subconscious like water into sand.

To be sure, he was fifteen or twenty years older than I was, but it is easier to play a role older than oneself than one younger. In any case, age to an actor is simply a matter of inner attitude; it has nothing to do with the steady march of catabolism.

I could have played him on boards, or read a speech in his place, within twenty minutes. But this part, as I understood it, would be more than such an interpretation; Dak had hinted that I would have to convince people who knew him well, perhaps in intimate circumstances. This is surpassingly more difficult. Does he take sugar in his coffee? If so, how much? Which hand does he use to strike a cigarette and with what gesture? I got the answer to that one and planted it deep in my mind even as I phrased the question; the simulacrum in front of me struck a cigarette in a fashion that convinced me that he had used matches and the old-fashioned sort of gasper for years before he had gone along with the march of so-called progress.

Worst of all, a man is not a single complexity; he is a *different* complexity to every person who knows him—which means that, to be successful, an impersonation must change for each “audience”—for each acquaintance of the man being impersonated. This is not merely difficult; it is statistically impossible. Such little things could trip one up: What shared experiences does your principal have with acquaintance John Jones? With a hundred, or a thousand, John Joneses? How could an impersonator possibly know?

Acting *per se*, like all art, is a process of abstracting, of retaining only significant detail. But in impersonation *any* detail can be significant. In time, something as silly as not crunching celery could let the cat out of the bag.

Then I recalled with glum conviction that my performance probably need be convincing only long enough for a marksman to draw a bead on me.

But I was still studying the man I was to replace (what else could I do?) when the door opened and I heard Dak in his proper person call out, “Anybody home?” The lights came on, the three-dimensional vision faded, and I felt as if I had been wrenched from a dream. I turned my head; the young woman called Penny



was struggling to lift her head from the other hydraulic bed and Dak was standing braced in the doorway.

I looked at him and said wonderingly, "How do you manage to stand up?" Part of my mind, the professional part that works independently, was noting how he stood and filing it in a new drawer marked: "How a Man Stands under Two Gravities."

He grinned at me. "Nothing to it. I wear arch supports."

"Hmmmph!"

"You can stand up, if you want to. Ordinarily we discourage passengers from getting out of the boost tanks when we are torching at anything over one and a half gees—too much chance that some idiot will fall over his own feet and break a leg. But I once saw a really tough weight-lifter type climb out of the press and walk at five gravities—but he was never good for much afterwards. But two gees is okay—about like carrying another man piggy-back." He glanced at the young lady. "Giving him the straight word, Penny?"

"He hasn't asked anything yet."

"So? Lorenzo, I thought you were the lad who wanted all the answers."

I shrugged. "I cannot now see that it matters, since it is evident that I will not live long enough to appreciate them."

"Eh? What soured your milk, old son?"

"Captain Broadbent," I said bitterly, "I am inhibited in expressing myself by the presence of a lady; therefore I cannot adequately discuss your ancestry, personal habits, morals, and destination. Let it stand that I knew what you had tricked me into as soon as I became aware of the identity of the man I am to impersonate. I will content myself with one question only: who is about to attempt to assassinate Bonforte? Even a clay pigeon should be entitled to know who is shooting at him."

For the first time I saw Dak register surprise. Then he laughed so hard that the acceleration seemed to be too much for him; he slid to the deck and braced his back against a bulkhead, still laughing.

"I don't see anything funny about it," I said angrily.

He stopped and wiped his eyes. "Lorrie old son, did you honestly think that I had set you up as a sitting duck?"

"It's obvious." I told him my deductions about the earlier assassination attempts.



He had the sense not to laugh again. "I see. You thought it was a job about like food taster for a Middle Ages king. Well, we'll have to try to straighten you out; I don't suppose it helps your acting to think that you are about to be burned down where you stand. Look, I've been with the Chief for six years. During that time I *know* he has never used a double . . . Nevertheless, I was present on two occasions when attempts were made on his life—one of those times I shot the hatchet man. Penny, you've been with the Chief longer than that. Has he ever used a double before?"

She looked at me coldly. "Never. The very idea that the Chief would let anybody expose himself to danger in his place is—well, I ought to slap your face; that's what I ought to do!"

"Take it easy, Penny," Dak said mildly. "You've both got jobs to do and you are going to have to work with him. Besides, his wrong guess isn't too silly, not from the outside. By the way, Lorenzo, this is Penelope Russell. She is the Chief's personal secretary, which makes her your number-one coach."

"I am honored to meet you, mademoiselle."

"I wish I could say the same!"

"Stow it, Penny, or I'll spank your round fanny—at two gravities. Lorenzo, I concede that doubling for John Joseph Bonforte isn't as safe as riding in a wheel chair—shucks, as we both know, several attempts have been made to close out his life insurance. But that is not what we are afraid of this time. Matter of fact, this time, for political reasons you will presently understand, the ladies we are up against won't dare to try to kill the Chief—or to kill you when you are doubling for the Chief. They are playing rough—as you *know!*—and they would kill me, or even Penny, for the slightest advantage. They would kill you right now, if they could get at you. But when you make this public appearance *as the Chief* you'll be safe; the circumstances will be such that they can't afford to kill."

He studied my face. "Well?"

I shook my head. "I don't follow you."

"No, but you will. It is a complicated matter, involving Martian ways of looking at things. Take it for granted; you'll know all about it before we get there."

I still did not like it. Thus far Dak had told me no outright lies that I knew of—but he could lie effectively by not telling all that



he knew, as I had learned the bitter way. I said, "See here, I have no reason to trust you, or to trust this young lady—if you will pardon me, miss. But while I haven't any liking for Mr. Bonforte, he does have the reputation for being painfully, even offensively, honest. When do I get to talk to *him*? As soon as we reach Mars?"

Dak's ugly, cheerful face was suddenly shadowed with sadness. "I'm afraid not. Didn't Penny tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Old son, that's why we've got to have a double for the Chief. They've kidnaped him."

"My head ached, possibly from the double weight, or perhaps from too many shocks. "Now you know," Dak went on. "You know why Jock Dubois didn't want to trust you with it until after we raised ground. It is the biggest news story since the first landing on the Moon, and we are sitting on it, doing our damndest to keep it from ever being known. We hope to use you until we can find him and get him back. Matter of fact, you have already started your impersonation. This ship is not really the *Go For Broke*; it is the Chief's private yacht and traveling office, the *Tom Paine*. The *Go For Broke* is riding a parking orbit around Mars, with its transponder giving out the recognition signal of this ship—a fact known only to its captain and comm officer—while the *Tommie* tucks up her skirts and rushes to Earth to pick up a substitute for the Chief. Do you begin to scan it, old son?"

I admit that I did not. "Yes, but—see here, Captain, if Mr. Bonforte's political enemies have kidnaped him, why keep it secret? I should expect you to shout it from the housetops."

"On Earth we would. At New Batavia we would. On Venus we would. But here we are dealing with Mars. Do you know the legend of Kkkahgral the Younger?"

"Eh? I'm afraid I don't."

"You must study it; it will give you insight into what makes a Martian tick. Briefly, this boy Kkkah was to appear at a certain time and place, thousands of years ago, for a very high honor—like being knighted. Through no fault of his own (the way we would look at it) he failed to make it on time. Obviously the only thing to do was to kill him—by Martian standards. But because of his youth and his distinguished record some of the radicals present argued that he should be allowed to go back and start over. But



Kkkahgral would have none of it. He insisted on his right to prosecute the case himself, won it, and was executed. Which makes him the very embodiment, the patron saint, of propriety on Mars."

"That's crazy!"

"Is it? We aren't Martians. They are a very old race and they have worked out a system of debts and obligations to cover every possible situation—the greatest formalists conceivable. Compared with them, the ancient Japanese, with their *giri* and *gimu*, were outright anarchists. Martians don't have 'right' and 'wrong'—instead they have propriety and impropriety, squared, cubed, and loaded with gee juice. But where it bears on this problem is that the Chief was about to be adopted into the nest of Kkkahgral the Younger himself. Do you scan me now?"

I still did not. To my mind this Kkkah character was one of the more loathsome items from *Le Grand Guignol*. Broadbent went on, "It's simple enough. The Chief is probably the greatest practical student of Martian customs and psychology. He has been working up to this for years. Comes local noon on Wednesday at Lacus Soli, the ceremony of adoption takes place. If the Chief is there and goes through his paces properly, everything is sweet. If he is not there—and it makes no difference at all why he is not there—his name is mud on Mars, in every nest from pole to pole—and the greatest interplanetary and interracial political coup ever attempted falls flat on its face. Worse than that, it will backfire. My guess is that the very least that will happen is for Mars to withdraw even from its present loose association with the Empire. Much more likely there will be reprisals and human beings will be killed—maybe every human on Mars. Then the extremists in the Humanity Party would have their way and Mars would be brought into the Empire by force—but only after every Martian was dead. And all set off just by Bonforte failing to show up for the adoption ceremony . . . Martians take these things very seriously."

Dak left as suddenly as he had appeared and Penelope Russell turned on the picture projector again. It occurred to me fretfully that I should have asked him what was to keep our enemies from simply killing *me*, if all that was needed to upset the political applecart was to keep Bonforte (in his proper person, or through his double) from attending some barbaric Martian ceremony. But



I had forgotten to ask—perhaps I was subconsciously afraid of being answered.

But shortly I was again studying Bonforte, watching his movements and gestures, feeling his expressions, subvocalizing the tones of his voice, while floating in that detached, warm reverie of artistic effort. Already I was “wearing his head.”

I was panicked out of it when the images shifted to one in which Bonforte was surrounded by Martians, touched by their pseudo limbs. I had been so deep inside the picture that I could actually feel them myself—and the stink was unbearable. I made a strangled noise and clawed at it. “*Shut it off!*”

The lights came up and the picture disappeared. Miss Russell was looking at me. “What in the world is the matter with you?”

I tried to get my breath and stop trembling. “Miss Russell—I am very sorry—but please—don’t turn that on again. I can’t *stand* Martians.”

She looked at me as if she could not believe what she saw but despised it anyhow. “I told them,” she said slowly and scornfully, “that this ridiculous scheme would not work.”

“I am very sorry. I cannot help it.”

She did not answer but climbed heavily out of the cider press. She did not walk as easily at two gravities as Dak did, but she managed. She left without another word, closing the door as she went.

She did not return. Instead the door was opened by a man who appeared to be inhabiting a giant kiddie stroller. “Howdy there, young fellow!” he boomed out. He was sixtyish, a bit too heavy, and bland; I did not have to see his diploma to be aware that his was a “bedside” manner.

“How do you do, sir?”

“Well enough. Better at lower acceleration.” He glanced down at the contrivance he was strapped into. “How do you like my corset-on-wheels? Not stylish, perhaps, but it takes some of the strain off my heart. By the way, just to keep the record straight, I’m Dr. Capek, Mr. Bonforte’s personal therapist. I know who you are. Now what’s this we hear about you and Martians?”

I tried to explain it clearly and unemotionally.

Dr. Capek nodded. “Captain Broadbent should have told me. I would have changed the order of your indoctrination program. The captain is a competent young fellow in his way but his mus-



cles run ahead of his brain on occasion . . . He is so perfectly normal an extrovert that he frightens me. But no harm done. Mr. Smythe, I want your permission to hypnotize you. You have my word as a physician that it will be used only to help you in this matter and that I will in no wise tamper with your personal integration." He pulled out an old-fashioned pocket watch of the sort that is almost a badge of his profession and took my pulse.

I answered, "You have my permission readily, sir—but it won't do any good. I can't go under." I had learned hypnotic techniques myself during the time I was showing my mentalist act, but my teachers had never had any luck hypnotizing me. A touch of hypnotism is very useful to such an act, especially if the local police aren't too fussy about the laws the medical association has hampered us with.

"So? Well, we'll just have to do the best we can, then. Suppose you relax, get comfortable, and we'll talk about your problem." He still kept the watch in his hand, fiddling with it and twisting the chain, after he had stopped taking my pulse. I started to mention it, since it was catching the reading light just over my head, but decided that it was probably a nervous habit of which he was not aware and really too trivial a matter to call to the attention of a stranger.

"I'm relaxed," I assured him. "Ask me anything you wish. Or free association, if you prefer."

"Just let yourself float," he said softly. "Two gravities makes you feel heavy, doesn't it? I usually just sleep through it myself. It pulls the blood out of the brain, makes one sleepy. They are beginning to boost the drive again. We'll all have to sleep . . . We'll be heavy . . . We'll have to sleep . . ."

I started to tell him that he had better put his watch away—or it would spin right out of his hand. Instead I fell asleep.

When I woke up, the other acceleration bunk was occupied by Dr. Capek. "Howdy, bub," he greeted me. "I got tired of that confounded perambulator and decided to stretch out here and distribute the strain."

"Uh, are we back on two gravities again?"

"Eh? Oh yes! We're on two gravities."

"I'm sorry I blacked out. How long was I asleep?"

"Oh, not very long. How do you feel?"



"Fine. Wonderfully rested, in fact."

"It frequently has that effect. Heavy boost, I mean. Feel like seeing some more pictures?"

"Why, certainly, if you say so, Doctor."

"Okay." He reached up and again the room went dark.

I was braced for the notion that he was going to show me more pictures of Martians; I made up my mind not to panic. After all, I had found it necessary on many occasions to pretend that they were not present; surely motion pictures of them should not affect me—I had simply been surprised earlier.

They were indeed stereos of Martians, both with and without Mr. Bonforte. I found it possible to study them with detached mind, without terror or disgust.

Suddenly I realized that I was *enjoying* looking at them!

I let out some exclamation and Capek stopped the film. "Trouble?"

"Doctor—you hypnotized me!"

"You told me to."

"But I can't be hypnotized."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Uh—so you managed it. I'm not too dense to see that." I added, "Suppose we try those pictures again. I can't really believe it."

He switched them on and I watched and wondered. Martians were not disgusting, if one looked at them without prejudice; they weren't even ugly. In fact, they possessed the same quaint grace as a Chinese pagoda. True, they were not human in form, but neither is a bird of paradise—and birds of paradise are the loveliest things alive.

I began to realize, too, that their pseudo limbs could be very expressive; their awkward gestures showed some of the bumbling friendliness of puppies. I knew now that I had looked at Martians all my life through the dark glasses of hate and fear.

Of course, I mused, their stench would still take getting used to, but—and then I suddenly realized that I was smelling them, the unmistakable odor—and I didn't mind it a bit! In fact, I liked it. "Doctor!" I said urgently. "This machine has a 'smellie' attachment—doesn't it?"

"Eh? I believe not. No, I'm sure it hasn't—too much parasitic weight for a yacht."



"But it must. I can smell them very plainly."

"Oh, yes." He looked slightly shamefaced. "Bub, I did one thing to you that I hope will cause you no inconvenience."

"Sir?"

"While we were digging around inside your skull it became evident that a lot of your neurotic orientation about Martians was triggered by their body odor. I didn't have time to do a deep job so I had to offset it. I asked Penny—that's the youngster who was in here before—for a loan of some of the perfume she uses. I'm afraid that from here on out, bub, Martians are going to smell like a Parisian house of joy to you. If I had had time I would have used some homelier pleasant odor, like ripe strawberries or hotcakes and syrup. But I had to improvise."

I sniffed. Yes, it did smell like a heavy and expensive perfume—and yet, damn it, it was unmistakably the reek of Martians. "I like it."

"You can't help liking it."

"But you must have spilled the whole bottle in here. The place is drenched with it."

"Hub? Not at all. I merely waved the stopper under your nose a half hour ago, then gave the bottle back to Penny and she went away with it." He sniffed. "The odor is gone now. 'Jungle Lust,' it said on the bottle. Seemed to have a lot of musk in it. I accused Penny of trying to make the crew space-happy and she just laughed at me." He reached up and switched off the stereopix. "We've had enough of those for now. I want to get you onto something more useful."

When the pictures faded out, the fragrance faded with them, just as it does with smellie equipment. I was forced to admit to myself that it was all in the head. But, as an actor, I was intellectually aware of that truth anyhow.

When Penny came back in a few minutes later, she had a fragrance exactly like a Martian.

I loved it.



## 4

My education continued in that room (Mr. Bonforte's guest room, it was) until turnover. I had no sleep, other than under hypnosis, and did not seem to need any. Either Doc Capek or Penny stuck with me and helped me the whole time. Fortunately my man was as thoroughly photographed and recorded as perhaps any man in history and I had, as well, the close co-operation of his intimates. There was endless material; the problem was to see how much I could assimilate, both awake and under hypnosis.

I don't know at what point I quit disliking Bonforte. Capek assured me—and I believe him—that he did not implant a hypnotic suggestion on this point; I had not asked for it and I am quite certain that Capek was meticulous about the ethical responsibilities of a physician and hypnotherapist. But I suppose that it was an inevitable concomitant of the role—I rather think I would learn to like Jack the Ripper if I studied for the part. Look at it this way: to learn a role truly, you must for a time become that character. And a man either likes himself, or he commits suicide, one way or another.

"To understand all is to forgive all"—and I was beginning to understand Bonforte.

At turnover we got that one-gravity rest that Dak had promised. We never were in free fall, not for an instant; instead of putting out the torch, which I gather they hate to do while under way, the ship described what Dak called a 180-degree skew turn. It leaves the ship on boost the whole time and is done rather quickly, but it has an oddly disturbing effect on the sense of balance. The effect has a name something like Coriolanus. Coriolis?

All I know about spaceships is that the ones that operate from the surface of a planet are true rockets but the *voyageurs* call them "teakettles" because of the steam jet of water or hydrogen they boost with. They aren't considered real atomic-power ships even though the jet is heated by an atomic pile. The long-jump ships such as the *Tom Paine*, torchships that is, are (so they tell



me) the real thing, making use of  $E$  equals  $MC$  squared, or is it  $M$  equals  $EC$  squared? You know—the thing Einstein invented.

Dak did his best to explain it all to me, and no doubt it is very interesting to those who care for such things. But I can't imagine why a gentleman should bother with such. It seems to me that every time those scientific laddies get busy with their slide rules life becomes more complicated. What was wrong with things the way they were?

During the two hours we were on one gravity I was moved up to Bonforte's cabin. I started wearing his clothes and his face and everyone was careful to call me "Mr. Bonforte" or "Chief" or (in the case of Dr. Capek) "Joseph," the idea being, of course, to help me build the part.

Everyone but Penny, that is . . . She simply would not call me "Mr. Bonforte." She did her best to help but she could not bring herself to that. It was clear as scripture that she was a secretary who silently and hopelessly loved her boss, and she resented me with a deep, illogical, but natural bitterness. It made it hard for both of us, especially as I was finding her most attractive. No man can do his best work with a woman constantly around him who despises him. But I could not dislike her in return; I felt deeply sorry for her—even though I was decidedly irked.

We were on a tryout-in-the-sticks basis now, as not everyone in the *Tom Paine* knew that I was not Bonforte. I did not know exactly which ones knew of the substitution, but I was allowed to relax and ask questions only in the presence of Dak, Penny, and Dr. Capek. I was fairly sure that Bonforte's chief clerk, Mr. Washington, knew but never let on; he was a spare, elderly mulatto with the tight-lipped mask of a saint. There were two others who certainly knew, but they were not in the *Tom Paine*; they were standing by and covering up from the *Go For Broke*, handling press releases and routine dispatches—Bill Corpsman, who was Bonforte's front man with the news services, and Roger Clifton. I don't know quite how to describe Clifton's job. Political deputy? He had been Minister without Portfolio, you may remember, when Bonforte was Supreme Minister, but that says nothing. Let's put it symbolically: Bonforte handed out policy and Clifton handed out patronage.

This small group had to know; if any others knew it was not considered necessary to tell me. To be sure, the other members of



Bonforte's staff and all the crew of the *Tom Paine* knew that something odd was going on; they did not necessarily know what it was. A good many people had seen me enter the ship—but as "Benny Grey." By the time they saw me again I was already "Bonforte."

Someone had had the foresight to obtain real make-up equipment, but I used almost none. At close range make-up can be seen; even Silicoflesh cannot be given the exact texture of skin. I contented myself with darkening my natural complexion a couple of shades with Semiperm and wearing his face, from inside. I did have to sacrifice quite a lot of hair and Dr. Capek inhibited the roots. I did not mind; an actor can always wear hair-pieces—and I was sure that this job was certain to pay me a fee that would let me retire for life, if I wished.

On the other hand, I was sometimes queasily aware that "life" might not be too long—there are those old saws about the man who knew too much and the one about dead men and tales. But truthfully I was beginning to trust these people. They were all darn nice people—which told me as much about Bonforte as I had learned by listening to his speeches and seeing his pix. A political figure is not a single man, so I was learning, but a compatible team. If Bonforte himself had not been a decent sort he would not have had these people around him.

The Martian language gave me my greatest worry. Like most actors, I had picked up enough Martian, Venerian, Outer Jovian, etc., to be able to fake in front of a camera or on stage. But those rolled or fluttered consonants are very difficult. Human vocal cords are not as versatile as a Martian's tympanus, I believe, and, in any case, the semi-phonetic spelling out of those sounds in Roman letters, for example "kkk" or "jjj" or "rrr," have no more to do with the true sounds than the g in "Gnu" has to do with the inhaled click with which a Bantu pronounces "Gnu." "Jjj," for instance, closely resembles a Bronx cheer.

Fortunately Bonforte had no great talent for other languages—and I am a professional; my ears really hear, I can imitate any sound, from a buzz saw striking a nail in a chunk of firewood to a setting hen disturbed on her nest. It was necessary only to acquire Martian as poorly as Bonforte spoke it. He had worked hard to overcome his lack of talent, and every word and phrase of Mar-



tian that he knew had been sight-sound recorded so that he could study his mistakes.

So I studied his mistakes, with the projector moved into his office and Penny at my elbow to sort out the spools for me and answer questions.

Human languages fall into four groups: inflecting ones as in Anglo-American, positional as in Chinese, agglutinative as in Old Turkish, polysynthetic (sentence units) as in Eskimo—to which, of course, we now add alien structures as wildly odd and as nearly impossible for the human brain as non-repetitive or emergent Venerian. Luckily Martian is analogous to human speech forms. Basic Martian, the trade language, is positional and involves only simple concrete ideas—like the greeting: “I see you.” High Martian is polysynthetic and very stylized, with an expression for every nuance of their complex system of rewards and punishments, obligations and debts. It had been almost too much for Bonforte; Penny told me that he could read those arrays of dots they use for writing quite easily but of the spoken form of High Martian he could say only a few hundred sentences.

Brother, how I studied those few he had mastered!

The strain on Penny was even greater than it was on me. Both she and Dak spoke some Martian but the chore of coaching me fell on her as Dak had to spend most of his time in the control room; Jock’s death had left him shorthanded. We dropped from two gravities to one for the last few million miles of the approach, during which time he never came below at all. I spent it learning the ritual I would have to know for the adoption ceremony, with Penny’s help.

I had just completed running through the speech in which I was to accept membership in the Kkkah nest—a speech not unlike that, in spirit, with which an orthodox Jewish boy assumes the responsibilities of manhood, but as fixed, as invariable, as Hamlet’s soliloquy. I had read it, complete with Bonforte’s mispronunciations and facial tic; I finished and asked, “How was that?”

“That was quite good,” she answered seriously.

“Thanks, Curly Top.” It was a phrase I had lifted from the language-practice spools in Bonforte’s files; it was what Bonforte called her when he was feeling mellow—and it was perfectly in character.



*"Don't you dare call me that!"*

I looked at her in honest amazement and answered, still in character, "Why, Penny my child!"

"Don't you call me *that*, either! You *fake*! You *phony*! You—*actor*!" She jumped up, ran as far as she could—which was only to the door—and stood there, faced away from me, her face buried in her hands and her shoulders shaking with sobs.

I made a tremendous effort and lifted myself out of the character—pulled in my belly, let my own face come up, answered in my own voice. "Miss Russell!"

She stopped crying, whirled around, looked at me, and her jaw dropped. I added, still in my normal self, "Come back here and sit down."

I thought she was going to refuse, then she seemed to think better of it, came slowly back and sat down, her hands in her lap but with her face that of a little girl who is "saving up more spit."

I let her sit for a moment, then said quietly, "Yes, Miss Russell, I am an actor. Is that a reason for you to insult me?"

She simply looked stubborn.

"As an actor, I am here to do an actor's job. You know why. You know, too, that I was tricked into taking it—it is not a job I would have accepted with my eyes open, even in my wildest moments. I hate having to do it considerably more than you hate having me do it—for despite Captain Broadbent's cheerful assurances I am not at all sure that I will come out of it with my skin intact—and I'm awfully fond of my skin; it's the only one I have. I believe, too, that I know why you find it hard to accept me. But is that any reason for you to make my job harder than it has to be?"

She mumbled. I said sharply, "Speak up!"

"It's dishonest! It's *indecent*!"

I sighed. "It certainly is. More than that, it is impossible—without the wholehearted support of the other members of the cast. So let's call Captain Broadbent down here and tell him. Let's call it off."

She jerked her face up and said, "Oh no! We can't do that."

"Why can't we? A far better thing to drop it now than to present it and have it flop. I can't give a performance under these conditions. Let's admit it."

"But—but—we've got to! It's necessary."

"Why is it necessary, Miss Russell? Political reasons? I have



not the slightest interest in politics—and I doubt if you have any really deep interest. So why must we do it?"

"Because—because *he*——" She stopped, unable to go on, strangled by sobs.

I got up, went over, and put a hand on her shoulder. "I know. Because if we don't, something that *he* has spent years building up will fall to pieces. Because he can't do it himself and his friends are trying to cover up and do it for him. Because his friends are loyal to him. Because *you* are loyal to him. Nevertheless, it hurts you to see someone else in the place that is rightfully his. Besides that, you are half out of your mind with grief and worry about him. Aren't you?"

"Yes." I could barely hear it.

I took hold of her chin and tilted her face up. "I know why you find it so hard to have me here, in his place. You love him. But I'm doing the best job for him I know how. *Confound it, woman! Do you have to make my job six times harder by treating me like dirt?*"

She looked shocked. For a moment I thought she was going to slap me. Then she said brokenly, "I am sorry. I am very sorry. I won't let it happen again."

I let go her chin and said briskly, "Then let's get back to work."

She did not move. "Can you forgive me?"

"Huh? There's nothing to forgive, Penny. You were acting up because you love him and you were worried. Now let's get to work. I've got to be letter-perfect—and it's only hours away." I dropped at once back into the role.

She picked up a spool and started the projector again. I watched him through it once, then did the acceptance speech with the sound cut out but stereo on, matching my voice—*his* voice, I mean—to the moving image. She watched me, looking from the image back to my face with a dazed look on her own. We finished and I switched it off myself. "How was that?"

"That was perfect!"

I smiled his smile. "Thanks, Curly Top."

"Not at all—'Mr. Bonforte.'"

Two hours later we made rendezvous with the *Go For Broke*.

Dak brought Roger Clifton and Bill Corpsman to my cabin as soon as the *Go For Broke* had transferred them. I knew them



from pictures. I stood up and said, "Hello, Rog. Glad to see you, Bill." My voice was warm but casual; on the level at which these people operated, a hasty trip to Earth and back was simply a few days' separation and nothing more. I limped over and offered my hand. The ship was at the moment under low boost as it adjusted to a much tighter orbit than the *Go For Broke* had been riding in.

Clifton threw me a quick glance, then played up. He took his cigar out of his mouth, shook hands, and said quietly, "Glad to see you back, Chief." He was a small man, bald-headed and middle-aged, and looked like a lawyer and a good poker player.

"Anything special while I was away?"

"No. Just routine. I gave Penny the file."

"Good." I turned to Bill Corpsman, again offered my hand.

He did not take it. Instead he put his fists on his hips, looked up at me, and whistled. "Amazing! I really do believe we stand a chance of getting away with it." He looked me up and down, then said, "Turn around, Smythe. Move around. I want to see you walk."

I found that I was actually feeling the annoyance that Bonforte would have felt at such uncalled-for impertinence, and, of course, it showed in my face. Dak touched Corpsman's sleeve and said quickly, "Knock it off, Bill. You remember what we agreed?"

"Chicken tracks!" Corpsman answered. "This room is sound-proof. I just want to make sure he is up to it. Smythe, how's your Martian? Can you spiel it?"

I answered with a single squeaking polysyllabic in High Martian, a sentence meaning roughly, "Proper conduct demands that one of us leave!"—but it means far more than that, as it is a challenge which usually ends in someone's nest being notified of a demise.

I don't think Corpsman understood it, for he grinned and answered, "I've got to hand it to you, Smythe. That's good."

But Dak understood it. He took Corpsman by the arm and said, "Bill, I told you to knock it off. You're in my ship and that's an order. We play it straight from here on—every second."

Clifton added, "Pay attention to him, Bill. You know we agreed that was the way to do it. Otherwise somebody might slip."

Corpsman glanced at him, then shrugged. "All right, all right. I was just checking up—after all, this was my idea." He gave me a one-sided smile and said, "Howdy, Mister Bonforte. Glad to see you back."



There was a shade too much emphasis on "Mister" but I answered, "Good to be back, Bill. Anything special I need to know before we go down?"

"I guess not. Press conference at Goddard City after the ceremonies." I could see him watching me to see how I would take it.

I nodded. "Very well."

Dak said hastily, "Say, Rog, how about that? Is it necessary? Did you authorize it?"

"I was going to add," Corpsman went on, turning to Clifton, "before the Skipper here got the jitters, that I can take it myself and tell the boys that the Chief has dry laryngitis from the ceremonies—or we can limit it to written questions submitted ahead of time and I'll get the answers written out for him while the ceremonies are going on. Seeing that he looks and sounds so good close up, I would say to risk it. How about it, Mister—'Bonforte'? Think you can swing it?"

"I see no problem involved in it, Bill." I was thinking that if I managed to get by the Martians without a slip I would undertake to ad-lib double talk to a bunch of human reporters as long as they wanted to listen. I had good command of Bonforte's speaking style by now and at least a rough notion of his policies and attitudes—and I need not be specific.

But Clifton looked worried. Before he could speak the ship's horn brayed out, "Captain is requested to come to the control room. Minus four minutes."

Dak said quickly, "You all will have to settle it. I've got to put this sled in its slot—I've got nobody up there but young Epstein." He dashed for the door.

Corpsman called out, "Hey, Skip! I wanted to tell you—" He was out the door and following Dak without waiting to say good-by.

Roger Clifton closed the door Corpsman had left open, came back, and said slowly, "Do you want to risk this press conference?"

"That is up to you. I want to do the job."

"Mmm . . . Then I'm inclined to risk it—if we use the written-questions method. But I'll check Bill's answers myself before you have to give them."

"Very well." I added, "If you can find a way to let me have



them ten minutes or so ahead of time, there shouldn't be any difficulty. I'm a very quick study."

He inspected me. "I quite believe it—Chief. All right, I'll have Penny slip the answers to you right after the ceremonies. Then you can excuse yourself to go to the men's room and just stay there until you are sure of them."

"That should work."

"I think so. Uh, I must say I feel considerably better now that I've seen you. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I think not, Rog. Yes, there is, too. Any word about—*him*?"

"Eh? Well, yes and no. He's still in Goddard City; we're sure of that. He hasn't been taken off Mars, or even out in the country. We blocked them on that, if that was their intention."

"Eh? Goddard City is not a big place, is it? Not more than a hundred thousand? What's the hitch?"

"The hitch is that we don't dare admit that you—I mean that *he*—is missing. Once we have this adoption thing wrapped up, we can put you out of sight, then announce the kidnaping as if it had just taken place—and make them take the city apart rivet by rivet. The city authorities are all Humanity Party appointees, but they will have to co-operate—after the ceremony. It will be the most wholehearted co-operation you ever saw, for they will be deadly anxious to produce him before the whole Kkkahgral nest swarms over them and tears the city down around their ears."

"Oh. I'm still learning about Martian psychology and customs."

"Aren't we all?"

"Rog? Mmm . . . What leads you to think that he is still alive? Wouldn't their purpose be better served—and with less risk—just by killing him?" I was thinking queasily how simple it had turned out to be to get rid of a body, if a man was ruthless enough.

"I see what you mean. But that, too, is tied up with Martian notions about 'propriety.'" (He used the Martian word.) "Death is the one acceptable excuse for not carrying out an obligation. If he were simply killed, they'd adopt him into the nest after his death—and then the whole nest and probably every nest on Mars would set out to avenge him. They would not mind in the least if the whole human race were to die or be killed—but to kill this one human being to keep him from being adopted, that's another kettle of fish entirely. Matter of obligation and propriety—in some ways a Martian's response to a situation is so automatic as to



remind one of instinct. It is not, of course, since they are incredibly intelligent. But they do the damndest things." He frowned and added, "Sometimes I wish I had never left Sussex."

The warning hooter broke up the discussion by forcing us to hurry to our bunks. Dak had cut it fine on purpose; the shuttle rocket from Goddard City was waiting for us when we settled into free fall. All five of us went down, which just filled the passenger couches—again a matter of planning, for the Resident Commissioner had expressed the intention of coming up to meet me and had been dissuaded only by Dak's message to him that our party would require all the space.

I tried to get a better look at the Martian surface as we went down, as I had had only one glimpse of it, from the control room of the *Tom Paine*—since I was supposed to have been there many times I could not show the normal curiosity of a tourist. I did not get much of a look; the shuttle pilot did not turn us so that we could see until he leveled off for his glide approach and I was busy then putting on my oxygen mask.

That pesky Mars-type mask almost finished us; I had never had a chance to practice with it—Dak did not think of it and I had not realized it would be a problem; I had worn both spacesuit and aqua lung on other occasions and I thought this would be about the same. It was not. The model Bonforte favored was a mouth-free type, a Mitsubishi "Sweet Winds" which pressurizes directly at the nostrils—a nose clamp, nostril plugs, tubes up each nostril which then run back under each ear to the supercharger on the back of your neck. I concede that it is a fine device, once you get used to it, since you can talk, eat, drink, etc., while wearing it. But I would rather have a dentist put both hands in my mouth.

The real difficulty is that you have to exercise conscious control on the muscles that close the back of your mouth, or you hiss like a teakettle, since the darn thing operates on a pressure difference. Fortunately the pilot equalized to Mars-surface pressure once we all had our masks on, which gave me twenty minutes or so to get used to it. But for a few moments I thought the jig was up, just over a silly piece of gadgetry. But I reminded myself that I had worn the thing hundreds of times before and that I was as used to it as I was to my toothbrush. Presently I believed it.

Dak had been able to avoid having the Resident Commissioner chit-chat with me for an hour on the way down but it had not



been possible to miss him entirely; he met the shuttle at the sky-field. The close timing did keep me from having to cope with other humans, since I had to go at once into the Martian city. It made sense, but it seemed strange that I would be safer among Martians than among my own kind.

It seemed even stranger to be on Mars.

## 5

Mr. Commissioner Boothroyd was a Humanity Party appointee, of course, as were all of his staff except for civil service technical employees. But Dak had told me that it was at least sixty-fourty that Boothroyd had not had a finger in the plot; Dak considered him honest but stupid. For that matter, neither Dak nor Rog Clifton believed that Supreme Minister Quiroga was in it; they attributed the thing to the clandestine terrorist group inside the Humanity Party who called themselves the "Actionists"—and they attributed *them* to some highly respectable big-money boys who stood to profit heavily.

Myself, I would not have known an Actionist from an auctioneer.

But the minute we landed something popped up that made me wonder whether friend Boothroyd was as honest and stupid as Dak thought he was. It was a minor thing but one of those little things that can punch holes in an impersonation. Since I was a Very Important Visitor the Commissioner met me; since I held no public office other than membership in the Grand Assembly and was traveling privately no official honors were offered. He was alone save for his aide—and a little girl about fifteen.

I knew him from photographs and I knew quite a bit about him; Rog and Penny had briefed me carefully. I shook hands, asked about his sinusitis, thanked him for the pleasant time I had had on my last visit, and spoke with his aide in that warm man-to-man fashion that Bonforte was so good at. Then I turned to the young lady. I knew Boothroyd had children and that one of them was about this age and sex; I did not know—perhaps Rog and Penny did not know—whether or not I had ever met her.



Boothroyd himself saved me. "You haven't met my daughter Deirdre, I believe. She insisted on coming along."

Nothing in the pictures I had studied had shown Bonforte dealing with young girls—so I simply had to *be* Bonforte—a widower in his middle fifties who had no children of his own, no nieces, and probably little experience with teen-age girls—but with lots of experience in meeting strangers of every sort. So I treated her as if she were twice her real age; I did not quite kiss her hand. She blushed and looked pleased.

Boothroyd looked indulgent and said, "Well, ask him, my dear. You may not have another chance."

She blushed deeper and said, "Sir, could I have your autograph? The girls in my school collect them. I have Mr. Quiroga's . . . I ought to have yours." She produced a little book which she had been holding behind her.

I felt like a copter driver asked for his license—which is home in his other pants. I had studied hard but I had not expected to have to forge Bonforte's signature. Damn it, you can't do *everything* in two and a half days!

But it was simply impossible for Bonforte to refuse such a request—and I was Bonforte. I smiled jovially and said, "You have Mr. Quiroga's already?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just his autograph?"

"Yes. Er, he put 'Best Wishes' on it."

I winked at Boothroyd. "Just 'Best Wishes,' eh? To young ladies I never make it less than 'Love.' Tell you what I'm going to do—" I took the little book from her, glanced through the pages.

"Chief," Dak said urgently, "we are short on minutes."

"Compose yourself," I said without looking up. "The entire Martian nation can wait, if necessary, on a young lady." I handed the book to Penny. "Will you note the size of this book? And then remind me to send a photograph suitable for pasting in it—and properly autographed, of course."

"Yes, Mr. Bonforte."

"Will that suit you, Miss Deirdre?"

"Geel!"

"Good. Thanks for asking me. We can leave now, Captain. Mr. Commissioner, is that our car?"

"Yes, Mr. Bonforte." He shook his head wryly. "I'm afraid you



have converted a member of my own family to your Expansionist heresies. Hardly sporting, eh? Sitting ducks, and so forth?"

"That should teach you not to expose her to bad company—eh, Miss Deirdre?" I shook hands again. "Thanks for meeting us, Mr. Commissioner. I am afraid we had better hurry along now."

"Yes, certainly. Pleasure."

"Thanks, Mr. Bonforte!"

"Thank *you*, my dear."

I turned away slowly, so as not to appear jerky or nervous in stereo. There were photographers around, still, news pickup, stereo, and so forth, as well as many reporters. Bill was keeping the reporters away from us; as we turned to go he waved and said, "See you later, Chief," and turned back to talk to one of them. Rog, Dak, and Penny followed me into the car. There was the usual skyfield crowd, not as numerous as at any earthport, but numerous. I was not worried about them as long as Boothroyd accepted the impersonation—though there were certainly some present who *knew* that I was not Bonforte.

But I refused to let those individuals worry me, either. They could cause us no trouble without incriminating themselves.

The car was a Rolls Outlander, pressurized, but I left my oxygen mask on because the others did. I took the right-hand seat, Rog sat beside me, and Penny beside him, while Dak wound his long legs around one of the folding seats. The driver glanced back through the partition and started up.

Rog said quietly, "I was worried there for a moment."

"Nothing to worry about. Now let's all be quiet, please. I want to review my speech."

Actually I wanted to gawk at the Martian scene; I knew the speech perfectly. The driver took us along the north edge of the field, past many godowns. I read signs for Verwijs Trading Company, Diana Outlines, Ltd., Three Planets, and I. G. Farbenindustrie. There were almost as many Martians as humans in sight. We ground hogs get the impression that Martians are slow as snails—and they are, on our comparatively heavy planet. On their own world they skim along on their bases like a stone sliding over water.

To the right, south of us past the flat field, the Great Canal dipped into the too-close horizon, showing no shore line beyond. Straight ahead of us was the Nest of Kkkah, a fairy city. I was



staring at it, my heart lifting at its fragile beauty, when Dak moved suddenly.

We were well past the traffic around the godowns but there was one car ahead, coming toward us; I had seen it without noticing it. But Dak must have been edgily ready for trouble; when the other car was quite close, he suddenly slammed down the partition separating us from the driver, swarmed over the man's neck, and grabbed the wheel. We slewed to the right, barely missing the other car, slewed again to the left and barely stayed on the road. It was a near thing, for we were past the field now and here the highway edged the canal.

I had not been much use to Dak a couple of days earlier in the Eisenhower, but I had been unarmed and not expecting trouble. This day I was still unarmed, not so much as a poisoned fang, but I comported myself a little better. Dak was more than busy trying to drive the car while leaning over from the back seat. The driver, caught off balance at first, now tried to wrestle him away from the wheel.

I lunged forward, got my left arm around the driver's neck, and shoved my right thumb into his ribs. "Move and you've had it!" The voice belonged to the hero-villain in *The Second-Story Gentleman*; the line of dialogue was his too.

My prisoner became very quiet.

Dak said urgently, "Rog, what are they doing?"

Clifton looked back and answered, "They're turning around."

Dak answered, "Okay. Chief, keep your gun on that character while I climb over." He was doing so even as he spoke, an awkward matter in view of his long legs and the crowded car. He settled into the seat and said happily, "I doubt if anything on wheels can catch a Rolls on a straightaway." He jerked on the damper and the big car shot forward. "How am I doing, Rog?"

"They're just turned around."

"All right. What do we do with this item? Dump him out?"

My victim squirmed and said, "I didn't do anything!" I jabbed my thumb harder and he quieted.

"Oh, not a thing," Dak agreed, keeping his eyes on the road. "All you did was try to cause a little crash—just enough to make Mr. Bonforte late for his appointment. If I had not noticed that you were slowing down to make it easy on yourself, you might have got away with it. No guts, eh?" He took a slight curve with



the tires screaming and the gyro fighting to keep us upright. "What's the situation, Rog?"

"They've given up."

"So." Dak did not slacken speed; we must have been doing well over three hundred kilometers. "I wonder if they would try to bomb us with one of their own boys aboard? How about it, bub? Would they write you off as expendable?"

"I don't know what you're talking about! You're going to be in trouble over this!"

"Really? The word of four respectable people against your jail-bird record? Or aren't you a transportee? Anyhow, Mr. Bonforte prefers to have me drive him—so naturally you were glad to do a favor for Mr. Bonforte." We hit something about as big as a worm cast on that glassy road and my prisoner and I almost went through the roof.

"'Mr. Bonforte!'" My victim made it a swear word.

Dak was silent for several seconds. At last he said, "I don't think we ought to dump this one, Chief. I think we ought to let you off, then take him to a quiet place. I think he might talk if we urged him."

The driver tried to get away. I tightened the pressure on his neck and jabbed him again with my thumb knuckle. A knuckle may not feel too much like the muzzle of a heater—but who wants to find out? He relaxed and said sullenly, "You don't dare give me the needle."

"Heavens, no!" Dak answered in shocked tones. "That would be illegal. Penny girl, got a bobby pin?"

"Why, certainly, Dak." She sounded puzzled and I was. She did not sound frightened, though, and I certainly was.

"Good. Bub, did you ever have a bobby pin shoved up under your fingernails? They say it will even break a hypnotic command not to talk. Works directly on the subconscious or something. Only trouble is that the patient makes the most unpleasant noises. So we are going to take you out in the dunes where you won't disturb anybody but sand scorpions. After you have talked—now here comes the nice part! After you talk we are going to turn you loose, not do anything, just let you walk back into town. But—listen carefully now!—if you are real nice and co-operative, you get a prize. We'll let you have your mask for the walk."

Dak stopped talking; for a moment there was no sound but the



keening of the thin Martian air past the roof. A human being can walk possibly two hundred yards on Mars without an oxygen mask, if he is in good condition. I believe I read of a case where a man walked almost half a mile before he died. I glanced at the trip meter and saw that we were about twenty-three kilometers from Goddard City.

The prisoner said slowly, "Honest, I don't know anything about it. I was just paid to crash the car."

"We'll try to stimulate your memory." The gates of the Martian city were just ahead of us; Dak started slowing the car. "Here's where you get out, Chief. Rog, better take your gun and relieve the Chief of our guest."

"Right, Dak." Rog moved up by me, jabbed the man in the ribs—again with a bare knuckle. I moved out of the way. Dak braked the car to a halt, stopping right in front of the gates.

"Four minutes to spare," he said happily. "This is a nice car. I wish I owned it. Rog, ease up a touch and give me room."

Clifton did so, Dak chopped the driver expertly on the side of his neck with the edge of his hand; the man went limp. "That will keep him quiet while you get clear. Can't have any unseemly disturbance under the eyes of the nest. Let's check time."

We did so. I was about three and a half minutes ahead of the deadline. "You are to go in exactly on time, you understand? Not ahead, not behind, but on the dot."

"That's right," Clifton and I answered in chorus.

"Thirty seconds to walk up the ramp, maybe. What do you want to do with the three minutes you have left?"

I sighed. "Just get my nerve back."

"Your nerve is all right. You didn't miss a trick back there. Cheer up, old son. Two hours from now you can head for home, with your pay burning holes in your pocket. We're on the last lap."

"I hope so. It's been quite a strain. Uh, Dak?"

"Yes?"

"Come here a second." I got out of the car, motioned him to come with me a short distance away. "What happens if I make a mistake—in there?"

"Eh?" Dak looked surprised, then laughed a little too heartily. "You won't make a mistake. Penny tells me you've got it down Jo-block perfect."



"Yes, but suppose I slip?"

"You won't slip. I know how you feel; I felt the same way on my first solo grounding. But when it started, I was so busy doing it I didn't have time to do it wrong."

Clifton called out, his voice thin in thin air, "Dak! Are you watching the time?"

"Gobs of time. Over a minute."

"Mr. Bonforte!" It was Penny's voice. I turned and went back to the car. She got out and put out her hand. "Good luck, Mr. Bonforte."

"Thanks, Penny."

Rog shook hands and Dak clapped me on the shoulder. "Minus thirty-five seconds. Better start."

I nodded and started up the ramp. It must have been within a second or two of the exact, appointed time when I reached the top, for the mighty gates rolled back as I came to them. I took a deep breath and cursed that damned air mask.

Then I took my stage.

It doesn't make any difference how many times you do it, that first walk on as the curtain goes up on the first night of any run is a breath-catcher and a heart-stopper. Sure, you know your sides. Sure, you've asked the manager to count the house. Sure, you've done it all before. No matter—when you first walk out there and know that all those eyes are on you, waiting for you to speak, waiting for you to do something—maybe even waiting for you to go up on your lines, brother, you feel it. This is why they have prompters.

I looked out and saw my audience and I wanted to run. I had stage fright for the first time in thirty years.

The siblings of the nest were spread out before me as far as I could see. There was an open lane in front of me, with thousands on each side, set close together as asparagus. I knew that the first thing I must do was slow-march down the center of that lane, clear to the far end, to the ramp leading down into the inner nest.

I could not move.

I said to myself, "Look, boy, you're John Joseph Bonforte. You've been here dozens of times before. These people are your friends. You're here because you want to be here—and because they want you here. So march down that aisle. Tum tum te *tum!* 'Here comes the bride!'"



I began to feel like Bonforte again. I was Uncle Joe Bonforte, determined to do this thing perfectly—for the honor and welfare of my own people and my own planet—and for my friends the Martians. I took a deep breath and one step.

That deep breath saved me; it brought me that heavenly fragrance. Thousands on thousands of Martians packed close together—it smelled to me as if somebody had dropped and broken a whole case of Jungle Lust. The conviction that I smelled it was so strong that I involuntarily glanced back to see if Penny had followed me in. I could feel her handclasp warm in my palm.

I started limping down that aisle, trying to make it about the speed a Martian moves on his own planet. The crowd closed in behind me. Occasionally kids would get away from their elders and skitter out in front of me. By “kids” I mean post-fission Martians, half the mass and not much over half the height of an adult. They are never out of the nest and we are inclined to forget that there can be little Martians. It takes almost five years, after fission, for a Martian to regain his full size, have his brain fully restored, and get all of his memory back. During this transition he is an idiot studying to be a moron. The gene rearrangement and subsequent regeneration incident to conjugation and fission put him out of the running for a long time. One of Bonforte’s spools was a lecture on the subject, accompanied by some not very good amateur stereo.

The kids, being cheerful idiots, are exempt from propriety and all that that implies. But they are greatly loved.

Two of the kids, of the same and smallest size and looking just alike to me, skittered out and stopped dead in front of me, just like a foolish puppy in traffic. Either I stopped or I ran them down.

So I stopped. They moved even closer, blocking my way completely, and started sprouting pseudo limbs while chittering at each other. I could not understand them at all. Quickly they were plucking at my clothes and snaking their patty-paws into my sleeve pockets.

The crowd was so tight that I could hardly go around them. I was stretched between two needs. In the first place they were so darn cute that I wanted to see if I didn’t have a sweet tucked away somewhere for them—but in a still firster place was the knowledge that the adoption ceremony was timed like a ballet. If I didn’t get



on down that street, I was going to commit the classic sin against propriety made famous by Kkkahgral the Younger himself.

But the kids were not about to get out of my way. One of them had found my watch.

I sighed and was almost overpowered by the perfume. Then I made a bet with myself. I bet that baby-kissing was a Galactic Universal and that it took precedence even over Martian propriety. I got on one knee, making myself about the height they were, and fondled them for a few moments, patting them and running my hands down their scales.

Then I stood up and said carefully, "That is all now. I must go," which used up a large fraction of my stock of Basic Martian.

The kids clung to me but I moved them carefully and gently aside and went on down the double line, hurrying to make up for the time I had lost. No life wand burned a hole in my back. I risked a hope that my violation of propriety had not yet reached the capital offense level. I reached the ramp leading down into the inner nest and started on down.

\* \* \* \* \*

That line of asterisks represents the adoption ceremony. Why? Because it is limited to members of the Kkkah nest. It is a family matter.

Put it this way: A Mormon may have very close gentile friends—but does that friendship get a gentile inside the Temple at Salt Lake City? It never has and it never will. Martians visit very freely back and forth between their nests—but a Martian enters the inner nest only of his own family. Even his conjugate-spouses are not thus privileged. I have no more right to tell the details of the adoption ceremony than a lodge brother has to be specific about ritual outside the lodge.

Oh, the rough outlines do not matter, since they are the same for any nest, just as my part was the same for any candidate. My sponsor—Bonforte's oldest Martian friend, Kkkahrreash—met me at the door and threatened me with a wand. I demanded that he kill me at once were I guilty of any breach. To tell the truth, I did not recognize him, even though I had studied a picture of him. But it had to be him because ritual required it.

Having thus made clear that I stood four-square for Mother-



hood, the Home, Civic Virtue, and never missing Sunday school, I was permitted to enter. 'Rrreash conducted me around all the stations, I was questioned and I responded. Every word, every gesture, was as stylized as a classical Chinese play, else I would not have stood a chance. Most of the time I did not know what they were saying and half of the time I did not understand my own replies; I simply knew my cues and the responses. It was not made easier by the low light level the Martians prefer; I was groping around like a mole.

I played once with Hawk Mantell, shortly before he died, after he was stone-deaf. There was a trouper! He could not even use a hearing device because the eighth nerve was dead. Part of the time he could cue by lips but that is not always possible. He directed the production himself and he timed it perfectly. I have seen him deliver a line, walk away—then whirl around and snap out a retort to a line that he had never heard, precisely on the timing.

This was like that. I knew my part and I played it. If *they* blew it, that was their lookout.

But it did not help my morale that there were never less than half a dozen wands leveled at me the whole time. I kept telling myself that they wouldn't burn me down for a slip. After all, I was just a poor stupid human being and at the very least they would give me a passing mark for effort. But I didn't believe it.

After what seemed like days—but was not, since the whole ceremony times exactly one ninth of Mars' rotation—after an endless time, we ate. I don't know what and perhaps it is just as well. It did not poison me.

After that the elders made their speeches, I made my acceptance speech in answer, and they gave me my name and my wand. I was a Martian.

I did not know how to use the wand and my name sounded like a leaky faucet, but from that instant on it was my legal name on Mars and I was legally a blood member of the most aristocratic family on the planet—exactly fifty-two hours after a ground hog down on his luck had spent his last half-Imperial buying a drink for a stranger in the bar of Casa Mañana.

I guess this proves that one should never pick up strangers.

I got out as quickly as possible. Dak had made up a speech for me in which I claimed proper necessity for leaving at once and



they let me go. I was nervous as a man upstairs in a sorority house because there was no longer ritual to guide me. I mean to say even casual social behavior was still hedged around with airtight and risky custom and I did not know the moves. So I recited my excuse and headed out. 'Rrreash and another elder went with me and I chanced playing with another pair of the kids when we were outside—or maybe the same pair. Once I reached the gates the two elders said good-bye in squeaky English and let me go out alone; the gates closed behind me and I reswallowed my heart.

The Rolls was waiting where they had let me out; I hurried down, a door opened, and I was surprised to see that Penny was in it alone. But not displeased. I called out, "Hi, Curly Top! I made it!"

"I knew you would."

I gave a mock sword salute with my wand and said, "Just call me Kkkahjjjerrr"—spraying the front rows with the second syllable.

"Be careful with that thing!" she said nervously.

I slid in beside her on the front seat and asked, "Do you know how to use one of these things?" The reaction was setting in and I felt exhausted but gay; I wanted three quick drinks and a thick steak, then to wait up for the critics' reviews.

"No. But do be careful."

"I think all you have to do is to press it here," which I did, and there was a neat two-inch hole in the windshield and the car wasn't pressurized any longer.

Penny gasped. I said, "Gee, I'm sorry. I'll put it away until Dak can coach me."

She gulped. "It's all right. Just be careful where you point it." She started wheeling the car and I found that Dak was not the only one with a heavy hand on the damper.

Wind was whistling in through the hole I had made. I said, "What's the rush? I need some time to study my lines for the press conference. Did you bring them? And where are the others?" I had forgotten completely the driver we had grabbed; I had not thought about him from the time the gates of the nest opened.

"No. They couldn't come."

"Penny, what's the matter? What's happened?" I was wondering if I could possibly take a press conference without coaching.



Perhaps I could tell them a little about the adoption; I wouldn't have to fake that.

"It's Mr. Bonforte—they've found him."

## 6

I had not noticed until then that she had not once called me "Mr. Bonforte." She could not, of course, for I was no longer he; I was again Lorrie Smythe, that actor chap they had hired to stand in for him.

I sat back and sighed, and let myself relax. "So it's over at last—and we got away with it." I felt a great burden lift off me; I had not known how heavy it was until I put it down. Even my "lame" leg stopped aching. I reached over and patted Penny's hand on the wheel and said in my own voice, "I'm glad it's over. But I'm going to miss having you around, pal. You're a trouper. But even the best run ends and the company breaks up. I hope I'll see you again sometime."

"I hope so too."

"I suppose Dak has arranged some shenanigan to keep me under cover and sneak me back into the *Tom Paine*?"

"I don't know." Her voice sounded odd and I gave her a quick glance and saw that she was crying. My heart gave a skip. Penny crying? Over us separating? I could not believe it and yet I wanted to. One might think that, between my handsome features and cultivated manners, women would find me irresistible, but it is a deplorable fact that all too many of them have found me easy to resist. Penny had seemed to find it no effort at all.

"Penny," I said hastily, "why all the tears, hon? You'll wreck this car."

"I can't help it."

"Well—put me in it. What's wrong? You told me they had got him back; you didn't tell me anything else." I had a sudden horrid but logical suspicion. "He was *alive*—wasn't he?"

"Yes—he's alive—but, oh, they've *hurt* him!" She started to sob and I had to grab the wheel.

She straightened up quickly. "Sorry."



"Want me to drive?"

"I'll be all right. Besides, you don't know how—I mean you aren't supposed to know how to drive."

"Huh? Don't be silly. I do know how and it no longer matters that—" I broke off, suddenly realizing that it might still matter. If they had roughed up Bonforte so that it showed, then he could not appear in public in that shape—at least not only fifteen minutes after being adopted into the Kkkah nest. Maybe I would have to take that press conference and depart publicly, while Bonforte would be the one they would sneak aboard. Well, all right—hardly more than a curtain call. "Penny, do Dak and Rog want me to stay in character for a bit? Do I play to the reporters? Or don't I?"

"I don't know. There wasn't time."

We were already approaching the stretch of godowns by the field, and the giant bubble domes of Goddard City were in sight. "Penny, slow this car down and talk sense. I've got to have my cues."

The driver had talked—I neglected to ask whether or not the bobby-pin treatment had been used. He had then been turned loose to walk back but had not been deprived of his mask; the others had barreled back to Goddard City, with Dak at the wheel. I felt lucky to have been left behind; *voyageurs* should not be allowed to drive anything but spaceships.

They went to the address the driver had given them, in Old Town under the original bubble. I gathered that it was the sort of jungle every port has had since the Phoenicians sailed through the shoulder of Africa, a place of released transportees, prostitutes, monkey-pushers, rangees, and other dregs—a neighborhood where policemen travel only in pairs.

The information they had squeezed out of the driver had been correct but a few minutes out of date. The room had housed the prisoner, certainly, for there was a bed in it which seemed to have been occupied continuously for at least a week, a pot of coffee was still hot—and wrapped in a towel on a shelf was an old-fashioned removable denture which Clifton identified as belonging to Bonforte. But Bonforte himself was missing and so were his captors.

They had left there with the intention of carrying out the origi-



nal plan, that of claiming that the kidnaping had taken place immediately after the adoption and putting pressure on Boothroyd by threatening to appeal to the Nest of Kkkah. But they had found Bonforte, had simply run across him in the street before they left Old Town—a poor old stumblebum with a week's beard, dirty and dazed. The men had not recognized him, but Penny had known him and made them stop.

She broke into sobs again as she told me this part and we almost ran down a truck train snaking up to one of the loading docks.

A reasonable reconstruction seemed to be that the laddies in the second car—the one that was to crash us—had reported back, whereupon the faceless leaders of our opponents had decided that the kidnaping no longer served their purposes. Despite the arguments I had heard about it, I was surprised that they had not simply killed him; it was not until later that I understood that what they had done was subtler, more suited to their purposes, and much crueller than mere killing.

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"Dak took him to the *voyageurs*' hostel in Dome 3."

"Is that where we are headed?"

"I don't know. Rog just said to go pick you up, then they disappeared in the service door of the hostel. Uh, no, I don't think we dare go there. I don't know what to do."

"Penny, stop the car."

"Huh?"

"Surely this car has a phone. We won't stir another inch until we find out—or figure out—what we should do. But I am certain of one thing: I should stay in character until Dak or Rog decides that I should fade out. Somebody has to talk to the newsmen. Somebody has to make a public departure for the *Tom Paine*. You're sure that Mr. Bonforte can't be spruced up so that he can do it?"

"What? Oh, he couldn't possibly. You didn't *see* him."

"So I didn't. I'll take your word for it. All right, Penny, I'm 'Mr. Bonforte' again and you're my secretary. We'd better get with it."

"Yes—Mr. Bonforte."

"Now try to get Captain Broadbent on the phone, will you, please?"

We couldn't find a phone list in the car and she had to go



through "Information," but at last she was tuned with the clubhouse of the *voyageurs*. I could hear both sides. "Pilots' Club, Mrs. Kelly speaking."

Penny covered the microphone. "Do I give my name?"

"Play it straight. We've nothing to hide."

"This is Mr. Bonforte's secretary," she said gravely. "Is his pilot there? Captain Broadbent?"

"I know him, dearie." There was a shout: "Hey! Any of you smokers see where Dak went?" After a pause she went on, "He's gone to his room. I'm buzzing him."

Shortly Penny said, "Skipper? The Chief wants to talk to you," and handed me the phone.

"This is the Chief, Dak."

"Oh. Where are you—sir?"

"Still in the car. Penny picked me up. Dak, Bill scheduled a press conference, I believe. Where is it?"

He hesitated. "I'm glad you called in, sir. Bill canceled it. There's been a—slight change in the situation."

