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ORBIT 12

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Also included are stories by Ursula K. Le Guin, Michael Bishop, Kate Wilhelm, Vonda N. McIntyre, Steve Chapman, Doris Piserchia, and Gene Wolfe.

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Cover painting by PAUL LEHR

Damon Knight's

An Anthology of New



ORBIT 12

Science Fiction Stories

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Orbit 12

Edward Bryant

S H A R K

THE WAR came and left but returned for him eighteen years later.

Folger should have known when the clouds of smaller fish disappeared. He should have guessed but he was preoccupied stabilizing the cage at ten meters, then sliding out the upper hatch. Floating free, he stared into the gray-green South Atlantic. Nothing. With his tongue he keyed the mike embedded in his mouthpiece. The sonex transmitter clipped to his tanks coded and beamed the message: "Query—Valerie—location." He repeated it. Electronics crackled in his ear, but there was no response.

Something moved to his right—something a darker gray, a darker green than the water. Then Folger saw the two dark eyes. Her body took form in the murk. A blunt torpedo shape gliding, she struck impossibly fast.

It was Folger's mistake and nearly fatal. He had hoped she would circle first. The great white shark bore straight in, mouth grinning open. Folger saw the teeth, only the teeth, rows of ragged white. "Query—" he screamed into the sonex.

Desperately he brought the shark billy in his right hand forward. The great white jaws opening and closing, triangular teeth knifing, whipped past soundlessly.

Folger lifted the billy—tried to lift it—saw the blood and the white ends protruding below his elbow and realized he was seeing surgically sawed bone.

The shock made everything deceptively easy. Folger reached behind him, felt the cage, and pulled himself up toward the hatch. The shark flowed into the distance.

One-handed, it was difficult entering the cage. He was half through the hatch and had turned the flotation control all the way up when he blacked out.

Her name, like that of half the other women in the village, was Maria. For more than a decade she had kept Folger's house. She cleaned, after a fashion. She cooked his two meals a day, usually boiled potatoes or mutton stew. She loved him with a silent, bitter, unrequited passion. Over all the years, they had never talked of it. They were not lovers; each night after fixing supper, she returned to her clay-and-stone house in the village. Had Folger taken a woman from the village, Maria would have knifed both of them as they slept. That problem had never arisen.

"People for you," said Maria.

Folger looked up from his charts. "Who?"

"No islanders."

Folger hadn't had an off-island visitor since two years before, when a Brazilian journalist had come out on the semiannual supply boat.

"You want them?" said Maria.

"Can I avoid it?"

Maria lowered her voice. "Government."

"Shit," said Folger. "How many?"

"Just two. You want the gun?" The sawed-off twelve-gauge, swathed in oilcloth, leaned in the kitchen closet.

"No." Folger sighed. "Bring them in."

Maria muttered something as she turned back through the doorway.

"What?"

She shook her matted black hair. "One is a woman!" she spat.

Valerie came to his quarters later in the afternoon. The project manager had already spoken to Folger. Knowing what she would say, Folger had two uncharacteristically stiff drinks before she arrived. "You can't be serious," was the first thing he said.

She grinned. "So they told you."

He said, "I can't allow it."

The grin vanished. "Don't talk as though you owned me."

"I'm not, I'm just—" He floundered. "Damn it, it's a shock."

She took his hand and drew him down beside her on the couch.

"Would I deny your dreams?"

His voice pleaded. "You're my lover."

Valerie looked away. "It's what I want."

"You're crazy."

"You can be an oceanographer," she said. "Why can't I be a shark?"

Maria ushered in the visitors with ill grace. "Get along," she said out in the hallway. "Señor Folger is a busy man."

"We will not disturb him long," said a woman's voice.

The visitors, as they entered, had to duck to clear the door-frame. The woman was nearly two meters in height; the man half a head taller. Identically clad in gray jump-suits, they wore identical smiles. They were—Folger searched for the right word—extreme. Their hair was too soft and silkily pale; their eyes too obviously blue, teeth too white and savage.

The pair looked down at Folger. "I am Inga Lindfors," said the woman. "My brother, Per." The man nodded slightly.

"Apparently you know who I am," said Folger.

"You are Marcus Antonius Folger," Inga Lindfors said.

"It was supposed to be Marcus Aurelius," Folger said irrelevantly. "My father never paid close attention to the classics."

"The fortune of confusion," said Inga. "I find Mark Antony the more fascinating. He was a man of decisive action."

Bewildered, Maria stared from face to face.

"You were a component of the Marine Institute on East Falkland," said Per.

"I was. It was a long time ago."

