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Edited by Damon Knight

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They were the answer to everyman's dream. But, Slovic made the mistake of falling in love with one!

THIRTEEN FRENCH SCIENCE-FICTION STORIES

edited by

DAMON KNIGHT

13 FRENCH SCIENCE-FICTION STORIES
A Bantam Book / published August 1965

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 65-15738

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

In 1959, more or less by accident, I discovered that there were remarkably good stories in a French science fiction magazine called *Fiction*. How long had this been going on? I sent for back issues, corresponded with French writers and editors, and found more stories of such high quality that I couldn't understand why none of them had ever been translated into English. I began making translations, painfully polishing up my French in the process, and here, six years later, is the result.

I am as proud of this book as if I had written it myself. But if any one man deserves the credit for it, it is Maurice Renault, who founded *Fiction* in 1953 as the *"Édition en langue français de* The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction." From the beginning, Renault and his editor, Alain Dorémieux, encouraged French writers to contribute. At first there were few acceptable submissions; lately there have been so many that the magazine has bought up material for years ahead.

Science fiction was not new to France—after all, it began with Jules Verne and J.-H. Rosny, Sr. in the nineteenth century. A few writers had published science fiction in book form in the 40's and 50's—notably René Barjavel, whose brilliant and delightful novels are still untranslated, but until *Fiction* came along there was no regular market in France for short science fiction stories.

Today, in its twelfth year, *Fiction* is one of the liveliest science fiction magazines in the world. It still devotes most of its pages to American stories translated from *Fantasy and Science Fiction;* but it also publishes the work of twenty or thirty French authors, of whom at least a dozen can stand

comparison with the best Anglo-Saxon writers of science fiction.

I owe warm and grateful thanks to all the living authors whose stories are in this book; to Maurice Renault, Pierre Versins, Demètre Ioakimidis, Jean Linard, Barbara Wright, for their friendship and many favors; to the editors of the French publishing houses, Éditions Denoël and Le Terrain Vague; and to patient Richard Roberts, formerly of Bantam Books.

DAMON KNIGHT

Juliette

by CLAUDE F. CHEINISSE

Avidly, when the final patient was gone, I lit my first cigarette of the day. All around me, interns and externs were getting up with a great hubbub. While I was putting on my jacket, someone came up and handed me a few more papers to sign; then I walked down an endless hall and passed the doorman, an ancient gold-braided wreck, decorated in the war of 1970. I had to answer him patiently once more that, yes, the weather was clearing, no, they still didn't know how to graft on an artificial arm, yes, the Doctor was very tired from his morning's consultation. At last I got out onto the steps, and as it did every day, my exhaustion vanished all at once: Juliette was waiting for me.

She was unaware of the envious looks of passing students, who were examining her contours minutely, without even trying to be surreptitious about it; the boldest ones whistled with admiration. She had eyes for nothing but the door where I was about to appear. As soon as I passed through the impalpable curtain that barred the hospital entrance to microbes and unwanted visitors, Juliette started her engine and opened the door.

I sat down in the passenger's seat with a sigh of relief. Juliette closed the door, pulled away gracefully, swerved to frighten an extern she didn't like, and headed toward the

restaurant, all without saying a word: she always respected the numb silence of my first few minutes. It was only after two red lights that she offered me a lit cigarette and asked tenderly, "Tired?"

My silence was an answer, and I knew she wouldn't be offended.

I let myself sink into a delicious idleness, compounded of English tobacco and Juliette's perfume. Three blocks farther down, a taxi cut into us from the left, and Juliette used her most strident voice to yell frightful things at him, which brought me back to earth.

Anyhow, we were almost at the restaurant. Juliette turned into the private drive that led to it, chose a shaded table surrounded by flowers, and when the waiter ran up, ordered a medium rare steak for me, and twenty liters and a grease job for herself.

My affair with Juliette dated from three years back. At the first glimpse, I'd fallen violently in love with her, taken out my checkbook, and without the slightest regret traded in a Citroën that had no personality—a good driver, but incapable of expressing any emotion, or carrying on a conversation outside her own sphere.

Juliette herself took a long time to lose her shyness, to consider me as her friend rather than her master. She never talked much about it, but I think she had been very unhappy before coming with me: half broken in, hardly out of the factory in Milan, she had been turned over to a detestable ape who never let her drive herself, always insisted on holding the wheel himself—and the way he did it. . . . As soon as she realized what she meant to me, our understanding was complete. By unspoken agreement, we didn't talk much about her past: I'm not one of these jealous types who insist on breaking in a car themselves and can't stand not to be the first owner; but at the same time, I don't like to think about anyone else driving Juliette.

The steak and the grease job were followed by a grapefruit and a wash, then by a good cup of coffee and a timing adjustment. To tease Juliette, I pretended to be interested in the lines of a Jaguar that came into the restaurant. Dignified, she ignored this treachery.

On the way back, at the turnpike exit, just before the sharp turn that overlooks the Seine, a new Dodge passed us going full speed.

Juliette said only, in a very soft voice, "Beginner . . ." and slowed up. Two seconds later, the taillights of the Dodge blinked on ahead of us—she was very close to the edge of the turn, and was forced to brake suddenly. Juliette twisted smoothly past her, with a throaty little laugh. Then she said, "She's young . . ." and laughed contentedly.

She liked to make a point of her experience, even while groaning sometimes (I didn't take her very seriously) about her advancing age and the imaginary slowing down of her reflexes.

Between my laboratory and my course at the University, the afternoon passed as usual. When I left the amphitheater, Juliette was there. I was tired, and was especially worn out by the hundred snickering students who had pretended to listen to me. Juliette knew or sensed it, grew very gentle—without being asked, she took the way to a scenic route that we loved, and once there, asked quietly, "Do you want to drive?"

In a moment I was in the driver's seat; the wheel rose toward me; Juliette was offering herself. . . . We followed the scenic route lovingly, one guiding the other, one in the other, feeling the same joy at each rhythmic turn, at each acceleration when the motor's thunder roared. . . . Toward the end, I relaxed my grip a little, only half steering her, leaving her almost free in her movements, attentive to the soft moans of her tires in the final turns. . . .

We were feeling calm again by the time we got back to the highway. I slid over into the passenger's seat; with a joyful heart, I lit a cigarette and unfolded my paper. Juliette was humming gaily. Before dinner, we went to pick up Josiane (the week before, it had been Christiane. A little earlier, Veronique. Before that . . . I don't remember. They're so much alike . . . all I ask of them is to be pretty, a bit dumb, and willing). And on the way back, when I put my arm around the girl's shoulders and began to nibble sweet nothings into her ear, I knew by the faint interruptions in the purring of the motor that Juliette was laughing, very quietly, to herself.

Juliette and I went home to bed about one in the morning, light and relaxed, whistling together. Not for a moment did I imagine this would be our last day of happiness.

In the middle of the night, the telephone woke me: an emergency. I got dressed, grumbling, turned the dispenser

dial to "coffee" and poured myself a big cup, then went down to the garage. Juliette was asleep, her brain disconnected. I called her: she switched on her wake-up current immediately. I heard the starter's whine, but the sound of the motor didn't follow. A second try, then a third had no more effect. In a timid little voice, Juliette said, "Excuse me . . ." I reassured her quickly, called a taxi, then the mechanic.

It was her first failure since the time we met.

The taxi came: he smelled of wet pipes and cold dogs. . . . He refused to wait for me, and I had to walk back. There was a light in the garage—the mechanic was using his stethoscope on Juliette. I went upstairs without disturbing them, and had a warm bath, a hot cup of coffee, and a book.

In the morning, Juliette didn't want to talk to me. It took the hint of a badly controlled skid on the wet pavement to make her whisper, "I'm getting old. . . ."

"You're not going to start that foolishness again, are you?" I protested.

But, a little farther on, she who never made a mistake missed the new Do Not Enter signal at the corner of the boulevard. A whistle nailed us to the spot: luckily, it was a man cop, accessible to certain arguments. . . . Juliette used her law-breaking voice, so sensual and full of promises that it always made me a little jealous. A minute later we were released, with a somewhat shaky "And don't do it again." That cop would have beautiful dreams tonight.

I tried to suggest a little overhaul in Milan: I could perfectly well take cabs for a month. But Juliette did not answer. She left me in front of the hospital steps without a word, and went off without telling me where she was going.

At noon, she was there waiting for me, and for a moment I could have believed that everything would be the way it had been yesterday, every day—that it had been just a matter of a general overhaul. She offered me a lighted cigarette, hurled herself at the back of the extern she didn't like, asked me in her soft voice, "Tired?" without expecting an answer.

But she braked to draw up in front of the agency where we had met, three years ago. The owner was waiting for us, and with a pang of sorrow I realized where she had been all morning.

I tried to argue with her, but she only said, "I'm tired. . . ." She had already made all the arrangements, all it needed

was my signature. The New One, shining in all her chrome, was apprehensively quiet. She was new, I would have to break her in.

The salesman tried to talk to me about the "trade-in on the old model," but I interrupted him, almost shouting: "No, I don't want us to separate, Juliette's going to stay with me. I—I'll use her in the evenings, or Sundays. I don't want anybody to tire her out any more; she has the right to get some rest."

The salesman looked at me rather pityingly. "It's nothing but a machine, Doctor. A beautiful machine."

But I remained very firm: I wouldn't sell Juliette. Besides, she backed me up: she said in an absent tone: "That's it, the evenings—or Sundays. . . ."

She was the one who wanted me to leave right away with the Replacement, to get acquainted with her. She promised me to go quietly back to the garage. When I leaned over to get my portfolio from the back seat, she used her law-breaking voice to say to me, "So long, darling. . . ." She had never spoken to me that way, had never even used that voice with me. I meant to tell her of all my affection, promise her again how many fine vacations we'd have, and fine spins along the scenic routes . . . but she was already gone.

When I arrived at the laboratory with the Intruder, toward the beginning of the afternoon, an automatic cop was waiting for me. As soon as I saw that long black and white cylinder, tapered like a torpedo, balancing on its two wheels in front of the door, I knew.

I hardly heard its report, recited in the neuter, official voice of those stupid machines. A few scraps of phrases whirled in the depths of my despair: ". . . gave chase, but . . . too fast . . . the turn . . ."

I had to keep up appearances, above all in front of a cop, human or not. I heard myself answer: "After all, she was nothing but a machine, a beautiful machine. . . ."

The Blind Pilot

by CHARLES HENNEBERG

The shop was low and dark, as if designed for someone who no longer knew day from night. Around it hung a scent of wax and incense, exotic woods, and roses dried in darkness. It was in the cellar of one of the oldest buildings of the old radioactive district, and you had to walk down several steps before you reached a grille of Venerian sandalwood. A cone of Martian crystal lighted the sign: THE BLIND PILOT.

The man who came in this morning, followed by a robot porter with a chest, was a half-crazy old voyager, like many who had gazed on the naked blazing of the stars. He was back from the Aselli—at least, if not from there, from the Southern Cross; his face was of wax, ravaged, graven, from lying too long in a cabin at the mercy of the ultraviolets, and in the black jungle of the planets.

The coffer was hewn from a heartwood hard as brass, porous here and there. He had it set down on the floor, and the sides vibrated imperceptibly, as if a great captive bee were struggling inside.

"Look here," he said, giving a rap on the lid, "I wouldn't sell that there for a million credits, but I'm needing to refloat myself, till I get my pay. They tell me you're an honest Yahoo. I'll leave this here in pawn and come back to get it in six days. What'll you give me?"

At the back of the shop, a young man raised his head. He

was sitting in an old armchair stiff with flowered brocade. He looked like one of those fine Velasquez cavaliers who had hands of steel, and were not ashamed to be beautiful: but a black bandage covered the upper part of his face.

"I'm no Yahoo," he answered coldly, "and I don't take live animals as pledges."

"Blind! You're blind!" stammered the newcomer.

"You saw my sign."

"Accident?"

"Out in the Pleiades."

"Sorry, shipmate!" said the traveler. But already he was scheming: "How'd you know there was an animal in there?"

"I'm blind—but not deaf."

The whole room was tingling with a crystalline vibration. Suddenly it stopped. The traveler wiped great drops of sweat from his forehead.

"Shipmate," he said, "that ain't really an animal. I'm holding onto that. I don't want to sell it to nobody. And if I don't have any money tonight, it's the jug for me. No more space voyages, no more loot, no more nothing. I'm an HZ, to be suspended."

"I get it," answered the quiet voice. "How much?"

The other almost choked. "Will you really give me—?"

"Not a thing, I don't give anything for nothing, and I told you before I'm not interested in your cricket in a cage. But I can let you have five thousand credits, no more, on your shipping papers. In six days, when you come back to get them, you'll pay me five hundred credits extra. That's all."

"You're *worse* than a Yahoo!"

"No. I'm blind." He added grimly, "My accident was caused by a jerk who hadn't insured his rocket. I don't like jerks."

"But," said the adventurer, shuffling his feet, "how can you check my papers?"

"My brother's over there. Come on out, Jacky."

A sharp little grin appeared in the shadows. Out between a lunar harmonium in a meteorite, and a dark Terrestrial cloth on which a flayed martyr had bled, came a cripple mounted on a little carriage—legless, with stumps of arms, propelling himself with the aid of two hooks: a malicious little old man of twelve.

"Mutant," said the blind man curtly. "But he makes out, with his prosthetics. Papers in order, Jacky?"

"Sure, North. And dirtier than a dustrag."

"That only means they've seen good use. Give him his five thousand credits."

The blind man pressed a button. A cabinet opened, revealing a sort of dumb-waiter. In the top half there was a little built-in strong box; in the bottom crouched a Foramen chimera, the most bloodthirsty of beasts, half cat, half harpy.

The traveler jumped back.

The cripple rolled himself over to the strong box, grabbed up a bundle of credits and blew on the monster's nose. It purred affectionately.

"You see, the money's well guarded here," said North.

"Can I leave my chest with you, anyhow?" asked the traveler humbly.

So the chest remained. Using the dumb-waiter, the cripple sent it up to the small apartment that the two brothers shared in the penthouse of the building. According to its owner, the creature that was "not really an animal" was in hibernation; it had no need of food. The porous wood allowed enough air to pass. But the box had to be kept in a dark place. "It lives in the great deeps," he had explained; "it can't stand daylight."

The building was really very old, with a lot of elevators and closets. The mutants and cripples of the last war, who lived there because it was cheap, accommodated themselves to it. North dragged the chest into the strong room next to his study.

That evening, the free movie in the building was showing an old stereo film, not even sensorial, about the conquest of the Pleiades, and Jacky announced that he wanted to see it. About to leave, he asked his brother, "You don't suppose that animal will get cold in there?"

"What are you talking about? It's in hibernation."

"Anyhow," said Jacky spitefully, "we're not getting paid to keep it in fuel."

The movie lasted till midnight, and when Jacky came back there was a full moon. The boy testified later that he had been a little overexcited. A white glimmer flooded the upper landing, and he saw that the French windows of the "garret," as they called his brother's study, were masked with a black cloth. Jacky supposed North had taken this

extra precaution on account of the animal; he pushed himself forward with his hooks, and knocked on the door, but no one answered, and there was no key in the lock.

He told himself then that maybe North had gone down six stories to the bar in the building, and he decided to wait. He sat on the landing; the night was mild, and he would not have traded the air at that height for any amount of conditioned and filtered atmosphere. The silver star floated overhead in the black sky. Jacky mused that "it means something after all, that shining going on just the same for *x* years, that moon that's seen so many old kings, poets, and all those lovers' stories. The cats that yowl at night must feel it; and the dogs too." In the lower-class buildings, there were only robot dogs. Jacky longed for a real dog—after all, he was only twelve. But mutants couldn't own living animals.

And then . . .

(On the magnetic tape where Jacky's deposition was taken down, it seemed that at that moment the boy began to choke. The recording was interrupted, and the next reel began: "Thanks for the coffee. It was good and bitter.")

He had heard an indefinable sound, very faint . . . just the sound of the ocean in a seashell. It grew, and grew. . . . At the same time (though he couldn't say how), there were images. A nacreous sky, the color of pearl, and green crystal waves, with crests of sparkling silver. Jacky felt no surprise; he had just left the stereo theater. Perhaps someone in the building opposite had turned on a sensorial camera—and the vibrations, the waves, were impinging here by accident.

But the melody swelled, and the boy sank under the green waves. They stank of seaweed and fish. . . . Carried along by the currents, the little cripple felt light and free. Banks of rustling diatoms parted for him; a blue phosphorescence haloed the medusas and starfish, and pearly blue anemones formed a forest. Grazed by a transparent jellyfish, Jacky felt a nettle-like burning. The shadow of a hammerhead shark went by, and scattered a twinkling cloud of smelt. Farther down, the shadow grew denser, more opaque and mysterious—caverns gaped in a coral reef. The tentacle of an octopus lashed the water, and the cripple shuddered.

He found himself thrown back against the hull of a ship,

half buried in the sand. A little black and gold siren, garlanded with barnacles, smiled under the prow; and he fell, transported, against a breach that spilled out a pirate treasure, coffers full of barbaric jewels. Heaps of bones were whitening at the bottom of the hold, and a skull smiled with empty sockets. This must be an amateur film, Jacky thought: a little too realistic. He freed himself, pushed away as hard as he could with his hooks, rose to the surface at last—and almost cried out.

The sky above him was not that of Earth. North had told him how that other dark ocean looked—the sub-ether. The stars were naked and dazzling. Reefs, that were burning meteors, sprang up out of the void. And the planets seemed to whirl near enough to touch—one was ruby, another orange, still another a tranquil blue; Saturn danced in its airy ring.

Jacky thrust his hooks out before him to push away those torches. In so doing, he slipped and rolled across the landing. The door opened a second later—he hadn't had time to fall three steps, but this time he wasn't diving alone: beside him, in the hideously reddened water, whirled and danced the body of a disjointed puppet, with gullied features in a face of wax.

Jacky raised his head. North stood on the sill, terrible, pale as a statue of old ivory; the black bandage cut his face in two. He called, "Who's there? Answer me, or I'll call the militia!"

His voice was loud and angry. North, who always spoke so softly to Jacky. . . .

"It's me, Jack," said the boy, trembling. "I was coming back, and I missed a step. . . ."

("I told a lie," said Jacky later, to the militiamen who were questioning him. And he stared into their eyes with a look of open defiance. "That's right, sure, I told a lie. Because I knew he'd kill me.")

The next morning there was no blood and no corpse on the landing. Only a smell of seaweed. . . .

Jacky was filling the coffee cups, in the back of the shop, while the television news broadcast was on. Toward the end, the announcer mentioned that the body of a drowned man had been taken from the harbor. The dead man's face appeared on the tiny screen at the moment North came into the shop.

"Hey, look at that!" called the cripple. "Your five thousand credits are done for."

"What's that?" asked his brother, picking up his china cup and his buttered bread with delicate accuracy.

"The character with the pet, what's his name? Oh, yes, Joash Du Guast—what a monicker! They've just fished him out of the channel. Guess what, they don't know who he is: somebody swiped his wallet."

"A dead loss," said the older. "You're certain he's the one?"

"He's still on the screen. He isn't a pretty sight."

An indefinable expression passed over North's mobile features. "You'd think he was relieved," Jacky told himself. Aloud, he asked, "What do we do with the animal?"

"Does it bother you?" asked North, a little too negligently.

"Me, old man," said the cripple in a clownish tone, imitating a famous fat actor, "as long as there's no wrinkles in my belly! Where did he come from, this Joash?"

"He talked about the Aselli," said North, reaching with a magician's deftness for another slice of bread. "And a lot of other things, too. What are you up to this morning? Got any work to do?"

"Not much! The Stimpson order to send out. A crate of lunar bells coming in. I ought to go to the Reeducation Center, too."

"Okay, I see you've got a full morning. Can you bring me a copy of the weekly news disc?"

"Sure."

But Jacky didn't go to the Reeducation Center that morning, nor to his customers. With his carriage perched on the slidewalk, he rode to Astronautics Headquarters, a building among others, and had some difficulty getting upstairs in the elevator, amid the students' jibes. Some of them asked, "You want to do the broad jump in a rocket?" And others, "He thinks these are the good old days, when everybody was hunting for round-bottoms to send to the Moon!" It was not really spiteful, and Jacky was used to it.

He felt a touch of nostalgia, not for himself but for North. He knew North would never come here again. The walls were covered with celestial charts; microfilm shelves rose from one floor to the next, and in all the glass cases there were models of spaceship engines, from the multi-stage rockets and sputniks, all the way up to the great ships that

synthesized their own fissionables. Jacky arrived all out of breath in front of the robot card sorter, and handed it his card.

"The Aselli," spat the robot. "Asellus Borealis? Asellus Australis? Gamma Cancri or Delta Cancri?"

"There's nothing else out there?"

"Yes, Alphard, longitude twenty-six degrees nineteen minutes. Alpha Hydrae."

"Hydra, that's an aquatic monster? Is it a water planet? Read me the card."

"There is little to tell," crackled the robot. "The planet is almost unexplored, its surface being composed of oceans. No regular relations with Earth."

"Fauna? Flora?"

"Without evidence to the contrary, those of oceans in general."

"Intelligent life?"

The robot made a face with its ball bearings. "Without evidence to the contrary, none. Nor any human beings. Nothing but sea lions and manatees."

"Manatees? What are they?" asked Jacky, suddenly apprehensive.

"Herbivorous sirenian mammals that live on Earth, along the shores of Africa and America. Manatees sometimes grow as long as three meters, and frequent the estuaries of rivers."

"But—'sirenians'?"

"A genus of mammals, related to the cetaceans, and comprising the dugongs, manatees, and so on."

Jacky's eyebrows went up and he cried, "I thought it came from 'siren'!"

"So it does," said the robot laconically. "Fabulous monsters, half woman, half bird or fish. With their sweet singing, they lured voyagers onto the reefs. . . ."

"Where did this happen?"

"On Earth, where else?" said the robot, offended. "Between the isle of Capri and the coast of Italy. Young man, you don't know quite what you mean to ask."

But Jacky knew.

On his return, as he expected, he found the shop closed and a note tacked to the door: "The pilot is out." Jacky hunted in his pockets for the key, slipped inside. All was calm and ordinary, except for that smell which ruled now like the mistress of the house, the smell that you breathe

on the beaches, in little coves, in summer: seaweed, shells, fish, perhaps a little tar.

Jacky set the table, set to work in the kitchenette, and prepared a nice little snack, lobster salad and ravioli. Secretive and spiteful, imprisoned among the yellowing antiques of the shop, the young cripple really loved them all.

When everything was ready—fresh flowers in the vases, the ravioli hot, ice cubes in the glasses—Jacky rang three times, according to custom. No one answered. Everything was a pretext for a secret language between the two mutilated brothers, who adored each other. The first stroke of the bell meant: "The meal is ready, his lordship may come down"; the second: "I'm hungry"; and the third: "I'm hungry, hungry, hungry!" The fourth had almost the sense of "Have you had an accident?"

Jacky hesitated a moment, then pressed the button. The silence was deep among the crystallized plants and the gems of seven planets. Did this mean that North was really away? The cripple hoisted himself into the dumb-waiter and rode up to the penthouse.

On the upper landing, the scent had changed; it had flowered now into unknown spices, and it would have taken a more expert observer than Jacky to recognize the aromatics of the fabulous past: nard, aloes, and benzoin, the bitter thyme of Sheba's Balkis, the myrrh and olibanum of Cleopatra.

In the midst of all this, the music was real, almost palpable, like a pillar of light, and Jacky asked himself how it could be that the others, on the floors below, didn't hear it.

North Ellis closed the door behind him, turned the key and shot the bolt. His blind man's hands, strong and slender, executed these movements with machine-like precision, but he was panting a little, and in spite of old habit, had almost missed the landing. He was so hard pressed . . . but he had to foresee everything. Jacky must never enter this room. Jacky . . . Resting his back against the door, North thought for a moment that he should have sent Jacky to Europe. Their aunt, their mother's sister, lived somewhere in a little village with a musical name. He felt responsible for Jacky.

He swept away these preoccupations like dead leaves, and walked toward the dark corner where the chest lay under a

black cloth. His fingers crept over the porous wood, which scented his palms.

"You're there," he said in a cold, harsh voice. "You've been waiting for me, you!"

The being that crouched at the heart of the shadows did not immediately answer, but the concentric waves of the music swelled out. And the man who had tumbled to earth with broken wings, awaited neither by his mother, dead of leukemia, nor by a red-haired girl who had laughed, turning her primrose face beside a white neck . . . the blind pilot felt himself neither deprived nor unhappy.

"You're beautiful, aren't you? You're very beautiful! Your voice . . ."

"What else would you like to know?" responded the waves, growing stronger. "You are sightless, I faceless. I told you, yesterday when you opened the strong room: I am all that streams and sings. The glittering cascades, the torrents of ice that break on the columbines, the reflection of the multiple moons on the oceans. . . . And I am the ocean. Let yourself float on my wave. Come. . . ."

"You made me kill that man yesterday."

"What is a man? I speak to you of tumbling abysses, dark and luminous by turns, of the crucibles where new life is forged, and you answer me with the death of a spaceman! Anyhow, he deserved it: he captured me, imprisoned me, and would have come back to separate us!"

"Separate us . . ." said North. "Do you think that's possible?"

"No—if you follow me."

The central melody grew piercing. It was like a spire, or a bridge over a limitless space. And the unconscious part of the human soul darted out to encounter that harmony. The wheeling abyss opened, it was peopled with trembling nebulas, with diamonds and roses of fire. . . .

North toppled into it.

. . . It was strange to recognize, in this nth dimension, the crowds of stars he had encountered in real voyages—the glacial scintillation of Polaris, the scattered pearls of Orion's Belt. North marveled to find himself again in this night, weightless and free, without spacesuit or rocket. Jets of photons bore him on immense wings. The garret, the mutants' building, the Earth? He could have laughed at them. The Boreal Dragon twisted its spirals in a spray of stars. He

crossed in one bound an abyss streaming with fire—Berenice's Hair—and cut himself on the blue sapphire of Vega in the Lyre. He was not climbing alone: the living music wound him in its rings.

"Do you think to know the Infinite?" said the voice enfolded in the harmonies. "Poor Earthlings, who claim to have discovered everything! Because you've built heavy machines that break all equilibrium, that burst into flame and fall, and martyr your vulnerable human flesh? . . . Come, I'll show you what we can see, we obscure and immobile ones, in the abysses, since what is on high is also down below. . . ."

The star spirals and the harmonies surged up. In the depths of his night, North gazed upon those things that the pilots, constrained by their limited periscopic screens, never saw: oceans of rubies, furnaces of emeralds, dark stars, constellations coiled like luminous dragons. Meteorites were a rain of motionless streaks. Novas came to meet him; they exploded and shattered in sidereal tornadoes, the giants and dwarfs fell again in incandescent cascades. Space-time was nothing but a flaming chalice.

"Higher! Faster!" sang the voice.

All that passed beyond the vertigo and tipsiness of the flesh. North felt himself tumbled, dissolved in the astral foam; he was nothing but an atom in the infinite. . . .

"Higher! Faster!"

Was it at that moment, among the dusty arcs, far down at the bottom of the abyss, at the heart of his being, that he felt that icy breath, that sensation of horror? It was more than unclean. It was as if he had leaped over the abysses and the centuries, passed beyond all human limits—and ended at this. At nothingness, the void. He was down at the bottom of a well, in utter darkness, and his mouth was full of blood. Rhythmic blows were shaking that closed universe. Trying to raise himself, he felt under his hands the porous, wrinkled wood. A childish voice was crying, "North! Oh, North! Don't you hear me? Let me in, let me in!"

North came back to himself, numbed, weak as if he had bled to death. For a little, he thought himself in the wrecked starship, out in the Pleiades. He hoisted himself up on his elbows and crawled toward the door. He had strength enough left to draw the bolt, turn the key, and then he fainted on the sill.

"It was those trips, you know . . ." Jacky looked up at the Spatial Militiamen who were taking their turn opposite him. They were not hard-hearted; they had given him a sandwich and a big quilt. But how much could they understand? "I never knew when North started getting unhappy. Me, I never went on a trip farther away than the coast. Ever since he's been blind, he always seemed to be so calm! I thought he was like me. When I was around him, I felt good, I never wanted to go anywhere. Sometimes, to try and be the same as him, I'd put a bandage around my eyes, and try to see everything in sounds instead of colors. Sure, the switchboard operator, and the night watchman (not the robot, the other one), they said this was no life for two boys. But North was blind and I was crippled. Who would have wanted us?"

The Chief of Militia reflected that Jacky was mistaken: someone would certainly have wanted North. But saying nothing of this, he went on asking questions.

. . . The next day was cloudy; North pulled an old spacesuit out of a pile of scrap iron and began to polish the plates, whistling. He explained to Jacky that he was going to put it at the entrance of the shop. Toward noon, Jacky took a message; he was told that the board of directors of a certain famous sanatorium were reluctant to accept a boarder mutated to that extent. He accepted their excuses and hung up, silently. So that was what it was all about: North wanted to get rid of him. He was crazy—it was as if he had gone blind all over again! During a miserable lunch, the idea came to him to put the apartment's telephone line out of commission: that way, the outer world would leave them alone. But first he wanted to call up Dr. Evers, their family doctor, and the telephone did not respond. Jacky realized that North had forestalled him.

After that, he made himself small, rolled his carriage behind some crates, and installed himself on a shelf of the bookcase. It was his favorite hiding place. There were still in the shop some volumes bound in blond leather, almost golden, which smelled of incense or cigars, with yellowing pages and the curious printing of the twentieth century. They had quaint pictures, not even animated. Without having to look for it, he stumbled upon the marvelous story of the navigator who sailed the wine-dark sea. The sail was purple, and the hull of sandalwood. Off the mythological coasts, a divine singing arose, inviting the sailors to more distant

flights. The reefs were fringed with pearls; the white moon rose high above the fabulous mountains. Ulysses stopped up their ears with wax and tied himself to the mast. But he himself heard the songs of the sirens. . . .

"North," the boy asked later, forgetting all caution, "is there such a thing as sirens?"

"What?" asked the blind man, with a start.

"I mean, the sailors in the olden days, they said—"

"Crud," said North. "Those guys went out of their heads, sailing across the oceans. Just think, it took them longer between Crete, a little island, and Ithaca, than it takes us to get to Jupiter. They went short of food, and their ships were walnut shells. And on top of everything else, for months on end they'd see nobody except a few shipmates, as chapped and hairy as they were. Well, they'd start to go off their rockers, and the first woman pirate was Circe of Calypso to them, and the first cetacean they met was an ocean princess."

"A manatee," said Jacky.

"That's right, a manatee. Have you ever seen one?"

"No."

"Sure, that's right, I don't think there is one in the zoo. Maybe in the exotic specimens. Take down the fourth book from the left, on the 'Nat. Sciences' shelf. Page seven hundred ninety-two. Got it?"

The page was freshly dog-eared; North must have been leafing through the book, without being able to read it. Well, it was a big beast with a round head and mustaches, and a thick oily skin. The female was giving suck to a little tar-baby. They all had serious expressions. Jacky was overcome with mad laughter.

"Ridiculous, isn't it?" North asked in an unrecognizable voice, harsh and broken. "To think so many guys have dived into the water on account of that! I think they must have been sick."

But that evening, he offered Jacky a ticket to the planetarium and a trip to the amusement park. Jacky refused politely; he was content to stay on his shelf. Again he plunged into the volume bound in blond leather, discovering for the first time that life has always been mysterious and that destiny wears many masks. The isles with the fabulous names flickered past to the rhythm of strophes; the heroes sailed for the conquest of the Golden Fleece, or perhaps they led a

pale well-beloved out of Hades. Some burned their wings in the sun and fell. . . .

North walked around cat-footed, closing the shutters, arranging the planetary knickknacks. He disappeared so quietly that Jacky was not aware of it, and it was only when the boy wanted to ask him for some information about sailing ships that his absence became a concrete fact. Suddenly afraid, Jacky slipped to the floor, and discovered that his carriage had also disappeared. He crawled then, with the aid of his hooks, among the scattered pieces of iron, and it was then that he stumbled over a horrible viscous thing: the wet billfold of Joash Du Guast. The five thousand credits were still inside.

After that, his fear had no limit, and Jacky crawled instinctively toward the door, which he found shut; then to the dumb-waiter, where he heard the Foramen chimera, caged, mew pleasantly. "It won't work, old lady," he breathed at it. "They've locked us both up together."

He licked a little blood out of the corners of his mouth, and thought hard. He would have to be quick. To be sure, he could hammer on the door, but the street was deserted at night, the normals were all getting ready to watch their telesets, or some other kind of screen—and there was no use knocking on the walls: the shop was surrounded by empty cellars. And the telephone was dead.

Jacky then did what any imprisoned boy of his age would have done (but from him, it demanded a superhuman effort): he clambered up the curtains, managed to open the window with his hook, and jumped out. He was hurt, falling on the pavement.

. . . "That damn' kid!" thought North as he opened the door of the garret. "Sirens!"

His hands were trembling. A wave of aromatics, already familiar, came into his night and surrounded him: he had breathed them on other worlds. He understood what was required of him, and he let himself go, abandoned himself to the furious maelstrom of sounds and smells, to the tide of singing and perfumes. His useless, mutilated body lay somewhere out of the way, on a shelf.

"Look at me," said the music. "I am in you, and you are

me. They tried in vain to keep you on Earth, with chains of falsehood. You are no longer of Earth, since we live one life together. Yesterday I showed you the abysses I know. Show me the stars you have visited: memory by memory, I shall take them. In that way, perhaps, shall we not find the world that calls us? Come. I shall choose a planet, like a pearl."

He saw them again, all of them.

Alpha Spicae, in the constellation of the Virgin, is a frozen globe, whose atmosphere is so rich in water vapor that a rocket sticks in the ground like a needle of frost. Under a distant green sun, this world scintillates like a million-faceted diamond, and its ice cap spreads toward the equator. On the ground, you are snared in a net of rainbows and green snow, a snow that smells like benzoin (all the pilots know that stellar illusion). On Alpha Spicae, a lost explorer goes mad in a few hours.

North was irresistibly drawn away, and shortly recognized the magnetic planet of the Ditch in Cygnus. That one, too, he had learned to avoid on his voyages: it was followed in its orbit by the thousands of sidereal corpses it had captured. The bravest pilots followed it in their coffins of sparkling ice; for that sphere, no larger than the Moon, is composed of pure golden ore.

They passed like a waterspout across a lake of incandescent crystal—Altair. Another trap lay in wait for them in the constellation Orion, where the gigantic diamond of Betelgeuse flashed; a phantasmagoria of deceptive images, a spiderweb of lightnings. The orb which cowered behind these mirages had no name, only a nickname: Sundew. Space pilots avoided it like the Pit.

"Higher!" sang the voice, made up now of thousands of etheric currents, millions of astral vibrations. "Farther!"