"So Penny told me. I'm just as well pleased; I'm rather tired. Dak, I've decided not to stay dirtside tonight; my gimp leg has been bothering me and I'm looking forward to a real rest in free fall." I hated free fall but Bonforte did not. "Will you or Rog make my apologies to the Commissioner, and so forth?"

"We'll take care of everything, sir."

"Good. How soon can you arrange a shuttle for me?"

"The *Pixie* is still standing by for you, sir. If you will go to Gate 3, I'll phone and have a field car pick you up."

"Very good. Out."

"Out, sir."

I handed the phone to Penny to put back in its clamp. "Curly Top, I don't know whether that phone frequency is monitored or not—or whether possibly the whole car is bugged. If either is the case, they may have learned two things—where Dak is and through that where *he* is, and second, what I am about to do next. Does that suggest anything to your mind?"

She looked thoughtful, then took out her secretary's notebook, wrote in it: *Let's get rid of the car.*

I nodded, then took the book from her and wrote in it: *How far away is Gate 3?*

She answered: *Walking distance.*



Silently we climbed out and left. She had pulled into some executive's parking space outside one of the warehouses when she had parked the car; no doubt in time it would be returned where it belonged—and such minutiae no longer mattered.

We had gone about fifty yards, when I stopped. Something was the matter. Not the day, certainly. It was almost balmy, with the sun burning brightly in clear, purple Martian sky. The traffic, wheel and foot, seemed to pay no attention to us, or at least such attention was for the pretty young woman with me rather than directed at me. Yet I felt uneasy.

"What is it, Chief?"

"Eh? *That* is what it is!"

"Sir?"

"I'm not being the 'Chief.' It isn't in character to go dodging off like this. Back we go, Penny."

She did not argue, but followed me back to the car. This time I climbed into the back seat, sat there looking dignified, and let her chauffeur me to Gate 3.

It was not the gate we had come in. I think Dak had chosen it because it ran less to passengers and more to freight. Penny paid no attention to signs and ran the big Rolls right up to the gate. A terminal policeman tried to stop her; she simply said coldly, "Mr. Bonforte's car. And will you please send word to the Commissioner's office to call for it here?"

He looked baffled, glanced into the rear compartment, seemed to recognize me, saluted, and let us stay. I answered with a friendly wave and he opened the door for me. "The lieutenant is very particular about keeping the space back of the fence clear, Mr. Bonforte," he apologized, "but I guess it's all right."

"You can have the car moved at once," I said. "My secretary and I are leaving. Is my field car here?"

"I'll find out at the gate, sir." He left. It was just the amount of audience I wanted, enough to tie it down solid that "Mr. Bonforte" had arrived by official car and had left for his space yacht. I tucked my life wand under my arm like Napoleon's baton and limped after him, with Penny tagging along. The cop spoke to the gatemaster, then hurried back to us, smiling. "Field car is waiting, sir."



"Thanks indeed." I was congratulating myself on the perfection of the timing.

"Uh . . ." The cop looked flustered and added hurriedly, in a low voice, "I'm an Expansionist, too, sir. Good job you did today." He glanced at the life wand with a touch of awe.

I knew exactly how Bonforte should look in this routine. "Why, thank you. I hope you have lots of children. We need to work up a solid majority."

He guffawed more than it was worth. "That's a good one! Uh, mind if I repeat it?"

"Not at all." We had moved on and I started through the gate. The gatemaster touched my arm. "Er . . . Your passport, Mr. Bonforte."

I trust I did not let my expression change. "The passports, Penny."

She looked frostily at the official. "Captain Broadbent takes care of all clearances."

He looked at me and looked away. "I suppose it's all right. But I'm supposed to check them and take down the serial numbers."

"Yes, of course. Well, I suppose I must ask Captain Broadbent to run out to the field. Has my shuttle been assigned a take-off time? Perhaps you had better arrange with the tower to 'hold.'"

But Penny appeared to be cattily angry. "Mr. Bonforte, this is ridiculous! We've *never* had this red tape before—certainly not on *Mars*."

The cop said hastily, "Of course it's all right, Hans. After all, this is Mr. Bonforte."

"Sure, but—"

I interrupted with a happy smile. "There's a simpler way out. If you—what is your name, sir?"

"Haslwanter. Hans Haslwanter," he answered reluctantly.

"Mr. Haslwanter, if you will call Mr. Commissioner Boothroyd, I'll speak to him and we can save my pilot a trip out to the field—and save me an hour or more of time."

"Uh, I wouldn't like to do that, sir. I could call the port captain's office?" he suggested hopefully.

"Just get me Mr. Boothroyd's number. *I* will call him." This time I put a touch of frost into my voice, the attitude of the busy and important man who wishes to be democratic but has had all



the pushing around and hampering by underlings that he intends to put up with.

That did it. He said hastily, "I'm sure it's all right, Mr. Bonforte. It's just—well, regulations, you know."

"Yes, I know. Thank you." I started to push on through.

"Hold it, Mr. Bonforte! Look this way."

I glanced around. That *i*-dotting and *t*-crossing civil servant had held us up just long enough to let the press catch up with us. One man had dropped to his knee and was pointing a stereobox at me; he looked up and said, "Hold the wand where we can see it." Several others with various types of equipment were gathering around us; one had climbed up on the roof of the Rolls. Someone else was shoving a microphone at me and another had a directional mike aimed like a gun.

I was as angry as a leading woman with her name in small type but I remembered who I was supposed to be. I smiled and moved slowly. Bonforte had a good grasp of the fact that motion appears faster in pictures; I could afford to do it properly.

"Mr. Bonforte, why did you cancel the press conference?"

"Mr. Bonforte, it is asserted that you intend to demand that the Grand Assembly grant full Empire citizenship to Martians; will you comment?"

"Mr. Bonforte, how soon are you going to force a vote of confidence in the present government?"

I held up my hand with the wand in it and grinned. "One at a time, please! Now what was that first question?"

They all answered at once, of course; by the time they had sorted out precedence I had managed to waste several moments without having to answer anything. Bill Corpsman came charging up at that point. "Have a heart, boys. The Chief has had a hard day. I gave you all you need."

I held out a palm at him. "I can spare a minute or two, Bill. Gentlemen, I'm just about to leave but I'll try to cover the essentials of what you have asked. So far as I know the present government does not plan any reassessment of the relation of Mars to the Empire. Since I am not in office my own opinions are hardly pertinent. I suggest that you ask Mr. Quiroga. On the question of how soon the opposition will force a vote of confidence all I can say is that we won't do it unless we are sure we can win it—and you know as much about that as I do."



Someone said, "That doesn't say much, does it?"

"It was not intended to say much," I retorted, softening it with a grin. "Ask me questions I can legitimately answer and I will. Ask me those loaded 'Have-you-quit-beating-your-wife?' sort and I have answers to match." I hesitated, realizing that Bonforte had a reputation for bluntness and honesty, especially with the press. "But I am not trying to stall you. You all know why I am here today. Let me say this about it—and you can quote me if you wish." I reached back into my mind and hauled up an appropriate bit from the speeches of Bonforte I had studied. "The real meaning of what happened today is not that of an honor to one man. This"—I gestured with the Martian wand—"is proof that two great races can reach out across the gap of strangeness with understanding. Our own race is spreading out to the stars. We shall find—we *are* finding—that we are vastly outnumbered. If we are to succeed in our expansion to the stars, we must deal honestly, humbly, with open hearts. I have heard it said that our Martian neighbors would overrun Earth if given the chance. This is nonsense; Earth is not suited to Martians. Let us protect our own—but let us not be seduced by fear and hatred into foolish acts. The stars will never be won by little minds; we must be big as space itself."

The reporter cocked an eyebrow. "Mr. Bonforte, seems to me I heard you make that speech last February."

"You will hear it next February. Also January, March, and all the other months. Truth cannot be too often repeated." I glanced back at the gatemaster and added, "I'm sorry but I'll have to go now—or I'll miss the tick." I turned and went through the gate, with Penny after me.

We climbed into the little lead-armored field car and the door sighed shut. The car was automatized, so I did not have to play up for a driver; I threw myself down and relaxed. "Whew!"

"I thought you did beautifully," Penny said seriously.

"I had a bad moment when he spotted the speech I was cribbing."

"You got away with it. It was an inspiration. You—you sounded just like *him*."

"Was there anybody there I should have called by name?"

"Not really. One or two maybe, but they wouldn't expect it when you were so rushed."

"I was caught in a squeeze. That fiddlin' gatemaster and his



passports. Penny, I should think that you would carry them rather than Dak."

"Dak doesn't carry them. We all carry our own." She reached into her bag, pulled out a little book. "I had mine—but I did not dare admit it."

"Eh?"

"*He* had *his* on him when they got him. We haven't dared ask for a replacement—not at this time."

I was suddenly very weary.

Having no instructions from Dak or Rog, I stayed in character during the shuttle trip up and on entering the *Tom Paine*. It wasn't difficult; I simply went straight to the owner's cabin and spent long, miserable hours in free fall, biting my nails and wondering what was happening down on the surface. With the aid of anti-nausea pills I finally managed to float off into fitful sleep—which was a mistake, for I had a series of no-pants nightmares, with reporters pointing at me and cops touching me on the shoulder and Martians aiming their wands at me. They all knew I was phony and were simply arguing over who had the privilege of taking me apart and putting me down the oubliette.

I was awakened by the hooting of the acceleration alarm. Dak's vibrant baritone was booming, "First and last red warning! One third gee! One minute!" I hastily pulled myself over to my bunk and held on. I felt lots better when it hit; one third gravity is not much, about the same as Mars' surface I think, but it is enough to steady the stomach and make the floor a real floor.

About five minutes later Dak knocked and let himself in as I was going to the door. "Howdy, Chief."

"Hello, Dak. I'm certainly glad to see you back."

"Not as glad as I am to be back," he said wearily. He eyed my bunk. "Mind if I spread out there?"

"Help yourself."

He did so and sighed. "Cripes, am I pooped! I could sleep for a week . . . I think I will."

"Let's both of us. Uh . . . You got him aboard?"

"Yes. What a gymkhana!"

"I suppose so. Still, it must be easier to do a job like that in a small, informal port like this than it was to pull the stunts you rigged at Jefferson."



"Huh? No, it's much harder here."

"Eh?"

"Obviously. Here everybody knows everybody—and people will talk." Dak smiled wryly. "We brought him aboard as a case of frozen canal shrimp. Had to pay export duty, too."

"Dak, how is he?"

"Well . . ." Dak frowned. "Doc Capek says that he will make a complete recovery—that it is just a matter of time." He added explosively, "If I could lay my hands on those rats! It would make you break down and bawl to see what they did to him—and yet we have to let them get away with it cold—for *his* sake."

Dak was fairly close to bawling himself. I said gently, "I gathered from Penny that they had roughed him up quite a lot. How badly is he hurt?"

"Huh? You must have misunderstood Penny. Aside from being filthy-dirty and needing a shave he was not hurt physically at all."

I looked stupid. "I thought they beat him up. Something about like working him over with a baseball bat."

"I would rather they had! Who cares about a few broken bones? No, no, it was what they did to his *brain*."

"Oh . . ." I felt ill. "Brainwash?"

"Yes. Yes and no. They couldn't have been trying to make him talk because he didn't have any secrets that were of any possible political importance. He always operated out in the open and everybody knows it. They must have been using it simply to keep him under control, keep him from trying to escape."

He went on, "Doc says that he thinks they must have been using the minimum daily dose, just enough to keep him docile, until just before they turned him loose. Then they shot him with a load that would turn an elephant into a gibbering idiot. The front lobes of his brain must be soaked like a bath sponge."

I felt so ill that I was glad I had not eaten. I had once read up on the subject; I hate it so much that it fascinates me. To my mind there is something immoral and degrading in an absolute cosmic sense in tampering with a man's personality. Murder is a clean crime in comparison, a mere peccadillo. "Brainwash" is a term that comes down to us from the Communist movement of the Late Dark Ages; it was first applied to breaking a man's will and altering his personality by physical indignities and subtle torture. But that might take months; later they found a "better" way, one



which would turn a man into a babbling slave in seconds—simply inject any one of several cocaine derivatives into his frontal brain lobes.

The filthy practice had first been developed for a legitimate purpose, to quiet disturbed patients and make them accessible to psychotherapy. As such, it was a humane advance, for it was used instead of lobotomy—"lobotomy" is a term almost as obsolete as "chastity girdle" but it means stirring a man's brain with a knife in such a fashion as to destroy his personality without killing him. Yes, they really used to do that—just as they used to beat them to "drive the devils out."

The Communists developed the new brainwash-by-drugs to an efficient technique, then when there were no more Communists, the Bands of Brothers polished it up still further until they could dose a man so lightly that he was simply receptive to leadership—or load him until he was a mindless mass of protoplasm—all in the sweet name of brotherhood. After all, you can't have "brotherhood" if a man is stubborn enough to want to keep his own secrets, can you? And what better way is there to be sure that he is not holding out on you than to poke a needle past his eyeball and slip a shot of babble juice into his brain? "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs." The sophistries of villains—bah!

Of course, it has been illegal for a long, long time now, except for therapy, with the express consent of a court. But criminals use it and cops are sometimes not lily white, for it does make a prisoner talk and it does not leave any marks at all. The victim can even be told to forget that it has been done.

I knew most of this at the time Dak told me what had been done to Bonforte and the rest I cribbed out of the ship's Encyclopedia Batavia. See the article on "Psychic Integration" and the one on "Torture."

I shook my head and tried to put the nightmares out of my mind. "But he's going to recover?"

"Doc says that the drug does not alter the brain structure; it just paralyzes it. He says that eventually the blood stream picks up and carries away all of the dope; it reaches the kidneys and passes out of the body. But it takes time." Dak looked up at me. "Chief?"

"Eh? About time to knock off that 'Chief' stuff, isn't it? He's back."



"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Would it be too much trouble to you to keep up the impersonation just a little while longer?"

"But why? There's nobody here but just us chickens."

"That's not quite true. Lorenzo, we've managed to keep this secret awfully tight. There's me, there's you." He ticked it off on his fingers. "There's Doc and Rog and Bill. And Penny, of course. There's a man by the name of Langston back Earthside whom you've never met. I think Jimmie Washington suspects but he wouldn't tell his own mother the right time of day. We don't know how many took part in the kidnaping, but not many, you can be sure. In any case, *they* don't dare talk—and the joke of it is they no longer could prove that he had ever been missing even if they wanted to. But my point is this: here in the *Tommie* we've got all the crew and all the idlers not in on it. Old son, how about staying with it and letting yourself be seen each day by crewmen and by Jimmie Washington's girl and such—while *he* gets well? Huh?"

"Mmm . . . I don't see why not. How long will it be?"

"Just the trip back. We'll take it slow, at an easy boost. You'll enjoy it."

"Okay. Dak, don't figure this into my fee. I'm doing this piece of it just because I *hate* brainwashing."

Dak bounced up and clapped me on the shoulder. "You're my kind of people, Lorenzo. Don't worry about your fee; you'll be taken care of." His manner changed. "Very well, Chief. See you in the morning, sir."

But one thing leads to another. The boost we had started on Dak's return was a mere shift of orbits, to one farther out where there would be little chance of a news service sending up a shuttle for a follow-up story. I woke up in free fall, took a pill, and managed to eat breakfast. Penny showed up shortly thereafter. "Good morning, Mr. Bonforte."

"Good morning, Penny." I inclined my head in the direction of the guest room. "Any news?"

"No, sir. About the same. Captain's compliments and would it be too much trouble for you to come to his cabin?"

"Not at all." Penny followed me in. Dak was there, with his heels hooked to his chair to stay in place; Rog and Bill were strapped to the couch.



Dak looked around and said, "Thanks for coming in, Chief. We need some help."

"Good morning. What is it?"

Clifton answered my greeting with his usual dignified deference and called me Chief; Corpsman nodded. Dak went on, "To clean this up in style you should make one more appearance."

"Eh? I thought——"

"Just a second. The networks were led to expect a major speech from you today, commenting on yesterday's event. I thought Rog intended to cancel it, but Bill has the speech worked up. Question is, will you deliver it?"

The trouble with adopting a cat is that they always have kittens. "Where? Goddard City?"

"Oh no. Right in your cabin. We beam it to Phobos; they can it for Mars and also put it on the high circuit for New Batavia, where the Earth nets will pick it up and where it will be relayed for Venus, Ganymede, et cetera. Inside of four hours it will be all over the system but you'll never have to stir out of your cabin."

There is something very tempting about a grand network. I had never been on one but once and that time my act got clipped down to the point where my face showed for only twenty-seven seconds. But to have one all to myself——

Dak thought I was reluctant and added, "It won't be a strain, as we are equipped to can it right here in the *Tommie*. Then we can project it first and clip out anything if necessary."

"Well—all right. You have the script, Bill?"

"Yes."

"Let me check it."

"What do you mean? You'll have it in plenty of time."

"Isn't that it in your hand?"

"Well, yes."

"Then let me read it."

Corpsman looked annoyed. "You'll have it an hour before we record. These things go better if they sound spontaneous."

"Sounding spontaneous is a matter of careful preparation, Bill. It's my trade. I know."

"You did all right at the skyfield yesterday without rehearsal. This is just more of the same old hoke: I want you to do it the same way."

Bonforte's personality was coming through stronger the longer



Corpsman stalled; I think Clifton could see that I was about to cloud up and storm, for he said, "Oh, for Pete's sake, Bill! Hand him the speech."

Corpsman snorted and threw the sheets at me. In free fall they sailed but the air spread them wide. Penny gathered them together, sorted them, and gave them to me. I thanked her, said nothing more, and started to read.

I skimmed through it in a fraction of the time it would take to deliver it. Finally I finished and looked up.

"Well?" said Rog.

"About five minutes of this concerns the adoption. The rest is an argument for the policies of the Expansionist Party. Pretty much the same as I've heard in the speeches you've had me study."

"Yes," agreed Clifton. "The adoption is the hook we hang the rest on. As you know, we expect to force a vote of confidence before long."

"I understand. You can't miss this chance to beat the drum. Well, it's all right, but—"

"But what? What's worrying you?"

"Well—characterization. In several places the wording should be changed. It's not the way *he* would express it."

Corpsman exploded with a word unnecessary in the presence of a lady; I gave him a cold glance. "Now see here, Smythe," he went on, "who knows how Bonforte would say it? You? Or the man who has been writing his speeches the past four years?"

I tried to keep my temper; he had a point. "It is nevertheless the case," I answered, "that a line which looks okay in print may not deliver well. Mr. Bonforte is a great orator, I have already learned. He belongs with Webster, Churchill, and Demosthenes—a rolling grandeur expressed in simple words. Now take this word 'intransigent,' which you have used twice. I might say that, but I have a weakness for polysyllables; I like to exhibit my literary erudition. But Mr. Bonforte would stay 'stubborn' or 'mulish' or 'pigheaded.' The reason he would is, naturally, that they convey emotion much more effectively."

"You see that you make the delivery effective! I'll worry about the words."

"You don't understand, Bill. I don't care whether the speech is politically effective or not; my job is to carry out a charac-



terization. I can't do that if I put into the mouth of the character words that he would never use; it would sound as forced and phony as a goat spouting Greek. But if I read the speech in words he *would* use, it will automatically be effective. He's a great orator."

"Listen, Smythe, you're not hired to write speeches. You're hired to——"

"Hold it, Bill!" Dak cut in. "And a little less of that 'Smythe' stuff, too. Well, Rog? How about it?"

Clifton said, "As I understand it, Chief, your only objection is to some of the phrasing?"

"Well, yes. I'd suggest cutting out that personal attack on Mr. Quiroga, too, and the insinuation about his financial backers. It doesn't sound like real Bonforte to me."

He looked sheepish. "That's a bit I put in myself. But you may be right. He always gives a man the benefit of the doubt." He remained silent for a moment. "You make the changes you think you have to. We'll can it and look at the playback. We can always clip it—or even cancel completely 'due to technical difficulties.'"

He smiled grimly. "That's what we'll do, Bill."

"Damn it, this is a ridiculous example of——"

"That's how it is going to be, Bill."

Corpsman left the room very suddenly. Clifton sighed. "Bill always has hated the notion that anybody but Mr. B. could give him instructions. But he's an able man. Uh, Chief, how soon can you be ready to record? We patch in at sixteen hundred."

"I don't know. I'll be ready in time."

Penny followed me back into my office. When she closed the door I said, "I won't need you for the next hour or so, Penny child. But you might ask Doc for more of those pills. I may need them."

"Yes, sir." She floated with her back to the door. "Chief?"

"Yes, Penny?"

"I just wanted to say don't believe what Bill said about writing his speeches!"

"I didn't. I've heard his speeches—and I've read this."

"Oh, Bill does submit drafts, lots of times. So does Rog. I've even done it myself. He—*he* will use ideas from anywhere if he thinks they are good. But when he delivers a speech, it is *his*, every word of it."



"I believe you. I wish he had written this one ahead of time."

"You just do your best!"

I did. I started out simply substituting synonyms, putting in the gutty Germanic words in place of the "intestinal" Latin jaw-breakers. Then I got excited and red in the face and tore it to pieces. It's a lot of fun for an actor to mess around with lines; he doesn't get the chance very often.

I used no one but Penny for my audience and made sure from Dak that I was not being tapped elsewhere in the ship—though I suspect that the big-boned galoot cheated on me and listened in himself. I had Penny in tears in the first three minutes; by the time I finished (twenty-eight and a half minutes, just time for station announcements), she was limp. I took no liberties with the straight Expansionist doctrine, as proclaimed by its official prophet, the Right Honorable John Joseph Bonforte; I simply reconstructed his message and his delivery, largely out of phrases from other speeches.

Here's an odd thing—I believed every word of it while I was talking.

But, brother, I made a speech!

Afterwards we all listened to the playback, complete with full stereo of myself. Jimmie Washington was present, which kept Bill Corpsman quiet. When it was over I said, "How about it, Rog? Do we need to clip anything?"

He took his cigar out of his mouth and said, "No. If you want my advice, Chief, I'd say to let it go as it is."

Corpsman left the room again—but Mr. Washington came over with tears leaking out of his eyes—tears are a nuisance in free fall; there's nowhere for them to go. "Mr. Bonforte, that was *beautiful*."

"Thanks, Jimmie."

Penny could not talk at all.

I turned in after that; a top-notch performance leaves me fagged. I slept for more than eight hours, then was awakened by the hooter. I had strapped myself to my bunk—I hate to float around while sleeping in free fall—so I did not have to move. But I had not known that we were getting under way so I called the control room between first and second warning. "Captain Broadbent?"



"Just a moment, sir," I heard Epstein answer.

Then Dak's voice came over. "Yes, Chief? We are getting under way on schedule—pursuant to your orders."

"Eh? Oh yes, certainly."

"I believe Mr. Clifton is on his way to your cabin."

"Very well, Captain." I lay back and waited.

Immediately after we started to boost at one gee Rog Clifton came in; he had a worried look on his face I could not interpret—equal parts of triumph, worry, and confusion. "What is it, Rog?"

"Chief! They've jumped the gun on us! The Quiroga government has resigned!"

## 7

I was still logy with sleep; I shook my head to try to clear it. "What are you in such a spin about, Rog? That's what you were trying to accomplish, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes, of course. But——" He stopped.

"But what? I don't get it. Here you chaps have been working and scheming for years to bring about this very thing. Now you've won—and you look like a bride who isn't sure she wants to go through with it. Why? The no-good-nicks are out and now God's chillun get their innings. No?"

"Uh—you haven't been in politics much."

"You know I haven't. I got trimmed when I ran for patrol leader in my scout troop. That cured me."

"Well, you see, timing is everything."

"So my father always told me. Look here, Rog, do I gather that if you had your druthers you'd druther Quiroga was still in office? You said he had 'jumped the gun.'"

"Let me explain. What we really wanted was to move a vote of confidence and win it, and thereby force a general election on them—but at our own time, when we estimated that we could win the election."

"Oh. And you don't figure you can win now? You think Quiroga will go back into office for another five years—or at least the Humanity Party will?"



Clifton looked thoughtful. "No, I think our chances are pretty good to win the election."

"Eh? Maybe I'm not awake yet. Don't you *want* to win?"

"Of course. But don't you see what this resignation has done to us?"

"I guess I don't."

"Well, the government in power can order a general election at any time up to the constitutional limitation of five years. Ordinarily they will go to the people when the time seems most favorable to them. But they don't resign between the announcement and the election unless forced to. You follow me?"

I realized that the event did seem odd, little attention as I paid to politics. "I believe so."

"But in this case Quiroga's government scheduled a general election, then resigned in a body, leaving the Empire without a government. Therefore the sovereign must call on someone else to form a 'caretaker' government to serve until the election. By the letter of the law he can ask any member of the Grand Assembly, but as a matter of strict constitutional precedent he has no choice. When a government resigns in a body—not just reshuffling portfolios but quits as a whole—then the sovereign *must* call on the leader of the opposition to form the 'caretaker' government. It's indispensable to our system; it keeps resigning from being just a gesture. Many other methods have been tried in the past; under some of them governments were changed as often as underwear. But our present system insures responsible government."

I was so busy trying to see the implications that I almost missed his next remark. "So, naturally, the Emperor has summoned Mr. Bonforte to New Batavia."

"Eh? New Batavia? Well!" I was thinking that I had never seen the Imperial capital. The one time I had been on the Moon the vicissitudes of my profession had left me without time or money for the side trip. "Then that is why we got under way? Well, I certainly don't mind. I suppose you can always find a way to send me home if the *Tommie* doesn't go back to Earth soon."

"What? Good heavens, don't worry about that now. When the time comes, Captain Broadbent can find any number of ways to deliver you home."

"Sorry. I forget that you have more important matters on your mind, Rog. Sure, I'm anxious to get home now that the job is



done. But a few days, or even a month, on Luna would not matter. I have nothing pressing me. But thanks for taking time to tell me the news." I searched his face. "Rog, you look worried as hell."

"Don't you see? The Emperor has sent for Mr. Bonforte. The *Emperor*, man! And Mr. Bonforte is in no shape to appear at an audience. They have risked a gambit—and perhaps trapped us in a checkmate!"

"Eh? Now wait a minute. Slow up. I see what you are driving at—but, look, friend, we aren't at New Batavia. We're a hundred million miles away, or two hundred million, or whatever it is. Doc Capek will have him wrung out and ready to speak his piece by then. Won't he?"

"Well—we hope so."

"But you aren't sure?"

"We can't be sure. Capek says that there is little clinical data on such massive doses. It depends on the individual's body chemistry and on the exact drug used."

I suddenly remembered a time when an understudy had slipped me a powerful purgative just before a performance. (But I went on anyhow, which proves the superiority of mind over matter—then I got him fired.) "Rog—they gave him that last, unnecessarily big dose not just out of simple sadism—but to set up this situation!"

"I think so. So does Capek."

"Hey! In that case it would mean that Quiroga himself is the man behind the kidnaping—and that we've had a *gangster* running the Empire!"

Rog shook his head. "Not necessarily. Not even probably. But it would indeed mean that the same forces who control the Actionists also control the machinery of the Humanity Party. But you will never pin anything on *them*; they are unreachable, ultra-respectable. Nevertheless, they could send word to Quiroga that the time had come to roll over and play dead—and have him do it. Almost certainly," he added, "without giving him a hint of the real reason why the moment was timely."

"Criminy! Do you mean to tell me that the top man in the Empire would fold up and quit, just like that? Because somebody behind the scenes ordered him to?"

"I'm afraid that is just what I do think."



I shook my head. "Politics is a dirty game!"

"No," Clifton answered insistently. "There is no such thing as a dirty game. But you sometimes run into dirty players."

"I don't see the difference."

"There is a world of difference. Quiroga is a third-rater and a stooge—in my opinion, a stooge for villains. But there is nothing third-rate about John Joseph Bonforte and he has never, *ever* been a stooge for anyone. As a follower, he believed in the cause; as the leader, he has led from conviction!"

"I stand corrected," I said humbly. "Well, what do we do? Have Dak drag his feet so that the *Tommie* does not reach New Batavia until he is back in shape to do the job?"

"We *can't* stall. We don't have to boost at more than one gravity; nobody would expect a man Bonforte's age to place unnecessary strain on his heart. But we can't delay. When the Emperor sends for you, you come."

"Then what?"

Rog looked at me without answering. I began to get edgy. "Hey, Rog, don't go getting any wild notions! This hasn't anything to do with *me*. I'm through, except for a few casual appearances around the ship. Dirty or not, politics is not my game—just pay me off and ship me home and I'll guarantee never even to register to vote!"

"You probably wouldn't have to do anything. Dr. Capek will almost certainly have him in shape for it. But it isn't as if it were anything *hard*—not like that adoption ceremony—just an audience with the Emperor and—"

"The Emperor!" I almost screamed. Like most Americans, I did not understand royalty, did not really approve of the institution in my heart—and had a sneaking, unadmitted awe of kings. After all, we Americans came in by the back door. When we swapped associate status under treaty for the advantages of a full voice in the affairs of the Empire, it was explicitly agreed that our local institutions, our own constitution, and so forth, would not be affected—and tacitly agreed that no member of the royal family would ever visit America. Maybe that is a bad thing. Maybe if we were used to royalty we would not be so impressed by them. In any case, it is notorious that "democratic" American women are more quiveringly anxious to be presented at court than is anybody else.



"Now take it easy," Rog answered. "You probably won't have to do it at all. We just want to be prepared. What I was trying to tell you is that a 'caretaker' government is no problem. It passes no laws, changes no policies. I'll take care of all the work. All you will have to do—if you have to do anything—is make the formal appearance before King Willem—and possibly show up at a controlled press conference or two, depending on how long it is before *he* is well again. What you have already done is much harder—and you will be paid whether we need you or not."

"Damn it, pay has nothing to do with it! It's—well, in the words of a famous character in theatrical history, 'Include me *out*.'"

Before Rog could answer, Bill Corpsman came bursting into my cabin without knocking, looked at us, and said sharply to Clifton, "Have you told him?"

"Yes," agreed Clifton. "He's turned down the job."

"Huh? Nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense," I answered, "and by the way, Bill, that door you just came through has a nice spot on it to knock. In the profession the custom is to knock and shout, 'Are you decent?' I wish you would remember it."

"Oh, dirty sheets! We're in a hurry. What's this guff about your refusing?"

"It's not guff. This is not the job I signed up for."

"Garbage! Maybe you are too stupid to realize it, Smythe, but you are in too deep to prattle about backing out. It wouldn't be healthy."

I went to him and grabbed his arm. "Are you threatening me? If you are, let's go outside and talk it over."

He shook my hand off. "In a spaceship? You really are simple, aren't you? But haven't you got it through your thick head that you caused this mess yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"He means," Clifton answered, "that he is convinced that the fall of the Quiroga government was the direct result of the speech you made earlier today. It is even possible that he is right. But it is beside the point. Bill, try to be reasonably polite, will you? We get nowhere by bickering."

I was so surprised by the suggestion that *I* had caused Quiroga to resign that I forgot all about my desire to loosen Corpsman's



teeth. Were they serious? Sure, it was one dilly of a fine speech, but was such a result possible?

Well, if it was, it was certainly fast service.

I said wonderingly, "Bill, do I understand that you are complaining that the speech I made was too effective to suit you?"

"Huh? Hell, no! It was a lousy speech."

"So? You can't have it both ways. You're saying that a lousy speech went over so big that it scared the Humanity Party right out of office. Is that what you meant?"

Corpsman looked annoyed, started to answer, and caught sight of Clifton suppressing a grin. He scowled, again started to reply—finally shrugged and said, "All right, buster, you proved your point; the speech could not have had anything to do with the fall of the Quiroga government. Nevertheless, we've got work to do. So what's this about you not being willing to carry your share of the load?"

I looked at him and managed to keep my temper—Bonforte's influence again; playing the part of a calm-tempered character tends to make one calm inside. "Bill, again you cannot have it two ways. You have made it emphatically clear that you consider me just a hired hand. Therefore I have no obligation beyond my job, which is finished. You can't hire me for another job unless it suits me. It doesn't."

He started to speak but I cut in. "That's all. Now get out. You're not welcome here."

He looked astounded. "Who the hell do you think you are to give orders around here?"

"Nobody. Nobody at all, as you have pointed out. But this is my private room, assigned to me by the Captain. So now get out or be thrown out. I don't like your manners."

Clifton added quietly, "Clear out, Bill. Regardless of anything else, it is his private cabin at the present time. So you had better leave." Rog hesitated, then added, "I think we both might as well leave; we don't seem to be getting anywhere. If you will excuse us—Chief?"

"Certainly."

I sat and thought about it for several minutes. I was sorry that I had let Corpsman provoke me even into such a mild exchange; it lacked dignity. But I reviewed it in my mind and assured myself



that my personal differences with Corpsman had not affected my decision; my mind had been made up before he appeared.

A sharp knock came at the door. I called out, "Who is it?"

"Captain Broadbent."

"Come in, Dak."

He did so, sat down, and for some minutes seemed interested only in pulling hangnails. Finally he looked up and said, "Would it change your mind if I slapped the blighter in the brig?"

"Eh? Do you have a brig in the ship?"

"No. But it would not be hard to jury-rig one."

I looked at him sharply, trying to figure what went on inside that bony head. "Would you actually put Bill in the brig if I asked for it?"

He looked up, cocked a brow, and grinned wryly. "No. A man doesn't get to be a captain operating on any such basis as that. I would not take that sort of order even from *him*." He inclined his head toward the room Bonforte was in. "Certain decisions a man must make himself."

"That's right."

"Mmm—I hear you've made one of that sort."

"That's right."

"So. I've come to have a lot of respect for you, old son. First met you, I figured you for a clotheshorse and a facemaker, with nothing inside. I was wrong."

"Thank you."

"So I won't plead with you. Just tell me: is it worth our time to discuss the factors? Have you given it plenty of thought?"

"My mind is made up, Dak. This isn't my pidgin."

"Well, perhaps you're right. I'm sorry. I guess we'll just have to hope he pulls out of it in time." He stood up. "By the way, Penny would like to see you, if you aren't going to turn in again this minute."

I laughed without pleasure. "Just 'by the way,' eh? Is this the proper sequence? Isn't it Dr. Capek's turn to try to twist my arm?"

"He skipped his turn; he's busy with Mr. B. He sent you a message, though."

"Eh?"

"He said you could go to hell. Embroidered it a bit, but that was the gist."

"He did? Well, tell him I'll save him a seat by the fire."



"Can Penny come in?"

"Oh, sure! But you can tell her that she is wasting her time; the answer is still 'No.'"

So I changed my mind. Confound it, why should an argument seem so much more logical when underlined with a whiff of *Jungle Lust*? Not that Penny used unfair means, she did not even shed tears—not that I laid a finger on her—but I found myself conceding points, and presently there were no more points to concede. There is no getting around it, Penny is the world-saver type and her sincerity is contagious.

The boning I did on the trip out to Mars was as nothing to the hard study I put in on the trip to New Batavia. I already had the basic character; now it was necessary to fill in the background, prepare myself to *be* Bonforte under almost any circumstances. While it was the royal audience I was aiming at, once we were at New Batavia I might have to meet any of hundreds or thousands of people. Rog planned to give me a defense in depth of the sort that is routine for any public figure if he is to get work done; nevertheless, I would have to see people—a public figure is a public figure, no way to get around that.

The tightrope act I was going to have to attempt was made possible only by Bonforte's Farleyfile, perhaps the best one ever compiled. Farley was a political manager of the twentieth century, of Eisenhower I believe, and the method he invented for handling the personal relations of politics was as revolutionary as the German invention of staff command was to warfare. Yet I had never heard of the device until Penny showed me Bonforte's.

It was nothing but a file about people. However, the art of politics is "nothing but" people. This file contained all, or almost all, of the thousands upon thousands of people Bonforte had met in the course of his long public life; each dossier consisted of what he knew about that person *from Bonforte's own personal contact*. Anything at all, no matter how trivial—in fact, trivia were always the first entries: names and nicknames of wives, children, and pets, hobbies, tastes in food or drink, prejudices, eccentricities. Following this would be listed date and place and comments for *every occasion* on which Bonforte had talked to that particular man.

When available, a photo was included. There might or might not



be "below-the-line" data, i.e. information which had been researched rather than learned directly by Bonforte. It depended on the political importance of the person. In some cases the "below-the-line" part was a formal biography running to thousands of words.

Both Penny and Bonforte himself carried minicorders powered by their body heat. If Bonforte was alone he would dictate into his own when opportunity offered—in rest rooms, while riding, etc.; if Penny went along she would take it down in hers, which was disguised to look like a wrist watch. Penny could not possibly do the transcribing and microfilming; two of Jimmie Washington's girls did little else.

When Penny showed me the Farleyfile, showed me the very bulk of it—and it was bulky, even at ten thousand words or more to the spool—and then told me that this represented personal information about Mr. Bonforte's acquaintances, I scroaned (which is a scream and groan done together, with intense feeling). "God's mercy, child! I tried to tell you this job could not be done. How could anyone memorize all that?"

"Why, you can't, of course."

"You just said that this was what *he* remembered about his friends and acquaintances."

"Not quite. I said that this is what he wanted to remember. But since he can't, not possibly, this is how he does it. Don't worry; you don't have to memorize anything. I just want you to know that it is available. It is my job to see that he has at least a minute or two to study the appropriate Farleyfile before anybody gets in to see him. If the need turns up, I can protect you with the same service."

I looked at the typical file she had projected on the desk reader. A Mr. Saunders of Pretoria, South Africa, I believe it was. He had a bulldog named Snuffles Bullyboy, several assorted uninteresting offspring, and he liked a twist of lime in his whisky and splash. "Penny, do you mean to tell me that Mr. B. pretends to remember minutiae like that? It strikes me as rather phony."

Instead of getting angry at the slur on her idol Penny nodded soberly. "I thought so once. But you don't look at it correctly, Chief. Do you ever write down the telephone number of a friend?"

"Eh? Of course."



"Is it dishonest? Do you apologize to your friend for caring so little about him that you can't simply remember his number?"

"*Eh?* All right, I give up. You've sold me."

"These are things he would like to remember if his memory were perfect. Since it isn't, it is no more phony to do it this way than it is to use a tickler file in order not to forget a friend's birthday—that's what it is: a giant tickler file, to cover *anything*. But there is more to it. Did you ever meet a really important person?"

I tried to think. Penny did not mean the greats of the theatrical profession; she hardly knew they existed. "I once met President Warfield. I was a kid of ten or eleven."

"Do you remember the details?"

"Why, certainly. He said, 'How did you break that arm, son?' and I said, 'Riding a bicycle, sir,' and he said, 'Did the same thing myself, only it was a collarbone.'"

"Do you think he would remember it if he were still alive?"

"Why, no."

"He might—he may have had you Farleyfiled. This Farleyfile includes boys of that age, because boys grow up and become men. The point is that top-level men like President Warfield meet many more people than they can remember. Each one of that faceless throng remembers his own meeting with the famous man and remembers it in detail. But the supremely important person in anyone's life is *himself*—and a politician must never forget that. So it is polite and friendly and warmhearted for the politician to have a way to be able to remember about other people the sort of little things that they are likely to remember about him. It is also essential—in politics."

I had Penny display the Farleyfile on King Willem. It was rather short, which dismayed me at first, until I concluded that it meant that Bonforte did not know the Emperor well and had met him only on a few official occasions—Bonforte's first service as Supreme Minister had been before old Emperor Frederick's death. There was no biography below the line, but just a notation, "*See House of Orange.*" I didn't—there simply wasn't time to plow through a few million words of Empire and pre-Empire history and, anyhow, I got fair-to-excellent marks in history when I was in school. All I wanted to know about the Emperor was what Bonforte knew about him that other people did not.

It occurred to me that the Farleyfile must include everybody in



the ship since they were (a) people (b) whom Bonforte had met. I asked Penny for them. She seemed a little surprised.

Soon I was the one surprised. The *Tom Paine* had in her six Grand Assemblymen. Rog Clifton and Mr. Bonforte, of course—but the first item in Dak's file read: "Broadbent, Darius K., the Honorable, G. A. for League of Free Travelers, Upper Division." It also mentioned that he held a Ph.D. in physics, had been reserve champion with the pistol in the Imperial Matches nine years earlier, and had published three volumes of verse under the nom de plume of "Acey Wheelwright." I resolved never again to take a man at merely his face value.

There was a notation in Bonforte's sloppy handwriting: "Almost irresistible to women—and vice versa!"

Penny and Dr. Capek were also members of the great parliament. Even Jimmie Washington was a member, for a "safe" district, I realized later—he represented the Lapps, including all the reindeer and Santa Claus, no doubt. He was also ordained in the First Bible Truth Church of the Holy Spirit, which I had never heard of, but which accounted for his tight-lipped deacon look.

I especially enjoyed reading about Penny—the Honorable Miss Penelope Taliaferro Russell. She was an M.A. in government administration from Georgetown and a B.A. from Wellesley, which somehow did not surprise me. She represented districtless university women, another "safe" constituency (I learned) since they are about five to one Expansionist Party members.

On down below were her glove size, her other measurements, her preferences in colors (I could teach her something about dressing), her preference in scent (Jungle Lust, of course), and many other details, most of them innocuous enough. But there was "comment":

"Neurotically honest—arithmetic unreliable—prides herself on her sense of humor, of which she has none—watches her diet but is gluttonous about candied cherries—little-mother-of-all-living complex—unable to resist reading the printed word in any form."

Underneath was another of Bonforte's handwritten addenda: "Ah, Curly Top! Snooping again, I see."

As I turned them back to her I asked Penny if she had read her own Farleyfile. She told me snippily to mind my own business! Then turned red and apologized.



Most of my time was taken up with study but I did take time to review and revise carefully the physical resemblance, checking the Semiperm shading by colorimeter, doing an extremely careful job on the wrinkles, adding two moles, and setting the whole job with electric brush. It was going to mean a skin peel before I could get my own face back but that was a small price to pay for a make-up job that could not be damaged, could not be smeared even with acetone, and was proof against such hazards as napkins. I even added the scar on the "game" leg, using a photograph Capek had kept in Bonforte's health history. If Bonforte had had wife or mistress, she would have had difficulty in telling the impostor from the real thing simply on physical appearance. It was a lot of trouble but it left my mind free to worry about the really difficult part of the impersonation.

But the all-out effort during the trip was to steep myself in what Bonforte thought and believed, in short the policies of the Expansionist Party. In a manner of speaking, he himself was the Expansionist Party, not merely its most prominent leader but its political philosopher and greatest statesman. Expansionism had hardly been more than a "Manifest Destiny" movement when the party was founded, a rabble coalition of groups who had one thing in common: the belief that the frontiers in the sky were the most important issue in the emerging future of the human race. Bonforte had given the party a rationale and an ethic, the theme that freedom and equal rights must run with the Imperial banner; he kept harping on the notion that the human race must never again make the mistakes that the white subrace had made in Africa and Asia.

But I was confused by the fact—I was awfully unsophisticated in such matters—that the early history of the Expansionist Party sounded remarkably like the present Humanity Party. I was not aware that political parties often change as much in growing up as people do. I had known vaguely that the Humanity Party had started as a splinter of the Expansionist movement but I had never thought about it. Actually it was inevitable; as the political parties which did not have their eyes on the sky dwindled away under the imperatives of history and ceased to elect candidates, the one party which had been on the right track was bound to split into two factions.

But I am running ahead; my political education did not proceed so logically. At first I simply soaked myself in Bonforte's public



utterances. True, I had done that on the trip out, but then I was studying how he spoke; now I was studying what he said.

Bonforte was an orator in the grand tradition but he could be vitriolic in debate, e.g. a speech he made in New Paris during the ruckus over the treaty with the Martian nests, the Concord of Tycho. It was this treaty which had knocked him out of office before; he had pushed it through but the strain on the coalition had lost him the next vote of confidence. Nevertheless, Quiroga had not dared denounce the treaty. I listened to this speech with special interest since I had not liked the treaty myself; the idea that Martians must be granted the same privileges on Earth that humans enjoyed on Mars had been abhorrent to me—until I visited the Kkkah nest.

“My opponent,” Bonforte had said with a rasp in his voice, “would have you believe that the motto of the so-called Humanity Party, ‘Government of human beings, by human beings, and for human beings,’ is no more than an updating of the immortal words of Lincoln. But while the voice is the voice of Abraham, the hand is the hand of the Ku Klux Klan. The true meaning of that innocent-seeming motto is ‘Government of all races everywhere, by human beings alone, for the profit of a privileged few.’

“But, my opponent protests, we have a God-given mandate to spread enlightenment through the stars, dispensing our own brand of Civilization to the savages. This is the Uncle Remus school of sociology—the good dahkies singin’ spirituals and Ole Massa lubbin’ every one of dem! It is a beautiful picture but the frame is too small; it fails to show the whip, the slave block—and the counting house!”

I found myself becoming, if not an Expansionist, then at least a Bonfortite. I am not sure that I was convinced by the logic of his words—indeed, I am not sure that they were logical. But I was in a receptive frame of mind. I wanted to understand what he said so thoroughly that I could rephrase it and say it in his place, if need be.

Nevertheless, here was a man who knew what he wanted and (much rarer!) why he wanted it. I could not help but be impressed, and it forced me to examine my own beliefs. What did I live by?

My profession, surely! I had been brought up in it, I liked it, I had a deep though unlogical conviction that art was worth the



effort—and, besides, it was the only way I knew to make a living. But what else?

I have never been impressed by the formal schools of ethics. I had sampled them—public libraries are a ready source of recreation for an actor short of cash—but I had found them as poor in vitamins as a mother-in-law's kiss. Given time and plenty of paper, a philosopher can prove anything.

I had the same contempt for the moral instruction handed to most children. Much of it is prattle and the parts they really seem to mean are dedicated to the sacred proposition that a "good" child is one who does not disturb mother's nap and a "good" man is one who achieves a muscular bank account without getting caught. No, thanks!

But even a dog has rules of conduct. What were mine? How did I behave—or, at least, how did I like to think I behaved?

"The show must go on." I had always believed that and lived by it. But why must the show go on?—seeing that some shows are pretty terrible. Well, because you agreed to do it, because there is an audience out there; they have paid and each one of them is entitled to the best you can give. You owe it to them. You owe it also to stagehands and manager and producer and other members of the company—and to those who taught you your trade, and to others stretching back in history to open-air theaters and stone seats and even to storytellers squatting in a market place. *No-blesse oblige*.

I decided that the notion could be generalized into any occupation. "Value for value." Building "on the square and on the level." The Hippocratic oath. Don't let the team down. Honest work for honest pay. Such things did not have to be proved; they were an essential part of life—true throughout eternity, true in the farthest reaches of the Galaxy.

I suddenly got a glimpse of what Bonforte was driving at. If there were ethical basics that transcended time and place, then they were true both for Martians and for men. They were true on any planet around any star—and if the human race did not behave accordingly they weren't ever going to win to the stars because some better race would slap them down for double-dealing.

The price of expansion was virtue. "Never give a sucker an even break" was too narrow a philosophy to fit the broad reaches of space.



But Bonforte was not preaching sweetness and light. "I am not a pacifist. Pacifism is a shifty doctrine under which a man accepts the benefits of the social group without being willing to pay—and claims a halo for his dishonesty. Mr. Speaker, life belongs to those who do not fear to lose it. This bill must pass!" And with that he had got up and crossed the aisle in support of a military appropriation his own party had refused in caucus.

Or again: "Take sides! Always take sides! You will sometimes be wrong—but the man who refuses to take sides must *always* be wrong! Heaven save us from poltroons who fear to make a choice. Let us stand up and be counted." (This last was in a closed caucus but Penny had caught it on her minicorder and Bonforte had saved it—Bonforte had a sense of history; he was a record keeper. If he had not been, I would not have had much to work with.)

I decided that Bonforte was my kind of man. Or at least the kind I liked to think I was. His was a *persona* I was proud to wear.

So far as I can remember I did not sleep on that trip after I promised Penny that I would take the royal audience if Bonforte could not be made ready. I intended to sleep—there is no point in taking your stage with your eyes bagging like hound's ears—but I got interested in what I was studying and there was a plentiful supply of pepper pills in Bonforte's desk. It is amazing how much ground you can cover working a twenty-four-hour day, free from interruptions and with all the help you could ask for.

But shortly before we were due at New Batavia, Dr. Capek came in and said, "Bare your left forearm."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because when you go before the Emperor we don't want you falling flat on your face with fatigue. This will make you sleep until we ground. Then I'll give you an antidote."

"Eh? I take it that you don't think *he* will be ready?"

Capek did not answer, but gave me the shot. I tried to finish listening to the speech I was running but I must have been asleep in seconds. The next thing I knew Dak was saying deferentially, "Wake up, sir. Please wake up. We're grounded at Lippershey Field."



## 8

Our Moon being an airless planet, a torchship can land on it. But the *Tom Paine*, being a torchship, was really intended to stay in space and be serviced only at space stations in orbit; she had to be landed in a cradle. I wish I had been awake to see it, for they say that catching an egg on a plate is easy by comparison. Dak was one of the half dozen pilots who could do it.

But I did not even get to see the *Tommie* in her cradle; all I saw was the inside of the passenger bellows they fastened to her air lock and the passenger tube to New Batavia—those tubes are so fast that, under the low gravity of the Moon, you are again in free fall at the middle of the trip.

We went first to the apartments assigned to the leader of the loyal opposition, Bonforte's official residence until (and if) he went back into power after the coming election. The magnificence of them made me wonder what the Supreme Minister's residence was like. I suppose that New Batavia is odds-on the most palatial capital city in all history; it is a shame that it can hardly be seen from outdoors—but that minor shortcoming is more than offset by the fact that it is the only city in the Solar System that is actually impervious to fusion bombs. Or perhaps I should say "effectively impervious" since there are some surface structures which could be destroyed. Bonforte's apartments included an upper living room in the side of a cliff, which looked out through a bubble balcony at the stars and Mother Earth herself—but his sleeping room and offices were a thousand feet of solid rock below, by private lift.

I had no time to explore the apartments; they dressed me for the audience. Bonforte had no valet even dirtside, but Rog insisted on "helping" me (he was a hindrance) while going over last-minute details. The dress was ancient formal court dress, shapeless tubular trousers, a silly jacket with a claw-hammer tail, both in black, and a chemise consisting of a stiff white breastplate, a "winged" collar, and a white bow tie. Bonforte's chemise was all



in one piece, because (I suppose) he did not use a dresser; correctly it should be assembled piece by piece and the bow tie should be tied poorly enough to show that it has been tied by hand—but it is too much to expect a man to understand both politics and period costuming.

It is an ugly costume, but it did make a fine background for the Order of Wilhelmina stretched in colorful diagonal across my chest. I looked at myself in a long glass and was pleased with the effect; the one color accent against the dead black and white was good showmanship. The traditional dress might be ugly but it did have dignity, something like the cool stateliness of a *maître d'hôtel*. I decided that I looked the part to wait on the pleasure of a sovereign.

Rog Clifton gave me the scroll which was supposed to list the names of my nominations for the ministries and he tucked into an inner pocket of my costume a copy of the typed list thereof—the original had gone forward by hand of Jimmie Washington to the Emperor's State Secretary as soon as we had grounded. Theoretically the purpose of the audience was for the Emperor to inform me that it was his pleasure for me to form a government and for me to submit humbly my suggestions; my nominations were supposed to be secret until the sovereign graciously approved.

Actually the choices were all made; Rog and Bill had spent most of the trip lining up the Cabinet and making sure the nominees would serve, using state-scramble for the radio messages. I had studied the Farleyfiles on each nomination and each alternate. But the list really was secret in the sense that the news services would not receive it until after the Imperial audience.

I took the scroll and picked up my life wand. Rog looked horrified. "Good Lord, man, you can't carry that thing into the presence of the Emperor!"

"Why not?"

"Huh? It's a *weapon*."

"It's a ceremonial weapon. Rog, every duke and every pipsqueak baronet will be wearing his dress sword. So I wear this."

He shook his head. "They have to. Don't you understand the ancient legal theory behind it? Their dress swords symbolize the duty they owe their liege lord to support and defend him by force of arms, in their own persons. But you are a commoner; traditionally you come before him unarmed."



"No, Rog. Oh, I'll do what you tell me to, but you are missing a wonderful chance to catch a tide at its flood. This is good theater, this is *right*."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Well, look, will the word get back to Mars if I carry this wand today? Inside the nests, I mean?"

"Eh? I suppose so. Yes."

"Of course. I would guess that every nest has stereo receivers; I certainly noticed plenty of them in Kkkah nest. They follow the Empire news as carefully as we do. Don't they?"

"Yes. At least the elders do."

"If I carry the wand, they'll know it; if I fail to carry it, they will know it. It matters to them; it is tied up with propriety. No adult Martian would appear outside his nest without his life wand, or inside on ceremonial occasions. Martians have appeared before the Emperor in the past; they carried their wands, didn't they? I'd bet my life on it."

"Yes, but you——"

"You forget that *I am a Martian*."

Rog's face suddenly blanked out. I went on, "I am not only 'John Joseph Bonforte'; I am Kkkahjjjerrr of Kkkah nest. If I fail to carry that wand, I commit a great impropriety—and frankly I do not know what would happen when the word got back; I don't know enough about Martian customs. Now turn it around and look at it the other way. When I walk down that aisle carrying this wand, *I am a Martian citizen about to be named His Imperial Majesty's first minister*. How will that affect the nests?"

"I guess I had not thought it through," he answered slowly.

"Nor would I have done so, had I not had to decide whether or not to carry the wand. But don't you suppose Mr. B. thought it through—before he ever let himself be invited to be adopted? Rog, we've got a tiger by the tail; the only thing to do is to swarm aboard and ride it. We can't let go."

Dak arrived at that point, confirmed my opinion, seemed surprised that Clifton had expected anything else. "Sure, we're setting a new precedent, Rog—but we're going to set a lot of new ones before we are through." But when he saw how I was carrying the wand he let out a scream. "Cripes, man! Are you trying to kill somebody? Or just carve a hole in the wall?"

"I wasn't pressing the stud."



"Thank God for small favors! You don't even have the safety on." He took it from me very gingerly and said, "You twist this ring—and shove this in that slot—then it's just a stick. Whew!"

"Oh. Sorry."

They delivered me to the robing room of the Palace and turned me over to King Willem's equerry, Colonel Pateel, a bland-faced Hindu with perfect manners and the dazzling dress uniform of the Imperial space forces. His bow to me must have been calculated on a slide rule; it suggested that I was about to be Supreme Minister but was not quite there yet, that I was his senior but nevertheless a civilian—then subtract five degrees for the fact that he wore the Emperor's aiguillette on his right shoulder.

He glanced at the wand and said smoothly, "That's a Martian wand, is it not, sir? Interesting. I suppose you will want to leave it here—it will be safe."

I said, "I'm carrying it."

"Sir?" His eyebrows shot up and he waited for me to correct my obvious mistake.

I reached into Bonforte's favorite clichés and picked one he used to reprove bumptiousness. "Son, suppose you tend to your knitting and I tend to mine."

His face lost all expression. "Very well, sir. If you will come this way?"

We paused at the entrance to the throne room. Far away, on the raised dais, the throne was empty. On both sides the entire length of the great cavern the nobles and royalty of the court were standing and waiting. I suppose Pateel passed along some sign, for the Imperial Anthem welled out and we all held still for it, Pateel in robotlike attention, myself in a tired stoop suitable to a middle-aged and overworked man who must do this thing because he must, and all the court like show-window pieces. I hope we never dispense with the pageantry of a court entirely; all those noble dress extras and spear carriers make a beautiful sight.

In the last few bars he came in from behind and took his throne—Willem, Prince of Orange, Duke of Nassau, Grand Duke of Luxembourg, Knight Commander of the Holy Roman Empire, Admiral General of the Imperial Forces, Adviser to the Martian Nests, Protector of the Poor, and, by the Grace of God, King of the Lowlands and Emperor of the Planets and the Spaces Between.



I could not see his face, but the symbolism produced in me a sudden warm surge of empathy. I no longer felt hostile to the notion of royalty.

As King Willem sat down the anthem ended; he nodded acknowledgment of the salute and a wave of slight relaxation rippled down the courtiers. Pateel withdrew and, with my wand tucked under my arm, I started my long march, limping a little in spite of the low gravity. It felt remarkably like the progress to the Inner Nest of Kkkah, except that I was not frightened; I was simply warm and tingling. The Empire medley followed me down, the music sliding from "King Christian" to "Marseillaise" to "The Star-Spangled Banner" and all the others.

At the first balk line I stopped and bowed, then again at the second, then at last a deep bow at the third, just before the steps. I did not kneel; nobles must kneel but commoners share sovereignty with the Sovereign. One sees this point incorrectly staged sometimes in stereo and theater, and Rog had made sure that I knew what to do.

"*Ave, Emperor!*" Had I been a Dutchman I would have said "Rex" as well, but I was an American. We swapped schoolboy Latin back and forth by rote, he inquiring what I wanted, I reminding him that he had summoned me, etc. He shifted into Anglo-American, with a slight "down-East" accent.

"You served our father well. It is now our thought that you might serve us. How say you?"

"My sovereign's wish is my will, Majesty."

"Approach us."

Perhaps I made too good a thing of it but the steps up the dais are high and my leg actually was hurting—and a psychosomatic pain is as bad as any other. I almost stumbled—and Willem was up out of his throne like a shot and steadied my arm. I heard a gasp go around the hall. He smiled at me and said *sotto voce*, "Take it easy, old friend. We'll make this short."

He helped me to the stool before the throne and made me sit down an awkward moment sooner than he himself was again seated. Then he held out his hand for the scroll and I passed it over. He unrolled it and pretended to study the blank page.

There was chamber music now and the court made a display of enjoying themselves, ladies laughing, noble gentlemen uttering galantries, fans gesturing. No one moved very far from his place, no



one held still. Little page boys, looking like Michelangelo's cherubim, moved among them offering trays of sweets. One knelt to Willem and he helped himself without taking his eyes off the nonexistent list. The child then offered the tray to me and I took one, not knowing whether it was proper or not. It was one of those wonderful, matchless chocolates made only in Holland.

I found that I knew a number of the court faces from pictures. Most of the unemployed royalty of Earth were there, concealed under their secondary titles of duke or count. Some said that Willem kept them on as pensioners to brighten his court; some said he wanted to keep an eye on them and keep them out of politics and other mischief. Perhaps it was a little of both. There were the nonroyal nobility of a dozen nations present, too; some of them actually worked for a living.

I found myself trying to pick out the Habsburg lips and the Windsor nose.

At last Willem put down the scroll. The music and the conversation ceased instantly. In dead silence he said, "It is a gallant company you have proposed. We are minded to confirm it."

"You are most gracious, Majesty."

"We will ponder and inform you." He leaned forward and said quietly to me alone, "Don't try to back down those damned steps. Just stand up. I am going to leave at once."

I whispered back, "Oh. Thank you, Sire."

He stood up, whereupon I got hastily to my feet, and he was gone in a swirl of robes. I turned around and noticed some startled looks. But the music started up at once and I was let to walk out while the noble and regal extras again made polite conversation.

Pateel was at my elbow as soon as I was through the far archway. "This way, sir, if you please."

The pageantry was over; now came the real audience.

He took me through a small door, down an empty corridor, through another small door, and into a quite ordinary office. The only thing regal about it was a carved wall plaque, the coat of arms of the House of Orange, with its deathless motto, "*I Maintain!*" There was a big, flat desk, littered with papers. In the middle of it, held down by a pair of metal-plated baby shoes, was the original of the typed list in my pocket. In a copper frame there was a family group picture of the late Empress and the kids. A



somewhat battered couch was against one wall and beyond it was a small bar. There were a couple of armchairs as well as the swivel chair at the desk. The other furnishings might have suited the office of a busy and not fussy family physician.