"We wish to speak with you," said Inga, "as representatives of the Protectorate of Old America."

"So? Talk."

"We speak officially."

"Oh." Folger smiled at Maria. "I must be alone with these people."

The island woman looked dubiously at the Lindfors. "I will be in the kitchen," she said.

"It is a formidable journey to Tres Rocas," said Per. "Our air-

boat left Cape Pembroke ten hours ago. Unfavorable winds."

Folger scratched himself and said nothing.

Inga laughed, a young girl's laugh in keeping with her age. "Marcus Antonius Folger, you've been too long away from American civilization."

"I doubt it," said Folger. "You've obviously gone to a lot of trouble to find me. Why?"

Why?

She always asked him questions when they climbed the rocks above the headland. Valerie asked and Folger answered and usually they both learned. Why the Falklands' seasonal temperature range was only ten degrees; what were quasars; how did third-generation computers differ from second; how dangerous were manta rays; when would the universe die. Today she asked a new question:

"What about the war?"

He paused, leaning into a natural chimney. "What do you mean?" The cold passed into his cheek, numbed his jaw, made the words stiff.

Valerie said, "I don't understand the war."

"Then you know what I know." Folger stared down past the rocks to the sea. How do you explain masses of people killing other people? He could go through the glossary—romary, secondary, tertiary targets; population priorities; death-yields—but so what? It didn't give credence or impact to the killing taking place on the land, in space, and below the seas.

"I don't know anything," said Valerie somberly. "Only what they tell us."

"Don't question them," said Folger. "They're a little touchy."

"But why?"

"The Protectorate remembers its friends," said Per.

Folger began to laugh. "Don't try to snow me. At the peak of my loyalty to the Protectorate—or what the Protectorate was then—I was apolitical."

"Twenty years ago, that would have been treason."

"But not now," said Inga quickly. "Libertarianism has made a great resurgence."

"So I hear. The boat brings magazines once in a while."

"The years of reconstruction have been difficult. We could have used your expertise on the continent."

"I was used here. Occasionally I find ways to help the islanders."

"As an oceanographer?"

Folger gestured toward the window. "The sea makes up most of their environment. I'm useful."

"With your talent," said Per, "it's such a waste here."

"Then too," Folger continued, "I help with the relics."

"Relics?" said Inga uncertainly.

"War surplus. Leftovers. Look." Folger picked up a dried, leathery rectangle from the table and tossed it to Per. He looked at the object, turning it over and over.

"Came from a killer whale. Got him last winter with a harpoon and shaped charge. Damn thing had stove in three boats, killed two men. Now read the other side."

Per examined the piece of skin closely. Letters and numerals had been deeply branded. "USMF-343."

"See?" said Folger. "Weapons are still out there. He was part of the lot the year before I joined the Institute. Not especially sophisticated, but he had longevity."

"Do you encounter many?" said Inga.

Folger shook his head. "Not too many of the originals."

The ketch had been found adrift with no one aboard. It had put out early that morning for Dos, one of the two small and uninhabited companions of Tres Rocas. The three men aboard had been expecting to hunt seal. The fishermen who discovered the derelict also found a bloody ax and severed sections of tentacle as thick as a man's forearm.

So Folger trolled along the route of the unlucky boat in his motorized skiff for three days. He searched a vast area of choppy, gray water, an explosive harpoon never far from his hand. Early on the fourth afternoon a half dozen dark-green tentacles poked from the sea on the port side of the boat. Folger reached with his left hand for the harpoon. He didn't see the tentacle from starboard that whipped and tightened around his chest and jerked him over the side.

The chill of the water stunned him. Folger had a quick, surrealistic glimpse of intricately weaving tentacles. Two eyes, each

as large as his fist, stared without malice. The tentacle drew him toward the beak.

Then a gray shadow angled below Folger. Razor teeth scythed through flesh. The tentacle was cut; Folger drifted.

The great white shark was at least ten meters long. Its belly was uncharacteristically dappled. The squid wrapped eager arms around the thrashing shark. The two sank into the darker water below Folger.

Lungs aching, he broke the surface less than a meter from the skiff. He always trailed a ladder from the boat. It made things easier for a one-armed man.

"Would you show us the village?" said Inga.

"Not much to see."

"We would be pleased by a tour anyway. Have you time?"

Folger reached for his coat. Inga moved to help him put it on.

"I can get it," said Folger.

"There are fine experts in prosthesis on the continent," said Per.

"No thanks," said Folger.

"Have you thought about a replacement?"

"Thought about it. But the longer I thought, the better I got without one. I had a few years to practice."

"It was in the war, then?" asked Inga.