But here, North began to struggle. He knew now where she was drawing him, and what incandescent hell he would meet on that path, because he had already experienced it. He knew of a peculiar planet with silvery-violet skies, out in the mysterious constellation of Cancer. It was the most beautiful he had ever glimpsed, the only one he had loved like a woman, because its oceans reminded him of a pair of eyes. Ten dancing moons crowned that Alpha Hydrae, which the ancient nomads called Al-Phard. It was a deep watery

world, with frothing waves: an odor of sea-salt, of seaweed, of ambergris drifted over its surface. A perpetual ultrasonic music jumbled all attempts at communication, and repulsed the starships. The oxygen content of Alpha Hydrae's atmosphere was so high that it intoxicated living beings and burned them up. The rockets that succeeded in escaping the attraction of Al-Phard carried back crews of the blissful dead.

It was in trying to escape its grip that an uncontrolled machine, with North aboard, had once headed toward the Pleiades and crashed on the surface of an asteroid.

Heavy blows shook the temples of the solitary navigator. The enormous sun of Pollux leaped out of space, exploded, fell to ruin in the darkness, with Procyon and the Goat; the whole Milky Way trembled and vibrated. The human soul lost in that torrent of energy, the soul that struggled, despaired, foundered, was only an infinitesimal atom, a sound —or the echo of a sound, in the harmony of the spheres.

"This is it," said Jacky, wiping his bloody mouth. "Honest, this is it, Inspector. There's the window I jumped out of. . . ."

There it was, with its smashed glass, and Jacky did not mention how painful the fall had been. His forearms slashed, he had hung suspended by his hooks. On the pavement, he had lost consciousness. Coming to later, under a fine drizzle of rain, he had, he said, "crawled and crawled." Few of the passing autos had even slowed down for that crushed human caterpillar. "Oh, Marilyn, did you see that funny little round-bottom?"—"It must be one of those mutant cripples, don't stop. Galla. . . ."—"Space! Are they still contagious?" Jacky bit his lips. Finally, a truck had stopped. Robots—a crew of robots from the sanitation department—had picked him up. He began to cry, seeing himself already thrown onto the junk-heap. By chance, the driver was human; he heard, and took him to the militia post.

"I don't hear anything," said the inspector after a moment of silence.

"The others in the block didn't hear anything either!" breathed Jacky.

"I think he must be very unhappy, or else drunk. . . . Are there ultrasonics, maybe? Look, the dogs are restless."

Certainly, the handsome Great Danes of the Special Serv-

ice were acting strangely: they were going around in circles and whining.

"A quarrel between monsters," thought Inspector Morel. "Just my luck: a mutant stump of a kid, a space pilot with the D.T.'s, and a siren! They'll laugh in my face down at headquarters!"

But, as Jacky cried and beat on the door, he gave the order to break it in. The boy crawled toward the dumbwaiter; one of the militiamen almost fired on the chimera, which had leaped from its cabinet, purring.

"That's nothing, it's only a big cat from Foramen!" Jacky wailed. "Come on, please come on, I'm going up the shaft."

"I was never in such a madhouse before," thought the inspector. There were things in every corner—robots or idols, with three heads or seven hands. There were talking shells. One of the men shouted, feeling a mobile creeper twine itself in his hair. They ought to forbid the import of these parlor tricks into an honest Terrestrial port. Not surprising that the lad upstairs should have gone off his nut, the inspector told himself.

When the militia reached the topmost landing of the building, Jacky was stretched out in front of the closed door, banging it desperately with his hooks. Whether on account of ultrasonics or not, the men were pale. The enormous harmony that filled the garret was here perceptible, palpable. Morel called, but no one answered.

"He's dead?" asked Jacky. "Isn't he?"

They sensed a living, evil presence inside.

Morel disposed his men in pairs, one on either side of the door. A ferret-faced little locksmith slipped up and began to work on the bolt. When he was finished, the militiamen were supposed to break the door down quickly and rush inside, while Morel covered them, if the need arose, with heat gun in hand. But it was black inside the garret; someone would have to carry a powerful flashlight and play it back and forth.

"Me," said Jacky. He was white as a sheet, trembling all over. "If my brother's dead, Inspector, you should let me go in. Anyhow, what risk would I take? You'll be right behind me. And I promise not to let go of the flashlight, no matter what."

The inspector looked at the legless child. "You might get

yourself shot," he said. "You never know what weapons these extra-terrestrials are going to use. Or what they're thinking, or what they want. That thing . . . maybe it sings the way we breathe."

"I know," said Jacky. He neglected to add, "That's why I asked to carry the flashlight. So as to get to it first."

The inspector handed him the flashlight. He seized it firmly with one of his hooks. And the first sharp ray, like a sword, cut through the keyhole into the attic.

They all felt the crushing tension let go. Released, with frothing tongues, the dogs lay down on the floor. It was as if a tight cord had suddenly snapped. And abruptly, behind the closed door, something broke with a stunning crash.

At the same instant, the landing was flooded with an intolerable smell of burned flesh. Down in the street, ant-like pedestrians screamed and ran. The building was burning. An object falling in flames had burned itself in the roof. . . . Fire trucks were called.

The militiamen broke down the door, and Morel stumbled over a horrible mass of flesh, calcined, crushed, which no longer bore any resemblance to North. A man who had fallen from a starship, across the stellar void, might have looked like that. A man who had leaped into a vacuum without a spacesuit . . . a half-disintegrated manikin. North Ellis, the blind pilot, had suffered his last shipwreck.

Overcome by nausea, the militiamen backed away. Jacky himself had not moved from the landing. He clung to the flashlight, and the powerful beam of light untiringly searched, swept the dark cave. The symphony that only his ears had heard grew fainter, then lost itself in a tempest of discordant sounds. The invisible being gave one last sharp wail (in the street, all the windows broke and all the lights went out).

Then there was silence.

Jacky sat and licked his bloody lips. Inside, in the garret, the militiamen were pulling down the black draperies, breaking furniture. One of them shouted, "There's nothing here!"

Jacky dropped the flashlight, raised himself on his stumps. "Look in the chest! In the strong room, to the side—"

"Nothing in here. Nothing in the chest."

"Wait a minute," said the youngest of the militiamen, "there it is—on the floor."

Then they dragged her out, her round head bobbed, and

Jacky recognized the thick, glossy skin and the flippers. She had died, probably, at the first touch of the light, but her corpse was still pulsing in a dull rhythm. An ultrasonic machine? No. Two red slits wept bloody tears. . . . The sirens of Alpha Hydrae cannot bear the light.

Olivia

by HENRI DAMONTI

I died last Monday about three o'clock in the afternoon, on my way back from my course on Diderot at the University. Very properly, I was run over by a military truck that I hadn't noticed coming from my left. No doubt I was thinking of Olivia. I thought of her too much during those last days, and anyhow, an unknown woman had warned me in a dream that something unexpected was going to happen to me.

When I say last Monday, you mustn't think it was *last* Monday, all I know is that I died on a Monday. I didn't realize it immediately. I had to see myself dead, and hear the sobs of my wife and sons, before I began to believe it; how can anybody who's in love with Olivia believe in death?

It's you I'm talking to, Olivia. Maybe you'll understand, better than I do, all the things that have happened to me since I died. I've been traveling for years. Last evening, at any rate, I was in Amsterdam picking out a lamp in an antique shop. I told the owner I'd made the trip from Paris to Amsterdam especially to buy a gilded bronze lamp—Olivia wants one, you understand, sir. Tomorrow, I'll be in Syracuse, where you were born; perhaps I'll see your mother, and I'll look at her eyes, which you told me are the same color as yours. I shall never see you again, Olivia.

Before I died, I had a wife. Her name was Eve. She is the one I ought to be with now. I had two sons—Robert, who

was twenty, and my favorite, Louis, who was only sixteen, but who was more sensitive and (according to me) more intelligent than his brother.

It was Eve who told me you existed. That was on a Monday, too. I was showing my little Louis some reproductions of Raoul Dufy paintings. Eve was smiling. Robert, under the floor lamp, was writing a letter that I would have liked to read; then Eve said, "The second floor is rented again." Our apartment was on the third. Eve added, "They're a nice couple. He's an engineer who works in television. Her name is Olivia." Trust you to know all about it, old girl.

Olivia, what a beautiful name! Louis, who was listening, said that Olivia was a name to dream about. Since I was in a mood to dream, I was already dreaming of you. Eve had learned all this from the postman, who said he'd never seen as beautiful a woman as Olivia; oh, she's got dark eyes, and lips . . .

One week, we found out your husband's name was Etienne. He was the one I met first on the stair, with his pipe, his blond curls, his blue pullover—Etienne, a thousand times handsomer than I. I saw you later. After Louis and Robert. After Eve.

"She comes from Chile," said Robert. "You can tell."

"You can tell by what?" asked Louis.

"You can tell."

Louis claimed that at night, Olivia—all of us were already calling you Olivia—played on the piano. Oh, papa, love songs from Chile!

Robert, eager for certainty, had decided that you came from Valparaiso, having committed a perfect crime. What an imagination! A perfect crime!

"Exactly," said Louis. "You don't understand at all, mama. Olivia is silent, she climbs the stairs silently, she just nods to us, she's sad, and at night, about one o'clock, she sees her crime before her eyes again and she plays love songs to forget."

You didn't seem beautiful to me right away. The evening when I saw you for the first time, I wanted to know if Eve thought you were beautiful. (You know Eve is never mistaken.) Too slender perhaps, but don't worry, your Olivia is beautiful.

A few days later came the loveliest holiday, no doubt about it, that I ever spent in my life with Eve. Robert and

Louis had gone on a camping trip with some friends on the Côte. I was always anxious for Louis, but the idea of being alone for a whole month made me decide to let him go with his brother.

Eve and I took a room in a little motel on the Île Saint-Louis where we had stayed in other years. It was a marvelous life of dreaming, reading until dawn, of dancing for long hours pressed close together, without saying a word. And yet I was dancing with Eve for the last time in my life, and saying farewell to her.

I had decided to devote September to a study of Rousseau and modern sensibility. But it was in September that I began to love you.

Eve never knew anything about it. She believed that I still loved her. Louis saw it at once. What's the matter with you, papa? You look as if you were ill. I was very ill, and I tried to find a way of speaking to you.

Sometimes, when Eve was not there, I went out on the landing hoping you would go out too. What could I be to you? A professor at the University, a good father, a good husband. And Etienne, tell me, did you love him? One day, I let the faucet run in the bathroom. Then I ran down to ask you anxiously if there wasn't a flood, I am so embarrassed, madame, my wife forgot to turn off the faucet. It was Etienne who opened the door. I babbled. A wretched sort of professor he must have thought me. Obligingly, he insisted on taking a look at the faucet. You understand, sir, one can't wait forever for the plumber. With a professional gesture, he turned off the innocent faucet, and to keep Eve from knowing anything, all I had to do was mop up.

I imagined to myself, all the same, that Etienne told you about it and that you understood my ruse. But why should you understand?

The next day Louis said to me, "Olivia is beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is beautiful."

"Tell me, papa, is she more beautiful than mama?"

"Olivia is a different lady."

"What does that mean, a different lady?"

I didn't know, any more than Louis did. Each time I saw you with Etienne, laughing, pensive, or sad as you often were, I thought I would die.

I made myself think of my jealousy as banal, absolutely

identical with the descriptions of Proust or Dostoievsky, there's nothing new under the sun, Olivia, but I was neither Swann nor Prince Myshkin, and I loved you without understanding anything, hoping for a miraculous letter from you, waiting for you at the street corner, making mad plans of flight to Valparaiso with you, who perhaps loved me too.

One evening when I went to see Louis in his room, he asked me suddenly, "Would you like to take the engineer's place?"

"What are you thinking of, Louis? You're mad."

"I'd like to take the engineer's place," said Louis, "and love Olivia all by myself."

I tried to talk of something else. But Louis added, paying no attention to what I said, "What if all three of us went away together?"

Louis had echoed my thoughts. I wanted to be like Etienne, tall, blond, twenty years younger, and to hold you in my arms every night. Olivia, how beautiful you are, how beautiful you are. Anyhow I really tried to speak to you, a few days before that Monday. I found myself waiting for the bus with you, at the end of the street; tell me, do you remember?

I raised my hat. I think you smiled. "The bus is in no hurry today."

"I should say not."

You didn't say anything more, and anyhow the bus prevented me from making up another excuse; already it was rolling down the street. I sat down far from you, and overcome by fear I got off at the next stop without turning around.

The last Sunday before my death, I wrote you a letter. You never received it, and I have lost it. It was only a few words: *"Olivia, I love you and I want to go away with you right away tonight. Tell me if you want that too."*

At three o'clock in the afternoon, a truck ran over me. All my life, I had lived in dread of getting run over by a car, so of course it had to happen.

The last image that arose in my memory was not yours, Olivia, but that of Eve when she was a little girl in a checked pinafore. Didn't you know? I met Eve when she was six; I was seven. I didn't even feel any pain, most of all I was aware of the shifting lights around me.

After that, I don't know. I found myself suddenly on the

other side of the street, I felt infinitely rested and at that instant I didn't even know that I'd just been run over and that I was dead. I looked at my watch, it was eleven o'clock. I didn't understand. The building entrance was open; I climbed the stair, thinking of you. I wasn't even surprised that the door of my apartment should be open too. Then I was afraid. The first thing I saw was my little Louis with a jacket that didn't suit him, crying. *Why, what's the matter, Louis?* He pretended not to recognize me.

I opened the bedroom door and saw myself lying on the bed, pale, cheeks sunken, eyes closed. Eve, not even wearing black, was sitting down, worn out, tearing a little handkerchief to pieces. *Eve, what's happening?* Eve raised her eyes. *Eve, it's I, look, I'm not dead!* Without hearing what I was saying, she offered me her hand and said, "Thank you, sir."

In the mirror I saw a young, blond-haired man, and I saw that that man was I. I was Etienne, since I had wished to be; Etienne, the one who would be able to hold Olivia in his arms to the end of time. A moment later, I was on the landing again, I ran out of the apartment. Etienne, I was Etienne, I loved you so, Olivia, that I didn't regret either my death or the tears of my wife; blood was beating violently at my temples, I was Etienne, but I was only his body, I didn't know anything Etienne knew, and I was going to live with you.

You opened the door without even looking at me. That day you were wearing your gray dress with the brick-red collar. I cried, "Hello, Olivia, I'm back early today." I tried to draw you to me as Etienne would do, but you freed yourself so quickly that I could not guess the reason. "What's the matter?"

"It's you—what's the matter with you, Etienne?"

"You know the prof up on the third floor is dead."

"You told me that yesterday."

"Olivia, I want you to believe me," but already at that moment I felt I was lost.

"Why do you call me Olivia?"

That evening, I was to learn that your name was not Olivia and that you'd never been to Valparaiso. I also learned that you no longer loved Etienne. What was I to do then with my youth, my burning life, and the most beautiful

autumn of all time, the one that was to have been the autumn of Olivia?

I also learned the next day that Etienne was not a television engineer, but a waiter in a high-class restaurant. Instead of preparing my course on Rousseau, I began serving soups, entrées, and complicated dishes to old Englishwomen who told me every day that I ought to sleep with them. Etienne did it, I think, but it was your money that kept you going. You'd met Etienne on a trip to Italy organized by an agency, and for the blue pullover, the blue eyes, the pretty curls on the forehead, you'd left Syracuse and your mother.

I love you anyway, Olivia, and I'm not Etienne. I couldn't tell you the truth; would you have understood me? A day later you disappeared. This is an old story now, and since then I've made love to other women and have thought I loved some of them, but it's you I'm looking for, because it was for you I died. I don't know if all deaths are alike, each one may be unique in its surprises: death to me was becoming an Etienne not loved by you.

While you were gone, I watched what happened at the home of my wife and children. Louis alone wept for several days. Eve did not wear mourning; nevertheless I know that my death broke her up. Robert was the same as usual, decisive and cold. One evening I heard them talking about my green notebook. I had a green notebook in which I jotted down pell-mell the thoughts of my children, various calculations, addresses, and even outlines of courses. Louis wanted this notebook, but no one had turned it up. All the same, it was in a drawer in the library. Louis was crying. Nobody had found anything. The next day, I saw Louis on the stair and offered him my condolences.

"My father," said Louis, "often spoke to me about you."

"And yet I never spoke to him but once."

"He thought your wife was very attractive."

I snubbed him, almost with malice: "Oh, my wife, you know . . ."

"My father thought she was very attractive, I assure you."

So Louis wanted Olivia to know, even after my death, that I loved her.

A sudden whim made me write on a scrap of paper that I slipped into Eve's letter box: *"The green notebook is in the drawer in the little room. The notebook is for Louis."*

Would they guess that my spirit was not dead? But really, I made this gesture more as a game than for any true interest in Louis; I thought only of you. Soon I knew that you had not gone off alone. There was a gray-eyed pianist.

I remember perfectly, that evening in the Grand-Théâtre. You were sitting in the first row, Olivia, and you were wearing a necklace of fine stones that I didn't know you had the day you left. Your hair was done up, you were smiling, and when I went to you, shaky with fever, trembling, you pretended not to recognize me.

"Olivia, you see, here I am."

"Leave me alone, sir."

You said that almost at the top of your voice. I had to go back to my seat. Your pianist played only for you. During the Beethoven concerto I decided to kill him, and quickly. After the concert, I forced my way into his loge.

He was alone.

"Are you in love with Olivia, sir?"

"Who?"

"Olivia."

"What are you doing here, sir?"

I took out my revolver then, but before I could make a move, the pianist already had a little automatic in his hand; he pressed the trigger twice, and two bullets went through my lungs and head. I fell strangling in my blood. Olivia, I cried out, Olivia, I'll never love anyone but you, and once more it was the image of Eve as a little girl that was the last, Eve smiling. Olivia, why aren't you here?

This new death made me enter instantly into the fleshly envelope of my murderer. I became the pianist. Before the Court of Assizes, you made a cold deposition, you seemed absent-minded. Acquitted, I was offered a concert tour in Belgium or Greece. I couldn't even read a note. I said so to my impresario on the eve of my first concert. You're nuts, my friend; play and don't bother me. I got away half an hour before the concert, and found myself next day on a street in Florence without a sou in my pocket, famished, longing for you—you who had not waited for me at the prison gate, because you were in a hurry to go and make love to an Egyptian banker who believed himself to be the son of Rameses II.

Eve was married again, to a vice-consul. I don't know where she dug him up, he was the most distinguished vice-

consul you can imagine. Louis wasn't at the wedding, but I was there. That day another vice-consul, a friend of the aforesaid vice-consul, was paying court to you. It was hardly any trouble to take his place and his life. I succeeded in approaching Eve.

"I believe I knew your first husband slightly, dear madam."

"Oh, really?" said Eve.

"Yes, by George, he was an expert on your eighteenth century, the great century, was he not?"

Eve was not listening to me.

Suddenly, taking her aside, I murmured, "Eve, listen; in the green notebook there's a note that concerns you, you and our Île Saint-Louis."

She stared at me, her eyes wide and frightened. I went away.

One day I even thought seriously of going back to Eve, to all the happiness of my lost real life, but how could I? The mere thought of it calls up the vision of you, Olivia, forever glowing and young. They lie who say that love stories end with death. All last night I walked along the docks of Amsterdam, the better to think of you and of what I plan to do, since I saw you day before yesterday with Louis on the rue de Rivoli. He held your arm. I know that you love him.

But what about me—tell me, why won't you love *me*, Olivia?

The Notary and the Conspiracy

by HENRI DAMONTI

For some years neither Master Duplessis' work nor his home life had brought him any satisfaction. Accordingly, he was a notary ripe for any extravagance. But the extravagances known as mistresses, gambling, speculation, and politics hardly tempted him at all.

Helplessly and sadly, his wife watched him waste away. His daughter Martine, who was twelve, understood nothing, and occupied herself actively with a butterfly collection.

One day, in the local paper, under the heading "Miscellaneous," Master Duplessis read the following announcement:

"I GUARANTEE UNUSUAL DIVERSIONS—NO ENTRANCE FEE—ONE TRIAL WILL CONVINCE YOU—APPLY NOW—BECOME A MEMBER OF OUR SOCIETY—DISCRETION ASSURED—ADDRESS BOX 322628."

The notary was convinced that it must be something to do with a group of philatelists, or else, more probably, with a gang of degenerates. A pleasure-lover's club. In that case his convictions would forbid him, he thought, to take any action in the matter. Three days later, while he was studying a donation with charges, the telephone rang.

"Master Duplessis?"

"Yes."

"Your application has been accepted. We have just one place vacant. Your appointment is for next Saturday at 8:30, at 18, rue de la Manufacture, second floor. In case of any indiscretion on your part, the appointment will be legally canceled, costs of expenses to be paid by you."

"Who is speaking?"

". . . ."

"Hello— Who is calling?"

The receiver clicked. The appointment had been made, but the voice was not unknown. To whom, then, did that voice belong? He did not speak about it to anyone.

One evening, it was a Thursday, while buying a pack of Gauloises, the notary suddenly recognized the voice. It belonged to Gilles, the son of the widow who kept the tobacco shop. Gilles was finishing his law course.

"What am I getting myself into? A hoax perpetrated by some students, who will make a laughingstock of me?"

All the same, his imagination leaped, he ate with a better appetite; in short, he was beginning to enjoy himself. On Saturday evening he left the house, under the pretext of discussing a brief with an attorney.

"Can't he come to see you, this attorney?" his wife asked.

"He has a slight fever."

The attorney really did have the grippe, and Master Duplessis was sure he would not take it into his head to telephone after dinner. By way of playing safe, however, he took his phone off the hook before leaving.

It was cold when the notary turned into the rue de la Manufacture. Before him, among the few passers-by, he recognized Dr. Labroque. Dr. Labroque divided his patients into three categories. To begin with, the sinners. According to this physician, the sinners were sick because they had disobeyed the Divine Will, by committing adultery and robbing their neighbors. The second category was that of the malingerers. A category similar to the first, but still more vicious and crafty—sinners in the rough. The real invalids were those who had ptosis and fallen stomachs, like himself. For ptotic patients he had a fatherly affection, never asking them for a centime in fees, only too happy to lavish his knowledge upon them.

In fact, Dr. Labroque was an excellent physician, at once suspicious and sympathetic. A bachelor, he had never met the ptotic woman of his dreams.

Suddenly Dr. Labroque turned.

"Ah, Duplessis! Good evening. Taking a walk?"

"Me?"

"I'll bet you have an appointment . . ."

"What makes you think that?"

"You have that look about you. Since we're both going to 18, rue de la Manufacture, let's walk together."

Master Duplessis did not say a word. Who could have believed that Dr. Labroque, so fierce, so pious, was an accomplice in villainy?

On the second floor of number 18, Dr. Labroque tapped three times lightly on a door. After a silence, the door opened by itself upon a dimly lit room where five or six people sat around a table. The notary first recognized Gilles, the one who had telephoned him; then his own part-time housekeeper, Madame Renard. He also saw a girl in her twenties, almost pretty.

Madame Renard stood up and said, "Master Duplessis, our hobby club has voted unanimously to admit you as a new member. Be kind enough to take your place. And now let us pass to the business of the evening."

Never had a housekeeper spoken to him in that tone. The hobby club, it seemed, furnished each of its members with a second life which he could lead simultaneously with his own. But it was a life in the past. It was a first-rate hobby; and who could say, thought Master Duplessis, that other similar hobby clubs had not existed throughout the world always?

Thus Madame Renard, the president, in her second life was maid of honor to Eugénie de Montijo, Empress of France. Dr. Labroque, sticking to his last, was a physician in Rome under Caligula, and trembled every day for his life. The strange young woman was about to marry a musician, and in her second life her name was Constance Weber.

It was explained to the notary that at the moment he had a choice between two vacant posts. That of a scribe attached to a temple of Rameses II, or that of a notary in Florence toward the middle of the fifteenth century. Secretly fascinated, Master Duplessis did not hesitate; he chose to be the Florentine notary.

"But how can I be a notary now and a notary in the fifteenth century?"

"It happens automatically," said Madame Renard.

"Anyhow, you're about to try it out," added Dr. Labroque. "So drink this unimportant little liqueur."

On the instant the notary saw himself become Messer Giovanni Dorlano, a notary close to the palace of the Medicis. Giovanni was arguing with his young wife about the necessary betrothal of Giovanna, who was sixteen and the issue of a previous marriage.

Master Duplessis stared with bewilderment at his new bedroom, decorated with chased coffers and magenta velvet, and his Florentine wife, young, graceful—so much younger than his spouse in ordinary life. . . .

"You have no choice, Messer Giovanni. She must be married."

"But to whom?"

"To whom? How dreamy and absent-minded you are nowadays. . . . The abbé remarked on it to me again today."

"You seem to be seeing a lot of that abbé."

Master Duplessis was surprised by this remark. Without realizing it, he had ceased to be a notary of the atomic age, in order to become jealous of a little abbé and madly in love with a young woman with green eyes.

"He was with me last night at the fireworks, since my husband had other things to do. . . ."

"But you know very well that I'm looking over some property deeds for the Prince. . . ."

"Why don't you marry the Prince?"

"Don't raise your voice, I beg you."

Just as the notary was about to become really angry he found himself again at 18, rue de la Manufacture, facing his housekeeper, Madame Renard.

"Well, how do you like Florence?"

"There's nothing more beautiful."

"Then it's perfect."

"Do I pay now?"

"Each member pays at the end of the entertainment. We meet every month to settle certain difficulties. Don't let me forget. Your entertainment will last for one month."

Master Duplessis returned dreamily to his domicile. His wife was not yet in bed. He said in a loud voice, "I believe you're right. She must be married."

"Who?"

"What do you mean, who? The girl."

"Martine? She's twelve years old. I was absolutely right, you're crazy."

"Excuse me. I was thinking of a problem given me by a client."

In truth, already he was thinking of nothing but living in Florence. Soon he discovered that he could live in Florence and at the same time carry on his work as before. In Florence he got up early, rattled off a little mass as quickly as possible, and served himself a good slice of roast pig, which he washed down with a wine from his own vineyard. Then he thoroughly scolded his four clerks who were already at work, and went to take the air, as he did every morning. On his return, his wife Maria welcomed him; attentions were heaped upon him, he was happy. Moreover, Messer Dorlano was a member of the Prince's secret council, and his opinions upon all that concerned the properties and the economic life of Florence were often more weightily considered than those of the rich bankers of the city or of the Prince's French astrologer.

Messer Dorlano let the days pass, and occupied himself less and less with Master Duplessis' work. Master Duplessis was asked to become a candidate in the municipal elections. He refused. The same day, by chance, he met Dr. Labroque again; he found the physician pale and weary.

"I should like to talk to you, Duplessis, about what has happened to me. It's terrible."

"Are you sick?"

"It's worse. . . . You know that—"

Dr. Labroque interrupted himself, casting a glance to the right, wiped his forehead, and continued: "You know that I also live in Rome. . . ."

"Yes, I know."

"Three days ago I was thrown into prison."

"You?"

"I'm chained in the most horrible prison in Rome. I'm about to croak of hunger and thirst. I'm hungry, Duplessis, I'm hungry—"

"But see here, Doctor, don't shout. Go home and have something to eat. . . ."

"I'd be hungry just the same. And the chains hurt me. Good-bye. I must leave you—an emergency. It's a malingerer, but I'm going to see him anyhow. . . ."

Then the physician seized Master Duplessis by the sleeve

and whispered, "Caligula is mad . . . raving mad. . . . Save me, Duplessis. . . . Get me out of prison. . . . I've been tortured. Down through the centuries, there's no problem more important than that of torture, aside from that of ptosis."

This meeting dismayed the notary, coming just on the day when Giovanna was promised in marriage and when the Prince, always benevolent, had given him an extraordinary ring and some aromatics from Smyrna. He congratulated himself on having chosen a city as delightful and as calm as Florence in the time of the Medicis. Unfortunately there was only a week left of his diversion, and Maria was more beautiful than ever.

The following day, while his present-day wife was announcing that her father, Paul de Rédy, the president of the corporation of barristers, was coming to dinner Saturday night, which was tomorrow, Maria, pressing herself against him frantically, told him that pilgrims from Pisa had brought the plague; it's true I assure you, I heard it from the wife of Pietro the one-eyed, a child has already died of it.

What did he care about dinner Saturday night with his father-in-law, while the plague threatened Florence? . . . Fifteen years earlier, Messer Dorlano had done as all the other merchants of Florence had done. He had ridden horseback to his summer residence well outside the city, taking with him his wife, his child, and a casket containing his silver and his most beautiful jewels. One month later he had returned to his hearth, happy to have lost nothing in the disaster but a few cousins and two old domestics who were useless anyway.

"Maria, have my horse saddled. You'll join me tomorrow with Giovanna."

"I'll go give the order. But I forgot to tell you that the abbé wants to speak to you urgently."

"What does he want of me?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid."

"I never liked that abbé."

A moment later Messer Dorlano knew why. Without preliminaries, in a low voice, the abbé informed him that the glorious Prince now governing Florence had succeeded in foiling a conspiracy against his life, that the principal malefactors had been unmasked and arrested, but you, Messer Dorlano . . .

"What have I to do with this conspiracy? Leave me in peace. The plague is enough. Good evening, abbé."

"Messer Dorlano, the Prince is persuaded that you are the instigator of the conspiracy."

The notary was stunned by this news. Placed as he was, he knew very well that the Prince invented at least one conspiracy a year, hanged a few merchants taken at random, and since the poor wretches had confessed previously under torture, the Prince's spirit was quickly appeased.

"If I flee the plague for my villa, that will confirm the Prince's suspicions," he thought; "and if I stay here, I won't escape the plague. . . ."

Master Duplessis left his office for the local library. "I must find a history of Florence and the Medicis; perhaps there will be something about me in it. . . ."

But on the doorsill of the library an immense weariness overtook him, and he felt himself forgetting why he had come.

"If I haven't conspired, they can't do anything to me. I've always been loyal to the Prince." The open air made him feel a little better. Wanting to confide in someone, he went to see Dr. Labroque.

"But my dear Labroque, you look twenty years younger."

"Duplessis, I'm the happiest man in the world. The monster, the abominable tyrant, Caligula, has just been killed. Embrace me, Duplessis, I live again. And now, I've found a place as ship's doctor aboard a galley that sails this evening. It'll be a cruise; and for ptosis, a sea voyage . . . Come with me, Duplessis. I'll tell Quintus Marcus you're a friend of mine. . . . But what am I saying? How could you know my friend Quintus Marcus?"

That evening Master Duplessis found his housekeeper helping his wife prepare dinner.

"Madame Renard, something terrible has happened. . . . I'll talk fast, my wife might hear us—I'm implicated in a conspiracy in Florence. . . ."

"Ah?"

"I know the Prince is looking for me—"

"Ah, yes?"

"What can I do?"

"I don't know, Master. There's nothing to do. You chose to live in Florence. There are those who live, there are those who die. Let me be, your wife is coming back."

Accordingly, he decided to see the Prince, and put off going to the country until tomorrow. He found the Prince in the chapel of his half-deserted palace. At that instant, Master Duplessis was saying to his father-in-law, "Won't you have some more of this fish? It seems perfect to me."

The Prince, on his knees, turned toward the notary. "Notary, I'll have you hung from a hook."

"Prince, I beseech you to listen to me. I'm innocent."

"One can be innocent, and be hung from a hook."

"I've never betrayed you. . . ."

"Come now . . . Leave me, notary. I have a fever, I am coughing. Captain Rogni is looking for you. He has an order to kill you. Yesterday I gave him a gold-hilted dagger. He wants to try it out on you. Afterward he'll hook you up. Leave me."

The notary plunged into an interminable discussion with his father-in-law on the Berlin problem, decolonization, and the future of Europe. He took advantage of it to wander through the deserted streets of Florence. In the afternoon he had sent off Maria and his daughter, and had asked a friend, the banker Grassi, to look after them. Now Messer Dorlano, with dry mouth and heavy head, could barely hold up his torch.

"No one will come looking for me in the plague of Florence, and tomorrow the Prince will have forgotten his delirium."

Suddenly, then, he remembered a meeting he had had three months ago with the Prince's nephew, Duke Orlando. The Duke had really come to ask him to become a member of a secret society. He had given an evasive reply.

"Well, are you dreaming? I've just checked you, and I warn you, your queen is in danger."

Master Duplessis hardly heard the remarks of his father-in-law as they played chess. At that moment he was entering his house in Florence with a beating heart, convinced that he had had other interviews with Duke Orlando, and that the conspiracy was not an invention of the Prince.

"I, who had everything to be the happiest notary in Florence, the prettiest wife, the best wine, one of the most enviable fortunes, why should I have got myself mixed up with princes, prisons, and conspiracy?"

"My dear boy . . . You've just lost your turn. You're not yourself. What does a notary think about while playing chess?

Just imagine, Amédée, I saw a strange advertisement in the paper . . . they promise unusual diversions. I have a good notion to answer it. . . ."

"I don't advise you to."

"Ah, if we listened to the notaries. . . . In fact, I've already answered it. . . ."

Then Messer Dorlano shut himself up in his room. The domestics had fled, after making fires in all the fireplaces in order to frighten away the demon of the pestilence. The notary thought, "I'll leave in the morning. I'll go to France. I know a captain in Genoa, who . . ."

This decision gave him a little courage. About eleven o'clock at night, Master Duplessis remembered that tomorrow night at this time his month's diversion would be up. In order to avoid any nasty surprises, he decided to stay in his room, firmly resolved not to go back to Florence again. In spite of all his efforts, he felt himself once more hurled into the skin of Messer Dorlano, counting his emeralds, shivering, his head wrapped for some unknown reason in a warm towel. Unable to sleep, he fell to praying.

In the morning Madame Duplessis found her husband feverish. She called Dr. Labroque.

"Doctor—I have to talk quietly. At the moment I am shut up in a house in Florence where the pestilence is raging. The Prince is looking for me. What shall I do?"

"But nothing at all, my dear fellow. You'll just have to wait. To begin with, you haven't got the pestilence, just a good grippe. A little penicillin, and tomorrow you'll be on your feet."

"You don't understand. I tell you they want to kill me. . . ."

"Why did you chose Florence? I know a carpenter who spent two months as scribe to a Pharaoh. He came back very pleased. Try to perspire, and talk a little less."

Messer Dorlano buried himself under the covers. He distinctly heard all the bells of Florence calling God and all the saints to the aid of the city of the Medicis. Then suddenly the door opened. "I'm lost," thought the notary, "here is my assassin. Virgin Mary protect me. O sweet saints of Paradise have pity on Messer Giovanni Dorlano, Maria how beautiful you were and how I loved you. . . ."

"Messer Dorlano, Messer Dorlano—"

"Who calls me?" asked the notary, hidden in his eiderdown.

"It's I, the abbé. The Prince is dead."

"What?"

"You heard me. The Prince is dead."

"It's a trap. Behind me, Satan."

It was no trap. The Prince had died, not of the plague, but of the golden dagger of Captain Rogni.

At dawn the happy notary left for the country. He had been saved from the plague and the Prince. At that moment in the twentieth century, his wife was handing him a steaming bowl of coffee. Decidedly, he felt better.