Pateel left me alone there, closing the door behind him. I did not have time to consider whether or not it was proper for me to sit down, as the Emperor came quickly in through a door opposite. "Howdy, Joseph," he called out. "Be with you in a moment." He strode through the room, followed closely by two servants who were undressing him as he walked, and went out a third door. He was back again almost at once, zipping up a suit of coveralls as he came in. "You took the short route; I had to come long way around. I'm going to insist that the palace engineer cut another tunnel through from the back of the throne room, damme if I'm not. I have to come around three sides of a square—either that or parade through semi-public corridors dressed like a circus horse." He added meditatively, "I never wear anything but underwear under those silly robes."

I said, "I doubt if they are as uncomfortable as this monkey jacket I am wearing, Sire."

He shrugged. "Oh well, we each have to put up with the inconveniences of our jobs. Didn't you get yourself a drink?" He picked up the list of nominations for cabinet ministers. "Do so, and pour me one."

"What will you have, Sire?"

"Eh?" He looked up and glanced sharply at me. "My usual. Scotch on ice, of course."

I said nothing and poured them, adding water to my own. I had had a sudden chill; if Bonforte knew that the Emperor always took scotch over bare cubes it should have been in his Farleyfile. It was not.

But Willem accepted the drink without comment, murmured, "Hot jets!" and went on looking at the list. Presently he looked up and said, "How about these lads, Joseph?"

"Sire? It is a skeleton cabinet, of course." We had doubled up on portfolios where possible and Bonforte would hold Defense and Treasury as well as first. In three cases we had given temporary appointments to the career deputy ministers—Research, Population Management, and Exterior. The men who would hold the



posts in the permanent government were all needed for campaigning.

"Yes, yes, it's your second team. Mmm . . . How about this man Braun?"

I was considerably surprised. It had been my understanding that Willem would okay the list without comment, but that he might want to chat about other things. I had not been afraid of chatting; a man can get a reputation as a sparkling conversationalist simply by letting the other man do all the talking.

Lothar Braun was what was known as a "rising young statesman." What I knew about him came from his Farleyfile and from Rog and Bill. He had come up since Bonforte had been turned out of office and so had never had any cabinet post, but had served as caucus sergeant at arms and junior whip. Bill insisted that Bonforte had planned to boost him rapidly and that he should try his wings in the caretaker government; he proposed him for Minister of External Communications.

Rog Clifton had seemed undecided; he had first put down the name of Angel Jesus de la Torre y Perez, the career subminister. But Bill had pointed out that if Braun flopped, now was a good time to find it out and no harm done. Clifton had given in.

"Braun?" I answered. "He's a coming young man. Very brilliant."

Willem made no comment, but looked on down the list. I tried to remember exactly what Bonforte had said about Braun in the Farleyfile. Brilliant . . . hardworking . . . analytical mind. Had he said anything against him? No—well, perhaps—"a shade too affable." That does not condemn a man. But Bonforte had said nothing at all about such affirmative virtues as loyalty and honesty. Which might mean nothing, as the Farleyfile was not a series of character studies; it was a data file.

The Emperor put the list aside. "Joseph, are you planning to bring the Martian nests into the Empire at once?"

"Eh? Certainly not before the election, Sire."

"Come now, you know I was talking about after the election. And have you forgotten how to say 'Willem'? 'Sire' from a man six years older than I am, under these circumstances, is silly."

"Very well, Willem."

"We both know I am not supposed to notice politics. But we know also that the assumption is silly. Joseph, you have spent



your off years creating a situation in which the nests would wish to come wholly into the Empire." He pointed a thumb at my wand. "I believe you have done it. Now if you win this election you should be able to get the Grand Assembly to grant me permission to proclaim it. Well?"

I thought about it. "Willem," I said slowly, "you know that is exactly what we have planned to do. You must have some reason for bringing the subject up."

He swizzled his glass and stared at me, managing to look like a New England groceryman about to tell off one of the summer people. "Are you asking my advice? The constitution requires you to advise me, not the other way around."

"I welcome your advice, Willem. I do not promise to follow it."

He laughed. "You damned seldom promise anything. Very well, let's assume that you win the election and go back into office—but with a majority so small that you might have difficulty in voting the nests into full citizenship. In such case I would not advise you to make it a vote of confidence. If you lose, take your licking and stay in office; stick the full term."

"Why, Willem?"

"Because you and I are patient men. See that?" He pointed at the plaque of his house. "'I Maintain!' It's not a flashy rule but it is not a king's business to be flashy; his business is to conserve, to hang on, to roll with the punch. Now, constitutionally speaking, it should not matter to me whether you stay in office or not. But it does matter to me whether or not the Empire holds together. I think that if you miss on the Martian issue immediately after the election, you can afford to wait—for your other policies are going to prove very popular. You'll pick up votes in by-elections and eventually you'll come around and tell me I can add 'Emperor of Mars' to the list. So don't hurry."

"I will think about it," I said carefully.

"Do that. Now how about the transportee system?"

"We're abolishing it immediately after the election and suspending it at once." I could answer that one firmly; Bonforte hated it.

"They'll attack you on it."

"So they will. Let them. We'll pick up votes."

"Glad to hear that you still have the strength of your convic-



tions, Joseph. I never liked having the banner of Orange on a convict ship. Free trade?"

"After the election, yes."

"What are you going to use for revenue?"

"It is our contention that trade and production will expand so rapidly that other revenues will make up for the loss of the customs."

"And suppose it ain't so?"

I had not been given a second-string answer on that one—and economics was largely a mystery to me. I grinned. "Willem, I'll have to have notice on that question. But the whole program of the Expansionist Party is founded on the notion that free trade, free travel, common citizenship, common currency, and a minimum of Imperial laws and restrictions are good not only for the citizens of the Empire but for the Empire itself. If we need the money, we'll find it—but not by chopping the Empire up into tiny bailiwicks." All but the first sentence was pure Bonforte, only slightly adapted.

"Save your campaign speeches," he grunted. "I simply asked." He picked up the list again. "You're quite sure this line-up is the way you want it?"

I reached for the list and he handed it to me. Damnation, it was clear that the Emperor was telling me as emphatically as the constitution would let him that, in his opinion, Braun was a wrong 'un. But, hell's best anthracite, I had no business changing the list Bill and Rog had made up.

On the other hand, it was not *Bonforte's* list; it was merely what they thought Bonforte would do if he were *compos mentis*.

I wished suddenly that I could take time out and ask Penny what she thought of Braun.

Then I reached for a pen from Willem's desk, scratched out "Braun," and printed in "de la Torre"—in block letters; I still could not risk Bonforte's handwriting. The Emperor merely said, "It looks like a good team to me. Good luck, Joseph. You'll need it."

That ended the audience as such. I was anxious to get away, but you do not walk out on a king; that is one prerogative they have retained. He wanted to show me his workshop and his new train models. I suppose he has done more to revive that ancient hobby than anyone else; personally I can't see it as an occupation for a



grown man. But I made polite noises about his new toy locomotive, intended for the "Royal Scotsman."

"If I had had the breaks," he said, getting down on his hands and knees and peering into the innards of the toy engine, "I could have been a very fair shop superintendent, I think—a master machinist. But the accident of birth discriminated against me."

"Do you really think you would have preferred it, Willem?"

"I don't know. This job I have is not bad. The hours are easy and the pay is good—and the social security is first-rate—barring the outside chance of revolution, and my line has always been lucky on that score. But much of the work is tedious and could be done as well by any second-rate actor." He glanced up at me. "I relieve your office of a lot of tiresome cornerstone-laying and parade-watching, you know."

"I do know and I appreciate it."

"Once in a long time I get a chance to give a little push in the right direction—what I think is the right direction. Kinging is a very odd profession, Joseph. Don't ever take it up."

"I'm afraid it's a bit late, even if I wanted to."

He made some fine adjustment on the toy. "My real function is to keep you from going crazy."

"Eh?"

"Of course. Psychosis-situational is the occupational disease of heads of states. My predecessors in the king trade, the ones who actually ruled, were almost all a bit balmy. And take a look at your American presidents; the job used frequently to kill them in their prime. But me, I don't have to run things; I have a professional like yourself to do it for me. And you don't have the killing pressure either; you, or those in your shoes, can always quit if things get too tough—and the old Emperor—it's almost always the 'old' Emperor; we usually mount the throne about the age other men retire—the Emperor is always there, maintaining continuity, preserving the symbol of the state, while you professionals work out a new deal." He blinked solemnly. "My job is not glamorous, but it *is* useful."

Presently he let up on me about his childish trains and we went back into his office. I thought I was about to be dismissed. In fact, he said, "I should let you get back to your work. You had a hard trip?"

"Not too hard. I spent it working."



"I suppose so. By the way, who *are* you?"

There is the policeman's tap on the shoulder, the shock of the top step that is not there, there is falling out of bed, and there is having her husband return home unexpectedly—I would take any combination of those in preference to that simple inquiry. I aged inside to match my appearance and more.

"Sire?"

"Come now," he said impatiently, "surely my job carries with it some privileges. Just tell me the truth. I've known for the past hour that you were not Joseph Bonforte—though you could fool his own mother; you even have his mannerisms. But who are you?"

"My name is Lawrence Smith, Your Majesty," I said faintly.

"Brace up, man! I could have called the guards long since, if I had been intending to. Were you sent here to assassinate me?"

"No, Sire. I am—loyal to Your Majesty."

"You have an odd way of showing it. Well, pour yourself another drink, sit down, and tell me about it."

I told him about it, every bit. It took more than one drink, and presently I felt better. He looked angry when I told him of the kidnaping, but when I told him what they had done to Bonforte's mind his face turned dark with a Jovian rage.

At last he said quietly, "It's just a matter of days until he is back in shape, then?"

"So Dr. Capek says."

"Don't let him go to work until he is fully recovered. He's a valuable man. You know that, don't you? Worth six of you and me. So you carry on with the doubling job and let him get well. The Empire needs him."

"Yes, Sire."

"Knock off that 'Sire.' Since you are standing in for him, call me 'Willem,' as he does. Did you know that was how I spotted you?"

"No, Si—no, Willem."

"He's called me Willem for twenty years. I thought it decidedly odd that he would quit it in private simply because he was seeing me on state business. But I did not suspect, not really. But, remarkable as your performance was, it set me thinking. Then when we went in to see the trains, I knew."

"Excuse me? How?"

"You were *polite*, man! I've made him look at my trains in the



past—and he always got even by being as rude as possible about what a way for a grown man to waste time. It was a little act we always went through. We both enjoyed it.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.”

“How could you have known?” I was thinking that I should have known, that damned Farleyfile should have told me . . . It was not until later that I realized that the file had not been defective, in view of the theory on which it was based, i.e. it was intended to let a famous man remember details about the *less* famous. But that was precisely what the Emperor was *not*—less famous, I mean. Of *course* Bonforte needed no notes to recall personal details about Willem! Nor would he consider it proper to set down personal matters about the sovereign in a file handled by his clerks.

I had muffed the obvious—not that I see how I could have avoided it, even if I had realized that the file would be incomplete.

But the Emperor was still talking. “You did a magnificent job—and after risking your life in a Martian nest I am not surprised that you were willing to tackle me. Tell me, have I ever seen you in stereo, or anywhere?”

I had given my legal name, of course, when the Emperor demanded it; I now rather timidly gave my professional name. He looked at me, threw up his hands, and guffawed. I was somewhat hurt. “Er, have you heard of me?”

“Heard of you? I’m one of your staunchest fans.” He looked at me very closely. “But you still look like Joe Bonforte. I can’t believe that you are Lorenzo.”

“But I am.”

“Oh, I believe it, I believe it. You know that skit where you are a tramp? First you try to milk a cow—no luck. Finally you end up eating out of the cat’s dish—but even the cat pushes you away?”

I admitted it.

“I’ve almost worn out my spool of that. I laugh and cry at the same time.”

“That is the idea.” I hesitated, then admitted that the barnyard “Weary Willie” routine had been copied from a very great artist of another century. “But I prefer dramatic roles.”

“Like this one?”

“Well—not exactly. For this role, once is quite enough. I wouldn’t care for a long run.”



"I suppose so. Well, tell Roger Clifton— No, don't tell Clifton anything. Lorenzo, I see nothing to be gained by ever telling anyone about our conversation this past hour. If you tell Clifton, even though you tell him that I said not to worry, it would just give him nerves. And he has work to do. So we keep it tight, eh?"

"As my emperor wishes."

"None of that, please. We'll keep it quiet because it's best so. Sorry I can't make a sickbed visit on Uncle Joe. Not that I could help him—although they used to think the King's Touch did marvels. So we'll say nothing and pretend that I never twigged."

"Yes—Willem."

"I suppose you had better go now. I've kept you a very long time."

"Whatever you wish."

"I'll have Pateel go back with you—or do you know your way around? But just a moment—" He dug around in his desk, muttering to himself. "That girl must have been straightening things again. No—here it is." He hauled out a little book. "I probably won't get to see you again—so would you mind giving me your autograph before you go?"

## 9

Rog and Bill I found chewing their nails in Bonforte's upper living room. The second I showed up Corpsman started toward me. "Where the hell have you been?"

"With the Emperor," I answered coldly.

"You've been gone five or six times as long as you should have been."

I did not bother to answer. Since the argument over the speech Corpsman and I had gotten along together and worked together, but it was strictly a marriage of convenience, with no love. We cooperated, but we did not really bury the hatchet—unless it was between my shoulder blades. I had made no special effort to conciliate him and saw no reason why I should—in my opinion his parents had met briefly at a masquerade ball.

I don't believe in rowing with other members of the company,



but the only behavior Corpsman would willingly accept from me was that of a servant, hat in hand and very 'umble, sir. I would not give him that, even to keep peace. I was a professional, retained to do a very difficult professional job, and professional men do not use the back stairs; they are treated with respect.

So I ignored him and asked Rog, "Where's Penny?"

"With *him*. So are Dak and Doc, at the moment."

"He's here?"

"Yes." Clifton hesitated. "We put him in what is supposed to be the wife's room of your bedroom suite. It was the only place where we could maintain utter privacy and still give him the care he needs. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"It won't inconvenience you. The two bedrooms are joined, you may have noticed, only through the dressing rooms, and we've shut off that door. It's soundproof."

"Sounds like a good arrangement. How is he?"

Clifton frowned. "Better, much better—on the whole. He is lucid much of the time." He hesitated. "You can go in and see him, if you like."

I hesitated still longer. "How soon does Dr. Capek think he will be ready to make public appearances?"

"It's hard to say. Before long."

"How long? Three or four days? A short enough time that we could cancel all appointments and just put me out of sight? Rog, I don't know just how to make this clear but, much as I would like to call on him and pay my respects, I don't think it is smart for me to see him at all until after I have made my last appearance. It might well ruin my characterization." I had made the terrible mistake of going to my father's funeral; for years thereafter when I thought of him I saw him dead in his coffin. Only very slowly did I regain the true image of him—the virile, dominant man who had reared me with a firm hand and taught me my trade. I was afraid of something like that with Bonforte; I was now impersonating a well man at the height of his powers, the way I had seen him and heard him in the many stereo records of him. I was very much afraid that if I saw him ill, the recollection of it would blur and distort my performance.

"I was not insisting," Clifton answered. "You know best. It's possible that we can keep from having you appear in public again,



but I want to keep you standing by and ready until he is fully recovered."

I almost said that the Emperor wanted it done that way. But I caught myself—the shock of having the Emperor find me out had shaken me a little out of character. But the thought reminded me of unfinished business. I took out the revised cabinet list and handed it to Corpsman. "Here's the approved roster for the news services, Bill. You'll see that there is one change on it—De la Torre for Braun."

"What?"

"Jesus de la Torre for Lothar Braun. That's the way the Emperor wanted it."

Clifton looked astonished; Corpsman looked both astonished and angry. "What difference does that make? He's got no god-damn right to have opinions!"

Clifton said slowly, "Bill is right, Chief. As a lawyer who has specialized in constitutional law I assure you that the sovereign's confirmation is purely nominal. You should not have let him make any changes."

I felt like shouting at them, and only the imposed calm personality of Bonforte kept me from it. I had had a hard day and, despite a brilliant performance, the inevitable disaster had overtaken me. I wanted to tell Rog that if Willem had not been a really big man, kingly in the fine sense of the word, we would all be in the soup—simply because I had not been adequately coached for the role. Instead I answered sourly, "It's done and that's that."

Corpsman said, "That's what *you* think! I gave out the correct list to the reporters two hours ago. Now you've got to go back and straighten it out. Rog, you had better call the Palace right away and——"

I said, "Quiet!"

Corpsman shut up. I went on in a lower key. "Rog, from a legal point of view, you may be right. I wouldn't know. I do know that the Emperor felt free to question the appointment of Braun. Now if either one of you wants to go to the Emperor and argue with him, that's up to you. But I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to get out of this anachronistic strait jacket, take my shoes off, and have a long, tall drink. Then I'm going to bed."

"Now wait, Chief," Clifton objected. "You've got a five-minute spot on grand network to announce the new cabinet."



"You take it. You're first deputy in this cabinet."

He blinked. "All right."

Corpsman said insistently, "How about Braun? He was promised the job."

Clifton looked at him thoughtfully. "Not in any dispatch that I saw, Bill. He was simply asked if he was willing to serve, like all the others. Is that what you meant?"

Corpsman hesitated like an actor not quite sure of his lines. "Of course. But it amounts to a promise."

"Not until the public announcement is made, it doesn't."

"But the announcement *was* made, I tell you. Two hours ago."

"Mmm . . . Bill, I'm afraid that you will have to call the boys in again and tell them that you made a mistake. Or I'll call them in and tell them that through an error a preliminary list was handed out before Mr. Bonforte had okayed it. But we've got to correct it before the grand network announcement."

"Do you mean to tell me you are going to let *him* get away with it?"

By "him" I think Bill meant me rather than Willem, but Rog's answer assumed the contrary. "Yes, Bill, this is no time to force a constitutional crisis. The issue isn't worth it. So will you phrase the retraction? Or shall I?"

Corpsman's expression reminded me of the way a cat submits to the inevitable—"just barely." He looked grim, shrugged, and said, "I'll do it. I want to be damned sure it is phrased properly, so we can salvage as much as possible out of the shambles."

"Thanks, Bill," Rog answered mildly.

Corpsman turned to leave. I called out, "Bill! As long as you are going to be talking to the news service I have another announcement for them."

"Huh? What are you after now?"

"Nothing much." The fact was I was suddenly overcome with weariness at the role and the tensions it created. "Just tell them that Mr. Bonforte has a cold and his physician has ordered him to bed for a rest. I've had a bellyful."

Corpsman snorted. "I think I'll make it 'pneumonia.'"

"Suit yourself."

When he had gone Rog turned to me and said, "Don't let it get you, Chief. In this business some days are better than others."



"Rog, I really am going on the sick list. You can mention it on stereo tonight."

"So?"

"I'm going to take to my bed and stay there. There is no reason at all why Bonforte can't 'have a cold' until he is ready to get back into harness himself. Every time I make an appearance it just increases the probability that somebody will spot something wrong—and every time I do make an appearance that sorehead Corpsman finds something to yap about. An artist can't do his best work with somebody continually snarling at him. So let's let it go at this and ring down the curtain."

"Take it easy, Chief. I'll keep Corpsman out of your hair from now on. Here we won't be in each other's laps the way we were in the ship."

"No, Rog, my mind is made up. Oh, I won't run out on you. I'll stay here until Mr. B. is able to see people, in case some utter emergency turns up"—I was recalling uneasily that the Emperor had told me to hang on and had assumed that I would—"but it is actually better to keep me out of sight. At the moment we have gotten away with it completely, haven't we? Oh, *they* know—somebody knows—that Bonforte was not the man who went through the adoption ceremony—but they don't dare raise that issue, nor could they prove it if they did. The same people may suspect that a double was used today, but they don't *know*, they can't be sure—because it is always possible that Bonforte recovered quickly enough to carry it off today. Right?"

Clifton got an odd, half-sheepish look on his face. "I'm afraid they are fairly sure you were a double, Chief."

"Eh?"

"We shaded the truth a little to keep you from being nervous. Doc Capek was certain from the time he first examined him that only a miracle could get him in shape to make the audience today. The people who dosed him would know that too."

I frowned. "Then you were kidding me earlier when you told me how well he was doing? How is he, Rog? Tell me the truth."

"I was telling you the truth that time, Chief. That's why I suggested that you see him—whereas before I was only too glad to string along with your reluctance to see him." He added, "Perhaps you had better see him, talk with him."

"Mmm—no." The reasons for not seeing him still applied; if I



did have to make another appearance I did not want my subconscious playing me tricks. The role called for a well man. "But, Rog, everything I said applies still more emphatically on the basis of what you have just told me. If they are even reasonably sure that a double was used today, then we don't dare risk another appearance. They were caught by surprise today—or perhaps it was impossible to unmask me, under the circumstances. But it will not be later. They can rig some deadfall, some test that I can't pass—then *blooey!* There goes the old ball game." I thought about it. "I had better be 'sick' as long as necessary. Bill was right; it had better be 'pneumonia.'"

Such is the power of suggestion that I woke up the next morning with a stopped-up nose and a sore throat. Dr. Capek took time to dose me and I felt almost human by suppertime; nevertheless, he issued bulletins about "Mr. Bonforte's virus infection." The sealed and air-conditioned cities of the Moon being what they are, nobody was anxious to be exposed to an air-vectored ailment; no determined effort was made to get past my chaperones. For four days I loafed and read from Bonforte's library, both his own collected papers and his many books . . . I discovered that both politics and economics could make engrossing reading; those subjects had never been real to me before. The Emperor sent me flowers from the royal greenhouse—or were they for *me*?

Never mind. I loafed and soaked in the luxury of being Lorenzo, or even plain Lawrence Smith. I found that I dropped back into character automatically if someone came in, but I can't help that. It was not necessary; I saw no one but Penny and Capek, except for one visit from Dak.

But even lotus-eating can pall. By the fourth day I was as tired of that room as I had ever been of a producer's waiting room and I was lonely. No one bothered with me; Capek's visits had been brisk and professional, and Penny's visits had been short and few. She had stopped calling me "Mr. Bonforte."

When Dak showed up I was delighted to see him. "Dak! What's new?"

"Not much. I've been trying to get the *Tommie* overhauled with one hand while helping Rog with political chores with the other. Getting this campaign lined up is going to give him ulcers, three gets you eight." He sat down. "Politics!"

"Hmm . . . Dak, how did you ever get into it? Offhand, I



would figure *voyageurs* to be as unpolitical as actors. And you in particular."

"They are and they aren't. Most ways they don't give a damn whether school keeps or not, as long as they can keep on herding junk through the sky. But to do that you've got to have cargo, and cargo means trade, and profitable trade means wide-open trade, with any ship free to go anywhere, no customs nonsense and no restricted areas. Freedom! And there you are; you're in politics. As for myself, I came here first for a spot of lobbying for the 'continuous voyage' rule, so that goods on the triangular trade would not pay two duties. It was Mr. B.'s bill, of course. One thing led to another and here I am, skipper of his yacht the past six years and representing my guild brothers since the last general election." He sighed. "I hardly know how it happened myself."

"I suppose you are anxious to get out of it. Are you going to stand for re-election?"

He stared at me. "Huh? Brother, until you've been in politics you haven't been *alive*."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said. It's rough and sometimes it's dirty and it's always hard work and tedious details. But it's the only sport for grownups. All other games are for kids. All of 'em." He stood up. "Gotta run."

"Oh, stick around."

"Can't. With the Grand Assembly convening tomorrow I've got to give Rog a hand. I shouldn't have stopped in at all."

"It is? I didn't know." I was aware that the G.A., the outgoing G.A. that is, had to meet one more time, to accept the caretaker cabinet. But I had not thought about it. It was a routine matter, as perfunctory as presenting the list to the Emperor. "Is *he* going to be able to make it?"

"No. But don't you worry about it. Rog will apologize to the house for your—I mean *his*—absence and will ask for a proxy rule under no-objection procedure. Then he will read the speech of the Supreme Minister Designate—Bill is working on it right now. Then in his own person he will move that the government be confirmed. Second. No debate. Pass. Adjourn sine die—and everybody rushes for home and starts promising the voters two women in every bed and a hundred Imperials every Monday morning. Routine." He added, "Oh yes! Some member of the Humanity Party



will move a resolution of sympathy and a basket of flowers, which will pass in a fine hypocritical glow. They'd rather send flowers to Bonforte's funeral." He scowled.

"It is actually as simple as that? What would happen if the proxy rule were refused? I thought the Grand Assembly didn't recognize proxies."

"They don't, for all ordinary procedure. You either pair, or you show up and vote. But this is just the idler wheels going around in parliamentary machinery. If they don't let him appear by proxy tomorrow, then they've got to wait around until he is well before they can adjourn sine die and get on with the serious business of hypnotizing the voters. As it is, a mock quorum has been meeting daily and adjourning ever since Quiroga resigned. This Assembly is as dead as Caesar's ghost, but it has to be buried constitutionally."

"Yes—but suppose some idiot *did* object?"

"No one will. Oh, it could force a constitutional crisis. But it won't happen."

Neither one of us said anything for a while. Dak made no move to leave. "Dak, would it make things easier if I showed up and gave that speech?"

"Huh? Shucks, I thought that was settled. You decided that it wasn't safe to risk another appearance short of an utter save-the-baby emergency. On the whole, I agree with you. There's the old saw about the pitcher and the well."

"Yes. But this is just a walk-through, isn't it? Lines as fixed as a play? Would there be any chance of anyone pulling any surprises on me that I couldn't handle?"

"Well, no. Ordinarily you would be expected to talk to the press afterwards, but your recent illness is an excuse. We could slide you through the security tunnel and avoid them entirely." He smiled grimly. "Of course, there is always the chance that some crackpot in the visitors' gallery has managed to sneak in a gun . . . Mr. B. always referred to it as the 'shooting gallery' after they winged him from it."

My leg gave a sudden twinge. "Are you trying to scare me off?"

"No."

"You pick a funny way to encourage me. Dak, be level with me. Do you *want* me to do this job tomorrow? Or don't you?"



"Of course I do! Why the devil do you think I stopped in on a busy day? Just to chat?"

The Speaker pro tempore banged his gavel, the chaplain gave an invocation that carefully avoided any differences between one religion and another—and everyone kept silent. The seats themselves were only half filled but the gallery was packed with tourists.

We heard the ceremonial knocking amplified over the speaker system; the Sergeant at Arms rushed the mace to the door. Three times the Emperor demanded to be admitted, three times he was refused. Then he prayed the privilege; it was granted by acclamation. We stood while Willem entered and took his seat back of the Speaker's desk. He was in uniform as Admiral General and was unattended, as was required, save by escort of the Speaker and the Sergeant at Arms.

Then I tucked my wand under my arm and stood up at my place at the front bench and, addressing the Speaker as if the sovereign were not present, I delivered my speech. It was not the one Corpsman had written; that one went down the oubliette as soon as I had read it. Bill had made it a straight campaign speech, and it was the wrong time and place.

Mine was short, non-partisan, and cribbed right straight out of Bonforte's collected writings, a paraphrase of the one the time before when he formed a caretaker government. I stood foursquare for good roads and good weather and wished that everybody would love everybody else, just the way all us good democrats loved our sovereign and he loved us. It was a blank-verse lyric poem of about five hundred words and if I varied from Bonforte's earlier speech then I simply went up on my lines.

They had to quiet the gallery.

Rog got up and moved that the names I had mentioned in passing be confirmed—second and no objection and the clerk cast a white ballot. As I marched forward, attended by one member of my own party and one member of the opposition, I could see members glancing at their watches and wondering if they could still catch the noon shuttle.

Then I was swearing allegiance to my sovereign, under and subject to the constitutional limitations, swearing to defend and continue the rights and privileges of the Grand Assembly, and to pro-



tect the freedoms of the citizens of the Empire wherever they might be—and incidentally to carry out the duties of His Majesty's Supreme Minister. The chaplain mixed up the words once, but I straightened him out.

I thought I was breezing through it as easy as a curtain speech—when I found that I was crying so hard that I could hardly see. When I was done, Willem said quietly to me, “A good performance, Joseph.” I don't know whether he thought he was talking to me or to his old friend—and I did not care. I did not wipe away the tears; I just let them drip as I turned back to the Assembly. I waited for Willem to leave, then adjourned them.

Diana, Ltd., ran four extra shuttles that afternoon. New Batavia was deserted—that is to say there were only the court and a million or so butchers, bakers, candlestick makers, and civil servants left in town—and a skeleton cabinet.

Having gotten over my “cold” and appeared publicly in the Grand Assembly Hall, it no longer made sense to hide out. As the supposed Supreme Minister I could not, without causing comment, never be seen; as the nominal head of a political party entering a campaign for a general election I had to see people—some people, at least. So I did what I had to do and got a daily report on Bonforte's progress toward complete recovery. His progress was good, if slow; Capek reported that it was possible, if absolutely necessary, to let him appear any time now—but he advised against it; he had lost almost twenty pounds and his co-ordination was poor.

Rog did everything possible to protect both of us. Mr. Bonforte knew now that they were using a double for him and, after a first fit of indignation, had relaxed to necessity and approved it. Rog ran the campaign, consulting him only on matters of high policy, and then passing on his answers to me to hand out publicly when necessary.

But the protection given me was almost as great; I was as hard to see as a topflight agent. My office ran on into the mountain beyond the opposition leader's apartments (we did not move over into the Supreme Minister's more palatial quarters; while it would have been legal, it just “was not done” during a caretaker regime)—they could be reached from the rear directly from the lower living room, but to get at me from the public entrance a man had to pass about five check points—except for the favored few who were con-



ducted directly by Rog through a bypass tunnel to Penny's office and from there into mine.

The setup meant that I could study the Farleyfile on anyone before he got to see me. I could even keep it in front of me while he was with me, for the desk had a recessed viewer the visitor could not see, yet I could wipe it out instantly if he turned out to be a floor pacer. The viewer had other uses; Rog could give a visitor the special treatment, rushing him right in to see me, leave him alone with me—and stop in Penny's office and write me a note, which would then be projected on the viewer—such quick tips as, “Kiss him to death and promise nothing,” or, “All he really wants is for his wife to be presented at court. Promise him that and get rid of him,” or even, “Easy on this one. It's a ‘swing’ district and he is smarter than he looks. Turn him over to me and I'll dicker.”

I don't know who ran the government. The senior career men, probably. There would be a stack of papers on my desk each morning, I would sign Bonforte's sloppy signature to them, and Penny would take them away. I never had time to read them. The very size of the Imperial machinery dismayed me. Once when we had to attend a meeting outside the offices, Penny had led me on what she called a short cut through the Archives—miles on miles of endless files, each one chockablock with microfilm and all of them with moving belts scooting past them so that a clerk would not take all day to fetch one file.

But Penny told me that she had taken me through only one wing of it. The file of the files, she said, occupied a cavern the size of the Grand Assembly Hall. It made me glad that government was not a career with me, but merely a passing hobby, so to speak.

Seeing people was an unavoidable chore, largely useless since Rog, or Bonforte through Rog, made the decisions. My real job was to make campaign speeches. A discreet rumor had been spread that my doctor had been afraid that my heart had been strained by the “virus infection” and had advised me to stay in the low gravity of the Moon throughout the campaign. I did not dare risk taking the impersonation on a tour of Earth, much less make a trip to Venus; the Farleyfile system would break down if I attempted to mix with crowds, not to mention the unknown hazards of the Actionist goon squads—what I would babble with a



minim dose of neodexocaine in the forebrain none of us liked to think about, me least of all.

Quiroga was hitting all continents on Earth, making his stereo appearances as personal appearances on platforms in front of crowds. But it did not worry Rog Clifton. He shrugged and said, "Let him. There are no new votes to be picked up by personal appearances at political rallies. All it does is wear out the speaker. Those rallies are attended only by the faithful."

I hoped that he knew what he was talking about. The campaign was short, only six weeks from Quiroga's resignation to the day he had set for the election before resigning, and I was speaking almost every day, either on a grand network with time shared precisely with the Humanity Party, or speeches canned and sent by shuttle for later release to particular audiences. We had a set routine; a draft would come to me, perhaps from Bill although I never saw him, and then I would rework it. Rog would take the revised draft away; usually it would come back approved—and once in a while there would be corrections made in Bonforte's handwriting, now so sloppy as to be almost illegible.

I never ad-libbed at all on those parts he corrected, though I often did on the rest—when you get rolling there is often a better, more alive way to say a thing. I began to notice the nature of his corrections; they were almost always eliminations of qualifiers—make it blunter, let 'em like it or lump it!

After a while there were fewer corrections. I was getting with it.

I still never saw him. I felt that I could not "wear his head" if I looked at him on his sickbed. But I was not the only one of his intimate family who was not seeing him; Capek had chucked Penny out—for her own good. I did not know it at the time. I did know that Penny had become irritable, absent-minded, and moody after we reached New Batavia. She got circles under her eyes like a raccoon—all of which I could not miss, but I attributed it to the pressure of the campaign combined with worry about Bonforte's health. I was only partly right. Capek spotted it and took action, put her under light hypnosis and asked her questions—then he flatly forbade her to see Bonforte again until I was done and finished and shipped away.

The poor girl was going almost out of her mind from visiting the sickroom of the man she hopelessly loved—then going straight in to work closely with a man who looked and talked and sounded



just like him, but in good health. She was probably beginning to hate me.

Good old Doc Capek got at the root of her trouble, gave her helpful and soothing post-hypnotic suggestions, and kept her out of the sickroom after that. Naturally I was not told about it at the time; it wasn't any of my business. But Penny perked up and again was her lovable, incredibly efficient self.

It made a lot of difference to me. Let's admit it; at least twice I would have walked out on the whole incredible rat race if it had not been for Penny.

There was one sort of meeting I had to attend, that of the campaign executive committee. Since the Expansionist Party was a minority party, being merely the largest fraction of a coalition of several parties held together by the leadership and personality of John Joseph Bonforte, I had to stand in for him and peddle soothing syrup to those prima donnas. I was briefed for it with painstaking care, and Rog sat beside me and could hint the proper direction if I faltered. But it could not be delegated.

Less than two weeks before election day we were due for a meeting at which the safe districts would be parceled out. The organization always had thirty to forty districts which could be used to make someone eligible for cabinet office, or to provide for a political secretary (a person like Penny was much more valuable if he or she was fully qualified, able to move and speak on the floor of the Assembly, had the right to be present at closed caucuses, and so forth), or for other party reasons. Bonforte himself represented a "safe" district; it relieved him from the necessity of precinct campaigning. Clifton had another. Dak would have had one if he had needed it, but he actually commanded the support of his guild brethren. Rog even hinted to me once that if I wanted to come back in my proper person, I could say the word and my name would go on the next list.

Some of the spots were always saved for party wheel horses willing to resign at a moment's notice and thereby provide the Party with a place through a by-election if it proved necessary to qualify a man for cabinet office, or something.

But the whole thing had somewhat the flavor of patronage and, the coalition being what it was, it was necessary for Bonforte to straighten out conflicting claims and submit a list to the campaign



executive committee. It was a last-minute job, to be done just before the ballots were prepared, to allow for late changes.

When Rog and Dak came in I was working on a speech and had told Penny to hold off anything but five-alarm fires. Quiroga had made a wild statement in Sydney, Australia, the night before, of such a nature that we could expose the lie and make him squirm. I was trying my hand at a speech in answer, without waiting for a draft to be handed me; I had high hopes of getting my own version approved.

When they came in I said, "Listen to this," and read them the key paragraph. "How do you like it?"

"That ought to nail his hide to the door," agreed Rog. "Here's the 'safe' list, Chief. Want to look it over? We're due there in twenty minutes."

"Oh, that damned meeting. I don't see why I should look at the list. Anything you want to tell me about it?" Nevertheless, I took the list and glanced down it. I knew them all from their Farleyfiles and a few of them from contact; I knew already why each one had to be taken care of.

Then I struck the name: *Corpsman, William J.*

I fought down what I felt was justifiable annoyance and said quietly, "I see Bill is on the list, Rog."

"Oh, yes. I wanted to tell you about that. You see, Chief, as we all know, there has been a certain amount of bad blood between you and Bill. Now I'm not blaming you; it's been Bill's fault. But there are always two sides. What you may not have realized is that Bill has been carrying around a tremendous inferiority feeling; it gives him a chip on the shoulder. This will fix it up."

"So?"

"Yes. It is what he has always wanted. You see, the rest of us all have official status, we're members of the G.A., I mean. I'm talking about those who work closely around, uh, *you*. Bill feels it. I've heard him say, after the third drink, that he was just a hired man. He's bitter about it. You don't mind, do you? The Party can afford it and it's an easy price to pay for elimination of friction at headquarters."

I had myself under full control by now. "It's none of my business. Why should I mind, if that is what Mr. Bonforte wants?"

I caught just a flicker of a glance from Dak to Clifton. I added, "That *is* what Mr. B. wants? Isn't it, Rog?"



Dak said harshly, "Tell him, Rog."

Rog said slowly, "Dak and I whipped this up ourselves. We think it is for the best."

"Then Mr. Bonforte did not approve it? You asked him, surely?"

"No, we didn't."

"Why not?"

"Chief, this is not the sort of thing to bother him with. He's a tired, old, sick man. I have not been worrying him with anything less than major policy decisions—which this isn't. It is a district we command no matter who stands for it."

"Then why ask my opinion about it at all?"

"Well, we felt you should know—and know why. We think you ought to approve it."

"Me? You're asking me for a decision as if I were Mr. Bonforte. I'm not." I tapped the desk in his nervous gesture. "Either this decision is at his level, and you should ask *him*—or it's not, and you should never have asked *me*."

Rog chewed his cigar, then said, "All right, I'm not asking you."

"No!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean 'No!' You did ask me; therefore there is doubt in your mind. So if you expect me to present that name to the committee—as if I were Bonforte—then go in and ask him."

They both sat and said nothing. Finally Dak sighed and said, "Tell the rest, Rog. Or I will."

I waited. Clifton took his cigar out of his mouth and said, "Chief, Mr. Bonforte had a stroke four days ago. He's in no shape to be disturbed."

I held still, and recited to myself all of "the cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces," and so forth. When I was back in shape I said, "How is his mind?"

"His mind seems clear enough, but he is terribly tired. That week as a prisoner was more of an ordeal than we realized. The stroke left him in a coma for twenty-four hours. He's out of it now, but the left side of his face is paralyzed and his entire left side is partly out of service."

"Uh, what does Dr. Capek say?"

"He thinks that as the clot clears up, you'll never be able to tell



the difference. But he'll have to take it easier than he used to. But, Chief, right now he is *ill*. We'll just have to carry on through the balance of the campaign without him."

I felt a ghost of the lost feeling I had had when my father died. I had never seen Bonforte, I had had nothing from him but a few scrawled corrections on typescript. But I leaned on him all the way. The fact that he was in that room next door had made the whole thing possible.

I took a long breath, let it out, and said, "Okay, Rog. We'll have to."

"Yes, Chief." He stood up. "We've got to get over to that meeting. How about *that*?" He nodded toward the safe-districts list.

"Oh." I tried to think. Maybe it was possible that Bonforte would reward Bill with the privilege of calling himself "the Honorable," just to keep him happy. He wasn't small about such things; he did not bind the mouths of the kine who tread the grain. In one of his essays on politics he had said, "I am not an intellectual man. If I have any special talent, it lies in picking men of ability and letting them work."

"How long has Bill been with him?" I asked suddenly.

"Eh? About four years. A little over."

Bonforte evidently had liked his work. "That's past one general election, isn't it? Why didn't he make him an Assemblyman then?"

"Why, I don't know. The matter never came up."

"When was Penny put in?"

"About three years ago. A by-election."

"There's your answer, Rog."

"I don't follow you."

"Bonforte could have made Bill a Grand Assemblyman at any time. He didn't choose to. Change that nomination to a 'resigner.' Then if Mr. Bonforte wants Bill to have it, he can arrange a by-election for him later—when he's feeling himself."

Clifton showed no expression. He simply picked up the list and said, "Very well, Chief."

Later that same day Bill quit. I suppose Rog had to tell him that his arm-twisting had not worked. But when Rog told me about it I felt sick, realizing that my stiff-necked attitude had us all in acute danger. I told him so. He shook his head.



"But he knows it *all*! It was his scheme from the start. Look at the load of dirt he can haul over to the Humanity camp."

"Forget it, Chief. Bill may be a louse—I've no use for a man who will quit in the middle of a campaign; you just don't do that, ever. But he is not a rat. In his profession you don't spill a client's secrets, even if you fall out with him."

"I hope you are right."

"You'll see. Don't worry about it. Just get on with the job."

As the next few days passed I came to the conclusion that Rog knew Bill better than I did. We heard nothing from him or about him and the campaign went ahead as usual, getting rougher all the time, but with not a peep to show that our giant hoax was compromised. I began to feel better and buckled down to making the best Bonforte speeches I could manage—sometimes with Rog's help; sometimes just with his okay. Mr. Bonforte was steadily improving again, but Capek had him on absolute quiet.

Rog had to go to Earth during the last week; there are types of fence-mending that simply can't be done by remote control. After all, votes come from the precincts and the field managers count for more than the speechmakers. But speeches still had to be made and press conferences given; I carried on, with Dak and Penny at my elbow—of course I was much more closely with it now; most questions I could answer without stopping to think.

There was the usual twice-weekly press conference in the offices the day Rog was due back. I had been hoping that he would be back in time for it, but there was no reason I could not take it alone. Penny walked in ahead of me, carrying her gear; I heard her gasp.

I saw then that Bill was at the far end of the table.

But I looked around the room as usual and said, "Good morning, gentlemen."

"Good morning, Mr. Minister!" most of them answered.

I added, "Good morning, Bill. Didn't know you were here. Whom are you representing?"

They gave him dead silence to reply. Every one of them knew that Bill had quit us—or had been fired. He grinned at me, and answered, "Good morning, *Mister Bonforte*. I'm with the Krein Syndicate."

I knew it was coming then; I tried not to give him the satisfaction of letting it show. "A fine outfit. I hope they are paying



you what you are worth. Now to business— The written questions first. You have them, Penny?"

I went rapidly through the written questions, giving out answers I had already had time to think over, then sat back as usual and said, "We have time to bat it around a bit, gentlemen. Any other questions?"

There were several. I was forced to answer "No comment" only once—an answer Bonforte preferred to an ambiguous one. Finally I glanced at my watch and said, "That will be all this morning, gentlemen," and started to stand up.

"Smythe!" Bill shouted.

I kept right on getting to my feet, did not look toward him.

"I mean you, Mr. Phony Bonforte-Smythe!" he went on angrily, raising his voice still more.

This time I did look at him, with astonishment—just the amount appropriate, I think, to an important official subjected to rudeness under unlikely conditions. Bill was pointing at me and his face was red. "You impostor! You small-time actor! You *fraud!*"

The London *Times* man on my right said quietly, "Do you want me to call the guard, sir?"

I said, "No. He's harmless."

Bill laughed. "So I'm harmless, huh? You'll find out."

"I really think I should, sir," the *Times* man insisted.

"No." I then said sharply, "That's enough, Bill. You had better leave quietly."

"Don't you wish I would?" He started spewing forth the basic story, talking rapidly. He made no mention of the kidnaping and did not mention his own part in the hoax, but implied that he had left us rather than be mixed up in any such swindle. The impersonation was attributed, correctly as far as it went, to illness on the part of Bonforte—with a strong hint that we might have doped him.

I listened patiently. Most of the reporters simply listened at first, with that stunned expression of outsiders exposed unwillingly to a vicious family argument. Then some of them started scribbling or dictating into minicorders.

When he stopped I said, "Are you through, Bill?"

"That's enough, isn't it?"

"More than enough. I'm sorry, Bill. That's all, gentlemen. I must get back to work."



"Just a moment, Mr. Minister!" someone called out. "Do you want to issue a denial?" Someone else added, "Are you going to sue?"

I answered the latter question first. "No, I shan't sue. One doesn't sue a sick man."

"Sick, am I?" shouted Bill.

"Quiet down, Bill. As for issuing a denial, I hardly think it is called for. However, I see that some of you have been taking notes. While I doubt if any of your publishers would run this story, if they do, this anecdote may add something to it. Did you ever hear of the professor who spent forty years of his life proving that the *Odyssey* was not written by Homer—but by another Greek of the *same name*?"

It got a polite laugh. I smiled and started to turn away again. Bill came rushing around the table and grabbed at my arm. "You can't laugh it off!" The *Times* man—Mr. Ackroyd, it was—pulled him away from me.

I said, "Thank you, sir." Then to Corpsman I added, "What do you want me to do, Bill? I've tried to avoid having you arrested."

"Call the guards if you like, you phony! We'll see who stays in jail longest! *Wait until they take your fingerprints!*"

I sighed and made the understatement of my life. "This is ceasing to be a joke. Gentlemen, I think I had better put an end to this. Penny my dear, will you please have someone send in fingerprinting equipment?" I knew I was sunk—but, damn it, if you are caught by the Birkenhead Drill, the least you owe yourself is to stand at attention while the ship goes down. Even a villain should make a good exit.

Bill did not wait. He grabbed the water glass that had been sitting in front of me; I had handled it several times. "The hell with that! This will do."

"I've told you before, Bill, to mind your language in the presence of ladies. But you may keep the glass."

"You're bloody well right I'll keep it."

"Very well. Please leave. If not, I'll be forced to summon the guard."

He walked out. Nobody said anything. I said, "May I provide fingerprints for any of the rest of you?"

Ackroyd said hastily, "Oh, I'm sure we don't want them, Mr. Minister."



"Oh, by all means! If there is a story in this, you'll want to be covered." I insisted because it was in character—and in the second and third place, you can't be a little bit pregnant, or slightly unmasked—and I did not want my friends present to be scooped by Bill; it was the last thing I could do for them.

We did not have to send for formal equipment. Penny had carbon sheets and someone had one of those lifetime memo pads with plastic sheets; they took prints nicely. Then I said good morning and left.

We got as far as Penny's private office; once inside she fainted dead. I carried her into my office, laid her on the couch, then sat down at my desk and simply shook for several minutes.

Neither one of us was worth much the rest of the day. We carried on as usual except that Penny brushed off all callers, claiming excuses of some sort. I was due to make a speech that night and thought seriously of canceling it. But I left the news turned on all day and there was not a word about the incident of that morning. I realized that they were checking the prints before risking it—after all, I *was* supposed to be His Imperial Majesty's first minister; they would want confirmation. So I decided to make the speech since I had already written it and the time was scheduled. I couldn't even consult Dak; he was away in Tycho City.

It was the best one I had made. I put into it the same stuff a comic uses to quiet a panic in a burning theater. After the pickup was dead I just sunk my face in my hands and wept, while Penny patted my shoulder. We had not discussed the horrible mess at all.

Rog grounded at twenty hundred Greenwich, about as I finished, and checked in with me as soon as he was back. In a dull monotone I told him the whole dirty story; he listened, chewing on a dead cigar, his face expressionless.

At the end I said almost pleadingly, "I *had* to give the fingerprints, Rog. You see, that, don't you? To refuse would not have been in character."

Rog said, "Don't worry."

"Huh?"

"I said, 'Don't worry.' When the reports on those prints come back from the Identification Bureau at The Hague, you are in for a small but pleasant surprise—and our ex-friend Bill is in for a much bigger one, but not pleasant. If he has collected any of his



blood money in advance, they will probably take it out of his hide. I hope they do."

I could not mistake what he meant. "Oh! But, Rog—they won't stop there. There are a dozen other places. Social Security . . . Uh, lots of places."

"You think perhaps we were not thorough? Chief, I knew this could happen, one way or another. From the moment Dak sent word to complete Plan Mardi Gras, the necessary cover-up started. Everywhere. But I didn't think it necessary to tell Bill." He sucked on his dead cigar, took it out of his mouth, and looked at it. "Poor Bill."

Penny sighed softly and fainted again.

## 10

Somehow we got to the final day. We did not hear from Bill again; the passenger lists showed that he went Earthside two days after his fiasco. If any news service ran anything I did not hear of it, nor did Quiroga's speeches hint at it.

Mr. Bonforte steadily improved until it was a safe bet that he could take up his duties after the election. His paralysis continued in part but we even had that covered: he would go on vacation right after election, a routine practice that almost every politician indulges in. The vacation would be in the *Tommie*, safe from everything. Sometime in the course of the trip I would be transferred and smuggled back—and the Chief would have a mild stroke, brought on by the strain of the campaign.

Rog would have to unsort some fingerprints, but he could safely wait a year or more for that.

Election day I was happy as a puppy in a shoe closet. The impersonation was over, although I was going to do one more short turn. I had already canned two five-minute speeches for grand network, one magnanimously accepting victory, the other gallantly conceding defeat; my job was finished. When the last one was in the can, I grabbed Penny and kissed her. She didn't even seem to mind.

The remaining short turn was a command performance; Mr.



Bonforte wanted to see me—as *him*—before he let me drop it. I did not mind. Now that the strain was over, it did not worry me to see him; playing him for his entertainment would be like a comedy skit, except that I would do it straight. What am I saying? Playing straight is the essence of comedy.

The whole family would gather in the upper living room—there because Mr. Bonforte had not seen the sky in some weeks and wanted to—and there we would listen to the returns, and either drink to victory or drown our sorrows and swear to do better next time. Strike me out of the last part; I had had my first and last political campaign and I wanted no more politics. I was not even sure I wanted to act again. Acting every minute for over six weeks adds up to about five hundred ordinary performances. That's a long run.

They brought him up the lift in a wheel chair. I stayed out of sight and let them arrange him on a couch before I came in; a man is entitled not to have his weakness displayed before strangers. Besides, I wanted to make an entrance.

I was almost startled out of character. He looked like my father! Oh, it was just a "family" resemblance; he and I looked much more alike than either one of us looked like my father, but the likeness was there—and the age was right, for he looked *old*. I had not guessed how much he had aged. He was thin and his hair was white.

I made an immediate mental note that during the coming vacation in space I must help them prepare for the transition, the resubstitution. No doubt Capek could put weight back on him; if not, there were ways to make a man appear fleshier without obvious padding. I would dye his hair myself. The delayed announcement of the stroke he had suffered would cover the inevitable discrepancies. After all, he *had* changed this much in only a few weeks; the need was to keep the fact from calling attention to the impersonation.

But these practical details were going on by themselves in a corner of my mind; my own being was welling with emotion. Ill though he was, the man gave off a force both spiritual and virile. I felt that warm, almost holy, shock one feels when first coming into sight of the great statue of Abraham Lincoln. I was reminded of another statue, too, seeing him lying there with his legs and his



helpless left side covered with a shawl: the wounded Lion of Lucerne. He had that massive strength and dignity, even when helpless: "The guard dies, but never surrenders."

He looked up as I came in and smiled the warm, tolerant, and friendly smile I had learned to portray, and motioned with his good hand for me to come to him. I smiled the same smile back and went to him. He shook hands with a grip surprisingly strong and said warmly, "I am happy to meet you at last." His speech was slightly blurred and I could not see the slackness on the side of his face away from me.

"I am honored and happy to meet you, sir." I had to think about it to keep from matching the blurring of paralysis.

He looked me up and down, and grinned. "It looks to me as if you had already met me."

I glanced down at myself. "I have tried, sir."

"'Tried'! You succeeded. It is an odd thing to see one's own self."

I realized with sudden painful empathy that he was not emotionally aware of his own appearance; my present appearance was "his"—and any change in himself was merely incidental to illness, temporary, not to be noticed. But he went on speaking. "Would you mind moving around a bit for me, sir? I want to see me—you—us. I want the audience's viewpoint for once."

So I straightened up, moved around the room, spoke to Penny (the poor child was looking from one to the other of us with a dazed expression), picked up a paper, scratched my collarbone and rubbed my chin, moved his wand from under my arm to my hand and fiddled with it.

He was watching with delight. So I added an encore. Taking the middle of the rug, I gave the peroration of one of his finest speeches, not trying to do it word for word, but interpreting it, letting it roll and thunder as he would have done—and ending with his own exact ending: "A slave cannot be freed, save he do it himself. Nor can you enslave a free man; the very most you can do is kill him!"

There was that wonderful hushed silence, then a ripple of clapping and Bonforte himself was pounding the couch with his good hand and calling, "Bravo!"

It was the only applause I ever got in the role. It was enough.

He had me pull up a chair then and sit with him. I saw him



glance at the wand, so I handed it to him. "The safety is on, sir."

"I know how to use it." He looked at it closely, then handed it back. I had thought perhaps he would keep it. Since he did not, I decided to turn it over to Dak to deliver to him. He asked me about myself and told me that he did not recall ever seeing me play, but that he had seen my father's *Cyrano*. He was making a great effort to control the errant muscles of his mouth and his speech was clear but labored.

Then he asked me what I intended to do now. I told him that I had no plans as yet. He nodded and said, "We'll see. There is a place for you. There is work to be done." He made no mention of pay, which made me proud.

The returns were beginning to come in and he turned his attention to the stereo tank. Returns had been coming in, of course, for forty-eight hours, since the outer worlds and the districtless constituencies vote before Earth does, and even on Earth an election "day" is more than thirty hours long, as the globe turns. But now we began to get the important districts of the great land masses of Earth. We had forged far ahead the day before in the outer returns and Rog had had to tell me that it meant nothing; the Expansionists always carried the outer worlds. What the billions of people still on Earth who had never been out and never would thought about it was what mattered.

But we needed every outer vote we could get. The Agrarian Party on Ganymede had swept five out of six districts; they were part of our coalition, and the Expansionist Party as such did not put up even token candidates. The situation on Venus was more ticklish, with the Venerians split into dozens of splinter parties divided on fine points of theology impossible for a human being to understand. Nevertheless, we expected most of the native vote, either directly or through caucused coalition later, and we should get practically all of the human vote there. The Imperial restriction that the natives must select human beings to represent them at New Batavia was a thing Bonforte was pledged to remove; it gained us votes on Venus; we did not know yet how many votes it would lose us on Earth.

Since the nests sent only observers to the Assembly the only vote we worried about on Mars was the human vote. We had the popular sentiment; they had the patronage. But with an honest count we expected a shoo-in there.



Dak was bending over a slide rule at Rog's side; Rog had a big sheet of paper laid out in some complicated weighting formula of his own. A dozen or more of the giant metal brains through the Solar System were doing the same thing that night, but Rog preferred his own guesses. He told me once that he could walk through a district, "sniffing" it, and come within two per cent of its results. I think he could.

Doc Capek was sitting back, with his hands over his paunch, as relaxed as an angleworm. Penny was moving around, pushing straight things crooked and vice versa and fetching us drinks. She never seemed to look directly at either me or Mr. Bonforte.

I had never before experienced an election-night party; they were not like any other. There is a cozy, warm rapport of all passion spent. It really does not matter too much how the people decide; you have done your best, you are with your friends and comrades, and for a while there is no worry and no pressure despite the over-all excitement, like frosting on a cake, of the incoming returns.

I don't know when I've had so good a time.

Rog looked up, looked at me, then spoke to Mr. Bonforte. "The Continent is seesaw. The Americans are testing the water with a toe before coming in on our side; the only question is, how deep?"

"Can you make a projection, Rog?"

"Not yet. Oh, we have the popular vote but in the G.A. it could swing either way by half a dozen seats." He stood up. "I think I had better mosey out into town."

Properly speaking, I should have gone, as "Mr. Bonforte." The Party leader should certainly appear at the main headquarters of the Party sometime during election night. But I had never been in headquarters, it being the sort of a buttonholing place where my impersonation might be easily breached. My "illness" had excused me from it during the campaign; tonight it was not worth the risk, so Rog would go instead, and shake hands and grin and let the keyed-up girls who had done the hard and endless paperwork throw their arms around him and weep. "Back in an hour."

Even our little party should have been down on the lower level, to include all the office staff, especially Jimmie Washington. But it would not work, not without shutting Mr. Bonforte himself out of



it. They were having their own party of course. I stood up. "Rog, I'll go down with you and say hello to Jimmie's harem."

"Eh? You don't have to, you know."

"It's the proper thing to do, isn't it? And it really isn't any trouble or risk." I turned to Mr. Bonforte. "How about it, sir?"

"I would appreciate it very much."

We went down the lift and through the silent, empty private quarters and on through my office and Penny's. Beyond her door was bedlam. A stereo receiver, moved in for the purpose, was blasting at full gain, the floor was littered, and everybody was drinking, or smoking, or both. Even Jimmie Washington was holding a drink while he listened to the returns. He was not drinking it; he neither drank nor smoked. No doubt someone had handed it to him and he had kept it. Jimmie had a fine sense of fitness.

I made the rounds, with Rog at my side, thanked Jimmie warmly and very sincerely, and apologized that I was feeling tired. "I'm going up and spread the bones, Jimmie. Make my excuses to people, will you?"

"Yes, sir. You've got to take care of yourself, Mr. Minister."

I went back up while Rog went on out into the public tunnels.

Penny shushed me with a finger to her lips when I came into the upper living room. Bonforte seemed to have dropped off to sleep and the receiver was muted down. Dak still sat in front of it, filling in figures on the big sheet against Rog's return. Capek had not moved. He nodded and raised his glass to me.

I let Penny fix me a scotch and water, then stepped out into the bubble balcony. It was night both by clock and by fact and Earth was almost full, dazzling in a Tiffany spread of stars. I searched North America and tried to pick out the little dot I had left only weeks earlier, and tried to get my emotions straight.

After a while I came back in; night on Luna is rather overpowering. Rog returned a little later and sat back down at his work sheets without speaking. I noticed that Bonforte was awake again.

The critical returns were coming in now and everybody kept quiet, letting Rog with his pencil and Dak with his slide rule have peace to work. At long, long last Rog shoved his chair back. "That's it, Chief," he said without looking up. "We're in. Majority not less than seven seats, probably nineteen, possibly over thirty."

After a pause Bonforte said quietly, "You're sure?"

"Positive. Penny, try another channel and see what we get."



I went over and sat by Bonforte; I could not talk. He reached out and patted my hand in a fatherly way and we both watched the receiver. The first station Penny got said: “—doubt about it, folks; eight of the robot brains say yes, *Curiac* says maybe. The Expansionist Party has won a decisive—” She switched to another.

“—confirms his temporary post for another five years. Mr. Quiroga cannot be reached for a statement but his general manager in New Chicago admits that the present trend cannot be over—”

Rog got up and went to the phone; Penny muted the news down until nothing could be heard. The announcer continued mouthing; he was simply saying in different words what we already knew.

Rog came back; Penny turned up the gain. The announcer went on for a moment, then stopped, read something that was handed to him, and turned back with a broad grin. “Friends and fellow citizens, I now bring you for a statement the *Supreme Minister!*”

The picture changed to my victory speech.

I sat there luxuriating in it, with my feelings as mixed up as possible but all good, painfully good. I had done a job on the speech and I knew it; I looked tired, sweaty, and calmly triumphant. It sounded ad-lib.

I had just reached: “Let us go forward together, with freedom for all—” when I heard a noise behind me.

“Mr. Bonforte!” I said. “Doc! *Doc!* Come quickly!”

Mr. Bonforte was pawing at me with his right hand and trying very urgently to tell me something. But it was no use; his poor mouth failed him and his mighty indomitable will could not make the weak flesh obey.

I took him in my arms—then he went into Cheyne-Stokes breathing and quickly into termination.

They took his body back down in the lift, Dak and Capek together; I was no use to them. Rog came up and patted me on the shoulder, then he went away. Penny had followed the others down. Presently I went again out onto the balcony. I needed “fresh air” even though it was the same machine-pumped air as the living room. But it felt fresher.

They had killed him. His enemies had killed him as certainly as if they had put a knife in his ribs. Despite all that we had done,



the risks we had taken, in the end they had murdered him. "Murder most foul!"

I felt dead inside me, numb with the shock. I had seen "myself" die, I had again seen my father die. I knew then why they so rarely manage to save one of a pair of Siamese twins. I was empty.

I don't know how long I stayed out there. Eventually I heard Rog's voice behind me. "Chief?"