"Of course it was in the war."

On their way out, they passed the kitchen. Maria looked up sullenly over the scraps of bloody mutton on the cutting board. Her eyes fixed on Inga until the blonde moved out of sight along the hall.

A light, cold rain was falling as they walked down the trail to the village. "Rain is the only thing I could do without here," said Folger. "I was raised in California."

"We will see California after we finish here," said Inga. "Per and I have a leave. We will get our anti-rad injections and ski the Sierras. At night we will watch the Los Angeles glow."

"Is it beautiful?"

"The glow is like seeing the aurora borealis every night," said Per.

Folger chuckled. "I always suspected L.A.'s future would be something like that."

"The half-life will see to the city's immortality," said Inga.

Per smiled. "We were there last year. The glow appears cold. It is supremely erotic."

In the night, in a bed, he asked her, "Why do you want to be a shark?"

She ran her nails delicately along the cords of his neck. "I want to kill people, eat them."

"Any people?"

"Just men."

"Would you like me to play analyst?" said Folger. She bit his shoulder hard. "Goddammit!" He flopped over. "Is there any blood?" he demanded.

Valerie brushed the skin with her hand. "You're such a coward."

"My threshold of pain's low," said Folger. "Sweetie."

"Don't call me Sweetie," she said. "Call me Shark."

"Shark."

They made love in a desperate hurry.

The descent steepened, the rain increased, and they hurried. They passed through a copse of stunted trees and reached the ruts of a primitive road.

"We have flash-frozen beefsteaks aboard the airboat," said Inga.

"That's another thing I've missed," Folger said.

"Then you must join us for supper."

"As a guest of the Protectorate?"

"An honored guest."

"Make mine rare," said Folger. "Very rare."

The road abruptly descended between two bluffs and overlooked the village. It was called simply the village because there were no other settlements on Tres Rocas and so no cause to distinguish. Several hundred inhabitants lived along the curve of the bay in small, one-story houses, built largely of stone.

"It's so bleak," said Inga. "What do people do?"

"Not much," said Folger. "Raise sheep, hunt seals, fish. When there were still whales, they used to whale. For recreation, the natives go out and dig peat for fuel."

"It's quite a simple existence," said Per.

"Uncomplicated," Folger said.

"If you could be anything in the sea," said Valerie, "what would it be?"

Folger was always discomfited by these games. He usually felt he chose wrong answers. He thought carefully for a minute or so. "A dolphin, I suppose."

In the darkness, her voice dissolved in laughter. "You lose!" He felt irritation. "What's the matter now?"

"Dolphins hunt in packs," she said. "They gang up to kill sharks. They're cowards."

"They're not. Dolphins are highly intelligent. They band together for cooperative protection."

Still between crests of laughter: "Cowards!"

On the outskirts of the village they encountered a dozen small, dirty children playing a game. The children had dug a shallow pit about a meter in diameter. It was excavated close enough to the beach so that it quickly filled with a mixture of ground seepage and rainwater.

"Stop," said Per. "I wish to see this."

The children stirred the muddy water with sticks. Tiny, thumb-sized fishes lunged and snapped at one another, burying miniature teeth in the others' flesh. The children stared up incuriously at the adults, then returned their attention to the pool.

Inga bent closer. "What are they?"

"Baby sharks," said Folger. "They hatch alive in the uterus of their mother. Some fisherman must have bagged a female sand tiger who was close to term. He gave the uterus to his kids. Fish won't live long in that pool."

"They're fantastic," Per breathed. For the first time since Folger had met him, he showed emotion. "So young and so ferocious."

"The first one hatched usually eats the others in the womb," said Folger.

"It's beautiful," said Inga. "An organism that is born fighting."

The sibling combat in the pit had begun to quiet. A few sand tiger babies twitched weakly. The children nudged them with the sticks. When there was no response, the sticks rose and fell violently, splashing the water and mashing the fish into the sand.

"The islanders hate sharks," Folger said.

She awoke violently, choking off a scream and blindly striking out at him. Folger held her wrists, pulled her against him, and then began to stroke her hair. Her trembling slowly subsided.

"Bad dreams?"

She nodded, her hair working softly against his jaw.

"Was I in them?"

"No," she said. "Maybe. I don't know. I don't think so."

"What happened?"

She hesitated. "I was swimming. They—some people pulled me out of the water. They put me on a concrete slab by the pier. There was no water, no sea—" She swallowed. "God, I want a drink."

"I'll fix you one," he said.