"I must be sure," Master Duplessis told himself, "to choose a less troubled era for my next entertainment. Why not be a friend of Cardinal Richelieu, or the Caliph Haroun El Rashid himself? . . . I must speak to Madame Renard about it. Even if it costs more . . ."

The occasion did not arise, for a troop of brigands was lying in wait, a league outside Florence, for the unfortunate merchants who were fleeing the city. At the moment when he was enjoying his coffee and reading the death notices in the local paper, the tallest of the brigands, a redhead with a terrible reputation, stuck a knife in his throat. The notary had neither time to cry out, nor to return to the present.

The notary's disappearance made a sensation; but no more so than the dozens and dozens of persons who disappear every day here and there. People suppose they have gone to Patagonia, or holed up in a distant convent, while in reality, as members of a hobby club, they have been impaled in the Ming dynasty or riddled at Waterloo.

This incomprehensible disappearance did not prevent the hobby club, presided over by Madame Renard, from meeting again on the following Saturday and welcoming Master Duplessis' father-in-law as a new member. The president of the corporation of barristers, Paul de Rédy, chose to become Tamerlain.

Who would have dreamed that so honorable a man could have such tastes?

The Vana

by ALAIN DORÉMIEUX

Slovic was twenty-five when he made up his mind to buy a Vana.

Slovic lived in New Paris, in the residential suburb of Meudon.

His functional apartment was on the twenty-seventh floor of a medium-sized housing development. Here Slovic whiled away the peaceful days; he performed his civic duties by completing the two required daily hours of labor. The rest of his time was devoted to leisure.

Slovic's nature was calm and sensible. He liked to play host to his friends of the same age, bachelors like himself. Miko, his best friend, worked in the same administration as he, but they seldom met, because their shifts rarely coincided. However, Miko and Slovic often took their meals together.

It was forbidden by law for men to live with women before the age of thirty. Miko said that a man should take advantage of his leisure in the meantime; he devoted himself to pleasure. Slovic's tastes were more simple. He sometimes regretted that he had not lived in the past, in the twentieth century, when, he had read, a young man could begin a family shortly after he reached the age of puberty. But at that time, the planet had not yet been overpopulated. It was the catastrophic increase in the human birth rate that had brought about the decree that was now in force.

Miko made fun of Slovic when the latter admitted that he wouldn't mind having a woman to share his life: he laughed, saying that Slovic was a retarded child, and didn't know what he was talking about.

He urged his friend to come with him to the House of Women, in the Reserved Zone: there he would find the best means of forgetting these crazy ideas.

Slovic sometimes went with his friend. But on certain days he didn't happen to feel like seeing Miko. Then he shut himself up at home, usually in the music room, where the three-channel hi-fi played music through the huge loudspeakers in the walls.

Slovic had tendencies that his friends called reactionary. He didn't like the music of his own time, with its subtle assemblies of complex sound elements. He preferred the well-worn language of the mid-twentieth-century composers: Gerry Mulligan, John Lewis, Horace Silver, Thelonious Monk, the ancestors of present-day musical expression. He collected the ancient, rare, expensive recordings of their works.

At other times, when he was not in the mood for music, he took his turbojet car and went for a drive on the seashore. He used the upper level of the multi-stage highway, the least crowded one. Speed gave him a sensation of half-drunken exaltation: he felt as if he were living more intensely. At such times he told himself that he hated the company of his equals.

But it was only a passing mood. As soon as Slovic found himself again in the company of Miko or his other friends, he failed to understand how he could have entertained such an idea. At any rate, he never spoke of it. He was afraid the others would look on him as an object of curiosity and disgust; and the word would go around that he was guilty of the crime of individualism; people had been locked up for less.

Slovic's life was thus divided between his work, music, his car, the times spent with Miko or his other friends, the visits to the House of Women, or occasionally to the House of Games. Slovic did not try to puzzle out whether he was happy or unhappy. This antithesis no longer existed except in books dealing with the past. Nowadays no one was "un-

happy" any longer. As for the word "happiness," it was an archaism now; its modern synonym was "comfort."

Nevertheless, sometimes Slovic had a sort of uneasy feeling, as if he wanted something he couldn't have. He didn't know what it could be, and didn't question himself about the sensation. He lacked nothing; like everyone else, he had all he needed to live. It wasn't that he had need of women, for he could find all he liked in the House of Women. As for living with one of them, Miko was right: there was nothing enviable in that; it was a puerile dream.

Slovic, then, would have gone on living in this way indefinitely, if it had not been for the Vanas. It was Miko who mentioned them to him for the first time. To tell the truth, Slovic had heard rumors of their existence already, but had only half paid attention. He was not interested in the news; he considered that it never brought anything really new.

The Vanas were one of the latest life forms discovered in the galaxy. An expedition had brought back several specimens from a terrestrial-type planet in the constellation of Orion. The rumors that had circulated about them had caused certain rich collectors to buy these specimens. Afterward, the rumors had spread.

The importation of extra-terrestrial life forms was restricted by many regulations. Proof must be made, by adequate tests, that such life forms did not belong to an intelligent species, and that they did not carry harmful bacteria. The Vanas satisfied these two conditions. Accordingly, a regular service had been established to their native world; demand for them had created an enormous market, and the trade in Vanas prospered.

The characteristics of the Vanas had been kept more or less secret at the beginning, and no doubt that is why Slovic had never had occasion to become interested in them. The public knew only that they were humanoid creatures, although unintelligent. But this partial blackout did not last long. The truth about the Vanas, first spread in whispers, ended by being spoken aloud. And it was Miko who let Slovic in on it.

Miko planned to buy one of these creatures for himself. He showed Slovic a tri-D photograph that a friend, well placed in the Galactic Society, had obtained for him. Slovic looked at it, and at once knew why people made such a to-do over the Vanas. For it was a woman he was looking at—or

rather, the perfect semblance of a human female; and this semblance of a woman was strangely beautiful.

Slovic stared questioningly at Miko, whose eyes were burning. The latter told him in turn what his friend had explained to him: the Vanas were animals, highly evolved animals, but animals all the same, who were not endowed with intelligence or speech, but who had all the appearance and—Miko insisted—all the functions of the women of Earth. The biologists of the expedition that had discovered them had studied their race. These female beings reproduced themselves by parthenogenesis. No male individuals had ever been discovered. The name given them arose from their cry, a soft, rhythmic cry suggesting very nearly the two syllables *va-na.*

The habits of the Vanas were idle and vegetative. The presence of the first expedition had not alarmed them: the crew had mingled with the creatures. It was one of these crewmen who had succumbed to the attraction that many Terrans would feel in their turn. Thus men had learned that the Vanas were made for love.

After the first specimens were introduced to Earth, it was established that Vanas easily became acclimated. They were almost exclusively herbivorous. The hydroponic cultures of Earth produced vegetables similar to those of their natural habitat, and it was found that the Vanas could live on them perfectly well.

The creatures could be taught as easily as a dog or a cat, and they were amenable to their master's slightest whim. Before long they began to give rise to certain excesses. In North America, they were the cause of a new wave of puritanism. Censors cited the case of men living with two or three Vanas at a time, and submitting them to shameful practices; it was whispered that Vanas had died as a result of cruelties inflicted by brutal and sadistic masters. The Commission of Public Morality and the Society for the Protection of the Animals of the Galaxy were simultaneously aroused.

In Europe, where the introduction of the Vanas was more recent, they posed no problem as yet. The government, which would have inflicted a severe penalty upon a man under thirty living with a woman, looked approvingly upon the same man sharing one roof with a Vana. It was population control that held the foreground of interest in Europe. At any rate, unions with Vanas remained strictly sterile.

Miko told Slovic all this, and ended by saying that he meant to order his Vana as soon as possible. He would be taken care of quickly, because of his friend in the importing company. He asked Slovic if he wanted to seize the opportunity, and order a Vana for himself through his intermediary. Slovic was about to refuse, to say that he wasn't interested. Suddenly, his eyes fell again on the photograph Miko had showed him. The Vana was very beautiful. Slovic, without stopping to think, and almost without knowing why, answered yes.

He received his Vana during the next week. She was delivered in a special cage, with an opaque plastic cover. When transporting Vanas, one avoided exposing them to public view. On the rare occasions when this precaution had been neglected, there had been riots.

When the deliverymen were gone, Slovic approached the cage, which was still covered. He threw back the cover in one motion—and saw the Vana.

She was sitting in a corner of the cage, looking at him. Slovic was astonished, for she was even more beautiful than he had imagined. She was like the one whose picture he had seen (all the Vanas looked alike, Miko had told him), but her physical presence was more seductive than any photograph could have conveyed.

Two things then struck Slovic's attention: the Vana's color, and her scent. Miko had neglected to tell him (perhaps he didn't know himself) that the epidermis of the Vanas was not like human skin. It was in fact the one point on which they seemed to differ in appearance from the human race. This epidermis, glossy as the pelt of an animal, was of a pale saffron color, with reddish-brown highlights. As for the odor of the creature, which was very pronounced, it suggested that of musk.

Slovic opened the door of the cage. The deliverymen had told him that he had nothing to fear; that the Vana, like all her race, was perfectly inoffensive, even if she seemed at first a little wild. He put out his hand toward her and she let him caress her without flinching. Her brilliant skin was warm, and curiously soft to the touch. He sensed a secret life palpitating under that skin, sending tremors out to the surface. It was an infinitely disturbing contact; he had never felt that sensation with a woman of Earth.

The Vana watched him unblinkingly. Staring into her eyes for the first time, Slovic had a shock. The creature's eyes were of an extremely pale turquoise, their irises were immense; their liquid stare seemed to be trying to absorb his own, to dissolve him in their depths. But the strangest thing of all was the absence of any human expression in that stare. It held neither joy, nor fear, nor sadness: it seemed empty.

Slovic left the door of the cage open, and after a few minutes the Vana got up and came out. She was short; her feet and hands were small and her joints delicate. Her naked body was that of a woman in all respects, except that it lacked any hairiness. But a mane surrounded the Vana's face, looking less like hair than like golden fur. Her shape was harmonious and perfect, with a contrast between the curved hips and the narrow waist. The breasts, high and firm, were developed in proportion to the rest of her body; the nipples were tawny-colored.

Finally, there was the Vana's face. That triangular face, with its two great eyes of a melting turquoise color, had an animal grace, a strange charm. The small head was carried on a long, slender neck, like a flower on its stem. The creature bent that head to one side, as if listening, watching Slovic. Her attitude seemed to invite a caress; everything about her was attractive. Slovic understood why purchasers of Vanas kept them jealously hidden from the world.

The Vana quickly grew accustomed to Slovic. He named her Sylvie, and began her training by feeding her. He had chosen the best foods from one of the specialty stores created for the Vanas. Afterward she came over to thank him by rubbing her cheek against him. Slovic stroked her with his hand. He had been advised not to be rough with the Vana at first, to be satisfied with caressing her. Before long, it was she who sought these caresses.

Slovic took Sylvie to bed with him on the evening of the second day. Thereafter, it became his nightly custom. Afterward he would take her to the pallet that he had laid on the floor of an empty room. One night, he was too sleepy to send her off to her pallet and she slept beside him.

Slovic discovered that it was pleasant to spend the night with the Vana. Accordingly, on several succeeding nights he kept her in his bed. On waking in the morning, he smelled her musky scent. He stretched out his arm and touched her

body, twined around his. With a little moan, she awoke in her turn. He drew her to him, embracing her warm, consenting flesh.

Miko came to see him. He was delighted with his own Vana. She gave him, he said, every satisfaction. He seemed surprised and shocked when Slovic told him that his sometimes slept with him. Then he regained his self-possession. "You treat her like a real woman!" he said, laughing. Slovic weighed this pronouncement and found it incongruous. Nevertheless, it was a good thing that Miko had made this remark; he resolved from then on not to permit the Vana too much familiarity.

All the same, after a few solitary nights, he noticed with a certain surprise that he missed the presence of Sylvie at his side.

One morning, he woke at dawn: the bed seemed empty and cold. He got up and went looking for the Vana. She was asleep on the pallet, curled up in her favorite posture; he woke her with a caress. She raised her eyelids, unveiling the quiet pools of her eyes. He was about to make her get up and go with him into his room. But, as she stretched herself slowly under his gaze, with a feline movement, he suddenly wanted to take her immediately. He threw himself down on the pallet, which was impregnated with her odor. She opened her body to him, with its glossy shifting highlights.

From that day on, he adopted an alternating custom: as often as he made Sylvie sleep in his bed, so often it was he who sought her in the morning on her pallet. Little by little, he also began to seek her company during the day. He no longer went to the House of Women, nor the House of Games. Miko marveled at his indifference to fun. He was hurt, too, that Slovic invited him to his home less often than formerly.

Miko was still satisfied with his Vana, and sometimes lent her to his friends, giving them the key to his apartment. One day, he asked Slovic if his Vana might not be available for an evening: his own was already promised to a friend, and he had another whom he wanted to accommodate in the same way. Slovic refused indignantly, and Miko was stupefied. A silence fell between the two friends; then Miko said, with an intonation of horror, "Slovic, you . . . you are *in love* with that animal!"

Slovic started, and looked at him. Miko was staring at him

with repulsion. In a thin voice, without even knowing what he was saying, Slovic cried, "I forbid you to call her an animal!"

Miko simply said, "You've gone crazy."

Then he went out, slamming the door. Slovic was pale. He went to Sylvie and took her in his arms, caressing her luxuriant golden mane, he said over and over, "You're not an animal. You're not an animal." Sylvie rubbed her cheek against him, as she had done when he fed her the first day. She cried softly, "Va-na." Slovic was convinced that she made this sound when she was happy.

From then on, Sylvie shared Slovic's life. He took her with him into the music room, and she lay beside him while he listened to the music he loved. She half closed her slanted eyes, leaving a narrow slit through which she kept a watchful gaze on Slovic. Slovic even took her with him in his car. He drove down the least traveled streets, sheltered from inquisitive stares. Sylvie curled up on the seat; her mane waved in the wind. Slovic burst out laughing, realizing that he had never known before what it was to burst into laughter. He had the sense of discovering something unknown; he realized that this was perhaps what he had been confusedly seeking.

One day he took Sylvie to the seaside, to a deserted beach. He didn't know what the sea was like on the Vanas' planet; but Sylvie seemed joyful. She swam and frolicked in the water, then played on the sand; and her dancing body sparkled in the sun. Slovic told himself that she would undoubtedly have laughed, if she had been capable of it. Later she came to lie close beside him, and licked his neck with her rough little tongue. Then she stroked his body with her hand, whose claws he kept trimmed regularly.

Another time, he amused himself by combing her hair. She drew back when he began to pull the comb through her rebellious mane. He calmed her with soft words, and a few caresses; she allowed him to continue. He combed her hair back, fastening it with a string on top of her head. Seeing her thus in profile, he thought of an ancient picture he remembered. He found the reproduction of it in his microfilm collection: it was one of the portraits of a girl with a ponytail, painted by Picasso in the year 1954, a geometric profile, drawn with great purity of line against a white background, reminiscent of a personage from a Cretan fresco. Slovic was delighted by the resemblance.

The days passed, and he left Sylvie no more. He realized that he was drifting away from the world he had been living in, beginning to reject that world, but he didn't care. His friends avoided him. They talked about Slovic's shameful passion for his Vana, his lowering himself to the level of an animal. He had become the object of a universal disapproval. Slovic went out less and less.

Miko came to see him one day, and speaking in the name of their old friendship, called on him to give up his perversity. Slovic smiled as he listened. When Miko had done speaking, he called Sylvie, and stroking her in his friend's presence, he declared, "Miko, remember when I told you that I'd have liked to live with a woman? Here is the woman."

Miko exclaimed, "You're crazy, you've lost your grip on things! These are animals, objects of pleasure, nothing more. They're not even as important as the creatures in the House of Women. And you dare to say you *love* one of these things?"

Slovic had gone pale with anger. Staring defiantly at Miko, he hugged Sylvie to him without speaking.

Miko gave up. He left Slovic, having warned him against the consequences of his attitude. "Society won't stand for such behavior," he said shortly. When he was gone, Slovic embraced Sylvie.

A little while later, Slovic was fined for an offense against public morality. He was accused of displaying himself in public with his Vana. At this time, the anti-Vana leagues were beginning to form in Europe, after the example of those that were proliferating in America. Another day, as he was about to enter his apartment, Slovic was insulted and stoned by spiteful neighbors. He made up his mind not to take Sylvie outdoors any more.

Sylvie now shared his room. Slovic had thrown out the pallet he had installed. She followed him everywhere in the apartment, attentive to every movement. Slovic loved to stare deeply into her enigmatic eyes. It seemed to him that sometimes, for a moment, he could read there something strange and indefinable, like a ripple on the smooth surface of the water.

Slovic now understood what was meant by the old word "happiness." He could spend hours in Sylvie's company, play-

ing with her or watching her without speaking. He did not mind her being unable to talk. On the contrary, her silence was sweet to him. In the morning, he bathed and combed her. In the evening, he went to sleep holding her in his arms, breathing her odor. Sometimes, at night, he turned on the light quietly in order to see her sleeping.

Once Sylvie fell sick, and he believed she was going to die. He stayed by her bedside day and night, overcome by this unknown illness for which he knew no remedy. Sylvie was in a strange, languid state. Her eyes were dull and seemed discolored; she did not have the strength to move. Slovic caressed her slowly, kissed her as if to breathe his own life into her: he felt as if she were his child.

She grew better without his knowing why. One night he had surrendered to sleep, and when he awoke she was pressed against him, and her gaze, brilliant once more, invited him.

Summer came. The town was empty of its inhabitants, off on vacation to the four corners of the Earth. The great housing developments fell silent. Through the large open windows, sunlight poured into the apartment. Slovic and Sylvie lay on the floor to expose themselves to its rays. He had fallen into the habit of going as naked as she. Soon his body acquired a coppery tint that harmonized with Sylvie's. One day when they were in front of the mirror, he told himself that he was beginning to resemble her, that he was growing like her.

Stretched out in the sun half asleep, Slovic fed on dreams. He would have liked to go away, take Sylvie with him—take her back to her native planet. There, they would live together without any constraint. Slovic would have no accounting to make to society, or to anyone. Deep down, he knew it was only a dream, but it gave him pleasure to abandon himself to it.

More and more, he felt as if he were living in a world far away, a world where he was alone with Sylvie. The outside world, for him, retreated into the background. The city, whose geometric buildings and ranked terraces he could see through his open window, was separated from him by a frontier: it was no more than a meaningless picture. Slovic was no longer a part of that city or that world.

Occasionally it happened that in leaning over his terrace he was taken by vertigo, as if the wide avenues more than

fifty meters below were suddenly rushing up to meet him. He pulled back, sweat on his forehead, feeling himself on the point of losing his balance. A hidden weakness stole into his limbs. He was about to stagger, and had to lean against a wall.

Slovic at first paid no attention to these symptoms, but after a few weeks he had to recognize that they were becoming more and more frequent. Weakness seemed to be overtaking his whole body, as if to paralyze him. Then he was forced to lie down. Sylvie came close to him and he looked at her without comprehension, overcome by a malaise that expanded inside him as if he were sinking into icy waters.

One morning, feeling worse, he did not get up. To amuse himself, he brought the television into his room. Long ago he had ceased to take any interest in it, preoccupied solely with Sylvie. From his bed, he watched the world news broadcast for the first time since he had shut himself off from all that. And it was thus that he learned the truth which the whole Earth already knew.

He watched the pictures succeed one another, hearing the speaker's voice without stirring. The Vanas had brought death to Earth, said the dramatically inflected voice. Scientists had been disturbed when the first owners of Vanas had begun to fall victims to a strange sickness, from which they shortly died. Since then, all the Vana owners had begun to die one after another. The creatures were carriers of a virus, whose existence had escaped the experts' notice at the time of the biological inspection. And this virus, after a long incubation period, was fatal to man.

On the screen, microphotographs showed the virus, which they had finally succeeded in isolating. The announcer continued his account. The Vanas transmitted the germ of death to man via the sexual act. Each repetition of the act augmented the contagion.

It was a contamination by an insidious poison, which mercilessly penetrated the organism, destroying it little by little. But the scientists had found a means of arresting the disease.

The epidemic had taken root in America, where the Vanas had been introduced in the first place. But it was now beginning to reach Europe, and the first victims were appearing there. Every owner of a Vana should therefore, without delay,

get rid of his animal, turning it over to the Health Service, which was engaged in killing the Vanas on a large scale in gas chambers; and they should immediately begin treatment in a special clinic; otherwise the doctors would not be responsible for the consequences.

The announcer stopped speaking. Using the telecontrol keyboard, Slovic turned off his bedside television. He stayed motionless for a long time; his face showed nothing. When he tried to get up, the floor seemed to turn under his feet. He had never felt so weak. He walked, grasping every available support, his body swaying.

Sylvie was asleep on a sofa in the next room. Slovic went to her, and looked at her for a long time, his limbs shaking as if with a fever. He leaned over to brush Sylvie's skin with his fingertips. She awoke and looked at him with those inhumanly soft eyes. "Sylvie, my little Sylvie," he murmured: and he lay down beside her.

The Devil's Goddaughter

by SUZANNE MALAVAL

When Fanche was born, her parents were sad; sad, for she was the eighth child of eight, and finding a godfather in the neighborhood was practically impossible.

Just the same, she was a pretty little thing, Fanche in her cradle—plump as a little pig, pink, her cheeks smooth as fruit from the tree.

The mama was sleeping, Fanche beside her in the big bed, when the devil, the real one, the most horned, the most hairy, came knocking on the door.

Sitting up with a start, the mama said, "Come in," and the devil gladly obliged.

"Good morning, woman! I come to ask for your Fanche as my goddaughter."

"Oh, no!" said the mama.

The eighth child of eight, already Fanche was loved eight times more than the others.

The devil, he was a perfect scoundrel, but he didn't say anything: when a woman just out of childbed talks in that tone of voice, even the devil himself has nothing to say.

Only, the papa coming back from the rye fields said yes, that he did, without looking at his wife, who was making faces at him.

Fanche was asleep, pretty as a daisy.

For sure, it wasn't at the church that they had the baptism

with such a godfather. But it was a gay, noisy baptism, with many mortal sins.

It was only the mama who was sad: everything she ate tasted of sulphur.

Little Fanche grew bigger. She went through seven years like nothing.

The brothers, the sisters, the whole kit and kaboodle took her along to Mass. The mama, she felt her heart beating.

Arrived at the holy church, impossible to bring the little one in. It was as if she were planted in the ground.

The poor little thing pushed with her feet, pulled with her hips, but nothing: she stayed where she was, stuck in the ground like a rosebush.

They went back home, not very proud.

Time passed.

Fanche was fifteen, so beautiful it was a marvel.

When she watched the flocks, the dog was utterly fascinated, and the sheep too.

One day when she was walking in the fields, she saw a gentleman coming who made her feel cold to the bottom of her soul.

"I'm your godfather," he told her.

She had not known she had a godfather of such ugliness.

"Come with me!"

She was obliged to do as he asked: he had taken her by the wrist, squeezing hard enough to make her arm go numb.

Hell is so close to the earth that she was there quickly, the poor goddaughter.

"You're queen of all this here. You ask, you get," the devil told her, with a sweeping gesture.

"I want to go back home."

But of course that was impossible.

Up above, they were worried, they searched for her in the bottoms of the ponds; but the mama knew very well what had happened.

Fanche didn't cry long. She was a crafty little thing, that Fanche, and never at a loss.

She made herself nice, sweet and good, so much so that

the devil's wife grew jealous. She was dark, with a squashed nose, and anyone who stroked her would prick his hand.

Also the devil spent a lot of time looking at his goddaughter, blonde as the wheat, fresh-cheeked, her voice like a song.

Fanche, my heaven: she was never out of the godfather's sight.

She was not astonished at all, but really not at all, when he came up to her and said: "Fanche, dolling, I want you give me a kiss."

"Uh-uh, godfather, no kiss!"

"I take one by force, if you don't let me."

"Godfather, you know I'd bite you."

He didn't doubt it.

"Dolling, on the forehead!"

"Not on the forehead."

"On the ear."

"Not on the ear, not anywhere else."

The devil, he got furious, he wanted that kiss so much.

"Fanche, my godchild, pull up skirt, let me see your calf."

"No, godfather, not as far as the calf!"

"As far as the ankle."

"Not even as far as the ankle!"

"If you don't, I grab you by the waist and pull up as far as the knee!"

"Godfather, you know I'd scratch you."

My heaven, how he knew it!

It was always the same routine.

"Listen, godchild, I ask you a riddle. If you guess it, I give you the keys to Hell. If you flunk, you give me that kiss . . . and not on the forehead! 'What is it that's as big as the Eiffel Tower, and doesn't weigh as much as a grain of flour?' "

Fanche was alarmed to hear this, for she knew that in taking the kiss, he'd slip his hand into her bosom, down there where it was pink and round.

Sure as sure, it meant damnation. After death, Hell again.

The devil's wife saw how the land lay, and knew that if she lost, the devil would bewitch her.

She whispered: "It's the shadow of the Eiffel Tower."

All Fanche had to do was repeat it. How furious he was, the devil!

"Listen, godchild! I ask you another riddle. If you guess it, I give you the winged horse. If you lose, I pull up your dress . . . and not just as far as the calf! 'On the wooden shoe of Father Fred, what can it be that walks on its head?' "

Fanche was in despair, for she knew that in pulling up her dress, he'd rumple her panties, down there where they were so well stitched.

Sure as sure, it meant damnation. After death, Hell again.

The devil's wife saw how the land lay, and didn't want the goddaughter to stay there and drive her devil mad.

She whispered: "It's the nails in the shoe."

The devil, he turned completely green at that. But a promise is a promise, even for Satan.

He gave the keys of Hell, he gave the winged horse—and good-bye.

When Fanche found herself at the door of her house, it was raining in the sunlight.

She knew what that meant—the devil was beating his wife.

Moon-Fishers

by CHARLES HENNEBERG

Hugh Page, test pilot for the Chronos group in the year 2500, looked with interest at the machine that stood in the middle of the Paratime Research laboratory. The white cockpit, equipped with luminous dials, looked like the airlock of a spaceship.

"It *is* the airlock of a spaceship," Professor Reszky told him. "We chose that shape for particular psychological reasons. The man who gets in there will be surrounded by cosmic radiation—as much so as any astronaut who takes off into space. The fourth dimension will contract around him, the universe will become immobile. The traveler can get off at any stop—past, present, or future. Only his body will remain in that cockpit."

"Then this trip will be a dream?"

"No. It's a real world on the other side, everything is real. Understand me, I'm not hiding anything from you: the dangers you'll meet are real dangers. The only difference is, if you should die, your corpse will be here."

"That's a consolation," said Page.

With his archangelic stature, his unruly black curls, and his long violet eyes, Page looked like a prince out of some Persian miniature. All things considered, Reszky thought to himself, it was because of that strange look that he had chosen Page from the crowd of standardized heroes. In a

gentler tone, he said, "The principle behind the trip moderates the risk."

"Because it will operate under new laws?"

"Exactly. For about three centuries—in fact, since the earliest hyperspace flights—mankind has been held back by an exasperating riddle. We know that time is a dimension, it expands and contracts according to its own laws; our spacemen come back young from distant galaxies, while the names of their parents have worn smooth on their tombstones. . . . But that path was closed to us, an invisible barrier stood in our way—worse than the monsters of the Odyssey, or those light and sound barriers that were broken by twentieth-century fliers. . . .

"That demanded an explanation. Some people gave out extravagant hypotheses, some insisted on the immutability of the past. Some amused themselves with brainteasers: 'Suppose you should be so unfortunate, during a stopover in the past, as to kill your grandfather before he'd become a parent—would you exist? And if you didn't, how could you have killed him?' It's what is called the temporal paradox."

Page laughed shortly. "As if anybody could be sure of his grandparents!"

"The uncertainty principle, of course!" Reszky wiped his fogged eyeglasses. . . . "But that was only a temporary setback. The answer was really terribly simple. Ever since Wells, apparently, the world had been hypnotizing itself with false ideas—we'd all had a material orientation to the problem. A machine, built of chrome and nickel, would move you up or down the Time Stream; you'd land in the middle of an era, bringing along your valise and briefcase, which would make for complications. Of course it was idiotic. We had to start all over again from the bottom."

"And where did we wind up?"

"At this fundamental idea, this egg of Columbus: *The time that acts on matter is external to it.* Our contact depends on extrasensory perception."

"In other words," Hugh said, "we're going to travel as disembodied spirits? Nobody will see or hear us, and we won't be able to interfere in anything that happens?"

"No," said the professor. He hesitated, looking very tired. "It always comes back to the Heisenberg principle, and Einsteinian relativity. Within certain limits, anything can hap-

pen. The present is built on an uncertain past, looking forward to a multiple and plastic future. Take the history of nations . . . Was Nero a misunderstood poet—a madman—or a complete monster? Was the first atomic bomb our doom, or our salvation? Each of these situations might be different, without changing the whole structure. Even the moment we're living in is nothing but a 'privileged configuration.' . . ."

"In other words—excuse the unscientific expression—I might 'bump into the past or the future'?"

"All that is still theory." Reszky sighed. "The first time journey is the one you're about to make, remember? All the same, I don't want to give you any illusions: there are no watertight compartments any more. There are phenomena of levitation, you see. And people gifted with strong psi faculties. Prophets and clairvoyants—"

"There was even," put in an assistant archeologist drily, "a certain continent with a strange reputation—Atlantis. Plato spoke of it in the *Critias* and the *Timaeus*. It was also described, in a wealth of detail, by a certain Theopompus who lived some three hundred eighty-nine years before Christ."

"A fable!" the scientist protested.

"Or a 'privileged configuration'? You said it yourself—anything can happen!"

"Look," said Hugh in a conciliatory tone, "what use could these Atlanteans be to us, in the case at hand?"

"What use? I don't know. I rather imagine they might cause you to run one of those well-known risks that Professor Reszky treats so lightly."

The physicist turned pale. "Explain that!" he said. "I don't care for half-truths. Just how could these fellows interfere with a paratime voyage beginning in our own year, twenty-five hundred, when they lived over five thousand years before Christ, and the one thing we know about them for sure is that they went down with their continent?"

"Oh, it's only a hypothesis . . . as long as you were talking about prophets and other clairvoyants. They were blue, it seems."

"An extenuating circumstance," said Hugh gravely. "But so what?"

The archeologist seemed indignant that a layman should presume to argue with him. "It seems," he explained rapidly, "that they also had unusual psychic abilities. *'They*

dreamed of the past and remembered the future.' That means that these 'moon-fishers' traveled far beyond us in the Time Stream, capturing visions in their nets and hatching out events to come."

"An unverifiable statement," Reszky interrupted coldly. "Let me remind you that the Service concerns itself only with the *exact* sciences."

Her name was Neter.

She was born some three thousand years before Christ. The hieroglyph of her name signified: life and lotus, the primal ocean, mystery; the beginning of the world and its feminine principle . . . and a throng of corollaries: moonbeams like a net on the waves; and on the desert, where it is a mirage; all that troubles, beckons, stirs up change; the veil of Isis over the future—and over the past as well. In the Nile valley, this royal name, bestowed upon an ordinary girl, was atonishing.

Isides, her father, was one of a small group of blue men —refugees from a vanished continent that was sometimes called Mu, Gondwanaland, or Lemuria, but most commonly Atlantis. These people were gentle and wise; their long lifespans awed the Egyptians, whose lives were short and swift. Some of them continued their migration, and carried their wisdom across the Red Sea. Isides, whom tradition credited with a span of nearly two hundred years, was venerated at Giza, where he founded the subterranean temple. Rumor gave him many wives—both goddesses and mortals (for in those days, the gods came easily down to Earth).

And one daughter: Neter.

We believe her mother was a Terran. Interplanetary crossmatings were hazardous then: thus was born ibis-headed Thoth, the baboon-faced Anubis, and Sekhmet with the body of a youth, surmounted by a lion's muzzle. Troubles by the thousand came from these births, not to mention Echidne and other sirens.

Neter, at fifteen, was beautiful and supple as a dancing serpent. Her whiteness was blue-tinged, as with all the Atlanteans: you can see her picture on a sarcophagus in the Valley of Kings, where she smiles beneath her tiara of sapphire. Necklaces of golden rose-leaves cover her long, flexible neck. The mouth is childish, sensitive, and passionate, and her opal eyes languish under extraordinary lashes.

Now, in those days Egypt was throwing off an ancient oppression: the Hyksos invaders were being expelled, the Eighteenth Dynasty was mounting the throne, and the age of gold was about to open.

Not that the land was entirely free; dark terror reigned in the desert. The Interplanetarians were landing in these sands. They were of many kinds. Much later, the Pharaoh Psammetichus III noted: *"They fell from the sky like the fruits of a fig-tree that is shaken; they were the color of copper and sulphur, and some had three eyes. . . ."*

These were paratroops from a neighboring planet. But at the dawn of the Eighteenth Dynasty, others were landing in those many-eyed wheels of which the prophet Ezekiel speaks: they had a lion's body, wings, and a human face. Their leader was called Ptah. His statue—that of the Sphinx—burdened the plain.

Dark tales went about: these beings were ambitious to rule; lurking in the tomb chambers of the Valley of Kings, they fed subtly on human sap—they drank the soul and not the blood. Multitudes of fellahs had confirmed these rumors by sight; but others put the blame on ghosts and specters. Trembling, the land waited for the day when that power would make itself felt. There was much calculation of the time of the apocalypse, and the exact form it would take.

Humanity was accustomed, already, to these random terrors, and these interminable eves of battle.

There came a night when the Atlantean Isides, in his cypress-girdled white house on the Nile, read a sign in the stars. He rose, pulled up his papyri in their cases, and went to the window beneath the archway: no, he had not been mistaken—a great trampling, a swell of hooting came from the desert, and above the wall of his house spiral antlers, sharp horns were outlined, as if a herd of antelopes, wild asses, and sheep were hurrying onward, surrounded by adders and lizards: every creature that was mild, inoffensive, that shrank from death in the shadows, had taken flight.

Isides went in haste to awaken his daughter, and reassured her, gazing deep into Neter's clear pupils. Nonetheless, they got into a litter closed with curtains of Cretan "woven air," carried by four giant Nubians. The litter was swallowed up in the silent procession of animals; and along

the banks of the Nile, three or four villages rose up and followed.

Neter had asked her father no questions; everything was understood between them. From time to time, parting the draperies, she put out her hand, which glowed in the darkness, and stroked a hind's velvet-soft muzzle. From the zenith, the moon cast her silver rays over the desert and seemed to draw to herself all Mizraim as her prey. Much later, when Thebes—all hanging gardens and alabaster towers—outlined itself on the pale horizon, Isides said: "Your uncle, Naphtali, the son of Jacob, is waiting for us."

That day, the fire from the desert consumed the oasis that surrounded the Atlantean's house, and the roaring of lions was heard in broad day.

Sunset found Neter sitting on a wall beside Deborah, the fourth wife of her uncle Naphtali, the two of them crunching watermelon seeds.