I turned. "Rog," I said urgently, "don't call me that. Please!"

"Chief," he persisted, "you know what you have to do now? Don't you?"

I felt dizzy and his face blurred. I did not know what he was talking about—I did not *want* to know what he was talking about.

"What do you mean?"

"Chief—one man dies—but the show goes on. You can't quit now."

My head ached and my eyes would not focus. He seemed to pull toward me and away while his voice drove on. ". . . robbed him of his chance to finish his work. So you've got to do it for him. You've got to make him live again!"

I shook my head and made a great effort to pull myself together and reply. "Rog, you don't know what you are saying. It's preposterous—ridiculous! I'm no statesman. I'm just a bloody actor! I make faces and make people laugh. That's all I'm good for."

To my own horror I heard myself say it in Bonforte's voice.

Rog looked at me. "Seems to me you've done all right so far."

I tried to change my voice, tried to gain control of the situation. "Rog, you're upset. When you've calmed down you will see how ridiculous this is. You're right; the show goes on. But not that way. The proper thing to do—the *only* thing to do—is for you yourself to move on up. The election is won; you've got your majority—now you take office and carry out the program."

He looked at me and shook his head sadly. "I would if I could. I admit it. But I can't. Chief, you remember those confounded executive committee meetings? You kept them in line. The whole coalition has been kept glued together by the personal force and leadership of one man. If you don't follow through now, all that he lived for—and died for—will fall apart."

I had no answering argument; he might be right—I had seen the wheels within wheels of politics in the past month and a half. "Rog, even if what you say is true, the solution you offer is impos-



sible. We've barely managed to keep up this pretense by letting me be seen only under carefully stage-managed conditions—and we've just missed being caught out as it is. But to make it work week after week, month after month, even year after year, if I understand you—no, it couldn't be done. It is impossible. I *can't* do it!"

"You *can*!" He leaned toward me and said forcefully, "We've all talked it over and we know the hazards as well as you do. But you'll have a chance to grow into it. Two weeks in space to start with—hell, a month if you want it! You'll study all the time—his journals, his boyhood diaries, his scrapbooks, you'll soak yourself in them. And we'll all help you."

I did not answer. He went on, "Look, Chief, you've learned that a political personality is not one man; it's a team—it's a team bound together by common purposes and common beliefs. We've lost our team captain and we've got to have another one. But the team is still there."

Capek was out on the balcony; I had not seen him come out. I turned to him. "Are you for this too?"

"Yes."

"It's your duty," Rog added.

Capek said slowly, "I won't go that far. I hope you will do it. But, damn it, I won't be your conscience. I believe in free will, frivolous as that may sound from a medical man." He turned to Clifton. "We had better leave him alone, Rog. He knows. Now it's up to him."

But, although they left, I was not to be alone just yet. Dak came out. To my relief and gratitude he did not call me "Chief."

"Hello, Dak."

"Howdy." He was silent for a moment, smoking and looking out at the stars. Then he turned to me. "Old son, we've been through some things together. I know you now, and I'll back you with a gun, or money, or fists any time, and never ask why. If you choose to drop out now, I won't have a word of blame and I won't think any the less of you. You've done a noble best."

"Uh, thanks, Dak."

"One more word and I'll smoke out. Just remember this: if you decide you can't do it, the foul scum who brainwashed him will win. In spite of everything, they win." He went inside.

I felt torn apart in my mind—then I gave way to sheer self-pity. It wasn't fair! I had my *own* life to live. I was at the top of my



powers, with my greatest professional triumphs still ahead of me. It wasn't right to expect me to bury myself, perhaps for years, in the anonymity of another man's role—while the public forgot me, producers and agents forgot me—would probably believe I was dead.

It wasn't fair. It was too much to ask.

Presently I pulled out of it and for a time did not think. Mother Earth was still serene and beautiful and changeless in the sky; I wondered what the election-night celebrations there sounded like. Mars and Jupiter and Venus were all in sight, strung like prizes along the zodiac. Ganymede I could not see, of course, nor the lonely colony out on far Pluto.

"Worlds of Hope," Bonforte had called them.

But he was dead. He was gone. They had taken away from him his birthright at its ripe fullness. He was dead.

And they had put it up to me to re-create him, make him live again.

Was I up to it? Could I possibly measure up to his noble standards? What would he want me to do? If he were in my place—what would Bonforte do? Again and again in the campaign I had asked myself: "What would Bonforte do?"

Someone moved behind me, I turned and saw Penny. I looked at her and said, "Did they send you out? Did you come to plead with me?"

"No."

She added nothing and did not seem to expect me to answer, nor did we look at each other. The silence went on. At last I said, "Penny? If I try to do it—will you help?"

She turned suddenly toward me. "Yes. Oh yes, Chief! I'll help!"

"Then I'll try," I said humbly.

I wrote all of the above twenty-five years ago to try to straighten out my own confusion. I tried to tell the truth and not spare myself because it was not meant to be read by anyone but myself and my therapist, Dr. Capek. It is strange, after a quarter of a century, to reread the foolish and emotional words of that young man. I remember him, yet I have trouble realizing that I was ever he. My wife Penelope claims that she remembers him better than I do—and that she never loved anyone else. So time changes us.



I find I can "remember" Bonforte's early life better than I remember my actual life as that rather pathetic person, Lawrence Smith, or—as he liked to style himself—"The Great Lorenzo." Does that make me insane? Schizophrenic, perhaps? If so, it is a necessary insanity for the role I have had to play, for in order to let Bonforte live again, that seedy actor had to be suppressed—completely.

Insane or not, I am aware that he once existed and that I was he. He was never a success as an actor, not really—though I think he was sometimes touched with the true madness. He made his final exit still perfectly in character; I have a yellowed newspaper clipping somewhere which states that he was "found dead" in a Jersey City hotel room from an overdose of sleeping pills—apparently taken in a fit of despondency, for his agent issued a statement that he had not had a part in several months. Personally, I feel that they need not have mentioned that about his being out of work; if not libelous, it was at least unkind. The date of the clipping proves, incidentally, that he would not have been in New Batavia, or anywhere else, during the campaign of '15.

I suppose I should burn it.

But there is no one left alive today who knows the truth other than Dak and Penelope—except the men who murdered Bonforte's body.

I have been in and out of office three times now and perhaps this term will be my last. I was knocked out the first time when we finally put the eetees—Venerians and Martians and Outer Jovians—into the Grand Assembly. But the non-human peoples are still there and I came back. The people will take a certain amount of reform, then they want a rest. But the reforms stay. People don't really want change, any change at all—and xenophobia is very deep-rooted. But we progress, as we must—if we are to go out to the stars.

Again and again I have asked myself: "What would Bonforte do?" I am not sure that my answers have always been right (although I am sure that I am the best-read student in his works in the System). But I have tried to stay in character in his role. A long time ago someone—Voltaire?—someone said, "If Satan should ever replace God he would find it necessary to assume the attributes of Divinity."

I have never regretted my lost profession. In a way, I have not



lost it; Willem was right. There is other applause besides hand-clapping and there is always the warm glow of a good performance. I have tried, I suppose, to create the perfect work of art. Perhaps I have not fully succeeded—but I think my father would rate it as a “good performance.”

No, I do not regret it, even though I was happier then—at least I slept better. But there is solemn satisfaction in doing the best you can for eight billion people.

Perhaps their lives have no cosmic significance, but they have feelings. They can hurt.







**THE  
DOOR  
INTO  
SUMMER**



*For*  
*A. P. and Phyllis,*  
*Mick and Annette,*  
*Aelurophiles All.*



# 1

One winter shortly before the Six Weeks War my tomcat, Petronius the Arbiter, and I lived in an old farmhouse in Connecticut. I doubt if it is there any longer, as it was near the edge of the blast area of the Manhattan near-miss, and those old frame buildings burn like tissue paper. Even if it is still standing it would not be a desirable rental because of the fall-out, but we liked it then, Pete and I. The lack of plumbing made the rent low and what had been the dining room had a good north light for my drafting board.

The drawback was that the place had eleven doors to the outside.

Twelve, if you counted Pete's door. I always tried to arrange a door of his own for Pete—in this case a board fitted into a window in an unused bedroom and in which I had cut a cat strainer just wide enough for Pete's whiskers. I have spent too much of my life opening doors for cats—I once calculated that, since the dawn of civilization, nine hundred and seventy-eight man-centuries have been used up that way. I could show you figures.

Pete usually used his own door except when he could bully me into opening a people door for him, which he preferred. But he *would not* use his door when there was snow on the ground.

While still a kitten, all fluff and buzzes, Pete had worked out a simple philosophy. I was in charge of quarters, rations, and weather; he was in charge of everything else. But he held me especially responsible for weather. Connecticut winters are good only for Christmas cards; regularly that winter Pete would check his own door, refuse to go out it because of that unpleasant white



stuff beyond it (he was no fool), then badger me to open a people door.

He had a fixed conviction that at least one of them must lead into summer weather. Each time this meant that I had to go around with him to each of eleven doors, hold it open while he satisfied himself that it was winter out that way, too, then go on to the next door, while his criticisms of my mismanagement grew more bitter with each disappointment.

Then he would stay indoors until hydraulic pressure utterly forced him outside. When he returned the ice in his pads would sound like little clogs on the wooden floor and he would glare at me and refuse to purr until he had chewed it all out . . . where-upon he would forgive me until the next time.

But he never gave up his search for the Door into Summer.

On 3 December, 1970, I was looking for it too.

My quest was about as hopeless as Pete's had been in a Connecticut January. What little snow there was in southern California was kept on mountains for skiers, not in downtown Los Angeles—the stuff probably couldn't have pushed through the smog anyway. But the winter weather was in my heart.

I was not in bad health (aside from a cumulative hangover), I was still on the right side of thirty by a few days, and I was far from being broke. No police were looking for me, nor any husbands, nor any process servers; there was nothing wrong that a slight case of amnesia would not have cured. But there was winter in my heart and I was looking for the door to summer.

If I sound like a man with an acute case of self-pity, you are correct. There must have been well over two billion people on this planet in worse shape than I was. Nevertheless, I was looking for the Door into Summer.

Most of the ones I had checked lately had been swinging doors, like the pair in front of me then—the SANS SOUCI Bar Grill, the sign said. I went in, picked a booth halfway back, placed the overnight bag I was carrying carefully on the seat, slid in by it, and waited for the waiter.

The overnight bag said, "Waarrh?"

I said, "Take it easy, Pete."

"Naaow!"

"Nonsense, you just went. Pipe down, the waiter is coming."

Pete shut up. I looked up as the waiter leaned over the table,



and said to him, "A double shot of your bar Scotch, a glass of plain water, and a split of ginger ale."

The waiter looked upset. "Ginger ale, sir? With Scotch?"

"Do you have it or don't you?"

"Why, yes, of course. But—"

"Then fetch it. I'm not going to drink it; I just want to sneer at it. And bring a saucer too."

"As you say, sir." He polished the table top. "How about a small steak, sir? Or the scallops are very good today."

"Look, mate, I'll tip you for the scallops if you'll promise not to serve them. All I need is what I ordered . . . and don't forget the saucer."

He shut up and went away. I told Pete again to take it easy, the Marines had landed. The waiter returned, his pride appeased by carrying the split of ginger ale on the saucer. I had him open it while I mixed the Scotch with the water. "Would you like another glass for the ginger ale, sir?"

"I'm a real buckaroo; I drink it out of the bottle."

He shut up and let me pay him and tip him, not forgetting a tip for the scallops. When he had gone I poured ginger ale into the saucer and tapped on the top of the overnight bag. "Soup's on, Peter."

It was unzipped; I never zipped it with him inside. He spread it with his paws, poked his head out, looked around quickly, then levitated his forequarters and placed his front feet on the edge of the table. I raised my glass and we looked at each other. "Here's to the female race, Pete—find 'em and forget 'em!"

He nodded; it matched his own philosophy perfectly. He bent his head daintily and started lapping up ginger ale. "If you can, that is," I added, and took a deep swig. Pete did not answer. Forgetting a female was no effort to him; he was the natural-born bachelor type.

Facing me through the window of the bar was a sign that kept changing. First it would read: WORK WHILE YOU SLEEP. Then it would say: AND DREAM YOUR TROUBLES AWAY. Then it would flash in letters twice as big:

#### MUTUAL ASSURANCE COMPANY

I read all three several times without thinking about them. I knew as much and as little about suspended animation as every-



body else did. I had read a popular article or so when it was first announced and two or three times a week I'd get an insurance-company ad about it in the morning mail; I usually chucked them without looking at them since they didn't seem to apply to me any more than lipstick ads did.

In the first place, until shortly before then, I could not have paid for cold sleep; it's expensive. In the second place, why should a man who was enjoying his work, was making money, expected to make more, was in love and about to be married, commit semi-suicide?

If a man had an incurable disease and expected to die anyhow but thought the doctors a generation later might be able to cure him—and he could afford to pay for suspended animation while medical science caught up with what was wrong with him—then cold sleep was a logical bet. Or if his ambition was to make a trip to Mars and he thought that clipping one generation out of his personal movie film would enable him to buy a ticket, I supposed that was logical too—there had been a news story about a café-society couple who got married and went right straight from city hall to the sleep sanctuary of Western World Insurance Company with an announcement that they had left instructions not to be called until they could spend their honeymoon on an interplanetary liner . . . although I had suspected that it was a publicity gag rigged by the insurance company and that they had ducked out the back door under assumed names. Spending your wedding night cold as a frozen mackerel does not have the ring of truth in it.

And there was the usual straightforward financial appeal, the one the insurance companies bore down on: "Work while you sleep." Just hold still and let whatever you have saved grow into a fortune. If you are fifty-five and your retirement fund pays you two hundred a month, why not sleep away the years, wake up still fifty-five, and have it pay you a thousand a month? To say nothing of waking up in a bright new world which would probably promise you a much longer and healthier old age in which to enjoy the thousand a month? That one they really went to town on, each company proving with incontrovertible figures that its selection of stocks for its trust fund made more money faster than any of the others. "Work while you sleep!"

It had never appealed to me. I wasn't fifty-five, I didn't want to retire, and I hadn't seen anything wrong with 1970.



Until recently, that is to say. Now I was retired whether I liked it or not (I didn't); instead of being on my honeymoon I was sitting in a second-rate bar drinking Scotch purely for anesthesia; instead of a wife I had one much-scarred tomcat with a neurotic taste for ginger ale; and as for liking right now, I would have swapped it for a case of gin and then busted every bottle.

But I wasn't broke.

I reached into my coat and took out an envelope, opened it. It had two items in it. One was a certified check for more money than I had ever had before at one time; the other was a stock certificate in Hired Girl, Inc. They were both getting a little mused; I had been carrying them ever since they were handed to me.

Why not?

Why not duck out and sleep my troubles away? Pleasanter than joining the Foreign Legion, less messy than suicide, and it would divorce me completely from the events and the people who had made my life go sour. So why not?

I wasn't terribly interested in the chance to get rich. Oh, I had read H. G. Wells's *When The Sleeper Wakes*, not only when the insurance companies started giving away free copies, but before that, when it was just another classic novel; I knew what compound interest and stock appreciation could do. But I was not sure that I had enough money both to buy the Long Sleep and to set up a trust large enough to be worth while. The other argument appealed to me more: go beddy-bye and wake up in a different world. Maybe a lot better world, the way the insurance companies would have you believe . . . or maybe worse. But certainly different.

I could make sure of one important difference: I could doze long enough to be certain that it was a world without Belle Darkin—or Miles Gentry, either, but Belle especially. If Belle was dead and buried I could forget her, forget what she had done to me, cancel her out . . . instead of gnawing my heart with the knowledge that she was only a few miles away.

Let's see, how long would that have to be? Belle was twenty-three—or claimed to be (I recalled that once she had seemed to let slip that she remembered Roosevelt as President). Well, in her twenties anyhow. If I slept seventy years, she'd be an obituary. Make it seventy-five and be safe.

Then I remembered the strides they were making in geriatrics;



they were talking about a hundred and twenty years as an attainable "normal" life span. Maybe I would have to sleep a hundred years. I wasn't certain that any insurance company offered that much.

Then I had a gently fiendish idea, inspired by the warm glow of Scotch. It wasn't necessary to sleep until Belle was dead; it was enough, more than enough, and just the fitting revenge on a female to be *young* when she was *old*. Just enough younger to rub her nose in it—say about thirty years.

I felt a paw, gentle as a snowflake, on my arm. "Mooorrrre!" announced Pete.

"Greedy gut," I told him, and poured him another saucer of ginger ale. He thanked me with a polite wait, then started lapping it.

But he had interrupted my pleasantly nasty chain of thought. What the devil could I do about Pete?

You can't give away a cat the way you can a dog; they won't stand for it. Sometimes they go with the house, but not in Pete's case; to him I had been the one stable thing in a changing world ever since he was taken from his mother nine years earlier . . . I had even managed to keep him near me in the Army and that takes real wangling.

He was in good health and likely to stay that way even though he was held together with scar tissue. If he could just correct a tendency to lead with his right he would be winning battles and siring kittens for another five years at least.

I could pay to have him kept in a kennel until he died (unthinkable!) or I could have him chloroformed (equally unthinkable)—or I could abandon him. That is what it boils down to with a cat: you either carry out the Chinese obligation you have assumed—or you abandon the poor thing, let it go wild, destroy its faith in the eternal rightness.

The way Belle had destroyed mine.

So, Danny Boy, you might as well forget it. Your own life may have gone as sour as dill pickles; that did not excuse you in the slightest from your obligation to carry out your contract to this super-spoiled cat.

Just as I reached that philosophical truth Pete sneezed; the bubbles had gone up his nose. "*Gesundheit*," I answered, "and quit trying to drink it so fast."



Pete ignored me. His table manners averaged better than mine and he knew it. Our waiter had been hanging around the cash register, talking with the cashier. It was the after-lunch slump and the only other customers were at the bar. The waiter looked up when I said "*Gesundheit*," and spoke to the cashier. They both looked our way, then the cashier lifted the flap gate in the bar and headed toward us.

I said quietly, "MPs, Pete."

He glanced around and ducked down into the bag; I pushed the top together. The cashier came over and leaned on my table, giving the seats on both sides of the booth a quick double-O. "Sorry, friend," he said flatly, "but you'll have to get that cat out of here."

"What cat?"

"The one you were feeding out of that saucer."

"I don't see any cat."

This time he bent down and looked under the table. "You've got him in that bag," he accused.

"Bag? Cat?" I said wonderingly. "My friend, I think you've come down with an acute figure of speech."

"Huh? Don't give me any fancy language. You've got a cat in that bag. Open it up."

"Do you have a search warrant?"

"What? Don't be silly."

"You're the one talking silly, demanding to see the inside of my bag without a search warrant. Fourth Amendment—and the war has been over for years. Now that we've settled that, please tell my waiter to make it the same all around—or fetch it yourself."

He looked pained. "Brother, this isn't anything personal, but I've got a license to consider. 'No dogs, no cats'—it says so right up there on the wall. We aim to run a sanitary establishment."

"Then your aim is poor." I picked up my glass. "See the lipstick marks? You ought to be checking your dishwasher, not searching your customers."

"I don't see no lipstick."

"I wiped most of it off. But let's take it down to the Board of Health and get the bacteria count checked."

He sighed. "You got a badge?"

"No."

"Then we're even. I don't search your bag and you don't take me down to the Board of Health. Now if you want another drink,



step up to the bar and have it . . . on the house. But not here." He turned and headed up front.

I shrugged. "We were just leaving anyhow."

As I started to pass the cashier's desk on my way out he looked up. "No hard feelings?"

"Nope. But I was planning to bring my horse in here for a drink later. Now I won't."

"Suit yourself. The ordinance doesn't say a word about horses. But just one more thing—does that cat really drink ginger ale?"

"Fourth Amendment, remember?"

"I don't want to see the animal; I just want to know."

"Well," I admitted, "he prefers it with a dash of bitters, but he'll drink it straight if he has to."

"It'll ruin his kidneys. Look here a moment, friend."

"At what?"

"Lean back so that your head is close to where mine is. Now look up at the ceiling over each booth . . . the mirrors up in the decorations. I *knew* there was a cat there—because I saw it."

I leaned back and looked. The ceiling of the joint had a lot of junky decoration, including many mirrors; I saw now that a number of them, camouflaged by the design, were so angled as to permit the cashier to use them as periscopes without leaving his station. "We need that," he said apologetically. "You'd be shocked at what goes on in those booths . . . if we didn't keep an eye on 'em. It's a sad world."

"Amen, brother." I went on out.

Once outside, I opened the bag and carried it by one handle; Pete stuck his head out. "You heard what the man said, Pete. 'It's a sad world.' Worse than sad when two friends can't have a quiet drink together without being spied on. That settles it."

"Now?" asked Pete.

"If you say so. If we're going to do it, there's no point in stalling."

"Now!" Pete answered emphatically.

"Unanimous. It's right across the street."

The receptionist at the Mutual Assurance Company was a fine example of the beauty of functional design. In spite of being streamlined for about Mach Four, she displayed frontal-mounted radar housings and everything else needed for her basic mission. I



reminded myself that she would be Whistler's Mother by the time I was out and told her that I wanted to see a salesman.

"Please be seated. I will see if one of our client executives is free." Before I could sit down she added, "Our Mr. Powell will see you. This way, please."

Our Mr. Powell occupied an office which made me think that Mutual did pretty well for itself. He shook hands moistly, sat me down, offered me a cigarette, and attempted to take my bag. I hung onto it. "Now, sir, how can we serve you?"

"I want the Long Sleep."

His eyebrows went up and his manner became more respectful. No doubt Mutual would write you a camera floater for seven bucks, but the Long Sleep let them get their patty-paws on *all* of a client's assets. "A very wise decision," he said reverently. "I wish I were free to take it myself. But . . . family responsibilities, you know." He reached out and picked up a form. "Sleep clients are usually in a hurry. Let me save you time and bother by filling this out for you . . . and we'll arrange for your physical examination at once."

"Just a moment."

"Eh?"

"One question. Are you set up to arrange cold sleep for a cat?"

He looked surprised, then pained. "You're jesting."

I opened the top of the bag; Pete stuck his head out. "Meet my side-kick. Just answer the question, please. If the answer is 'no,' I want to sashay up to Central Valley Liability. Their offices are in this same building, aren't they?"

This time he looked horrified. "Mister— Uh, I didn't get your name?"

"Dan Davis."

"Mr. Davis, once a man enters our door he is under the benevolent protection of Mutual Assurance. I *couldn't* let you go to Central Valley."

"How do you plan to stop me? Judo?"

"Please!" He glanced around and looked upset. "Our company is an ethical company."

"Meaning that Central Valley is not?"

"I didn't say that; you did. Mr. Davis, don't let me sway you——"

"You won't."



"—but get sample contracts from each company. Get a lawyer, better yet, get a licensed semanticist. Find out what we offer—and actually deliver—and compare it with what Central Valley claims to offer." He glanced around again and leaned toward me. "I shouldn't say this—and I do hope you won't quote me—but they don't even use the standard actuarial tables."

"Maybe they give the customer a break instead."

"What? My dear Mr. Davis, we distribute every accrued benefit. Our charter requires it . . . while Central Valley is a stock company."

"Maybe I should buy some of their— Look, Mr. Powell, we're wasting time. Will Mutual accept my pal here? Or not? If not, I've been here too long already."

"You mean you want to pay to have that creature preserved alive in hypothermia?"

"I mean I want both of us to take the Long Sleep. And don't call him 'that creature'; his name is Petronius."

"Sorry. I'll rephrase my question. You are prepared to pay two custodial fees to have both of you, you and, uh, Petronius committed to our sanctuary?"

"Yes. But not two standard fees. Something extra, of course, but you can stuff us both in the same coffin; you can't honestly charge as much for Pete as you charge for a man."

"This is most unusual."

"Of course it is. But we'll dicker over the price later . . . or I'll dicker with Central Valley. Right now I want to find out if you can do it."

"Uh . . ." He drummed on his desk top. "Just a moment." He picked up his phone and said, "Opal, get me Dr. Berquist." I didn't hear the rest of the conversation, for he switched on the privacy guard. But after a while he put down the instrument and smiled as if a rich uncle had died. "Good news, sir! I had overlooked momentarily the fact that the first successful experiments were made on cats. The techniques and critical factors for cats are fully established. In fact there is a cat at the Naval Research Laboratory in Annapolis which is and has been for more than twenty years alive in hypothermia."

"I thought NRL was wiped out when they got Washington?"

"Just the surface buildings, sir, not the deep vaults. Which is a tribute to the perfection of the technique; the animal was unat-



tended save by automatic machinery for more than two years . . . yet it still lives, unchanged, unaged. As you will live, sir, for whatever period you elect to entrust yourself to Mutual."

I thought he was going to cross himself. "Okay, okay, now let's get on with the dicker."

There were four factors involved: first, how to pay for our care while we were hibernating; second, how long I wanted us to sleep; third, how I wanted my money invested while I was in the freezer; and last, what happened if I conked out and never woke up.

I finally settled on the year 2000, a nice round number and only thirty years away. I was afraid that if I made it any longer I would be completely out of touch. The changes in the last thirty years (my own lifetime) had been enough to bug a man's eyes out—two big wars and a dozen little ones, the downfall of communism, the Great Panic, the artificial satellites, the change to atomic power—why, when I was a kid they didn't even have multimorphs.

I might find 2000 A.D. pretty confusing. But if I didn't jump that far Belle would not have time to work up a fancy set of wrinkles.

When it came to how to invest my dough I did not consider government bonds and other conservative investments; our fiscal system has inflation built into it. I decided to hang onto my Hired Girl stock and put the cash into other common stocks, with a special eye to some trends I thought would grow. Automation was bound to get bigger. I picked a San Francisco fertilizer firm too; it had been experimenting with yeasts and edible algae—there were more people every year and steak wasn't going to get any cheaper. The balance of the money I told him to put into the company's managed trust fund.

But the real choice lay in what to do if I died in hibernation. The company claimed that the odds were better than seven out of ten that I would live through thirty years of cold sleep . . . and the company would take either end of the bet. The odds weren't reciprocal and I didn't expect them to be; in any honest gambling there is a breakage to the house. Only crooked gamblers claim to give the sucker the best of it, and insurance is legalized gambling. The oldest and most reputable insurance firm in the world, Lloyd's of London, makes no bones about it—Lloyd's associates will take either end of any bet. But don't expect better-than-track odds: somebody has to pay for Our Mr. Powell's tailor-made suits.

I chose to have every cent go to the company trust fund in case



I died . . . which made Mr. Powell want to kiss me and made me wonder just how optimistic those seven-out-of-ten odds were. But I stuck with it because it made me an heir (if I lived) of everyone else with the same option (if they died), Russian roulette with the survivors picking up the chips . . . and with the company, as usual, raking in the house percentage.

I picked every alternative for the highest possible return and no hedging if I guessed wrong; Mr. Powell loved me, the way a croupier loves a sucker who keeps playing the zero. By the time we had settled my estate he was anxious to be reasonable about Pete; we settled for 15 per cent of the human fee to pay for Pete's hibernation and drew up a separate contract for him.

There remained consent of court and the physical examination. The physical I didn't worry about; I had a hunch that, once I elected to have the company bet that I would die, they would accept me even in the last stages of the Black Death. But I thought that getting a judge to okay it might be lengthy. It had to be done, because a client in cold sleep was legally in chancery, alive but helpless.

I needn't have worried. Our Mr. Powell had quadruplicate originals made of nineteen different papers. I signed till I got finger cramps, and a messenger rushed away with them while I went to my physical examination; I never even saw the judge.

The physical was the usual tiresome routine except for one thing. Toward the end the examining physician looked me sternly in the eye and said, "Son, how long have you been on this binge?"

"Binge?"

"Binge."

"What makes you think that, Doctor? I'm as sober as you are. 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled——'"

"Knock it off and answer me."

"Mmm . . . I'd say about two weeks. A little over."

"Compulsive drinker? How many times have you pulled this stunt in the past?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I haven't. You see——" I started to tell him what Belle and Miles had done to me, why I felt the way I did.

He shoved a palm at me. "Please. I've got troubles of my own and I'm not a psychiatrist. Really, all I'm interested in is finding out whether or not your heart will stand up under the ordeal of



putting you down to four degrees centigrade. Which it will. And I ordinarily don't care why anyone is nutty enough to crawl into a hole and pull it in after him; I just figure it is one less damn fool underfoot. But some residual tinge of professional conscience prevents me from letting any man, no matter how sorry a specimen, climb into one of those coffins while his brain is sodden with alcohol. Turn around."

"Huh?"

"Turn around; I'm going to inject you in your left buttock."

I did and he did. While I was rubbing it he went on, "Now drink this. In about twenty minutes you will be more sober than you've been in a month. Then, if you have any sense—which I doubt—you can review your position and decide whether to run away from your troubles . . . or stand up to them like a man."

I drank it.

"That's all; you can get dressed. I'm signing your papers, but I'm warning you that I can veto it right up to the last minute. No more alcohol for you at all, a light supper and no breakfast. Be here at noon tomorrow for final check."

He turned away and didn't even say good-by. I dressed and went out of there, sore as a boil. Powell had all my papers ready. When I picked them up he said, "You can leave them here if you wish and pick them up at noon tomorrow . . . the set that goes in the vault with you, that is."

"What happens to the others?"

"We keep one set ourselves, then after you are committed we file one set with the court and one in the Carlsbad Archives. Uh, did the doctor caution you about diet?"

"He certainly did." I glanced at the papers to cover my annoyance.

Powell reached for them. "I'll keep them safe overnight."

I pulled them back. "I can keep them safe. I might want to change some of these stock selections."

"Uh, it's rather late for that, my dear Mr. Davis."

"Don't rush me. If I do make any changes I'll come in early." I opened the overnight bag and stuck the papers down in a side flap beside Pete. I had kept valuable papers there before; while it might not be as safe as the public archives in the Carlsbad Caverns, they were safer than you might think. A sneak thief had tried



to take something out of that flap on another occasion; he must still have the scars of Pete's teeth and claws.

## 2

My car was parked under Pershing Square where I had left it earlier in the day. I dropped money into the parking attendant, set the bug on arterial-west, got Pete out and put him on the seat, and relaxed.

Or tried to relax. Los Angeles traffic was too fast and too slashingly murderous for me to be really happy under automatic control; I wanted to redesign their whole installation—it was not a really modern “fail safe.” By the time we were west of Western Avenue and could go back on manual control I was edgy and wanted a drink. “There’s an oasis, Pete.”

“Blurrrt?”

“Right ahead.”

But while I was looking for a place to park—Los Angeles was safe from invasion; the invaders wouldn’t find a place to park—I recalled the doctor’s order not to touch alcohol.

So I told him emphatically what he could do with his orders.

Then I wondered if he could tell, almost a day later, whether or not I had taken a drink. I seemed to recall some technical article, but it had not been in my line and I had just skimmed it.

Damnation, he was quite capable of refusing to let me cold-sleep. I’d better play it cagey and lay off the stuff.

“Now?” inquired Pete.

“Later. We’re going to find a drive-in instead.” I suddenly realized that I didn’t really want a drink; I wanted food and a night’s sleep. Doc was correct; I was more sober and felt better than I had in weeks. Maybe that shot in the fanny had been nothing but B<sub>1</sub>; if so, it was jet-propelled. So we found a drive-in restaurant. I ordered chicken in the rough for me and a half pound of hamburger and some milk for Pete and took him out for a short walk while it was coming. Pete and I ate in drive-ins a lot because I didn’t have to sneak him in and out.

A half hour later I let the car drift back out of the busy circle,



stopped it, lit a cigarette, scratched Pete under the chin, and thought.

Dan, my boy, the doc was right; you've been trying to dive down the neck of a bottle. That's okay for your pointy head but it's too narrow for your shoulders. Now you're cold sober, you've got your belly crammed with food and it's resting comfortably for the first time in days. You feel better.

What else? Was the doc right about the rest of it? Are you a spoiled infant? Do you lack the guts to stand up to a setback? Why are you taking this step? Is it the spirit of adventure? Or are you simply hiding from yourself, like a Section Eight trying to crawl back into his mother's womb?

But I *do* want to do it, I told myself—the year 2000. Boy!

Okay, so you want to. But do you have to run off without settling the beefs you have right here?

All right, all right!—but *how* can I settle them? I don't want Belle back, not after what she's done. And what else can I do? Sue them? Don't be silly, I've got no evidence—and anyhow, nobody ever wins a lawsuit but the lawyers.

Pete said, "Welllll? Y'know!"

I looked down at his waffle-scarred head. Pete wouldn't sue anybody; if he didn't like the cut of another cat's whiskers, he simply invited him to come out and fight like a cat. "I believe you're right, Pete. I'm going to look up Miles, tear his arm off, and beat him over the head with it until he talks. We can take the Long Sleep afterward. But we've got to know just what it was they did to us and who rigged it."

There was a phone booth back of the stand. I called Miles, found him at home, and told him to stay there; I'd be out.

My old man named me Daniel Boone Davis, which was his way of declaring for personal liberty and self-reliance. I was born in 1940, a year when everybody was saying that the individual was on the skids and the future belonged to mass man. Dad refused to believe it; naming me was a note of defiance. He died under brain-washing in North Korea, trying to the last to prove his thesis.

When the Six Weeks War came along I had a degree in mechanical engineering and was in the Army. I had not used my degree to try for a commission because the one thing Dad had left me was an overpowering yen to be on my own, giving no orders, taking no orders, keeping no schedules—I simply wanted to serve



my hitch and get out. When the Cold War boiled over, I was a sergeant-technician at Sandia Weapons Center in New Mexico, stuffing atoms in atom bombs and planning what I would do when my time was up. The day Sandia disappeared I was down in Dallas drawing a fresh supply of *Schrecklichkeit*. The fall-out on that was toward Oklahoma City, so I lived to draw my GI benefits.

Pete lived through it for a similar reason. I had a buddy, Miles Gentry, a veteran called back to duty. He had married a widow with one daughter, but his wife had died about the time he was called back. He lived off post with a family in Albuquerque so as to have a home for his stepchild Frederica. Little Ricky (we never called her "Frederica") took care of Pete for me. Thanks to the cat-goddess Bubastis, Miles and Ricky and Pete were away on a seventy-two that awful weekend—Ricky took Pete with them because I could not take him to Dallas.

I was as surprised as anyone when it turned out we had divisions stashed away at Thule and other places that no one suspected. It had been known since the '30s that the human body could be chilled until it slowed down to almost nothing. But it had been a laboratory trick, or a last-resort therapy, until the Six Weeks War. I'll say this for military research: if money and men can do it, it gets results. Print another billion, hire another thousand scientists and engineers, then in some incredible, left-handed, inefficient fashion the answers come up. Stasis, cold sleep, hibernation, hypothermia, reduced metabolism, call it what you will—the logistics-medicine research teams had found a way to stack people like cordwood and use them when needed. First you drug the subject, then hypnotize him, then cool him down and hold him precisely at four degrees centigrade; that is to say, at the maximum density of water with no ice crystals. If you need him in a hurry he can be brought up by diathermy and posthypnotic command in ten minutes (they did it in seven at Nome), but such speed tends to age the tissues and may make him a little stupid from then on. If you aren't in a hurry two hours minimum is better. The quick method is what professional soldiers call a "calculated risk."

The whole thing was a risk the enemy had not calculated, so when the war was over I was paid off instead of being liquidated or sent to a slave camp, and Miles and I went into business to-



gether about the time the insurance companies started selling cold sleep.

We went to the Mojave Desert, set up a small factory in an Air Force surplus building, and started making *Hired Girl*, my engineering and Miles's law and business experience. Yes, I invented *Hired Girl* and all her kinfolk—*Window Willie* and the rest—even though you won't find my name on them. While I was in the service I had thought hard about what one engineer can do. Go to work for Standard, or du Pont, or General Motors? Thirty years later they give you a testimonial dinner and a pension. You haven't missed any meals, you've had a lot of rides in company airplanes. But you are never your own boss. The other big market for engineers is civil service—good starting pay, good pensions, no worries, thirty days annual leave, liberal benefits. But I had just had a long government vacation and wanted to be my own boss.

What was there small enough for one engineer and not requiring six million man-hours before the first model was on the market? Bicycle-shop engineering with peanuts for capital, the way Ford and the Wright brothers had started—people said those days were gone forever; I didn't believe it.

Automation was booming—chemical-engineering plants that required only two gauge-watchers and a guard, machines that printed tickets in one city and marked the space "sold" in six other cities, steel moles that mined coal while the UMW boys sat back and watched. So while I was on Uncle Sam's payroll I soaked up all the electronics, linkages, and cybernetics that a "Q" clearance would permit.

What was the last thing to go automatic? Answer: any housewife's house. I didn't attempt to figure out a sensible scientific house; women didn't want one; they simply wanted a better-upholstered cave. But housewives were still complaining about the Servant Problem long after servants had gone the way of the mastodon. I had rarely met a housewife who did not have a touch of slaveholder in her; they seemed to think there really *ought* to be strapping peasant girls grateful for a chance to scrub floors fourteen hours a day and eat table scraps at wages a plumber's helper would scorn.

That's why we called the monster *Hired Girl*—it brought back thoughts of the semi-slave immigrant girl whom Grandma used to bully. Basically it was just a better vacuum cleaner and we



planned to market it at a price competitive with ordinary suck brooms.

What *Hired Girl* would do (the first model, not the semi-intelligent robot I developed it into) was to clean floors . . . any floor, all day long and without supervision. And there never was a floor that didn't need cleaning.

It swept, or mopped, or vacuum-cleaned, or polished, consulting tapes in its idiot memory to decide which. Anything larger than a BB shot it picked up and placed in a tray on its upper surface, for someone brighter to decide whether to keep or throw away. It went quietly looking for dirt all day long, in search curves that could miss nothing, passing over clean floors in its endless search for dirty floors. It would get out of a room with people in it, like a well-trained maid, unless its mistress caught up with it and flipped a switch to tell the poor thing it was welcome. Around dinnertime it would go to its stall and soak up a quick charge—this was before we installed the everlasting power pack.

There was not too much difference between *Hired Girl*, Mark One, and a vacuum cleaner. But the difference—that it would clean without supervision—was enough; it sold.

I swiped the basic prowl pattern from the "Electric Turtles" that were written up in *Scientific American* in the late forties, lifted a memory circuit out of the brain of a guided missile (that's the nice thing about top-secret gimmicks; they don't get patented), and I took the cleaning devices and linkages out of a dozen things, including a floor polisher used in army hospitals, a soft-drink dispenser, and those "hands" they use in atomics plants to handle anything "hot." There wasn't anything really new in it; it was just the way I put it together. The "spark of genius" required by our laws lay in getting a good patent lawyer.

The real genius was in the production engineering; the whole thing could be built with standard parts ordered out of Sweet's Catalogue, with the exception of two three-dimensional cams and one printed circuit. The circuit we subcontracted; the cams I made myself in the shed we called our "factory," using war-surplus automated tools. At first Miles and I were the whole assembly line—bash to fit, file to hide, paint to cover. The pilot model cost \$4317.09; the first hundred cost just over \$39 each—and we passed them on to a Los Angeles discount house at \$60 and they sold them for \$85. We had to let them go on consignment to



unload them at all, since we could not afford sales promotion, and we darn near starved before receipts started coming in. Then *Life* ran a two-page on *Hired Girl* . . . and it was a case of having enough help to assemble the monster.

Belle Darkin joined us soon after that. Miles and I had been pecking out letters on a 1908 Underwood; we hired her as a typewriter jockey and bookkeeper and rented an electric machine with executive type face and carbon ribbon and I designed a letterhead. We were ploughing it all back into the business and Pete and I were sleeping in the shop while Miles and Ricky had a nearby shack. We incorporated in self-defense. It takes three to incorporate; we gave Belle a share of stock and designated her secretary-treasurer. Miles was president and general manager; I was chief engineer and chairman of the board . . . with 51 per cent of the stock.

I want to make clear why I kept control. I wasn't a hog; I simply wanted to be my own boss. Miles worked like a trouter, I give him credit. But better than 60 per cent of the savings that got us started were mine and 100 per cent of the inventiveness and engineering were mine. Miles could not possibly have built *Hired Girl*, whereas I could have built it with any of a dozen partners, or possibly without one—although I might have flopped in trying to make money out of it; Miles was a businessman while I am not.

But I wanted to be certain that I retained control of the shop—and I granted Miles equal freedom in the business end . . . too much freedom, it turned out.

*Hired Girl*, Mark One, was selling like beer at a ball game and I was kept busy for a while improving it and setting up a real assembly line and putting a shop master in charge, then I happily turned to thinking up more household gadgets. Amazingly little real thought had been given to housework, even though it is at least 50 per cent of all work in the world. The women's magazines talked about "labor saving in the home" and "functional kitchens," but it was just prattle; their pretty pictures showed living-working arrangements essentially no better than those in Shakespeare's day; the horse-to-jet-plane revolution had not reached the home.

I stuck to my conviction that housewives were reactionaries. No "machines for living"—just gadgets to replace the extinct domestic servant, that is, for cleaning and cooking and baby tending.



I got to thinking about dirty windows and that ring around the bathtub that is so hard to scrub, as you have to bend double to get at it. It turned out that an electrostatic device could make dirt go *spung!* off any polished silica surface, window glass, bathtubs, toilet bowls—anything of that sort. That was *Window Willie* and it's a wonder that somebody hadn't thought of him sooner. I held him back until I had him down to a price that people could not refuse. Do you know what window washing used to cost by the hour?

I held *Willie* out of production much longer than suited Miles. He wanted to sell it as soon as it was cheap enough, but I insisted on one more thing: *Willie* had to be easy to repair. The great shortcoming of most household gadgets was that the better they were and the more they did, the more certain they were to get out of order when you needed them most—and then require an expert at five dollars an hour to make them move again. Then the same thing will happen the following week, if not to the dishwasher, then to the air conditioner . . . usually late Saturday night during a snowstorm.

I wanted my gadgets to work and keep on working and not to cause ulcers in their owners.

But gadgets do get out of order, even mine. Until that great day when all gadgets are designed with no moving parts, machinery will continue to go sour. If you stuff a house with gadgets some of them will always be out of order.

But military research does get results and the military had licked this problem years earlier. You simply can't lose a battle, lose thousands or millions of lives, maybe the war itself, just because some gadget the size of your thumb breaks down. For military purposes they used a lot of dodges—"fail safe," stand-by circuits, "tell me three times," and so forth. But one they used that made sense for household equipment was the plug-in component principle.

It is a moronically simple idea: don't repair, replace. I wanted to make every part of *Window Willie* which could go wrong a plug-in unit, then include a set of replacements with each *Willie*. Some components would be thrown away, some would be sent out for repair, but *Willie* himself would never break down longer than necessary to plug in the replacement part.

Miles and I had our first row. I said the decision as to when to go from pilot model to production was an engineering one; he



claimed that it was a business decision. If I hadn't retained control *Willie* would have gone on the market just as maddeningly subject to acute appendicitis as all other sickly, half-engineered "labor-saving" gadgets.

Belle Darkin smoothed over the row. If she had turned on the pressure I might have let Miles start selling *Willie* before I thought it was ready, for I was as goofed up about Belle as is possible for a man to be.

Belle was not only a perfect secretary and office manager, she also had personal specs which would have delighted Praxiteles and a fragrance which affected me the way catnip does Pete. With top-notch office girls as scarce as they were, when one of the best turns out to be willing to work for a shoestring company at a below-standard salary, one really ought to ask "why?"—but we didn't even ask where she had worked last, so happy were we to have her dig us out of the flood of paper work that marketing *Hired Girl* had caused.

Later on I would have indignantly rejected any suggestion that we should have checked on Belle, for by then her bust measurement had seriously warped my judgment. She let me explain how lonely my life had been until she came along and she answered gently that she would have to know me better but that she was inclined to feel the same way.

Shortly after she smoothed out the quarrel between Miles and myself she agreed to share my fortunes. "Dan darling, you have it in you to be a great man . . . and I have hopes that I am the sort of woman who can help you."

"You certainly are!"

"Shush, darling. But I am not going to marry you right now and burden you with kids and worry you to death. I'm going to work with you and build up the business first. Then we'll get married."

I objected, but she was firm. "No, darling. We are going a long way, you and I. *Hired Girl* will be as great a name as General Electric. But when we marry I want to forget business and just devote myself to making you happy. But first I must devote myself to your welfare and your future. Trust me, dear."

So I did. She wouldn't let me buy her the expensive engagement ring I wanted to buy; instead I signed over to her some of my stock as a betrothal present. I went on voting it, of course. Thinking back, I'm not sure who thought of that present.



I worked harder than ever after that, thinking about wastebaskets that would empty themselves and a linkage to put dishes away after the dishwasher was through. Everybody was happy . . . everybody but Pete and Ricky, that is. Pete ignored Belle, as he did anything he disapproved of but could not change, but Ricky was really unhappy.

My fault. Ricky had been "my girl" since she was a six-year-old at Sandia, with hair ribbons and big solemn dark eyes. I was "going to marry her" when she grew up and we would both take care of Pete. I thought it was a game we were playing, and perhaps it was, with little Ricky serious only to the extent that it offered her eventual full custody of our cat. But how can you tell what goes on in a child's mind?

I am not sentimental about kids. Little monsters, most of them, who don't civilize until they are grown and sometimes not then. But little Frederica reminded me of my own sister at that age, and besides, she liked Pete and treated him properly. I think she liked me because I never talked down (I had resented that myself as a child) and took her Brownie activities seriously. Ricky was okay; she had quiet dignity and was not a banger, not a squealer, not a lap climber. We were friends, sharing the responsibility for Pete, and, so far as I knew, her being "my girl" was just a sophisticated game we were playing.

I quit playing it after my sister and mother got it the day they bombed us. No conscious decision—I just didn't feel like joking and never went back to it. Ricky was seven then; she was ten by the time Belle joined us and possibly eleven when Belle and I became engaged. She hated Belle with an intensity that I think only I was aware of, since it was expressed only by reluctance to talk to her—Belle called it "shyness" and I think Miles thought it was too.

But I knew better and tried to talk Ricky out of it. Did you ever try to discuss with a subadolescent something the child does not want to talk about? You'll get more satisfaction shouting in Echo Canyon. I told myself it would wear off as Ricky learned how very lovable Belle was.

Pete was another matter, and if I had not been in love I would have seen it as a clear sign that Belle and I would never understand each other. Belle "liked" my cat—oh, sure, sure! She adored cats and she loved my incipient bald spot and admired my choice in restaurants and she liked everything about me.



But liking cats is hard to fake to a cat person. There are cat people and there are others, more than a majority probably, who "cannot abide a harmless, necessary cat." If they try to pretend, out of politeness or any reason, it shows, because they don't understand how to treat cats—and cat protocol is more rigid than that of diplomacy.

It is based on self-respect and mutual respect and it has the same flavor as the *dignidad de hombre* of Latin America which you may offend only at risk to your life.

Cats have no sense of humor, they have terribly inflated egos, and they are very touchy. If somebody asked me why it was worth anyone's time to cater to them I would be forced to answer that there is no logical reason. I would rather explain to someone who detests sharp cheeses why he "ought to like" Limburger. Nevertheless, I fully sympathize with the mandarin who cut off a priceless embroidered sleeve because a kitten was sleeping on it.

Belle tried to show that she "liked" Pete by treating him like a dog . . . so she got scratched. Then, being a sensible cat, he got out in a hurry and stayed out a long time—which was well, as I would have smacked him, and Pete has never been smacked, not by me. Hitting a cat is worse than useless; a cat can be disciplined only by patience, never by blows.

So I put iodine on Belle's scratches, then tried to explain what she had done wrong. "I'm sorry it happened—I'm terribly sorry! But it will happen again if you do that again!"

"But I was just petting him!"

"Uh, yes . . . but you weren't cat-petting him; you were dog-petting him. You must never pat a cat, you stroke it. You must never make sudden movements in range of its claws. You must never touch it without giving it a chance to see that you are about to . . . and you must always watch to see that it likes it. If it doesn't want to be petted, it will put up with a little out of politeness—cats are very polite—but you can tell if it is merely enduring it and stop before its patience is exhausted." I hesitated. "You don't like cats, do you?"

"What? Why, how silly! Of course I like cats." But she added, "I haven't been around them much, I suppose. She's pretty touchy, isn't she?"

"He.' Pete is a he-male cat. No, actually he's not touchy, since



he's always been well treated. But you do have to learn how to behave with cats. Uh, you must never laugh at them."

"What? Forevermore, *why*?"

"Not because they aren't funny; they're extremely comical. But they have no sense of humor and it offends them. Oh, a cat won't scratch you for laughing; he'll simply stalk off and you'll have trouble making friends with him. But it's not too important. Knowing how to pick up a cat is much more important. When Pete comes back in I'll show you how."

But Pete didn't come back in, not then, and I never showed her. Belle didn't touch him after that. She spoke to him and acted as if she liked him, but she kept her distance and he kept his. I put it out of my mind; I couldn't let so trivial a thing make me doubt the woman who was more to me than anything in life.

But the subject of Pete almost reached a crisis later. Belle and I were discussing where we were going to live. She still wouldn't set the date, but we spent a lot of time on such details. I wanted a ranchette near the plant; she favored a flat in town until we could afford a Bel-Air estate.

I said, "Darling, it's not practical; I've got to be near the plant. Besides, did you ever try to take care of a tomcat in a city apartment?"

"Oh, that! Look, darling, I'm glad you mentioned it. I've been studying up on cats, I really have. We'll have him altered. Then he'll be much gentler and perfectly happy in a flat."

I stared at her, unable to believe my ears. Make a eunuch of that old warrior? Change him into a fireside decoration? "Belle, you don't know what you're saying!"

She tut-tutted me with the old familiar "Mother knows best," giving the stock arguments of people who mistake cats for property . . . how it wouldn't hurt him, that it was really for his own good, how she knew how much I valued him and she would never think of depriving me of him, how it was really very simple and quite safe and better for everybody.

I cut in on her. "Why don't you arrange it for both of us?"

"What, dear?"

"Me, too. I'd be much more docile and I'd stay home nights and I'd never argue with you. As you pointed out, it doesn't hurt and I'd probably be a lot happier."

She turned red. "You're being preposterous."



"So are you!"

She never mentioned it again. Belle never let a difference of opinion degenerate into a row; she shut up and bided her time. But she never gave up, either. In some ways she had a lot of cat in her . . . which may have been why I couldn't resist her.

I was glad to drop the matter. I was up to here in *Flexible Frank*. *Willie* and *Hired Girl* were bound to make us lots of money, but I had a bee in my bonnet about the perfect, all-work household automaton, the general-purpose servant. All right, call it a robot, though that is a much-abused word and I had no notion of building a mechanical man.

I wanted a gadget which could do *anything* inside the home—cleaning and cooking, of course, but also really hard jobs, like changing a baby's diaper, or replacing a typewriter ribbon. Instead of a stable of *Hired Girls* and *Window Willies* and *Nursemaid Nans* and *Houseboy Harries* and *Gardener Guses* I wanted a man and wife to be able to buy one machine for, oh, say about the price of a good automobile, which would be the equal of the Chinese servant you read about but no one in my generation had ever seen.

If I could do that it would be the Second Emancipation Proclamation, freeing women from their age-old slavery. I wanted to abolish the old saw about how "women's work is never done." Housekeeping is repetitious and unnecessary drudgery; as an engineer it offended me.

For the problem to be within the scope of one engineer, almost all of *Flexible Frank* had to be standard parts and must not involve any new principles. Basic research is no job for one man alone; this had to be development from former art or I couldn't do it.

Fortunately there was an awful lot of former art in engineering and I had not wasted my time while under a "Q" clearance. What I wanted wasn't as complicated as the things a guided missile was required to do.

Just what did I want *Flexible Frank* to do? Answer: any work a human being does around a house. He didn't have to play cards, make love, eat, or sleep, but he did have to clean up after the card game, cook, make beds, and tend babies—at least he had to keep track of a baby's breathing and call someone if it changed. I decided he did not have to answer telephone calls, as A.T.&T. was



already renting a gadget for that. There was no need for him to answer the door either, as most new houses were being equipped with door answerers.

But to do the multitude of things I wanted him to do, he had to have hands, eyes, ears, and a brain . . . a good enough brain.

Hands I could order from the atomics-engineering equipment companies who supplied *Hired Girl's* hands, only this time I would want the best, with wide-range servos and with the delicate feedback required for microanalysis manipulations and for weighing radioactive isotopes. The same companies could supply eyes—only they could be simpler, since *Frank* would not have to see and manipulate from behind yards of concrete shielding the way they do in a reactor plant.

The ears I could buy from any of a dozen radio-TV houses—though I might have to do some circuit designing to have his hands controlled simultaneously by sight, sound, and touch feedback the way the human hand is controlled.

But you can do an awful lot in a small space with transistors and printed circuits.

*Frank* wouldn't have to use stepladders. I would make his neck stretch like an ostrich and his arms extend like lazy tongs. Should I make him able to go up and down stairs?

Well, there was a powered wheel chair that could. Maybe I should buy one and use it for the chassis, limiting the pilot model to a space no bigger than a wheel chair and no heavier than such a chair could carry—that would give me a set of parameters. I'd tie its power and steering into *Frank's* brain.

The brain was the real hitch. You can build a gadget linked like a man's skeleton or even much better. You can give it a feedback-control system good enough to drive nails, scrub floors, crack eggs—or not crack eggs. But unless it has that stuff between the ears that a man has, it is not a man, it's not even a corpse.

Fortunately I didn't need a human brain; I just wanted a docile moron, capable of largely repetitive household jobs.

Here is where the Thorsen memory tubes came in. The intercontinental missiles we had struck back with "thought" with Thorsen tubes, and traffic-control systems in places like Los Angeles used an idiot form of them. No need to go into theory of an electronic tube that even Bell Labs doesn't understand too well, the point is that you can hook a Thorsen tube into a control circuit,



direct the machine through an operation by manual control, and the tube will "remember" what was done and can direct the operation *without* a human supervisor a second time, or any number of times. For an automated machine tool this is enough; for guided missiles and for *Flexible Frank* you add side circuits that give the machine "judgment." Actually it isn't judgment (in my opinion a machine can never have judgment); the side circuit is a hunting circuit, the programming of which says "look for so-and-so within such-and-such limits; when you find it, carry out your basic instruction." The basic instruction can be as complicated as you can crowd into one Thorsen memory tube—which is a *very* wide limit indeed!—and you can program so that your "judgment" circuits (moronic back-seat drivers, they are) can interrupt the basic instructions any time the cycle does not match that originally impressed into the Thorsen tube.

This meant that you need cause *Flexible Frank* to clear the table and scrape the dishes and load them into the dishwasher only once, and from then on he could cope with any dirty dishes he ever encountered. Better still, he could have an electronically duplicated Thorsen tube stuck into his head and could handle dirty dishes the first time he ever encountered them . . . and never break a dish.

Stick another "memorized" tube alongside the first one and he could change a wet baby first time, and never, never, never stick a pin in the baby.

*Frank's* square head could easily hold a hundred Thorsen tubes, each with an electronic "memory" of a different household task. Then throw a guard circuit around all the "judgment" circuits, a circuit which required him to hold still and squawl for help if he ran into something not covered by his instructions—that way you wouldn't use up babies or dishes.

So I did build *Frank* on the framework of a powered wheel chair. He looked like a hatrack making love to an octopus . . . but, boy, how he could polish silverware!

Miles looked over the first *Frank*, watched him mix a martini and serve it, then go around emptying and polishing ash trays (never touching ones that were clean), open a window and fasten it open, then go to my bookcase and dust and tidy the books in it. Miles took a sip of his martini and said, "Too much vermouth."



"It's the way I like them. But we can tell him to fix yours one way and mine another; he's got plenty of blank tubes in him. Flexible."

Miles took another sip. "How soon can he be engineered for production?"

"Uh, I'd like to fiddle with him for about ten years." Before he could groan I added, "But we ought to be able to put a limited model into production in five."

"Nonsense! We'll get you plenty of help and have a Model-T job ready in six months."

"The devil you will. This is my magnum opus. I'm not going to turn him loose until he is a work of art . . . about a third that size, everything plug-in replaceable but the Thorsens, and so all-out flexible that he'll not only wind the cat and wash the baby, he'll even play ping-pong if the buyer wants to pay for the extra programming." I looked at him; *Frank* was quietly dusting my desk and putting every paper back exactly where he found it. "But ping-pong with him wouldn't be much fun; he'd never miss. No, I suppose we could teach him to miss with a random-choice circuit. Mmm . . . yes, we could. We will, it would make a nice selling demonstration."

"One year, Dan, and not a day over. I'm going to hire somebody away from Loewy to help you with the styling."

I said, "Miles, when are you going to learn that I boss the engineering? Once I turn him over to you, he's yours . . . but not a split second before."

Miles answered, "It's still too much vermouth."

I piddled along with the help of the shop mechanics until I had *Frank* looking less like a three-car crash and more like something you might want to brag about to the neighbors. In the meantime I smoothed a lot of bugs out of his control system. I even taught him to stroke Pete and scratch him under the chin in such a fashion that Pete liked it—and, believe me, that takes negative feedback as exact as anything used in atomics labs. Miles didn't crowd me, although he came in from time to time and watched the progress. I did most of my work at night, coming back after dinner with Belle and taking her home. Then I would sleep most of the day, arrive late in the afternoon, sign whatever papers Belle had for me, see what the shop had done during the day, then take



Belle out to dinner again. I didn't try to do much before then, because creative work makes a man stink like a goat. After a hard night in the lab shop nobody could stand me but Pete.

Just as we were finishing dinner one day Belle said to me, "Going back to the shop, dear?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Good. Because Miles is going to meet us there."

"Huh?"

"He wants a stockholders' meeting."

"A stockholders' meeting? Why?"

"It won't take long. Actually, dear, you haven't been paying much attention to the firm's business lately. Miles wants to gather up loose ends and settle some policies."

"I've been sticking close to the engineering. What else am I supposed to do for the firm?"

"Nothing, dear. Miles says it won't take long."

"What's the trouble? Can't Jake handle the assembly line?"

"Please, dear. Miles didn't tell me why. Finish your coffee."

Miles was waiting for us at the plant and shook hands as solemnly as if we had not met in a month. I said, "Miles, what's this all about?"

He turned to Belle. "Get the agenda, will you?" This alone should have told me that Belle had been lying when she claimed that Miles had not told her what he had in mind. But I did not think of it—hell, I *trusted* Belle!—and my attention was distracted by something else, for Belle went to the safe, spun the knob, and opened it.

I said, "By the way, dear, I tried to open that last night and couldn't. Have you changed the combination?"

She was hauling papers out and did not turn. "Didn't I tell you? The patrol asked me to change it after that burglar scare last week."

"Oh. You'd better give me the new numbers or some night I'll have to phone one of you at a ghastly hour."

"Certainly." She closed the safe and put a folder on the table we used for conferences.

Miles cleared his throat and said, "Let's get started."

I answered, "Okay. Darling, if this is a formal meeting, I guess you had better make pothooks . . . Uh, Wednesday, November eighteenth, 1970, 9:20 P.M., all stockholders present—put our



names down—D. B. Davis, chairman of the board and presiding. Any old business?”

There wasn't any. “Okay, Miles, it's your show. Any new business?”

Miles cleared his throat. “I want to review the firm's policies, present a program for the future, and have the board consider a financing proposal.”

“Financing? Don't be silly. We're in the black and doing better every month. What's the matter, Miles? Dissatisfied with your drawing account? We could boost it.”

“We wouldn't stay in the black under the new program. We need a broader capital structure.”

“What new program?”

“Please, Dan. I've gone to the trouble of writing it up in detail. Let Belle read it to us.”

“Well . . . okay.”

Skipping the gobbledegook—like all lawyers, Miles was fond of polysyllables—Miles wanted to do three things: (a) take *Flexible Frank* away from me, hand it over to a production-engineering team, and get it on the market without delay; (b)—but I stopped it at that point. “No!”