"They pulled me out. I lay there and felt the ocean drain away. And then I felt things tear loose inside me. There was nothing supporting my heart and liver and intestines and everything began to pull away from everything else. God, it hurts—"

Folger patted her head. "I'll get you a drink."

"So?" said Per. "Sharks aren't particularly aggressive, are they?"

"Not until after the war," said Folger. "Since then there's been continual skirmishing. Both the villagers and the sharks hunt the same game. Now they've started to hunt each other."

"And," said Inga, "there has been you."

Folger nodded. "I know the sea predators better. After all, that was my job."

The children, bored with the dead shark pool, followed the adults toward the village. They gawked at the Lindfors. One of the more courageous boys reached tentatively toward Inga's hair as it blew back in the wind.

"Vayan!" shouted Folger. "All of you, move!" The children reluctantly withdrew. "They're accustomed to whites," he said, "but blondes are a novelty."

"Fascinating," said Inga. "It is like an enclave of a previous century."

The road widened slightly and became the village's main street, still unpaved, and winding down along the edge of the sea. Folger saw the aluminum bulk of an airboat tied to a pier, incongruous between two fishing ketches. "You come alone?" he said.

"Just the two of us," said Inga.

Per put his hand lightly on her wrist. "We're quite effective as a team," he said.

They passed a dark stone house, its door swung open to the wind. Rain blew across the threshold.

"Abandoned?" said Inga.

"Quaint old island custom," said Folger. "Catholicism's a little diluted here. Priest only comes twice a year." He pointed at the open door. "The man who lived there died at sea a couple days ago. Family'll keep the door open, no matter what, for a week. It's so his soul can find shelter until it's shunted to heaven or hell."

Per said, "What happened to the man?"

"He was fishing," Folger said. "Friends saw it all. A great white shark got him."

Closer, now:

"Dolphin!"

"Shark!"

They lay together.

"I wish we had more time," said Inga. "I should like to hunt a shark."

"Perhaps on some future leave," said Per.

"And that's about it for the village," said Folger. "There isn't much more to see, unless you enjoy native crafts like dipping tallow candles or carding wool."

"It's incredible," said Inga. "The only time I have seen anything remotely like this was in pre-Reconstruction America."

Folger said, "You don't look that old."

"I was barely into puberty. The Protectorate brought our father from Copenhagen. He is a design engineer in hydro-electrics. He worked on the Oklahoma Sea projects."

They stood on a rough plank pier beyond one horn of the crescent of houses. Per tapped a boot on the wood to shake loose some of the mud. "I still can't see how you endure this place, Folger."

Half asleep, Folger said, "Some day when the war is over, we'll get a place by the ocean. There's still some great country north of San Francisco. We'll have a house among the trees, on a mountainside overlooking the beach. Maybe we'll make it a stone tower, like Robinson Jeffers built."

Close to his ear, Valerie said, "A tower would be nice."

"You'll be able to read all day, and swim, and we'll never have any visitors we don't want."

"It's a fine dream for you," Valerie whispered.

"I came as jetsam," Folger said.

The three of them stood silently for a few minutes, watching clouds darker than the water roil in from the west. Triangular shapes took form on the horizon. Folger squinted. "Fishermen are coming in." After another minute he said, "Tour's over."

"I know," said Inga.

"—hoping. I kept hoping." Folger raised himself on one elbow. "You really are going to go through with it."

The fishing boats neared the breakwater. Folger and the others could hear the faint cries of the crewmen. "Why are you here?" he said.

Per Lindfors laid a comradely hand on Folger's shoulder. "We came here to kill you."

Folger smiled. What other response could there be?

"Tell me how it works," said Valerie.

They paused on a steel catwalk overlooking the catch pens. In the tank immediately below, two divers warily man-handled a five-meter great blue in an oval path. If water weren't forced over the shark's gill surfaces, the fish would suffocate. The water glittered in the glare of arc lights. Beyond the pens, the beacon on Cape Pembroke blinked its steady twelve pulses per minute.

"I know the general techniques," said Folger. "But it's not my specialty. I'm strictly mapping and logistics."

"I don't need apologies," said Valerie.

"Excuse me while I violate the National Security Act." Folger turned to face her. "Most of the technology is borrowed from the brothers upstairs on the orbital platforms. Everybody's been doing secret work with cyborgs. Somewhere along the line, somebody got the bright idea of importing it underwater."

"The Marine Forces," said Valerie.

"Right. The bureaucrats finally realized that the best weapons for fighting undersea wars already existed in the ocean. They were weapons which had been adapted for that purpose for more than a hundred million years. All that was needed were guidance systems."

Valerie said wistfully, "Sharks."