"Uncle" was only a title of friendship, for Isides, descended from the holy continent, had no blood relationship with the hard-working and prolific family of the shepherd Jacob. But, a poet at heart (for it is said: "Naphtali is a hind let loose: he giveth goodly words"), the Hebrew valued the Atlantean spirit, in its clarity and pride; he himself was very wise, even though deep in intrigues and married many times. His last wife, Deborah, was just Neter's age; they too were bound by friendship.

Now Thebes was stirred by momentous happenings: the Pharaoh Ahmose was dead, and his son was away at war. A certain Apopi, working in the pay of the Hyksos, was preaching revolt: what had Egypt to do with a bellicose young prince who went off seeking conquest and emptying the granaries? Besides, nobody knew him, and his family was nothing but a tribe of the Delta . . . and similar nonsense. The dregs of the populace drank plain wine at his expense and shouted loudly. But towards noon, a panting quartermaster ran up, announcing a cloud of dust that heralded the coming of an innumerable army. Every heart missed a beat. "The Pharaoh!" He arrived, having crossed the Nile.

His name was Amenophis. At twenty, he was beautiful with a violent beauty; all the girls of Mizraim were in love with him. Brought up far from the court, he was said to be

secretive. The rumor ran that he would enter by the South Gate . . . and everyone went to the ramparts, the former revolutionaries shouting their joy louder than anyone. That crowd blocked all the streets, and persons of quality, lingering at the jewelers' or the Greeks', where they haggled over amber and purple, found themselves carried into the front row of spectators.

Thus Neter and Deborah leaned over a wall, and the little Jewess said, shaking her brown locks: "Do you think he will really reign, this one . . . Amenophis?"

"What else?" The Atlantean seemed pale and distraught; she was toying with her rings.

"I don't know," said Deborah. "No, really. You hear so many stories! They say that in him we shall have a great, conquering king. They say he will raise up the peoples of Egypt like a wave, to hurl them upon Elam and Canaan . . . and perhaps on Mesopotamia and the Indies, too. The earth will tremble before him, and he shall possess it in blood and tumult."

"I imagine," said Neter drily, "that he will think first of delivering his own country from Ptah and the shadows of Ptah."

"That—" Deborah stopped and bit her fingernail, as if she had said too much. The Atlantean gazed at her curiously.

"You don't believe it, do you? You have curious perceptions. You've changed since our last journey, Deborah!"

She lowered her voice. Around the two foreigners, the Theban mob exploded in color, shouts, and laughter; women were chattering, children running naked, and a muffled psalmody arose from the priests' procession. But Neter, even in broad daylight, in the City, felt the shadow and ice of an eternal night. Deborah laughed slightly, leaned over, and with her dainty cat's tongue licked the white nape of her friend's neck.

"It's good," she said. "Like cream. Why don't you like to make love, Neter? Of course, they say you'll be queen one day . . . don't forget your little handmaiden then! I'll tell you everything, if you promise not to betray me. Listen: each night I'm visited by a winged Keroub . . . no, not a Keroub: they have a bull's body, and they bellow. This one is like a feline—long, powerful, and soft. He does whatever he likes with me, and he pours things into my soul . . . oh! I don't know how to tell you! It's terrible, and delicious."

"And Naphtali, Deborah?"

"He's a hundred years old! My friendship with the Visitor can't do him any harm. Why shouldn't you try it, Neter? It's nothing at all like our human stupidity: you grow so powerful, so wise—you become one with Ptah! It's such ecstasy! At the same time, you know you're lost, you know everything. . . ."

"You exaggerate," answered Neter. She would have liked to escape this friendly arm that embraced her, this charming, soiled creature, but now she knew: Destiny was beginning to weave its threads. In a pattern planned long before, Deborah was the unforeseeable and necessary arabesque.

Frozen with horror, Neter chose her words carefully. "Prove to me that you know one secret, just one . . . and I'll believe you."

Deborah saw herself mirrored in the clear gaze of her friend: she had vertical pupils, like a cat's.

"Well, then," she said, "listen again. . . . After tonight, for a certainty, the Pharaoh will no longer be Amenophis, son of Ahmose."

"Do you mean . . . they'll kill him?"

"There won't be any need. The Ptahs are wise: they'll put another soul in his body. And he'll serve them, he will be their slave."

"Another soul? You're crazy. He has one of his own."

"Do you think so? Perhaps he has one, after all. But the Ptahs only need his face and his body. I've found out they often perform such operations. There's a phrase I happen to remember—perhaps you'll understand it: 'Since we have discovered we are resistant to all mutation, we shall live on in another fashion . . . men have a horror of princes with wings and talons!' "

"It's impossible," said Neter harshly. "The Pharaoh won't let those beasts come near him. He's well guarded."

"Yes. Except for tonight. For you know there's a very old custom: the armed Vigil. A young sovereign of Egypt passes the night before his coronation in the Temple of Ammon, in its oasis. He must be alone. On the sill, a priest offers him a wine mixed with myrrh. Ptah knows the priest. In the wine there will be a mixture of herbs and a charm, so that Amenophis shall fall asleep, and the Most Mysterious shall come and take possession of that empty envelope—that vacant body. . . ."

Neter controlled herself again, but she had sunk her nails into her palm, and it was almost with relief that she felt the human warmth of her own blood. In a low, soft voice, she asked, "You don't find this an odious treachery? I'm not talking about Amenophis: but what about Egypt. She deserves another king."

"Oh, this one will be very great!" Deborah lowered her kohl-painted lids, with a guilty and voluptuous air. "And anyhow . . . how can we know the gods? Perhaps it's already happened! Many princes who were hollow as bells have turned into Pharaohs full of wisdom. Suppose the trial of the oasis is really nothing but . . . that exchange? My lover shall reign over Egypt! But don't tell Naphtali! And tonight, tonight . . ."

Neter had slipped down from the wall, but she could not move forward. It was, she thought, like a nightmare, in which you want to run, cry out—and you are fixed to the spot, while every word dies in your throat.

A cloud of scarlet dust veiled the horizon; fanfares burst out. Standing on the ramparts, the Thebans beat on their cymbals and let fall a rain of lotus and rose petals. The priests were waving their censers. Deborah called something, holding out her slender arms toward her friend. As often befell her in moments of great emotion, the Atlantean had to cling to the present by a cornice, a fellah's robe, to keep from toppling into one of the two vertiginous abysses that gaped for her equally: the future and the past.

She ran. She must warn, help. . . . Above all, she must silence her thoughts—so many telepathic beings were hidden in that crowd—and now Deborah was their creature. She stopped, gasping: the street ahead was choked. Tiny as she was, the blue tunics and floating klaphtes of the priests blocked her view . . . she could have wept. Suddenly the hypnagogic fog—the state of indecision, of vacuity—in which she had floated all that day, was dissipated, and she realized with horror that she must see Amenophis at that instant: *otherwise she would never be sure.* Her little fists drummed boldly on the back of a tall Lydian, who turned with a grin. "So little, and so naughty! What do you want, O daughter of Isis?"

Panting, she stammered, "I must see the Pharaoh!"

"Oho! You're all crazy for that. Climb up here."

He was a musician; he lifted her onto his harp, which

stood upright in a sandalwood case. There she remained, like a sculptured figurine, a victory. It was time: down below, the bronze doors were opening; with a thunderous sound, amid clouds of aromatics, noisy, dazzling as a barbaric jewel, heavy—like a python with a thousand coils—the army of Mizraim entered Thebes.

Slim runners in leather aprons preceded the clumsy Ionian mercenaries, whose cuirasses prefigured interplanetary armor. Numidians galloped on their fine golden mares, and Libyan Negroes led packs of desert leopards.

In a chariot drawn by four white stallions stood a golden statue, motionless. A serpent of emeralds—the royal Uraeus —writhed on his forehead; the dark, perfect countenance was bare. When the Pharaoh of Egypt passed, followed by the melodious wall of his harpists, he raised his eyes. Behind the thick grilles of his lashes, Neter met two lakes of night: dark and dull. She could set her mind at rest: Amenophis I had no soul. Not yet.

In 2500, Hugh Page, the first paratime traveler, entered his cockpit after many handshakes, leaving Professor Reszky to fend for himself in the midst of a crowd of reporters. The importance people gave to this trip was beyond him. He wasn't leaving much behind, and he had no great love for his own era. There had been more beautiful ones; he'd learned about them in his hypno courses. Certain primitive statues, frescoes of the Italian Renaissance, enamels found in the sphinxes of the Valley of Kings, awoke in him some distant echo, natural, intensely moving. . . . He adjusted his electrode helmet and watched Reszky.

Snatches of conversation drifted over to him. What had that other freak said, again? *The Atlanteans, in order to travel in time, left vacant spaces, empty forms, in various eras. That explains the appearance of these great, unparalleled geniuses: da Vinci, Pascal, Einstein. They were men of the future.* . . . In the false daylight of the neons, the archeologist's face was turning blue. Hugh consulted his chronometer, and pressed the selenium control lever.

And there was a different world.

An immense white moon hung over the desert. Page did not remember leaving the cabin—but here he was among these red dunes. The sand sparkled faintly; it looked like

Syrtis Major, on Mars. He opened the faceplate of his helmet slightly, and a dry wind, charged with oxygen, burned his cheeks.

He was uneasy: was this really Earth? The first trial might be subject to routing errors. Under three metallic palms ran a thin crystal stream that seemed heavy to him, saturated with mineral salts.

For a moment the traveler wavered: he was done for; Reszky, mistaking the direction, had sent him into an unforeseeable future, a dead Earth—this desert was nothing but the bottom of an ocean, dried up by evaporation, and this cindery-tasting trickle, the last water. . . . The altered pattern of the stars, the limpid atmosphere bore out the horror of that theory: the stars seemed enormous, and the Pole Star had changed its place, as if the axis of the globe had straightened slightly. Would Reszky know how to find him again? . . . On the burned or frozen planets he had visited in the old days, at least he'd had his spaceship, but not here. . . .

Almost at the same moment, a savage howl, as alarming as an air-raid siren, came from behind a dune. With his electrogun off safety (though he could well believe the weapon was useless), Page saw a fantastic monster rise in outline against the white disk. The moon sparkled on its silvery, blue-shadowed pelt; tall as a loading crane, it had long, flexible legs and neck, a hump in the middle of its back, and a supercilious expression. The monster took a few lurching steps, then folded its knees, manlike, and fell over in the sand. And the spaceman heard a melodious sob.

A small silhouette detached itself from the shadow. A long blue cloak trailed behind her, and for an instant Page glimpsed a face cast down, a pearly whiteness, a whiteness of cherry-trees in blossom, of the abyss—lashes pearled with tears, and a child's mouth. The girl ran blindly forward (to Hugh, she was undeniably a girl), and the traveler followed her: This life form, the first intelligent one he had found, was delightful. He tried to pick up her thoughts. A flood of disorderly waves struck him (true, his psi faculties were unusually acute here): the girl was weary, frightened, she had been traveling all night. There was a feeling of urgency. And this wretched dromedary refused to go! Page went up to her, nearly asked her a question, but remembered in time that he was invisible and inaudible. Nevertheless, as if in

answer, the girl's thoughts concentrated with extraordinary power on a foreign danger, alive and merciless—something that came from another world. For a moment, Page had a ridiculous hunch—other spacemen had arrived in this country before him, and the girl was fleeing from the invaders.

Meanwhile, in the turbulent mental flood, two images swam up with remarkable clarity. The first was that of an oasis and a semicircular building, constructed of enormous blocks of black marble and jasper—a solitary, nocturnal temple, from which radiated a feeling of horror. Hugh's hypnotic instruction enabled him to recognize one of the oldest sanctuaries in the world: the Temple of Ammon Ra, where all the sovereigns of Egypt, including Alexander the Great, had sought consecration. Then he was really on Earth—but in the depths of what illusory past?

The strange girl went on running; she stumbled, and a second image detached itself among her thought waves: a man—no, more than a man. Page could not make out his features—only the brilliance of a cuirass that looked, Page thought to himself, rather like space armor. This creature was threatened by some danger, worse than death. Trying to clarify that shadow, bring it into sharper detail, Page drew a blank. Evidently his reception was out of phase with the girl's sending: he saw nothing but the desert, and the image of the sphinx of Giza.

As if in despair at being unable to communicate more clearly, the fugitive stopped and wrung her hands. A shock, more felt than heard, had made the plain tremble, and yet nothing was to be seen: only, at the edge of vision, sand devils danced like columns of incense smoke. A second later, a whirlwind shape hurled itself past them: it was the white dromedary, its shadow flying like a cloud across the desert; ears laid back, neck trembling, it disappeared in a curtain of dust.

And Page saw the lions come.

The first roar sounded from the bottom of a fault, deep under the plain. Thunder rolled along the ground, then broke up into staccato trains of roars and shrieks. A wavering tornado arose among the dunes—a cloud of sand, claws, and lightning flashes—a wind from the forge. The girl fell to the ground, and before the spaceman could move, that volcano was upon them.

Twenty, or a hundred, or a thousand red sand devils. A

hundred, or a thousand long, roaring flames—muzzles carved in granite, manes interminglingl—and when they came near, the twin pupils of boiling gold. Certainly there were more than enough to hurl back, rip to shreds, two vulnerable human bodies. Page had instinctively bent his knees, wrapping his arms around the slender body of the girl, who seemed to be hiding her face against him, in spite of the space armor. He had had no time to draw his electrogun. Could people die on the paratemporal plane? Reszky had said . . . He closed his eyes.

A minute later, he was still alive; and the brazier-wind, the living hurricane, had passed. The girl in his arms held herself still and attentive. Hugh opened his eyes, to see the tawny mass disappear over the horizon. A few stragglers galloped by, bounding aside from the spot where the Invisible stood. No dromedary was in sight, and the universe was settling down in vast waves of earth-shock.

Animals could sense "presences," the traveler reminded himself. He recalled familiar sights (so distant from this frenzied world): his dog pointing at an empty spot—a housecat motionless, staring at the night. For them, the darkness was alive. But the girl who had taken shelter against him? . . . She was standing; he could see her better now in the moonlight, and a dizziness overcame him. Page's time was full of spectacular girls, hard and civilized, admirable mannequins. Never before had he seen a creature who made him think of lilies.

"Lord," she said, "I must go. The trial is beginning, when each one must be alone. You know now . . . Ptah . . ."

Was it a prayer, addressed to some invisible god? She was already moving away. Now other shadows were passing over the desert. A chariot with shining wheels rolled past, and in it were two men speaking in curt thoughts. Once more Page saw the image of the oasis, its parallel palm-shadows, the temple with its pillars of jasper. But to these travelers, there was a man holding vigil within; and beyond doubt, he was the one the girl was trying to reach. Page made an effort and saw—beyond the sand and mist—a tall silhouette, a dark, handsome face that was strangely familiar, and the emeralds of the filet. "A king," he thought. "A Pharaoh. Probably they've got a date. My little stranger does all right for herself." Full of an unaccountable bitterness, he turned away from the oasis.

Now that he was left alone, he could better appreciate his state of being, suspended between temporal planes. He was actually floating above the dunes. He had only to think of a gap in the rock, and he found himself instantly on the edge of the cliff. Down below, cool air rose from a spring. "This is what they call levitation, or telekinesis," he thought.

A solitary lion leaped up, roared, pricked his ears, then bounded aside, because Page was walking deliberately into him. The enormous beast ran off, head down, like a whipped dog. Mentally, Page made him turn back, sent him sliding over the cliff: so, animals obeyed him. . . .

It was then that the danger became clear.

It wasn't a living being, at least not yet. Rather, it was a shaft of mental waves—powerful, inexorable, commanding. It was a body-emptying thing, before which all human thought faded and died. He had to call on all his discipline to keep from running away; instead, he moved forward. This, he realized, was the customary attack of an ancient and carnivorous race that had developed its powers of absorption at the expense of all mortal faculties. A race of psychic vampires, in short; or else . . . The tide was so powerful that it automatically projected the image of a sphinx onto Page's vision. But this time, the sphinx was alive. . . .

"Why not?" Hugh asked himself. Terrestrial monuments are covered with these divine and bestial masks; planetary legends are full of horrible, insane things, blasphemous things that we try to forget, because it's too hard to live with them. But all the same, men have encountered those Assyrian bull-kings somewhere, those harpies and gorgons. . . . Why not a Sphinx, reigning over the night?

Page wavered; the projected vision had struck him with such force that he experienced it as a physical blow; a curtain of blood veiled his sight, and a wave of hallucinations broke over him. "Just like a groggy fighter," he thought, trying to put up a defensive screen. But perhaps no hurt fighter had ever felt such thunderous pain. Yet the wave flowed back, and he caught his breath long enough to bring order into the sensations that were assailing him.

They were of all kinds, and evidently radiated from at least two different beings. One was dark and gigantic; built on the scale of a demented universe, it evoked black infinity, burned and frozen globes revolving around giant suns;

and these stars bore the names of luminaries that humanity had not yet reached: Sirius, Altair, Aldebaran. . . . Was it from thence that the greedy, carnivorous beings came? These waves forced themselves upon him with their visions and discordant sounds, their worlds exploding in cosmic collisions; from the titanic bellowing of the saurians of their carboniferous ages, from the musky stenches of the primal swamps where all life was born and perished, they pulled together a history of combats, shouts, and violence—a whole universe of terror, mental and physical.

Page could not doubt that these were the personal memories of a Monster. Ptah—the girl had spoken that name; Ptah . . . Under the name of Sokaris, he had already reigned over Memphis—or had that been one of his ancestors? At any rate, today he meant to stretch out his claws over the whole land. . . . But why should he launch an attack on a paratime traveler? (For an instant, the spaceman wished he had stuck to his own profession—precise, limited by the laws of physics . . . clearly, Reszky and his assistants had not foreseen this danger.) His struggles against the invading personality were growing weaker; sharp, penetrating, inhuman sensations were taking possession of his subconscious mind.

But a feebler wave, like a strain of music—a thread of crystal, a moonbeam—came to his aid. This one was profoundly human: she spoke of a cerulean sea, a continent of opal, a cold wisdom, built in harmony, that made you proud to be a Terran. Page's whole being went out toward that stream of images, and he realized that the stranger was fighting beside him. But then—the temple, the oasis . . . Was she not by the side of her handsome dark Pharaoh?

He had no time to reflect on it, for the carnivorous mind returned to the assault. Until now it had only shouted and thundered; it had been terror and helpless annihilation. . . . Now it was changing its tactics, having tested its adversary's strength—and not without surprise; now it was making itself monstrously sweet, insinuating, attacking the nerves, which it filled to brimming with a horrible delight beyond all physical pleasure, and sharper than pain. And it promised and murmured, almost at the level of consciousness, of terrible things; it dripped the essence of punishment and ecstasy. The being that had taken over his nervous system, and was performing astonishing symphonies on that clavier,

had lived so long and drained so many frightful joys that the human mind dissolved at its touch; the human soul, irrevocably stained, fell into oblivion. In a flash of despair, Page sensed that all these experiences were happening at this very moment; by a concentration of his will, Ptah lived, and made him share his inferno.

Him. Always him. Then where was the Pharaoh that the Monster was to attack?

He fought as a man, as an explorer, one who had been taught to preserve his own personality in isolation and in chaos: he was Hugh Page, a unique human being, from the year 2500—and he had nothing to do with this outpouring of hatred and lust. That realization broke the spell; the wave of black and red withdrew. Hugh found himself on his knees under a dune; he had rolled among blocks of stone, and his hands were full of blood; the beating of his heart made him dizzy, and he realized that the last attack had been so violent that it had almost torn him out of the fourth dimension —he was regaining physical form. . . . He shuddered.

In the silence of the desert, a melodious thought wave spoke (perhaps the voice of the stranger, but warmer and more penetrating). "Run! Oh, run! It's you they want to destroy!"

"Me? What for? I don't belong in this country, or this time."

"You know nothing about it. The most horrible danger—"

"Can I go to you?" Hugh asked—and each word tore his dry throat. "Can I be any help?"

"No. No. . . ." (Here, a wave of icy despair.)

"I want to see you again."

"It's impossible. You're lost, if they succeed in materializing you."

"And can they do it?"

"I don't know. They have robbed so many Atlantean brains! Integrate yourself into another dimension. Don't think about me any more."

(That wasn't the stranger: she couldn't talk that way.)

"They have robbed so many Atlantean brains!"

His, too, undoubtedly—Page felt drained. Since he'd shared the memories and sensations of the Monster for some moments, it followed that the others had had access to his own knowledge. He shivered: whatever else he might be, he

was a good physicist and a better spaceman. Would they know how to use his knowledge? Could they. . . ? He shuddered at the thought of Earth, in the year 2500, invaded by the bestial masks of Pharaonic Egypt.

But: integrate himself into another dimension? On the other shore of Time, the silhouette of Professor Reszky seemed to him oddly insubstantial. That phantom ought to turn on a control board, press the "return" lever. . . . That seemed impossible. Suddenly, he began to appreciate the violent world into which he had fallen: it was *his* Earth, and yet a new planet: the air was intoxicatingly pure; all the colors leaped out in lively contrast, the pink moon among the sand devils blazed incredibly . . . the luxuriant oasis, its palms as if washed by a rainstorm, everything, even the dizzy scents that rose from the pale cups of the water lilies, the musk of hidden beasts, the coolness of a spring, forcefully proclaimed a young, rich, intoxicating universe. And at the same time, never had horror and death been so immediate, so close: everything in this world was an invitation to live for the moment. "I live!" cried the osier bed trampled beneath the tree-trunk legs of the hippopotamus. "I exist!" sparkled the moth in the jaws of darkness. The fleeting moment distilled a piercing delight.

It was in that pink glow that they showed themslves in outline, at the other side of the plain—and truly, Page had never seen anything more hideous on any carboniferous planet. To begin with, because there was a certain order, the parody of human discipline, in their movements, and because some of them, riding in chariots, holding the reins, seemed familiar, like childhood nightmares. (Who has not dreamed himself pursued, trailed by a pack, falling from a dizzy height, falling forever? . . .) Page had tried in vain to believe, on the strength of the hypno courses, that many of Egypt's gods had little humanity about them; he hadn't been able to take it in. Now, from every hollow of the ground ("In that accursed land," says a Chaldean manuscript, "every hollow in the sand hides a million demons . . ."), from every dune, bizarre visions were springing up: winged or squat, octopod or cynocephalous, some crawling on the ground, with a crackling of coils, a sound and smell of the tide; others whirling in an eddy of plumes—all came toward the Oasis of Ammon, and there was saurians and giant rams, entities with the heads of jackals, the broad backs of hippo-

potamuses; the gods of Bubastis, Mendes, Assyria; monsters and idols without faces. All the terrors of the Dark Ages were following a conqueror's chariot.

Up above, upon wheels of gold, under a purple canopy, the living Sphinx was enthroned.

The procession advanced with inexorable slowness. There was no resisting it; nothing could have halted that march toward victory. All the reawakened terrors of childhood, all the old familiar specters . . . a man would have been nothing but a doormat to that procession of gods.

And they were heading toward the Oasis of Ammon.

For a moment, the urge to be with the stranger in the temple was so strong that Hugh bit his wrist. No, he hadn't come here for that. He was on a mission, he must simply collect and retain all the facts he could, fight if he were attacked, and return to his own era. But the mere thought of returning seemed to him cosmically absurd. And unfair . . .

On his knees, so exhausted he was, he crawled toward the spring in the reeds. The water was burning cold. He drank in great gulps, aware without surprise that his senses were growing more and more acute. The spring that fed the oasis disappeared a little farther down into a fault in the granite, from which arose a raucous murmuring. Curious, Hugh leaned over the edge, and a terrible wild-animal stench struck his nostrils. It was the lion wadi, on a lower level of the plain. It billowed like an ocean; it was a deep, reddish tidal wave, in which the thin trickle of water sparkled here and there. Hugh saw what man had never seen and lived.

The animals drank with courtesy, making room for the weakest. In the mass he could make out the great beasts of the Gulf, blunt-fashioned, with muzzles carved in sandstone, with their tumbling cubs and beautiful lionesses, the color of ripe corn. A little farther down were outlined the horns of a ram whose thirst had made him forget danger; a rhinoceros, with its little bloodshot eyes, rolled over, tearing up the margin of the crumbling cliff. Dune leopards, blossoming with black roses more plentifully than the fields of May, slunk among the towering obliqueness of striped giants. In the ripples of sand, tiny kraits hissed. . . .

All at once, as the wind changed, a motionless shiver went over the living mass. It was almost instantaneous. A beautiful lioness, pink as a nude woman, leaped away into the dunes. A tiger that was almost blue slashed the air.

Jackals howled as they were trampled underfoot, and above the roaring concert could be heard the frightful laugh of the hyena. Astounded, Hugh realized that the animals were aware of his presence; the tidal wave was in motion ahead of him. He moved forward. It was a material force, unleashed, capable of sweeping anything out of its path—or anyone. . . .

"Come on Ptah!" said Page to himself.

The collision of the two masses shook the desert.

Hugh Page came to himself in the deep coolness of the vaults. His head lay on a blue robe, folded up in a trough of marble, and he remembered that Egyptian beds included a half-moon-shaped cavity in place of the pillow. It made for sweet dreams, evidently. The idea was so foolish that he laughed. A ring of metal was squeezing his temples, and two immense opal eyes, veiled with long lashes, were watching him.

"You fought bravely," said a crystal voice. And after a silence: "And you are handsome. . . ."

"Then you can see me?" he asked politely, trying to get up. But a small hand restrained him.

"Don't move. When we picked you up, you seemed dead: all the lions of the desert and the whole army of Ptah had passed over your armor—luckily, it was made of tough material."

"Where is Ptah?"

"He has fled," I think, she said absently. "He's hiding in the desert—he's lost nearly everything he had, and after all, he's nothing but a big beast!"

"Who picked me up—was it you?"

"My father. My uncle Naphtali. Some strangers. You can pay them later; it doesn't matter much. In a few minutes, the remedy we've given you will begin to work and then you can walk, and go back to Thebes. There you will be received as a living god."

"But," said Hugh, "I don't want to go to Thebes! Certainly not, if everyone can see me now."

"A Pharaoh must be crowned in Thebes."

"But—"

"And you are the Pharaoh. Your name is Amenophis I,

son of Ahmose, grandson of Kamose. You rule over the two Egypts, the White and the Blue; over part of Asia, and the numberless peoples of the desert. You wear the Uraeus and the Pschent, and you are a god."

The remedy must have worked, for Hugh Page sat up in his burst armor.

"Listen," he said, "one of us is crazy: my name is Hugh Page, and I'm a pilot on a mission. I came here from the year 2500, via the Time Stream, and I'm going to go back the same way. Anyhow, I thought I understood yesterday—reading your thoughts—that the Pharaoh Amenophis was in this temple. Where is he? He's the real king of Egypt, and I have no business usurping his prerogatives."

The blue-gray eyes expressed a delightful despair. "Uncle Naphtali!" the stranger cried. "Uncle Naphtali! Come quickly! The shock was greater than we thought—our prince is mad!"

An admirable white-bearded oldster, with the manner of a patriarch, threw himself on Hugh and took his pulse. "O Pharaoh!" he said. "May your name be blessed a million and again a million times. . . . May Your Majesty recover his senses: there is no more fever."

"I'm no more the Pharaoh than you are!"

"A common effect of battle against the demons, Sire: I am your cupbearer and your court poet, I recognize you formally as my king. Would you like me to call my brother Joseph, your high commissioner? Or my brother Dan, your chief of police? Or the High Priest Isides, who is present?"

"You wear the Uraeus and the Pschent, Sire," said a calm blue oldster.

Hugh put his hand to his forehead—he felt the scales of the golden serpent, the cold of the jewels. Kneeling before him, a Nubian slave offered a disk of silver, which acted as a mirror. Was this really his face, this dark, perfect image, with the great eyes in which flashes of light came and went?

"I—" he began. "I don't understand any more. There's been a substitution."

"An impossible thing, Sire: your servants have kept vigil all the night in the oasis. And before, and after the combat, the Princess Neter, your betrothed, remained by your side."

The Princess Neter, his betrothed . . .

He looked deeply into the opal eyes that were smiling at him. She was the most delightful girl he had ever met, and a loyal comrade in battle. She had picked him up among the remains of the monsters. It seemed to him that he had always known her—or at least dreamed of her, in a past that was perhaps really the future. . . .

"Leave us alone," he said, in an imperious voice that was strange to him. "I wish to speak with the Princess Neter."

And they were alone, before the altar of Ammon-Ra, among the holy disks and the pillars of jasper. Page leaned against the base of a statue, and Neter took his hand to caress it softly with her long lashes.

"I'm not Amenophis I," he said. "And you know it, Neter."

"You will be Amenophis."

"What good is this cruel game? Some day they'll find the real Pharaoh—or his corpse."

"There is no other Pharaoh. Do you think the jealous lords of the desert would have let him live? *There was only a shadow, an envelope of our making which already had your face, because we Atlanteans have always known you would come.* It was so perfect that even Ptah let himself be tempted to take it. . . . That turned out very well, incidentally: he has given you all his knowledge. . . . I admired your battle. You will be a great king, Amenophis."

"But the other Pharaohs—"

"How do you know their origins were any different? It's due to paratime travelers that humanity has been able to progress in spite of invasions and cataclysms. That's the usefulness, and the real meaning of your discovery. Egypt needs you. And so do I."

The fine strands of her hair smelled of honey and amber. Her pale mouth was there—and Hugh felt himself weakening. He tried once more to get his footing in the stable, solid world where he had thought he belonged. "There can't be any interference with the Time Stream. This is a dream we're in!"

"No: a privileged configuration. Amenophis I comes out of the Temple of Ammon changed, you know. The chroniclers will say: '*He grew like unto the gods.*' "

"Exactly, and I'm not. Not even a little bit! And besides—" he seized this idea with the despair of a castaway who, drowning, sinks contentedly to the bottom—"don't forget, I

may be called back to the year 2500 at any moment! All it takes is for Professor Reszky to pull the lever. . . ."

"No," said Neter. "*'We moon-fishers, ascending the Time Stream, gather souls and images in our nets.'* Someone said that. . . . Kiss me, and you'll understand. Now, do you see? The paratime cockpit is empty. . . . Your body is here."

The Non-humans

by CHARLES HENNEBERG

These are not just the ramblings of an old condottiere. There are more things in this terraqueous universe, and under heaven, than the priests talk of; and I wasn't always the leathery old soldier who sits here, spinning his yarns over a mug of mead.

I'm telling you of the Florence of yesteryear. Not that anthill scorned by the Signory and a blushing Gonfalonier, but the leonine City of the Red Lily, that was daughter and mistress of the brave. The town that astonished all Italy, and drew foreigners like a lodestone.

1490 . . . a year that seems so far away, yet comes so near as soon as I close my eyes! I was young then, a little mad, as we all are at twenty, and well pleased with my person, which the ladies often found to their liking. I belonged, you know, to the noble family of the Pazzi, which had yet been spared its exile and its illustrious misfortunes; one of my uncles was a cardinal, the galleys of another traded as far as the shores of Algeria. My widowed mother and I lived in a charming pink palace in Fiesole. Yes, it was destroyed, later on; like so many things. But that has nothing to do with my story.

You have heard men speak of those matchless years, when a divine breath passed over Italy. It came from the snows of Olympus, from the violet sea, from golden Byzantium under the barbarian's heel; in our hearts and in the soil of our hills,

it awoke old sleeping gods, the Graces, and the arts. In every mountain spring, a timid naiad awoke, parting the green strands of her hair; at dawn, on the trampled grass, one saw the dancing trail of a satyr. Artists began to paint and carve, women were proud and beautiful, and science, abandoning its alchemist's alembics, looked to the skies. Afterward, we had Girolamo Savonarola and the Inquisition. . . . Let us pass on.

For me (O marvell) those years corresponded to my youth. I wasted little time in the counting house of my merchant uncle, selling Greek velvet and the incense of the Axumites. I composed sonnets, like Cornazano, music—like Lorenzo de' Medici—and I numbered among my friends the master Perugino. This famous artist had once painted the portrait of my parents, and my sainted mother held him in great esteem.

It was in this studio, in fact, that I met Nardo—you know, Nardo, the youngest of his students, whom the master used as model for his angelic musicians? You can still see him here and there among the frescoes, playing on the harp or the rebeck—his pearly skin, blond curls, and his strange, empty eyes. . . . "Half his soul always seems to be absent," said the master, with a laugh. Anyhow, Nardo—see, his name escapes me (it's old age, or that wound from Agnadel). It matters little; it will come back to me. He was an inn servant's bastard, but legitimized by his father, a country squire. Afterward, he made his own way. . . .

I went often to the studio of Messer Perugino. His nature was happy, his genius limitless. It was he, no other, who endowed Italy with those misty twilights, between darkness and day, broken by a ray of supernal dawn; to him, too, we owe those first heads of youths and pensive virgins, the velvet-smooth faces, the eyelids half closed on some ravishing secret. Later, artists understood and defined these things, but none was able to copy that silent expectation of a miracle: it belonged to our era.

Messer Perugino was then at the zenith of his fortunes, and he surrounded himself with brilliant young men. Being rather vain, he had also launched the fashion among artists of wearing a long purple or black velvet cloak, which became him very well, and a Florentine beret tilted over the ear.

To entertain his friends and their merry companions, the "honestae meretrix" of Florence, the master had rented and

redecorated a huge shack on the Arno; it had formerly been part of a row of grain warehouses, deserted since the Great Plague; it adjoined the Alley of the Old Jews, but Perugino liked it. Outside, this vast structure still looked run-down, but the interior was like a cathedral vault—many rooms had been made into one, and the walls were covered with extravagant drawings. We took much pleasure there, drank deep, and sang bacchic hymns in Latin, while the little tradesmen of the neighborhood trembled in their beds, and their chaste spouses hastily snuffed out the candles, crossing themselves . . . or got up to shoot the bolts on their daughters' doors.

Their daughters . . . We'll come to them.

One evening when I was at Messer Perugino's, and he had taken it into his head to paint me as Saint Sebastian pierced with arrows (as Mantegna did with one of his friends), a strange personage came to visit the master. Tall, thin, dressed in black, with his leathery complexion and his crooked features, he might have been mistaken for the Wandering Jew himself, were it not that he wore a sword like a gentleman.

The visitor introduced himself: Messer Deodat Lazarelli, which was, he informed us voluntarily, a corruption of his Arab name of Al-Hazreh. You say there was a scholar of that name? I know him not. The Deodat in question explained to us that his ancestors had been barbaric kings in Cathay, living on herbs and mares' milk, and offering their wives to passing strangers in token of friendship. Our Deodat had been converted to the Christian faith, and, leaving that plateau where his spiritual advancement made it impossible to stay, he had made his fortune and retired to Florence, "the city," he said, "which has become the center of the universe." And he asked the master of Perugia to paint a portrait of his daughter, whose name was Noemi, or Nahema.