“Wait a minute, Dan. As president and general manager, I'm certainly entitled to present my ideas in an orderly manner. Save your comments. Let Belle finish reading.”

“Well . . . all right. But the answer is still ‘no.’”

Point (b) was in effect that we should quit frittering around as a one-horse outfit. We had a big thing, as big as the automobile had been, and we were in at the start; therefore we should at once expand and set up organization for nationwide and world-wide selling and distribution, with production to match.

I started drumming on the table. I could just see myself as chief engineer of an outfit like that. They probably wouldn't even let me have a drafting table and if I picked up a soldering gun, the union would pull a strike. I might as well have stayed in the Army and tried to make general.

But I didn't interrupt. Point (c) was that we couldn't do this on pennies; it would take millions. Mannix Enterprises would put up the dough—what it amounted to was that we would sell out to Mannix, lock, stock, and *Flexible Frank*, and become a daughter corporation. Miles would stay on as division manager and I would



stay on as chief research engineer, but the free old days would be gone; we'd both be hired hands.

"Is that all?" I said.

"Mmm . . . yes. Let's discuss it and take a vote."

"There ought to be something in there granting us the right to sit in front of the cabin at night and sing spirituals."

"This is no joke, Dan. This is how it's got to be."

"I wasn't joking. A slave needs privileges to keep him quiet. Okay, is it my turn?"

"Go ahead."

I put up a counterproposal, one that had been growing in my mind. I wanted us to get out of production. Jake Schmidt, our production shop master, was a good man; nevertheless I was forever being jerked out of a warm creative fog to straighten out bugs in production—which is like being dumped out of a warm bed into ice water. This was the real reason why I had been doing so much nightwork and staying away from the shop in the daytime. With more war-surplus buildings being moved in and a night shift contemplated I could see the time coming when I would get no peace to create, even though we turned down this utterly unpalatable plan to rub shoulders with General Motors and Consolidated. I certainly was not twins; I couldn't be both inventor and production manager.

So I proposed that we get smaller instead of bigger—license *Hired Girl* and *Window Willie*, let someone else build and sell them while we raked in the royalties. When *Flexible Frank* was ready we would license him too. If Mannix wanted the licenses and would outbid the market, swell! Meantime, we'd change our name to Davis & Gentry Research Corporation and hold it down to just the three of us, with a machinist or two to help me jackleg new gadgets. Miles and Belle could sit back and count the money as it rolled in.

Miles shook his head slowly. "No, Dan. Licensing would make us some money, granted. But not nearly the money we would make if we did it ourselves."

"Confound it, Miles, we wouldn't be doing it ourselves; that's just the point. We'd be selling our souls to the Mannix people. As for money, how much do you want? You can use only one yacht or one swimming pool at a time . . . and you'll have both before the year is out if you want them."



"I don't want them."

"What *do* you want?"

He looked up. "Dan, you want to invent things. This plan lets you do so, with all the facilities and all the help and all the expense money in the world. Me, I want to run a big business. A *big* business. I've got the talent for it." He glanced at Belle. "I don't want to spend my life sitting out here in the middle of the Mojave Desert acting as business manager to one lonely inventor."

I stared at him. "You didn't talk that way at Sandia. You want out, Pappy? Belle and I would hate to see you go . . . but if that is the way you feel, I guess I could mortgage the place or something and buy you out. I wouldn't want any man to feel tied down." I was shocked to my heels, but if old Miles was restless I had no right to hold him to my pattern.

"No, I don't want out; I want us to grow. You heard my proposal. It's a formal motion for action by the corporation. I so move."

I guess I looked puzzled. "You insist on doing it the hard way? Okay, Belle, the vote is 'no.' Record it. But I won't put up my counterproposal tonight. We'll talk it over and exchange views. I want you to be happy, Miles."

Miles said stubbornly, "Let's do this properly. Roll call, Belle."

"Very well, sir. Miles Gentry, voting stock shares number—" She read off the serial numbers. "How say you?"

"Aye."

She wrote in her book.

"Daniel B. Davis, voting stock shares number—" She read off a string of telephone numbers again; I didn't listen to the formality. "How say you?"

"No. And that settles it. I'm sorry, Miles."

"Belle S. Darkin," she went on, "voting shares number—" She recited figures again. "I vote 'aye.'"

My mouth dropped open, then I managed to stop gasping and say, "But, baby, you can't do that! Those are your shares, sure, but you know perfectly well that—"

"Announce the tally," Miles growled.

"The 'ayes' have it. The proposal is carried."

"Record it."

"Yes, sir."

The next few minutes were confused. First I yelled at her, then



I reasoned with her, then I snarled and told her that what she had done was not honest—true, I had assigned the stock to her but she knew as well as I did that I always voted it, that I had had no intention of parting with control of the company, that it was an engagement present, pure and simple. Hell, I had even paid the income tax on it last April. If she could pull a stunt like this when we were engaged, what was our marriage going to be like?

She looked right at me and her face was utterly strange to me. "Dan Davis, if you think we are still engaged after the way you have talked to me, you are even stupider than I've always known you were." She turned to Gentry. "Will you take me home, Miles?"

"Certainly, my dear."

I started to say something, then shut up and stalked out of there without my hat. It was high time to leave, or I would probably have killed Miles, since I couldn't touch Belle.

I didn't sleep, of course. About 4 A.M. I got out of bed, made phone calls, agreed to pay more than it was worth, and by five-thirty was in front of the plant with a pickup truck. I went to the gate, intending to unlock it and drive the truck to the loading dock so that I could run *Flexible Frank* over the tail gate—*Frank* weighed four hundred pounds.

There was a new padlock on the gate.

I shinnied over, cutting myself on barbed wire. Once inside, the gate would give me no trouble, as there were a hundred tools in the shop capable of coping with a padlock.

But the lock on the front door had been changed too.

I was looking at it, deciding whether it was easier to break a window with a tire iron, or get the jack out of the truck and brace it between the doorframe and the knob, when somebody shouted, "Hey, you! Hands up!"

I didn't put my hands up but I turned around. A middle-aged man was pointing a hogleg at me big enough to bombard a city. "Who the devil are you?"

"Who are *you*?"

"I'm Dan Davis, chief engineer of this outfit."

"Oh." He relaxed a little but still aimed the field mortar at me. "Yeah, you match the description. But if you have any identification on you, better let me see it."

"Why should I? I asked who *you* are?"



"Me? Nobody you'd know. Name of Joe Todd, with the Desert Protective & Patrol Company. Private license. You ought to know who we are; we've had you folks as clients for the night patrol for months. But tonight I'm on as special guard."

"You are? Then if they gave you a key to the place, use it. I want to get in. And quit pointing that blunderbuss at me."

He still kept it leveled at me. "I couldn't rightly do that, Mr. Davis. First place, I don't have a key. Second place, I had particular orders about you. You aren't to go in. I'll let you out the gate."

"I want the gate opened, all right, but I'm going in." I looked around for a rock to break a window.

"Please, Mr. Davis . . ."

"Huh?"

"I'd hate to see you insist, I really would. Because I couldn't chance shooting you in the legs; I ain't a very good shot. I'd have to shoot you in the belly. I've got soft-nosed bullets in this iron; it'd be pretty messy."

I suppose that was what changed my mind, though I would like to think it was something else; i.e. when I looked again through the window I saw that *Flexible Frank* was not where I had left him.

As he let me out the gate Todd handed me an envelope. "They said to give this to you if you showed up."

I read it in the cab of the truck. It said:

18 November, 1970

Dear Mr. Davis,

*At a regular meeting of the board of directors, held this date, it was voted to terminate all your connection (other than as stockholder) with the corporation, as permitted under paragraph three of your contract. It is requested that you stay off company property. Your personal papers and belongings will be forwarded to you by safe means.*

*The board wishes to thank you for your services and regrets the differences in policy opinion which have forced this step on us.*

Sincerely yours,

Miles Gentry

Chairman of the Board and General Manager  
by B. S. Darkin, Sec'y-Treasurer



I read it twice before I recalled that I had never had any contract with the corporation under which to invoke paragraph three or any other paragraph.

Later that day a bonded messenger delivered a package to the motel where I kept my clean underwear. It contained my hat, my desk pen, my other slide rule, a lot of books and personal correspondence, and a number of documents. But it did not contain my notes and drawings for *Flexible Frank*.

Some of the documents were very interesting. My "contract," for example—sure enough, paragraph three let them fire me without notice subject to three months' salary. But paragraph seven was even more interesting. It was the latest form of the yellow-dog clause, one in which the employee agrees to refrain from engaging in a competing occupation for five years by letting his former employers pay him cash to option his services on a first-refusal basis; i.e., I could go back to work any time I wanted to just by going, hat in hand, and asking Miles and Belle for a job—maybe that was why they sent the hat back.

But for five long years I could not work on household appliances without asking them first. I would rather have cut my throat.

There were copies of assignments of all patents, duly registered, from me to Hired Girl, Inc., for *Hired Girl* and *Window Willie* and a couple of minor things. (*Flexible Frank*, of course, had never been patented—well, I didn't *think* he had been patented; I found out the truth later.)

But I had never assigned any patents, I hadn't even formally licensed their use to Hired Girl, Inc.; the corporation was my own creature and there hadn't seemed to be any hurry about it.

The last three items were my stock-shares certificate (those I had not given to Belle), a certified check, and a letter explaining each item of the check—accumulated "salary" less drawing-account disbursements, three months' extra salary in lieu of notice, option money to invoke "paragraph seven" . . . and a thousand-dollar bonus to express "appreciation of services rendered." That last was real sweet of them.

While I reread that amazing collection I had time to realize that I had probably not been too bright to sign everything that Belle put in front of me. There was no possible doubt that the signatures were mine.



I steadied down enough the next day to talk it over with a lawyer, a very smart and money-hungry lawyer, one who didn't mind kicking and clapper-clawing and biting in the clinches. At first he was anxious to take it on a contingent-fee basis. But after he finished looking over my exhibits and listening to the details he sat back and laced his fingers over his belly and looked sour. "Dan, I'm going to give you some advice and it's not going to cost you anything."

"Well?"

"Do nothing. You haven't got a prayer."

"But you said——"

"I know what I said. They rooked you. But how can you prove it? They were too smart to steal your stock or cut you off without a penny. They gave you exactly the deal you could have reasonably expected if everything had been kosher and you had quit, or had been fired over—as they express it—a difference of policy opinion. They gave you everything you had coming to you . . . and a measly thousand to boot, just to show there are no hard feelings."

"But I didn't *have* a contract! And I *never* assigned those patents!"

"These papers say you did. You admit that's your signature. Can you prove what you say by anyone else?"

I thought about it. I certainly could not. Not even Jake Schmidt knew anything that went on in the front office. The only witnesses I had were . . . Miles and Belle.

"Now about that stock assignment," he went on, "that's the one chance to break the log jam. If you——"

"But that is the only transaction in the whole stack that really is legitimate. I signed over that stock to her."

"Yes, but why? You say that you gave it to her as an engagement present in expectation of marriage. Never mind how she voted it; that's beside the point. If you can prove that it was given as a betrothal gift in full expectation of marriage, and that she knew it when she accepted it, you can force her either to marry you or to disgorge. *McNulty vs. Rhodes*. Then you're in control again and kick them out. Can you prove it?"

"Damn it, I don't want to marry her now. I wouldn't have her."

"That's your problem. But one thing at a time. Have you any witnesses or any evidence, letters or anything, which would tend



to show that she accepted it, understanding that you were giving it to her as your future wife?"

I thought. Sure, I had witnesses . . . the same old two. Miles and Belle.

"You see? With nothing but your word against both of theirs, plus a pile of written evidence, you not only won't get anywhere, but you might wind up committed to a Napoleon factory with a diagnosis of paranoia. My advice to you is to get a job in some other line . . . or at the very most go ahead and buck their yellow-dog contract by setting up a competitive business—I'd like to see that phraseology tested, as long as I didn't have to fight it myself. But don't charge them with conspiracy. They'll win, then they'll sue you and clean you out of what they let you keep." He stood up.

I took only part of his advice. There was a bar on the ground floor of the same building; I went in and had a couple or nine drinks.

I had plenty of time to recall all this while I was driving out to see Miles. Once we had started making money, he had moved Ricky and himself to a nice little rental in San Fernando Valley to get out of the murderous Mojave heat and had started commuting via the Air Force Slot. Ricky wasn't there now, I was happy to recall; she was up at Big Bear Lake at Girl Scout camp—I didn't want to chance Ricky's being witness to a row between me and her stepdaddy.

I was bumper to bumper in Sepulveda Tunnel when it occurred to me that it would be smart to get the certificate for my Hired Girl stock off my person before going to see Miles. I did not expect any rough stuff (unless I started it), but it just seemed a good idea . . . like a cat who has had his tail caught in the screen door once, I was permanently suspicious.

Leave it in the car? Suppose I was hauled in for assault and battery; it wouldn't be smart to have it in the car when the car was towed in and impounded.

I could mail it to myself, but I had been getting my mail lately from general delivery at the G.P.O., while shifting from hotel to hotel as often as they found out I was keeping a cat.

I had better mail it to someone I could trust.

But that was a mighty short list.



Then I remembered someone I *could* trust.

Ricky.

I may seem a glutton for punishment to decide to trust one female just after I had been clipped by another. But the cases are not parallel. I had known Ricky half her life and if there ever was a human being honest as a Jo block, Ricky was she . . . and Pete thought so too. Besides, Ricky didn't have physical specifications capable of warping a man's judgment. Her femininity was only in her face; it hadn't affected her figure yet.

When I managed to escape from the log jam in Sepulveda Tunnel I got off the throughway and found a drugstore; there I bought stamps and a big and a little envelope and some note paper. I wrote to her:

*Dear Rikki-tikki-tavi,*

*I hope to see you soon but until I do, I want you to keep this inside envelope for me. It's a secret, just between you and me.*

I stopped and thought. Doggone it, if anything happened to me . . . oh, even a car crash, or anything that can stop breathing . . . while Ricky had this, eventually it would wind up with Miles and Belle. Unless I rigged things to prevent it. I realized as I thought about it that I had subconsciously reached a decision about the cold-sleep deal; I wasn't going to take it. Sobering up and the lecture the doc had read me had stiffened my spine; I wasn't going to run away, I was going to stay and fight—and this stock certificate was my best weapon. It gave me the right to examine the books; it entitled me to poke my nose into any and all affairs of the company. If they tried again simply to keep me out with a hired guard I could go back next time with a lawyer and a deputy sheriff and a court order.

I could drag them into court with it too. Maybe I couldn't win but I could make a stink and perhaps cause the Mannix people to shy off from buying them out.

Maybe I shouldn't send it to Ricky at all.

No, if anything happened to me I wanted her to have it. Ricky and Pete were all the "family" I had. I went on writing:

*If by any chance I don't see you for a year, you'll know something has happened to me. If that happens, take care of Pete, if*



*you can find him—and without telling anybody take the inside envelope to a branch of the Bank of America, give it to the trust officer and tell him to open it.*

*Love and kisses,  
Uncle Danny*

Then I took another sheet and wrote: “3 December, 1970, Los Angeles, California—For one dollar in hand received and other valuable considerations I assign”—here I listed legal descriptions and serial numbers of my Hired Girl, Inc., stock shares—“to the Bank of America in trust for Frederica Virginia Gentry and to be reassigned to her on her twenty-first birthday,” and signed it. The intent was clear and it was the best I could do on a drugstore counter with a juke box blaring in my ear. It should make sure that Ricky got the stock if anything happened to me, while making darn sure that Miles and Belle could not grab it away from her.

But if all went well, I would just ask Ricky to give the envelope back to me when I got around to it. By not using the assignment form printed on the back of the certificate, I avoided all the red tape of having a minor assign it back to me; I could just tear up the separate sheet of paper.

I sealed the stock certificate with the note assigning it into the smaller envelope, placed it and the letter to Ricky in the larger envelope, addressed it to Ricky at the Girl Scout camp, stamped it, and dropped it in the box outside the drugstore. I noted that it would be picked up in about forty minutes and climbed back into my car feeling positively lighthearted . . . not because I had safeguarded the stock but because I had solved my greater problems.

Well, not “solved” them, perhaps, but had decided to face them, not run off and crawl in a hole to play Rip van Winkle . . . nor try to blot them out again with ethanol in various flavors. Sure, I wanted to see the year 2000, but just by sitting tight I *would* see it . . . when I was sixty, and still young enough, probably, to whistle at the girls. No hurry. Jumping to the next century in one long nap wouldn’t be satisfactory to a normal man anyhow—about like seeing the end of a movie without having seen what goes before. The thing to do with the next thirty years was to enjoy them while they unfolded; then when I came to the year 2000 I would understand it.

In the meantime I was going to have one lulu of a fight with



Miles and Belle. Maybe I wouldn't win, but I would sure let them know they had been in a scrap—like the times Pete had come home bleeding in six directions but insisting loudly, "You ought to see the other cat!"

I didn't expect much out of this interview tonight. All it would amount to was a formal declaration of war. I planned to ruin Miles's sleep . . . and he could phone Belle and ruin hers.

### 3

By the time I got to Miles's house I was whistling. I had quit worrying about that precious pair and had worked out in my head, in the last fifteen miles, two brand-new gadgets, either one of which could make me rich. One was a drafting machine, to be operated like an electric typewriter. I guessed that there must be easily fifty thousand engineers in the U.S. alone bending over drafting boards every day and hating it, because it gets you in your kidneys and ruins your eyes. Not that they didn't want to design—they did want to—but physically it was much too hard work.

This gismo would let them sit down in a big easy chair and tap keys and have the picture unfold on an easel above the keyboard. Depress three keys simultaneously and have a horizontal line appear just where you want it; depress another key and you fillet it in with a vertical line; depress two keys and then two more in succession and draw a line at an exact slant.

Cripes, for a small additional cost as an accessory, I could add a second easel, let an architect design in isometric (the only easy way to design), and have the second picture come out in perfect perspective rendering without his even looking at it. Why, I could even set the thing to pull floor plans and elevations right out of the isometric.

The beauty of it was that it could be made almost entirely with standard parts, most of them available at radio shops and camera stores. All but the control board, that is, and I was sure I could bread-board a rig for that by buying an electric typewriter, tearing its guts out, and hooking the keys to operate these other circuits.



A month to make a primitive model, six weeks more to chase bugs . . .

But that one I just tucked away in the back of my mind, certain that I could do it and that it would have a market. The thing that really delighted me was that I had figured out a way to outflex poor old *Flexible Frank*. I knew more about *Frank* than anyone else could learn, even if they studied him a year. What they could not know, what even my notes did not show, was that there was at least one workable alternative for every choice I had made—and that my choices had been constrained by thinking of him as a household servant. To start with, I could throw away the restriction that he had to live in a powered wheel chair. From there on I could do anything, except that I would need the Thorsen memory tubes—and Miles could not keep me from using those; they were on the market for anyone who wanted to design a cybernetic sequence.

The drafting machine could wait; I'd get busy on the unlimited all purpose automaton, capable of being programmed for *anything* a man could do, just as long as it did not require true human judgment.

No, I'd rig a drafting machine first, then use it to design *Protean Pete*. "How about that, Pete? We're going to name the world's first real robot after you."

"Mrrrrr?"

"Don't be so suspicious; it's an honor." After breaking in on *Frank*, I could design Pete right at my drafting machine, really refine it, and quickly. I'd make it a killer, a triple-threat demon that would displace *Frank* before they ever got him into production. With any luck I'd run them broke and have them begging me to come back. Kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, would they?

There were lights on in Miles's house and his car was at the curb. I parked in front of Miles's car, said to Pete, "You'd better stay here, fellow, and protect the car. Holler 'halt' three times fast, then shoot to kill."

"Nooo!"

"If you go inside you'll have to stay in the bag."

"Bleerrrt?"

"Don't argue. If you want to come in, get in your bag."

Pete jumped into the bag.



Miles let me in. Neither of us offered to shake hands. He led me into his living room and gestured at a chair.

Belle was there. I had not expected her, but I suppose it was not surprising. I looked at her and grinned. "Fancy meeting you here! Don't tell me you came all the way from Mojave just to talk to little old me?" Oh, I'm a gallus-snapper when I get started; you should see me wear women's hats at parties.

Belle frowned. "Don't be funny, Dan. Say what you have to say, if anything, and get out."

"Don't hurry me. I think this is cozy . . . my former partner . . . my former fiancée. All we lack is my former business."

Miles said placatingly, "Now, Dan, don't take that attitude. We did it for your own good . . . and you can come back to work any time you want to. I'd be glad to have you back."

"For my own good, eh? That sounds like what they told the horse thief when they hanged him. As for coming back—how about it, Belle? Can I come back?"

She bit her lip. "If Miles says so, of course."

"It seems like only yesterday that it used to be: 'If Dan says so, of course.' But everything changes; that's life. And I'm not coming back, kids; you can stop fretting. I just came here tonight to find out some things."

Miles glanced at Belle. She answered, "Such as?"

"Well, first, which one of you cooked up the swindle? Or did you plan it together?"

Miles said slowly, "That's an ugly word, Dan. I don't like it."

"Oh, come, come, let's not be mealymouthed. If the word is ugly, the deed is ten times as ugly. I mean faking a yellow-dog contract, faking patent assignments—that one is a federal offense, Miles; I think they pipe sunlight to you on alternate Wednesdays. I'm not sure, but no doubt the FBI can tell me. Tomorrow," I added, seeing him flinch.

"Dan, you're not going to be silly enough to try to make trouble about this?"

"Trouble? I'm going to hit you in all directions, civil and criminal, on all counts. You'll be too busy to scratch . . . unless you agree to do one thing. But I didn't mention your third peccadillo—theft of my notes and drawings of *Flexible Frank* . . . and the working model, too, although you may be able to make me pay for the materials for that, since I did bill them to the company."



"Theft, nonsense!" snapped Belle. "You were working for the company."

"Was I? I did most of it at night. And I never was an employee, Belle, as you both know. I simply drew living expenses against profits earned by my shares. What is the Mannix outfit going to say when I file a criminal complaint, charging that the things they were interested in buying—*Hired Girl*, *Willie*, and *Frank*—never did belong to the company but were stolen from me?"

"Nonsense," Belle repeated grimly. "You were working for the company. You had a contract."

I leaned back and laughed. "Look, kids, you don't have to lie now; save it for the witness stand. There ain't nobody here but just us chickens. What I really want to know is this: who thought it up? I know how it was done. Belle, you used to bring in papers for me to sign. If more than one copy had to be signed, you would paper-clip the other copies to the first—for my convenience, of course; you were always the perfect secretary—and all I would see of the copies underneath would be the place to sign my name. Now I know that you slipped some jokery into some of those neat piles. So I know that you were the one who conducted the mechanics of the swindle; Miles could not have done it. Shucks, Miles can't even type very well. But who worded those documents you horsed me into signing? You? I don't think so . . . unless you've had legal training you never mentioned. How about it, Miles? Could a mere stenographer phrase that wonderful clause seven so perfectly? Or did it take a lawyer? *You*, I mean."

Miles's cigar had long since gone out. He took it from his mouth, looked at it, and said carefully, "Dan, old friend, if you think you'll trap us into admissions, you're crazy."

"Oh, come off it; we're alone. You're both guilty either way. But I'd like to think that Delilah over there came to you with the whole thing wrapped up, complete, and then tempted you into a moment of weakness. But I know it's not true. Unless Belle is a lawyer herself, you were both in it, accomplices before and after. You wrote the double talk; she typed it and tricked me into signing. Right?"

"Don't answer, Miles!"

"Of course I won't answer," Miles agreed. "He may have a recorder hidden in that bag."

"I should have had," I agreed, "but I don't." I spread the top



of the bag and Pete stuck his head out. "You getting it all, Pete? Careful what you say, folks; Pete has an elephant's memory. No, I didn't bring a recorder—I'm just good old lunkheaded Dan Davis who never thinks ahead. I go stumbling along, trusting my friends . . . the way I trusted you two. Is Belle a lawyer, Miles? Or did you yourself sit down in cold blood and plan how you could hog-tie me and rob me and make it look legal?"

"Miles!" interrupted Belle. "With his skill, he could make a recorder the size of a pack of cigarettes. It may not be in the bag. It may be on him."

"That's a good idea, Belle. Next time I'll have one."

"I'm aware of that, my dear," Miles answered. "If he has, you are talking very loosely. Mind your tongue."

Belle answered with a word I didn't know she used. My eyebrows went up. "Snapping at each other? Trouble between thieves already?"

Miles's temper was stretching thin, I was happy to see. He answered, "Mind *your* tongue, Dan . . . if you want to stay healthy."

"Tsk, ts! I'm younger than you are and I've had the judo course a lot more recently. And you wouldn't shoot a man; you'd frame him with some sort of fake legal document. 'Thieves,' I said, and 'thieves' I meant. Thieves and liars, both of you." I turned to Belle. "My old man taught me never to call a lady a liar, sugar face, but you aren't a lady. You're a liar . . . and a thief . . . and a tramp."

Belle turned red and gave me a look in which all her beauty vanished and the underlying predatory animal was all that remained. "Miles!" she said shrilly. "Are you going to sit there and let him—"

"Quiet!" Miles ordered. "His rudeness is calculated. It's intended to make us get excited and say things we'll regret. Which you are almost doing. So keep quiet." Belle shut up, but her face was still feral. Miles turned to me. "Dan, I'm a practical man always, I hope. I tried to make you see reason before you walked out of the firm. In the settlement I tried to make it such that you would take the inevitable gracefully."

"Be raped quietly, you mean."

"As you will. I still want a peaceful settlement. You couldn't win any sort of suit, but as a lawyer I know that it is always better



to stay out of court than to win. If possible. You mentioned a while ago that there was some one thing I could do that would placate you. Tell me what it is; perhaps we can reach terms."

"Oh, that. I was coming to it. *You* can't do it, but perhaps you can arrange it. It's simple. Get Belle to assign back to me the stock I assigned to her as an engagement present."

"No!" said Belle.

Miles said, "I told you to keep quiet."

I looked at her and said, "Why not, my former dear? I've taken advice on this point, as the lawyers put it, and, since it was given in consideration of the fact that you promised to marry me, you are not only morally but legally bound to return it. It was not a 'free gift,' as I believe the expression is, but something handed over for an expected and contracted consideration which I never received, to wit, your somewhat lovely self. So how about coughing up, huh? Or have you changed your mind again and are now willing to marry me?"

She told me where and how I could expect to marry her.

Miles said tiredly, "Belle, you're only making things worse. Don't you understand that he is trying to get our goats?" He turned back to me. "Dan, if that is what you came over for, you may as well leave. I stipulate that if the circumstances had been as you alleged, you might have a point. But they were not. You transferred that stock to Belle for value received."

"Huh? What value? Where's the canceled check?"

"There didn't need be any. For services to the company beyond her duties."

I stared. "What a lovely theory! Look, Miles old boy, if it was for service to the company and not to me personally, then you must have known about it and would have been anxious to pay her the same amount—after all, we split the profits fifty-fifty even if I had . . . or thought I had . . . retained control. Don't tell me you gave Belle a block of stock of the same size?"

Then I saw them glance at each other and I got a wild hunch. "Maybe you did! I'll bet my little dumpling made you do it, or she wouldn't play. Is that right? If so, you can bet your life she registered the transfer at once . . . and the dates will show that *I* transferred stock to her at the very time we got engaged—shucks, the engagement was in the *Desert Herald*—while *you* transferred stock to her when you put the skids under me and she jilted me—



and it's all a matter of record! Maybe a judge *will* believe me, Miles? What do you think?"

I had cracked them, I had cracked them! I could tell from the way their faces went blank that I had stumbled on the one circumstance they could never explain and one I was never meant to know. So I crowded them . . . and had another wild guess. Wild? No, logical. "How much stock, Belle? As much as you got out of me, just for being 'engaged'? You did more for him; you should have gotten more." I stopped suddenly. "Say . . . I thought it was odd that Belle came all the way over here just to talk to me, seeing how she hates that trip. Maybe you didn't come all that way; maybe you were here all along. Are you two shackled up? Or should I say 'engaged'? Or . . . are you already married?" I thought about it. "I'll bet you are. Miles, you aren't as starry-eyed as I am; I'll bet my other shirt that you would never, never transfer stock to Belle simply on promise of marriage. But you might for a wedding present—provided you got back voting control of it. Don't bother to answer; tomorrow I'm going to start digging for the facts. They'll be on record too."

Miles glanced at Belle and said, "Don't waste your time. Meet Mrs. Gentry."

"So? Congratulations, both of you. You deserve each other. Now about my stock. Since Mrs. Gentry obviously can't marry me, then——"

"Don't be silly, Dan. I've already offset your ridiculous theory. I did make a stock transfer to Belle just as you did. For the same reason, services to the firm. As you say, these things are matters of record. Belle and I were married just a week ago . . . but you will find the stock registered to her quite some time ago if you care to look it up. You can't connect them. No, she received stock from both of us, because of her great value to the firm. Then after you jilted her and after you left the employ of the firm, we were married."

It set me back. Miles was too smart to tell a lie I could check on so easily. But there was something about it that was not true, something more than I had as yet found out.

"When and where were you married?"

"Santa Barbara courthouse, last Thursday. Not that it is your business."

"Perhaps not. When was the stock transfer?"



"I don't know exactly. Look it up if you want to know."

Damn it, it just did not ring true that he had handed stock over to Belle before he had her committed to him. That was the sort of sloppy stunt I pulled; it wasn't in character for him. "I'm wondering something, Miles. If I put a detective to work on it, might I find that the two of you got married once before a little earlier than that? Maybe in Yuma? Or Las Vegas? Or maybe you ducked over to Reno that time you both went north for the tax hearings? Maybe it would turn out that there was such a marriage recorded, and maybe the date of the stock transfer and the dates my patents were assigned to the firm all made a pretty pattern. Huh?"

Miles did not crack; he did not even look at Belle. As for Belle, the hate in her face could not have been increased even by a lucky stab in the dark. Yet it seemed to fit and I decided to ride the hunch to the limit.

Miles simply said, "Dan, I've been patient with you and have tried to be conciliatory. All it's got me is abuse. So I think it's time you left. Or I'll bloody well make a stab at throwing you out—you and your flea-bitten cat!"

"*Olé!*" I answered. "That's the first manly thing you've said tonight. But don't call Pete 'flea-bitten.' He understands English and he is likely to take a chunk out of you. Okay, ex-pal, I'll get out . . . but I want to make a short curtain speech, very short. It's probably the last word I'll ever have to say to you. Okay?"

"Well . . . okay. Make it short."

Belle said urgently, "Miles, I want to talk to you."

He motioned her to be quiet without looking at her. "Go ahead. Be brief."

I turned to Belle. "You probably won't want to hear this, Belle. I suggest that you leave."

She stayed, of course. I wanted to be sure she would. I looked back at him. "Miles, I'm not too angry with you. The things a man will do for a larcenous woman are beyond belief. If Samson and Mark Antony were vulnerable, why should I expect you to be immune? By rights, instead of being angry I should be grateful to you. I guess I am, a little. I do know I'm sorry for you." I looked over at Belle. "You've got her now and she's all your problem . . . and all it has cost me is a little money and temporarily my peace of mind. But what will she cost *you*? She cheated me, she even managed to persuade you, my trusted friend, to cheat me



. . . what day will she team up with a new cat's-paw and start cheating you? Next week? Next month? As long as next year? As surely as a dog returns to its vomit—"

"Miles!" Belle shrilled.

Miles said dangerously, "Get out!" and I knew he meant it. So I stood up.

"We were just going. I'm sorry for you, old fellow. Both of us made just one mistake originally, and it was as much my fault as yours. But you've got to pay for it alone. And that's too bad . . . because it was such an innocent mistake."

His curiosity got him. "What do you mean?"

"We should have wondered why a woman so smart and beautiful and competent and all-around high-powered was willing to come to work for us at clerk-typist's wages. If we had taken her fingerprints the way the big firms do, and run a routine check, we might not have hired her . . . and you and I would still be partners."

Pay dirt again! Miles looked suddenly at his wife and she looked—well, "cornered rat" is wrong; rats aren't shaped like Belle.

And I couldn't leave well enough alone; I just had to pick at it. I walked toward her, saying, "Well, Belle? If I took that highball glass sitting beside you and had the fingerprints checked, what would I find? Pictures in post offices? The big con? Or bigamy? Marrying suckers for their money, maybe? Is Miles legally your husband?" I reached down and picked up the glass.

Belle slapped it out of my hand.

And Miles shouted at me.

And I had finally pushed my luck too far. I had been stupid to go into a cage of dangerous animals with no weapons, then I forgot the first tenet of the animal tamer; I turned my back. Miles shouted and I turned toward him. Belle reached for her purse . . . and I remember thinking that it was a hell of a time for her to be reaching for a cigarette.

Then I felt the stab of the needle.

I remember feeling just one thing as my knees got weak and I started slipping toward the carpet: utter astonishment that Belle would do such a thing to me. When it came right down to it, I still trusted her.



## 4

I never was completely unconscious. I got dizzy and vague as the drug hit me—it hits even quicker than morphine. But that was all. Miles yelled something at Belle and grabbed me around the chest as my knees folded. As he dragged me over and let me collapse into a chair, even the dizziness passed.

But while I was awake, part of me was dead. I know now what they used on me: the “zombie” drug, Uncle Sam’s answer to brainwashing. So far as I know, we never used it on a prisoner, but the boys whipped it up in the investigation of brainwashing and there it was, illegal but very effective. It’s the same stuff they now use in one-day psychoanalysis, but I believe it takes a court order to permit even a psychiatrist to use it.

God knows where Belle laid hands on it. But then God alone knows what other suckers she had on the string.

But I wasn’t wondering about that then; I wasn’t wondering about anything. I just lay slumped there, passive as a vegetable, hearing what went on, seeing anything in front of my eyes—but if Lady Godiva had strolled through without her horse I would not have shifted my eyes as she passed out of my vision.

Unless I was told to.

Pete jumped out of his bag, trotted over to where I slouched, and asked what was wrong. When I didn’t answer he started stroping my shins vigorously back and forth while still demanding an explanation. When still I did not respond he levitated to my knees, put his forepaws on my chest, looked me right in the face, and demanded to know what was wrong, right now and no nonsense.

I didn’t answer and he began to wail.

That caused Miles and Belle to pay attention to him. Once Miles had me in the chair he had turned to Belle and had said bitterly, “Now you’ve done it! Have you gone crazy?”

Belle answered, “Keep your nerve, Chubby. We’re going to settle him once and for all.”

“What? If you think I’m going to help in a *murder*—”

“Stuff it! That would be the logical thing to do . . . but you



don't have the guts for it. Fortunately it's not necessary with that stuff in him."

"What do you mean?"

"He's our boy now. He'll do what I tell him to. He won't make any more trouble."

"But . . . good God, Belle, you can't keep him doped up forever. Once he comes out of it——"

"Quit talking like a lawyer. I know what this stuff will do; you don't. When he comes out of it he'll do whatever I've told him to do. I'll tell him never to sue us; he'll never sue us. I tell him to quit sticking his nose into our business; okay, he'll leave us alone. I tell him to go to Timbuktu; he'll go there. I tell him to forget all this; he'll forget . . . but he'll do it just the same."

I listened, understanding her but not in the least interested. If somebody had shouted, "The house is on fire!" I would have understood that, too, and I still would not have been interested.

"I don't believe it."

"You don't, eh?" She looked at him oddly. "You ought to."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Skip it, skip it. This stuff works, Chubby. But first we've got to——"

It was then that Pete started wailing. You don't hear a cat wail very often; you could go a lifetime and not hear it. They don't do it when fighting, no matter how badly they are hurt; they never do it out of simple displeasure. A cat does it only in ultimate distress, when the situation is utterly unbearable but beyond its capacity and there is nothing left to do but keen.

It puts one in mind of a banshee. Also it is hardly to be endured; it hits a nerve-racking frequency.

Miles turned and said, "That confounded cat! We've got to get it out of here."

Belle said, "Kill it."

"Huh? You're always too drastic, Belle. Why, Dan would raise more Cain about that worthless animal than he would if we had stripped him completely. Here——" He turned and picked up Pete's travel bag.

"I'll kill it!" Belle said savagely. "I've wanted to kill that damned cat for months." She looked around for a weapon and found one, a poker from the fireplace set; she ran over and grabbed it.



Miles picked up Pete and tried to put him into the bag.

"Tried" is the word. Pete isn't anxious to be picked up by anyone but me or Ricky, and even I would not pick him up while he was wailing, without very careful negotiation; an emotionally disturbed cat is as touchy as mercury fulminate. But even if he were not upset, Pete certainly would never permit himself without protest to be picked up by the scruff of the neck.

Pete got him with claws in the forearm and teeth in the fleshy part of Miles's left thumb. Miles yelped and dropped him.

Belle shrielled, "Stand clear, Chubby!" and swung at him with the poker.

Belle's intentions were sufficiently forthright and she had the strength and the weapon. But she wasn't skilled with her weapon, whereas Pete is very skilled with his. He ducked under that round-house swipe and hit her four ways, two paws for each of her legs.

Belle screamed and dropped the poker.

I didn't see much of the rest of it. I was still looking straight ahead and could see most of the living room, but I couldn't see anything outside that angle because no one told me to look in any other direction. So I followed the rest of it mostly by sound, except once when they doubled back across my cone of vision, two people chasing a cat—then with unbelievable suddenness, two people being chased by a cat. Aside from that one short scene I was aware of the battle by the sounds of crashes, running, shouts, curses, and screams.

But I don't think they ever laid a glove on him.

The worst thing that happened to me that night was that in Pete's finest hour, his greatest battle and greatest victory, I not only did not see all the details, but I was totally unable to appreciate any of it. I saw and I heard but I had no feeling about it; at his supreme Moment of Truth I was numb.

I recall it now and conjure up emotion I could not feel then. But it's not the same thing; I'm forever deprived, like a narcolept on a honeymoon.

The crashes and curses ceased abruptly, and shortly Miles and Belle came back into the living room. Belle said between gasps, "Who left that censorable screen door unhooked?"

"You did. Shut up about it. It's gone now." Miles had blood on his face as well as his hands; he dabbed at the fresh scratches on his face and did them no good. At some point he must have



tripped and gone down, for his clothes looked it and his coat was split up the back.

"I will like hell shut up. Have you got a gun in the house?"

"Huh?"

"I'm going to shoot that damned cat." Belle was in even worse shape than Miles; she had more skin where Pete could get at it—legs, bare arms and shoulders. It was clear that she would not be wearing strapless dresses again soon, and unless she got expert attention promptly she was likely to have scars. She looked like a harpy after a no-holds-barred row with her sisters.

Miles said, "Sit down!"

She answered him briefly and, by implication, negatively. "I'm going to kill that cat."

"Then don't sit down. Go wash yourself. I'll help you with iodine and stuff and you can help me. But forget that cat; we're well rid of it."

Belle answered rather incoherently, but Miles understood her. "You too," he answered, "in spades. Look here, Belle, if I did have a gun—I'm not saying that I have—and you went out there and started shooting, whether you got the cat or not you would have the police here inside of ten minutes, snooping around and asking questions. Do you want *that* with *him* on our hands?" He jerked a thumb in my direction. "And if you go outside the house tonight without a gun that beast will probably kill you." He scowled even more deeply. "There ought to be a law against keeping an animal like that. He's a public danger. Listen to him."

We could all hear Pete prowling around the house. He was not wailing now; he was voicing his war cry—inviting them to choose weapons and come outside, singly or in bunches.

Belle listened to it and shuddered. Miles said, "Don't worry; he can't get in. I not only hooked the screen you left open, I locked the door."

"I did not leave it open!"

"Have it your own way." Miles went around checking the window fastenings. Presently Belle left the room and so did he. Sometime while they were gone Pete shut up. I don't know how long they were gone; time didn't mean anything to me.

Belle came back first. Her make-up and hairdo were perfect; she had put on a long-sleeved, high-necked dress and had replaced the ruined stockings. Except for Band-Aid strips on her face, the



results of battle did not show. Had it not been for the grim look on her phiz I would have considered her, under other circumstances, a delectable sight.

She came straight toward me and told me to stand up, so I did. She went through me quickly and expertly, not forgetting watch pocket, shirt pockets, and the diagonal one on the left inside of the jacket which most suits do not have. The take was not much—my wallet with a small amount of cash, ID cards, driver's license, and such, keys, small change, a nasal inhaler against the smog, minor miscellaneous junk, and the envelope containing the certified check which she herself had bought and had sent to me. She turned it over, read the closed endorsement I had made on it, and looked puzzled.

"What's this, Dan? Buying a slug of insurance?"

"No." I would have told her the rest, but answering the last question asked of me was the best I could do.

She frowned and put it with the rest of the contents of my pockets. Then she caught sight of Pete's bag and apparently recalled the flap in it I used for a brief case, for she picked it up and opened the flap.

At once she found the quadruplicate sets of the dozen and a half forms I had signed for Mutual Assurance Company. She sat down and started to read them. I stood where she had left me, a tailor's dummy waiting to be put away.

Presently Miles came in wearing bathrobe and slippers and quite a large amount of gauze and adhesive tape. He looked like a fourth-rate middleweight whose manager has let him be out-matched. He was wearing one bandage like a scalp lock, fore and aft on his bald head; Pete must have got to him while he was down.

Belle glanced up, waved him to silence, and indicated the stack of papers she was through with. He sat down and started to read. He caught up with her and finished the last one reading over her shoulder.

She said, "This puts a different complexion on things."

"An understatement. This commitment order is for December fourth—that's *tomorrow*. Belle, he's as hot as noon in Mojave; we've got to get him out of here!" He glanced at a clock. "They'll be looking for him in the morning."



"Miles, you always get chicken when the pressure is on. This is a break, maybe the best break we could hope for."

"How do you figure?"

"This zombie soup, good as it is, has one shortcoming. Suppose you dose somebody with it and load him up with what you want him to do. Okay, so he does it. He carries out your orders; he has to. Know anything about hypnosis?"

"Not much."

"Do you know *anything* but law, Chubby? You haven't any curiosity. A posthypnotic command—which is what this amounts to—may conflict, in fact it's almost certain to conflict, with what the subject really wants to do. Eventually that may land him in the hands of a psychiatrist. If the psychiatrist is any good, he's likely to find out what the trouble is. It is just possible that Dan here might go to one and get unstuck from whatever orders I give him. If he did, he could make plenty of trouble."

"Damn it, you told me this drug was sure-fire."

"Good God, Chubby, you have to take chances with everything in life. That's what makes it fun. Let me think."

After a bit she said, "The simplest thing and the safest is to let him go ahead with this sleep jump he is all set to take. He wouldn't be any more out of our hair if he was dead—and we don't have to take any risk. Instead of having to give him a bunch of complicated orders and then praying that he won't come unstuck, all we have to do is order him to go ahead with the cold sleep, then sober him up and get him out of here . . . or get him out of here and then sober him." She turned to me. "Dan, when are you going to take the Sleep?"

"I'm not."

"Huh? What's all this?" She gestured at the papers from my bag.

"Papers for cold sleep. Contracts with Mutual Assurance."

"He's nutty," Miles commented.

"Mmm . . . of course he is. I keep forgetting that they can't really think when they're under it. They can hear and talk and answer questions . . . but it has to be just the right questions. They can't think." She came up close and looked me in the eyes. "Dan, I want you to tell me all about this cold-sleep deal. Start at the beginning and tell it all the way through. You've got all the papers here to do it; apparently you signed them just today. Now



you say you aren't going to do it. Tell me all about it, because I want to know why you were going to do it and now you say you aren't."

So I told her. Put that way, I could answer. It took a long time to tell as I did just what she said and told it all the way through in detail.

"So you sat there in that drive-in and decided not to? You decided to come out here and make trouble for us instead?"

"Yes." I was about to go on, tell about the trip out, tell her what I had said to Pete and what he had said to me, tell her how I had stopped at a drugstore and taken care of my Hired Girl stock, how I had driven to Miles's house, how Pete had not wanted to wait in the car, how—

But she did not give me a chance. She said, "You've changed your mind again, Dan. You *want* to take the cold sleep. You're going to take the cold sleep. You won't let anything in the world stand in the way of your taking the cold sleep. Understand me? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to take the cold sleep. I want to take . . ." I started to sway. I had been standing like a flagpole for more than an hour, I would guess, without moving any muscle, because no one had told me to. I started collapsing slowly toward her.

She jumped back and said sharply, "Sit down!"

So I sat down.

Belle turned to Miles. "That does it. I'll hammer away at it until I'm sure he can't miss."

Miles looked at the clock. "He said that doctor wanted him there at noon."

"Plenty of time. But we had better drive him there ourselves, just to be— No, damn it!"

"What's the trouble?"

"The time *is* too short. I gave him enough soup for a horse, because I wanted it to hit him fast—before he hit me. By noon he'd be sober enough to convince most people. But not a doctor."

"Maybe it'll just be perfunctory. His physical examination is already here and signed."

"You heard what he said the doctor told him. The doctor's going to check him to see if he's had anything to drink. That means he'll test his reflexes and take his reaction time and peer in



his eyes and—oh, all the things we don't want done. The things we don't dare let a doctor do. Miles, it won't work."

"How about the next day? Call 'em up and tell them there has been a slight delay?"

"Shut up and let me think."

Presently she started looking over the papers I had brought with me. Then she left the room, returned immediately with a jeweler's loop, which she screwed into her right eye like a monocle, and proceeded to examine each paper with great care. Miles asked her what she was doing, but she brushed his question aside.

Presently she took the loop out of her eye and said, "Thank goodness they all have to use the same government forms. Chubby, get me the yellow-pages phone book."

"What for?"

"Get it, get it. I want to check the exact phrasing of a firm name—oh, I know what it is but I want to be sure."

Grumbling, Miles fetched it. She thumbed through it, then said, "Yes, 'Master Insurance Company of California' . . . and there's room enough on each of them. I wish it could be 'Motors' instead of 'Master'; that would be a cinch—but I don't have any connections at 'Motors Insurance,' and besides, I'm not sure they even handle hibernation; I think they're just autos and trucks." She looked up. "Chubby, you're going to have to drive me out to the plant right away."

"Huh?"

"Unless you know of some quicker way to get an electric typewriter with executive type face and carbon ribbon. No, you go out by yourself and fetch it back; I've got telephoning to do."

He frowned. "I'm beginning to see what you plan to do. But, Belle, this is crazy. This is fantastically dangerous."

She laughed. "That's what you think. I told you I had good connections before we ever teamed up. Could you have swung the Mannix deal alone?"

"Well . . . I don't know."

"I know. And maybe you don't know that Master Insurance is part of the Mannix group."

"Well, no, I didn't. And I don't see what difference it makes."

"It means my connections are still good. See here, Chubby, the firm I used to work for used to help Mannix Enterprises with their tax losses . . . until my boss left the country. How do you think



we got such a good deal without being able to guarantee that Danny boy went with the deal? I know all about Mannix. Now hurry up and get that typewriter and I'll let you watch an artist at work. Watch out for that cat."

Miles grumbled but started to leave, then returned. "Belle? Didn't Dan park right in front of the house?"

"Why?"

"His car isn't there now." He looked worried.

"Well, he probably parked around the corner. It's unimportant. Go get that typewriter. Hurry!"

He left again. I could have told them where I had parked but, since they did not ask me, I did not think about it. I did not think at all.

Belle went elsewhere in the house and left me alone. Sometime around daylight Miles got back, looking haggard and carrying our heavy typewriter. Then I was left alone again.

Once Belle came back in and said, "Dan, you've got a paper there telling the insurance company to take care of your Hired Girl stock. You don't want to do that; you want to give it to me."

I didn't answer. She looked annoyed and said, "Let's put it this way. You do want to give it to me. You know you want to give it to me. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes. I want to give it to you."

"Good. You want to give it to me. You have to give it to me. You won't be happy until you give it to me. Now where is it? Is it in your car?"

"No."

"Then where is it?"

"I mailed it."

"What?" She grew shrill. "When did you mail it? Who did you mail it to? Why did you do it?"

If she had asked the second question last I would have answered it. But I answered the last question, that being all I could handle. "I assigned it."

Miles came in. "Where did he put it?"

"He says he's mailed it . . . because he has *assigned* it! You had better find his car and search it—he may just think he actually mailed it. He certainly had it with him at the insurance company."

"Assigned it!" repeated Miles. "Good Lord! To whom?"



"I'll ask him. Dan, to whom did you assign your stock?"

"To the Bank of America." She didn't ask me why or I would have told her about Ricky.

All she did was slump her shoulders and sigh. "There goes the ball game, Chubby. We can forget about the stock. It'll take more than a nail file to get it away from a bank." She straightened up suddenly. "Unless he hasn't really mailed it yet. If he hasn't I'll clean that assignment off the back so pretty you'll think it's been to the laundry. Then he'll assign it again . . . to me."

"To us," corrected Miles.

"That's just a detail. Go find his car."

Miles returned later and announced, "It's not anywhere within six blocks of here. I cruised around all the streets, and the alleys too. He must have used a cab."

"You heard him say he drove his own car."

"Well, it's not out there. Ask him when and where he mailed the stock."

So Belle did and I told them. "Just before I came here. I mailed it at the postbox at the corner of Sepulveda and Ventura Boulevard."

"Do you suppose he's lying?" asked Miles.

"He can't lie, not in the shape he's in. And he's too definite about it to be mixed up. Forget it, Miles. Maybe after he's put away it will turn out that his assignment is no good because he had already sold it to us . . . at least I'll get his signature on some blank sheets and be ready to try it."

She did try to get my signature and I tried to oblige. But in the shape I was in I could not write well enough to satisfy her. Finally she snatched a sheet out of my hand and said viciously, "You make me sick! I can sign your name better than that." Then she leaned over me and said tensely, "I wish I had killed your cat."

They did not bother me again until later in the day. Then Belle came in and said, "Danny boy, I'm going to give you a hypo and then you'll feel a lot better. You'll feel able to get up and move around and act just like you always have acted. You won't be angry at anybody, especially not at Miles and me. We're your best friends. We are, aren't we? Who are your best friends?"

"You are. You and Miles."

"But I'm more than that. I'm your sister. Say it."

"You're my sister."



"Good. Now we're going for a ride and then you are going for a long sleep. You've been sick and when you wake up you'll be well. Understand me?"

"Yes."

"Who am I?"

"You're my best friend. You're my sister."

"Good boy. Push your sleeve back."

I didn't feel the hypo go in, but it stung after she pulled it out. I sat up and shrugged and said, "Gee, Sis, that stung. What was it?"

"Something to make you feel better. You've been sick."

"Yeah, I'm sick. Where's Miles?"

"He'll be here in a moment. Now let's have your other arm. Push back the sleeve."

I said, "What for?" but I pushed back the sleeve and let her shoot me again. I jumped.

She smiled. "That didn't really hurt, did it?"

"Huh? No, it didn't hurt. What's it for?"

"It will make you sleepy on the ride. Then when we get there you'll wake up."

"Okay. I'd like to sleep. I want to take a long sleep." Then I felt puzzled and looked around. "Where's Pete? Pete was going to sleep with me."

"Pete?" Belle said. "Why, dear, don't you remember? You sent Pete to stay with Ricky. She's going to take care of him."

"Oh yes!" I grinned with relief. I had sent Pete to Ricky; I remembered mailing him. That was good. Ricky loved Pete and she would take good care of him while I was asleep.

They drove me out to the Consolidated Sanctuary at Sawtelle, one that many of the smaller insurance companies used—those that didn't have their own. I slept all the way but came awake at once when Belle spoke to me. Miles stayed in his car and she took me in. The girl at the desk looked up and said, "Davis?"

"Yes," agreed Belle. "I'm his sister. Is the representative for Master Insurance here?"

"You'll find him down in Treatment Room Nine—they're ready and waiting. You can give the papers to the man from Master." She looked at me with interest. "He's had his physical examination?"



"Oh yes!" Belle assured her. "Brother is a therapy-delay case, you know. He's under an opiate . . . for the pain."

The receptionist clucked sympathetically. "Well, hurry on in then. Through that door and turn left."

In Room Nine there was a man in street clothes and one in white coveralls and a woman in a nurse's uniform. They helped me get undressed and treated me like an idiot child while Belle explained again that I was under a sedative for the pain. Once he had me stripped and up on the table, the man in white massaged my belly, digging his fingers in deeply. "No trouble with this one," he announced. "He's empty."

"He hasn't had anything to eat or drink since yesterday evening," agreed Belle.

"That's fine. Sometimes they come in here stuffed like a Christmas turkey. Some people have no sense."

"True. Very true."

"Uh-huh. Okay, son, clench your fist tight while I get this needle in."

I did and things began to get really hazy. Suddenly I remembered something and tried to sit up. "Where's Pete? I want to see Pete."

Belle took my head and kissed me. "There, there, Buddy! Pete couldn't come, remember? Pete had to stay with Ricky." I quieted down and she said gently to the others, "Our brother Peter has a sick little girl at home."

I dropped off to sleep.

Presently I felt very cold. But I couldn't move to reach the covers.

## 5

I was complaining to the bartender about the air conditioning—it was turned too high and we were all going to catch cold. "No matter," he assured me. "You won't feel it when you're asleep. Sleep . . . sleep . . . soup of the evening, beautiful sleep." He had Belle's face.



"How about a warm drink then?" I wanted to know. "A Tom and Jerry? Or a hot buttered bum?"

"You're a bum!" the doctor answered. "Sleeping's too good for him; throw the bum out!"

I tried to hook my feet around the brass rail to stop them. But this bar had no brass rail, which seemed funny, and I was flat on my back, which seemed funnier still, unless they had installed bedside service for people with no feet. I didn't have feet, so how could I hook them under a brass rail? No hands, either. "Look, Maw, no hands!" Pete sat on my chest and wailed.

I was back in basic training . . . advanced basic, it must have been, for I was at Camp Hale at one of those silly exercises where they throw snow down your neck to make a man of you. I was having to climb the damndest biggest mountain in all Colorado and it was all ice and I had no feet. Nevertheless, I was carrying the biggest pack anybody ever saw—I remembered that they were trying to find out if GIs could be used instead of pack mules and I had been picked because I was expendable. I wouldn't have made it at all if little Ricky hadn't got behind me and pushed.

The top sergeant turned and he had a face just like Belle's and he was livid with rage. "Come on, you! I can't afford to wait for you. I don't care whether you make it or not . . . but you can't sleep until you get there."

My no-feet wouldn't take me any farther and I fell down in the snow and it was icy warm and I did fall asleep while little Ricky wailed and begged me not to. But I had to sleep.

I woke up in bed with Belle. She was shaking me and saying, "Wake up, Dan! I can't wait thirty years for you; a girl has to think of her future." I tried to get up and hand her the bags of gold I had under the bed, but she was gone . . . and anyhow a *Hired Girl* with her face had picked all the gold up and put it in its tray on top and scurried out of the room. I tried to run after it but I had no feet, no body at all, I discovered. "I ain't got no body, and no body cares for me . . ." The world consisted of top sergeants and work . . . so what difference did it make where you worked or how? I let them put the harness back on me and I went back to climbing that icy mountain. It was all white and beautifully rounded and if I could just climb to the rosy tip they would let me sleep, which was what I needed. But I never made it . . . no hands, no feet, no nothing.



There was a forest fire on the mountain. The snow did not melt, but I could feel the heat in waves beating against me while I kept on struggling. The top sergeant was leaning over me and saying, "Wake up . . . wake up . . . wake up."

He no more than got me awake before he wanted me to sleep again. I'm vague about what happened then for a while. Part of the time I was on a table which vibrated under me and there were lights and snaky-looking equipment and lots of people. But when I was fully awake I was in a hospital bed and I felt all right except for that listless half-floating feeling you have after a Turkish bath. I had hands and feet again. But nobody would talk to me and every time I tried to ask a question a nurse would pop something into my mouth. I was massaged quite a lot.

Then one morning I felt fine and got out of bed as soon as I woke up. I felt a little dizzy but that was all. I knew who I was, I knew how I had got there, and I knew that all that other stuff had been dreams.

I knew who had put me there. If Belle had given me orders while I was drugged to forget her shenanigans, either the orders had not taken or thirty years of cold sleep had washed out the hypnotic effect. I was blurry about some details but I knew how they had shanghaied me.

I wasn't especially angry about it. True, it had happened just "yesterday," since yesterday is the day just one sleep behind you—but the sleep had been thirty years long. The feeling cannot be precisely defined, since it is entirely subjective, but, while my memory was sharp for the events of "yesterday," nevertheless my feelings about those events were to things far away. You have seen double images in television of a pitcher making his windup while his picture sits as a ghost on top of a long shot of the whole baseball diamond? Something like that . . . my conscious recollection was a close-up; my emotional reaction was to something long ago and far away.

I fully intended to look up Belle and Miles and chop them into cat meat, but there was no hurry. Next year would do—right now I was eager to have a look at the year 2000.

But speaking of cat meat, where was Pete? He ought to be around somewhere . . . unless the poor little beggar hadn't lived through the Sleep.



Then—and not until then—did I remember that my careful plans to bring Pete along had been wrecked.

I took Belle and Miles out of the “Hold” basket and moved them over to “Urgent.” Try to kill my cat, would they?

They had done worse than kill Pete; they had turned him out to go wild . . . to wear out his days wandering back alleys in search of scraps, while his ribs grew thin and his sweet pixie nature warped into distrust of all two-legged beasts.

They had let him die—for he was surely dead by now—let him die thinking that *I* had deserted him.

For this they would pay . . . if they were still alive. Oh, how I hoped they were still alive—*unspeakable!*

I found that I was standing by the foot of my bed, grasping the rail to steady myself and dressed only in pajamas. I looked around for some way to call someone. Hospital rooms had not changed much. There was no window and I could not see where the light came from; the bed was high and narrow, as hospital beds had always been in my recollection, but it showed signs of having been engineered into something more than a place to sleep—among other things, it seemed to have some sort of plumbing under it which I suspected was a mechanized bedpan, and the side table was part of the bed structure itself. But, while I ordinarily would have been intensely interested in such gadgetry, right now I simply wanted to find the pear-shaped switch which summons the nurse—I wanted my clothes.

It was missing, but I found what it had been transformed into: a pressure switch on the side of the table that was not quite a table. My hand struck it in trying to find it, and a transparency opposite where my head would have been had I been in bed shone out with: SERVICE CALL. Almost immediately it blinked out and was replaced with: ONE MOMENT, PLEASE.

Very quickly the door silently rolled aside and a nurse came in. Nurses had not changed much. This one was reasonably cute, had the familiar firm manners of a drill sergeant, wore a perky little white hat perched on short orchid-colored hair, and was dressed in a white uniform. It was strangely cut and covered her here and uncovered her there in a fashion different from 1970—but women’s clothes, even work uniforms, were always doing that. She would



still have been a nurse in any year, just by her unmistakable manner.

"You get back in that bed!"

"Where are my clothes?"

"Get back in that bed. Now!"

I answered reasonably, "Look, nurse, I'm a free citizen, over twenty-one, and not a criminal. I don't have to get back into that bed and I'm not going to. Now are you going to show me where my clothes are or shall I go out the way I am and start looking?"

She looked at me, then turned suddenly and went out; the door ducked out of her way.

But it would not duck out of my way. I was still trying to study out the gimmick, being fairly sure that if one engineer could dream it up, another could figure it out, when it opened again and a man came in.

"Good morning," he said. "I'm Dr. Albrecht."

His clothes looked like a cross between a Harlem Sunday and a picnic to me, but his brisk manner and his tired eyes were convincingly professional; I believed him. "Good morning, Doctor. I'd like to have my clothes."

He stepped just far enough inside to let the door slide into place behind him, then reached inside his clothes and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He got one out, waved it briskly in the air, placed it in his mouth and puffed on it; it was lighted. He offered me the pack. "Have one?"

"Uh, no, thanks."

"Go ahead. It won't hurt you."