"Sharks and killer whales; squid; to a degree, dolphins. We're considering a few other species."

"I want to know how it's done."

"Primarily by direct transplant. Surgical modification. Nerve grafts are partially electronic. Is that what you wanted to know?"

She stared down at the docile shark in the tank. "There's no coming back, is there?"

"We'll probably use your old body to feed the new one."

"So kill me. Do I rate a reason why?"

"Not if your execution had been scheduled now," said Inga. "It would not have been merciful to alert you in advance. Such cheap melodrama is forbidden by Protectorate codes."

Folger snorted. "Isn't all this overly Machiavellian?"

"Not at all. We were given considerable latitude on this assignment. We wished to be sure of doing the right thing."

"—come down to the point of whether or not I'll stop you from doing this." Wind off the headland deadened his words.

"Can you stop me?" Valerie's voice was flat, without challenge. He didn't answer.

"Would you?" Valerie kissed him gently on the side of the throat. "Here's a Hindu proverb for you. 'The woman you love, you must not possess.'"

He said in a whisper, without looking at her, "I love you."

"If you're not going to kill me," Folger said, "I've got work to do."

"Folger, what is your fondest wish?"

He stared at her with enigmatic eyes. "You can't give it to me."

"Wealth?" said Per. "Recognition? You had a considerable reputation before the war."

"When we leave," said Inga, "we want you to return with us."

Folger looked slowly from one to the other. "Leave the island?"

"A center for deep Pacific studies is opening on Guam," Inga said. "The directorship is yours."

"I don't believe any of this," said Folger. "I'm in my fifties and even considering the postwar chaos, I'm a decade behind my field."

"Some refresher study at the University of San Juan," said Per.

Inga said, "Reconstruction is not all that complete. Genius is uncommon. You are needed, Folger."

"Death or a directorship," said Folger.

Folger spoke to the project manager in a sterile cubicle off the operating theater. "What are her chances?"

"For survival? Excellent."

"I mean afterwards."

The project manager drew deeply on his extinguished pipe. "Can't say. Test data's been spotty."

"Christ, Danny!" Folger swung around. "Don't doubletalk me. What's that mean?"

The project manager evaded Folger's eyes. "A high proportion of the test subjects haven't returned from field trials. The bio boys think it may have something to do with somatic memory, cellular retention of the old, nonhuman personality."

"And you didn't tell us anything about this?"

"Security, Marc." The project manager looked uncomfortable. "I never know from day to day what's under wraps. You know, we haven't had radio reception for twelve days now. Nobody knows—"

"I swear, Danny, if anything happens to her—"

The pipe dropped from the project manager's open mouth. "But she's a volunteer—"

It was the first time Folger had ever struck another human being.

"Elections are approaching on the continent," said Inga.

"Free?"

"Of course," said Per.

"Reasonably," said Inga. "Within the needs of reconstruction."

A crowd of children scampered past. Farther down the beach, the fishermen began to unload the day's catch.

"Do you remember a man named Diaz-Gomide?" said Per.

"No."

"He is a Brazilian journalist."

"Yes," said Folger. "About two years ago, right?"

Per nodded. "He is not only a journalist, but also a higher-up in the opposition party. He is their shadow minister of information."

"Senhor Diaz-Gomide has proved a great embarrassment to the present administration," said Inga.

"The same regime that's been in power for a quarter century," said Folger.

Inga made a noncommittal gesture. "Someone had to keep order through the war and after."

"The point is," said Per, "that this Diaz-Gomide has been disseminating historical lies on behalf of his party."

"Let me guess," said Folger. He walked slowly toward the end of the pier and the Lindfors followed. "He had disclosed terrible things about the government in connection with the Marine Institute on East Falkland."

"Among other fabrications," said Per.

Folger stopped with his toes overhanging the water. "He alleged that inhuman experiments were carried on, that the brains of unwilling or unknowing subjects were transplanted into the bodies of sea creatures."

"Something like that, except he couched it in less clinical language."

"Down the rabbit hole." Folger shook his head slowly. "What do you want from me—a disclaimer?"

Inga said, "We suspect Diaz-Gomide grossly distorted your statements in the interview. It would be well if you set the record straight."

"The Marine Forces experiments have been greatly exaggerated," said Per.

"Probably not," said Folger.

They stared at each other.

Folger floated in the center of the holding tank. The whisper of the regulator sounded extraordinarily loud in his ears. He turned to follow the great white shark as it slowly circled, its eye continually focused on Folger. The shark—he found difficulty ascribing it her name—moved fluidly, weaving, head traveling from side to side slowly with the rhythm of its motion through the water.