The master had other commissions in hand, and the prospect of painting a mud-faced girl little pleased him; he declined the offer, recommending certain colleagues of lesser renown to Al-Hazreh. But the old rascal knew how to make himself heard; he wasted no time in discussion, but emptied a long purse of red Morocco leather on the table.

The painter's eye gleamed—not that Perugino was in the least avaricious, but he could already see all the beautiful

things he might bring into being from that golden heap. In a toneless voice, he told the Arab that his daughter might come to pose on the morrow.

"No," said the other dryly, in a changed tone, as if he had bought the right to be insolent. "My daughter cannot leave my house, nor appear in public. You will come to me. Don't think I am wasting your time: I live behind your house, just inside the Alley of the Old Jews, in the seed merchant's house, which I have purchased."

"But," said I, "nobody could live in that ruin! The place has been abandoned for a hundred years or more!"

(I thought I knew Florence—unforeseeable, inexhaustible city!)

"*I* live there," retorted the man haughtily. (With my chest bare and daubed with "dragon's blood," no doubt he took me for a hired model.) "As for the rest, I shall send a slave to conduct you there, master."

Without a glance for me, he bowed to the master and left.

"What think you of that pismire, Guido?" Perugino asked me.

"That he lacks courtesy, and that my hand itches. . . . But he's a stranger; we must make allowances for his barbaric habits. What will you do?"

"I know not," answered the artist. "Bah! Gold is always good to take! If the wench be not too ugly, I'll botch it together in three sittings and leave the background for Nardo to finick at. He'll give a good account of himself—won't you, my chick, my swan?"

Concealed behind the tapestries, Nardo gave us a hint of his charming, drowsy smile.

I left the studio supposing I should never see or hear again of the unpleasant Al-Hazreh.

But destiny toys with men, and that same evening—out of idleness, and to try out my new black sorrel—I wandered down the Alley of the Old Jews. There I surprised a singular activity: a façade was being covered with mortar, the metal-work of the shutters was being polished; giant Negroes were carrying bundles of golden cloth, ebony furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl, jade and onyx vases, and those astonishing screens of cloisonné enamel which were beginning to reach us from the Orient. Others were spreading a deep-piled

Mirzapur on the steps, still others were sponging the flagstones of the entry with aromatics, burning incense and benzoin there.

The installation of a prince, if such he was! I stayed there, surprised and charmed: in a few days and without commotion, these diligent servants had transformed the ruin into a fairy palace. But porters were springing up afresh, bent caryatids carrying chests in the sinister form of coffins, made of pale lemonwood enriched only by its grain. A fantastic thing: while they were setting them on the ground, a chorus of thin and discordant voices reached me, as if from a flock of hungry sparrows; I turned, thinking a crowd of children had followed me, but the Alley was deserted, the gabled houses dark, the doors closed.

Nevertheless, a yellow rose, with a peppery scent, fell on the neck of my sorrel.

After that, I had no rest because I had failed to enter that house of Barbary. Youth is so fashioned: if Al-Hazreh had been less secretive and jealous, never would I have found myself under his windows. And if the rose had been white and of a less piquant perfume . . . It is natural to invent one's own chimeras: already I was imagining that beauty in the robes of a Empress of Cathay, with tilted eyes and a skin of yellow satin.

. . . In which I was mistaken.

The next morning, meeting Nardo accompanied by an enormous black who carried brushes and canvas, I fell into step. Nardo made me a present of his angelic smile. The morning was mild, the sky of an exquisite mauve; silvery carillons fell from the campaniles, and mist floated on the transparent river.

I was apprehensive of meeting the gallows bird Al-Hazreh, but he had the good grace to absent himself, and we went up, through all the enchantments of the thousand and one nights. One room succeeded another, each with its lintel of lapis-lazuli and its ivory door; on each doorsill slept a black; a fountain pulsed in each lotus-shaped basin.

One immense room, which had been part of the warehouses, was now transformed with exquisite taste into a studio: daylight entering by a window of colored crystal was softened by turquoise veils; it gave things an aspect aquatic and strange. An ebony screen, pierced in the form of lilies and swans, marked off the space of a choir. There was little

furniture, save for some armchairs and small tables garlanded with mother-of-pearl, now mauve, now pink, according to the light. In the center of the hall, masses of iris lay in a basin carved of blue opaline. I also noted the lemonwood chests, disposed here and there on a little platform. An orchestra hidden behind the screen began a soft *canzone.*

On the platform sat a girl. I know not how to describe her, save by comparison with the rare and precious things she evoked: moonlight, the shivering of willows, pearls, mist floating on the water. Angelic, androgynous, mysterious, without a past, without a country, sprung perhaps from an alien universe. . . . I believe she was dressed in mist and azure. I believe . . . At the first glimpse, I fell under an unaccountable spell; I was powerless, turned into an automaton.

I let Nardo go through the necessary motions, unfold the easel and prepare the colors, always keeping behind him where I could see my fair unknown. Nardo, by contrast, was vivaciously selecting his charcoal sticks.

I promise you I did not follow the progress of his work; I was plunged into an abyss of vertiginous sensations, and I saw, I remembered, beings, things, whole sequences of time—strange, magnificent, or dreadful—all of which bore some relation to the adorable creature who sat before me.

Two series of images were blended: first a black gulf, shot through with nebulous gleams, stars, like the pearls of a necklace spilled on velvet—and windings, spirals of flame, emerald and purple explosions (such as, I know now, no artificer can produce). A dazzling light burst through the colored window —and it was the face of a giant globe.

Then, like a traveler who contemplates the valley of the Arno from the summit of the Apennines, I saw another Earth come toward me, with its sharp reliefs, its frosted peaks, and its craters of night among the great luminous plateaus; phosphorescent oceans beat upon their shores, and a gloomy light chilled the ruins of magnificent cities. And these landscapes at the same time were a song and a music, mounting by stairs of silver toward the vast heavens.

"Can you paint that?" asked the girl, addressing herself equally to Nardo and me. I would have pointed out wherein lay her error, but my voice died away on my lips. Nardo was already drawing with his native ease and swiftness, darting a tangle of spidery lines onto the canvas. A glance at his

sketch made me turn pale: without exchanging a word with me, he had just copied my visions.

We were so absorbed that we did not hear Messer Perugino enter the studio, then withdraw on tiptoe.

I asked the master's permission to be present at the second sitting, and Perugino, who had just sunk a new arrow into the biceps of Saint Sebastian, looked up in surprise. "Do you really want to?"

"Per Bacco! If not, would I speak of it?"

"Good," he conceded, spreading a bloody highlight across the pectorals of my double, "but don't swear: it sits ill with the expression of a martyr. I grant you that the arrangement of milord Al-Hazreh's lodgings is ingenious, and his ambition to have me paint his wax doll is amusing. . . ."

"His—what?"

"His automaton," said the artist. "His demon, queen of the vampires. His giant homunculus." And taking my indignation at its height: "You haven't looked upon her closely, then? It's true that with all the lights dimmed, you might be excused."

Breathless, I could only form the words: "But that girl spoke to us!"

"Really? After all, the thing is possible. Such astonishing engines have been made! In France, it appears, some angels were constructed of gilded wood, with a mechanism so perfect that they walked, shook their wings, and even spoke a compliment, at the coronation of the young queen, Ysabeau de Bavière. But Paracelcus maintains that not only the mandragores, but certain bulbs of the white lily, grown in jars and buried in dung at the full of the moon, with appropriate incantations, give birth to living beings a cubit tall. These sprats, though very devoted to their masters, are of a vicious and malignant humor. Certain alchemists relate that they live on air, like the fish of Cathay, but it is generally conceded that they feed on a blood jelly. Parenthetically, it would interest me to know how Al-Hazreh procures this, since it is compounded of human blood. . . . At any rate, automaton, homunculus, or mandragore, whether your Signorina Nahema belongs to one species or the other, it is certain she is no Christian creature, and I shall not paint her! I shall not let Art itself, in my person, be abased!"

"But," I protested again, "what you speak of is impossible, senseless! Nardo, who has painted her, will certify—"

Exasperated, the master interrupted. "Nardo! What a witness! A stripling who never has dared lift his eyes to a living woman! An automaton is just the sort of toy that fascinates children. Well, let Nardo paint her, since he understands her so well, and he can also gild a few tavern and cookshop signboards, to earn sweets for his serving-wench mother!"

This unjust judgment confirmed my suspicions: to wit, that the master was jealous of Nardo's progress.

I went to the second sitting with the firm intention of assuring myself that Signorina Al-Hazreh was no statue of wax. I found the same blue paradise, the same enchantment, and an attentive Nardo, bent over his canvas.

We were hardly settled when a black wench brought the girl an elongated silver lute. Dwarfs served us rose and lemon ices, and poured heavy date wine, cooled with snow, into rainbow-colored murrhines. (I wondered later if some philter in it had not stirred up my senses.) Nahema played and sang, in a voice of crystal; her melodies spoke of a dead world, once delightful; of stars and glaciers, or of lost souls wandering in search of one another. And as she sang, there appeared to us (I can speak of Nardo as for myself) throngs of dim shadows that invaded the hall, danced along the hangings, wrung their hands, lovingly appealed for an impossible joy, while their long hair mingled with the iris in the basin.

We met Al-Hazreh no more; but we breathed the mustiness of his jealousy. Sometimes a curtain moved without a breath of air; something like a giant spider scurried about the dark corners; we sensed a discordant echo. . . . To be sure, no one worried his head about it.

The third day . . .

The fact is that I lived only for those hours: the rest of my life shaded off into somnolence. I was seen no more at banquets, and I avoided Perugino's studio. For long intervals I barely subsisted, like a plant with its roots out of the ground: then, suddenly, I would be plunged into my native humus, or rather into a watery space where all was strength and life. Nardo waited for me on the bank of the Arno, and we went up silently toward the Alley.

The third sitting was devoted, then, to what I shall call

"natural magic." Nahema spoke to us of sciences lost to the western world: they had been destroyed by the great incendiaries—Omar had burned the Alexandrian, and in the Ming Library the Mongols' shaggy little ponies had trampled the precious papyri. Other knowledge lay in the depths, on submerged continents. . . .

She told us of beings who had lived in those deep waters, moving about in disk-shaped vessels, or with their heads protected by helmets of crystal. Later she described other creatures to us, rising in the air like smoke above the stubble, gliding like birds on their extended wings, or else (this is too complicated for me) traversing the sidereal ether, solely by virtue of an incredible vitality that overleaped sound, light, and time itself. "Thus," she said, "energy endures; for proof: the light of a star, dead for millennia, brings us its radiant, living image. The temporal no longer exists: we enter into eternity."

She proved to us that the ancient alchemy was nothing but a pallid reflection of true chemistries, for which the transmutation of elements would be child's play. "Some day," she promised, "men will harness the thunder, the chaos of exploding suns, the light of nearby stars, all at once. Then perhaps they will hold the Secret between their hands. They will create new materials—priceless, extraordinary, resistant as iron or satiny as a baby's skin—and who knows—"

She paused, and Nardo asked if scholars were already imagining such things. Nahema's lips curved, in a smile that belied the sadness in her eyes.

"There are the empirics," she said. "But it is not at all the same." Seeing that we did not understand, she explained: "Those whom you call sorcerers. They manipulate great natural forces blindly: there is the danger." As she spoke, she attentively studied her own hands, their tapering fingers, their delicate modeling. A white flame ran beneath the texture of her skin.

We spoke no further that day.

Here falls an incident of which I am a little ashamed, and which I would put aside if it did not lie so close to my story. I have already told you that, in the blissful consumption in which I lived, I no longer counted the days, nor visited my usual companions; I forgot even my loves. The word is not too strong, for that evening, encountering Mona Chiara Sal-

viati, at a turning of the Alley of the Old Jews, under the very porch of Santa Reparata, I did not recognize her.

This pretty banker's widow had been kind to me; she was white and brown, she was approaching a stormy age, and she threw herself upon my neck, petulantly. I lifted her and deposited her carefully on the curbing of a well. She stood there petrified, alarming with her cries some tradesmen issuing from vespers, and a scullion who sat on the sill of a cookshop. Thus I was able to dive into the first street I saw, felicitating myself on being rid of her at such a fair price, and without recalling the ancient adage: "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

At our fourth meeting, Nahema spoke to us of myths and mysteries. Ever and again she returned to the Platonic account which declares that all beings were originally made double. "Your Bible," she added in passing, "confirms that truth in its Elohist version. '*And Elohim created man in His own image: male and female He created them.*'" These perfect beings who were force and beauty, energy and intuition all at the same time, were nevertheless separated, "just as a woman halves an egg with a knife," and flung solitary into chaos. Ever afterward they wandered, with the indestructible memory of their lost companions, with a desire and anguish that nothing could appease. . . .

"Sometimes they find each other," Nahema finished sadly, "but not always with happiness, for they seek an impossibly deep and intimate union; and, chained to unremembering bodies, their souls bruise and wound each other in vain."

"Does it never happen," asked Nardo in his crystalline voice, "that the meeting is happy and the union as perfect as the fusion of two metals? Did Laura not love Petrarch, and Paolo his Francesca da Rimini?"

"Yes," answered Nahema, "but death is there in wait. No true immortality exists for any but a whole being: that is to say, for twin souls, fused into a single body. Moreover, it's by that faculty of fusion, of receptivity, that the elect distinguish one another: that is the sign of perfect lovers."

"I would have liked such a union," said the child, lowering his long eyelashes. Then he painted in silence.

It is time, since the occasion offers, to speak of Nardo's painting. I have said that I considered Perugino an unjust

master; small as my knowledge might be in matters of art, I could foretell that we had a great painter in that apprentice. A Botticelli or a Mantegna—who knows? His line was firm without crudity, soft without daintiness, and his knowledge of perspective was exceptional for his age. But this portrait of Nahema was the first in whose presence I had felt that faint chill at the heart, that sacred shiver, which comes from the contemplation of a masterpiece.

The girl appeared at the bottom of the mysterious landscape of peaks and trails of stars that she had suggested to us. Her face, of an inhuman serenity, smiled at some inner vision, reproachless, faultless, hopeless. It was a music of which Nahema formed the principal motif—Nahema . . . or some distant star. Yes, the work was beautiful. But later on, it seems, Nardo did better ones; so it is said.

Have I mentioned that during these reeling and unreeling conversations in the hall of blue magic—platonic dialogues beside which the talk of any woman, even the charming Chiara, was no more than an insipid and vulgar babbling—we sometimes dared to approach the platform? Nardo lay at the girl's feet; she gave me her dangling hand, and I savored its perfume, its satiny softness, and its warmth. She granted us no other liberty.

Sometimes Nahema's glance lay heavy on us; it seemed to me that her eyes cried out, demanded a response. What could I say to her? Yes, truly, I loved her! My most ardent wish was to steal her away from the evil renegade. . . . Only once I spoke the same of Al-Hazreh with hatred in her presence. Her penciled eyebrows rose.

"Do not arouse him," she said. "He has his suspicions. Like Ugolino, he foresees the moment when, with his sons dead of hunger, he must go to meet his Master. Let us not envy the fate of apprentice sorcerers. . . . What, you didn't know that Deodat Lazarelli is one of them?"

She passed a too-perfect hand over a smooth forehead, where neither age nor human afflictions had left any trace, and let it fall. "Yes. He is a sorcerer. To the despair of soulless beings—and of wandering souls."

It was the last time that I saw her in Nardo's presence.

The next evening—was it really the next morning? I had lost the notion of time, as I told you. In any case, it was the night before a storm. The city swooned under a ceiling of

lead, and over the Ponte Vecchio the sun went down in a tragic purple. From the old quarters arose a heavy stench of carrion, roses, and incense. Uneasiness haunted the Alley of the Old Jews, whose inhabitants had gone to ground; even the servants of Al-Hazreh were nowhere to be seen. On a bridge, at the exact spot where Dante saw Beatrice and fell instantly in love with her, I met milord Perugino, in the midst of his court of students in paint-spattered velvet, sword-hung bravos, and courtesans. It was an eternity ago that I had deserted his studio. Doubtless he was just now risen from the banquet table; he was not drunk, but overexcited, and he drew me aside from his noisy group.

"Well then," he began, "what news? How goes your love affair with the wax doll? Guido, Guido, I've always known you were too handsome for a simple cavalier of Florence, and that your gift would play you a bad turn! Is it true, as they say, that yon statue is as wise as the Queen of Sheba, and more seductive than Helen of Troy? Has she really cured an emperor of leprosy, and driven Pope Callixtus Borgia mad? Beware the toils of Hell, my son," he resumed, adopting clerical language; "is she not called Nahema? Well, it's a demon's name, as much as Lilith is!"

"Messer Perugino," I retorted, controlling myself, "it ill becomes a cavalier to hear his lady spoken of in that tone, but you have ever been as an elder brother to me. I beg you therefore to make an end of these spiteful pleasantries: if not, let us cross steel, and may God be our judge!"

He looked at me, his eyes so wide that the pupils swallowed up the corneas. "So it stands thus!" he cried. "How sorry I am to have put you in their way! But as God is my witness, until this very moment I thought of it just so, as a pleasantry. Well then, Guido dei Pazzi, you are a man of sense and no idler, nor one of the Piagnoni, one of the 'weepers' of San Marco. How you could stray into the toils of a cleverly painted automaton—!"

"She is no machine, but an adorable girl."

"You are truly in love with her?"

"Yes," said I, weighing each word, for the truth was in them: "and to the point, I know she is no wax statue—I see her every day, in Nardo's company. I breathe her perfume, I kiss her hand, she talks with us. Her breath is that of a morning in May. . . ."

"Always in Nardo's company?" demanded Perugino, with a malicious air. "Never alone together?"

"You know our habits."

"Nevertheless," said he, "there is one way for you to assure yourself that the idlers of the ghetto lie, that the Genoese and Venetian merchants lie, that the Legate himself lies! All these persons are persuaded that Master Al-Hazreh, who is the Wandering Jew, Ahasuerus, or the Devil, is displaying before us all an effigy modeled from a substance of which he is the inventor, having used it for this end certain solar or other radiations! She moves (I mean the statue) by the aid of an ingenious mechanism—at least, if that marvel be not due simply to the presence of a demon. He did not succeed in producing that creature without divers experiments, of which the resulting homunculi feed on fresh human blood. Numbers of children have disappeared in the neighborhood, and we expect the tribunes of the faith to be seized of a formal complaint, which cannot be long delayed. As for this Nahema, demon or mysterious entity, come from another world by way of the shadows, you have only to read the cabalists to have her to the fingertips: she reigns over the vampires, leads men to foreswear themselves, to guilty passions, to catastrophes, and to suicides, and marks those whom she leads astray with an infernal star between their eyes!"

"Lies, all of it!"

"In any case, her powers are great. You have but to look at yourself—all Florence is talking of you."

"Master!"

"There is one single way to prove all this idle talk and madman's tales—"

"And that, if you please?" I demanded, white with rage.

"Faith," said Perugino, laughing, "the damsel likes you, does she not? Take advantage of it. Then you'll see."

Evil words are like the bad seed, like the tare that springs up wherever it falls: they sprout, even in a soul full of anger.

I have already told you that the sky was overcast. The violet night blotted out the Campanile, and the Marzocco, the heraldic lion of Florence, furiously roared in its cage. Silent flashes of lightning lit up the clouds. Leaving Peru-

gino, I walked aimlessly; children fled before me and women quickly closed their doors; I was that sort of leper—the enchanted one, the possessed! Over the Arno, the air was intoxicating as sage wine. Without knowing how, I found myself again in the Alley of the Old Jews.

There was no one in the house of Al-Hazreh: neither in the entry nor along the corridors. All the portals were open; the servants had fled. I stood motionless on the sill, when I heard a groan or a sob—so weak that it might have been the sigh of a breaking lute string. Then a squalling: it sounded like a flock of birds invading the rafters. The noise came from the blue hall, and I had recognized the voice—I rushed toward it.

All the hangings were drawn; a suffocating darkness filled the studio, where a single torch glimmered at the corner of the platform. Its feeble gleam made the shadows impossibly large, and in that liquid dark I saw Nahema standing, white as wax, and Al-Hazreh on his knees. He was pricking her wrist with a stiletto—the sacrificial knife—and the blood fell drop by drop into a goblet. Without sparing time to draw my sword from its sheath, I fought him with my bare hands in the darkness. The curved blade glittered, but I was younger and stronger. . . .

"Don't kill him!" cried Nahema.

The renegade fled. And we were left alone—or almost. With a handkerchief, Nahema made me a tourniquet. Her own hand was no longer bleeding. Then I saw around us the open lemonwood chests; and standing on the floor, crystal flagons a cubit tall, in which a blue phosphorescence floated. Their tops were sealed with membranes, each pierced by an alembic tube.

In each jar wriggled a living creature, monstrously human —a horror.

There was a king, and a queen. A mitred bishop; a condottiere. A Hospitaler, on his horse. A gorgon whose every red lock writhed. What else do I remember? There was even one dressed in scarlet, and provided with a sword no bigger than a pin, with which he was attacking the jar—a Satan, sprung from the cogitations of a Doctor Faustus. . . .

All of them squalled and clamored with an incredible arrogance; only a few inches tall, nevertheless they had a damnable reality. And they held out their arms to us, their

minuscule lips avid, pursing toward our wounds, toward the alembic tube from which would drop their manna, their red dew—our blood. . . .

I was on the point of knocking over the jars and trampling these tiny monsters underfoot, when the girl seized my wrist and thrust forward a bloodless face, pathetic with anger.

"Stop!" she panted, in a voice unrecognizably harsh. "Why kill these unhappy creatures? It's not their fault if they exist, if they tremble with fear and die of hunger! Al-Hazreh alone is responsible. *I* offered myself to feed my brothers—the non-humans!"

"No!" I cried, maddened, "I can't believe it! You're not of that race of mandragores! Your blood flows, you are living, I love you!"

"Do you really love me?" she asked hungrily. "Do you alone understand the meaning of that word: love? No, listen, touch me not. Indeed I am no machine, nor any magical root, nor was I hatched from the husks of a white onion. Imagine that all your dreams are true. Better: picture to yourself that sidereal abyss in which your earth is only an atom. Look: in that black sky, among the pearls of Orion's Belt, there is one that is a dead sun, around which icy globes tirelessly revolve. One of these is my mother world, which once was beauty itself. If you love me, Terran, believe that I am really human—more human than you, for I belong to the same race, only more ancient, born on a planet that no longer exists, save as a cadaver in the void.

"But indeed, death did not come at one stroke. Our species was advanced and powerful; we struggled long to keep up a semblance of life among those craters of ice and those frosty peaks of which you have dreamed. When all was lost, a few survivors dared the supreme adventure: they knew that somewhere in the cosmos other worlds existed, peopled with creatures who resembled themselves, bodies in which they might awaken. They tried to join those far-off mother-worlds. I—

"Only by accident, I was cast away on Earth: it is new, crude, it is unready for these experiences. But Al-Hazreh seized me in the meshes of his mad incantations. . . . He drew me here. . . . No, I should not accuse Al-Hazreh: there must have been a predestination—there can be no effect without a cause; perhaps this globe was a haven. . . .

I wander from my story. Al-Hazreh gave me this body for a prison. No, it is not of wax (I read your thought), but I am chained in it, and suffering. You say, do you not, that you love me? Even though I am a creature from the stars? . . . You love me—and truly wish to accept me?"

"I love you. It matters little whence you came."

So saying, I took her in my arms, with the headlong passion of my first youth. The lace of my doublet crushed into her delicate bosom; I wanted to squeeze her, bruise her, drown myself in her, and be her master. And with all my strength I strained against a thin flame, an enveloping softness that invaded my nerves. It seemed to me that an incredible flood of energy lifted and pierced me, driving the blood back to my heart—and it was such terror, and such delight! We struggled thus, silently, mouth to mouth, until she seemed to melt in my arms, and then—only physical sensations remaining—with a vertiginous, stabbing clarity, I realized that that petal-like skin which I caressed, those honeyed lips, the living waves of her hair wherein I was held as in a net, *were not the hair, the lips, the flesh of a human being.* . . .

An insurmountable horror overtook me. I thrust away that cosmic foe who was about to subdue me. Or did she herself perhaps break away from my embrace? She flung in my face: "No. You are not the one I seek. Get out!"

All that night, I wandered through the streets, trying to deal logically with my nightmare. Very well, Al-Hazreh was a sorcerer. He had tried—the folly was current—to create life. To begin with, following the teachings of Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus (I was not completely ignorant!)—from this came the homunculi, fascinating, imperfect monsters. Finally (by what procedure?—"by radiations," Perugino had said), he began to reconstitute living matter and to give it a seductive form. Each time, he had learned that his statue still lacked that divine spark: the soul, or the spirit. So he had gone on with his search. Was it Plato, or the Ophites, who told him of the survival in the Cosmos of wandering spirits, seeking new bodies to inhabit?

"*Animula vagula, blandula* . . ." The Emperor Hadrian had said on his deathbed. The patient madness of Al-Hazreh flung itself into the search for these aliens, and he had found

Nahema—exiled, lost, irresponsible. . . . I shuddered. Perugino had been right: her admirable body was nothing but inert matter, serving as a prison. And yet she had shuddered and wept in my arms. She was waiting for a miracle: I was not worthy of it.

At dawn I ran aground, exhausted, in the studio of the master, who dressed my wounds and watched over me as if I were a prodigal son.

I understood now that since my first visit to the Alley of the Old Jews, my soul had really been absent, drawn into the limbo where Nahema lived, out of space and time, far from this century and the town called Florence. I knew nothing of the troubles that were shaking the Medicis' throne, nor of the first sermons of the young Savonarola, nor of the first halting steps on our soil, once more free, of that frightful machine from Spain: the Inquisition. My way of life had so altered that my kinsmen were disturbed. The most anxious to intervene, indeed, was Mona Chiara Salviati. That lady had extensive connections, but she resorted simply to her confessor, a novice friar, animated by zeal, who was none other than our old and well-loved Fra Giorgio da Casale.

Yes, that is what I said: the Bludgeon of Sorcerers; he who had lately burned four hundred in a single day. In short, the Grand Inquisitor of Tuscany.

My convalescence was long. My mother had taken me to Fiesole, and watched jealously over my bed. I spent hours lying flat on a terrace covered with climbing vetch. My pretty cousins played on the rebeck or the viol. Summer came; the vines were heavy with grapes, plundered by drunken thrushes. In the morning mist, the Arno shone like a sword blade. I experienced a phenomenon well known to exorcists: withdrawn from the presence of my dear demon, I forgot her, while still keeping her imprint in my flesh.

But there came a day when by chance a Florentine friend spoke the name of Al-Hazreh in my presence.

"The magician of the Alley of the Old Jews," he explained. "What, you have not heard? It's true, he was arrested the day after Messer Perugino gathered you in with that nasty wound. The Inquisition was seized of a complaint, and moved. But the nub of the affair is that the guards could not subdue the sorcerer, because he performed miracles: a fire that burned in the very stone, serpents on the steps of

the staircase . . . in short, the whole bagful. So they locked the doors and shutters, and put sentinels down below. They chanted exorcisms; they burnt a pyre of Agnus Castus soaked in aromatics; it poisoned the whole of Florence for three days. Meanwhile shouts and frightful noises could be heard inside the old house. . . . Oh, no—he was alone, his servants had run away. It was a screeching like an immense aviary . . . but he had no birds. Finally all was quiet. Four days later, the guards read their proclamation and broke down the doors."

"And then?"

"Then he was dead. It seems he had pierced his wrists with fragments of crystal. There were pieces of broken jars around the corpse, which was curled up and all black."

"And that was all?"

"Oh, yes—there was also a red, quivering jelly."

"Then it wasn't the Wandering Jew," said my mother, who had approached during the conversation. She crossed herself. "Why do you tell of such horrors? Guido is still so weak!"

So, I thought, Al-Hazreh had died in the attempt to destroy his creatures? Or had they killed him to drink his blood? A recollection lit up the blank spaces of my memory. I stiffened and cried out, "The Jew—didn't he have a daughter, or a ward? What became of her? Speak, in God's name!"

My comrade looked at me, surprised by such vehemence. "I know not," he said.

No one had heard any report of her. . . .

Recovered, I left my house, Florence, and Tuscany, to engage myself, as a condottiere must, under many standards. I served under Alviano, "married to the Republic of Venice"; under Da Fermo; under the great Vitellozzo Vitelli, the Strategist. I served—from 1502 to 1507—the Tiara and the Keys, under Monsigneur de Valentinois—and may God pardon me: I would have served under the Devil himself!

The story would be ended if I had not learned, on the first day I returned to Perugino's studio, that he had dismissed Nardo.

"The boy was becoming impossible!" grumbled the master. "He changed from one day to the next; he discovered new laws of perspective! Invented colors, and painted with them! And submarine vessels—and flying machines. . . . The air, according to him, has weight and can hold up solid bodies.

. . . Pure folly! How many ounces, sir, in the morning breeze? I showed him the door for one ultimate insolence: he aspired to sign that portrait of Al-Hazreh's!"

"Then the portrait exists?" I demanded fervently.

"Certainly not! I destroyed it: an unspeakable daub. The colors decomposed before they were dry!"

I wished to see Nardo again: it was not easy. I learned that the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza, had taken him under his protection, having regard for his birth, and probably for his talents. He should be leaving for Lombardy; perhaps he was already on the way.

Drawn irresistibly, I wandered into the Alley of the Old Jews. It had just been ravaged by a terrible fire; dogs prowled among the beams and the calcined debris; a whole section of the warehouses, that which had enclosed the grain merchant's house, had burned: in a single night, and no one knew the date. Nor the causes of the disaster. No fire smoldered under the cinders. . . .

Then this befell me:

The night came over Florence: soft, cold, and blue, as it is at the beginning of autumn. Every lungful of air was laced with a minty coolness. At the corner of a street I made out a familiar silhouette: the black mantle and the painter's beret. I called, and the man turned about. It was Nardo. He had grown taller; his body balanced itself with exquisite grace, and his features seemed to glow. Magnificently dressed, he confirmed that he was in the favor of His Highness. While he spoke, I heard the music of his voice, I followed the gestures of his hands and his fringed eyelids. It was Nardo —and it was not.

"Come and see what I am painting now," he proposed with a sort of gaiety. "I can do so many things, you see! Come."

At the inn where he lodged at the duke's expense, he showed me some ravishing sketches of aerial creatures, of angels and demons equally beautiful, of lunar landscapes, here and there the outline of an unknown monster, or a giant wing. They were no more than studies, gropings, but it was impossible to doubt: under his tapering fingers a world was being born. He had visited the stars and the depths. . . . What he had brought back to Earth belonged to another scale of values, to a domain and an art unknown to humankind. The execution was perfection itself. I observed also that through all the sketches, haunting the dreams and

work of the artist, drifted the same face, androgynous and angelic, with depthless eyes.

At length, "Nahemal" I cried.

Nardo gazed at me calmly. "Yes," he said. "We part no-more. Look here, this is the model of her silver lute which I have reconstructed. I have noted down the tunes of her songs. Here are the engines that she draws by my hand—I do not understand as yet what purpose they serve, but soon I shall understand. Soon, when the fusion is complete, Guido. For I loved her, too, you see, I was ready to give her my being and my life, when her hour had struck. I asked to receive her. She acknowledged me. Since then, she is present everywhere, she lives through me—*in me.*"

His features were stamped with an inhuman serenity.

Another mug of mead, landlord, for the old condottiere!

Ah—Nardo's name comes back to me: he took that of his village—Vinci. He called himself Leonardo da Vinci.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For many years Andrea del Verrocchio was da Vinci's master, and many people know of no other. But one day Verrocchio, grown jealous, showed him the door, and for a time Leonardo, not knowing what to do, is said to have frequented "the studios of the most illustrious painters of Florence." Well, the most illustrious of these painters was Perugino.

Perugino represents exactly for the dawn of the Renaissance what Leonardo is for its high noon. I thought it would be interesting to put the two men face to face, since Perugino's influence is evident in the early works of da Vinci.

Nathalie Charles-Henneberg

After Three Hundred Years

by PIERRE MILLE

Henny could not figure out what that bar of iron or steel was that Pousse, the blacksmith, had just thrown onto his charcoal fire. It was all rusty, rectangular, with curious bulges on both sides from top to bottom. One of Pousse's sons grabbed it in his strong pincers, turned it around and around, already growing red. His younger brother, standing at the patched old leather bellows, blew up the fire.

Pousse's wife came in with a bucket of water. She was almost as big and strong as her husband—breasts swinging under a kind of hemp bag, the only garment she wore; on her feet, sabots without stockings.

"All right," said the blacksmith, "set it down."

He took a deep breath, picked up his hammer, then replaced it. "Big nails, you want?" he asked Henny. "What're they for?"

"Yes, big ones," the young man said. "For the wall in the stable, between the cows and the pigs. It's rotten—the pigs get through it, and scatter the cows' straw around. Big nails, like these here."

He held out some long four-sided spikes, almost as completely rusted as the bar of steel.

"Them was made by machine, in the old days," said the blacksmith. "That's the only way they'd work, by machine—and there was none of these forged for a long time. . . oh, centuries and centuries. I don't know how long. It was my

great-great-grandfather that taught himself blacksmithing here. Where'd you find them you got in your hand? In the roof of that old building, the Church, they call it?"

"I was up there, but there's no more left. Nothing at all, except the big roof-beams."

"Yes, the rest is all gone. They cleaned it all out, one way and another. And it's the same thing in them big houses, what they call châteaux. You know the one at Toué? I was there the other day with a gang from the neighborhood. We picked up the last stones. We're going to use them to build up the town wall, over on the west side. It isn't strong enough over there."

"I know it isn't—that's where They got in, last year."

"I've got something to make me remember it better than you," said the blacksmith, pointing to his wooden leg, then to the tiny blue dot of the scar on his shoulder.

"And They killed my boy!" the woman said. "Oh, if we just had rifles. *They* have 'em!"

"There's a few left," said Henny, "but what about powder? And even if we had the powder, those rifles only take cartridges made of copper, or some other metal in thin sheets. Where'd we find them?"

"I'd take care of that all right," the blacksmith said proudly. "It's the powder we need, like you say. *They* got some!"

"Not much," Henny said. "Not many rifles, either. Because it takes all kinds of things to make rifles—carbon, iron, steel, complicated machines, and factories for all that—"

"Just the same, They make 'em!"

"Yes. You know Milot, the one that lived with Them because he wanted to work in Their laboratories, only They wanted to kill him, and he came here to hide two years ago? Well, he says it's always the same way—it's one of the laws of human nature. He says he read an old book, written in ancient French, and this book said that ever since the beginning of the world there's been ups and downs in every kind of industry—clothes, houses, transportation. Periods of decadence after periods of perfection. In the arts, too, he says."

"The arts?" said the blacksmith. It was a meaningless word to him.

"All the arts and all the industries," Henny insisted, "except making weapons. People have always kept on making weapons—always kept on inventing them and perfecting them,

even—ever since the first man. That hasn't ever stopped."

"I understand that all right," said the blacksmith. "It's not like that with us, but Them! The only way they got to live is to take what us Champiards make to live on ourselves. . . . In the old days, everybody knew how to read, they say. I don't know how myself, of course, but you ought to read us that book, in the evenings, in the winter, when you come here with your Jène."