I shook my head. I had always worked with a cigarette smoldering beside me; the progress of a job could be judged by the overflowing ash trays and the burns on the drafting board. Now I felt a little faint at the sight of smoke and wondered if I had dropped the nicotine habit somewhere in the slept-away years. "Thanks just the same."

"Okay. Mr. Davis, I've been here six years. I'm a specialist in hypnology, resuscitation, and like subjects. Here and elsewhere I've helped eight thousand and seventy-three patients make the comeback from hypothermia to normal life—you're number eight thousand and seventy-four. I've seen them do all sorts of odd things when they came out—odd to laymen; not to me. Some of them want to go right back to sleep again and scream at me when



I try to keep them awake. Some of them *do* go back to sleep and we have to ship them off to another sort of institution. Some of them start weeping endlessly when they realize that it is a one-way ticket and it's too late to go home to whatever year they started from. And some of them, like you, demand their clothes and want to run out into the street."

"Well? Why not? Am I a prisoner?"

"No. You can have your clothes. I imagine you'll find them out of style, but that is your problem. However, while I send for them, would you mind telling me what it is that is so terribly urgent that you must attend to it right this minute . . . after it has waited thirty years? That's how long you've been at subtemperature—thirty years. Is it really urgent? Or would later today do as well? Or even tomorrow?"

I started to blurt out that it damn well was urgent, then stopped and looked sheepish. "Maybe not that urgent."

"Then as a favor to me, will you get back into bed, let me check you over, have your breakfast, and perhaps talk with me before you go galloping off in all directions? I might even be able to tell you which way to gallop."

"Uh, okay, Doctor. Sorry to have caused trouble." I climbed into bed. It felt good—I was suddenly tired and shaky.

"No trouble. You should see some that we get. We have to pull them down off the ceiling." He straightened the covers around my shoulders, then leaned over the table built into the bed. "Dr. Albrecht in Seventeen. Send a room orderly with breakfast, uh . . . menu four-minus."

He turned to me and said, "Roll over and pull up your jacket; I want to get at your ribs. While I'm checking you, you can ask questions. If you want to."

I tried to think while he prodded my ribs. I suppose it was a stethoscope he used although it looked like a miniaturized hearing aid. But they had not improved one thing about it; the pickup he pushed against me was as cold and hard as ever.

What do you ask after thirty years? Have they reached the stars yet? Who's cooking up "The War to End War" this time? Do babies come out of test tubes? "Doc, do they still have popcorn machines in the lobbies of movie theaters?"

"They did the last time I looked. I don't get much time for such things. By the way, the word is 'grabbie' now, not 'movie.'"



"So? Why?"

"Try one. You'll find out. But be sure to fasten your seat belt; they null the whole theater on some shots. See here, Mr. Davis, we're faced with this same problem every day and we've got it down to routine. We've got adjustment vocabularies for each entrance year, and historical and cultural summaries. It's quite necessary, for malorientation can be extreme no matter how much we lackweight the shock."

"Uh, I suppose so."

"Decidedly. Especially in an extreme lapse like yours. Thirty years."

"Is thirty years the maximum?"

"Yes and no. Thirty-five years is the very longest we've had experience with, since the first commercial client was placed in sub-temperature in December 1965. You are the longest Sleeper I have revived. But we have clients in here now with contract times up to a century and a half. They should never have accepted you for as long as thirty years; they didn't know enough then. They were taking a great chance with your life. You were lucky."

"Really?"

"Really. Turn over." He went on examining me and added, "But with what we've learned now I'd be willing to prepare a man for a thousand-year jump if there were any way to finance it . . . hold him at the temperature you were at for a year just to check, then crash him to minus two hundred in a millisecond. He'd live. I think. Let's try your reflexes."

That "crash" business didn't sound good to me. Dr. Albrecht went on: "Sit up and cross your knees. You won't find the language problem difficult. Of course I've been careful to talk in 1970 vocabulary—I rather pride myself on being able to talk selectively in the entrance speech of any of my patients; I've made a hypno-study of it. But you'll be speaking contemporary idiom perfectly in a week; it's really just added vocabulary."

I thought of telling him that at least four times he had used words not used in 1970, or at least not that way, but I decided it wouldn't be polite. "That's all for now," he said presently. "By the way, Mrs. Schultz has been trying to reach you."

"Huh?"

"Don't you know her? She insisted that she was an old friend of yours."



"Schultz," I repeated. "I suppose I've known several 'Mrs. Schultzes' at one time and another, but the only one I can place was my fourth-grade teacher. But she'd be dead by now."

"Maybe she took the Sleep. Well, you can accept the message when you feel like it. I'm going to sign a release on you. But if you're smart, you'll stay here for a few days and soak up reorientation. I'll look in on you later. So 'twenty-three, skiddoo!' as they used to say in your day. Here comes the orderly with your breakfast."

I decided that he was a better doctor than a linguist. But I stopped thinking about it when I saw the orderly. It rolled in, carefully avoiding Dr. Albrecht, who walked straight out, paying no attention to it and making no effort himself to avoid it.

It came over, adjusted the built-in bed table, swung it over me, opened it out, and arranged my breakfast on it. "Shall I pour your coffee?"

"Yes, please." I did not really want it poured, as I would rather have it stay hot until I'd finished everything else. But I wanted to see it poured.

For I was in a delighted daze . . . it was *Flexible Frank!*

Not the jackleg, bread-boarded, jury-rigged first model Miles and Belle had stolen from me, of course not. This one resembled the first *Frank* the way a turbospeedster resembles the first horseless carriages. But a man knows his own work. I had set the basic pattern and this was the necessary evolution . . . *Frank's* great-grandson, improved, slicked up, made more efficient—but the same bloodline.

"Will that be all?"

"Wait a minute."

Apparently I had said the wrong thing, for the automaton reached inside itself and pulled out a stiff plastic sheet and handed it to me. The sheet remained fastened to him by a slim steel chain. I looked at it and found printed on it:

*VOICE CODE—Eager Beaver Model XVII-a*

*IMPORTANT NOTICE!! This service automaton DOES NOT understand human speech. It has no understanding at all, being merely a machine. But for your convenience it has been designed to respond to a list of spoken orders. It will ignore anything else*



said in its presence, or (if any phrase triggers it incompletely or such that a circuit dilemma is created) it will offer this instruction sheet. Please read it carefully.

Thank you,

Aladdin Autoengineering Corporation  
Manufacturers of EAGER BEAVER, WILLIWAU, DRAFTING DAN, BUILDER BILL, GREEN THUMB, and NANNY. Custom Designers and Consultants in Automation Problems

"At Your Service!"

The motto appeared on their trade-mark showing Aladdin rubbing his lamp and a genie appearing.

Below this was a long list of simple orders—STOP, GO, YES, NO, SLOWER, FASTER, COME HERE, FETCH A NURSE, etc. Then there was a shorter list of tasks common in hospitals, such as back rubs, and including some that I had never heard of. The list closed abruptly with the statement: "Routines 87 through 242 may be ordered only by hospital staff members and the order phrases are therefore not listed here."

I had not voice-coded the first *Flexible Frank*; you had to punch buttons on his control board. It was not because I had not thought of it, but because the analyzer and telephone exchange for the purpose would have weighed and bulked and cost more than all the rest of *Frank, Sr.*, net. I decided that I would have to learn some new wrinkles in miniaturization and simplification before I would be ready to practice engineering here. But I was anxious to get started on it, as I could see from *Eager Beaver* that it was going to be more fun than ever—lots of new possibilities. Engineering is the art of the practical and depends more on the total state of the art than it does on the individual engineer. When railroading time comes you can railroad—but not before. Look at poor Professor Langley, breaking his heart on a flying machine that should have flown—he had put the necessary genius in it—but he was just a few years too early to enjoy the benefit of collateral art he needed and did not have. Or take the great Leonardo da



Vinci, so far out of his time that his most brilliant concepts were utterly unbuildable.

I was going to have fun here—I mean “now.”

I handed back the instruction card, then got out of bed and looked for the data plate. I had halfway expected to see “Hired Girl, Inc.” at the bottom of the notice and I wondered if “Aladdin” was a daughter corporation of the Mannix group. The data plate did not tell me much other than model, serial number, factory, and such, but it did list the patents, about forty of them—and the earliest, I was *very* interested to see, was in 1970 . . . almost certainly based on my original model and drawings.

I found a pencil and memo pad on the table and jotted down the number of that first patent, but my interest was purely intellectual. Even if it had been stolen from me (I was sure it had been), it had expired in 1987—unless they had changed the patent laws—and only those granted later than 1983 would still be valid. But I wanted to know.

A light glowed on the automaton and he announced: “I am being called. May I leave?”

“Huh? Sure. Run along.” It started to reach for the phrase list; I hastily said, “Go!”

“Thank you. Good-by.” It detoured around me.

“Thank *you*.”

“You are welcome.”

Whoever had dictated the gadget’s sound responses had a very pleasant baritone voice.

I got back into bed and ate the breakfast I had let get cold—only it turned out not to be cold. Breakfast four-minus was about enough for a medium-sized bird, but I found that it was enough, even though I had been very hungry. I suppose my stomach had shrunk. It wasn’t until I had finished that I remembered that this was the first food I had eaten in a generation. I noticed it then because they had included a menu—what I had taken for bacon was listed as “grilled yeast strips, country style.”

But in spite of a thirty-year fast, my mind was not on food; they had sent a newspaper in with breakfast: the Great Los Angeles *Times*, for Wednesday, 13 December, 2000.

Newspapers had not changed much, not in format. This one was tabloid size, the paper was glazed instead of rough pulp and the illustrations were either full color, or black-and-white stereo—I



couldn't puzzle out the gimmick on that last. There had been stereo pictures you could look at without a viewer since I was a small child; as a kid I had been fascinated by ones used to advertise frozen foods in the '50s. But those had required fairly thick transparent plastic for a grid of tiny prisms; these were simply on thin paper. Yet they had depth.

I gave it up and looked at the rest of the paper. *Eager Beaver* had arranged it on a reading rack and for a while it seemed as if the front page was all I was going to read, for I could not find out how to open the durned thing. The sheets seemed to have frozen solid.

Finally I accidentally touched the lower right-hand corner of the first sheet; it curled up and out of the way . . . some surface-charge phenomenon, triggered at that point. The other pages got neatly out of the way in succession whenever I touched that spot.

At least half of the paper was so familiar as to make me homesick—"Your Horoscope Today, Mayor Dedicates New Reservoir, Security Restrictions Undermining Freedom of Press Says N. Y. Solon, Giants Take Double-Header, Unseasonable Warmth Perils Winter Sports, Pakistan Warns India"—et cetera, ad tedium. This is where I came in.

Some of the other items were new but explained themselves: LUNA SHUTTLE STILL SUSPENDED FOR GEMINIDS—*Twenty-Four-Hour Station Suffers Two Punctures, No Casualties*; FOUR WHITES LYNCHED IN CAPETOWN—*UN Action Demanded*; HOST-MOTHERS ORGANIZE FOR HIGHER FEES—*Demand "Amateurs" Be Outlawed*; MISSISSIPPI PLANTER INDICTED UNDER ANTI-ZOMBIE LAW—*His Defense: "Them Boys Hain't Drugged, They're Just Stupid!"*

I was fairly sure that I knew what that last one meant . . . from experience.

But some of the news items missed me completely. The "wogg-lies" were still spreading and three more French towns had been evacuated; the King was considering ordering the area dusted. King? Oh well, French politics might turn up anything, but what was this "Poudre Sanitaire" they were considering using on the "wogg-lies"?—whatever they were. Radioactive, maybe? I hoped they picked a dead calm day . . . preferably the thirtieth of February. I had had a radiation overdose myself once, through a mistake by a damn-fool WAC technician at Sandia. I had not reached



the point-of-no-return vomiting stage, but I don't recommend a diet of curies.

The Laguna Beach division of the Los Angeles police had been equipped with Leycoils and the division chief warned all Teddies to get out of town. "My men have orders to nark first and sub-speck afterward. This has got to stop!"

I made a mental note to keep clear of Laguna Beach until I found out what the score was. I wasn't sure I wanted to be sub-specked, or suspected, even afterward.

Those are just samples. There were any number of news stories that started out trippingly, then foundered in what was, to me, double talk.

I started to breeze on past the vital statistics when my eye caught some new subheads. There were the old familiar ones of births, deaths, marriages, and divorces, but now there were "commitments" and "withdrawals" as well, listed by sanctuaries. I looked up "Sawtelle Cons. Sanc." and found my own name. It gave me a warm feeling of "belonging."

But the most intensely interesting things in the paper were the ads. One of the personals stuck in my mind: "Attractive still-young widow with yen to travel wishes to meet mature man similarly inclined. Object: two-year marriage contract." But it was the display advertising that got me.

*Hired Girl* and her sisters and her cousins and her aunts were all over the place—and they were still using the trade-mark, a husky girl with a broom, that I had designed originally for our letterhead. I felt a twinge of regret that I had been in such a jumping hurry to get rid of my stock in *Hired Girl, Inc.*; it looked as if it was worth more than all the rest of my portfolio. No, that was wrong; if I had kept it with me at the time, that pair of thieves would have lifted it and faked an assignment to themselves. As it was, Ricky had gotten it—and if it had made Ricky rich, well, it couldn't happen to a nicer person.

I made a note to track down Ricky first thing, top priority. She was all that was left to me of the world I had known and she loomed very large in my mind. Dear little Ricky! If she had been ten years older I would never have looked at Belle . . . and wouldn't have got my fingers burned.

Let's see, how old would she be now? Forty—no, forty-one. It was hard to think of Ricky as forty-one. Still, that wouldn't be old



in a woman these days—or even those days. From forty feet you frequently couldn't tell forty-one from eighteen.

If she was rich I'd let her buy me a drink and we would drink to Pete's dear departed funny little soul.

And if something had slipped and she was poor in spite of the stock I had assigned her, then—by damn, I'd marry her! Yes, I would. It didn't matter that she was ten years or so older than I was; in view of my established record for flubbing the dud I needed somebody older to look out for me and tell me no—and Ricky was just the girl who could do it. She had run Miles and Miles's house with serious little-girl efficiency when she was less than ten; at forty she would be just the same, only mellowed.

I felt really warm and no longer lost in a strange land for the first time since I had wakened. Ricky was the answer to everything.

Then deep inside me I heard a voice: "Look, stupid, you can't marry Ricky, because a girl as sweet as she was going to be would now have been married for at least twenty years. She'll have four kids . . . maybe a son bigger than you are . . . and certainly a husband who won't be amused by you in the role of good old Uncle Danny."

I listened and my jaw sagged. Then I said feebly, "All right, all right—so I've missed the boat again. But I'm still going to look her up. They can't do more than shoot me. And, after all, she's the only other person who really understood Pete."

I turned another page, suddenly very glum at the thought of having lost both Ricky and Pete. After a while I fell asleep over the paper and slept until *Eager Beaver* or his twin fetched lunch.

While I was asleep I dreamed that Ricky was holding me on her lap and saying, "It's all right, Danny. I found Pete and now we're both here to stay. Isn't that so, Pete?"

"Yeeow!"

The added vocabularies were a cinch; I spent much more time on the historical summaries. Quite a lot can happen in thirty years, but why put it down when everybody else knows it better than I do? I wasn't surprised that the Great Asia Republic was crowding us out of the South American trade; that had been in the cards since the Formosan treaty. Nor was I surprised to find India more Balkanized than ever. The notion of England being a prov-



ince of Canada stopped me for a moment. Which was the tail and which was the dog? I skipped over the panic of '87; gold was a wonderful engineering material for some uses; I could not regard it as a tragedy to find that it was now cheap and no longer a basis for money, no matter how many people lost their shirts in the change-over.

I stopped reading and thought about the things you could do with cheap gold, with its high density, good conductivity, extreme ductility . . . and stopped when I realized I would have to read the technical literature first. Shucks, in atomics alone it would be invaluable. The way the stuff could be worked, far better than any other metal, if you could use it in miniaturizing—again, I stopped, morally certain that *Eager Beaver* had had his “head” crammed full of gold. I would just have to get busy and find out what the boys had been doing in the “small back rooms” while I had been away.

The Sawtelle Sanctuary wasn't equipped to let me read up on engineering, so I told Doc Albrecht I was ready to check out. He shrugged, told me I was an idiot, and agreed. But I did stay one more night; I found that I was fagged just from lying back and watching words chase past in a book scanner.

They brought me modern clothes right after breakfast the next morning . . . and I had to have help in dressing. They were not so odd in themselves (although I had never worn cerise trousers with bell bottoms before) but I could not manage the fastenings without coaching. I suppose my grandfather might have had the same trouble with zippers if he had not been led into them gradually. It was the Sticktite closure seams, of course—I thought I was going to have to hire a little boy to help me go to the bathroom before I got it through my head that the pressure-sensitive adhesion was axially polarized.

Then I almost lost my pants when I tried to ease the waistband. No one laughed at me.

Dr. Albrecht asked, “What are you going to do?”

“Me? First I'm going to get a map of the city. Then I'm going to find a place to sleep. Then I'm going to do nothing but professional reading for quite a while . . . maybe a year. Doc, I'm an obsolete engineer. I don't aim to stay that way.”

“Mmmm. Well, good luck. Don't hesitate to call if I can help.”

I stuck out my hand. “Thanks, Doc. You've been swell. Uh,



maybe I shouldn't mention this until I talk to the accounting office of my insurance company and see just how well off I am—but I don't intend to let it go with words. Thanks for the sort of thing you've done for me should be more substantial. Understand me?"

He shook his head. "I appreciate the thought. But my fees are covered by my contract with the sanctuary."

"But—"

"No. I can't take it, so please let's not discuss it." He shook hands and said, "Good-by. If you'll stay on this slide it will take you to the main offices." He hesitated. "If you find things a bit tiring at first, you're entitled to four more days recuperation and reorientation here without additional charge under the custodial contract. It's paid for. Might as well use it. You can come and go as you like."

I grinned. "Thanks, Doc. But you can bet that I won't be back—other than to say hello someday."

I stepped off at the main office and told the receptionist there who I was. It handed me an envelope, which I saw was another phone message from Mrs. Schultz. I still had not called her, because I did not know who she was, and the sanctuary did not permit visits nor phone calls to a revived client until he wanted to accept them. I simply glanced at it and tucked it in my blouse, while thinking that I might have made a mistake in making *Flexible Frank* too flexible. Receptionists used to be pretty girls, not machines.

The receptionist said, "Step this way, please. Our treasurer would like to see you."

Well, I wanted to see him, too, so I stepped that way. I was wondering how much money I had made and was congratulating myself on having plunged in common stocks rather than playing it "safe." No doubt my stocks had dropped in the Panic of '87, but they ought to be back up now—in fact I knew that at least two of them were worth a lot of dough now; I had been reading the financial section of the *Times*. I still had the paper with me, figuring I might want to look up some others.

The treasurer was a human being, even though he looked like a treasurer. He gave me a quick handshake. "How do you do, Mr. Davis. I'm Mr. Doughty. Sit down, please."

I said, "Howdy, Mr. Doughty. I probably don't need to take that much of your time. Just tell me this: does my insurance com-



pany handle its settlements through your office? Or should I go to their home offices?" .

"Do please sit down. I have several things to explain to you."

So I sat. His office assistant (good old *Frank* again) fetched a file folder for him and he said, "These are your original contracts. Would you like to see them?"

I wanted very much to see them, as I had kept my fingers crossed ever since I was fully awake, wondering if Belle had figured out some way to bite the end off that certified check. A certified check is much harder to play hanky-panky with than is a personal check, but Belle was a clever gal.

I was much relieved to see that she had left my commitments unchanged, except of course that the side contract for Pete was missing and also the one concerning my Hired Girl stock. I supposed that she had just burned those, to keep from raising questions. I examined with care the dozen or more places where she had changed "Mutual Assurance Company" to "Master Insurance Company of California."

The gal was a real artist, no question. I suppose a scientific criminologist armed with microscope and comparison stereo and chemical tests and so forth could have proved that each of those documents had been altered, but I could not. I wondered how she had coped with the closed endorsement on the back of the certified check, since certified checks are always on paper guaranteed non-erasable. Well, she probably had not used an eraser—what one person can dream up another person can outsmart . . . and Belle was *very* smart.

Mr. Doughty cleared his throat. I looked up. "Do we settle my account here?"

"Yes."

"Then I can put it in two words. How much?"

"Mmm . . . Mr. Davis, before we go into that question, I would like to invite your attention to one additional document . . . and to one circumstance. This is the contract between this sanctuary and Master Insurance Company of California for your hypothermia, custody, and revivification. You will note that the entire fee is paid in advance. This is both for our protection and for yours, since it guarantees your safe-being while you are helpless. The funds—all such funds—are placed in escrow with the



superior-court division handling chancery matters and are paid quarterly to us as earned."

"Okay. Sounds like a good arrangement."

"It is. It protects the helpless. Now you must understand clearly that this sanctuary is a separate corporation from your insurance company; the custodial contract with us was a contract entirely separate from the one for the management of your estate."

"Mr. Doughty, what are you getting at?"

"Do you have any assets other than those you entrusted to Master Insurance Company?"

I thought it over. I had owned a car once . . . but God alone knew what had become of it. I had closed out my checking account in Mojave early in the binge, and on that busy day when I ended up at Miles's place—and in the soup—I had started with maybe thirty or forty dollars in cash. Books, clothes, slide rule—I had never been a pack rat—and that minor junk was gone anyhow. "Not even a bus transfer, Mr. Doughty."

"Then—I am very sorry to have to tell you this—you have no assets of any sort."

I held still while my head circled the field and came in for a crash landing. "What do you mean? Why, some of the stocks I invested in are in fine shape. I *know* they are. It says so right here." I held up my breakfast copy of the *Times*.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Davis, but you don't own any stocks. Master Insurance went broke."

I was glad he had made me sit down; I felt weak. "How did this happen? The Panic?"

"No, no. It was part of the collapse of the Mannix Group . . . but of course you don't know about that. It happened after the Panic, and I suppose you could say that it started from the Panic. But Master Insurance would not have gone under if it had not been systematically looted . . . gutted—'milked' is the vulgar word. If it had been an ordinary receivership, something at least would have been salvaged. But it was not. By the time it was discovered there was nothing left of the company but a hollow shell . . . and the men who had done it were beyond extradition. Uh, if it is any consolation to you, it could not happen under our present laws."

No, it was no consolation, and besides, I didn't believe it. My



old man claimed that the more complicated the law the more opportunity for scoundrels.

But he also used to say that a wise man should be prepared to abandon his baggage at any time. I wondered how often I was going to have to do it to qualify as "wise." "Uh, Mr. Doughty, just out of curiosity, how did Mutual Assurance make out?"

"Mutual Assurance Company? A fine firm. Oh, they took their licking during the Panic along with everybody else. But they weathered it. You have a policy with them, perhaps?"

"No." I did not offer explanation; there was no use. I couldn't look to Mutual; I had never executed my contract with them. I couldn't sue Master Insurance; there is no point in suing a bankrupt corpse.

I could sue Belle and Miles if they were still around—but why be silly? No proof, none.

Besides, I did not want to sue Belle. It would be better to tattoo her all over with "Null and Void" . . . using a dull needle. Then I'd take up the matter of what she had done to Pete. I hadn't figured out a punishment to suit the crime for that one yet.

I suddenly remembered that it was the Mannix group that Miles and Belle had been about to sell Hired Girl, Inc., to when they had booted me out. "Mr. Doughty? Are you sure that the Mannix people haven't any assets? Don't they own Hired Girl?"

"'Hired Girl?' Do you mean the domestic autoappliance firm?"

"Yes, of course."

"It hardly seems possible. In fact, it is not possible, since the Mannix empire, as such, no longer exists. Of course I can't say that there never was any connection between Hired Girl Corporation and the Mannix people. But I don't believe it could have been much, if any, or I think I would have heard of it."

I dropped the matter. If Miles and Belle had been caught in the collapse of Mannix, that suited me fine. But, on the other hand, if Mannix had owned and milked Hired Girl, Inc., it would have hit Ricky as hard as it hit them. I didn't want Ricky hurt, no matter what the side issues were.

I stood up. "Well, thanks for breaking it gently, Mr. Doughty. I'll be on my way."

"Don't go yet. Mr. Davis . . . we of this institution feel a responsibility toward our people beyond the mere letter of the contract. You understand that yours is by no means the first case of



this sort. Now our board of directors has placed a small discretionary fund at my disposal to ease such hardships. It——”

“No charity, Mr. Doughty. Thanks anyhow.”

“Not charity, Mr. Davis. A loan. A character loan, you might call it. Believe me, our losses have been negligible on such loans . . . and we don’t want you to walk out of here with your pockets empty.”

I thought that one over twice. I didn’t even have the price of a haircut. On the other hand, borrowing money is like trying to swim with a brick in each hand . . . and a small loan is tougher to pay back than a million. “Mr. Doughty,” I said slowly, “Dr. Albrecht said that I was entitled to four more days of beans and bed here.”

“I believe that is right—I’d have to consult your card. Not that we throw people out even when their contract time is up if they are not ready.”

“I didn’t suppose that you did. But what are the rates on that room I had, as hospital room and board?”

“Eh? But our rooms are not for rent in that way. We aren’t a hospital; we simply maintain a recovery infirmary for our clients.”

“Yes, surely. But you must figure it, at least for cost accounting purposes.”

“Mmm . . . yes and no. The figures aren’t allocated on that basis. The subheads are depreciation, overhead, operation, reserves, diet kitchen, personnel, and so forth. I suppose I could make an estimate.”

“Uh, don’t bother. What would equivalent room and board in a hospital come to?”

“That’s a little out of my line. Still . . . well, you could call it about one hundred dollars per day, I suppose.”

“I had four days coming. Will you lend me four hundred dollars?”

He did not answer but spoke in a number code to his mechanical assistant. Then eight fifty-dollar bills were being counted into my hand. “Thanks,” I said sincerely as I tucked it away. “I’ll do my damndest to see that this does not stay on the books too long. Six per cent? Or is money tight?”

He shook his head. “It’s not a loan. Since you put it as you did, I canceled it against your unused time.”

“Huh? Now, see here, Mr. Doughty, I didn’t intend to twist your arm. Of course, I’m going to——”



"Please. I told my assistant to enter the charge when I directed it to pay you. Do you want to give our auditors headaches all for a fiddling four hundred dollars? I was prepared to loan you much more than that."

"Well— I can't argue it now. Say, Mr. Doughty, how much money is this? How are price levels now?"

"Mmm . . . that is a complex question."

"Just give me an idea? What does it cost to eat?"

"Food is quite reasonable. For ten dollars you can get a very satisfactory dinner . . . if you are careful to select moderate-priced restaurants."

I thanked him and left with a really warm feeling. Mr. Doughty reminded me of a paymaster I used to have in the Army. Paymasters come in only two sizes: one sort shows you where the book says that you can't have what you've got coming to you; the second sort digs through the book until he finds a paragraph that lets you have what you need even if you don't rate it.

Doughty was the second sort.

The sanctuary faced on the Wilshire Ways. There were benches in front of it and bushes and flowers. I sat down on a bench to take stock and to decide whether to go east or west. I had kept a stiff lip with Mr. Doughty but, honestly, I was badly shaken, even though I had the price of a week's meals in my jeans.

But the sun was warm and the drone of the Ways was pleasant and I was young (biologically at least) and I had two hands and my brain. Whistling "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," I opened the *Times* to the "Help Wanted" columns.

I resisted the impulse to look through "Professional—Engineers" and turned at once to "Unskilled."

That classification was darned short. I almost couldn't find it.

## 6

I got a job the second day, Friday, the fifteenth of December. I also had a mild run-in with the law and had repeated tangles with new ways of doing things, saying things, feeling about things. I discovered that "reorientation" by reading about it is like reading about sex—not the same thing.



I suppose I would have had less trouble if I had been set down in Omsk, or Santiago, or Djakarta. In going to a strange city in a strange land you *know* that the customs are going to be different, but in Great Los Angeles I subconsciously expected things to be unchanged even though I could see that they were changed. Of course thirty years is nothing; anybody takes that much change and more in a lifetime. But it makes a difference to take it in one bite.

Take one word I used all in innocence. A lady present was offended and only the fact that I was a Sleeper—which I hastily explained—kept her husband from giving me a mouthful of knuckles. I won't use the word here—oh yes, I will; why shouldn't I? I'm using it to explain something. Don't take my word for it that the word was in good usage when I was a kid; look it up in an old dictionary. Nobody scrawled it in chalk on sidewalks when I was a kid.

The word was "kink."

There were other words which I still do not use properly without stopping to think. Not taboo words necessarily, just ones with changed meanings. "Host" for example—"host" used to mean the man who took your coat and put it in the bedroom; it had nothing to do with the birth rate.

But I got along. The job I found was crushing new ground limousines so that they could be shipped back to Pittsburgh as scrap. Cadillacs, Chryslers, Eisenhowers, Lincolns—all sorts of great, big, new powerful turbobuggies without a kilometer on their clocks. Drive 'em between the jaws, then *crunch! smash! crash!*—scrap iron for blast furnaces.

It hurt me at first, since I was riding the Ways to work and didn't own so much as a gravJumper. I expressed my opinion of it and almost lost my job . . . until the shift boss remembered that I was a Sleeper and really didn't understand.

"It's a simple matter of economics, son. These are surplus cars the government has accepted as security against price-support loans. They're two years old now and they can never be sold . . . so the government junks them and sells them back to the steel industry. You can't run a blast furnace just on ore; you have to have scrap iron as well. You ought to know that even if you are a Sleeper. Matter of fact, with high-grade ore so scarce, there's more and more demand for scrap. The steel industry needs these cars."



"But why build them in the first place if they can't be sold? It seems wasteful."

"It just *seems* wasteful. You want to throw people out of work? You want to run down the standard of living?"

"Well, why not ship them abroad? It seems to me they could get more for them on the open market abroad than they are worth as scrap."

"What!—and ruin the export market? Besides, if we started dumping cars abroad we'd get everybody sore at us—Japan, France, Germany, Great Asia, everybody. What are you aiming to do? Start a war?" He sighed and went on in a fatherly tone. "You go down to the public library and draw out some books. You don't have any right to opinions on these things until you know something about them."

So I shut up. I didn't tell him that I was spending all my off time at the public library or at U.C.L.A.'s library; I had avoided admitting that I was, or used to be, an engineer—to claim that I was now an engineer would be too much like walking up to du Pont's and saying, "Sirrah, I am an alchymiste. Hast need of art such as mine?"

I raised the subject just once more because I noticed that very few of the price-support cars were really ready to run. The workmanship was sloppy and they often lacked essentials like instrument dials or air conditioners. But when one day I noticed from the way the teeth of the crusher came down on one that it lacked even a power plant, I spoke up about it.

The shift boss just stared at me. "Great jumping Jupiter, son, surely you don't expect them to put their best workmanship into cars that are just surplus? These cars had price-support loans against them before they ever came off the assembly line."

So that time I shut up and stayed shut. I had better stick to engineering; economics is too esoteric for me.

But I had plenty of time to think. The job I had was not really a "job" at all in my book; all the work was done by *Flexible Frank* in his various disguises. *Frank* and his brothers ran the crusher, moved the cars into place, hauled away the scrap, kept count, and weighed the loads; my job was to stand on a little platform (I wasn't allowed to sit) and hang onto a switch that could stop the whole operation if something went wrong. Nothing ever did, but I soon found that I was expected to spot at least one fail-



ure in automation each shift; stop the job, and send for a trouble crew.

Well, it paid twenty-one dollars a day and it kept me eating. First things first.

After social security, guild dues, income tax, defense tax, medical plan, and the welfare mutual fund I took home about sixteen of it. Mr. Doughty was wrong about a dinner costing ten dollars; you could get a very decent plate dinner for three if you did not insist on real meat, and I would defy anyone to tell whether a hamburger steak started life in a tank or out on the open range. With the stories going around about bootleg meat that might give you radiation poisoning I was perfectly happy with surrogates.

Where to live had been somewhat of a problem. Since Los Angeles had not been treated to the one-second slum-clearance plan in the Six Weeks War, an amazing number of refugees had gone there (I suppose I was one of them, although I hadn't thought of myself as such at the time) and apparently none of them had ever gone home, even those that had homes left to go back to. The city—if you can call Great Los Angeles a city; it is more of a condition—had been choked when I went to sleep; now it was as jammed as a lady's purse. It may have been a mistake to get rid of the smog; back in the '60s a few people used to leave each year because of sinusitis.

Now apparently nobody left, ever.

The day I checked out of the sanctuary I had had several things on my mind, principally (1) find a job, (2) find a place to sleep, (3) catch up in engineering, (4) find Ricky, (5) get back into engineering—on my own if humanly possible, (6) find Belle and Miles and settle their hash—without going to jail for it, and (7) a slug of things, like looking up the original patent on *Eager Beaver* and checking my strong hunch that it was really *Flexible Frank* (not that it mattered now, just curiosity), and looking up the corporate history of Hired Girl, Inc., etc., etc.

I have listed the above in order of priority, as I had found out years ago (through almost flunking my freshman year in engineering) that if you didn't use priorities, when the music stopped you were left standing. Some of these priorities ran concurrently, of course; I expected to search out Ricky and probably Belle & Co. as well, while I was boning engineering. But first things first and second things second; finding a job came even ahead of hunting



for a sack because dollars are the key to everything else . . . when you haven't got them.

After getting turned down six times in town I had chased an ad clear out to San Bernardino Borough, only to get there ten minutes too late. I should have rented a flop at once; instead I played it real smart and went back downtown, intending to find a room, then get up very early and be first in line for some job listed in the early edition.

How was I to know? I got my name on four rooming-house waiting lists and wound up in the park. I stayed there, walking to keep warm, until almost midnight, then gave up—Great Los Angeles winters are subtropical only if you accent the "sub." I then took refuge in a station of Wilshire Ways . . . and about two in the morning they rounded me up with the rest of the vagrants.

Jails have improved. This one was warm and I think they required the cockroaches to wipe their feet.

I was charged with barracking. The judge was a young fellow who didn't even look up from his newspaper but simply said, "These all first offenders?"

"Yes, your honor."

"Thirty days, or take a labor-company parole. Next."

They started to march us out but I didn't budge. "Just a minute, Judge."

"Eh? Something troubling you? Are you guilty or not guilty?"

"Uh, I really don't know because I don't know what it is I have done. You see—"

"Do you want a public defender? If you do you can be locked up until one can handle your case. I understand they are running about six days late right now . . . but it's your privilege."

"Uh, I still don't know. Maybe what I want is a labor-company parole, though I'm not sure what it is. What I really want is some advice from the Court, if the Court pleases."

The judge said to the bailiff, "Take the others out." He turned back to me. "Spill it. But I'll warrant you won't like my advice. I've been on this job long enough to have heard every phony story and to have acquired a deep disgust toward most of them."

"Yes, sir. Mine isn't phony; it's easily checked. You see, I just got out of the Long Sleep yesterday and—"

But he did look disgusted. "One of those, eh? I've often wondered what made our grandparents think they could dump their



riffraff on us. The last thing on earth this city needs is more people . . . especially ones who couldn't get along in their own time. I wish I could boot you back to whatever year you came from with a message to everybody there that the future they're dreaming about is not, repeat *not*, paved with gold." He sighed. "But it wouldn't do any good, I'm sure. Well, what do you expect me to do? Give you another chance? Then have you pop up here again a week from now?"

"Judge, I don't think I'm likely to. I've got enough money to live until I find a job and—"

"Eh? If you've got money, what were you doing barracking?"

"Judge, I don't even know what that word means." This time he let me explain. When I came to how I had been swindled by Master Insurance Company his whole manner changed.

"Those swine! My mother got taken by them after she had paid premiums for twenty years. Why didn't you tell me this in the first place?" He took out a card, wrote something on it, and said, "Take this to the hiring office at the Surplus & Salvage Authority. If you don't get a job come back and see me this afternoon. But no more barracking. Not only does it breed crime and vice, but you yourself are running a terrible risk of meeting up with a zombie recruiter."

That's how I got a job smashing up brand-new ground cars. But I still think I made no mistake in logic in deciding to job-hunt first. Anywhere is home to the man with a fat bank account—the cops leave him alone.

I found a decent room, too, within my budget, in a part of West Los Angeles which had not yet been changed over to New Plan. I think it had formerly been a coat closet.

I would not want anyone to think I disliked the year 2000, as compared with 1970. I liked it and I liked 2001 when it rolled around a couple of weeks after they wakened me. In spite of recurrent spasms of almost unbearable homesickness, I thought that Great Los Angeles at the dawn of the Third Millennium was odds-on the most wonderful place I had ever seen. It was fast and clean and very exciting, even if it was too crowded . . . and even that was being coped with on a mammoth, venturesome scale. The New Plan parts of town were a joy to an engineer's heart. If the city government had had the sovereign power to stop immigra-



tion for ten years, they could have licked the housing problem. Since they did not have that power, they just had to do their best with the swarms that kept rolling over the Sierras—and their best was spectacular beyond belief and even the failures were colossal.

It was worth sleeping thirty years just to wake up in a time when they had licked the common cold and nobody had a post-nasal drip. That meant more to me than the research colony on Venus.

Two things impressed me most, one big, one little. The big one was NullGrav, of course. Back in 1970 I had known about the Babson Institute gravitation research but I had not expected anything to come of it—and nothing had; the basic field theory on which NullGrav is based was developed at the University of Edinburgh. But I had been taught in school that gravitation was something that nobody could ever do anything about, because it was inherent in the very shape of space.

So they changed the shape of space, naturally. Only temporarily and locally, to be sure, but that's all that's needed in moving a heavy object. It still has to stay in field relation with Mother Terra, so it's useless for space ships—or it is in 2001; I've quit making bets about the future. I learned that to make a lift it was still necessary to expend power to overcome the gravity potential, and conversely, to lower something you had to have a power pack to store all those foot-pounds in, or something would go Phzzt!-*Spung!* But just to transport something horizontally, say from San Francisco to Great Los Angeles, just lift it once, then float along, no power at all, like an ice skater riding a long edge.

Lovely!

I tried to study the theory of it, but the math starts in where tensor calculus leaves off; it's not for me. But an engineer is rarely a mathematical physicist and he does not have to be; he simply has to savvy the skinny of a thing well enough to know what it can do in practical applications—know the working parameters. I could learn those.

The “little thing” I mentioned was the changes in female styles made possible by the Sticktite fabrics. I was not startled by mere skin on bathing beaches; you could see that coming in 1970. But the weird things that the ladies could do with Sticktite made my jaw sag.



My grandpappy was born in 1890; I suppose that some of the sights in 1970 would have affected him the same way.

But I liked the fast new world and would have been happy in it if I had not been so bitterly lonely so much of the time. I was out of joint. There were times (in the middle of the night, usually) when I would gladly have swapped it all for one beat-up tomcat, or for a chance to spend an afternoon taking little Ricky to the zoo . . . or for the comradeship Miles and I had shared when all we had was hard work and hope.

It was still early in 2001 and I wasn't halfway caught up on my homework, when I began to itch to leave my feather-bedded job and get back to the old drawing board. There were so many, many things possible under current art which had been impossible in 1970; I wanted to get busy and design a few dozen.

For example I had expected that there would be automatic secretaries in use—I mean a machine you could dictate to and get back a business letter, spelling, punctuation, and format all perfect, without a human being in the sequence. But there weren't any. Oh, somebody had invented a machine which could type, but it was suited only to a phonetic language like Esperanto and was useless in a language in which you could say: "Though the tough cough and hiccough plough him through."

People won't give up the illogicalities of English to suit the convenience of an inventor. Mohammed must go to the mountain.

If a high-school girl could sort out the cockeyed spelling of English and usually type the right word, how could a machine be taught to do it?

"Impossible" was the usual answer. It was supposed to require human judgment and understanding.

But an invention is something that was "impossible" up to then—that's why governments grant patents.

With memory tubes and the miniaturization now possible—I had been right about the importance of gold as an engineering material—with those two things it would be easy to pack a hundred thousand sound codes into a cubic foot . . . in other words, to sound-key every word in a Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. But that was unnecessary; ten thousand would be ample. Who expects a stenographer to field a word like "kourbash" or "pyrophyllite"? You spell such words for her if you must use them. Okay, we code the machine to accept spelling when necessary. We sound-code for



punctuation . . . and for various formats . . . and to look up addresses in a file . . . and for how many copies . . . and routing . . . and provide at least a thousand blank word-codings for special vocabulary used in a business or profession—and make it so that the owner-client could put those special words in himself, spell a word like “stenobenthic” with the memory key depressed and never have to spell it again.

All simple. Just a matter of hooking together gadgets already on the market, then smoothing it into a production model.

The real hitch was homonyms. *Dictation Daisy* wouldn't even slow up over that “tough cough and hiccough” sentence because each of those words carries a different sound. But choices like “they're” and “their,” “right” and “write” would give her trouble.

Did the L. A. Public Library have a dictionary of English homonyms? It did . . . and I began counting the unavoidable homonym pairs and trying to figure how many of these could be handled by information theory through context statistics and how many would require special coding.

I began to get jittery with frustration. Not only was I wasting thirty hours a week on an utterly useless job, but also I could not do real engineering in a public library. I needed a drafting room, a shop where I could smooth out the bugs, trade catalogues, professional journals, calculating machines, and all the rest.

I decided that I would just have to get at least a subprofessional job. I wasn't silly enough to think that I was an engineer again; there was too much art I had not yet soaked up—repeatedly I had thought of ways to do something, using something new that I had learned, only to find out at the library that somebody had solved the same problem, neater, better, and cheaper than my own first stab at it and ten or fifteen years earlier.

I needed to get into an engineering office and let these new things soak in through my skin. I had hopes that I could land a job as a junior draftsman.

I knew that they were using powered semi-automatic drafting machines now; I had seen pictures of them even though I had not had one under my hands. But I had a hunch that I could learn to play one in twenty minutes, given the chance, for they were remarkably like an idea I had once had myself: a machine that bore the same relation to the old-fashioned drawing-board-and-T-square method that a typewriter did to writing in longhand. I had



worked it all out in my head, how you could put straight lines or curves anywhere on an easel just by punching keys.

However, in this case I was just as sure that my idea had not been stolen as I was certain that *Flexible Frank* had been stolen, because my drafting machine had never existed except in my head. Somebody had had the same idea and had developed it logically the same way. When it's time to railroad, people start railroading.

The Aladdin people, the same firm that made *Eager Beaver*, made one of the best drawing machines, *Drafting Dan*. I dipped into my savings, bought a better suit of clothes and a secondhand brief case, stuffed the latter with newspapers, and presented myself at the Aladdin salesrooms with a view to "buying" one. I asked for a demonstration.

Then, when I got close to a model of *Drafting Dan*, I had a most upsetting experience. *Déjà vu*, the psychologists call it—"I have been here before." The damned thing had been developed in precisely the fashion in which I would have developed it, had I had time to do so . . . instead of being kidnaped into the Long Sleep.

Don't ask me exactly why I felt that way. A man knows his own style of work. An art critic will say that a painting is a Rubens or a Rembrandt by the brushwork, the treatment of light, the composition, the choice of pigment, a dozen things. Engineering is not science, it is an art, and there is always a wide range of choices in how to solve engineering problems. An engineering designer "signs" his work by those choices just as surely as a painter does.

*Drafting Dan* had the flavor of my own technique so strongly that I was quite disturbed by it. I began to wonder if there wasn't something to telepathy after all.

I was careful to get the number of its first patent. In the state I was in I wasn't surprised to see that the date on the first one was 1970. I resolved to find out who had invented it. It might have been one of my own teachers, from whom I had picked up some of my style. Or it might be an engineer with whom I had once worked.

The inventor might still be alive. If so, I'd look him up someday . . . get acquainted with this man whose mind worked just like mine.

But I managed to pull myself together and let the salesman show me how to work it. He hardly need have bothered; *Drafting*



*Dan* and I were made for each other. In ten minutes I could play it better than he could. At last I reluctantly quit making pretty pictures with it, got list price, discounts, service arrangements, and so forth, then left saying that I would call him, just as he was ready to get my signature on the dotted line. It was a dirty trick, but all I cost him was an hour's time.

From there I went to the Hired Girl main factory and applied for a job.

I knew that Belle and Miles were no longer with Hired Girl, Inc. In what time I could spare between my job and the compelling necessity to catch up in engineering I had been searching for Belle and Miles and most especially for Ricky. None of the three was listed in the Great Los Angeles telephone system, nor for that matter anywhere in the United States, for I had paid to have an "information" search made at the national office in Cleveland. A quadruple fee, it was, as I had had Belle searched for under both "Gentry" and "Darkin."

I had the same luck with the Register of Voters for Los Angeles County.

Hired Girl, Inc., in a letter from a seventeenth vice-president in charge of foolish questions, admitted cautiously that they had once had officers by those names thirty years ago but they were unable to help me now.

Picking up a trail thirty years cold is no job for an amateur with little time and less money. I did not have their fingerprints, or I might have tried the FBI. I didn't know their social-security numbers. My Country 'Tis of Thee had never succumbed to police-state nonsense, so there was no bureau certain to have a dossier on each citizen, nor was I in a position to tap such a file even if there had been.

Perhaps a detective agency, lavishly subsidized, could have dug through utilities' records, newspaper files, and God knows what, and traced them down. But I didn't have the lavish subsidy, nor the talent and time to do it myself.

I finally gave up on Miles and Belle while promising myself that I would, as quickly as I could afford it, put professionals to tracing Ricky. I had already determined that she held no Hired Girl stock and I had written to the Bank of America to see if they held, or ever had held, a trust for her. I got back a form letter informing me that such things were confidential, so I had written again, say-



ing that I was a Sleeper and she was my only surviving relative. That time I got a nice letter, signed by one of the trust officers and saying that he regretted that information concerning trust beneficiaries could not be divulged even to one in my exceptional circumstances, but he felt justified in giving me the negative information that the bank had not at any time through any of its branches held a trust in favor of one Frederica Virginia Gentry.

That seemed to settle one thing. Somehow those birds had managed to get the stock away from little Ricky. My assignment of the stock would have had to go through the Bank of America, the way I had written it. But it had not. Poor Ricky! We had both been robbed.

I made one more stab at it. The records office of the Superintendent of Instruction in Mojave did have record of a grade-school pupil named Frederica Virginia Gentry . . . but the named pupil had taken a withdrawal transcript in 1971. Further deponent sayeth not.

It was some consolation to know that somebody somewhere admitted that Ricky had ever existed. But she might have taken that transcript to any of many, many thousand public schools in the United States. How long would it take to write to each of them? And were their records so arranged as to permit them to answer, even supposing they were willing?

In a quarter of a billion people one little girl can drop out of sight like a pebble in the ocean.

But the failure of my search did leave me free to seek a job with Hired Girl, Inc., now that I knew Miles and Belle were not running it. I could have tried any of a hundred automation firms, but Hired Girl and Aladdin were the big names in appliance automatons, as important in their own field as Ford and General Motors had been in the heyday of the ground automobile. I picked Hired Girl partly for sentimental reasons; I wanted to see what my old outfit had grown into.

On Monday, 5 March, 2001, I went to their employment office, got into the line for white-collar help, filled out a dozen forms having nothing to do with engineering and one that did . . . and was told don't-call-us-we'll-call-you.

I hung around and managed to bull myself in to see an assistant hiring flunky. He reluctantly looked over the one form that meant



anything and told me that my engineering degree meant nothing, since there had been a thirty-year lapse when I had not used my skill.

I pointed out that I had been a Sleeper.

"That makes it even worse. In any case, we don't hire people over forty-five."

"But I'm *not* forty-five. I'm only thirty."

"You were born in 1940. Sorry."

"What am I supposed to do? Shoot myself?"

He shrugged. "If I were you, I'd apply for an old-age pension."

I got out quickly before I gave him some advice. Then I walked three quarters of a mile around to the front entrance and went in. The general manager's name was Curtis; I asked for him.

I got past the first two layers simply by insisting that I had business with him. Hired Girl, Inc., did not use their own automatons as receptionists; they used real flesh and blood. Eventually I reached a place several stories up and (I judged) about two doors from the boss, and here I encountered a firm pass-gauge type who insisted on knowing my business.

I looked around. It was a largish office with about forty real people in it, as well as a lot of machines. She said sharply, "Well? State your business and I'll check with Mr. Curtis's appointment secretary."

I said loudly, making sure that everybody heard it, "I want to know what he's going to do about my wife!"

Sixty seconds later I was in his private office. He looked up. "Well? What the devil is this nonsense?"

It took half an hour and some old records to convince him that I did not have a wife and that I actually was the founder of the firm. Then things got chummy over drinks and cigars and I met the sales manager and the chief engineer and other heads of departments. "We thought you were dead," Curtis told me. "In fact, the company's official history says that you are."

"Just a rumor. Some other D. B. Davis."

The sales manager, Jack Galloway, said suddenly, "What are you doing now, Mr. Davis?"

"Not much. I've, uh, been in the automobile business. But I'm resigning. Why?"

"Why? Isn't it obvious?" He swung around toward the chief engineer, Mr. McBee. "Hear that, Mac? All you engineers are



alike; you wouldn't know a sales angle if it came up and kissed you. 'Why?' Mr. Davis. Because you're sales copy, that's why! Because you're romance. Founder of Firm Comes Back from Grave to Visit Brain Child. Inventor of the First Robot Servant Views Fruits of His Genius."

I said hastily, "Now wait a minute—I'm not an advertising model nor a grabbie star. I like my privacy. I didn't come here for that; I came here for a job . . . in engineering."

Mr. McBee's eyebrows went up but he said nothing.

We wrangled for a while. Galloway tried to tell me that it was my simple duty to the firm I had founded. Mr. McBee said little, but it was obvious that he did not think I would be any addition to his department—at one point he asked me what I knew about designing solid circuits. I had to admit that my only knowledge of them was from a little reading of non-classified publications.

Curtis finally suggested a compromise. "See here, Mr. Davis, you obviously occupy a very special position. One might say that you founded not merely this firm but the whole industry. Nevertheless, as Mr. McBee has hinted, the industry has moved on since the year you took the Long Sleep. Suppose we put you on the staff with the title of . . . uh, 'Research Engineer Emeritus.'"

I hesitated. "What would that mean?"

"Whatever you made it mean. However, I tell you frankly that you would be expected to co-operate with Mr. Galloway. We not only make these things, we have to sell them."

"Uh, would I have a chance to do any engineering?"

"That's up to you. You'd have facilities and you could do what you wished."

"Shop facilities?"

Curtis looked at McBee. The chief engineer answered, "Certainly, certainly . . . within reason, of course." He had slipped so far into Glasgow speech that I could hardly understand him.

Galloway said briskly, "That's settled. May I be excused, B.J.? Don't go away, Mr. Davis—we're going to get a picture of you with the very first model of *Hired Girl*."

And he did. I was glad to see her . . . the very model I had put together with my own pinkies and lots of sweat. I wanted to see if she still worked, but McBee wouldn't let me start her up—I don't think he really believed that I knew how she worked.



I had a good time at Hired Girl all through March and April. I had all the professional tools I could want, technical journals, the indispensable trade catalogues, a practical library, a *Drafting Dan* (Hired Girl did not make a drafting machine themselves, so they used the best on the market, which was Aladdin's), and the shop-talk of professionals . . . music to my ears!

I got acquainted especially with Chuck Freudenberg, components assistant chief engineer. For my money Chuck was the only real engineer there; the rest were overeducated slipstick mechanics . . . including McBee, for the chief engineer was, I thought, a clear proof that it took more than a degree and a Scottish accent to make an engineer. After we got better acquainted Chuck admitted that he felt the same way. "Mac doesn't really like anything new; he would rather do things the way his grandpa did on the bonnie banks of the Clyde."

"What's he doing in this job?"

Freudenberg did not know the details, but it seemed that the present firm had been a manufacturing company which had simply rented the patents (my patents) from Hired Girl, Inc. Then about twenty years ago there had been one of those tax-saving mergers, with Hired Girl stock swapped for stock in the manufacturing firm and the new firm taking the name of the one that I had founded. Chuck thought that McBee had been hired at that time. "He's got a piece of it, I think."

Chuck and I used to sit over beers in the evening and discuss engineering, what the company needed, and the whichness of what. His original interest in me had been that I was a Sleeper. Too many people, I had found, had a queasy interest in Sleepers (as if we were freaks) and I avoided letting people know that I was one. But Chuck was fascinated by the time jump itself and his interest was a healthy one in what the world had been like before he was born, as recalled by a man who literally remembered it as "only yesterday."

In return he was willing to criticize the new gadgets that were always boiling up in my head, and set me straight when I (as I did repeatedly) would rough out something that was old hat . . . in 2001 A.D. Under his friendly guidance I was becoming a modern engineer, catching up fast.

But when I outlined to him one April evening my autosecretary



idea he said slowly, "Dan, have you done work on this on company time?"

"Huh? No, not really. Why?"

"How does your contract read?"

"What? I don't have one." Curtis had put me on the payroll and Galloway had taken pictures of me and had a ghost writer asking me silly questions; that was all.

"Mmm . . . pal, I wouldn't do anything about this until you are sure where you stand. This is really new. And I think you can make it work."

"I hadn't worried about that angle."

"Put it away for a while. You know the shape the company is in. It's making money and we put out good products. But the only new items we've brought out in five years are ones we've acquired by license. I can't get anything new past Mac. But you can bypass Mac and take this to the big boss. So don't . . . unless you want to hand it over to the company just for your salary check."

I took his advice. I continued to design but I burned any drawings I thought were good—I didn't need them once I had them in my head. I didn't feel guilty about it; they hadn't hired me as an engineer, they were paying me to be a show-window dummy for Galloway. When my advertising value was sucked dry, they would give me a month's pay and a vote of thanks and let me go.

But by then I'd be a real engineer again and able to open my own office. If Chuck wanted to take a flyer I'd take him with me.

Instead of handing my story to the newspapers, Jack Galloway played it slow for the national magazines; he wanted *Life* to do a spread, tying it in with the one they had done a third of a century earlier on the first production model of *Hired Girl*. *Life* did not rise to the bait but he did manage to plant it several other places that spring, tying it in with display advertising.

I thought of growing a beard. Then I realized that no one recognized me and would not have cared if they had.

I got a certain amount of crank mail, including one letter from a man who promised me that I would burn eternally in hell for defying God's plan for my life. I chucked it, while thinking that if God had really opposed what had happened to me, He should never have made cold sleep possible. Otherwise I wasn't bothered.

But I did get a phone call, on Thursday, 3 May, 2001. "Mrs. Schultz is on the line, sir. Will you take the call?"



Schultz? Damnation, I had promised Doughty the last time I had called him that I would take care of that. But I had put it off because I did not want to; I was almost sure it was one of those screwballs who pursued Sleepers and asked them personal questions.

But she had called several times, Doughty had told me, since I had checked out in December. In accordance with the policy of the sanctuary they had refused to give her my address, agreeing merely to pass along messages.

Well, I owed it to Doughty to shut her up. "Put her on."

"Is this Danny Davis?" My office phone had no screen; she could not see me.

"Speaking. Your name is Schultz?"

"Oh, Danny darling, it's so *good* to hear your voice!"

I didn't answer right away. She went on, "Don't you *know* me?"

I knew her, all right. It was Belle Gentry.

## 7

I made a date with her.

My first impulse had been to tell her to go to hell and switch off. I had long since realized that revenge was childish; revenge would not bring Pete back and fitting revenge would simply land me in jail. I had hardly thought about Belle and Miles since I had quit looking for them.

But Belle almost certainly knew where Ricky was. So I made a date.

She wanted me to take her to dinner, but I would not do that. I'm not fussy about fine points of etiquette. But eating is something you do only with friends; I would see her but I had no intention of eating or drinking with her. I got her address and told her I would be there that evening at eight.

It was a cheap rental, a walk-up flat in a part of town (lower La Brea) not yet converted to New Plan. Before I buzzed her door I knew that she had not hung onto what she had bilked me out of, or she would not have been living there.



And when I saw her I realized that revenge was much too late; she and the years had managed it for me.

Belle was not less than fifty-three by the age she had claimed, and probably closer to sixty in fact. Between geriatrics and endocrinology a woman who cared to take the trouble could stay looking thirty for at least thirty extra years, and lots of them did. There were grabbie stars who boasted of being grandmothers while still playing ingénue leads.

Belle had not taken the trouble.

She was fat and shrill and kittenish. It was evident that she still considered her body her principal asset, for she was dressed in a Sticktite negligee which, while showing much too much of her, also showed that she was female, mammalian, overfed, and underexercised.

She was not aware of it. That once-keen brain was fuzzy; all that was left was her conceit and her overpowering confidence in herself. She threw herself on me with squeals of joy and came close to kissing me before I could unwind her.

I pushed her wrists back. "Take it easy, Belle."

"But, darling! I'm so happy—so excited—and so *thrilled* to see you!"

"I'll bet." I had gone there resolved to keep my temper . . . just find out what I wanted to know and get out. But I was finding it difficult. "Remember how you saw me last? Drugged to my eyebrows so that you could stuff me into cold sleep."

She looked puzzled and hurt. "But, sweetheart, we only did it for your own good! You were *so* ill."

I think she believed it. "Okay, okay. Where's Miles? You're Mrs. Schultz now?"

Her eyes grew wide. "Didn't you *know*?"

"Know what?"

"Poor Miles . . . poor, *dear* Miles. He lived less than two years, Danny boy, after you left us." Her expression changed suddenly. "The frallup cheated me!"

"That's too bad." I wondered how he had died. Did he fall or was he pushed? Arsenic soup? I decided to stick to the main issue before she jumped the track completely. "What became of Ricky?"

"Ricky?"

"Miles's little girl. Frederica."



"Oh, that horrible little brat! How should I know? She went to live with her grandmother."

"Where? And what was her grandmother's name?"

"Where? Tucson—or Yuma—or some place dull like that. It might have been Indio. Darling, I don't want to talk about that impossible child—I want to talk about *us*."

"In a moment. What was her grandmother's name?"

"Danny boy, you're being very tiresome. Why in the world should I remember something like that?"

"What was it?"

"Oh, Hanolon . . . or Haney . . . Heinz. Or it might have been Hinckley. Don't be dull, dear. Let's have a drink. Let's drink a toast to our happy reunion."

I shook my head. "I don't use the stuff." This was almost true. Having discovered that it was an unreliable friend in a crisis, I usually limited myself to a beer with Chuck Freudenberg.

"How very dull, dearest. You won't mind if I have one." She was already pouring it—straight gin, the lonely girl's friend. But before she downed it she picked up a plastic pill bottle and rolled two capsules into her palm. "Have one?"

I recognized the striped casing—euphorion. It was supposed to be non-toxic and non-habit-forming, but opinions differed. There was agitation to class it with morphine and the barbiturates. "Thanks. I'm happy now."

"How nice." She took both of them, chased them with gin. I decided if I was to learn anything at all I had better talk fast; soon she would be nothing but giggles.

I took her arm and sat her down on her couch, then sat down across from her. "Belle, tell me about yourself. Bring me up to date. How did you and Miles make out with the Mannix people?"

"Uh? But we didn't." She suddenly flared up. "That was *your* fault!"

"Huh? My fault? I wasn't even there."

"Of course it was *your* fault. That monstrous thing you built out of an old wheel chair . . . *that* was what they wanted. And then it was gone."

"Gone? Where was it?"

She peered at me with piggy, suspicious eyes. "You ought to know. You took it."

"Me? Belle, are you crazy? I couldn't take anything. I was fro-



zen stiff, in cold sleep. Where was it? And when did it disappear?" It fitted in with my own notions that somebody must have swiped *Flexible Frank*, if Belle and Miles had not made use of him. But out of all the billions on the globe, I was the one who certainly had not. I had not seen *Frank* since that disastrous night when they had outvoted me. "Tell me about it, Belle. Where was it? And what made you think *I* took it?"