She—he made the attempt—she was beautiful; implacably, savagely so. He had seldom been this close to a shark. He watched silently her body crease with a thousand furrows, every move-

ment emphasizing musculature. He had never seen beauty so deadly.

After a time, he tried the sonex. "Valerie—inquiry—what is it like."

The coded reply came back and unscrambled. "Marc—never know—mass&bulk&security—better."

He sent: "Inquiry—happy."

"Yes."

They exchanged messages for a few minutes more. He asked, "Inquiry—what will they do with you."

"Assigned soldier—picket duty—Mariana Trench."

"Inquiry—when."

"Never—never soldier—run away first."

"So," said Folger. "Recant or die?"

"We would like to see you take the directorship of the research center on Guam," said Inga.

Folger found the paper among other poems scattered like dry leaves in Valerie's room:

*"In the void, inviolate
from what she was
is
and will be"*

He went outside to the catch pens. From the catwalk he looked into the tank. The shark circled ceaselessly. She swung around to his side and Folger watched the dark back, the mottled gray-and-white belly slide by. He watched until darkness fell.

"Do I get time to consider the offer?" Folger asked.

The Lindfors looked at each other, considering.

"I was never good at snap decisions."

"We would like to tidy up this affair—" said Per.

"I know," Folger said. "Skiing the Sierras."

"Would twelve hours be sufficient?"

"Time enough to consult my Book of Changes."

"Do you really?" Inga's eyes widened fractionally.

"Treason," Per said.

"No. No more. My mystical phase played through."

"Then we can expect your decision in the morning?"

"Right."

"And now it is time for supper," said Inga. "Shall we go to the boat? I remember, Folger. Very rare."

"No business during dinner?"

"No," Inga promised.

"Your goddamn girl," said the project manager. Soaked through with sea water and reeking of contraband liquor, he sloshed into Folger's quarters. "She got away."

Folger switched on the lamp by the bunk and looked up sleepily. "Danny? What? Who got away?"

"Goddamn girl."

"Valerie?" Folger swung his legs off the bed and sat up.

"Smashed the seagate. Let loose half the tanks. We tried to head her off in the channel."

"Is she all right?"

"All right?" The project manager cupped his hands over his face. "She stove in the boat. Got Kendall and Brooking. You never saw so much blood."

"Christ!"

"Hell of it was," said the project manager, "we really needed her in the morning."

"For what?"

"Really needed her," the project manager repeated. He staggered out of the room and disappeared in the hall.

Folger answered his own question the following day. Through devious channels of information, he learned that Valerie had been scheduled for vivisection.

That night, Folger climbed the mountain above his house. He felt he was struggling through years as much as brush and mud. The top of the mountain was ragged, with no proper peak. Folger picked a high point and spread his slicker over damp rock. He sat in the cold and watched the dark Atlantic. He looked up and picked out the Southern Cross. A drizzle began.

"Well, hell," he said, and climbed back down the mountain.

Folger took an Institute launch out beyond the cape and anchored. He lowered the cage, then donned his scuba gear. He said into the sonex: "Query—Valerie—location."

Later that morning, Folger suffered his loss.

Maria shook him awake in the morning. Folger awakened reluctantly, head still full of gentle spirals over glowing coral.

The water had been warm; he needed no suit or equipment. Endless, buoyant flight—

“Señor Folger, you must get up. It has been seen.”

His head wobbled as she worried his shoulder with insistent fingers. “Okay, I’m awake.” He yawned. “What’s been seen?”

“The big white one,” Maria said. “The one that killed Manuel Padilla three days ago. It was sighted in the bay soon after the sun rose.”

“Anybody try anything?” Folger asked.

“No. They were afraid. It is at least ten meters long.”

Folger yawned again. “Hell of a way to start a morning.”

“I have food for you.”

Folger made a face. “I had steak last night. Real beef. Have you ever tasted beef?”

“No, Señor.”

Maria accompanied him down the mountain to the village. She insisted upon carrying some of the loose gear; the mask, a box of twelve-gauge shells, a mesh sack of empty jars. Folger filled the jars with sheep’s blood at the village butcher shop. He checked his watch; it was seven o’clock.

The skiff was tied up at the end of the second pier. The aluminum airboat glittered in the sun as they passed it. Inga Lindfors stood very still on the bridge. “Good morning, Folger,” she called.

“Good morning,” said Folger.

“Your answer?”

Folger appraised her for a moment. “No,” he said, walking on.

The carcinogenic spread of the war finally and actively engulfed the Falkland Islands. The systematic integrity of the Institute was violated. Many components scattered; some stayed to fight.