"I've never read it myself. I haven't got it. I told you, I got all that stuff from Milot. Even if I did have the book, that wouldn't do any good. It's written in the old language—you wouldn't understand it. No more than we can understand the people that live three days' march from here."

The language they spoke was debased French, in which certain consonants were beginning to disappear or had already done so, while some vowels were transposed. Henny, three centuries earlier, had been Henry, and Jène had been Jeanne. Cheuzi had been Choisi, near Compiègne. And they themselves were unaware that some of the words they used —the names of different kinds of beef, mutton, and poultry, as well as military terms—were distorted forms of Russian and Chinese words.

All this had been too much for the smith's slow and untrained mind. He went back to the nails. "Well, anyhow, them you brought me—where'd you find 'em?"

"At my place—in a wing of the house that's falling down. I'm taking it apart little by little, and I put aside anything that's useful."

"Yes, everybody does that. But what happens when there's nothing more to pull down? People don't look ahead. What are our kids going to do when they grow up?"

"Your grandfather probably said the same thing—but we got along. Whatever happens, people get along—they adapt themselves to get along, even if they have to grow smaller, like plants in poor ground."

"True," said the blacksmith simply. "I'd sooner live poor than die."

As he spoke, his eldest daughter came in, carrying two big earthenware pots with care.

"Just back from the potter's? It took you long enough. What were you doing, watching him throw the pots on the wheel?"

"Well, that wasn't all," she said tranquilly. At sixteen,

strong rather than pretty, sturdy and happy-looking, she was obviously pregnant.

"You're right, as long as young folks keep making love, the world'll go on," said the blacksmith philosophically.

His two sons roared with approving laughter, slapping their red hands on their leather aprons.

"They say there's even more kids born now. That's what the old folks claim."

"Its likely," Henny answered. "We don't farm with machines any more, like the old days—you can't just send away for what you want, you have to make it all yourself—so we need more kids. And of course They kill some. . . . And there's others that die, anyhow—there's no more doctors."

"Yes there is!" said the blacksmith. "There's old Ma Jatte —she knows all about healing!"

"Yes, but they had doctors, before," Henny insisted.

The blacksmith shrugged. He was content with his life, whereas Henny's poor scraps of culture, the traditions handed down by his forebears, sometimes made him long fiercely for vanished, legendary days. The smith remained calm as he beat on his anvil, his face illuminated by the white sparks from the heated metal. He was a man without memory; he found his kind of existence tolerable, never having known another.

From the bucket into which he had tossed them red-hot, he drew out several dozen crudely shaped nails, the heads flattened by a final blow of the hammer; they were rather like those that in the old days could be found embedded in the walls of Roman ruins, or in the most ancient of Christian churches; but these had a still rougher look. The others were the product of an art transmitted over long generations; these of a stumbling, reborn industry.

Henny put them into the scrip he wore at his belt. "What do you want for that?"

"Got any eggs?"

"Yes—Jène keeps a good poultry yard; the hens lay."

"Four dozen nails, that'll be four dozen eggs."

"You certainly don't work cheap!"

"You think it's so easy to get iron? You have to travel a long ways on the track now—folks have been getting the stuff there so long—it's getting used up."

Now Henny recognized that bar of metal, with its curious humps on top and bottom, which the blacksmith had cut into

pieces to provide raw material for his work: it was an iron rail, rusted all over. This was the mine that had furnished metal to the surrounding countryside for three centuries. People had torn up the track out of prudence, to begin with, to keep the Enemy—the City Raiders—from using it to reach them and pillage them. But it was a long time now since the last locomotive had been a heap of old iron—they had all been taken apart, scrap by scrap. One had been wrecked a few leagues away. The memory of it remained, for three villages had fought over the copper tubing it in. Copper!—almost the only metal that could be used to make the alembics in which alcohol was distilled. Cheuzi had won the victory, and it was the blacksmith's skill in repairing the apparatus that made him one of the most important men of the city. The community—one might have said the tribe—of Cheuzi was the richer for it. Neighboring villages that had no alembics traded wheat, cattle, hides tanned with oak bark and ashes, for the precious alcohol. For this was almost all that remained of civilization—alcohol! To get it, sometimes they even traded off their plows—swing plows, like those of ancient times. This did not suit the blacksmith at all, and he denounced the poor quality of these tools, the clumsiness of his rivals. It was in this way, among a few artisans of this neo-barbaric people, that a wraith of competition kept alive a certain desire to do well, a remnant of patient ingenuity.

Henny followed the city walls to get back to his dwelling. All the villages now were fortified, in a rudimentary way that nevertheless enabled them to fight off their enemies when they attacked with mounted troops, as was usually the case. But these villages, reduced in number, were actually more populous than before—the smallest, least able to resist, had been abandoned. Thus Cheuzi, which had boasted less than five hundred inhabitants in the days of civilization, now had more than fifteen hundred. Built at the confluence of two rivers that protected it from northwest to northeast, leaving it exposed only on the south, it had become a little city piled up on itself, all squeezed together, no greater in extent than before; it had narrow, winding little streets, houses of two or three stories—behind each one, wherever possible, an interior court for the animals, farming implements, and the stored harvests.

Some houses still remained from ancient times, particularly

those built long before the Great Disaster, dating from the seventeenth or eighteenth century; the economical constructions of a later date had fallen down. New ones had been put up in their place, and the very inefficiency of their builders had served to make them more massive. They had shutters of solid wood, pierced to admit light, without windowpanes —glass was not to be had except in fragments, which were considered precious objects, to be used in ornament. It had grown customary to replace the stairways with movable ladders, so that each householder could barricade himself in the upper story, where he kept food supplies and as much as possible of the harvest.

Henny stopped at the house of Pafot, his nearest neighbor; he needed help to repair his pigsty. The custom of exchanging voluntary labor had grown up among the Champiards, little by little, out of necessity. Except for a few indispensable artisans—blacksmiths, weavers, potters—there were no more professional craftsmen. Even the weavers had to be supplied with hemp or wool, ready spun, and the potters with clay. The division of labor is a thing of cities; never, in any era, has it been firmly established in the countryside. Since the Disaster, it had entirely disappeared.

Pafot, who in earlier times would have been called Parfond, told Henny that he was putting in his hay, but that tomorrow he would send him a "Prisoner." This was the name given to a class of people who had become practically the slaves of the community—captives taken in the course of the attacks that the village had so often sustained. They worked on the community projects, or else were loaned out to the Champiards. Many of them were Russian, German, even Chinese. But if a Cheuzi girl should grant one of them her favors—not an infrequent occurrence—the children sired by him were born free; so far had the conception of true slavery vanished from their minds.

Here was one of the rare traditions that the Champiards had retained, without even calling it into question, from the dead era when it was believed that no man could ever become another man's property. But gradually these unions were modifying the character of the race, while at the same time they hastened the deformation of the language. It was not uncommon now for the Cheuziens to have almond eyes, prominent cheekbones, faces more or less triangular in shape. This change in character had become more marked since the

sack of Cheuzi, two generations before, when the town had been taken by the City Raiders: many men had been killed, nearly all the women raped by the rebels' Chinese mercenaries. Nevertheless—a curious thing—these members of a new race continued to call themselves French. The idea that the country belonged to them, and them alone, even though they were ignorant of its extent and boundaries, remained in their minds, obscure but profound, ineradicable. They were the people of France.

Leaving Pafot, Henny went on to his own house. The door was constructed of beams, crudely put together but solid, reinforced with heavy crossbars. It was fastened at night, or in case of need, by a strong wooden bar; in the daytime, by a knotted cord. There were no more locks; that was an art too difficult even for the proud blacksmith. Henny untied the knot.

Once this must have been a vast, opulent dwelling. There had been two buildings, set apart from each other, of which one was now in ruins; hardly anything was left but the skeleton of its roof-beams. The other had been kept in repair by Henny's ancestors and by Henny himself, in the poor measure of the means they could command. All the windows had been replaced by solid wooden shutters. Most of the interior doors were missing.

In winter, it was much harder to keep warm here than in the houses the Champiards had learned to build for themselves, where huge fireplace-hoods made it possible to heap up great logs. These fireplaces of the civilized era, intended for some other fuel, or kept only for display—traces of a central heating system could be found in the cellars—gave out only a feeble warmth.

Several centuries earlier, in the French countryside, one might have stumbled across an old run-down château transformed into a farmhouse; there, where in other times one would have found tapestries, furniture, breathing a sense of elegance, lightness, beauty, now one would see only harness hung from the walls, onions drying in a corner; a crude table, long and thick, used for preparing food as well as for eating; rough chairs and benches. Such was the appearance of Henny's home. He was not ashamed of it, never having seen anything else, living as everyone around him lived.

He called, "Jènel Jènel"

No answer. He felt no uneasiness at first; there was no threat to Cheuzi at the moment. He knew his wife to be in good health, happy and cheerful.

"She's still with her chickens," he thought, "or else in the stable."

The hens greeted him with the round, disdainful eye they reserve for men, and the unpredictable gait that always takes them to the spot toward which one is convinced they are not going. In the stable, the cows, lying in their straw, raised their heads a moment, then went on chewing their cuds: it was only the master, a man not to be feared. Having established this point, they were content; but Henny could not see Jène anywhere, not even in the old formal garden, now turned into a kitchen plot. He went back into the house, climbed the worn stairs to the second story. Anxiety was a tightness in his chest.

"Jène!"

He breathed out; up there, stifled by the bales of hay that filled the attic, farther away than this attic itself, from a garret that he could not remember having entered since his childhood, a voice answered, "Is that you, Henny? Wait, I'm coming!"

Jène came into view—very young, hardly more than a child—crawling over the tops of the bales piled to the ceiling, without haste, her movements slow and sure.

"My little Jène! You scared me—I couldn't find you anywhere."

He told himself he had been frightened over nothing. In these times men lived always expecting the worst; they knew by experience that the next moment was never without peril. But hereabouts they were hardened to it. As old man Pousse, the blacksmith, had said, it was enough to live. You escaped from one danger only to run into another. Well, that was the condition of life itself, just as it must appear to the wild animals that were hunted by men and by beasts of prey: from the first moment to the last, it was the threat of imminent death, always. And yet they adapted themselves to that incessant horror; their beating hearts slowed as soon as the cause of their alarm was past; they played, they made love.

But Henny's nature was more sensitive; almost alone in his generation, he felt that poignant emotion his distant ancestors had known—apprehension, useless, even pernicious apprehen-

sion, inhibiting the instinctive reflexes of defense and self-preservation. Henny had been afraid like a man, a lover, of the old times: his little Jène!

In the days of civilization, they had known nothing of the strength of a symbiosis like this. It had been pleasure, then, that united the man to his mistress, his wife; sometimes, more and more rarely, to children as well: but each continued to live a separate, individual life. For Jène and Henny, there was desire and pleasure; and there were also the imperious demands of the earth they tilled.

"What were you doing, Jène? I looked for you everywhere. The idea of finding you up here! And what are you hiding behind your back?"

She had just come to a halt, glowing with a joy he had not seen in her face for years. Champiard girls, bound to rough and monotonous work, grew solemn early; even in adolescence, they achieved only a brutish sort of coquetry, and in the transports of their first loves there was more exultation than gayety. It is true that the Champiards had developed a taste for singing, which their ancestors had lost; but their most moving songs, even those in which they tried to express some cheerfulness, were fiery rather than light-hearted. Ordinarily they no longer danced in couples, but in groups from which, now and then, a single dancer, man or woman, would come forward for an instant.

Jène, one of the few blondes in the district, was slender and strong. There was logic in her head, violence in her blood; she was impetuous and reasonable. For a long time the difficulty of obtaining steel needles of sufficient smallness—big ones were still made, hammered out of crude iron, then sharpened on a stone—had forced women to give up sewn garments. Jène's hemp shirt was only a sort of sleeveless sack. Her tan homespun skirt, the natural color of sheep's wool—dyestuffs were harder and harder to come by—was a single piece of cloth, not sewn together but merely overlapped on the left side. Her feet were bare, like Henny's and most of the other Champiards' in summer, unless they wore sabots to work in the fields. In winter, they wrapped these sabots in strips of woolen cloth.

Jène held her brown, shapely arms behind her, concealing something; her face was ecstatic, triumphant.

"What is it?" Henny asked. "Come on, show it to me!"

At that moment he felt as young as she—and indeed, he

was only a few years older—infected by the spirit of play that radiated from her. But Jène still refused to let him see the thing she was hiding so jealously.

"Just imagine!" she said. "You told me there was nothing left in that room at the end of the attic—but I have a better memory! I thought I remembered seeing a trunk or a box there, when I was very little. And all of a sudden, as in a dream, I saw it, and I was sure, absolutely sure that under all the dust, that thing was made of leather! Leather, do you understand? Hard leather, the kind they don't make any more! I climbed up into that room. The lid was closed with an iron lock, not a piece of rope. That must be old, very old! But the lock was all eaten away with rust—I hit it once with a wooden mallet, and it broke. And inside, it was just full of things—such things! Dresses, imagine! And thin, thin —what did they make them out of? Clouds of gold, pink, green like the trees, blue like the sky. Yes, clouds! They fell into powder when I tried to unfold them. But down at the bottom, in a pretty little case that kept it safe, there was this! Look, Henny, look!"

They had walked down the stairway; they were standing in the main hall, at the foot of the steps. With a gesture like a lover's, Jène opened the case, showing two little high-heeled dancing slippers made of silvery white satin, spangled with gold, with rosettes of paste jewels.

"How it shines, how it shines! And I can make it shine even more!"

She crumpled a few leaves of soapwort in her hands, dipped them in water, scrubbed the rosettes, then moistened them with clear water. The little flames of light that darted from the stones were reflected in her eyes.

There is a magic in certain things. Henny felt a sudden sense of devotion, a need to pay homage to the feminine grace that had vanished generations ago. In his rough homespun, he went to one knee and made as if to slip those frail objects onto the bare feet of his wife, who stood there excited, almost dancing.

"You're crazy, Henny, you're crazy! And stupid—so stupid! In my bare feet, and dressed the way I am . . . It's not right, they weren't made for that, I know. Wait and see."

He watched the miracle of that reborn coquetry, the magnificent coquetry of the ancient time. Jène went to a heavy chest, made of oak battens painstakingly put together,

and hunted for her finest, prettiest length of hempen cloth. She measured what she needed by eye and with her outstretched arms, and cut the piece off with a decisive gesture.

"Wait and see," she repeated, "wait and see! What a pity this is so small!"

Women nowadays collected every fragment of glass with care. A whole windowpane was a treasure worth an ox; it was the rarest gift a lover could make to his mistress. By laying the glass over a piece of zinc, also found in the ruins, a mirror could be made that would give a wavering, dismal reflection. Jène owned one of these mirrors; she had always been proud of it; but today she wept over its inadequacy.

Another moment, and she was naked in the charm of her youth, the ardor of the blood that flowed in her veins, the strong, graceful lines that rose from her round knees, her long thighs, to the smooth lyre-curved belly, to the pink tips of her breasts—vigorous, healthy, made for desire and possession. At another time she would have been proud of her beauty; now she thought only that, naked, she might become beautiful; she was naked only to become dressed. A woman dressing does not give herself; she is preparing to give herself, later, when she has savored the appetites she arouses.

Around the curve of her hips, around her pliant waist, Jène unrolled and draped the gray-brown cloth—that poor, humble cloth. She had to make its folds follow the lines of her body; an instinctive knowledge taught her how, with only one or two of the bone fibulae that had taken the place of pins. She found the place: a knot on the right shoulder, the left breast uncovered, the other hidden by the guileless folds of the cloth.

She paused for thought, bit her lips. "No," she said, "it's not right yet."

She found a way to lower the back, changed the neckline to expose the upper halves of her round, firm breasts. And, turning continually before the imperfect and inadequate mirror, she lost patience because she could never see all of herself at once.

"You're beautiful!" said Henny, marveling. "I mean it, you're beautiful. Isn't that funny, I never thought you could be so beautiful!"

She combed her hair with a boxwood comb that Henny had carved with his own hands, one winter evening at the

blacksmith's. She meditated again, then bound her hair with a double string of red berries across her forehead.

"Now," she said, "now!"

"The little shoes, the beautiful shoes!" said Henny drunkenly.

"With my legs bare? You don't understand anything. No, wait!"

She took the narrow strips she used to wrap her ankles above the sabots in wintertime, and braided them in loose interlacings around her legs to the knee; their color made them blend into the sort of *stola* that her feminine genius had just recreated.

Then, seating herself, she spoke like a queen. "Now you may put my shoes on, if you please!"

He kneeled for the second time. "How little they are! How little they look! Can you walk on them? It's impossible, I don't believe it!"

She took a few hesitant steps, hindered by the baffling high heels; then, gaining assurance, she curtseyed, walked, danced, drunk with joy, her young head as if in the clouds. "Am I not beautiful!"

She repeated, "Beautiful! Beautiful! Beautiful!" She intoxicated herself with this word, with the magical power that she felt radiating from her whole body. And by a contrast that struck bitterly home, made him awkward, humiliated him to the point of anger, Henny, in his peasant blouse and the petticoat she had knitted for him, felt himself ugly, dirty, crude, inferior to her, at the very moment when he felt the furious desire to carry her off, take her, have her beneath him, all to himself, no longer seeing her but still having before his eyes the vision of this woman, tall, slender, glorious as he had never seen her before.

Yet it took only one step, one movement from him: she fell into his arms. She had understood both his aroused senses and his timidity, and it gave her an immense satisfaction, stronger, more delightful than the most delightful ecstasy, even while it prepared her for that ecstasy. She was not being taken, this time: she was giving herself, granting herself. For Jène, it was a new, unknown feeling, this revelation of the power women had possessed in the old time, and it exalted her to the point of frenzy.

But suddenly, as he was about to become her master again,

the master who takes, tears, violates . . . she pushed him away at arm's length and cried, "Henny! Henny!"

"What?" he said roughly, taken aback.

"Henny, all that must have been real—all those things? The time when everything was wonderful, when women were really beautiful, the way I tried to be beautiful? If they saw the way I dressed up, they'd think it was a make-believe, a lie, something to laugh at. Henny, Henny, what was that time like, and why isn't it that way any more?"

Thus began the great revolt among the Champiards that shook the power of the City Raiders.

The Monster

by GÉRARD KLEIN

Night was ready to fall, just in equilibrium on the edge of the horizon, ready to close like a lid over the town, releasing in its fall the precise clockwork of the stars. Metallic curtains fell like eyelids over the shop windows. Keys went into locks and made the bolts grate. The day was over. A rain of footsteps beat upon the dusty asphalt of the streets. It was then that the news ran through the town, leaping from mouth to ear, showing itself in dazed or frightened eyes, humming in the copper telephone wires or crackling in television picture tubes.

"We repeat, there is no danger," the loudspeaker said to Marion, sitting in her kitchen, hands on her knees, looking out the window at the newly cut grass, the white garden fence and the road. "Residents of the areas around the park are merely asked to remain at home so as not to interfere in any way with the movements of the specialists. The thing from another planet is not at all hostile to human beings. It's a historic day, this day when we can welcome as our guest a being from another world, one undoubtedly born, in the opinion of the eminent professor who stands beside me at this moment, under the light of another sun."

Marion rose and opened the window. She breathed the air charged with the scent of grass, a spray of water, and a

thousand sharp knives of cold, and stared at the street, at the dark and distant point where it detached itself from the high cliffs of the town's tall buildings, and spread itself out, widened among the lawns and the brick houses. In the front of each house, a light burned in a window, and behind nearly every one of these windows Marion could make out a waiting shadow. And these shadows leaning on the sills disappeared one by one, while men's footsteps echoed in the street, keys slipped into oiled locks, and doors clicked, shutting out the day that was ended and the nightfall.

"Nothing will happen to him," Marion told herself, thinking of Bernard, who would be crossing the park, if he came as usual by the shortest and easiest way. She glanced in the mirror, touching her black hair. She was small and somewhat round, and soft as melting vanilla ice cream.

"Nothing will happen to him," Marion told herself, looking toward the park, between the tall illuminated checkerboards of the building fronts, seeing the dark, compact mass of trees enlivened by no other light but that of passing autos' headlamps; "probably he's taking another route"; but in spite of herself, she imagined Bernard walking down the gravel paths with an easy stride, between the clipped shadows of yews and the quaking of poplars, in the thin moonlight, avoiding the low fences that bordered the lawns like iron eyelashes, carrying a newspaper in one hand and whistling perhaps, or smoking a half-burned-out pipe and blowing little puffs of thin smoke, eyes half closed, his attitude faintly insolent, as if he could fight the world. And a big black claw moved in the bushes, or a long tentacle coiled itself up in a ditch, ready to flick through the air like a whip and snap, and she saw them, with her eyes closed, on the point of calling out and screaming with terror, and she did nothing because it was only an illusion brought on by the confident words of the radio.

"All necessary precautions have been taken. The park entrances are being watched. The last pedestrians have been escorted individually as far as the gates. We ask you only to avoid making any noise and preferably any light in the vicinity of the park, in order not to frighten our guest from another world. Contact has not yet been made with the being from another planet. No one can say what its shape is, or how many eyes it has. But here we are at the entrance of

the park itself, and we'll keep you up to date. Beside me now is Professor Hermant of the Institute of Space Research, who will give you the results of his preliminary observations. Professor, I'm going to turn the mike over to you. . . ."

Marion thought about that thing from space, that being, huddled and lonely in a corner of the park, crouching against the wet ground, shivering with cold in this alien wind—staring up through an opening in the bushes at the sky, with its new, unknown stars—feeling the earth shake with the footsteps of the men who were surrounding it, the throbbing of motors, and deeper down, the subterranean rumbling of the city.

"Would what I do in its place?" Marion wondered, and she knew that everything would be all right because the radio voice was solemn and untroubled, assured, like the voice of a preacher heard on Sunday, whose words hardly broke the silence. She knew the men would move forward toward that creature trembling in the light of the headlamps, and that it would wait, calm and trusting, for them to hold out their hands and talk to it, and then it would go to them, quivering with anxiety, until, listening to their incomprehensible voices—as she had listened to Bernard's a year ago —it would suddenly understand.

"Our instruments have barely scratched the surface of the immense spaces around us," said the professor's voice. "Just imagine, at the very moment I'm speaking to you, we're hurtling through cosmic space, between the stars, between clouds of hydrogen. . . ."

He paused for breath. "Therefore, anything at all might be waiting for us beyond that mysterious door that we call space. And now we find that a being from another world has pushed open that door and passed through it. Just one hour and forty-seven minutes ago, a spaceship landed silently in the park of this city. It had been detected an hour and a half earlier, when it entered the upper layers of the atmosphere. It appears to be small in size. It is still too early for any conjectures about its method of propulsion. My distinguished colleague, Professor Li, is of the opinion that the device may be propelled by an effect of oriented spatial asymmetry, but the research undertaken in this direction—"

"Professor," the announcer interrupted, "some people have

advanced the idea that it isn't a ship at all, but merely a creature capable of movement among the stars. What do you think of that theory?"

"Well, it's still too soon for any definite opinion. No one has yet seen the object, and all we know is that it seemed able to direct its flight and arrest its fall. We don't even know whether it actually contains a living being. It's possible that it's only a machine, a sort of robot, if you like. But in any case, it contains a message of the highest scientific interest. This is the greatest scientific event since the discovery of fire by our remote ancestors. We know now that we're not alone any longer in the starry immensity. To answer your question: frankly, I do not believe that a living creature, in the sense you mean, could survive in the conditions of outer space—the absence of atmosphere, of heat and gravitation, the destructive radiation."

"Professor, do you think there's the slightest danger?"

"Honestly, no. This thing has shown no hostile intentions, it's simply stayed in a corner of the park. I'm amazed at the swiftness with which the necessary precautions have been taken, but I don't think they will accomplish anything. I'm more concerned with the possible reactions of people when they meet an absolutely alien being. That is why I ask each person to remain calm, whatever happens. The scientific authorities have the situation in hand. Nothing unfortunate can happen. . . ."

Marion took a cigarette out of the drawer and lit it awkwardly. It was something she had not done for years, since her fifteenth birthday, perhaps. She inhaled the smoke, and coughed. Her fingers were trembling. She brushed a little white ash off her dress.

"What shall we have for dinner tonight?" she asked aloud, reproaching herself for her nervousness. But she did not have the courage to take a frying pan from the cupboard, or even to open the refrigerator.

She put out the light, then went back to the window, and drawing on her cigarette like a little girl, tried to hear a sound of footsteps in the road. But there were only the voices in the peaceful houses, a strain of music, muffled like the humming of bees in a hive, and the purring of words in the loudspeaker.

"Keep calm," she said in a loud voice, biting her lips.

"Thousands of people have gone through the park tonight and nothing has happened to them. And nothing will happen to him. Things never happen to people you know, only to gray faces with unlikely names in the newspapers."

The clock struck eight. "Maybe I could telephone the office," Marion thought. "Maybe he'll be there half the night." But they had no telephone, and it would have meant putting on a coat, going out into the darkness and running through the cold, going into a café full of curious faces, unhooking the little black dead humming beast of the phone, and calling with a changed, metallic voice while she crumpled a handkerchief in her pocket. That was what she should do. That was what a brave, independent woman would do. But she was not, she told herself, filled with shame—either brave nor independent. All she could do was wait, and look out at the glittering city with eyes full of nightmares.

"Thank you, Professor," said the radio. "We are standing now not more than four hundred meters from the place where the creature is hiding. The men of the special brigades are moving forward slowly, studying every square centimeter of the ground. I can't make out anything yet—oh yes, a black shape, vaguely spherical, on the other side of the pond, perhaps a little taller than a man. It's really quite dark, and . . . The park is absolutely empty. The ambassador from the stars is all alone now, but don't worry, you'll be able to make his acquaintance very soon. . . ."

Marion dropped her cigarette and watched it burning itself out on the clean tiles. Bernard was not in the park. Perhaps he was strolling toward it, or perhaps he was prowling around the park fence, trying to glimpse the visitor from the stars. In fifteen minutes he would be here, smiling, his hair sparkling with the microscopic droplets of the mist.

Then the old anxiety rose up out of some internal cavern, purple and damp. "But why don't they move on faster," she thought, imagining the men working in darkness, measuring, weighing, analyzing, moving soundlessly through the night like moles above ground; "why don't they move on faster if there's no danger?"

And it came to her mind that something was being hidden behind the calm screen of the loudspeaker and the words embroidered with confidence. She thought suddenly that perhaps they were trembling as they spoke, perhaps their hands

were clenching convulsively on the microphone while they pretended to be sure of themselves; perhaps their faces were horribly pale in spite of the red glare of the dark lanterns. She told herself that they didn't know any more than she did about things that might be wandering outside the atmosphere of Earth. And she thought that they would do nothing for Bernard, that only she could make the least gesture, even if she couldn't think what it might be: perhaps run to meet him, throw her arms around his neck and press herself against him, perhaps take him far away from that loathsome star creature—or perhaps simply weep in a white-metal kitchen chair, and wait, motionless, like a silhouette cut out of black paper.

She was incapable of thinking about anything else. She did not want to hear the voice from the radio any more, but she dared not turn it off, for fear of being still more alone. She picked up a magazine and opened it at random, but she had never really liked to read, and now she would have had to spell everything out letter by letter, her eyes were so blurry; and anyway, the stale words had no more meaning for her at this moment. She tried to look at the pictures, but she saw them as if through a drop of water, or a prism, transparent, strangely dislocated, broken along impossible lines.

Then she heard a step; she got up, ran to the door, opened it, and leaned out into the night, toward the dim wet lawn, and listened, but the footsteps dwindled suddenly, paused, receded, and died out altogether.

She went back into the kitchen and the sound of the radio seemed unendurable. She turned down the volume and pressed her ear right up against the loudspeaker, listening through the curtain of her hair to that minuscule voice, that insect rubbing against a vibrating membrane.

"Look out," said a voice at the other end of a long tube of shivering glass, "something's happening. I think the creature is moving. The specialists are maybe two hundred meters away from it, not more. I hear a sort of voice. Maybe the being from another world is about to speak . . . it's calling out . . . its voice seems almost human . . . like a long sigh . . . I'm going to let you listen to it."

Marion crushed her ear against the radio, her hair imprinting itself into her skin. She heard a series of clicks, a

long wordless buzzing, a sharp whistle, then silence; then the voice came into being in the depths of the loudspeaker, hardly audible, deep as the heavy breathing of a sleeper.

"MA-riON," said the voice, nested in the hollow of the loudspeaker, huddling in a dark corner of the park.

It was Bernard's voice.

She sprang up; the chair toppled behind her with a crash.

"MA-riON," murmured the strange, familiar voice. But she did not hear it, she was running down the road, leaving behind her the door wide open and all her anguish dead. She ran past two houses, then stopped a moment, out of breath, shaking with cold. The night was everywhere. Hairlines of light barely escaped from the drawn blinds of the houses. The street-lights were out. She began to walk down the middle of the road, where she was less likely to trip over a stone or fall in a puddle.

An unaccustomed silence hung over the neighborhood, punctuated from time to time by a distant bark, or the metallic uproar of a train. She met a man who was singing as he walked, as black as a statue carved from anthracite. She was about to stop him and ask him to go with her, but when she got near she saw he was drunk, and walked around him.

It seemed to her that she was lost in a hostile city, even though she knew every one of these houses, and had criticized the curtains at every window a hundred times, out walking with Bernard in the daytime. She ran between the tall buildings as if between walls of trees overhanging a forest trail. And she was certain that if she paused, she would hear the breathing of a fierce animal behind her. She was crossing a desert place, a concrete clearing, which the night had roofed over with a canopy pierced with pinholes that were the stars. She came to the edge of the park and began to run along the fence, counting the bars.

Her heels struck the asphalt with the clear ringing of a hammer falling on the keys of a xylophone. Fear ran over her skin like an army of ants. She held her breath. The moon cast a tenuous, impalpable shadow before her.

She whirled, her skirt flaring. There was nothing behind her but the row of nocturnal walls, without form or tint, like great mounds of obsidian devouring all light and all color, turning the night into a gulf and the edge of the sidewalk

into a tightrope along which she had run, weightless and numb with her anguish and her cold. She was alone with the night.

A hand touched her arm, made her turn around. She cried out. The hand released her and she backed away to the park fence and pressed her shoulders against the bars, throwing up her hands.

"Sorry, ma'am," said the policeman in a heavy, stumbling voice that was strangely reassuring. "Everybody was asked to stay home. Do you have a radio?"

"Yes," Marion whispered with an effort, not moving, not breathing, not even really moving her lips.

"Want me to take you back home? There isn't much danger here, but . . ." He hesitated. His face was pale in the darkness. A tic jumped at regular intervals in his cheek. ". . . A man was caught just now, and it would be better . . ."

"Bernard," said Marion, her spread fingers pressed against the folds of her dress.

"It wasn't pretty," the policeman muttered. "It would be better if you came with me. And now the thing's calling out. Hurry up, ma'am. I've got my rounds to finish. Hope you don't live far. I don't usually patrol by myself, you understand. But we're short of men tonight."

With the tip of his shoe he crushed a half-smoked cigarette, swollen with water; the paper tore apart and the tobacco scattered.

"My husband," said Marion.

"Come on, let's go. He's waiting for you at home."

"No," said Marion, shaking her head, and her hair fell across her face like a net of fine black mesh. "He's there in the park. I heard him."

"There's nobody in the park." The tic appeared again, deforming his cheek. Marion saw that his jaw was trembling slightly. His left hand rubbed his leather belt and his right hand touched the polished holster of his revolver. He was more frightened than she. He was afraid for himself.

"Don't you understand?" she cried. "Don't you realize?" She threw herself at him, seized him by the arms. She wanted to claw that pale, trembling face, that human façade, as white as the façades of the city were dark.

"My husband is in there calling for me. I heard his voice on the radio. Why won't you let me alone?"

Without warning, she felt tears running down her cheeks. "Oh, let me go," she moaned.

He tipped up momentarily on the square toes of his shiny black leather shoes. "Maybe," he said hesitantly, "maybe. I don't know." Then, more gently, "Sorry, ma'am. Come with me."

They walked along the fence. She ran ahead of him on tiptoe, paused to wait for him every four or five steps.

"Hurry," she said, "for God's sake, hurry."

"Don't make too much noise, ma'am, it's not so far away, and it seems it has sharp ears. Pretty soon now we'll hear it."

"I know," she said, "it's my husband's voice."

He looked at her fixedly, in silence.

"It ate him up," she said. "I know it. I saw it. It has great big pointed teeth all made of steel. I heard them click. It was awful."

Suddenly she began to cry again. Her body shook with her sobs.

"Calm down. Nothing's going to happen to you."

"No," she admitted. "Not any more."

But her voice was broken with hiccoughs and tears blurred her eyes as she ran. She slipped and one of her shoes flew in the air and she kicked the other off hastily and went on running in her stockings.

Suddenly she heard the monster's voice, and she saw Bernard's lips moving. It was a prolonged, tranquil sound, not at all frightening, but so weak that she would have liked to cup it in her hand to protect it from the wind.

She saw the men in dark uniforms who were guarding the park entrance. She stood still and waited through the exchange of questions and the muttered, tight-lipped answers. She went into the park. She saw the web of copper wires they had woven, glittering wires in a circle, surrounding the strange thing that spoke with Bernard's voice. She felt the dampness of the grass under her feet.

"Who are you?" breathed a voice.

"I came to . . ." she began, but she heard the voice in the distance: "MA-riON. MA-riON."

"Don't you hear it?" she said.

"I've been hearing it for an hour," said the man. He turned the beam of his flashlight on Marion. His teeth and the buttons of his uniform gleamed. His thin mustache made his

mouth seem forever smiling, but his eyes, now, looked desperate.

"It makes human sounds, Earth words it found in that poor guy it caught—words without any connection or sense. At first we thought it was a man calling out. Then we realized no man in the world has a voice like that."

"It's Bernard's voice," she said. "Bernard is my husband. We'll be married a year next month."

"Who are you? What's your name?"

She let herself fall on the grass and wrapped her arms around her head to shut out the voice.

"Marion," the voice repeated insistently. It could not be the voice of a man, it was too penetrating. It seemed to come from the bottom of a pit, or from the inside of an oven. It flowed along the ground and seemed to issue from the earth, like the voice of plants, or the voice of insects, or the voice of a snake gliding through the damp grass.

"You'd almost think it was waiting for somebody," said the man. He sat down beside her. "Tell me your name."

"It's me he's calling to," she said. "I have to go to him."

"Don't move. What's your name? What are you doing here, in that dress, on a night like this?"

"Marion," she whispered, "Marion Laharpe. That was my name."

She thought of her name, that fragile bubble, floating away in the time it took to put a ring on her finger, blown up again in the time it took to run to a park invaded by the night.

"My husband was"—she hesitated, then made up her mind —"eaten by that thing, and he's calling me and I have to go to him."