"It had to be you. Nobody else knew it was important. That pile of junk! I *told* Miles not to put it in the garage."

"But if somebody did swipe it, I doubt if they could make it work. You still had all the notes and instructions and drawings."

"No, we didn't either. Miles, the fool, had stuffed them all inside it the night we had to move it to protect it."

I did not fuss about the word "protect." Instead I was about to say that he couldn't possibly have stuffed several pounds of paper into *Flexible Frank*; he was already stuffed like a goose—when I remembered that I had built a temporary shelf across the bottom of his wheel-chair base to hold tools while I worked on him. A man in a hurry might very well have emptied my working files into that space.

No matter. The crime, or crimes, had been committed thirty years ago. I wanted to find out how Hired Girl, Inc., had slipped away from them. "After the Mannix deal fell through what did you do with the company?"

"We ran it, of course. Then when Jake quit us Miles said we had to shut down. Miles was a weakling . . . and I never liked that Jake Schmidt. Sneaky. Always asking why you had quit . . . as if we could have stopped you! I wanted us to hire a *good* foreman and keep going. The company would have been worth more. But Miles insisted."

"What happened then?"

"Why, then we licensed to Geary Manufacturing, of course. You know that; you're working there now."

I did know that; the full corporate name of Hired Girl was now "Hired Girl Appliances and Geary Manufacturing, Inc."—even though the signs read simply "Hired Girl." I seemed to have found out all I needed to know that this flabby old wreck could tell me.

But I was curious on another point. "You two sold your stock after you licensed to Geary?"



"Huh? Whatever put that silly notion in your head?" Her expression broke and she began to blubber, pawing feebly for a handkerchief, then giving up and letting the tears go. "He cheated me! He cheated me! The dirty shiker *cheated* me . . . he kinked me out of it." She snuffled and added meditatively, "You all cheated me . . . and you were the worst of the lot, Danny boy. After I had been so good to you." She started to bawl again.

I decided that euphorion wasn't worth whatever it cost. Or maybe she enjoyed crying. "How did he cheat you, Belle?"

"What? Why, *you* know. He left it all to that dirty brat of his . . . after all that he had promised me . . . after I nursed him when he hurt so. And she *wasn't even his own daughter*. That proves it."

It was the first good news I had had all evening. Apparently Ricky had received one good break, even if they had grabbed my stock away from her earlier. So I got back to the main point. "Belle, what was Ricky's grandmother's name? And where did they live?"

"Where did *who* live?"

"Ricky's grandmother."

"Who's Ricky?"

"Miles's daughter. Try to think, Belle. It's important."

That set her off. She pointed a finger at me and shrilled, "I know *you*. You were in *love* with her, that's what. That dirty little sneak . . . her and that horrible cat."

I felt a burst of anger at the mention of Pete. But I tried to suppress it. I simply grabbed her shoulders and shook her a little. "Brace up, Belle. I want to know just one thing. Where did they live? How did Miles address letters when he wrote to them?"

She kicked at me. "I won't even talk to you! You've been perfectly stinking ever since you got here." Then she appeared to sober almost instantly and said quietly, "I don't know. The grandmother's name was Haneker, or something like that. I only saw her once, in court, when they came to see about the will."

"When was that?"

"Right after Miles died, of course."

"When did Miles die, Belle?"

She switched again. "You want to know too much. You're as bad as the sheriffs . . . questions, questions, questions!" Then she looked up and said pleadingly, "Let's forget everything and just be



ourselves. There's just you and me now, dear . . . and we still have our lives ahead of us. A woman isn't old at thirty-nine . . . Schultzie said I was the youngest thing he ever saw—and that old goat had seen plenty, let me tell you! We could be so happy, dear. We——”

I had had all I could stand, even to play detective. “I’ve got to go, Belle.”

“What, dear? Why, it’s early . . . and we’ve got all night ahead of us. I thought——”

“I don’t care what you thought. I’ve got to leave right now.”

“Oh dear! Such a pity. When will I see you again? Tomorrow? I’m terribly busy but I’ll break my engagements and——”

“I won’t be seeing you again, Belle.” I left.

I never did see her again.

As soon as I was home I took a hot bath, scrubbing hard. Then I sat down and tried to add up what I had found out, if anything. Belle seemed to think that Ricky’s grandmother’s name began with an “H”—if Belle’s maunderings meant anything at all, a matter highly doubtful—and that they had lived in one of the desert towns in Arizona, or possibly California. Well, perhaps professional skip-tracers could make something of that.

Or maybe not. In any case it would be tedious and expensive; I’d have to wait until I could afford it.

Did I know anything else that signified?

Miles had died (so Belle said) around 1972. If he had died in this county I ought to be able to find the date in a couple of hours of searching, and after that I ought to be able to track down the hearing on his will . . . if there had been one, as Belle had implied. Through that I might be able to find out where Ricky had lived then. If courts kept such records. (I didn’t know.) If I had gained anything by cutting the lapse down to twenty-eight years and locating the town she had lived in that long ago.

If there was any point in looking for a woman now forty-one and almost certainly married and with a family. The jumbled ruin that had once been Belle Darkin had shaken me; I was beginning to realize what thirty years could mean. Not that I feared that Ricky grown up would be anything but gracious and good . . . but would she even remember me? Oh, I did not think she would have forgotten me entirely, but wasn’t it likely that I would be



just a faceless person, the man she had sometimes called "Uncle Danny" and who had that nice cat?

Wasn't I, in my own way, living in a fantasy of the past quite as much as Belle was?

Oh well, it couldn't hurt to try again to find her. At the least, we could exchange Christmas cards each year. Her husband could not very well object to that.

## 8

The next morning was Friday, the fourth of May. Instead of going into the office I went down to the county Hall of Records. They were moving everything and told me to come back next month, so I went to the office of the *Times* and got a crick in my neck from a microscanner. But I did find out that if Miles had died any date between twelve and thirty-six months after I had been tucked in the freezer, he had not done so in Los Angeles County—if the death notices were correct.

Of course there was no law requiring him to die in L.A. County. You can die anyplace. They've never managed to regulate that.

Perhaps Sacramento had consolidated state records. I decided I would have to check someday, thanked the *Times* librarian, went out to lunch, and eventually got back to Hired Girl, Inc.

There were two phone calls and a note waiting, all from Belle. I got as far in the note as "Dearest Dan," tore it up and told the desk not to accept any calls for me from Mrs. Schultz. Then I went over to the accounting office and asked the chief accountant if there was any way to check up on past ownership of a retired stock issue. He said he would try and I gave him the numbers, from memory, of the original Hired Girl stock I had once held. It took no feat of memory; we had issued exactly one thousand shares to start with and I had held the first five hundred and ten, and Belle's "engagement present" had come off the front end.

I went back to my cubbyhole and found McBee waiting for me. "Where have you been?" he wanted to know.

"Out and around. Why?"



"That's hardly a sufficient answer. Mr. Galloway was in twice today looking for you. I was forced to tell him I did not know where you were."

"Oh, for Pete's sake! If Galloway wants me he'll find me eventually. If he spent half the time peddling the merchandise on its merits that he does trying to think up cute new angles, the firm would be better off." Galloway was beginning to annoy me. He was supposed to be in charge of selling, but it seemed to me that he concentrated on kibitzing the advertising agency that handled our account. But I'm prejudiced; engineering is the only part that interests me. All the rest strikes me as paper shuffling, mere overhead.

I knew what Galloway wanted me for and, to tell the truth, I had been dragging my feet. He wanted to dress me up in 1900 costumes and take pictures. I had told him that he could take all the pix he wanted of me in 1970 costumes, but that 1900 was twelve years before my father was born. He said nobody would know the difference, so I told him what the fortuneteller told the cop. He said I didn't have the right attitude.

These people who deal in fancification to fool the public think nobody can read and write but themselves.

McBee said, "You don't have the right attitude, Mr. Davis."

"So? I'm sorry."

"You're in an odd position. You are charged to my department, but I'm supposed to make you available to advertising and sales when they need you. From here on I think you had better use the time clock like everyone else . . . and you had better check with me whenever you leave the office during working hours. Please see to it."

I counted to ten slowly, using binary notation. "Mac, do *you* use the time clock?"

"Eh? Of course not. I'm the chief engineer."

"So you are. It says so right over on that door. But see here, Mac, I was chief engineer of this bolt bin before you started to shave. Do you really think that I am going to knuckle under to a time clock?"

He turned red. "Possibly not. But I can tell you this: if you don't, you won't draw your check."

"So? You didn't hire me; you can't fire me."

"Mmm . . . we'll see. I can at least transfer you out of my de-



partment and over to advertising where you belong. If you belong anywhere." He glanced at my drafting machine. "You certainly aren't producing anything here. I don't fancy having that expensive machine tied up any longer." He nodded briskly. "Good day."

I followed him out. An *Office Boy* rolled in and placed a large envelope in my basket, but I did not wait to see what it was; I went down to the staff coffee bar and fumed. Like a lot of other triple-ought-gauge minds, Mac thought creative work could be done by the numbers. No wonder the old firm hadn't produced anything new for years.

Well, to hell with him. I hadn't planned to stick around much longer anyway.

An hour or so later I wandered back up and found an interoffice mail envelope in my basket, I opened it, thinking that Mac had decided to throw the switch on me at once.

But it was from accounting; it read:

*Dear Mr. Davis:*

*Re: the stock you inquired about.*

*Dividends on the larger block were paid from first quarter 1971 to second quarter 1980 on the original shares, to a trust held in favor of a party named Heinicke. Our reorganization took place in 1980 and the abstract at hand is somewhat obscure, but it appears that the equivalent shares (after reorganization) were sold to Cosmopolitan Insurance Group, which still holds them. Regarding the smaller block of stock, it was held (as you suggested) by Belle D. Gentry until 1972, when it was assigned to Sierra Acceptances Corporation, who broke it up and sold it piecemeal "over the counter." The exact subsequent history of each share and its equivalent after reorganization could be traced if needed, but more time would be required.*

*If this department can be of any further assistance to you, please feel free to call on us.*

*Y. E. Reuther, Ch. Acct.*

I called Reuther and thanked him and told him that I had all I wanted. I knew now that my assignment to Ricky had never been effective. Since the transfer of my stock that did show in the record was clearly fraudulent, the deal whiffed of Belle; this third



party could have been either another of her stooges or possibly a fictitious person—she was probably already planning on swindling Miles by then.

Apparently she had been short of cash after Miles's death and had sold off the smaller block. But I did not care what had happened to any of the stock once it passed out of Belle's control. I had forgotten to ask Reuther to trace Miles's stock . . . that might give a lead to Ricky even though she no longer held it. But it was late Friday already; I'd ask him Monday. Right now I wanted to open the large envelope still waiting for me, for I had spotted the return address.

I had written to the patent office early in March about the original patents on both *Eager Beaver* and *Drafting Dan*. My conviction that the original *Eager Beaver* was just another name for *Flexible Frank* had been somewhat shaken by my first upsetting experience with *Drafting Dan*; I had considered the possibility that the same unknown genius who had conceived *Dan* so nearly as I had imagined him might also have developed a parallel equivalent of *Flexible Frank*. The theory was bulwarked by the fact that both patents had been taken out the same year and both patents were held (or had been held until they expired) by the same company, Aladdin.

But I had to know. And if this inventor was still alive I wanted to meet him. He could teach me a thing or four.

I had written first to the patent office, only to get a form letter back that all records of expired patents were now kept in the National Archives in Carlsbad Caverns. So I wrote the Archives and got another form letter with a schedule of fees. So I wrote a third time, sending a postal order (no personal checks, please) for prints of the whole works on both patents—descriptions, claims, drawings, histories.

This fat envelope looked like my answer.

The one on top was 4,307,909, the basic for *Eager Beaver*. I turned to the drawings, ignoring for the moment both description and claims. Claims aren't important anyway except in court; the basic notion in writing up claims on an application for patent is to claim the whole wide world in the broadest possible terms, then let the patent examiners chew you down—this is why patent attorneys are born. The descriptions, on the other hand, have to be factual, but I can read drawings faster than I can read descriptions.



I had to admit that it did not look too much like *Flexible Frank*. It was better than *Flexible Frank*; it could do more and some of the linkages were simpler. The basic notion was the same—but that had to be true, as a machine controlled by Thorsen tubes and ancestral to *Eager Beaver* had to be based on the same principles I had used in *Flexible Frank*.

I could almost see myself developing just such a device . . . sort of a second-stage model of *Frank*, I had once had something of the sort in mind—*Frank* without *Frank*'s household limitations.

I finally got around to looking up the inventor's name on the claims and description sheets.

I recognized it all right. It was D. B. Davis.

I looked at it while whistling "Time on My Hands" slowly and off key. So Belle had lied again. I wondered if there was any truth at all in that spate of drivel she had fed me. Of course Belle was a pathological liar, but I had read somewhere that pathological liars usually have a pattern, starting from the truth and embellishing it, rather than indulging in complete fancy. Quite evidently my model of *Frank* had never been "stolen" but had been turned over to some other engineer to smooth up, then the application had been made in my name.

But the Mannix deal had never gone through; that one fact was certain, since I knew it from company records. But Belle had said that their failure to produce *Flexible Frank* as contracted had soured the Mannix deal.

Had Miles grabbed *Frank* for himself, letting Belle think that it had been stolen? Or restolen, rather.

In that case . . . I dropped guessing at it, as hopeless, more hopeless than the search for Ricky. I might have to take a job with Aladdin before I would be able to ferret out where they had gotten the basic patent and who had benefited by the deal. It probably was not worth it, since the patent was expired, Miles was dead, and Belle, if she had gained a dime out of it, had long since thrown it away. I had satisfied myself on the one point important to me, the thing I had set out to prove; i.e., that I myself was the original inventor. My professional pride was salvaged and who cares about money when three meals a day are taken care of? Not me.

So I turned to 4,307,910, the first *Drafting Dan*.

The drawings were a delight. I couldn't have planned it better myself; this boy really had it. I admired the economy of the link-



ages and the clever way the circuits had been used to reduce the moving parts to a minimum. Moving parts are like the vermiform appendix; a source of trouble to be done away with whenever possible.

He had even used an electric typewriter for his keyboard chassis, giving credit on the drawing to an IBM patent series. That was smart, that was engineering: never reinvent something that you can buy down the street.

I had to know who this brainy boy was, so I turned to the papers.

It was D. B. Davis.

After quite a long time I phoned Dr. Albrecht. They rounded him up and I told him who I was, since my office phone had no visual.

"I recognized your voice," he answered. "Hi, there, son. How are you getting along with your new job?"

"Well enough. They haven't offered me a partnership yet."

"Give them time. Happy otherwise? Find yourself fitting back in?"

"Oh, sure! If I had known what a great place here and now is I'd have taken the Sleep earlier. You couldn't hire me to go back to 1970."

"Oh, come now! I remember that year pretty well. I was a kid then on a farm in Nebraska. I used to hunt and fish. I had fun. More than I have now."

"Well, to each his own. I like it now. But look, Doc, I didn't call up just to talk philosophy; I've got a little problem."

"Well, let's have it. It ought to be a relief; most people have big problems."

"Doc? Is it at all possible for the Long Sleep to cause amnesia?"

He hesitated before replying. "It is conceivably possible. I can't say that I've ever seen a case, as such. I mean unconnected with other causes."

"What are the things that cause amnesia?"

"Any number of things. The commonest, perhaps, is the patient's own subconscious wish. He forgets a sequence of events, or rearranges them, because the facts are unbearable to him. That's a functional amnesia in the raw. Then there is the old-fashioned



knock on the head—amnesia from trauma. Or it might be amnesia through suggestion . . . under drugs or hypnosis. What's the matter, bub? Can't you find your checkbook?"

"It's not that. So far as I know, I'm getting along just fine now. But I can't get some things straight that happened before I took the Sleep . . . and it's got me worried."

"Mmm . . . any possibility of any of the causes I mentioned?"

"Yes," I said slowly. "Uh, all of them, except maybe the bump on the head . . . and even that might have happened while I was drunk."

"I neglected to mention," he said dryly, "the commonest temporary amnesia—pulling a blank while under the affluence of incohol. See here, son, why don't you come see me and we'll talk it over in detail? If I can't tag what is biting you—I'm not a psychiatrist, you know—I can turn you over to a hypno-analyst who will peel back your memory like an onion and tell you why you were late to school on the fourth of February your second-grade year. But he's pretty expensive, so why not give me a whirl first?"

I said, "Cripes, Doc, I've bothered you too much already . . . and you are pretty stuffy about taking money."

"Son, I'm always interested in my people; they're all the family I have."

So I put him off by saying that I would call him the first of the week if I wasn't straightened out. I wanted to think about it anyhow.

Most of the lights went out except in my office; a *Hired Girl*, scrubwoman type, looked in, twiggled that the room was still occupied, and rolled silently away. I still sat there.

Presently Chuck Freudenberg stuck his head in and said, "I thought you left long ago. Wake up and finish your sleep at home."

I looked up. "Chuck, I've got a wonderful idea. Let's buy a barrel of beer and two straws."

He considered it carefully. "Well, it's Friday . . . and I always like to have a head on Monday; it lets me know what day it is."

"Carried and so ordered. Wait a second while I stuff some things in this brief case."

We had some beers, then we had some food, then we had more beers at a place where the music was good, then we moved on to another place where there was no music and the booths had hush



linings and they didn't disturb you as long as you ordered something about once an hour. We talked. I showed him the patent records.

Chuck looked over the *Eager Beaver* prototype. "That's a real nice job, Dan. I'm proud of you, boy. I'd like your autograph."

"But look at this one." I gave him the drafting-machine patent papers.

"Some ways this one is even nicer. Dan, do you realize that you have probably had more influence on the present state of the art than, well, than Edison had in his period? You know that, boy?"

"Cut it out, Chuck; this is serious." I gestured abruptly at the pile of photostats. "Okay, so I'm responsible for one of them. But I *can't* be responsible for the other one. I didn't do it . . . unless I'm completely mixed up about my own life before I took the Sleep. Unless I've got amnesia."

"You've been saying that for the past twenty minutes. But you don't seem to have any open circuits. You're no crazier than is normal in an engineer."

I banged the table, making the steins dance. "I've got to *know*!"

"Steady there. So what are you going to do?"

"Huh?" I pondered it. "I'm going to pay a psychiatrist to dig it out of me."

He sighed. "I thought you might say that. Now look, Dan, let's suppose you pay this brain mechanic to do this and he reports that nothing is wrong, your memory is in fine shape, and all your relays are closed. What then?"

"That's impossible."

"That's what they told Columbus. You haven't even mentioned the most likely explanation."

"Huh? What?"

Without answering he signaled the waiter and told it to bring back the big phone book, extended area. I said, "What's the matter? You calling the wagon for me?"

"Not yet." He thumbed through the enormous book, then stopped and said, "Dan, scan this."

I looked. He had his finger on "Davis." There were columns of Davises. But where he had his finger there were a dozen "D. B. Davises"—from "Dabney" to "Duncan."

There were three "Daniel B. Davises." One of them was me.

"That's from less than seven million people," he pointed out.



"Want to try your luck on more than two hundred and fifty million?"

"It doesn't prove anything," I said feebly.

"No," he agreed, "it doesn't. It would be quite a coincidence, I readily agree, if two engineers with such similar talents happened to be working on the same sort of thing at the same time and just happened to have the same last name and the same initials. By the laws of statistics we could probably approximate just how unlikely it is that it would happen. But people forget—especially those who ought to know better, such as yourself—that while the laws of statistics tell you how unlikely a particular coincidence is, they state just as firmly that coincidences *do happen*. This looks like one. I like that a lot better than I like the theory that my beer buddy has slipped his cams. Good beer buddies are hard to come by."

"What do you think I ought to do?"

"The first thing to do is not to waste your time and money on a psychiatrist until you try the second thing. The second thing is to find out the first name of this 'D. B. Davis' who filed this patent. There will be some easy way to do that. Likely as not his first name will be 'Dexter.' Or even 'Dorothy.' But don't trip a breaker if it is 'Daniel,' because the middle name might be 'Berzowski' with a social-security number different from yours. And the third thing to do, which is really the first, is to forget it for now and order another round."

So we did, and talked of other things, particularly women. Chuck had a theory that women were closely related to machinery, but utterly unpredictable by logic. He drew graphs on the table top in beer to prove his thesis.

Sometime later I said suddenly, "If there were real time travel, I know what I would do."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"About my problem. Look, Chuck, I got here—got to 'now' I mean—by a sort of half-baked, horse-and-buggy time travel. But the trouble is I can't go back. All the things that are worrying me happened thirty years ago. I'd go back and dig out the truth . . . if there were such a thing as real time travel."

He stared at me. "But there *is*."

"What?"

He suddenly sobered. "I shouldn't have said that."



I said, "Maybe not, but you already have said it. Now you'd better tell me what you mean before I empty this here stein over your head."

"Forget it, Dan. I made a slip."

"Talk!"

"That's just what I can't do." He glanced around. No one was near us. "It's classified."

"Time travel classified? Good God, *why?*"

"Hell, boy, didn't you ever work for the government? They'd classify sex if they could. There doesn't have to be a reason; it's just their *policy*. But it *is* classified and I'm bound by it. So lay off."

"But— Quit fooling around about it, Chuck; this is important to me. Terribly important." When he didn't answer and looked stubborn I said, "You can tell *me*. Shucks, I used to have a 'Q' clearance myself. Never suspended, either. It's just that I'm no longer with the government."

"What's a 'Q' clearance?"

I explained and presently he nodded. "You mean an 'Alpha' status. You must have been hot stuff, boy; I only rated a 'Beta.'"

"Then why can't you tell me?"

"Huh? You know why. Regardless of your rated status, you don't have the necessary 'Need to Know' qualification."

"The hell I don't! 'Need to Know' is what I've got most of."

But he wouldn't budge, so finally I said in disgust, "I don't think there is such a thing. I think you just had a belch back up on you."

He stared at me solemnly for a while, then he said, "Danny."

"Huh?"

"I'm going to tell you. Just remember your 'Alpha' status, boy. I'm going to tell you because it can't hurt anything and I want you to realize that it couldn't possibly be of use to you in your problem. It's time travel, all right, but it's not practical. You can't use it."

"Why not?"

"Give me a chance, will you? They never smoothed the bugs out of it and it's not even theoretically possible that they ever will. It's of no practical value whatsoever, even for research. It's a mere by-product of NullGrav—that's why they classified it."

"But, hell, NullGrav is declassified."



"What's that got to do with it? If this was commercial, too, maybe they'd unwrap it. But shut up."

I'm afraid I didn't, but I'd rather tell this as if I had. During Chuck's senior year at the University of Colorado—Boulder, that is—he had earned extra money as a lab assistant. They had a big cryogenics lab there and at first he had worked in that. But the school had a juicy defense contract concerned with the Edinburgh field theory and they had built a big new physics laboratory in the mountains out of town. Chuck was reassigned there to Professor Twitchell—Dr. Hubert Twitchell, the man who just missed the Nobel Prize and got nasty about it.

"Twitch got the notion that if he polarized around another axis he could reverse the gravitational field instead of leveling it off. Nothing happened. So he fed what he had done back into the computer and got wild-eyed at the results. He never showed them to me, of course. He put two silver dollars into the test cage—they still used hard money around those parts then—after making me mark them. He punched the solenoid button and they disappeared.

"Now that is not much of a trick," Chuck went on. "Properly, he should have followed up by making them reappear out of the nose of a little boy who volunteers to come up on the stage. But he seemed satisfied, so I was—I was paid by the hour.

"A week later one of those cartwheels reappeared. Just one. But before that, one afternoon while I was cleaning up after he had gone home, a guinea pig showed up in the cage. It didn't belong in the lab and I hadn't seen it around before, so I took it over to the bio lab on my way home. They counted and weren't short any pigs, although it's hard to be certain with guinea pigs, so I took it home and made a pet out of it.

"After that single silver dollar came back Twitch got so worked up he quit shaving. Next time he used two guinea pigs from the bio lab. One of them looked awfully familiar to me, but I didn't see it long because he pushed the panic button and they both disappeared.

"When one of them came back about ten days later—the one that didn't look like mine—Twitch knew for sure he had it. Then the resident O-in-C for the department of defense came around—a chair-type colonel who used to be a professor himself, of botany. Very military type . . . Twitch had no use for him. This colonel



swore us both to double-dyed secrecy, over and above our 'status' oaths. He seemed to think that he had the greatest thing in military logistics since Caesar invented the carbon copy. His idea was that you could send divisions forward or back to a battle you had lost, or were going to lose, and save the day. The enemy would never figure out what had happened. He was crazy in hearts and spades, of course . . . and he didn't get the star he was bucking for. But the 'Critically Secret' classification he stuck on it stayed, so far as I know, right up to the present. I've never seen a disclosure on it."

"It might have some military use," I argued, "it seems to me, if you could engineer it to take a division of soldiers at a time. No, wait a minute. I see the hitch. You always had 'em paired. It would take two divisions, one to go forward, one to go back. One division you would lose entirely . . . I suppose it would be more practical to have a division at the right time in the first place."

"You're right, but your reasons are wrong. You don't have to use two divisions or two guinea pigs or two anything. You simply have to match the masses. You could use a division of men and a pile of rocks that weighed as much. It's an action-reaction situation, corollary with Newton's Third Law." He started drawing in the beer drippings again. "MV equals MV . . . the basic rocket-ship formula. The cognate time-travel formula is MT equals MT."

"I still don't see the hitch. Rocks are cheap."

"Use your head, Danny. With a rocket ship you can aim the kinkin' thing. But which direction is last week? Point to it. Just try. You haven't the slightest idea which mass is going back and which one is going forward. There's no way to orient the equipment."

I shut up. It would be embarrassing to a general to expect a division of fresh shock troops and get nothing but a pile of gravel. No wonder the ex-prof never made brigadier. But Chuck was still talking:

"You treat the two masses like the plates of a condenser, bringing them up to the same temporal potential. Then you discharge them on a damping curve that is effectively vertical. *Smacko!*—one of them heads for the middle of next year, the other one is history. But you never know which one. But that's not the worst of it; you can't come back."

"Huh? Who wants to come back?"



"Look, what use is it for research if you can't come back? Or for commerce? Either way you jump, your money is no good and you can't possibly get in touch with where you started. No equipment—and believe me it takes equipment and power. We took power from the Arco reactors. Expensive . . . that's another drawback."

"You could get back," I pointed out, "with cold sleep."

"Huh? *If* you went to the past. You might go the other way; you never know. *If* you went a short enough time back so that they had cold sleep . . . no farther back than the war. But what's the point of that? You want to know something about 1980, say, you ask somebody or you look it up in old newspapers. Now if there was some way to photograph the Crucifixion . . . but there isn't. Not possible. Not only couldn't you get back, but there isn't that much power on the globe. There's an inverse-square law tied up in it too."

"Nevertheless, some people would try it just for the hell of it. Didn't anybody ever ride it?"

Chuck glanced around again. "I've talked too much already."

"A little more won't hurt."

"I think three people tried it. I *think*. One of them was an instructor. I was in the lab when Twitch and this bird, Leo Vincent, came in; Twitch told me I could go home. I hung around outside. After a while Twitch came out and Vincent didn't. So far as I know, he's still in there. He certainly wasn't teaching at Boulder after that."

"How about the other two?"

"Students. They all three went in together; only Twitch came out. But one of them was in class the next day, whereas the other one was missing for a week. Figure it out yourself."

"Weren't you ever tempted?"

"Me? Does my head look flat? Twitch suggested that it was almost my duty, in the interests of science, to volunteer. I said no, thanks; I'd take a short beer instead . . . but that I would gladly throw the switch for him. He didn't take me up on it."

"I'd take a chance on it. I could check up on what's worrying me . . . and then come back again by cold sleep. It would be worth it."

Chuck sighed deeply. "No more beer for you, my friend; you're drunk. You didn't listen to me. One,"—he started making tallies



on the table top—"you have no way of knowing that you'd go back; you might go forward instead."

"I'd risk that. I like now a lot better than I liked then; I might like thirty years from now still better."

"Okay, so take the Long Sleep again; it's safer. Or just sit tight and wait for it to roll around; that's what I'm going to do. But quit interrupting me. Two, even if you did go back, you might miss 1970 by quite a margin. So far as I know, Twitch was shooting in the dark; I don't think he had it calibrated. But of course I was just the flunky. Three, that lab was in a stand of pine trees and it was built in 1980. Suppose you come out ten years before it was built in the middle of a western yellow pine? Ought to make quite an explosion, about like a cobalt bomb, huh? Only you wouldn't know it."

"But— As a matter of fact, I don't see why you would come out anywhere near the lab. Why not to the spot in outer space corresponding to where the lab used to be—I mean where it was . . . or rather—"

"You don't mean anything. You stay on the world line you were on. Don't worry about the math; just remember what that guinea pig *did*. But if you go back before the lab was built, maybe you wind up in a tree. Four, how could you get back to now even with cold sleep, even if you did go the right way, arrive at the right time, and live through it?"

"Huh? I did once, why not twice?"

"Sure. But what are you going to use for money?"

I opened my mouth and closed it. That one made me feel foolish. I had had the money once; I had it no longer. Even what I had saved (not nearly enough) I could not take with me—shucks, even if I robbed a bank (an art I knew nothing about) and took a million of the best back with me, I couldn't spend it in 1970. I'd simply wind up in jail for trying to shove funny money. They had even changed the shape, not to mention serial numbers, dates, colors, and designs. "Maybe I'd just have to save it up."

"Good boy. And while you were saving it, you'd probably wind up here and now again without half trying . . . but minus your hair and your teeth."

"Okay, okay. But let's go back to that last point. Was there ever a big explosion on that spot? Where the lab was?"

"No, I don't think so."



"Then I *wouldn't* wind up in a tree—because I *didn't*. Follow me?"

"I'm three jumps ahead of you. The old time paradox again, only I won't buy it. I've thought about theory of time, too, maybe more than you have. You've got it just backward. There wasn't any explosion and you aren't going to wind up in a tree . . . because *you aren't ever going to make the jump*. Do you follow me?"

"But suppose I did?"

"You won't. Because of my fifth point. It's the killer, so listen closely. You ain't about to make any such jump because the whole thing is classified and you *can't*. They won't let you. So let's forget it, Danny. It's been a very interesting intellectual evening and the FBI will be looking for me in the morning. So let's have one more round and Monday morning if I'm still out of jail I'll phone the chief engineer over at Aladdin and find out the first name of this other 'D. B. Davis' character and who he was or is. He might even be working there and, if so, we'll have lunch with him and talk shop. I want you to meet Springer, the chief over at Aladdin, anyway; he's a good boy. And forget this time-travel nonsense; they'll never get the bugs out of it. I should never have mentioned it . . . and if you ever say I did I'll look you square in the eye and call you a liar. I might need my classified status again someday."

So we had another beer. By the time I was home and had taken a shower and had washed some of the beer out of my system I knew he was right. Time travel was about as practical a solution to my difficulties as cutting your throat to cure a headache. More important, Chuck would find out what I wanted to know from Mr. Springer just over chips and a salad, no sweat, no expense, no risk. And I liked the year I was living in.

When I climbed into bed I reached out and got the week's stack of papers. The *Times* came to me by tube each morning, now that I was a solid citizen. I didn't read it very much, because whenever I got my head soaked full of some engineering problem, which was usually, the daily fripperies you find in the news merely annoyed me, either by boring me or, worse still, by being interesting enough to distract my mind from its proper work.

Nevertheless, I never threw out a newspaper until I had at least glanced at the headlines and checked the vital-statistics column, the latter not for births, deaths, and marriages, but simply for



"withdrawals," people coming out of cold sleep. I had a notion that someday I would see the name of someone I had known back then, and then I would go around and say hello, bid him welcome, and see if I could give him a hand. The chances were against it, of course, but I kept on doing it and it always gave me a feeling of satisfaction.

I think that subconsciously I thought of all other Sleepers as my "kinfolk," the way anybody who once served in the same outfit is your buddy, at least to the extent of a drink.

There wasn't much in the papers, except the ship that was still missing between here and Mars, and that was not news but a sad lack of it. Nor did I spot any old friends among the newly awakened Sleepers. So I lay back and waited for the light to go out.

About three in the morning I sat up very suddenly, wide awake. The light came on and I blinked at it. I had had a very odd dream, not quite a nightmare but nearly, of having failed to notice little Ricky in the vital statistics.

I knew I hadn't. But just the same when I looked over and saw the week's stack of newspapers still sitting there I was greatly relieved; it had been possible that I had stuffed them down the chute before going to sleep, as I sometimes did.

I dragged them back onto the bed and started reading the vital statistics again. This time I read all categories, births, deaths, marriages, divorces, adoptions, changes of name, commitments, and withdrawals, for it had occurred to me that my eye might have caught Ricky's name without consciously realizing it, while glancing down the column to the only subhead I was interested in—Ricky might have got married or had a baby or something.

I almost missed what must have caused the distressing dream. It was in the *Times* for 2 May, 2001, Tuesday's withdrawals listed in Wednesday's paper: "Riverside Sanctuary . . . F. V. Heinicke."

"*F. V. Heinicke!*"

"Heinicke" was Ricky's grandmother's name . . . I knew it, I was *certain* of it! I didn't know *why* I knew it. But I felt that it had been buried in my head and had not popped up until I read it again. I had probably seen it or heard it at some time from Ricky or Miles, or it was even possible that I had met the old gal at Sandia. No matter, the name, seen in the *Times*, had fitted a forgotten piece of information in my brain and then I *knew*.



Only I still had to prove it. I had to make sure that "F. V. Heinicke" stood for "Frederica Heinicke."

I was shaking with excitement, anticipation, and fear. In spite of well-established new habits I tried to zip my clothes instead of sticking the seams together and made a botch of getting dressed. But a few minutes later I was down in the hall where the phone booth was—I didn't have an instrument in my room or I would have used it; I was simply a supplementary listing for the house phone. Then I had to run back up again when I found that I had forgotten my phone-credit ID card—I was really disorganized.

Then, when I had it, I was trembling so that I could hardly fit it into the slot. But I did and signaled "Service."

"Circuit desired?"

"Uh, I want the Riverside Sanctuary. That's in Riverside Borough."

"Searching . . . holding . . . circuit free. We are signaling."

The screen lighted up at last and a man looked grumpily at me. "You must have the wrong phasing. This is the sanctuary. We're closed for the night."

I said, "Hang on, *please*. If this is the Riverside Sanctuary, you're just who I want."

"Well, what do you want? At this hour?"

"You have a client there, F. V. Heinicke, a new withdrawal. I want to know—"

He shook his head. "We don't give out information about clients over the phone. And certainly not in the middle of the night. You'd better call after ten o'clock. Better yet, come here."

"I will, I will. But I want to know just one thing. What do the initials 'F. V.' stand for?"

"I told you that—"

"Will you *listen*, please? I'm not just butting in; I'm a Sleeper myself. Sawtelle. Withdrawn just lately. So I know all about the 'confidential relationship' and what's proper. Now you've already published this client's name in the paper. You and I both know that the sanctuaries always give the papers the full names of clients withdrawn and committed . . . but the papers trim the given names to initials to save space. Isn't that true?"

He thought about it. "Could be."

"Then what possible harm is there in telling me what the initials 'F. V.' stand for?"



He hesitated still longer. "None, I guess, if that's all you want. It's all you're going to get. Hold on."

He passed out of the screen, was gone for what seemed like an hour, came back holding a card. "The light's poor," he said, peering at it. "'Frances'—no, 'Frederica.' 'Frederica Virginia.'"

My ears roared and I almost fainted. "Thank God!"

"You all right?"

"Yes. Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Yes, I'm all right."

"Hm. I guess there's no harm in telling you one more thing. It might save you a trip. She's already checked out."

## 9

I could have saved time by hiring a cab to jump me to Riverside, but I was handicapped by lack of cash. I was living in West Hollywood; the nearest twenty-four-hour bank was downtown at the Grand Circle of the Ways. So first I rode the Ways downtown and went to the bank for cash. One real improvement I had not appreciated up to then was the universal checkbook system; with a single cybernet as clearinghouse for the whole city and radioactive coding on my checkbook, I got cash laid in my palm as quickly there as I could have gotten it at my home bank across from *Hired Girl, Inc.*

Then I caught the express Way for Riverside. When I reached the sanctuary it was just daylight.

There was nobody there but the night technician I had talked to and his wife, the night nurse. I'm afraid I didn't make a good impression. I had a day's beard, I was wild-eyed, I probably had a beer breath, and I had not worked out a consistent framework of lies.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Larrigan, the night nurse, was sympathetic and helpful. She got a photograph out of a file and said, "Is this your cousin, Mr. Davis?"

It was Ricky. There was no doubt about it, it was Ricky! Oh, not the Ricky I had known, for this was not a little girl but a ma-



ture young woman, twentyish or older, with a grown-up hairdo and a grown-up and very beautiful face. She was smiling.

But her eyes were unchanged and the ageless pixie quality of her face that had made her so delightful a child was still there. It was the same face, matured, filled out, grown beautiful, but unmistakable.

The stereo blurred, my eyes had filled with tears, "Yes," I managed to choke. "Yes. That's Ricky."

Mr. Larrigan said, "Nancy, you shouldn't have showed him that."

"Pooh, Hank, what harm is there in showing a photograph?"

"You know the rules." He turned to me. "Mister, as I told you on the phone, we don't give out information about clients. You come back here at ten o'clock when the administration office opens."

"Or you could come back at eight," his wife added. "Dr. Bernstein will be here then."

"Now, Nancy, you just keep quiet. If he wants information, the man to see is the director. Bernstein hasn't any more business answering questions than we have. Besides, she wasn't even Bernstein's patient."

"Hank, you're being fussy. You men like rules just for the sake of rules. If he's in a hurry to see her, he could be in Brawley by ten o'clock." She turned to me. "You come back at eight. That's best. My husband and I can't really tell you anything anyhow."

"What's this about Brawley? Did she go to Brawley?"

If her husband had not been there I think she would have told me more. She hesitated and he looked stern. She answered, "You see Dr. Bernstein. If you haven't had breakfast, there's a real nice place just down the street."

So I went to the "real nice place" (it was) and ate and used their washroom and bought a tube of *Beardgo* from a dispenser in the washroom and a shirt from another dispenser and threw away the one I had been wearing. By the time I returned I was fairly respectable.

But Larrigan must have bent Dr. Bernstein's ear about me. He was a young man, resident in training, and he took a very stiff line. "Mr. Davis, you claim to be a Sleeper yourself. You must certainly know that there are criminals who make a regular business of preying on the gullibility and lack of orientation of a newly



awakened Sleeper. Most Sleepers have considerable assets, all of them are unworldly in the world in which they find themselves, they are usually lonely and a bit scared—a perfect setup for confidence men.”

“But all I want to know is where she went! I’m her cousin. But I took the Sleep before she did, so I didn’t know she was going to.”

“They usually claim to be relatives.” He looked at me closely. “Haven’t I seen you before?”

“I strongly doubt it. Unless you just happened to pass me on the Ways, downtown.” People are always thinking they’ve seen me before; I’ve got one of the Twelve Standard Faces, as lacking in uniqueness as one peanut in a sackful. “Doctor, how about phoning Dr. Albrecht at Sawtelle Sanctuary and checking on me?”

He looked judicial. “You come back and see the director. He can call the Sawtelle Sanctuary . . . or the police, whichever he sees fit.”

So I left. Then I may have made a mistake. Instead of coming back to see the director and very possibly getting the exact information I needed (with the aid of Albrecht’s vouching for me), I hired a jumpcab and went straight to Brawley.

It took three days to pick up her trail in Brawley. Oh, she had lived there and so had her grandmother; I found that out quickly. But the grandmother had died twenty years earlier and Ricky had taken the Sleep. Brawley is a mere hundred thousand compared with the seven million of Great Los Angeles; the twenty-year-old records were not hard to find. It was the trail less than a week old that I had trouble with.

Part of the trouble was that she was with someone; I had been looking for a young woman traveling alone. When I found out she had a man with her I thought anxiously about the crooks preying on Sleepers that Bernstein had lectured me about and got busier than ever.

I followed a false lead to Calxico, went back to Brawley, started over, picked it up again, and traced them as far as Yuma.

At Yuma I gave up the chase, for Ricky had gotten married. What I saw on the register at the county clerk’s office there shocked me so much that I dropped everything and jumped a ship for Denver, stopping only to mail a card to Chuck telling him to clear out my desk and pack the stuff in my room.



I stopped in Denver just long enough to visit a dental-supply house. I had not been in Denver since it had become the capital—after the Six Weeks War, Miles and I had gone straight to California—and the place stunned me. Why, I couldn't even find Colfax Avenue. I had understood that everything essential to the government was buried back under the Rockies. If that is so, then there must be an awful lot of nonessentials still aboveground; the place seemed even more crowded than Great Los Angeles.

At the dental-supply house I bought ten kilograms of gold, isotope 197, in the form of fourteen-gauge wire. I paid \$86.10 a kilogram for it, which was decidedly too much, since gold of engineering quality was selling for around \$70 a kilogram, and the transaction mortally wounded my only thousand-dollar bill. But engineering gold comes either in alloys never found in nature, or with isotopes 196 and 198 present, or both, depending on the application. For my purposes I wanted fine gold, undetectable from gold refined from natural ore, and I did not want gold that might burn my pants off if I got cozy with it—the overdose at Sandia had given me a healthy respect for radiation poisoning.

I wound the gold wire around my waist and went to Boulder. Ten kilograms is about the weight of a well-filled weekend bag and that much gold bulks almost exactly the same as a quart of milk. But the wire form of it made it bulk more than it would have solid; I can't recommend it as a girdle. But gold slugs would have been still harder to carry, and this way it was always with me.

Dr. Twitchell was still living there, though no longer working; he was professor emeritus and spent most of his waking hours in the bar of the faculty club. It took me four days to catch him in another bar, since the faculty club was closed to outlanders like me. But when I did, it turned out to be easy to buy him a drink.

He was a tragic figure in the classic Greek meaning, a great man—a *very* great man—gone to ruin. He should have been up there with Einstein and Bohr and Newton; as it was, only a few specialists in field theory were really aware of the stature of his work. Now when I met him his brilliant mind was soured with disappointment, dimmed with age, and soggy with alcohol. It was like visiting the ruins of what had been a magnificent temple after the roof has fallen in, half the columns knocked down, and vines have grown over it all.

Nevertheless, he was brainier on the skids than I ever was at my



best. I'm smart enough myself to appreciate real genius when I meet it.

The first time I saw him he looked up, looked straight at me and said, "You again."

"Sir?"

"You used to be one of my students, didn't you?"

"Why, no, sir, I never had that honor." Ordinarily when people think they have seen me before, I brush it off; this time I decided to exploit it if I could. "Perhaps you are thinking of my cousin, Doctor—class of '86. He studied under you at one time."

"Possibly. What did he major in?"

"He had to drop out without a degree, sir. But he was a great admirer of yours. He never missed a chance to tell people he had studied under you."

You can't make an enemy by telling a mother her child is beautiful. Dr. Twitchell let me sit down and presently let me buy him a drink. The greatest weakness of the glorious old wreck was his professional vanity. I had salvaged part of the four days before I could scrape up an acquaintance with him by memorizing everything there was about him in the university library, so I knew what papers he had written, where he had presented them, what earned and honorary degrees he held, and what books he had written. I had tried one of the latter, but I was already out of my depth on page nine, although I did pick up a little patter from it.

I let him know that I was a camp follower of science myself; right at present I was researching for a book: *Unsung Geniuses*.

"What's it going to be about?"

I admitted diffidently that I thought it would be appropriate to start the book with a popular account of his life and works . . . provided he would be willing to relax a bit from his well-known habit of shunning publicity. I would have to get a lot of my material from him, of course.

He thought it was claptrap and could not think of such a thing. But I pointed out that he had a duty to posterity and he agreed to think it over. By the next day he simply assumed that I was going to write his biography—not just a chapter, a whole book. From then on he talked and talked and I took notes . . . real notes; I did not dare try to fool him by faking, as he sometimes asked me to read back.

But he never mentioned time travel.



Finally I said, "Doctor, isn't it true that if it had not been for a certain colonel who was once stationed here you would have had the Nobel Prize hands down?"

He cursed steadily for three minutes with magnificent style. "Who told you about him?"

"Uh, Doctor, when I was doing research writing for the Department of Defense—I've mentioned that, haven't I?"

"No."

"Well, when I was, I heard the whole story from a young Ph.D. working in another section. He had read the report and he said it was perfectly clear that you would be the most famous name in physics today . . . if you had been permitted to publish your work."

"Hrrmph! That much is true."

"But I gathered that it was classified . . . by order of this Colonel, uh, Plushbottom."

"Thrushbotham. Thrushbotham, sir. A fat, fatuous, flatulent, foot-kissing fool incompetent to find his hat with it nailed to his head. Which it should have been."

"It seems a great pity."

"What is a pity, sir? That Thrushbotham was a fool? That was nature's doing, not mine."

"It seems a pity that the world should be deprived of the story. I understand that you are not allowed to speak of it."

"Who told you that? I say what I please!"

"That was what I understood, sir . . . from my friend in the Department of Defense."

"Hrrrmph!"

That was all I got out of him that night. It took him a week to decide to show me his laboratory.

Most of the building was now used by other researchers, but his time laboratory he had never surrendered, even though he did not use it now; he fell back on its classified status and refused to let anyone else touch it, nor had he permitted the apparatus to be torn down. When he let me in, the place smelled like a vault that has not been opened in years.

He had had just enough drinks not to give a damn, not so many but what he was still steady. His capacity was pretty high. He lectured me on the mathematics of time theory and temporal displacement (he didn't call it "time travel"), but he cautioned me



not to take notes. It would not have helped if I had, as he would start a paragraph with, "It is therefore obvious—" and go on from there to matters which may have been obvious to him and God but to no one else.

When he slowed down I said, "I gathered from my friend that the one thing you had not been able to do was to calibrate it? That you could not tell the exact magnitude of the temporal displacement?"

"What? Poppycock! Young man, if you can't measure it, it's not science." He bubbled for a bit, like a teakettle, then went on, "Here. I'll *show* you." He turned away and started making adjustments. All that showed of his equipment was what he called the "temporal locus stage"—just a low platform with a cage around it—and a control board which might have served for a steam plant or a low-pressure chamber. I'm fairly sure I could have studied out how to handle the controls had I been left alone to examine them, but I had been told sharply to stay away from them. I could see an eight-point Brown recorder, some extremely heavy-duty solenoid-actuated switches, and a dozen other equally familiar components, but it didn't mean a thing without the circuit diagrams.

He turned back to me and demanded, "Have you any change in your pocket?"

I reached in and hauled out a handful. He glanced at it and selected two five-dollar pieces, mint new, the pretty green plastic hexagonals issued just that year. I could have wished that he had picked half fives, as I was running low.

"Do you have a knife?"

"Yes, sir."

"Scratch your initials on each of them."

I did so. He then had me place them side by side on the stage. "Note the exact time. I have set the displacement for exactly one week, plus or minus six seconds."

I looked at my watch. Dr. Twitchell said, "Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . *now*."

I looked up from my watch. The coins were gone. I didn't have to pretend that my eyes bugged out. Chuck had told me about a similar demonstration—but seeing it was another matter.

Dr. Twitchell said briskly, "We will return here one week from tonight and wait for one of them to reappear. As for the other one



—you saw both of them on the stage? You placed them there yourself?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where was I?”

“At the control board, sir.” He had been a good fifteen feet from the nearest part of the cage around the stage and had not approached it since.

“Very well. Come here.” I did so and he reached into a pocket. “Here’s one of your bits. You’ll get the other back a week from now.” He handed me a green five-dollar coin; it had my initials on it.

I did not say anything because I can’t talk very well with my jaws sagging loosely. He went on, “Your remarks last week disturbed me. So I visited this place on Wednesday, something I have not done for—oh, more than a year. I found this coin on the stage, so I knew that it had been . . . *would be* . . . using the equipment again. It took me until tonight to decide to demonstrate it to you.”

I looked at the coin and felt it. “This was in your pocket when we came here tonight?”

“Certainly.”

“But how could it be both in your pocket and my pocket at the same time?”

“Good Lord, man, have you no eyes to see with? No brain to reason with? Can’t you absorb a simple fact simply because it lies outside your dull existence? You fetched it here in your pocket tonight—and we kicked into last week. You saw. A few days ago I found it here. I placed it in my pocket. I fetched it here tonight. The same coin . . . or, to be precise, a later segment of its space-time structure, a week more worn, a week more dulled—but what the canaille would call the ‘same’ coin. Although no more identical in fact than is a baby identical with the man the baby grows into. Older.”

I looked at it. “Doctor . . . push me back in time by a week.”

He stared angrily. “Out of the question!”

“Why not? Won’t it work with people?”

“Eh? Certainly it will work with people.”

“Then why not do it? I’m not afraid. And think what a wonderful thing it would be for the book . . . if I could testify of *my own knowledge* that the Twitchell time displacement works.”



"You *can* report it of your own knowledge. You just saw it."

"Yes," I admitted slowly, "but I won't be believed. That business with the coins . . . I saw it and I believe it. But anyone simply reading an account of it would conclude that I was gullible, that you had hoaxed me with some simple legerdemain."

"Damn it, sir!"

"That's what *they* would say. They wouldn't be able to believe that I actually had seen what I reported. But if you were to ship me back just a week, then I could report of my own knowledge—"

"Sit down. Listen to me." He sat down, but there was no place for me to sit, although he did not seem aware of it. "I *have* experimented with human beings long ago. And for that reason I resolved never to do it again."

"Why? Did it kill them?"

"What? Don't talk nonsense." He looked at me sharply, added, "You are not to put this in the book."

"As you say, sir."

"Some minor experiments showed that living subjects could make temporal displacements without harm. I had confided in a colleague, a young fellow who taught drawing and other matters in the school of architecture. Really more of an engineer than a scientist, but I liked him; his mind was alive. This young chap—it can't hurt to tell you his name: Leonard Vincent—was wild to try it . . . really try it; he wanted to undergo major displacement, five hundred years. I was weak. I let him."

"Then what happened?"

"How should I know? Five hundred years, man! I'll never live to find out."

"But you think he's five hundred years in the future?"

"Or the past. He might have wound up in the fifteenth century. Or the twenty-fifth. The chances are precisely even. There's an indeterminacy—symmetrical equations. I've sometimes thought . . . no, just a chance similarity in names."

I didn't ask what he meant by this because I suddenly saw the similarity, too, and my hair stood on end. Then I pushed it out of my mind; I had other problems. Besides, chance similarity was all it could be—a man could not get from Colorado to Italy, not in the fifteenth century.

"But I resolved not to be tempted again. It wasn't science, it



added nothing to the data. If he was displaced forward, well and good. But if he was displaced backward . . . then possibly I sent my friend to be killed by savages. Or eaten by wild animals."

Or even possibly, I thought, to become a "Great White God." I kept the thought to myself. "But you needn't use so long a displacement with me."

"Let's say no more about it, if you please, sir."

"As you wish, Doctor." But I couldn't drop it. "Uh, may I make a suggestion?"

"Eh? Speak up."

"We could get almost the same result by a rehearsal."

"What do you mean?"

"A complete dry run, with everything done just exactly as if you were intending to displace a living subject—I'll act out that part. We'll do everything precisely as if you meant to displace me, right up to the point where you would push that button. Then I'll understand the procedure . . . which I don't quite, as yet."

He grumbled a little but he really wanted to show off his toy. He weighed me and set aside metal weights just equal to my hundred and seventy pounds. "These are the same scales I used with poor Vincent."

Between us we placed them on one side of the stage. "What temporal setting shall we make?" he asked. "This is your show."

"Uh, you said that it could be set accurately?"

"I said so, sir. Do you doubt it?"

"Oh no, no! Well, let's see, this is the twenty-fourth of May—suppose we . . . how about, uh, say thirty-one years, three weeks, one day, seven hours, thirteen minutes, and twenty-five seconds?"

"A poor jest, sir. When I said 'accurate' I meant 'accurate to better than one part in one hundred thousand.' I have had no opportunity to calibrate to one part in nine hundred million."

"Oh. You see, Doctor, how important an exact rehearsal is to me, since I know so little about it. Uh, suppose we call it thirty-one years and three weeks. Or is that still too finicky?"

"Not at all. The maximum error should not exceed two hours." He made his adjustments. "You can take your place on the stage."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. All but the power. I could not actually make this displacement with the line voltage I used on those coins. But since we aren't actually going to do it, that doesn't matter."



I looked disappointed and was. "Then you don't actually have what is necessary to produce such a displacement? You were speaking theoretically?"

"Confound it, sir, I was not speaking theoretically."

"But if you don't have the power . . . ?"

"I can get the power if you insist. Wait." He went to a corner of the lab and picked up a phone. It must have been installed when the lab was new; I hadn't seen one like it since I was awakened. There followed a brisk conversation with the night superintendent of the university's powerhouse. Dr. Twitchell was not dependent on profanity; he could avoid it entirely and be more biting than most real artists can be when using plainer words. "I am not in the least interested in your opinions, my man. Read your instructions. I have full facilities whenever I wish them. Or can you read? Shall we meet with the president at ten tomorrow morning and have him read them to you? Oh? So you *can* read? Can you write as well? Or have we exhausted your talents? Then write this down: Emergency full power across the bus bars of the Thornton Memorial Laboratory in exactly eight minutes. Repeat that back."

He replaced the instrument. "People!"

He went to the control board, made some changes, and waited. Presently, even from where I stood inside the cage, I could see the long hands of three sets of meters swing across their dials and a red light came on at the top of the board. "Power," he announced.

"Now what happens?"

"Nothing."

"That's just what I thought."

"What do you mean?"

"What I said. Nothing would happen."

"I'm afraid I don't understand you. I hope I don't understand you. What I meant is that nothing would happen unless I closed this pilot switch. If I did, you would be displaced precisely thirty-one years, three weeks."

"And I still say nothing would happen."

His face grew dark. "I think, sir, you are being intentionally offensive."

"Call it what you want to. Doctor, I came here to investigate a remarkable rumor. Well, I've investigated it. I've seen a control board with pretty lights on it; it looks like a set for a mad scientist in a grabbie spectacular. I've seen a parlor trick performed with a



couple of coins. Not much of a trick, by the way, since you selected the coins yourself and told me how to mark them; any parlor magician could do better. I've heard a lot of talk. But talk is cheap. What you claim to have discovered is impossible. By the way, they know that down at the department. Your report wasn't suppressed; it's simply filed in the screwball file. They get it out and pass it around now and then for a laugh."

I thought the poor old boy was going to have a stroke there and then. But I had to stimulate him by the only reflex he had left, his vanity.

"Come out of there, sir. Come out. I'm going to thrash you. With my bare hands I'm going to thrash you."

The rage he was in, I think he might have managed it, despite age and weight and physical condition. But I answered, "You don't scare me, Pappy. That dummy button doesn't scare me either. Go ahead and push it."

He looked at me, looked at the button, but still he didn't do anything. I snickered and said, "A hoax, just as the boys said it was. Twitch, you're a pompous old faker, a stuffed shirt. Colonel Thrushbotham was right."

That did it.

## 10

Even as he stabbed at the button I tried to shout at him not to do it. But it was too late; I was already falling. My last thought was an agonized one that I didn't want to go through with it. I had chucked away everything and tormented almost to death a poor old man who hadn't done me any harm—and I didn't even know which way I was going. Worse, I didn't know that I could get there.

Then I hit. I don't think I fell more than four feet but I had not been ready for it. I fell like a stick, collapsed like a sack.

Then somebody was saying, "Where the devil did *you* come from?"

It was a man, about forty, bald-headed but well built and lean. He was standing facing me with his fists on his hipbones. He



looked competent and shrewd and his face was not unpleasant save that at the moment he seemed sore at me.

I sat up and found that I was sitting on granite gravel and pine needles. There was a woman standing by the man, a pleasant pretty woman somewhat younger than he. She was looking at me wide-eyed but not speaking.

"Where am I?" I said foolishly. I could have said, "When am I?" but that would have sounded still more foolish, and besides, I didn't think of it. One look at them and I knew when I was *not*—I was sure it was not 1970. Nor was I still in 2001; in 2001 they kept that sort of thing for the beaches. So I must have gone the wrong way.

Because neither one of them wore anything but smooth coats of tan. Not even Sticktite. But they seemed to find it enough. Certainly they were not embarrassed by it.

"One thing at a time," he objected. "I asked you how you got here?" He glanced up. "Your parachute didn't stick in the trees, did it? In any case, what are you doing here? This is posted private property; you're trespassing. And what are you doing in that Mardi Gras getup?"

I didn't see anything wrong with my clothes—especially in view of the way they were dressed. But I didn't answer. Other times, other customs—I could see that I was going to have trouble.

She put a hand on his arm. "Don't, John," she said gently. "I think he's hurt."

He looked at her, glanced back sharply at me. "Are you hurt?"

I tried to stand up, managed it. "I don't think so. A few bruises, maybe. Uh, what date is today?"

"Huh? Why, it's the first Sunday in May. The third of May, I think. Is that right, Jenny?"

"Yes, dear."

"Look," I said urgently, "I got an awful knock on the head. I'm confused. What's the date? The whole date?"

"What?"

I should have kept my mouth shut until I could pick it up off something, a calendar or a paper. But I had to know right then; I couldn't stand to wait. "What year?"

"Brother, you did get a lump. It's 1970." I saw him staring at my clothes again.

My relief was almost more than I could stand. I'd made it, I'd



made it! I wasn't too late. "Thanks," I said. "Thanks an awful lot. You don't know." He still looked as if he wanted to call out the reserves, so I added nervously, "I'm subject to sudden attacks of amnesia. Once I lost, uh—five whole years."

"I should think that would be upsetting," he said slowly. "Do you feel well enough to answer my questions?"

"Don't badger him, dear," she said softly. "He looks like a nice person. I think he's just made a mistake."

"We'll see. Well?"

"I feel all right . . . now. But I was pretty confused for a minute there."

"Okay. How did you get here? And why are you dressed that way?"

"To tell the truth, I'm not sure how I got here. And I certainly don't know where I am. These spells hit me suddenly. As for how I'm dressed . . . I guess you could call it personal eccentricity. Uh . . . like the way you're dressed. Or not dressed."

He glanced down at himself and grinned. "Oh, yes, I'm quite aware that the way my wife and I are dressed . . . or not dressed . . . would call for explanation under some circumstances. But we prefer to make trespassers do the explaining instead. You see, you don't belong here, dressed that way or any other, while we do—just as we are. These are the grounds of the Denver Sunshine Club."

John and Jenny Sutton were the sort of sophisticated, unshockable, friendly people who could invite an earthquake in for tea. John obviously was not satisfied with my fishy explanations and wanted to cross-examine me, but Jenny held him back. I stuck to my story about "dizzy spells" and said that the last I remembered was yesterday evening and that I had been in Denver, at the New Brown Palace. Finally he said, "Well, it's quite interesting, even exciting, and I suppose somebody who's going into Boulder can drop you there and you can get a bus back into Denver." He looked at me again. "But if I take you back to the clubhouse, people are going to be mighty, mighty curious."

I looked down at myself. I had been made vaguely uneasy by the fact that I was dressed and they were not—I mean I felt like the one out of order, not they. "John . . . would it simplify things if I peeled off my clothes, too?" The prospect did not upset me; I



had never been in one of the bare-skin camps before, seeing no point in them. But Chuck and I had spent a couple of weekends at Santa Barbara and one at Laguna Beach—at a beach skin makes sense and nothing else does.

He nodded. "It certainly would."

"Dear," said Jenny, "he could be our guest."

"Mmm . . . yes. My only love, you paddle your sweet self into the grounds. Mix around and manage to let it be known that we are expecting a guest from . . . where had it better be, Danny?"

"Uh, from California. Los Angeles. I actually am from there." I almost said "Great Los Angeles" and realized that I was going to have to guard my speech. "Movies" were no longer "grabbies."