Folger, his stump capped with glossy scar tissue, had already said his good-byes.

Suspended in the cold, gray void, Folger realized he was hyperventilating. He floated free, willing himself to relax, letting his staccato breathing find a slower, smoother rhythm. Beside him, a line trailed up to the rectangular blur of the skiff’s hull. Tied to the nylon rope were a net and the unopened jars of sheep’s-blood bait.

Folger checked his limited arsenal. Tethered to his left wrist was the underwater gun. It was a four-foot aluminum tube capped with a firing mechanism and a waterproof shotgun shell. A shorter, steel-tipped shark billy was fixed to a bracket tied to the stump of Folger's right arm.

Something intruded on his peripheral vision and he looked up.

Arrogant and sure, the two deadly shadows materialized out of the murk. The Lindfors wore only mask, fins, and snorkel. They appeared armed only with knives.

Folger saw them and raised the shark gun in warning. Per Lindfors grinned, his teeth very white. With slow, powerful strokes, he and his sister approached Folger from either side.

Disregarding Inga for the moment, Folger swung the muzzle of the shark gun toward Per. Per batted it aside with his free hand as Folger pulled the trigger. The concussion seemed to stun only Folger. Still smiling, Per extended his knife-hand.

Inga screamed in the water. Per disregarded Folger's weak attempt to fend him off with the billy and began to stroke for the surface. Folger turned his head.

A clownish face rushed at him. Folger stared at the teeth. The pointed nose veered at the last moment as the shark brushed by and struck at Per. The jaws cleanly sliced away Per's left arm and half his chest. The fish doubled back upon itself and made another strike. Per's legs, separate and trailing blood, tumbled slowly through the water.

Then Folger remembered Inga. He turned in the water and saw half her torso and part of her head, a swatch of silky hair spread out fanlike behind the corpse.

He looked back at the shark. It turned toward him slowly and began to circle, eerily graceful for its immense size. A dark eye fixed him coldly.

Folger held the metal billy obliquely in front of his chest. The tether of the shark gun had broken with the recoil.

The shark and Folger inspected each other. He saw the mottled coloration of the shark's belly. He thought he saw a Marine Forces code branded low on the left flank. He keyed the sonex:

"Query—Valerie—query—Valerie."

The shark continued to circle. Folger abruptly realized the shark was following an inexorably diminishing spiral.

"Query—Valerie—I am Folger."

"Folger." An answer came back. "Valerie."

"I am Folger," he repeated.

"Folger," came the reply. "Love/hunger-hunger/love."

"Valerie—love."

"Hunger—love." The shark suddenly broke out of her orbit and drove at Folger. The enormous jaws opened, upper jaw sliding forward, triangular teeth ready to shear.

Folger hopelessly raised the billy. The jaws closed empty and the shark swept by. She was close enough to touch had Folger wished. The shark drove toward the open sea and Folger swam for the surface.

He tossed the yarrow stalks for an hour. Eventually he put them away, along with the book. Folger sat at the table until the sun rose. He heard Maria's footsteps outside on the stone walk. He listened to the sound of her progress through the outside door, the kitchen, and the hall.

"Señor Folger, you didn't sleep?"

"I'm getting old," he said.

Maria was excited. "The great white one is back."

"Oh?"

"The fishermen fear to go out."

"That's sensible."

"Señor, you must kill it."

"Must I?" Folger grinned. "Fix me some tea."

She turned toward the kitchen.

"Maria, you needn't come up tonight to fix supper."

After his usual meager breakfast, Folger gathered together his gear and walked out the front door of his house. He hesitated on the step.

You become what you live.

She lived shark.

He said into the wind, "What do you want me to do? Carve a cenotaph here on the mountain?"

"What, señor?" said Maria.

“Let’s go.” They started toward the trail. “Hold it,” said Folger. He walked back to the house and opened the front door to the wind and rain. He chocked it with a rock. Then he climbed down the path to the sea.

Ursula K. Le Guin

DIRECTION OF THE ROAD

THEY DIDN'T used to be so demanding. They never hurried us into anything more than a gallop, and that was rare; most of the time it was just a jigjog foot pace. And when one of them was on his own feet, it was a real pleasure to approach him. There was time to accomplish the entire act with style. There he'd be, working his legs and arms the way they do, usually looking at the road, but often aside at the fields, or straight at me; and I'd approach him steadily but quite slowly, growing larger all the time, synchronizing the rate of approach and the rate of growth perfectly, so that at the very moment that I'd finished enlarging from a tiny speck to my full size—sixty feet in those days—I was abreast of him and hung above him, loomed, towered, overshadowed him. Yet he would show no fear. Not even the children were afraid of me, though often they kept their eyes on me as I passed by and started to diminish.