"Don't excite yourself," said the man. His narrow mustache quivered. "No one's been eaten. And even if they had, how could you be sure it was your husband?"

But his voice shook, cracked apart like a wall about to tumble down; it had a quality of uncertainty, fear, and pity, all mixed together and weighed down by anger.

"Don't lie," said Marion. "I recognize his voice and that policeman that came with me said a man had been killed, and he had to go through the park, and he didn't come home, and I heard the voice on the radio, just now, and it was calling me. A million people heard that voice. You can't say they didn't."

"No," he said, "I believe you." His voice faded as he spoke,

and seemed dead, the syllables dancing like ashes in the breath of air from his lungs. "There was nothing we could do. We shut the gates too late. We saw him come out of a path, and just like that the thing was on him, covering him. It happened very fast. I'm sorry. If there's any way I can help . . ."

Then his voice hardened. "We're going to kill that thing. I know that won't bring your husband back, but I wanted to tell you. We're not going to take any unnecessary risks. Look."

The long tubes of flame-throwers shone like tongues on the grass, like sound teeth in a rotten mouth. They lay on the lawn, on the other side of the glittering network of electric wires. And beside each of these lances a man seemed to sleep, but from time to time a shudder ran over his back and his head turned as he tried to look through the tall weeds and the leaves of bushes and probe that hostile, ambush-filled area in front of him.

"No," said Marion in a loud voice. "Don't touch it. I'm sure it's Bernard."

The man shook his head. "He's dead, madam. We saw it happen. The monster may be just repeating his last words, over and over, mechanically. He died thinking of you, that's certain. The professor can explain it better than I can."

"The professor," said Marion. "I heard him. He said there was no danger, that we should keep calm and that he knew what he was doing and that it was a historic event and . . ."

"He's human like the rest of us. He yelled when that thing attacked your husband. He said he didn't understand. He said he'd been waiting all his life for a friend from the stars. He said he'd rather have been eaten himself than see that."

"He kept quiet," she said bitterly. "He said everything was all right. He said we mustn't lose our heads, and he knew that Bernard . . ."

"He did what he thought was best. Now, he says we've got to wipe that vermin off the face of the Earth and send it to hell. He's sent for some gas."

"Marion," softly called the voice without lips, the voice without ivory teeth, or fleshy tongue, from beyond the gleaming copper tubes.

"I want to talk to him," she said into the silence. "I'm sure it's Bernard, and he'll understand me."

"Very well. We've tried that too. But it doesn't answer."

She grasped the microphone in her fingers like a stone curiously polished by the sea.

"Bernard," she breathed. "Bernard, here I am."

Her voice spurted from the loudspeaker like water from a fountain, strangely altered, distilled. It rebounded from the tree trunks and scattered among the leaves, ran along the stems like a noisy sap, crept among the twigs and weeds in the hollows of the ground. It flooded the lawn, soaked into the shrubbery, filled the paths, disturbed the surface of the pond with undetectable ripples.

"Bernard. Do you hear me? I want to help you."

And the voice answered, "Marion. I'm waiting for you. I've been waiting for you so long, Marion."

"Here I am, Bernard," she said, and her voice was light and fresh, it soared over the children's sandbox, glided between the swings, the merry-go-round, the seesaws, between the rings and trapeze that hung from the crossbar.

"He's calling me. I have to go," she said.

"It's a trap," voices called behind her. "Stay here. There's nothing human in there."

"What do I care? That's Bernard's voice."

"Look," said someone.

A spotlight came on like an eye opening and pierced the black air like a tangible bar of light. And she saw a mass of darkness, sparkling, bubbling, foaming, made of clusters of big bubbles that broke at the surface of a sphere of flabby, viscous coal. It was a living sponge of jet, breathing and swallowing.

"Filth from space," said the solemn voice of the professor, behind her.

"I'm coming, Bernard," said Marion, and she dropped the microphone and threw herself forward. She dodged the hands that tried to stop her and began running down the graveled path. She leaped over the copper-meshed web and passed between the gleaming tongues of the flame-throwers.

"It's a trap," called a deep voice behind her. "Come back. The creature has absorbed some of your husband's knowledge—it's using it as a lure. Come back. That isn't human. It has no face."

But no one followed her. When she turned her head, she saw the men standing up, grasping their lances and looking at her, horrified, their eyes and teeth gleaming with the same metallic light as the buttons of their uniforms.

She rounded the pond. Her feet struck the cement pavement with soft, dull sounds, then they felt the cool, caressing touch of the grass again.

She wondered even as she ran what was going to happen, what would become of her, but she told herself that Bernard would know for her, that he had always known, and that it was best that way. He was waiting for her beyond that black doorway through which his voice came with so much difficulty, and she was about to be with him.

A memory came suddenly into her mind. A sentence read or heard, an idea harvested and stored away, to be milled and tasted now. It was something like this: Men are nothing but empty shells, sometimes cold and deserted like abandoned houses, and sometimes inhabited, haunted by the beings we call life, jealousy, joy, fear, hope and so many others. Then there was no more loneliness.

And as she ran, exhaling a warm breath that condensed into a thin plume of vapor, looking back at the pale, contracted faces of the soldiers, dwindling at every step, she began to think that this creature had crossed space and searched for a new world because it felt itself desperately hollow and useless in its own, because none of those intangible beings would haunt it, and that she and Bernard would perhaps live in the center of its mind, just as confidence and anxiety, silence and boredom live in the hearts and minds of men. And she hoped that they would bring it peace, that they would be two quiet little lights, illuminating the honeycombed depths of its enormous, unknown brain.

She shuddered and laughed. "What does it feel like to be eaten?" she asked herself.

She tried to imagine a spoonful of ice cream melting between her lips, running cool down her throat, lying in the little dark warmth of her stomach.

"Bernard," she cried. "I've come."

She heard the men shouting behind her.

"Marion," said the monster with Bernard's voice, "you took so long."

She closed her eyes and threw herself forward. She felt the cold slip down her skin and leave her like a discarded garment. She felt herself being transformed. Her body was dissolving, her fingers threading out, she was expanding inside that huge sphere, moist and warm, comfortable, and, she understood now, good and kind.

"Bernard," she said, "they're coming after us to kill us."

"I know," said the voice, very near now and reassuring.

"Can't we do anything—run away?"

"It's up to him," he said. "I'm just beginning to know him. I told him to wait for you. I don't know exactly what he's going to do. Go back out into space, maybe? Listen."

And, pressed together, inside a cave of flesh, surrounded by all those trees, that strange grass, and that hostile light, cutting like a scalpel into that palpitating paste of jet, they heard the approaching footsteps, distinct, stealthy, of the human killers who ringed them, fingers clenched on their copper lances, faces masked, ready to spew out a lethal grey mist . . . a broken branch, a liquid rustling, a stifled oath, a click.

A Little More Caviar?

by CLAUDE VEILLOT

Mademoiselle Moreau had a funny look on her face that morning. When she went to the rear of the class to get the projector ready, we could tell she wanted to cry or something.

"Today, children," she said, "we're going to talk about Earth."

Everybody said "Ah!" while she went to pull the shades down and darken the room. Everybody except Herbert, who looked bored, as if all that was an old story to him. Naturally, because he was taking the course over. So he knew already.

"You'll see," Herbert whispered, "there's nothing interesting about it. It's just like Bis-bis."

The projector began to hum. Herbert was right. It was just like Bis-bis: a globe turning in space, a big greenish globe.

"I've already explained to you that Earth is one of the nine planets of the solar system," said Mademoiselle Moreau, trying to get back to her everyday schoolteacher voice. "Its distance from the Sun is 149 million kilometers. It revolves around the Sun in 365 and one-quarter days, and it turns on its own axis once every twenty-four hours. . . ."

"If it turns around the Sun, like us, how's it come we can't see it? How's it come nobody's ever showed it to us in the telescope?" Tina asked in her little voice.

Tina has two little stiff pigtails behind her ears, with pink

bows. That's why they call her Pigtails. Tina always asks lots of questions.

"We're not speaking of this sun, dear," Mademoiselle Moreau answered quietly. "Your mother and father must have explained that to you. We're speaking of a sun far, far away, a beautiful yellow star billions and billions of kilometers from here. . . ."

"Phuh! A star of the second magnitude," said Herbert. "My dad explained it to me. Just a candle, compared to Sirius."

You could see he was just repeating it without understanding it; but all the same, the little kids, the ones under seven, were looking at him respectfully.

"That's true, Herbert," said Mademoiselle Moreau. "There are many larger and brighter stars. But there are none more beautiful."

On the screen appeared another globe, a smaller one, which turned around the first one. A line of dots winked on behind it to show its path.

"That is the Moon," Mademoiselle Moreau explained. "It is Earth's satellite. It revolves around Earth in twenty-seven days. . . ."

"Then it's like Bis-bis!" Tina squealed.

Herbert made a scornful hissing noise with his lips. We saw Mademoiselle Moreau smile in the shadows.

"Not exactly," she answered patiently. "The Moon is a little globe turning around a big one, Earth. Whereas Biskupek and Biskupek-bis are two big globes of equal dimensions, each one turning around the other."

"I know about that," Tina said confidently. "Daddy let me look at Bis-bis the other day in his telescope. When it first got dark it was, uh, on the left—"

"In the west," Mademoiselle Moreau corrected her.

"Yes, in the west. And then it climbed up in the sky little by little. It's a big ball—oh, a very big ball!"

Last time Mademoiselle Moreau tried to explain to us about Earth, it was just the same. At the beginning, they were all interested, then after five minutes they were talking about something else. The Earth is so far away . . . close to nine light-years, Dad says. It's way off there in the stars. We're never going out there in the stars, so why talk about Earth?

"Mademoiselle, is it true there's flowers on Bis-bis, like here?"

"Oh, gee, what a dumb question!" Herbert said, shuffling his feet on the floor. He made a face in Tina's direction and banged his desk-top down. Mademoiselle Moreau got mad.

"Herbert, you're not nice at all, and I must add that you're not very smart, either. When someone takes a course over, it's a little too easy to show off. You have nothing to boast about."

Herbert looked down. He gets on Mademoiselle Moreau's nerves a lot. One time I heard her talking about him to Captain Boulanger. She said, "That stupid, boastful little American—"

The Captain laughed and said, "Annie dear, how can you think in such archaic concepts? Americans, British, French, Russians, Italians, Yugoslavs— Do you really think all that still has any meaning in our situation?"

"At any rate, it's their fault we're here, isn't it?"

"How's that?"

"Well, the Ship—was it the Americans who built it—yes or no?"

The Captain put a hand gently on her shoulder. "You're bitter, Annie, because you feel trapped here. Trapped forever, probably. You haven't been able to accept that idea yet, have you?"

"No, that's true, I haven't accepted it. I think I'll never accept it." Her eyes filled with tears. "I know what you're going to tell me: I'm a volunteer. When the Allied Nations decided to build the Ship and launch it, they didn't force anyone to go aboard."

"And even if most of the work on the Ship was done by Americans, they didn't do it alone. The Ship was the work of all Earthmen, Annie, you know that. That's why the crew and the scientific teams were recruited from all the civilized nations. That's why we all talk Interlingua, and we're so used to it that we don't even think about it any more. This isn't an American expedition, Annie. It isn't even an international expedition. It's purely and simply an Earth expedition."

"Of course, you're right and I'm stupid. But if you only knew, sometimes . . ."

She looked over at the window. "Look at those miserable shacks. It looks like the flea market! After ten years on Biskupek, see what we've turned into—derelicts, idling our lives away. We aren't a success; you might as well admit it. We

trained ourselves to roam gloriously through the galaxy, but not to drive nails or dig a garden. We're cut off from our culture and our technology, our racial drive—we can't even make a good imitation of normal Earth life. Here we are, twelve hundred specialists of all fields, fifty of us are geniuses, but we're scratching out a bare existence in a virgin forest, with the childish conviction that all this is temporary, that it's just a bad period to get through, and that we'll be out of it soon. I think that illusion is going to kill us all."

"Others have said the same thing before, Annie. The realists among us say we should forget Earth completely, make a serious study of Biskupek for a permanent installation. They're fighting against what they call our geocentrism. The geocentrism you're still practicing when you teach the terrestrial globe to these kids who've never seen it—and probably never will."

"I know all that," Mademoiselle Moreau admitted. "But these feelings aren't logical, you know that. They're purely sentimental, almost visceral."

"All of us who have known Earth are condemned to the same tortures," the Captain said again. "Only the generations to come may be free of them."

Then Mademoiselle Moreau raised her head and saw I was still in the room.

"Hervé, why aren't you out playing? Go outside with your little friends."

As I went out, she went on with her conversation with the Captain, but this time I couldn't understand a word of what they were saying. They must have been using one of those complicated languages that the big people sometimes talk when they're alone. It must have been—what did they call it?—French. It sounded like some of the things Dad and Mom said to each other sometimes when they didn't want me to understand. But French wasn't the only one. Herbert's parents had another one, and Tina's still another one. Imagine it, every big person had their own language. What good was that, when everybody could talk to everybody else in Interlingua?

. . . "Well, Hervé, don't you hear me? What was I just saying?"

Oh-oh! The picture had changed. On the screen now there were trees, but they certainly weren't our trees. They

were too little. You could tell by the people walking under them. They could almost reach up and touch the lowest branches. And besides, these people were all dressed funny. Instead of wearing pants and little boots, the ladies had a kind of puffy apron wrapped all around them, with designs on them—dots, stripes. . . . You could see their legs. It was kind of ridiculous, I must say, and Herbert was trying to keep from laughing. This must be more pictures of Earth.

"Well, Hervé? Why don't you answer? What is the springtime?"

The sound of the door opening got me out of it. Captain Boulanger stood there. There was something scary about how still he was.

Mademoiselle Moreau turned off the projector automatically and went to open the blinds. In the grayish daylight you could see his face, and it was all hard-looking.

"What's the matter?" Mademoiselle Moreau said nervously.

The Captain walked over as far as the old black plastic blackboard, all worn out by synthetic chalk.

"It's Penn," he said. "He's come back."

Right away everybody started talking and yelling at once. Mademoiselle Moreau, standing in front of the Captain, didn't even turn her head to tell us to be quiet.

Colonel Penn was back from Bis-bis. That was news!

Colonel Penn's beard was already long when he left, the year before, but now it was all the way down to his stomach, and it was all white. His hair was very long too. It came out from under his old helmet and hung in ringlets behind his ears. Lots of the men in the colony had let their hair and beard grow that way.

I ran across town in hopes of getting there first, but there was already a crowd ahead of me. People were running out of all the houses. You could see officers hurrying down the wooden stairs, trying to put on their patched tunics.

"Children, children!" Mademoiselle Moreau called behind us. But nobody listened to her. I don't know if even a kangaroo-tiger jumping out of the woods and popping up at the end of the street would have stopped us.

I never saw so many people at once. There must have been five hundred. I knew Dad would laugh when I told him

that. He says down there on Earth, there are millions and millions and millions of people. If that's true, I wonder where they put them all.

The ground had been cleared not far from town. That was where the cargo rockets took off for the Ship with the relief crews. That was where I'd gone lots of times with Mom, to wait for Dad when he'd finished his time in space.

The grass had begun growing back already, and vines were crawling all over. But it was only last week that the maintenance crew had burned it all clear. In town, too, you had to keep the plants from growing up everywhere. The other day, Tina's house cracked and raised up a little. A big root had pushed its way right underneath.

The cargo rocket's reactors had just shut off when I got there. I squeezed in between dozens of legs until I ran into Tom Cusack's back. He turned around and grabbed me by the neck. "No farther, Hervé! It's forbidden!"

I saw he was doing his hitch on the police; he had the blue armband on. Other armbands were forming a chain with him to keep people away.

Steam was rising from the wet ground around the old rocket.

"It's hardly believable," somebody said, "to think that scrap heap could get to Bis-bis and back."

"Yes, but it was reconditioned. They worked on it for five years."

That was when the cabin door opened and I saw Colonel Penn's beard. I thought about the stories Mom sometimes tells me, stories about Earth. Father Christmas—that must be something like Colonel Penn.

The people around me didn't shout, or applaud, or anything. You could see they were feeling too much emotion. Major Ivan Sokolov, the one who was in charge of the Administration Committee while the Colonel was gone, walked steadily up to the cargo rocket. Everything was happening very slowly and yet nobody seemed to get impatient. There was a waiting kind of feeling in the air.

"Digbee, the committeeman, told me everything was finished up there," a voice muttered behind me. "But it seems they found some of the guys from lifeboat seven."

"After ten years? Come on, that doesn't make sense!"

Major Sokolov had climbed the little metal ladder. We

saw him put his arms around Colonel Penn, then saw somebody else in the shadow of the airlock.

All of a sudden the Colonel's voice came out real loud, as if he was right in the middle of us. He was talking into the landing-field microphone. Dad said later that his speech wasn't the kind that would echo down the ages.

"Well, here we are back among you. We had our troubles up there. You probably know already that Langtree and Bordeneuve stayed on Bis-bis. They're dead. But the expedition wasn't a failure. We found lifeboat seven."

You could have cut the silence with a knife. All around, you could hear the tiny rustling sounds of the roots, shoots, and seeds working their way through the humus of the forest.

"Of its forty passengers and crew, thirty-nine died over the years. But one man survived. We brought him back. He is safe and sound. It's Piotr Hovcar, the biochemist."

There was a terrible yell out of the crowd, a sound with so much unbearable emotion in it, such frightening joy, that it made my hair stand on end. Nobody, apparently, had stopped to think that the survivor might be married and that his wife might be there on the field.

"There's something that doesn't hang together in Hovcar's story," Dad said. "Logically, he shouldn't have survived."

"Why not?" Mom asked. "Didn't Penn say Bikupek-bis was a planet like this one? According to him, they're actually twins. Two identical planets revolving around each other, three million kilometers apart. . . ."

"True, but you're forgetting something. When we abandoned the ship in orbit around Biskupek, we had forty lifeboats and five cargo rockets. Seven boats were lost with all hands in space, five crashed on landing, but twenty-seven managed to get down safely. Plus the cargo rockets. That makes a total of more than fifteen hundred people. That's why we survived—because of our numbers, because we had all the equipment we needed, and because we had the cargo rockets to get us back to the Ship whenever we wanted.

"One lone lifeboat headed for Biskupek-bis because of a piloting error: number seven. Hovcar says they made a very bad landing. Almost half of them were killed when they touched down. The rest died one after another, lost in quicksands, eaten by carnivorous plants, or just worn out by

fever, or despair. Hovcar was all alone for six years on that damned planet. Six years, just think about it a minute!"

"What about it? Haven't you read *Robinson Crusoe?*"

"A pretty poor analogy. Bis-bis isn't an idyllic Terrestrial island where a man can just bend over and pick up whatever he needs. Anyhow, even Crusoe couldn't have pulled through without looting the wreck of the ship that brought him there —whereas Hovcar never could get back to the Ship. No, if there are any Robinson Crusoes here, we're elected. Swiss Family Robinsons. But Hovcar all alone on Bis-bis—that's a man plunged living into hell. Do you know there are twenty-kilo mosquitoes up there? That's how Bordeneuve died, Penn told me. And do you know there are octopus-lianas? It was one of them that sucked all the blood out of Langtree."

I was stretched out on the rafters, with my ears open wide. It was easy to climb up there from my bed. The log wall didn't reach all the way to the ceiling. There was an unfinished attic up there where Dad kept some old boxes, books, and supplies. A knot had fallen out of the rough flooring, and I could see them through the hole, finishing their coffee.

It seems that isn't real coffee, by the way. To the big people, real coffee is what grows up there, on Earth. Well, the supply they brought on the Biskupek expedition was used up long ago. You wouldn't find a bean of it in the holds even if you took the Ship apart piece by piece. But the botanists found a plant in the forest that has berries like coffee. Mom says it's good enough to fool yourself with.

"In any case, Piotr Hovcar came back alive. That's a fact."

"I admit it," said Dad with a smile. "I'm not that dogmatic."

"Was it the best thing for him? Wouldn't it have been better for him to die up there, like the others from number seven?"

Dad's eyes went very sad and very soft. He took Mom's hand under the table. "You're taking this too hard, Minnie. You ought to be glad to see one of ours come back alive after all this time. You ought to be thinking about Helga Hovcar's happiness. If you aren't, you must be really down in the dumps."

"It's true, Georges. I'm in them up to my neck. I—I'm afraid of not being able to hold on. You know, seeing Piotr Hovcar, looking just the same—that took me back ten years all at once. More than that, even. I saw myself at the

training base. You know Hovcar was paying court to me in those days? Even though he couldn't speak French or English. I was the one who helped him with his Interlingua lessons. . . ."

"You never told me that before, woman," said Dad, pretending to be very angry.

"When I saw him, just now, a whole lot of memories came up to the top of my mind, higgledy-piggledy. I had them buried inside me for ten years; I thought they were dead. It's nothing to do with Hovcar himself, naturally, just all the things that seeing him brought back to life. And I see myself the way I was ten years ago—a volunteer wild with enthusiasm, devoured with curiosity, bursting with pride. . . . All the newspapers were talking about us—'the subspace volunteers,' 'the galactic colonists,' 'the pioneers of spacetime,' 'the Mayflower of the cosmos.' There must have been two thousand of us; they interviewed nearly all of us one after the other. . . . Then there was that excitement of the last preparations, the rocket taxis that took us up to the Ship, the final slogans from the radio: 'Time is vanquished. . . . Thanks to the subspace drive, they'll travel in three months a distance that takes nine light years. . . . They'll be telling our great-grandchildren about the wonders of Sirius, Procyon, and Altair. . . .'

"Oh, Georges, I thought I had accepted it all. To be years in space, never to see my family again, never to go back and see the Earth we knew, to find that centuries had passed. . . . Yes, I accepted all that because deep inside I had a calm certainty: someday, somehow, sooner or later, we would go back. There was no hurry, it could wait a long time. What I needed was simply to know it was possible."

All I could see through the hole in the floor was the top of Mom's head. There were threads of white in her black hair. Was Mom old? Thirty-five years, that seems like a lot to me, but the big people think it's still young.

Her voice got harsh. She hit the table with her fist like a man. "Good God, Georges, how could we have let ourselves get into this rattrap? How could we have missed seeing that the Ship we were so proud of was only a scrap of iron in the sky, a filing, a speck of dust—nothing! How could we have let ourselves be so impressed by that miserable sphere of steel, its three hundred meters of diameter, its hundreds of thousands of tons, and its thirty-two concentric decks? How

could we have been so presumptuous, not to foresee the unexpected—after three months in subspace, the Ship comes out on schedule in the region of Sirius—and breaks down. Breaks down, like an old Ford. Completely, irreparably."

"You know very well that it isn't irreparable."

"I don't believe it any more, Georges, not any more. Oh, I believed it a long time. I wanted to believe it very hard and very long. When Colonel Biskupek called us all together on board, that first time, when he said we might be able to make repairs but there was a danger of the Ship's breaking apart, when he told us the expedition would land on the planet while a skeleton crew stayed aboard, then, yes, I believed it desperately. And then the repair crew came back, and a cargo rocket took up their relief. . . . And then that one came back, and so on. . . . Then Colonel Biskupek died and Penn took his place. Then Brücker died, then Mary McDougall, then Commander Kozintsev, then Professor Morgenstein, then Donald McDougall, then the little Cordelier girl. . . . Have you counted the gravestones in the clearing, Georges? I have. There are two hundred thirty-nine. That's a lot, in ten years, out of a total of fifteen hundred."

"When you look at it from that angle, obviously, there seem to be grounds for pessimism. The funny thing is, though, that the total is still fifteen hundred, pretty nearly."

Mom was quiet for a moment. Then she let out a little laugh that was almost gay.

"You're right at that, Georges. The children . . . more than two hundred children have been born here. Man is incorrigible."

"Man is indestructible," Dad corrected her. "I'm not worried about Man."

They laughed together, and it was just then that the yelling burst out. It came out of the darkness, so strong that it seemed to drill through our walls. It was so awful that I jammed my mouth against my arm so I wouldn't yell too. After it stopped, it was still sounding in my head.

Mom stood up, her lips white. "Good heavens, what's that? An animal?"

I felt something like an icy prickling between my shoulder-blades. That was no animal. I knew that voice; I'd heard it that afternoon on the landing field. It was Helga Hovcar's.

Nobody saw me. While they were gathering in front of

Piotr Hovcar's house, I ran across the path, bruising my feet on the pebbles. I was in my pajamas, and I hadn't had time to put on my shoes, but I wasn't going to miss whatever it was.

I pulled myself up the trunk of the mealie tree that overhung the front door. The floodlight didn't reach that high. Hidden by the darkness, I slid out along the branches, and a lot of pods burst, scattering their powdery whiteness all over me.

Dad walked forward firmly in the circle of the floodlight. Dad is brave. He's always the first one to step forward. He was in the first rocket. Not when the colony was set up, no, long before that, when they had to explore. Mom told me about it. Colonel Biskupek knew the planet had an atmosphere and that the gravity was nine-tenths Earth normal, but somebody still had to go and see. It was Dad that commanded the first reconnaissance rocket. They landed and explored for days and days. There were thirty of them, and Dad was in charge of them all. The others were waiting back on the Ship. According to Mom, I wasn't born then. That must be why I don't remember it. That's an old story, but it goes to show Dad is brave.

He knocked hard on the door and shouted, "Hovcar! It's me, Sidaner. What's going on?"

We couldn't hear any sound inside, and it was all dark. There were fifteen people around the floodlight; they had all dressed in a hurry before they ran over—the nearest neighbors.

"Better break the door down," said Sean Finney. "There's no rhyme or reason to wait standing here."

As he said that, there was a commotion behind the floodlight and Colonel Penn came up beside Dad. At the same time, the door of Hovcar's house began to open.

"Hovcar!" Colonel Penn called in a harsh voice.

It seemed to me his voice was more strained than it needed to be, for Piotr Hovcar strolled out on the doorstep and didn't seem upset at all. He had his coat off and his sleeves rolled up, and he was smiling with an inquiring expression.

"We heard a yell," Dad said. "Is Helga—"

Then he stopped, because Helga had just appeared behind Hovcar, a thin scarf thrown over her shoulders. Hovcar turned his head toward her. "They say you gave them a scare," he said, affectionately reproachful.

Helga had a confused smile on her face. "I don't know how to apologize," she said. "I was—I had a dream. An awful nightmare."

"She thrashed around so in her sleep that she woke me up," Hovcar explained. "I tried to calm her, and then, before she had her eyes open, she let out that yell."

"I'm terribly sorry," Helga said. "I don't know how to explain. . . . It must have been all the emotion today, Piotr coming back . . ."

She seemed to be caught between laughter and tears. She hid her face against her husband's shoulder.

"See how your wives will welcome you if you stay away for ten years," Hovcar joked.

There were a few laughs. Most of the tight feeling had gone out of the air.

"Faith, Helga, what a vòice!" said Sean Finney. "The service crew must have heard you up on the Ship. Lieutenant McKay probably fell out of his bunk."

They started to leave. Then everything happened so fast that it seemed to me the three things came all at once. Hovcar put his bare arm around his wife's shoulder, Dad stepped toward them as if to say good night, and Colonel Penn fired.

The thermic pistol made the noise they always make, the loud hiss of gas under pressure. But it almost seemed that the hissing came from the two bodies. Piotr Hovcar and Helga, struck point-blank by the heat-beam, stood welded together. Then, without a sound, they began to melt.

I can't think of any other word: they began to melt. I've seen a thermic pistol fired before. One time, Dad killed a kangaroo-tiger that came to eat the sheep in the pen, down by the arroyo. The beam made a black hole and the animal fell down. That was all.

But here, Hovcar and Helga were melting. Without separating from each other, they sagged down slowly and got all soft. I saw an eye and some teeth sliding down the pasty mass, and the two bodies began to spread out over the ground.

Dad had leaped back. The only expression on his face was amazement, like someone who couldn't believe his eyes. Then he threw himself at Colonel Penn, who was still playing the heat-beam on the two bodies.

"My God, Colonel—"

"Don't go near *that*, Sidaner. Take my word, don't go near it." His voice was tight and hard, but it did not shake at all. He seemed to have everything under control, and the rest of them didn't even move.

Anyhow, they were too busy looking at what was happening on the ground. And what was happening was unbelievable. The thing that had been Hovcar and Helga was spread out in the middle of their burnt clothing, and it was moving. It had turned into a shapeless mass, quivering as if it was alive, that squirmed feverishly, tried to get away from the heat-beam, flinched when the beam hit it, put out pseudopods in the opposite direction.

Hopping around to keep from touching the thing, turning under the glare of the floodlight, Colonel Penn kept boiling it away, and the crawling jelly turned black and gritty under the scorching beam of the pistol.

Part of the thing had split off, and was moving with frantic slowness toward the edge of the light. The beam followed it cruelly, caught up with it, stayed on it until it was completely burned. Before long, there was nothing left on the baked ground but a few scraps of charred material, and the Colonel kept on grimly spraying those until they boiled away into nothing.

Then they all stood there, not moving, struck dumb, looking at each other in the white glare of the floodlight.

"In the name of space, Colonel, what was that?" asked Sean Finney, white as a sheet.

The Colonel slowly put his pistol back in the holster.

"That wasn't Hovcar, was it?"

"No, it wasn't he. It wasn't Helga, either."

"Not Helga?" Mom exclaimed. She was still pale. "Then where is Helga?"

Colonel Penn shook his head. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't have my suspicions. But I put them aside, almost unconsciously. In a sense, this is my fault. I'm to blame for what's happened. But it was impossible to believe! I put it out of my mind, and I brought Hovcar back because . . . because it was just Hovcar, it couldn't possibly not be.'"

"If you don't tell us what this is all about, there isn't a chance that we'll understand a bit of it," Sean Finney interrupted. "Would it do any actual harm if the colony knew a little more about this, do you think?"

"I intended to make a report, in one form or another, but it

didn't seem urgent. Not about Hovcar, you understand. It wasn't until just now that I understood—that the truth seemed to leap to my eyes. Yes. It was when . . . when Hovcar pulled Helga against him that I saw what I'd been refusing to believe."

The branch was trembling under me as if somebody was shaking the trunk of the mealie tree. But it wasn't the tree that was trembling, it was me. Sweat was running down my sides, and I felt sick at my stomach. I'd been trembling like that since it started, ever since Colonel Penn drew his thermic pistol.

And I was trembling because I'd seen what the Colonel saw just before he fired: Piotr Hovcar had put his arm around Helga's shoulder, and his arm had sunk into her shoulder. That was what I saw. Dad was stepping toward Hovcar, and Hovcar was smiling at him, and at the same time, without his seeming to notice it, his bare arm was embedding itself in Helga's back. There was no blood, or anything. The two bodies just seemed to absorb each other, and Hovcar's wrist was almost out of sight in Helga's shoulder when Colonel Penn began to fire.

Nobody was talking about anything else at recess. Everybody was talking about caviar. Yesterday nobody had ever heard of the word, and now it was the only thing.

"But what's caviar anyway?" Tina asked in a complaining little voice.

"It's something you eat," Herbert told her, trying to sound important. "Something that grows up there, on Earth."

"And was there some on Bis-bis, too?"

Herbert shrugged scornfully. "The Colonel said it *looked* like caviar. He didn't say it was. My dad says the Colonel's got some in a box with a double lid. It's like a pile of little tiny black bubbles, all stuck together. And it moves!"

Herbert was not making it up. I'd heard Dad talking about it, too. The Colonel had made a report on it in the conference hall. Just about everybody was there. We wanted to hear too, Herbert and me; we walked around the building and tried to look in between the boards, but Lieutenant Le Garrec came out and told us to go play.

"Just like caviar," Dad told Mom later. "When Penn talked about that . . . that thing, and especially what it could do, we could hardly believe him. Then he took out the box he'd

brought back from up there—you know, one of those collecting boxes the zoologists use. We could see the stuff through the double glass, a pile of gummy pellets. You could really have mistaken it for caviar. There was nearly half a kilo of it.

"Penn explained that he really came across it by accident. He was watching a little animal from a distance—a sort of woods mouse—and he saw this lump of gelatin fall on it from a branch. It absorbed the mouse. Penn saw it liquefy and disappear. The thing had actually digested it. But that wasn't all he saw. There was another mouse nearby. Well, the 'caviar' slowly transformed itself—listen to this—transformed itself into a mouse. It put out an ear, then two, then a tail, then two eyes. . . . You understand? Perfect mimicry. The phony mouse went up to the real one, and boom!"

"What do you mean, boom?" Mom asked in a broken voice.

"The phony mouse snaffled up the real one. It jumped on its back and started to spread out like jelly. The real one had just time to squeak. When it was over, there was no mouse at all. Just a little more caviar. Penn scooped it up in his box and decided the Bis-bis expedition had lasted long enough."

I didn't want to show myself, because Dad would have stopped telling the story, but I wished I could see Mom's face. Her voice was all changed. I think she was really scared.

"But then, Georges, do you think—"

She did not finish. Dad went on, "A story like that is hard to swallow. Even the biologists told Penn he hadn't observed properly, that he must have made a mistake. Then Penn got mad. He said, 'You want a demonstration? I'll give you one.' He looked all around him on the floor, then he reached down suddenly. He's very quick, you know. He caught a beetle on the first try. Then he picked up the box, slid open the top lid and dropped the insect onto the lower one. Then he closed the lid. 'I'm using these methods, gentlemen, because I don't want to run any risk. I have no idea what this thing is capable of.'

"He pulled back the second lid. The beetle fell into the bottom of the box. Then we saw it, through the glass. Just exactly what Penn saw on Bis-bis: the lump of gelatin surrounded the beetle, covered it, and then there was no more beetle."

"But, Georges, you didn't see it transform itself—it didn't turn into another beetle."

"Ah, but it did. When Penn dropped a second beetle into the box, the 'caviar' . . . stopped being caviar. And this time it was an even better show than the mouse, because the stuff divided, and each lump turned into a little beetle. Needless to say, the real beetle didn't last long. You understand, Minnie? That thing eats something, and it *becomes* that thing. It absorbs a mouse, and if another mouse comes along, it imitates the first one in order to trap the second. It helps itself to a beetle, and then splits into as many beetles as its mass allows."

Mom's voice dropped to a whisper. "Then, Piotr Hovcar . . ."

"That's what Penn couldn't bring himself to believe, and how can you blame him? Even so, remember I told you, logically Hovcar shouldn't have been able to survive alone on Bis-bis. And he didn't."

"But, Georges—"

"I know, I know, we saw him come out of the rocket, people talked to him, even threw their arms around him. . . . And he fooled Helga just as easily as he did us."

"But my God, did they have to kill her too?"

"Don't misunderstand. When Penn fired, there was already no more Helga. Why do you suppose she yelled like that, a few minutes earlier? That was the mouse's squeak, the beetle's last hop. At that moment, the fake Hovcar was beginning to absorb her—that's the truth."