"From Los Angeles. That and 'Danny' is all that is necessary; we don't use last names, unless offered. So, honey, you spread the word, as if it were something everybody already knew. Then in about half an hour you have to meet us down by the gate. But come here instead. And fetch my overnight bag."

"Why the bag, dear?"

"To conceal that masquerade costume. It's pretty conspicuous, even for anyone who is as eccentric as Danny said he is."

I got up and went at once behind some bushes to undress, since I wouldn't have any excuse for locker-room modesty once Jenny Sutton left us. I had to do it; I couldn't peel down and reveal that I had twenty thousand dollars' worth of gold, figured at the 1970 standard of sixty dollars an ounce, wrapped around my waist. It did not take long, as I had made a belt of the gold, instead of a girdle, the first time I had had trouble getting it off and on to bathe; I had double-looped it and wired it together in front.

When I had my clothes off I wrapped the gold in them and tried to pretend that it all weighed only what clothes should. John Sutton glanced at the bundle but said nothing. He offered me a cigarette—he carried them strapped to his ankle. They were a brand I had never expected to see again.

I waved it but it didn't light. Then I let him light it for me. "Now," he said quietly, "that we are alone, do you have anything you want to tell me? If I'm going to vouch for you to the club, I'm honor-bound to be sure, at the very least, that you won't make trouble."

I took a puff. It felt raw in my throat. "John, I won't make any trouble. That's the last thing on earth that I want."



"Mmm . . . probably. Just 'dizzy spells' then?"

I thought about it. It was an impossible situation. The man had a right to know. But he certainly would not believe the truth . . . at least *I* would not have in his shoes. But it would be worse if he *did* believe me; it would kick up the very hoorah that I did not want. I suppose that if I had been a real, honest, legitimate time traveler, engaged in scientific research, I would have sought publicity, brought along indisputable proof, and invited tests by scientists.

But I wasn't; I was a private and somewhat shady citizen, engaged in hanky-panky I didn't want to call attention to. I was simply looking for my Door into Summer, as quietly as possible.

"John, you wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"Mmm . . . perhaps. Still, I saw a man fall out of empty sky . . . but he didn't hit hard enough to hurt him. He's wearing funny clothes. He doesn't seem to know where he is or what day it is. Danny, I've read Charles Fort, the same as most people. But I never expected to meet a case. But, having met one, I don't expect the explanation to be as simple as a card trick. So?"

"John, something you said earlier—the way you phrased something—made me think you were a lawyer."

"Yes, I am. Why?"

"Can I make a privileged communication?"

"Hmm—are you asking me to accept you as a client?"

"If you want to put it that way, yes. I'm probably going to need advice."

"Shoot. Privileged."

"Okay. I'm from the future. Time travel."

He didn't say anything for several moments. We were lying stretched out in the sun. I was doing it to keep warm; May in Colorado is sunshiny but brisk. John Sutton seemed used to it and was simply lounging, chewing a pine needle.

"You're right," he answered. "I don't believe it. Let's stick to 'dizzy spells.'"

"I told you you wouldn't."

He sighed. "Let's say I don't want to. I don't want to believe in ghosts, either, or reincarnation, or any of this ESP magic. I like simple things that I can understand. I think most people do. So my first advice to you is to keep it a privileged communication. Don't spread it around."



"That suits me."

He rolled over. "But I think it would be a good idea if we burned these clothes. I'll find you something to wear. Will they burn?"

"Uh, not very easily. They'll melt."

"Better put your shoes back on. We wear shoes mostly, and those will get by. Anybody asks you questions about them, they're custom-made. Health shoes."

"They are, both."

"Okay." He started to unroll my clothes before I could stop him. "What the devil!"

It was too late, so I let him uncover it. "Danny," he said in a queer voice, "is this stuff what it appears to be?"

"What does it appear to be?"

"Gold."

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"

"I bought it."

He felt it, tried the dead softness of the stuff, sensuous as putty, then hefted it. "Cripes! Danny . . . listen to me carefully. I'm going to ask you one question, and be damned careful how you answer it. Because I've got no use for a client who lies to me. I dump him. And I won't be a party to a felony. Did you come by this stuff legally?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you haven't heard of the Gold Reserve Act of 1968?"

"I have. I came by it legally. I intend to sell it to the Denver Mint, for dollars."

"Jeweler's license, maybe?"

"No. John, I told the simple truth, whether you believe me or not. Where I came from I bought that over the counter, legal as breathing. Now I want to turn it in for dollars at the earliest possible moment. I know that it is against the law to keep it. What can they do to me if I lay it on the counter at the mint and tell them to weigh it?"

"Nothing, in the long run . . . if you stick to your 'dizzy spells.' But they can surely make your life miserable in the meantime." He looked at it. "I think you had better kick a little dirt over it."

"Bury it?"

"You don't have to go that far. But if what you tell me is true,



you found this stuff in the mountains. That's where prospectors usually find gold."

"Well . . . whatever you say. I don't mind some little white lies, since it is legitimately mine anyhow."

"But is it a lie? When did you first lay eyes on this gold? What was the earliest date when it was in your possession?"

I tried to think back. It was the same day I left Yuma, which was sometime in May, 2001. About two weeks ago. . . .

*Hunh!*

"Put that way, John . . . the earliest date on which I saw that gold . . . was today, May third, 1970."

He nodded. "So you found it in the mountains."

The Suttons were staying over until Monday morning, so I stayed over. The other club members were all friendly but remarkably unnosy about my personal affairs, less so than any group I've ever been in. I've learned since that this constitutes standard good manners in a skin club, but at the time it made them the most discreet and most polite people I had ever met.

John and Jenny had their own cabin and I slept on a cot in the clubhouse dormitory. It was darn chilly. The next morning John gave me a shirt and a pair of blue jeans. My own clothes were wrapped around the gold in a bag in the trunk of his car—which itself was a Jaguar Imperator, all I needed to tell me that he was no cheap shyster. But I had known that by his manner.

I stayed overnight with them and by Tuesday I had a little money. I never laid eyes on the gold again, but in the course of the next few weeks John turned over to me its exact mint value as bullion minus the standard fees of licensed gold buyers. I know that he did not deal with the mint directly, as he always turned over to me vouchers from gold buyers. He did not deduct for his own services and he never offered to tell me the details.

I did not care. Once I had cash again, I got busy. That first Tuesday, 5 May, 1970, Jenny drove me around and I rented a small loft in the old commercial district. I equipped it with a drafting table, a workbench, an army cot, and darn little else; it already had 120, 240, gas, running water, and a toilet that stopped up easily. I didn't want any more and I had to watch every dime.

It was tedious and time-wasting to design by the old compass-and-T-square routine and I didn't have a minute to spare, so I



built *Drafting Dan* before I rebuilt *Flexible Frank*. Only this time *Flexible Frank* became *Protean Pete*, the all-purpose automaton, so linked as to be able to do almost anything a man can do, provided its Thorsen tubes were properly instructed. I knew that *Protean Pete* would not stay that way; his descendants would evolve into a horde of specialized gadgets, but I wanted to make the claims as broad as possible.

Working models are not required for patents, merely drawings and descriptions. But I needed good models, models that would work perfectly and anybody could demonstrate, because these models were going to have to sell themselves, show by their very practicality and by the evident economy designed into them for their eventual production engineering that they would not only work but would be a good investment—the patent office is stuffed with things that work but are worthless commercially.

The work went both fast and slow, fast because I knew exactly what I was doing, slow because I did not have a proper machine shop nor any help. Presently I grudgingly dipped into my precious cash to rent some machine tools, then things went better. I worked from breakfast to exhaustion, seven days a week, except for about one weekend a month with John and Jenny at the bare-bottom club near Boulder. By the first of September I had both models working properly and was ready to start on the drawings and descriptions. I designed and sent out for manufacture pretty speckle-lacquer cover plates for both of them and I had the external moving parts chrome-plated; these were the only jobs I farmed out and it hurt me to spend the money, but I felt that it was necessary. Oh, I had made extreme use of catalogue-available standard components; I could not have built them otherwise, nor would they have been commercial when I got through. But I did not like to spend money on custom-made prettiness.

I did not have time to get around much, which was just as well. Once when I was out buying a servo motor I ran into a chap I had known in California. He spoke to me and I answered before I thought. "Hey, Dan! Danny Davis! Imagine bumping into you here. I thought you were in Mojave?"

I shook hands. "Just a quick business trip. I'm going back in a few days."

"I'm going back this afternoon. I'll phone Miles and tell him I saw you."



I looked worried and was. "Don't do that, please."

"Why not? Aren't you and Miles still buddy-buddy budding tycoons together?"

"Well . . . look, Mort, Miles doesn't know I'm here. I'm supposed to be in Albuquerque on business for the company. But I flew up here on the side, on strictly personal and private business. Get me? Nothing to do with the firm. And I don't care to discuss it with Miles."

He looked knowing. "Woman trouble?"

"Well . . . yes."

"She married?"

"You might say so."

He dug me in the ribs and winked. "I catch. Old Miles is pretty puritanical isn't he? Okay, I'll cover for you and someday you can cover for me. Is she any good?"

I'd like to cover you with a spade, I thought to myself, you fourth-rate frallup. Mort was the sort of no-good traveling salesman who spends more time trying to seduce waitresses than taking care of his customers—besides which, the line he handled was as shoddy as he was, never up to its specs.

But I bought him a drink and treated him to fairy tales about the "married woman" I had invented and listened while he boasted to me of no doubt equally fictitious exploits. Then I shook him.

On another occasion I tried to buy Dr. Twitchell a drink and failed.

I had seated myself beside him at the restaurant counter of a drugstore on Champa Street, then caught sight of his face in the mirror. My first impulse was to crawl under the counter and hide.

Then I caught hold of myself and realized that, out of all the persons living in 1970, he was the one I had least need to worry about. Nothing could go wrong because nothing had . . . I meant "nothing would." No— Then I quit trying to phrase it, realizing that if time travel ever became widespread, English grammar was going to have to add a whole new set of tenses to describe reflexive situations—conjugations that would make the French literary tenses and the Latin historical tenses look simple.

In any case, past or future or something else, Twitchell was not a worry to me now. I could relax.

I studied his face in the mirror, wondering if I had been misled



by a chance resemblance. But I had not been. Twitchell did not have a general-issue face like mine; he had stern, self-assured, slightly arrogant and quite handsome features which would have looked at home on Zeus. I remembered that face only in ruins, but there was no doubt—and I squirmed inside as I thought of the old man and how badly I had treated him. I wondered how I could make it up to him.

Twitchell caught sight of me eying him in the mirror and turned to me. "Something wrong?"

"No. Uh . . . you're Dr. Twitchell, aren't you? At the university?"

"Denver University, yes. Have we met?"

I had almost slipped, having forgotten that he taught at the city university in this year. Remembering in two directions is difficult. "No, Doctor, but I've heard you lecture. You might say I'm one of your fans."

His mouth twitched in a half-smile but he did not rise to it. From that and other things I learned that he had not yet acquired a gnawing need for adulation; he was sure of himself at that age and needed only his own self-approval. "Are you sure you haven't got me mixed up with a movie star?"

"Oh no! You're Dr. Hubert Twitchell . . . the great physicist."

His mouth twitched again. "Let's just say that I am a physicist. Or try to be."

We chatted for a while and I tried to hang onto him after he had finished his sandwich. I said it would be an honor if he would let me buy him a drink. He shook his head. "I hardly drink at all and certainly never before dark. Thanks anyway. It's been nice meeting you. Drop into my lab someday if you are ever around the campus."

I said I would.

But I did not make many slips in 1970 (second time around) because I understood it and, anyhow, most people who might have recognized me were in California. I resolved that if I did meet any more familiar faces I would give them the cold stare and the quick brushoff—take no chances.

But little things can cause you trouble too. Like the time I got caught in a zipper simply because I had become used to the more convenient and much safer Sticktite closures. A lot of little things like that I missed very much after having learned in only six



months to take them for granted. Shaving—I had to go back to *shaving*! Once I even caught a cold. That horrid ghost of the past resulted from forgetting that clothes could get soaked in rain. I wish that those precious esthetes who sneer at progress and prattle about the superior beauties of the past could have been with me—dishes that let food get chilled, shirts that had to be laundered, bathroom mirrors that steamed up when you needed them, runny noses, dirt underfoot and dirt in your lungs—I had become used to a better way of living and 1970 was a series of petty frustrations until I got the hang of it again.

But a dog gets used to his fleas and so did I. Denver in 1970 was a very quaint place with a fine old-fashioned flavor; I became very fond of it. It was nothing like the slick New Plan maze it had been (or would be) when I had arrived (or would arrive) there from Yuma; it still had less than two million people, there were still buses and other vehicular traffic in the streets—there still were *streets*; I had no trouble finding Colfax Avenue.

Denver was still getting used to being the national seat of government and was not quite happy in the role, like a boy in his first formal evening clothes. Its spirit still yearned for high-heeled boots and its Western twang even though it knew it had to grow up and be an international metropolis, with embassies and spies and famous gourmet restaurants. The city was being jerry-built in all directions to house the bureaucrats and lobbyists and contact men and clerk-typists and flunkies; buildings were being thrown up so fast that with each one there was hazard of enclosing a cow inside the walls. Nevertheless, the city had extended only a few miles past Aurora on the east, to Henderson on the north, and Littleton on the south—there was still open country before you reached the Air Academy. On the west, of course, the city flowed into the high country and the federal bureaus were tunneling back into the mountains.

I liked Denver during its federal boom. Nevertheless, I was excruciatingly anxious to get back to my own time.

It was always the little things. I had had my teeth worked over completely shortly after I had been put on the staff of Hired Girl and could afford it. I had never expected to have to see a dental plastician again. Nevertheless, in 1970 I did not have anti-caries pills and so I got a hole in a tooth, a painful one or I would have ignored it. So I went to a dentist. So help me, I had forgotten what



he would see when he looked into my mouth. He blinked, moved his mirror around, and said, "Great jumping Jehosaphat! Who was your dentist?"

"Kah hoo hank?"

He took his hands out of my mouth. "Who did it? And how?"

"Huh? You mean my teeth? Oh, that's experimental work they're doing in . . . India."

"How do they do it?"

"How would I know?"

"Mmm . . . wait a minute. I've got to get some pictures of this." He started fiddling with his X-ray equipment.

"Oh no," I objected. "Just clean out that bicuspid, plug it up with anything, and let me out of here."

"But—"

"I'm sorry, Doctor. But I'm on a dead run."

So he did as I said, pausing now and again to look at my teeth. I paid cash and did not leave my name. I suppose I could have let him have the pics, but covering up had become a reflex. It couldn't have hurt anything to let him have them. Nor helped either, as X rays would not show how regeneration was accomplished, nor could I have told him.

There is no time like the past to get things done. While I was sweating sixteen hours a day on *Drafting Dan* and *Protean Pete* I got something else done with my left hand. Working anonymously through John's law office I hired a detective agency with national branches to dig up Belle's past. I supplied them with her address and the license number and model of her car (since steering wheels are good places to get fingerprints) and suggested that she might have been married here and there and possibly might have a police record. I had to limit the budget severely; I couldn't afford the sort of investigation you read about.

When they did not report back in ten days I kissed my money good-by. But a few days later a thick envelope showed up at John's office.

Belle had been a busy girl. Born six years earlier than she claimed, she had been married twice before she was eighteen. One of them did not count because the man already had a wife; if she had been divorced from the second the agency had not uncovered it.

She had apparently been married four times since then although



once was doubtful; it may have been the "war-widow" racket worked with the aid of a man who was dead and could not object. She had been divorced once (respondent) and one of her husbands was dead. She might still be "married" to the others.

Her police record was long and interesting but apparently she had been convicted of a felony only once, in Nebraska, and granted parole without doing time. This was established only by fingerprints, as she had jumped parole, changed her name, and had acquired a new social-security number. The agency asked if they were to notify Nebraska authorities.

I told them not to bother; she had been missing for nine years and her conviction had been for nothing worse than lure in a badger game. I wondered what I would have done if it had been dope peddling? Reflexive decisions have their complications.

I ran behind schedule on the drawings and October was on me before I knew it. I still had the description only half worded, since they had to tie into drawings, and I had done nothing about the claims. Worse, I had done nothing about organizing the deal so that it would hold up; I could not do it until I had a completed job to show. Nor had I had time to make contacts. I began to think that I had made a mistake in not asking Dr. Twitchell to set the controls for at least thirty-two years instead of thirty-one years and a fiddling three weeks; I had underestimated the time I would need and overestimated my own capacity.

I had not shown my toys to my friends, the Suttons, not because I wanted to hide them, but because I had not wanted a lot of talk and useless advice while they were incomplete. On the last Saturday in September I was scheduled to go out to the club camp with them. Being behind schedule, I had worked late the night before, then had been awakened early by the torturing clang of an alarm clock so that I could shave and be ready to go when they came by. I shut the sadistic thing off and thanked God that they had got rid of such horrible devices in 2001, then I pulled myself groggily together and went down to the corner drugstore to phone and say that I couldn't make it, I had to work.

Jenny answered, "Danny, you're working too hard. A weekend in the country will do you good."

"I can't help it, Jenny. I have to. I'm sorry."

John got on the other phone and said, "What's all this nonsense?"



"I've got to work, John. I've simply got to. Say hello to the folks for me."

I went back upstairs, burned some toast, vulcanized some eggs, sat back down at *Drafting Dan*.

An hour later they banged on my door.

None of us went to the mountains that weekend. Instead I demonstrated both devices. Jenny was not much impressed by *Drafting Dan* (it isn't a woman's gismo, unless she herself is an engineer), but she was wide-eyed over *Protean Pete*. She kept house with a Mark II *Hired Girl* and could see how much more this machine could do.

But John could see the importance of *Drafting Dan*. When I showed him how I could write my signature, recognizably my own, just by punching keys—I admit I had practiced—his eyebrows stayed up. "Chum, you're going to throw draftsmen out of work by the thousand."

"No, I won't. The shortage of engineering talent in this country gets worse every year; this gadget will just help to fill the gap. In a generation you are going to see this tool in every engineering and architectural office in the nation. They'll be as lost without it as a modern mechanic would be without power tools."

"You talk as if you knew."

"I do know."

He looked over at *Protean Pete*—I had set him to tidying my workbench—and back at *Drafting Dan*. "Danny . . . sometimes I think maybe you were telling me the truth, you know, the day we met you."

I shrugged. "Call it second sight . . . but I do know. I'm certain. Does it matter?"

"I guess not. What are your plans for these things?"

I frowned. "That's the hitch, John. I'm a good engineer and a fair jackleg mechanic when I have to be. But I'm no businessman; I've proved that. You've never fooled with patent law?"

"I told you that before. It's a job for a specialist."

"Do you know an honest one? Who's smart as a whip besides? It's reached the point where I've got to have one. I've got to set up a corporation, too, to handle it. And work out the financing. But I haven't got much time; I'm *terribly* pressed for time."

"Why?"

"I'm going back where I came from."



He sat and said nothing for quite a while. At last he said, "How much time?"

"Uh, about nine weeks. Nine weeks from this coming Thursday to be exact."

He looked at the two machines, looked back at me. "Better revise your schedule. I'd say that you had more like nine months' work cut out for you. You won't be in production even then—just lined up to start moving, with luck."

"John, I can't."

"I'll say you can't."

"I mean I can't change my schedule. That's beyond my control . . . now." I put my face in my hands. I was dead with fatigue, having had less than five hours' sleep and having averaged not much better for days. The shape I was in, I was willing to believe that there was something, after all, to this "fate" business—a man could struggle against it but never beat it.

I looked up. "Will *you* handle it?"

"Eh? What part of it?"

"Everything. I've done all I know how to do."

"That's a big order, Dan. I could rob you blind. You know that, don't you? And this may be a gold mine."

"It will be. I know."

"Then why trust me? You had better just keep me as your attorney, advice for a fee."

I tried to think while my head ached. I had taken a partner once before—but, damnation, no matter how many times you get your fingers burned, you *have* to trust people. Otherwise you are a hermit in a cave, sleeping with one eye open. There wasn't any way to be safe; just being alive was deadly dangerous . . . fatal. In the end.

"Cripes, John, you know the answer to that. *You* trusted *me*. Now I need your help again. Will you help me?"

"Of course he will," Jenny put in gently, "though I haven't heard what you two were talking about. Danny? Can it wash dishes? Every dish you have is dirty."

"What, Jenny? Why, I suppose he can. Yes, of course he can."

"Then tell him to, please. I want to see it."

"Oh. I've never programmed him for it. I will if you want me to. But it will take several hours to do it right. Of course after that he'll always be able to do it. But the first time . . . well, you see,



dishwashing involves a lot of alternate choices. It's a 'judgment' job, not a comparatively simple routine like laying bricks or driving a truck."

"Goodness! I'm certainly glad to find that at least one man understands housework. Did you hear what he said, dear? But don't stop to teach him now, Danny. I'll do them myself." She looked around. "Danny, you've been living like a pig, to put it gently."

To tell the simple truth, it had missed me entirely that *Protean Pete* could work for *me*. I had been engrossed in planning how he could work for other people in commercial jobs, and teaching him to do them, while I myself had simply been sweeping dirt into the corner or ignoring it. Now I began teaching him all the household tasks that *Flexible Frank* had learned; he had the capacity, as I had installed three times as many Thorsen tubes in him as *Frank* had had.

I had time to do it, for John took over.

Jenny typed descriptions for us; John retained a patent attorney to help with the claims. I don't know whether John paid him cash or cut him in on the cake; I never asked. I left the whole thing up to him, including what our shares should be; not only did it leave me free for my proper work, but I figured that if he decided such things he could never be tempted the way Miles had been. And I honestly did not care; money as such is not important. Either John and Jenny were what I thought they were or I might as well find that cave and be a hermit.

I insisted on just two things. "John, I think we ought to call the firm 'The Aladdin Autoengineering Corporation.'"

"Sounds pretty fancy. What's wrong with 'Davis & Sutton'?"

"That's how it's got to be, John."

"So? Is your second sight telling you this?"

"Could be, could be. We'll use a picture of Aladdin rubbing his lamp as a trade-mark, with the genie forming above him. I'll make a rough sketch. And one thing: the home office had better be in Los Angeles."

"What? Now you've gone too far. That is, if you expect me to run it. What's wrong with Denver?"

"Nothing is wrong with Denver, it's a nice town. But it is not the place to set up the factory. Pick a good site here and some bright morning you wake up and find that the federal enclave has washed over it and you are out of business until you get re-es-



tablished on a new one. Besides that, labor is scarce, raw materials come overland, building materials are all gray-market. Whereas Los Angeles has an unlimited supply of skilled workmen and more pouring in every day, Los Angeles is a seaport, Los Angeles is——”

“How about the smog? It’s not worth it.”

“They’ll lick the smog before long. Believe me. And haven’t you noticed that Denver is working up smog of its own?”

“Now wait a minute, Dan. You’ve already made it clear that I will have to run this while you go kiyooodling off on some business of your own. Okay, I agreed. But I ought to have some choice in working conditions.”

“It’s necessary, John.”

“Dan, nobody in his right mind who lives in Colorado would move to California. I was stationed out there during the war; I *know*. Take Jenny here; she’s a native Californian, that’s her secret shame. You couldn’t hire her to go back. Here you’ve got winters, changing seasons, brisk mountain air, magnificent——”

Jenny looked up. “Oh, I wouldn’t go so far as to say I’d *never* go back.”

“What’s that, dear?”

Jenny had been quietly knitting; she never talked unless she really had something to say. Now she put down her knitting, a clear sign. “If we did move there, dear, we could join the Oakdale Club; they have outdoor swimming all year round. I was thinking of that just this last weekend when I saw ice on the pool at Boulder.”

I stayed until the evening of 2 December, 1970, the last possible minute. I was forced to borrow three thousand dollars from John—the prices I had paid for components had been scandalous—but I offered him a stock mortgage to secure it. He let me sign it, then tore it up and dropped it in a wastebasket. “Pay me when you get around to it.”

“It will be thirty years, John.”

“As long as that?”

I pondered it. He had never invited me to tell my whole story since the afternoon, six months earlier, when he had told me frankly that he did not believe the essential part—but was going to vouch for me to their club anyhow.



I told him I thought it was time to tell him. "Shall we wake up Jenny? She's entitled to hear it too."

"Mmm . . . no. Let her nap until just before you have to leave. Jenny is a very uncomplicated person, Dan. She doesn't care who you are or where you came from as long as she likes you. If it seems a good idea, I can pass it on to her later."

"As you will." He let me tell it all, stopping only to fill our glasses—mine with ginger ale; I had a reason not to touch alcohol. When I had brought it up to the point where I landed on a mountainside outside Boulder, I stopped. "That's it," I said. "Though I was mixed up on one point. I've looked at the contour since and I don't think my fall was more than two feet. If they had—I mean 'if they were going to'—bulldoze that laboratory site any deeper, I would have been buried alive. Probably would have killed both of you too—if it didn't blow up the whole county. I don't know just what happens when a flat wave form changes back into a mass where another mass already is."

John went on smoking. "Well?" I said. "What do you think?"

"Danny, you've told me a lot of things about what Los Angeles—I mean 'Great Los Angeles'—is going to be like. I'll let you know when I see you just how accurate you've been."

"It's accurate. Subject to minor slips of memory."

"Mmm . . . you certainly make it sound logical. But in the meantime I think you are the most agreeable lunatic I've ever met. Not that it handicaps you as an engineer . . . or as a friend. I like you, boy. I'm going to buy you a new strait jacket for Christmas."

"Have it your own way."

"I *have* to have it this way. The alternative is that I myself am stark staring mad . . . and that would make quite a problem for Jenny." He glanced at the clock. "We'd better wake her. She'd scalp me if I let you leave without saying good-by to her."

"I wouldn't think of it."

They drove me to Denver International Port and Jenny kissed me good-by at the gate. I caught the eleven o'clock shuttle for Los Angeles.



# 11

The following evening, 3 December, 1970, I had a cabdriver drop me a block from Miles's house comfortably early, as I did not know exactly what time I had arrived there the first time. It was already dark as I approached his house, but I saw only his car at the curb, so I backed off a hundred yards to a spot where I could watch that stretch of curb and waited.

Two cigarettes later I saw another car pull up there, stop, and its lights go out. I waited a couple of minutes longer, then hurried toward it. It was my own car.

I did not have a key but that was no hurdle; I was always getting ears-deep in an engineering problem and forgetting my keys; I had long ago formed the habit of keeping a spare ditched in the trunk. I got it now and climbed into the car. I had parked on a slight grade heading downhill, so, without turning on lights or starting the engine, I let it drift to the corner and turned there, then switched on the engine but not the lights, and parked again in the alley back of Miles's house and on which his garage faced.

The garage was locked. I peered through dirty glass and saw a shape with a sheet over it. By its contours I knew it was my old friend *Flexible Frank*.

Garage doors are not built to resist a man armed with a tire iron and determination—not in southern California in 1970. It took seconds. Carving *Frank* into pieces I could carry and stuff into my car took much longer. But first I checked to see that the notes and drawings were where I suspected they were—they were indeed, so I hauled them out and dumped them on the floor of the car, then tackled *Frank* himself. Nobody knew as well as I did how he was put together, and it speeded up things enormously that I did not care how much damage I did; nevertheless, I was as busy as a one-man band for nearly an hour.

I had just stowed the last piece, the wheel-chair chassis, in the car trunk and had lowered the turtleback down on it as far as it would go when I heard Pete start to wail. Swearing to myself at



the time it had taken to tear *Frank* apart I hurried around the garage and into their back yard. Then the commotion started.

I had promised myself that I would relish every second of Pete's triumph. But I couldn't see it. The back door was open and light was streaming out the screen door, but while I could hear sounds of running, crashes, Pete's blood-chilling war cry, and screams from Belle, they never accommodated me by coming into my theater of vision. So I crept up to the screen door, hoping to catch a glimpse of the carnage.

The damned thing was hooked! It was the only thing that had failed to follow the schedule. So I frantically dug into my pocket, broke a nail getting my knife open—and jabbed through and unhooked it just in time to jump out of the way as Pete hit the screen like a stunt motorcyclist hitting a fence.

I fell over a rosebush. I don't know whether Miles and Belle even tried to follow him outside. I doubt it; I would not have risked it in their spot. But I was too busy getting myself untangled to notice.

Once I was on my feet I stayed behind bushes and moved around to the side of the house; I wanted to get away from that open door and the light pouring out of it. Then it was just a case of waiting until Pete quieted down. I would not touch him then, certainly not try to pick him up. I know cats.

But every time he passed me, prowling for an entrance and sounding his deep challenge, I called out to him softly. "Pete. Come here, Pete. Easy, boy, it's all right."

He knew I was there and twice he looked at me, but otherwise ignored me. With cats it is one thing at a time; he had urgent business right now and no time to head-bump with Papa. But I knew he would come to me when his emotions had eased off.

While I squatted, waiting, I heard water running in their bathrooms and guessed that they had gone to clean up, leaving me in the living room. I had a horrid thought then: what would happen if I sneaked in and cut the throat of my own helpless body? But I suppressed it; I wasn't that curious and suicide is such a final experiment, even if the circumstances are mathematically intriguing.

But I never have figured it out.

Besides, I didn't want to go inside for any purpose. I might run into Miles—and I didn't want any truck with a dead man.

Pete finally stopped in front of me about three feet out of reach.



"Mrrrowrr?" he said—meaning, "Let's go back and clean out the joint. You hit 'em high, I'll hit 'em low."

"No, boy. The show is over."

"Aw, c'mahnnn!"

"Time to go home, Pete. Come to Danny."

He sat down and started to wash himself. When he looked up, I put my arms out and he jumped into them. "Kwleert?" ("Where the hell were *you* when the riot started?")

I carried him back to the car and dumped him in the driver's space, which was all there was left. He sniffed the hardware on his accustomed place and looked around reproachfully. "You'll have to sit in my lap," I said. "Quit being fussy."

I switched on the car's lights as we hit the street. Then I turned east and headed for Big Bear and the Girl Scout camp. I chucked away enough of *Frank* in the first ten minutes to permit Pete to resume his rightful place, which suited us both better. When I had the floor clear, several miles later, I stopped and shoved the notes and drawings down a storm drain. The wheel-chair chassis I did not get rid of until we were actually in the mountains, then it went down a deep arroyo, making a nice sound effect.

About three in the morning I pulled into a motor court across the road and down a bit from the turnoff into the Girl Scout camp, and paid too much for a cabin—Pete almost queered it by sticking his head up and making a comment when the owner came out.

"What time," I asked him, "does the morning mail from Los Angeles get up here?"

"Helicopter comes in at seven-thirteen, right on the dot."

"Fine. Give me a call at seven, will you?"

"Mister, if you can sleep as late as seven around here you're better than I am. But I'll put you in the book."

By eight o'clock Pete and I had eaten breakfast and I had showered and shaved. I looked Pete over in daylight and concluded that he had come through the battle undamaged except for possibly a bruise or two. We checked out and I drove into the private road for the camp. Uncle Sam's truck turned in just ahead of me; I decided that it was my day.

I never saw so many little girls in my life. They skittered like kittens and they all looked alike in their green uniforms. Those I passed wanted to look at Pete, though most of them just stared shyly and did not approach. I went to a cabin marked "Head-



quarters," where I spoke to another uniformed scout who was decidedly no longer a girl.

She was properly suspicious of me; strange men who want to be allowed to visit little girls just turning into big girls should always be suspected.

I explained that I was the child's uncle, Daniel B. Davis by name, and that I had a message for the child concerning her family. She countered with the statement that visitors other than parents were permitted only when accompanied by a parent and, in any case, visiting hours were not until four o'clock.

"I don't want to visit with Frederica, but I must give her this message. It's an emergency."

"In that case you can write it out and I will give it to her as soon as she is through with rhythm games."

I looked upset (and was) and said, "I don't want to do that. It would be much kinder to tell the child in person."

"Death in the family?"

"Not quite. Family trouble, yes. I'm sorry, ma'am, but I am not free to tell anyone else. It concerns my niece's mother."

She was weakening but still undecided. Then Pete joined the discussion. I had been carrying him with his bottom in the crook of my left arm and his chest supported with my right hand; I had not wanted to leave him in the car and I knew Ricky would want to see him. He'll put up with being carried that way quite a while but now he was getting bored. "Krrwarr?"

She looked at him and said, "He's a fine boy, that one. I have a tabby at home who could have come from the same litter."

I said solemnly, "He's Frederica's cat. I had to bring him along because . . . well, it was necessary. No one to take care of him."

"Oh, the poor little fellow!" She scratched him under the chin, doing it properly, thank goodness, and Pete accepted it, thank goodness again, stretching his neck and closing his eyes and looking indecently pleased. He is capable of taking a very stiff line with strangers if he does not fancy their overtures.

The guardian of youth told me to sit down at a table under the trees outside the headquarters. It was far enough away to permit a private visit but still under her careful eye. I thanked her and waited.

I didn't see Ricky come up. I heard a shout, "Uncle Danny!"



and another one as I turned, "And you brought *Pete!* Oh, this is *wonderful!*"

Pete gave a long bubbling *bleerrrt* and leaped from my arms to hers. She caught him neatly, rearranged him in the support position he likes best, and they ignored me for a few seconds while exchanging cat protocols. Then she looked up and said soberly, "Uncle Danny, I'm awful glad you're here."

I didn't kiss her; I did not touch her at all. I've never been one to paw children and Ricky was the sort of little girl who only put up with it when she could not avoid it. Our original relationship, back when she was six, had been founded on mutual decent respect for the other's individualism and personal dignity.

But I did look at her. Knobby knees, stringy, shooting up fast, not yet filled out, she was not as pretty as she had been as a baby girl. The shorts and T-shirt she was wearing, combined with peeling sunburn, scratches, bruises, and an understandable amount of dirt, did not add up to feminine glamour. She was a matchstick sketch of the woman she would become, her coltish gawkiness relieved only by her enormous solemn eyes and the pixie beauty of her thin smudged features.

She looked adorable.

I said, "And I'm awful glad to be here, Ricky."

Trying awkwardly to manage Pete with one arm, she reached with her other hand for a bulging pocket in her shorts. "I'm surprised too. I just this minute got a letter from you—they dragged me away from mail call; I haven't even had a chance to open it. Does it say that you're coming today?" She got it out, creased and mussed from being crammed into a pocket too small.

"No, it doesn't, Ricky. It says I'm going away. But after I mailed it, I decided I just had to come say good-by in person."

She looked bleak and dropped her eyes. "You're going away?"

"Yes. I'll explain, Ricky, but it's rather long. Let's sit down and I'll tell you about it." So we sat on opposite sides of the picnic table under the ponderosas and I talked. Pete lay on the table between us, making a library lion of himself with his forepaws on the creased letter, and sang a low song like bees buzzing in deep clover, while he narrowed his eyes in contentment.

I was much relieved to find that she already knew that Miles had married Belle—I hadn't relished having to break that to her.



She glanced up, dropped her eyes at once, and said with no expression at all, "Yes, I know. Daddy wrote me about it."

"Oh. I see."

She suddenly looked grim and not at all a child. "I'm not going back there, Danny. I *won't* go back there."

"But— Look here, Rikki-tikki-tavi, I know how you feel. I certainly don't want you to go back there—I'd take you away myself if I could. But how can you help going back? He's your daddy and you are only eleven."

"I don't have to go back. He's not my real daddy. My grandmother is coming to get me."

"What? When's she coming?"

"Tomorrow. She has to drive up from Brawley. I wrote her about it and asked her if I could come live with her because I wouldn't live with Daddy any more with *her* there." She managed to put more contempt into one pronoun than an adult could have squeezed out of profanity. "Grandma wrote back and said that I didn't have to live there if I didn't want to because he had never adopted me and she was my 'guardian of record.'" She looked up anxiously. "That's right, isn't it? They can't make me?"

I felt an overpowering flood of relief. The one thing I had not been able to figure out, a problem that had worried me for months, was how to keep Ricky from being subjected to the poisonous influence of Belle for—well, two years; it had seemed certain that it would be about two years. "If he never adopted you, Ricky, I'm certain that your grandmother can make it stick if you are both firm about it." Then I frowned and chewed my lip. "But you may have some trouble tomorrow. They may object to letting you go with her."

"How can they stop me? I'll just get in the car and go."

"It's not that simple, Ricky. These people who run the camp, they have to follow rules. Your daddy—Miles, I mean—Miles turned you over to them; they won't be willing to turn you back over to anyone but him."

She stuck out her lower lip. "I won't go. I'm going with Grandma."

"Yes. But maybe I can tell you how to make it easy. If I were you, I wouldn't tell them that I'm leaving camp; I'd just tell them that your grandmother wants to take you for a ride—then don't come back."



Some of her tension relaxed. "All right."

"Uh . . . don't pack a bag or anything or they may guess what you're doing. Don't try to take any clothes but those you are wearing at the time. Put any money or anything you really want to save into your pockets. You don't have much here that you would really mind losing, I suppose?"

"I guess not." But she looked wistful. "I've got a brand-new swim suit."

How do you explain to a child that there are times when you just must abandon your baggage? You can't—they'll go back into a burning building to save a doll or a toy elephant. "Mmm . . . Ricky, have your grandmother tell them that she is taking you over to Arrowhead to have a swim with her . . . and that she may take you to dinner at the hotel there, but that she will have you back before taps. Then you can carry your swimming suit and a towel. But nothing else. Er, will your grandmother tell that fib for you?"

"I guess so. Yes, I'm sure she will. She says people have to tell little white fibs or else people couldn't stand each other. But she says fibs were meant to be used, not abused."

"She sounds like a sensible person. You'll do it that way?"

"I'll do it just that way, Danny."

"Good." I picked up the battered envelope. "Ricky, I told you I had to go away. I have to go away for a very long time."

"How long?"

"Thirty years."

Her eyes grew wider if possible. At eleven, thirty years is not a long time; it's forever. I added, "I'm sorry, Ricky. But I have to."

"Why?"

I could not answer that one. The true answer was unbelievable and a lie would not do. "Ricky, it's much too hard to explain. But I have to. I can't help it." I hesitated, then added, "I'm going to take the Long Sleep. The cold sleep—you know what I mean."

She knew. Children get used to new ideas faster than adults do; cold sleep was a favorite comic-book theme. She looked horrified and protested, "But, Danny, *I'll never see you again!*"

"Yes, you will. It's a long time but I'll see you again. And so will Pete. Because Pete is going with me; he's going to cold-sleep too."

She glanced at Pete and looked more woebegone than ever.



"But—Danny, why don't you and Pete just come down to Brawley and live with us? That would be ever so much better. Grandma will like Pete. She'll like you too—she says there's nothing like having a man around the house."

"Ricky . . . dear Ricky . . . I *have* to. Please don't tease me." I started to tear open the envelope.

She looked angry and her chin started to quiver. "I think *she* has something to do with this!"

"What? If you mean Belle, she doesn't. Not exactly, anyway."

"She's not going to cold-sleep with you?"

I think I shuddered. "Good heavens, no! I'd run miles to avoid her."

Ricky seemed slightly mollified. "You know, I was so *mad* at you about *her*. I had an awful outrage."

"I'm sorry, Ricky. I'm truly sorry. You were right and I was wrong. But she hasn't anything to do with this. I'm through with her, forever and forever and cross my heart. Now about this." I held up the certificate for all that I owned in Hired Girl, Inc. "Do you know what it is?"

"No."

I explained it to her. "I'm giving this to you, Ricky. Because I'm going to be gone so long I want you to have it." I took the paper on which I had written an assignment to her, tore it up, and put the pieces in my pocket; I could not risk doing it that way—it would be too easy for Belle to tear up a separate sheet and we were not yet out of the woods. I turned the certificate over and studied the standard assignment form on the back, trying to plan how to work it in the Bank of America in trust for—"Ricky, what is your full name?"

"Frederica Virginia. Frederica Virginia Gentry. You know."

"Is it 'Gentry'? I thought you said Miles had never adopted you?"

"Oh! I've been Ricky Gentry as long as I can remember. But you mean my *real* name. It's the same as Grandma's . . . the same as my real daddy's. Heinicke. But nobody ever calls me that."

"They will now." I wrote "Frederica Virginia Heinicke" and added "and to be reassigned to her on her twenty-first birthday" while prickles ran down my spine—my original assignment might have been defective in any case.

I started to sign and then noticed our watchdog sticking her



head out of the office. I glanced at my wrist, saw that we had been talking an hour; I was running out of minutes.

But I wanted it nailed down tight. "Ma'am!"

"Yes?"

"By any chance, is there a notary public around here? Or must I find one in the village?"

"I am a notary. What do you wish?"

"Oh, good! Wonderful! Do you have your seal?"

"I never go anywhere without it."

So I signed my name under her eye and she even stretched a point (on Ricky's assurance that she knew me and Pete's silent testimony to my respectability as a fellow member of the fraternity of cat people) and used the long form: "—known to me personally as being said Daniel B. Davis—" When she embossed her seal through my signature and her own I sighed with relief. Just let Belle try to find a way to twist that one!

She glanced at it curiously but said nothing. I said solemnly, "Tragedies cannot be undone but this will help. The kid's education, you know."

She refused a fee and went back into the office. I turned back to Ricky and said, "Give this to your grandmother. Tell her to take it to a branch of the Bank of America in Brawley. They'll do everything else." I laid it in front of her.

She did not touch it. "That's worth a lot of money, isn't it?"

"Quite a bit. It will be worth more."

"I don't want it."

"But, Ricky, I want you to have it."

"I don't want it. I won't *take* it." Her eyes filled with tears and her voice got unsteady. "You're going away forever and . . . and you don't care about me any more." She sniffed. "Just like when you got engaged to *her*. When you could just as easily bring Pete and come live with Grandma and me. I don't *want* your money!"

"Ricky. Listen to me, Ricky. It's too late. I couldn't take it back now if I wanted to. It's already yours."

"I don't care. I won't ever touch it." She reached out and stroked Pete. "Pete wouldn't go away and leave me . . . only you're going to make him. Now I won't even have Pete."

I answered unsteadily, "Ricky? Rikki-tikki-tavi? You want to see Pete . . . and me again?"

I could hardly hear her. "Of course I do. But I won't."



"But you can."

"Huh? How? You said you were going to take the Long Sleep . . . thirty years, you said."

"And I am. I have to. But, Ricky, here is what you can do. Be a good girl, go live with your grandmama, go to school—and just let this money pile up. When you are twenty-one—if you still want to see us—you'll have enough money to take the Long Sleep yourself. When you wake up I'll be there waiting for you. Pete and I will both be waiting for you. That's a solemn promise."

Her expression changed but she did not smile. She thought about it quite a long time, then said, "You'll really be there?"

"Yes. But we'll have to make a date. If you do it, Ricky, do it just the way I tell you. You arrange it with the Cosmopolitan Insurance Company and you make sure that you take your Sleep in the Riverside Sanctuary in Riverside . . . and you make very sure that they have orders to wake you up on the first day of May, 2001, exactly. I'll be there that day, waiting for you. If you want me to be there when you first open your eyes, you'll have to leave word for that, too, or they won't let me farther than the waiting room—I know that sanctuary; they're very fussy." I took out an envelope which I had prepared before I left Denver. "You don't have to remember this; I've got it all written out for you. Just save it, and on your twenty-first birthday you can make up your mind. But you can be sure that Pete and I will be there waiting for you, whether you show up or not." I laid the prepared instructions on the stock certificate.

I thought that I had her convinced but she did not touch either of them. She stared at them, then presently said, "Danny?"

"Yes, Ricky?"

She would not look up and her voice was so low that I could barely hear her. But I did hear her. "If I do . . . will you marry me?"

My ears roared and the lights flickered. But I answered steadily and much louder than she had spoken. "Yes, Ricky. That's what I want. That's why I'm doing this."

I had just one more thing to leave with her: a prepared envelope marked "To Be Opened in the Event of the Death of Miles Gentry." I did not explain it to her; I just told her to keep it. It contained proof of Belle's varied career, matrimonial and other-



wise. In the hands of a lawyer it should make a court fight over his will no contest at all.

Then I gave her my class ring from Tech (it was all I had) and told her it was hers; we were engaged. "It's too big for you but you can keep it. I'll have another one for you when you wake up."

She held it tight in her fist. "I won't want another one."

"All right. Now better tell Pete good-by, Ricky. I've got to go. I can't wait a minute longer."

She hugged Pete, then handed him back to me, looked me steadily in the eye even though tears were running down her nose and leaving clean streaks. "Good-by, Danny."

"Not 'good-by,' Ricky. Just 'so long.' We'll be waiting for you."

It was a quarter of ten when I got back to the village. I found that a helicopter bus was due to leave for the center of the city in twenty-five minutes, so I sought out the only used-car lot and made one of the fastest deals in history, letting my car go for half what it was worth for cash in hand at once. It left me just time to sneak Pete into the bus (they are fussy about airsick cats) and we reached Powell's office just after eleven o'clock.

Powell was much annoyed that I had canceled my arrangements for Mutual to handle my estate and was especially inclined to lecture me over having lost my papers. "I can't very well ask the same judge to pass on your committal twice in the same twenty-four hours. It's most irregular."

I waved money at him, cash money with convincing figures on it. "Never mind eating me out about it, Sergeant. Do you want my business or don't you? If not, say so, and I'll beat it on up to Central Valley. Because I'm going today."

He still fumed but he gave in. Then he grumbled about adding six months to the cold-sleep period and did not want to guarantee an exact date of awakening. "The contracts ordinarily read 'plus or minus' one month to allow for administrative hazards."

"This one doesn't. This one reads 27 April, 2001. But I don't care whether it says 'Mutual' at the top or 'Central Valley.' Mr. Powell, I'm buying and you're selling. If you don't sell what I want to buy I'll go where they do sell it."

He changed the contract and we both initialed it.

At twelve straight up I was back in for my final check with their medical examiner. He looked at me. "Did you stay sober?"



"Sober as a judge."

"That's no recommendation. We'll see." He went over me almost as carefully as he had "yesterday." At last he put down his rubber hammer and said, "I'm surprised. You're in much better shape than you were yesterday. Amazingly so."

"Doc, you don't know the half of it."

I held Pete and soothed him while they gave him the first sedative. Then I lay back myself and let them work on me. I suppose I could have waited another day, or even longer, just as well as not—but the truth was that I was frantically anxious to get back to 2001.

About four in the afternoon, with Pete's flat head resting on my chest, I went happily to sleep again.

## 12

My dreams were pleasanter this time. The only bad one I remember was not too bad, but simply endless frustration. It was a cold dream in which I wandered shivering through branching corridors, trying every door I came to, thinking that the next one would surely be the Door into Summer, with Ricky waiting on the other side. I was hampered by Pete, "following me ahead of me," that exasperating habit cats have of scalloping back and forth between the legs of persons trusted not to step on them or kick them.

At each new door he would duck between my feet, look out it, find it still winter outside, and reverse himself, almost tripping me.

But neither one of us gave up his conviction that the next door would be the right one.

I woke up easily this time, with no disorientation—in fact the doctor was somewhat irked that all I wanted was some breakfast, the Great Los Angeles *Times*, and no chitchat. I didn't think it was worth while to explain to him that this was my second time around; he would not have believed me.

There was a note waiting for me, dated a week earlier, from John:



*Dear Dan,*

*All right, I give up. How did you do it?*

*I'm complying with your request not to be met, against Jenny's wishes. She sends her love and hopes that you won't be too long in looking us up—I've tried to explain to her that you expect to be busy for a while. We are both fine although I tend to walk where I used to run. Jenny is even more beautiful than she used to be.*

*Hasta la vista, amigo,  
John*

*P.S. If the enclosure is not enough, just phone—there is plenty more where it came from. We've done pretty well, I think.*

I considered calling John, both to say hello and to tell him about a colossal new idea I had had while asleep—a gadget to change bathing from a chore to a sybaritic delight. But I decided not to; I had other things on my mind. So I made notes while the notion was fresh and then got some sleep, with Pete's head tucked into my armpit. I wish I could cure him of that. It's flattering but a nuisance.

On Monday, the thirtieth of April, I checked out and went over to Riverside, where I got a room in the old Mission Inn. They made the predictable fuss about taking a cat into a room and an autobellhop is not responsive to bribes—hardly an improvement. But the assistant manager had more flexibility in his synapses; he listened to reason as long as it was crisp and rustled. I did not sleep well; I was too excited.

I presented myself to the director of the Riverside Sanctuary at ten o'clock the next morning. "Dr. Rumsey, my name is Daniel B. Davis. You have a committed client here named Frederica Heinicke?"

"I suppose you can identify yourself?"

I showed him a 1970 driver's license issued in Denver, and my withdrawal certificate from Forest Lawn Sanctuary. He looked them over and me, and handed them back. I said anxiously, "I think she's scheduled for withdrawal today. By any chance, are there any instructions to permit me to be present? I don't mean the processing routines; I mean at the last minute, when she's ready for the final restimulant and consciousness."



He shoved his lips out and looked judicial. "Our instructions for this client do not read to wake her today."

"No?" I felt disappointed and hurt.

"No. Her exact wishes are as follows: instead of necessarily being waked today, she wished not to be waked at all until you showed up." He looked me over and smiled. "You must have a heart of gold. I can't account for it on your beauty."

I sighed. "Thanks, Doctor."

"You can wait in the lobby or come back. We won't need you for a couple of hours."

I went back to the lobby, got Pete, and took him for a walk. I had parked him there in his new travel bag and he was none too pleased with it, even though I had bought one as much like his old one as possible and had installed a one-way window in it the night before. It probably didn't smell right as yet.

We passed the "real nice place," but I was not hungry even though I hadn't been able to eat much breakfast—Pete had eaten my eggs and had turned up his nose at yeast strips. At eleven-thirty I was back at the sanctuary. Finally they let me in to see her.

All I could see was her face; her body was covered. But it was my Ricky, grown woman size and looking like a slumbering angel.

"She's under posthypnotic instruction," Dr. Rumsey said softly. "If you will stand just there, I'll bring her up. Uh, I think you had better put that cat outside."

"No, Doctor."

He started to speak, shrugged, turned back to his patient. "Wake up, Frederica. Wake up. You must wake up now."

Her eyelids fluttered, she opened her eyes. They wandered for an instant, then she caught sight of us and smiled sleepily. "Danny . . . and Pete." She raised both arms—and I saw that she was wearing my Tech class ring on her left thumb.

Pete chirrlupped and jumped on the bed, started doing shoulder dives against her in an ecstasy of welcome.

Dr. Rumsey wanted her to stay overnight, but Ricky would have none of it. So I had a cab brought to the door and we jumped to Brawley. Her grandmother had died in 1980 and her social links there had gone by attrition, but she had left things in storage there—books mostly. I ordered them shipped to Aladdin,



care of John Sutton. Ricky was a little dazzled by the changes in her old home town and never let go my arm, but she never succumbed to that terrible homesickness which is the great hazard of the Sleep. She merely wanted to get out of Brawley as quickly as possible.

So I hired another cab and we jumped to Yuma. There I signed the county clerk's book in a fine round hand, using my full name "Daniel Boone Davis," so that there could be no possible doubt as to which D. B. Davis had designed this magnum opus. A few minutes later I was standing with her little hand in mine and choking over, "I, Daniel, take thee, Frederica . . . till death us do part."

Pete was my best man. The witnesses we scraped up in the courthouse.

We got out of Yuma at once and jumped to a guest ranch near Tucson, where we had a cabin away from the main lodge and equipped with our own *Eager Beaver* to fetch and carry so that we did not need to see anyone. Pete fought a monumental battle with the tom who until then had been boss of the ranch, whereupon we had to keep Pete in or watch him. This was the only shortcoming I can think of. Ricky took to being married as if she had invented it, and me—well, I had Ricky.

There isn't much more to be said. Voting Ricky's Hired Girl stock—it was still the largest single block—I had McBee eased upstairs to "Research Engineer Emeritus" and put Chuck in as chief engineer. John is boss of Aladdin but keeps threatening to retire—an idle threat. He and I and Jenny control the company, since he was careful to issue preferred stock and to float bonds rather than surrender control. I'm not on the board of either corporation; I don't run them and they compete. Competition is a good idea—Darwin thought well of it.

Me, I'm just the "Davis Engineering Company"—a drafting room, a small shop, and an old machinist who thinks I'm crazy but follows my drawings to exact tolerance. When we finish something I put it out for license.

I had my notes on Twitchell recovered. Then I wrote and told him I had made it and returned via cold sleep . . . and apologized abjectly for having "doubted" him. I asked if he wanted to see the



manuscript when I finished. He never answered so I guess he is still sore at me.

But I *am* writing it and I'll put it in all major libraries even if I have to publish at my own expense. I owe him that much. I owe him much more; I owe him for Ricky. And for Pete. I'm going to title it *Unsung Genius*.

Jenny and John look as if they would last forever. Thanks to geriatrics, fresh air, sunshine, exercise, and a mind that never worries, Jenny is prettier than ever at . . . well, sixty-three is my guess. John thinks that I am "merely" clairvoyant and does not want to look at the evidence. Well, how *did* I do it? I tried to explain it to Ricky, but she got upset when I told her that while we were on our honeymoon I was actually and no foolin' also up at Boulder, and that while I was visiting her at the Girl Scout camp I was also lying in a drugged stupor in San Fernando Valley.

She turned white. So I said, "Let's put it hypothetically. It's all logical when you look at it mathematically. Suppose we take a guinea pig—white with brown splotches. We put him in the time cage and kick him back a week. But a week earlier we had already found him there, so at that time we had put him in a pen with himself. Now we've got two guinea pigs . . . although actually it's just one guinea pig, one being the other one a week older. So when you took one of them and kicked him back a week and——"

"Wait a minute! Which one?"

"Which one? Why, there never was but one. You took the one a week younger, of course, because——"

"You said there was just one. Then you said there were two. Then you said the two was just one. But you were going to take one of the two . . . when there was just one——"

"I'm trying to *explain* how two can be just one. If you take the younger——"

"How can you tell which guinea pig is younger when they look just alike?"

"Well, you could cut off the tail of the one you are sending back. Then when it came back you would——"

"Why, Danny, how cruel! Besides, guinea pigs don't have tails."

She seemed to think that proved something. I should never have tried to explain.

But Ricky is not one to fret over things that aren't important. Seeing that I was upset, she said softly, "Come here, dear." She



rumpled what hair I have left and kissed me. "One of you is all I want, dearest. Two might be more than I could manage. Tell me one thing—are you glad you waited for me to grow up?"

I did my darnedest to convince her that I was.

But the explanation I tried to give does not explain everything. I missed a point even though I was riding the merry-go-round myself and counting the revolutions. Why didn't I see the notice of my own withdrawal? I mean the second one, in April 2001, not the one in December 2000. I should have; I was there and I used to check those lists. I was awakened (second time) on Friday, 27 April, 2001; it should have been in next morning's *Times*. But I did not see it. I've looked it up since and there it is: "D. B. Davis," in the *Times* for Saturday, 28 April, 2001.

Philosophically, just one line of ink can make a different universe as surely as having the continent of Europe missing. Is the old "branching time streams" and "multiple universes" notion correct? Did I bounce into a different universe, different because I had monkeyed with the setup? Even though I found Ricky and Pete in it? Is there another universe somewhere (or *somewhen*) in which Pete yowled until he despaired, then wandered off to fend for himself, deserted? And in which Ricky never managed to flee with her grandmother but had to suffer the vindictive wrath of Belle?

One line of fine print isn't enough. I probably fell asleep that night and missed reading my own name, then stuffed the paper down the chute next morning, thinking I had finished with it. I *am* absent-minded, particularly when I'm thinking about a job.

But what would I have done if I *had* seen it? Gone there, met myself—and gone stark mad? No, for if I *had* seen it, I wouldn't have done the things I did afterward—"afterward" for me—which led up to it. Therefore it could never have happened that way. The control is a negative feedback type, with a built-in "fail safe," because the very existence of that line of print depended on my not seeing it; the apparent possibility that I might have seen it is one of the excluded "not possibles" of the basic circuit design.

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." Free will and predestination in one sentence and both true. There is only *one* real world, with one past and one future. "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, amen." Just *one* . . . but big enough and complicated



enough to include free will and time travel and everything else in its linkages and feedbacks and guard circuits. You're allowed to do anything inside the rules . . . but you come back to your own door.

I'm not the only person who has time-traveled. Fort listed too many cases not explainable otherwise and so did Ambrose Bierce. And there were those two ladies in the gardens of the Trianon. I have a hunch, too, that old Doc Twitchell closed that switch oftener than he admitted . . . to say nothing of others who may have learned how in the past or future. But I doubt if much ever comes of it. In my case only three people know and two don't believe me. You can't do much if you do time-travel. As Fort said, you railroad only when it comes time to railroad.

But I can't get Leonard Vincent out of my mind. Was he Leonardo da Vinci? Did he beat his way across the continent and go back with Columbus? The encyclopedia says that his life was such-and-such—but he might have revised the record. I know how that is; I've had to do a little of it. They didn't have social-security numbers, ID cards, nor fingerprints in fifteenth-century Italy; he could have swung it.

But think of him, marooned from everything he was used to, aware of flight, of power, of a million things, trying desperately to picture them so that they could be made—but doomed to frustration because you simply can't do the things we do today without centuries of former art to build on.

Tantalus had it easier.

I've thought about what could be done with time travel commercially if it were declassified—making short jumps, setting up machinery to get back, taking along components. But someday you'd make one jump too many and not be able to set up for your return because it's not time to "railroad." Something simple, like a special alloy, could whip you. And there is that truly awful hazard of not knowing which way you are going. Imagine winding up at the court of Henry VIII with a load of subflexive fasartas intended for the twenty-fifth century. Being becalmed in the horse latitudes would be better.

No, you should never market a gadget until the bugs are out of it.

But I'm not worried about "paradoxes" or "causing anach-



ronisms"—if a thirtieth-century engineer does smooth out the bugs and then sets up transfer stations and trade, it will be because the Builder designed the universe that way. He gave us eyes, two hands, a brain; anything we do with them *can't* be a paradox. He doesn't need busybodies to "enforce" His laws; they enforce themselves. There are no miracles and the word "anachronism" is a semantic blank.

But I don't worry about philosophy any more than Pete does. Whatever the truth about this world, I like it. I've found my Door into Summer and I would not time-travel again for fear of getting off at the wrong station. Maybe my son will, but if he does I will urge him to go forward, not back. "Back" is for emergencies; the future is better than the past. Despite the crapehangers, romanticists, and anti-intellectuals, the world steadily grows better because the human mind, applying itself to environment, *makes* it better. With hands . . . with tools . . . with horse sense and science and engineering.

Most of these long-haired belittlers can't drive a nail nor use a slide rule, I'd like to invite them into Dr. Twitchell's cage and ship them back to the twelfth century—then let them enjoy it.

But I am not mad at anybody and I like now. Except that Pete is getting older, a little fatter, and not as inclined to choose a younger opponent; all too soon he must take the very Long Sleep. I hope with all my heart that his gallant little soul may find its Door into Summer, where catnip fields abound and tabbies are complacent, and robot opponents are programmed to fight fiercely—but always lose—and people have friendly laps and legs to strop against, but never a foot that kicks.

Ricky is getting fat, too, but for a temporary, happier reason. It has just made her more beautiful and her sweet eternal *Yea!* is unchanged, but it isn't comfortable for her. I'm working on gadgets to make things easier. It just isn't very *convenient* to be a woman; something ought to be done and I'm convinced that some things can be done. There's that matter of leaning over, and also the backaches—I'm working on those, and I've built her a hydraulic bed that I think I will patent. It ought to be easier to get in and out of a bathtub than it is too. I haven't solved that yet.

For old Pete I've built a "cat bathroom" to use in bad weather—automatic, self-replenishing, sanitary, and odorless. However,



Pete, being a proper cat, prefers to go outdoors, and he has never given up his conviction that if you just try *all* the doors one of them is bound to be the Door into Summer.

You know, I think he is right.