"I think it's true, I believe what you say, but I can't imagine it. Even granting that this . . . this material can digest animals, insects, and then imitate them, how can I believe . . . After all, you saw Hovcar come out on his doorstep. You heard Helga—"

"That wasn't them, Minnie, get it through your head. Penn thinks that stuff can identify itself absolutely with whatever it absorbs—and not just on the physiological level. When it digests a mouse, not only can it take on the appearance of a mouse, it actually *becomes* a mouse, it *knows* whatever the mouse knew. No more, but no less. And when it digested Hovcar—years ago, probably—it knew everything Hovcar knew. No more, but no less. So it knew there were other creatures like Hovcar on the neighboring planet, a whole tasty colony. It knew what it had to do to get Penn to take it

on board the cargo rocket. It also knew that if it wanted to . . . absorb the whole colony, it would have to do it progressively, one person at a time, to avoid being discovered and destroyed."

"That thing has to be destroyed," Mom said in a hoarse voice. "They've got to burn it right away, exterminate it, and then never talk about it again."

"That's what they're going to do. But the biologists have asked for a postponement to give them time to examine it. They're wild with curiosity. Della Rocca is working on it, at the moment. Tomorrow they'll destroy it."

"It's a long time till tomorrow," Mom said.

Things are going badly. While I was running down the sloping street, I heard the hiss of a thermic pistol twice. It came from Carmelo Della Rocca's house, where I saw two men with blue armbands go in. I hope Tina wasn't there.

Nobody had seen her at school that afternoon. But Mademoiselle Moreau didn't have time to worry about it. The arithmetic lesson had hardly started when Captain Boulanger burst in, followed by Dr. Namara and two blue armbands.

I had just thrown a spitball against the blackboard, so Mademoiselle Moreau had made me stand in the corner outside in the covered playground. That's why they didn't see me when they came in. The Captain was white, his nostrils pinched-looking.

"Where's the little Della Rocca girl?"

"I haven't seen her yet," Mademoiselle Moreau said. "I thought she was a little late."

She turned pale suddenly. "Has anything happened to her?"

Without answering, the Captain turned to the two policemen. "Find her! And remember: above all, don't touch her. Shoot on sight."

Mademoiselle Moreau threw herself toward him. "What's happening? You're crazy!"

He aimed at her nervously with his thermic pistol. "Don't come near me, Annie. Not till we've made the tests. Pardon me, but it's necessary."

I didn't wait for them to notice me. I ran to the other side of the playground and squeezed through the hole in the fence. I have to find Tina and warn her. I don't want her to get hurt.

Now that I've found her, everything is all right. They're all afraid, but I'm not afraid any more. I have to be careful and then I won't get burned. Tina told me that. She told me something else that was funny: "We're free."

I found her at the edge of the arroyo, near the sheep pens. That's her favorite hiding place when she plays hooky. I told her Captain Boulanger was looking for her, and she smiled gently. "I know. That's why I'm hiding here. But they're not looking for you. You'll be able to carry it on."

"Carry what on?"

"The expansion."

"Listen, Tina, you're always saying crazy things, and the whole class laughs at you, but I like you. Tell me why they're looking for you. Did you do something bad? What was it?"

"I didn't do anything bad. I did what I had to do."

"What? What did you do?"

There was a funny, lopsided smile on her face. "I ate some caviar."

"See, you're talking crazy again."

"No, I'm not! Daddy took Colonel Penn's box to make some experiments on the caviar. At recess, they said caviar is something to eat, didn't they? So I wanted to taste it."

"You ate *that?*"

"Sure!"

"But Tina, you're crazy! I heard Dad and Mom talking about it. I didn't understand everything they said, but I know it's something very dangerous. You shouldn't have done it."

"Pooh! The caviar's very good. As soon as I ate it, I knew."

"You knew what?"

"Everything. I knew everything."

"But they're hunting for you, Tina. They want to hurt you."

"That's because they don't know. You have to go tell them. You have to tell them we don't want to do them any harm, and that the expansion has to go on."

"Listen, Tina, you didn't know what you did was bad. You come with me and we'll explain it to them."

"No. If they see me, they'll burn me without listening to me. I know. But you go."

"Okay, Tina, okay, I'll tell them you didn't know."

She came up to me and stroked my cheek. "You're nice, Hervé. You're the nicest one of all. Should I kiss you?"

She put her arms around me and squeezed very hard. I was

afraid, all of a sudden, because her mouth on my cheek was like a lot of little stinging insects. I yelled, because it seemed to me her face was melting into mine, that her arms were flowing into my neck and I was dying.

But it didn't last. I wonder now why I yelled. Now I'm not afraid of anything. I *know*. We're free and the expansion is going on. They have a spaceship in orbit around the planet. They haven't managed to fix it because they're twelve hundred separate intelligences. But when we're all one, when we've melted all those individual minds into one intelligence, one single thought, then we can easily get the Ship into working order. I've often heard Dad say it was a pity we had no nexialist aboard, because that's the science that integrates all the others. Well, this will be complete nexialism.

On Earth, there are millions and billions of entities. I know. Dad said so, and Tina's Dad too. Millions and billions of intelligences. When we've absorbed them all, we'll be One and we'll be universal. The universe will belong to us. Why can't they understand that? Why do they want to burn us when we're bringing them freedom?

Here's the house. Mom runs into the doorway, with Dad behind her. Their faces are drawn with anxiety.

"Hervé, where were you? We were so worried. Don't stay outdoors, dear. Terrible things are happening. . . ."

Both of them open their arms wide, and I snuggle into them. Dad, Mom, how I love them. I love them more than before. I want to be more a part of them than I was before, much more, completely.

Dad and Mom yell when my arms begin to spread out over them, but they won't last long. Don't cry. Please don't cry. Soon, you'll *know*.

The Chain of Love

by CATHERINE CLIFF

I was at the end of my rope, really at the end.

No money, no more work, not even a bed to sleep in. I was thinking the Seine would be a good place to finish it off, a good ending for a little actress out of work. A producer would just happen to be driving by in his Cadillac convertible; he'd see me and fish me out. Overcome by my sparkling personality, he'd hold a press conference for me. Publicity, flashbulbs, big parts. It happens to actresses all the time—in the illustrated magazines.

The streets were quiet.

I didn't know where I was any more, and I didn't care. This neighborhood or another one, this street or another—what did it matter? I walked. That's all; I walked. That street led me into another one, and the second into a third, and I'd keep on walking like this for days, weeks. . . .

A voice asked, "Tired?" and I realized I had been hearing footsteps behind me for several minutes. I turned around, ready to give him a hard answer. I was not a sociable type, and nothing about this evening was making me more sociable. Then I saw his face. First I saw his eyes, so deep and brilliant. So strangely deep and brilliant. Then I noticed the way he was dressed. He was not of this Earth.

Funny! Millions of people that belonged to my own race

in this town, tonight, and the first one to ask me a really human question was this creature from outer space.

They had landed a few years ago—from what distant planet, we didn't know. For a long time there was nothing else on the front pages. Then the excitement died down. We got used to them, the same way we did to anything. Sure, we were used to these strange creatures from somewhere else—maybe because they weren't all that strange, they looked too much like us.

There weren't many of them. After a month, they could talk our language a little; after a year, they spoke it fluently. Nothing strange there, either. They acted like tourists. You saw them strolling around, looking at the sights. When they talked to you, they were very charming, but always with a kind of subtle reserve that kept you from getting too familiar.

"Tired?" he asked again.

I was about to turn my back on him, but at the same time I didn't want to. I was beginning to feel a little less desperate—not so lost, and at the same time less aggressive. There was an indescribable gentleness in the way he reached out to smooth the hair away from my cheek.

"Hungry?"

I murmured, "Yes."

He took my hand and led me into a grocery shop. He asked me what I'd like to eat. He bought some ham, butter, a bottle of milk, and a jar of jam.

He smiled. "Coffee?"

I smiled back, delighted. I hadn't tasted coffee for four days.

Then we left. He bought some bread a little farther down—a nice brown loaf.

He lived in a little private house; right away, I loved its smell of old wood. He fixed the food, and I helped him. Just for a moment, I had the feeling that he was watching me, my movements, my gestures—watching gently, without any particular curiosity.

I ate my ham and drank my coffee. He served himself some foods I had never seen before. I looked curiously at his plate. After a moment, laughing, he picked it up and held it under my nose. I was laughing too; I tried to compare the smell of that food with something familiar. Vegetables, meat, or what? I couldn't tell. He put a little on my plate, and it was good. It didn't remind me of anything, but it was good.

Later, he ran me a bath. When I came out of the bathroom, he called me upstairs. I found him in one of the rooms, making the bed. He seemed a little awkward, tangling himself up in the sheets and blankets. For a minute he was about to put a blanket on before the sheets; then he thought about it and started over.

I helped him with the bed, and he laughed; he seemed to be enjoying himself. He was nice when he laughed.

Before he left, he touched my hair—gently, amiably.

Next morning when I left, he said to me, "Come back tonight. Come back every night, as long as you like or whenever you need to."

I looked at him, a long time. He was so simple and honest. I knew I couldn't ever come back, and I was sorry.

Just the same, I did come back.

That night, and other nights. Sometimes I got there before he did, and waited for him in front of the house. He was happy to see me, really happy. One time, I was standing in the doorway, in the shadow. He came up and stopped a moment, glancing around; he seemed to be looking for something. He was looking for me; I knew it. I could tell by his smile when he saw me.

He always brought me food, and that seemed natural. I ate his kind of food, too, more and more often. He ran my bath every night. Then he'd take me up to my room, stroke my hair, and leave me.

It never once occurred to me, not even for an instant, that I was sponging on him. It seemed natural, strangely natural.

Then, little by little, I began to have a feeling that I couldn't explain at first. During the day, I lived the way I always had, these last years, trying to get bit parts, a little money. But all the time I'd be feeling anxious, lonesome, as if I were missing something. Before long, I caught myself watching the clock, and at night I'd run toward his house as if I were starving.

After dinner, I watched him read. I stared at him, studied him. Every now and then he'd look up at me with his strange, brilliant eyes, and smile. He was so simple, so honest. And yet he was so much like an ordinary man. I could never put my finger on the difference. But I knew there was one.

He loved me. I was becoming certain of it. Anyhow, it didn't take brains to see that he did. He never tried to hide

anything. I could see it in the tenderness of his smiles, his voice.

He never asked me any questions, and I never asked him any. But it was because I didn't dare. He awed me somehow; I couldn't figure out why, but it was true.

One morning I was combing my hair. He came up and took the comb out of my hand. He began arranging my hair, gently, carefully; he parted it in a different way and studied the result. He said, "You're growing very pretty. You needed to put on some weight."

I felt awful when we separated in the morning. And all day long, the desire to be with him—desire, sharper and sharper, more demanding, to be with him, near him, breathe the air he breathed.

He was always calm, always the same.

Sometimes we played with a ball in the garden. It hurt me, almost, to see how quickly and precisely he moved. There was something unbearable, crushing, about the grace of his body. At the end of every game, he kissed me gently on the cheek.

One night, he came into my room. When I saw him, I was stunned by the joy I felt.

He came up to the bed, tucked in my covers, and smiled. He said, "Tomorrow, I'll get you some proper sheets."

When he stroked my face, I took his hand in mine, caressed it with my lips, nipped it with the points of my teeth. He began talking to me gently, in little tender words that I didn't understand. Then he drew my hand away, put the light out, and left.

How many days, how many months went by?

I stopped thinking, stopped asking myself questions. I submitted. The power of his nearness became stronger and stronger; I couldn't do without it. When it occurred to me that I would have given my life for him, right away, without stopping to think, I believe I was short of the truth.

I spent whole evenings sitting on the floor, leaning against his legs, my face between his knees, almost fainting with pleasure. Sometimes he would talk to me, and his voice went right through my body. I would rub my chcek against his legs, press myself tighter against him, into his warmth.

One morning he said to me, "We're going to spend the day together."

He took me out to the woods in the afternoon. He was enjoying himself, he laughed, and the brilliance of his eyes

was almost more than I could bear. We sat down on a bench, and after a moment I noticed he was paying attention to the man next to him. I heard the man say, "We love animals here. This little dog has been my only friend for years. Whatever affection you give them, you get it back five times over. An animal is faithful forever."

I heard him answer, "We love animals very much, too."

I leaned over to look at the man. I saw his little dog, a very pretty dog with intelligent eyes, light brown fur, a collar and chain. She was sitting at her master's feet, her muzzle against his legs.

And suddenly, but with absolute sureness, I understood.

At that instant, he turned to look at me. I blinked; I could not look into his eyes. I knew.

I knew, but it was much too late.

He got up, said good-bye to the man, took my hand in his; and I followed him obediently.

The Dead Fish

by BORIS VIAN

The carriage door stuck as usual; at the other end of the train, the big hat chief leaned hard on the red button, and the compressed air squirted into the tubes. The assistant strained to force the two panels apart. He was hot. Drops of gray sweat zigzagging across his face, like flies, and the dirty collar of his insulated zephyr shirt was exposed.

The train was about to start when the chief released the button. The air belched joyously under the train, and the assistant almost lost his balance as the door suddenly gave way. He stumbled down, not without ripping open his collecting bag on the latch.

The train started, and the resulting atmospheric displacement pushed the assistant against the malodorous latrines, where two Arabs were discussing politics with great knife-blows.

The assistant shook himself, patted his hair, which was crushed against his soft skull like rotten weeds. A faint mist rose from his half-naked torso, from which stood out a jutting clavicle, and the beginnings of one or two pairs of uncouth, badly planted ribs.

With a heavy step, he went down the platform tiled with hexagons of red and green, soiled here and there with long black trails: it had rained octopuses during the afternoon, but the time that the station employees were supposed to dedi-

cate to mopping the platform, according to their monumental chart, had been passed in the satisfaction of unmentionable needs.

The assistant rummaged in his pockets, and his fingers encountered the coarse corrugated pasteboard that he had to surrender at the exit. His knees hurt, and the dampness of the pools he had explored during the day made his badly fastened joints grind together. It must be said, he had gathered a more than honorable booty in his bag.

He handed his ticket to the dim man standing behind the grille. The man took it, looked at it and smiled ferociously.

"You haven't got another one?" he said.

"No," said the assistant.

"This one is forged."

"But it was my boss that gave it to me," said the assistant nicely, with a charming smile and a little nod.

The clerk giggled. "I'm not surprised it's forged, then. He bought ten from us, this morning."

"Ten what?" said the assistant.

"Ten forged tickets."

"But why?" said the assistant. His smile grew weaker and drooped to the left.

"To give them to you," said the clerk. "*Primo*, so as to get you sworn at, to begin with, which I am about to do; and *secundo*, so that you'd have to pay the fine."

"Why?" said the assistant. "I've got hardly any money."

"Because it's slimy to travel with a forged ticket," said the clerk.

"But you're the ones that forge them!"

"We have to. Because there are characters slimy enough to travel with forged tickets. You think it's fun, hey, to forget tickets all the while?"

"You'd certainly do better to clean up a tile," said the assistant.

"No word games," said the clerk. "Pay the fine. It's thirty francs."

"That's not true," said the assistant. "It's twelve francs when you haven't got a ticket."

"It's much more serious to have a forged one," said the clerk. "Pay, or I'll call my dog!"

"He won't come," said the assistant.

"No," said the clerk, "but it'll make your ears hurt, anyhow."

The assistant looked at the gloomy and emaciated face of the clerk, who gave him a venomous stare in return.

"I haven't got much money," he muttered.

"Me either," said the clerk. "Pay up."

"He gives me fifty francs a day," said the assistant, "and I have to eat."

The clerk tugged at the visor of his cap, and a blue screen dropped over his face. "Pay up," he said with his hand, rubbing the thumb and forefinger together.

The assistant reached for his shiny, patched-up wallet. He took out two creased ten-franc notes and a little five-franc note that was still bleeding.

"Twenty-five," he proposed uncertainly.

"Thirty," said the three outstretched fingers of the clerk.

The assistant sighed, and his boss's face appeared between his toes. He spat on it, right in the eye. His heart beat faster. The face dissolved and blackened. He put the money in the outstretched hand and left. He heard the click of the visor returning to its usual place.

Walking slowly, he reached the foot of the hill. The bag bruised his skinny hips, and the bamboo handle of his net whipped his frail, malformed calves at random as he walked.

2

He pushed against the iron gate, which opened with a frightful groan. A big red lamp went on at the top of the steps, and a bell echoed faintly in the vestibule. He entered as quickly as he could and closed the gate, not without giving himself an electric shock because the anti-burglar decoration was not in its usual place.

He went up the walk. Right in the middle, his foot struck something hard and a jet of ice-water sprang from the ground, between his ankle and his trouser leg, wetting him to the knee.

He began to run. His anger, as it did every night, mastered him progressively. He went up the three steps, fists clenched. At the top, his net got itself between his legs, and in the movement he made to keep from falling, he ripped his bag a second time on a nail that appeared out of nowhere. He felt something twist inside him, and panted without saying a word. After a few moments he calmed himself, and his chin fell on his chest. Then he felt the chill of his wet trousers, and grabbed the doorknob. He let go of it precipitously. An

evil-smelling vapor arose, and a fragment of his skin, stuck to the burning porcelain, blackened and shriveled. The door was open. He went in.

His weak legs would not support him, and he slid down in a corner of the vestibule, on the cold leprous-smelling tiles. His heart groaned between his ribs and shook him with great, brutal, irregular blows.

3

"It's poor," said his boss.

He was examining the contents of the bag.

The assistant waited, standing in front of the table.

"You've spoiled them," added the boss. "The perforations of this one are completely ruined."

"It's the net—it's too old," said the assistant. "If you want me to catch young stamps in good condition, you've got to buy me a decent net."

"Who is it that uses this net?" said the boss. "Is it you or me?"

The assistant did not answer. His burned hand was paining him.

"Answer me," said the boss. "Is it you or me?"

"It's me, for you," said the assistant.

"I don't force you," said the boss. "If you claim to earn fifty francs a day, you've got to justify it, anyhow."

"Less thirty francs for the ticket," said the assistant.

"What ticket? I pay you for the round trip."

"With forged tickets."

"All you have to do is pay attention."

"How am I supposed to tell the difference?"

"It isn't hard," said the boss. "They're obviously forged when they're made of corrugated pasteboard. Ordinary tickets are wood."

"Good," said the assistant. "You'll give me back my thirty francs."

"No. All these stamps are in poor condition."

"That isn't true," said the assistant. "I spent two hours fishing for them, and I had to break the ice. I took every precaution, and there's hardly two spoiled ones out of sixty."

"These aren't the ones I want," said the boss. "I want the 1855 two-cent Guiana. I'm not interested in the Zanzibar series, which you caught already yesterday."

"I catch what I can find," said the assistant. "Especially with a net like that. And anyhow, it's not the season for Guianas. You can exchange the Zanzibars."

"Everybody's finding them, this year," said the boss. "They're not worth anything any more."

"And the jet of water in my legs, and the decoration on the gate, and the doorknob—" suddenly exploded the assistant. His thin yellow face folded up in wrinkles, and he looked as if he were about to cry.

"That'll toughen you up," said the boss. "What am I supposed to do with myself here? Me, I get bored."

"Go hunt for stamps," said the assistant. He succeeded in controlling himself at the price of a considerable effort.

"I pay you for that," said the boss. "You're a thief. You steal the money you earn."

The assistant wiped his forehead with his threadbare sleeve, in a weary gesture. His head was clear as a bell. The table drew away from him slightly and he looked for something to catch hold of again. But the mantelpiece escaped in its turn, and he fell down.

"Get up," said the boss. "Not on my carpet."

"I want my dinner," said the assistant.

"Next time, come back earlier," said the boss. "Get up. I don't like to see you on my carpet. Get up, in God's name!" His voice trembled with fury, and his knotty hands pounded on the desk.

The assistant made a terrible effort and succeeded in getting to his knees. His belly hurt, and blood and serum were flowing from his hand. He had wound a dirty handkerchief around it.

The boss made a rapid choice and hurled three stamps at his face. They stuck to his cheek with a slight cupping-glass sound.

"You go and put those back where you got them," he said. He hammered out the syllables to give them the form of points of steel.

The assistant was crying. His soft hair fell over his forehead, and the stamps marked his left cheek. He got up heavily.

"For the last time," said the boss, "I don't want stamps in poor condition. And don't tell me any tales about the net."

"No, sir," said the assistant.

"Here's your fifty francs," said the boss. He took a bank-

note from his pocket, spat on it, tore it half-way across, and threw it on the floor.

The assistant lowered himself painfully. His knees cracked in brief, dry triplets.

"Your shirt is dirty," said the boss. "You'll sleep outside tonight."

The assistant picked up the banknote and left the room. The wind blew harder and shook the corrugated window in front of the ironwork grille of the vestibule door. He closed the door of the office, with a final glance at the silhouette of his boss. The latter, bent over his Zanzibar album, with a large loupe in his eye, was beginning to compare and evaluate.

4

He went down the steps of the stairway, wrapping himself in his long jacket, which was green-stained from having been too long in contact with the water in the stamp pools. The wind insinuated itself into the holes in the cloth and swelled his back so much that it gave him the look of a hunchback, not without damage to his spinal column; he suffered from internal mimicry, and had to struggle every day to keep his poor organs in their ordinary shape and their habitual function.

It was night now, and the earth gave forth a cheap, tarnished glimmer. The assistant turned to the right and followed the wall of the house. He guided himself by following the black line made by the uncoiled hose that his boss used to drown the rats in the cellar. He reached the worm-eaten doghouse nearby where he had already slept the previous night. The straw inside was damp and smelled of cockroaches. An old piece of quilt covered the arched doorway. When he lifted it to grope his way inside, there was a blinding glare and an explosion. A giant firecracker had just exploded inside the doghouse, filling it with a violent stench of powder.

The assistant had started, and his heart was racing. He tried to quell the beating by holding his breath, but almost immediately his eyes began to dance, and he greedily swallowed a mouthful of air. The smell of powder entered his lungs at the same time, and calmed him a little.

He waited for the silence to return and listened atten-

tively, then whistled softly. Without turning around, he crept into the doghouse and curled up on the sickly straw. He whistled again, then strained his ears. Light, small footsteps were approaching, and in the pale glimmer of the earth, he could see his living thing, which was coming to find him. It was a soft, shaggy, tame living thing, which he fed as well as he could on dead fish. It came into the doghouse and lay down against him. All at once he came to himself and put his hand to his cheek. The three stamps were beginning to suck his blood, and he tore them off brutally, holding himself in so as not to scream. He threw them away from him, outside the doghouse. The dampness of the ground would preserve them, probably, until tomorrow. The living thing began to lick his cheek, and he spoke to it to calm himself. He spoke to it in a low voice, for his boss had ways of listening to him when he was alone.

"He gets on my nerves," he panted.

The living thing murmured softly and licked him harder.

"I think I ought to do something. Not let myself be bullied, get some decent shirts in spite of him, and have forged tickets in wood. And then, mend the net and keep him from poking holes in it. I think I ought to refuse to sleep in the doghouse, and demand my room, and demand a raise, because I can't live on fifty francs a day. And also gain weight, and become very strong and very handsome, and rebel before he expects it, and heave a brick in his face. I think I will."

He changed his position and pondered with such intensity that the air in the doghouse was expelled in great puffs from the rounded hole, and not enough was left inside to breathe. A little came back in through holes under the floor of the doghouse, through the straw, but that again increased the smell of cockroaches, with which now was mingled the disagreeable odor of slugs in heat.

"I don't like this doghouse. It's cold. Luckily you're here. There are noises in the cellar, it's the water that comes in through the rat holes. You can't sleep with the roaring of rats in your ears every night of your life. Why does he want to kill those rats at any price, and kill them with water? You kill rats with blood."

The living thing stopped licking him. He could make out its profile against the gray background of the luminous earth, with its slender muzzle and its pointed ears, and its yellow eyes that reflected some cold lightnings. It turned in

a circle, hunting for a convenient place, and nestled against him, nose on his thighs.

"I'm cold," said the assistant.

He began to sob quietly. His tears slipped onto the straw, from which arose a thin vapor, and the outlines of objects became blurred.

"Wake me up tomorrow morning," he added. "I have to take the three stamps back. I hope he doesn't give me a forged ticket for the train."

There was a distant hubbub, then some piercing hisses, and the sounds of small galloping feet.

"Oh!" said the assistant. "That's it! He's beginning again with the rats! I hope it's a rat. I'd hold the hose myself. I hope he'll give me fifty francs tomorrow night. I'm hungry. I could eat a rat alive."

He squeezed his belly with both hands, still crying, and then the rhythm of his sobs diminished little by little, as a machine runs down, and his twisted body stretched itself out. His feet protruded through the opening of the doghouse, and he slept, with his cheek on the evil-smelling straw. In his empty stomach, there was a sound of gravel.

5

From the room where he crouched, the boss heard the melodious phrase with which the pepper vendor usually announced her passage. He got to his feet and ran toward the vestibule, whose door he opened with conscious brutality. Standing on the stair, he watched the girl approach.

She had on her usual uniform, a little pleated rump-length skirt, short red and blue socks, and a bolero that left bare the lower part of her breasts, not to mention the red and white striped cotton cap, which the pepper vendors of Mauritius have imposed on the world by force of patience.

The boss nodded to her and she came up the walk. He went down the steps at the same time and advanced to meet her.

"Good day," he said. "I want some pepper."

"How many grains?" she asked with an artificial smile, for she detested him.

Her black hair and her fair skin had the effect on the boss of a glass of cold water on the nuts, in truth, a most im-

portant effect. "Go up the steps," he said, "and I'll specify the quantity."

"You want to stay behind and look at my thighs, that's it, right?"

"Yes," said the boss, drooling. He reached out his hands.

"Pay for the pepper first," she said.

"How much?"

"A hundred francs a grain, and you taste first."

"Will you go up the steps?" murmured the boss. "I'll give you a Zanzibar series."

"My brother brought three of them up to the house yesterday," she said with a mellifluous chuckle. "Taste my pepper."

She offered him a grain, and the boss did not perceive that it was toxic carnation seed. Unsuspectingly, he put it in his mouth and swallowed it.

The pepper vendor was already moving away.

"What?" wondered the boss. "How about the steps?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" said the pepper vendor, with consummate wickedness.

Meanwhile, the boss was beginning to feel the comforting effect of the poison, and he began to run at full speed around the house. Leaning against the gate, the pepper vendor watched him.

On the third lap, she waved to him and waited until he looked back at her, which he did on the fourth lap, still running faster and faster. Then she tucked up her little pleated skirt, and from where she stood she saw the boss's face turn violet, then completely black, then begin to burn, and as he kept his eyes fixed on what she was showing him, he tripped over the garden hose that he used to drown the rats; he fell with his face against a large stone, which fitted itself precisely between his cheekbones, in place of his nose and jaws. His feet stayed behind on the ground and dug a double trench, where, little by little, according to the rate at which his shoes wore out, could be seen the trail of five clumsy toes, which served to keep his socks on.

The pepper vendor closed the gate and went on her way, tossing the tassel of her cotton cap to the other side, in sign of derision.

6

The assistant tried vainly to open the carriage door. It was very hot in the train; in that way, the passengers caught cold in getting out, for the engineer had a brother who was a handkerchief salesman.

He had toiled the whole day for a miserable catch, and his heart swelled with satisfaction, for he was going to kill his boss. He succeeded at last in forcing apart the two halves of the door, by pulling them up and down, and realized that the big hat chief had turned them on their sides as a spiteful practical joke. Pleased to have foiled him this time, he leaped lightly onto the platform and fumbled in his pocket. He found without trouble the bit of corrugated pasteboard that he had to surrender at the exit, and advanced rapidly toward that spot, occupied by a man with a sly expression in whom he recognized the clerk of yesterday.

"I have a forged ticket," he said.

"Ah?" said the other. "Let's see."

He offered his ticket and the man took it, then examined it with such concentrated attention that his cap opened up to let his ears enter the lining.

"It's a good copy," said the man.

"Except it isn't wood, it's pasteboard," said the assistant.

"Really?" said the man. "You'd swear it was wood; if you didn't know it was pasteboard, naturally."

"All the same," said the assistant, "just think, my boss gave it to me for real."

"A real one costs only twelve francs," said the man. "He pays a lot more for these."

"How much?" asked the assistant.

"I'll give you thirty francs for it," said the man, and put his hand in his pocket.

The assistant recognized from the ease of this gesture that he must be a degenerate character. But the man only brought out three ten-franc notes forged with walnut dye. "Here!" he added.

"They're counterfeit, of course?" said the assistant.

"I can't give you good ones for a bad one, you must realize," said the clerk.

"No," said the assistant, "but I'll keep mine."

He crouched and took a great leap, by means of which

his small fist was able to take the skin off the whole right side of the face under the cap. The man put his hand to his visor and fell at the salute, which caused him to bang his elbow on the hard cement of the platform, paved, at that particular spot, with hexagons of a phosphorescent blue.

The assistant stepped over the body and went on. He felt himself saturated with warm, limpid life, and hurried to ascend the hill. He removed the thong from his net and used it as a climbing rope. In passing, he harpooned the heads of the iron pillars that supported the guard fence along the track cutting, and, pulling on the handle, hauled himself easily up among the sharp-edged stones of the path. After a few yards, the torn net flew away. He would put the ring of steel wire around his boss's neck.

He reached the gate quickly and pushed it open without precautions. He hoped to receive the current to strengthen his anger, but felt nothing, and stopped. In front of the steps, something stirred feebly. He ran along the walk. In spite of the cold, his skin began to redden, and he smelled the neglected odor of his body, with a moldy smell of straw and cockroaches.

He hardened his stringy biceps, and his fingers curled around the bamboo handle. His boss, no doubt, had killed someone.

He stopped dumbfounded, recognizing the dark suit and the shiny starched collar. His boss's head was no more than a blackish mass, and his legs had managed to dig two deep, grooved ruts.

A kind of despair took possession of him and he trembled all over, shaken by his anger and his longing for massacre. He glanced all around, uneasy and confused. He had prepared a lot of things to say. He had to say them.

"What did you do that for, you crumb?"

The "crumb" resounded in the neutral air with a disused and insufficient sonority.

"Crumb! Bum! Son of a bitch! Jerk! Dirty son of a bitch! Robber! No-good! Son of a bitch!"

Tears streamed from his eyes, for the boss did not answer. He took the bamboo handle and placed it in the middle of the boss's back.

"Answer me, you old bastard. You gave me a forged ticket."

He leaned with all his weight and the handle sank into

the tissues softened by poison. He turned it to grind out the worms, holding the other end of the handle like the stem of a gyroscope. "A forged ticket, straw full of roaches, and I'm hungry enough to eat gravel, and what about my fifty francs for today?"

The boss hardly stirred any more, and the worms wouldn't come out.

"I wanted to kill you, dirty son of a bitch. I've got to kill you. Kill you dead, you old bastard, yes, you. What about my fifty francs, hey?"

He pulled the handle out of the wound and struck great blows on the carbonized skull, which sank in like the crust of an overdone soufflé. Where the boss's head should be, there was nothing any more. It ended at the collar.

The assistant stopped trembling.

"You'd rather go away? All right. But me, I've got to kill someone."

He sat on the ground, he wept as he had the night before, and his living thing ran up light-footed, seeking friendship. The assistant closed his eyes. He felt the tender, soft touch on his cheek, and his fingers closed around the frail neck. The living thing made no movement to free itself, and, when the caress grew cold on his cheek, he knew that he had strangled it. Then he rose. He stumbled along the walk and went out into the road; he turned to the right, without knowing, and the boss did not stir at all.

7

He saw the big blue-stamp pool directly ahead of him. Night was falling, and the water glimmered with mysterious and distant reflections. The pool was not deep; you found stamps there by the hundred, but they had no great value, because they reproduced themselves all year round.

He took two stakes out of his bag and planted them close to the pool, a yard apart. Between them he stretched a strident steel wire and touched it with a finger, for a sad note. The wire stood four inches above the ground, parallel to the edge of the pool.

The assistant went a few steps away, then turned, facing the water, and walked straight toward the wire. He had his eyes closed and was whistling a tender melody, the one that his living thing liked. He went slowly, with short steps,

and tripped over the steel wire. He fell with his head in the water. His body lay motionless, and, under the mute surface, blue stamps were already attaching themselves to his sunken cheeks.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CLAUDE CHEINISSE, the author of "Juliette," is an extraordinary young man—a distinguished figure, at the age of thirty-three, in a field of science I am not allowed to mention. He divides his time between research and teaching; in his off hours he manages to lead a busy social life, fly both gliders and powered aircraft, collect weapons and cartridges, practice his marksmanship, swim, and drive sports cars.

All I am able to learn about CATHERINE CLIFF, author of "The Chain of Love," is that she is the wife of the writer Jacques Sternberg; that's not much help, because although Sternberg writes science fiction, too, there is no story of his in this collection.

HENRI DAMONTI, author of "Olivia" and "The Notary and the Conspiracy," is a young Strasbourg lawyer, specializing in divorce and criminal cases. He is a student of the Cabala, writes radio plays for children, loves Mozart, takes no exercise: "This is wrong, I know, but laziness is an incurable disease." The name is a pseudonym, picked up from an old Arsène Lupin novel.

ALAIN DORÉMIEUX, author of "The Vana," has a taste for an elegant mixture of eroticism and horror, which manifests itself in the occasional stories he writes for *Fiction*, as well as in the tone of the magazine itself. "The Vana" was rejected with cries of outrage by a well-known American men's magazine: this amused Dorémieux.

NATHALIE CHARLES-HENNEBERG is a Russian, born in the

Caucasus, who met her Alsatian-German husband in Syria when he was a member of the French Foreign Legion; they fought side by side in the first handful of Free French. Their early collaborations were signed "Charles Henneberg"; after Henneberg's death in 1959, his widow added her own first name to the familiar by-line. By day, she translates technical material from Russian to French; by night, she is a prolific novelist, the "most read" science-fiction writer in France. Three of her luxuriant, intricately patterned stories are in this collection: "Moon-Fishers," "The Non-Humans," and "The Blind Pilot."

GÉRARD KLEIN, author of "The Monster," is the prodigy of French science fiction: he was an established writer at eighteen. For the last several years he has been working on films.

SUZANNE MALAVAL, author of "The Devil's Goddaughter," is a young housewife who lives "a stone's throw from Joan of Arc's village." She is a *Fiction* discovery.

PIERRE MILLE, author of "After Three Hundred Years," died in 1941 at the age of seventy-six. He was a newspaperman and a widely read novelist, with more than fifty published books to his credit. This story is one I would never have stumbled on myself; Claude Cheinisse found it in an old magazine, had it beautifully bound, and sent it to me for a New Year's present.

CLAUDE VEILLOT, author of "A Little More Caviar?" is an Algerian-born newspaperman. His novel about Algerian truck-drivers, "Nous N'Irons Pas en Nigéria," has been made into a French motion picture.

BORIS VIAN, author of "The Dead Fish," died in his thirties, in 1959, of a heart attack while watching the screening of his movie, "I'll Spit on Your Grave." He was a Satrap of the College of 'Pataphysics, the neo-Surrealist group that includes Raymond Queneau and Eugène Ionesco.

D.K.

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