Sometimes on a hot afternoon one of the adults would stop me right there at our meeting place and lie down with his back against mine for an hour or more. I didn't mind in the least. I have an excellent hill, good sun, good wind, good view; why should I mind standing still for an hour or an afternoon? It's only a relative stillness, after all. One need only look at the sun to realize how fast one is going; and then, one grows continually—

especially in summer. In any case I was touched by the way they would entrust themselves to me, letting me lean against their little, warm backs, and falling sound asleep there between my feet. I liked them. They have seldom lent us grace as do the birds; but I really preferred them to squirrels.

In those days the horses used to work for them, and that too was enjoyable from my point of view. I particularly liked the canter, and got quite proficient at it. The surging and rhythmical motion accompanied shrinking and growing with a swaying and swooping, almost an illusion of flight. The gallop was less pleasant. It was jerky and pounding: one felt tossed about like a sapling in a gale. And then, the slow approach and growth, the moment of looming-over, and the slow retreat and diminishing, all that was lost during the gallop. One had to hurl oneself into it, cloppety-cloppety-cloppety! . . . and the man usually too busy riding, and the horse too busy running, even to look up. But then, it didn't happen often. A horse is mortal, after all, and like all the loose creatures grows tired easily; so they didn't tire their horses unless there was urgent need. And they seemed not to have so many urgent needs, in those days.

It's been a long time since I had a gallop, and to tell the truth I shouldn't mind having one. There was something invigorating about it, after all.

I remember the first motorcar I saw. Like most of us, I took it for a mortal, some kind of loose creature new to me. I was a bit startled, for after a hundred and thirty-two years I thought I knew all the local fauna. But a new thing is always interesting, in its trivial fashion, so I observed this one with attention. I approached it at a fair speed, about the rate of a canter, but in a new gait, suitable to the ungainly looks of the thing: an uncomfortable, bouncing, rolling, choking, jerking gait. Within two minutes, before I'd grown a foot tall, I knew it was no mortal creature, bound or loose or free. It was a making, like the carts the horses got hitched to. I thought it so very ill-made that I didn't expect it to return, once it gasped over the West Hill, and I heartily hoped it never would, for I disliked that jerking bounce.

But the thing took to a regular schedule, and so, perforce, did I. Daily at four I had to approach it, twitching and stuttering out

of the west, and enlarge, loom-over, and diminish. Then at five back I had to come, poppeting along like a young jackrabbit for all my sixty feet, jiggling and jouncing out of the east, until at last I got clear out of sight of the wretched little monster and could relax and loosen my limbs to the evening wind. There were always two of them inside the machine: a young male holding the wheel, and behind him an old female wrapped in rugs, glowering. If they ever said anything to each other I never heard it. In those days I overheard a good many conversations on the road, but not from that machine. The top of it was open, but it made so much noise that it overrode all voices, even the voice of the song-sparrow I had with me that year. The noise was almost as vile as the jouncing.

I am of a family of rigid principle and considerable self-respect. The Quercian motto is "Break but bend not," and I have always tried to uphold it. It was not only personal vanity, but family pride, you see, that was offended when I was forced to jounce and bounce in this fashion by a mere making.

The apple trees in the orchard at the foot of the hill did not seem to mind; but then, apples are tame. Their genes have been tampered with for centuries. Besides, they are herd creatures; no orchard tree can really form an opinion of its own.

I kept my own opinion to myself.

But I was very pleased when the motorcar ceased to plague us. All month went by without it, and all month I walked at men and trotted at horses most willingly, and even bobbed for a baby on its mother's arm, trying hard though unsuccessfully to keep in focus.

Next month, however—September it was, for the swallows had left a few days earlier—another of the machines appeared, a new one, suddenly dragging me and the road and our hill, the orchard, the fields, the farmhouse roof, all jiggling and jouncing and racketing along from east to west; I went faster than a gallop, faster than I had ever gone before. I had scarcely time to loom, before I had to shrink right down again.

And the next day there came a different one.

Yearly, then weekly, daily, they became commoner. They became a major feature of the local order of things. The road was

dug up and remetaled, widened, finished off very smooth and nasty, like a slug's trail, with no ruts, pools, rocks, flowers, or shadows on it. There used to be a lot of little loose creatures on the road, grasshoppers, ants, toads, mice, foxes, and so on, most of them too small to move for, since they couldn't really see one. Now the wise creatures took to avoiding the road, and the unwise ones got squashed. I have seen all too many rabbits die in that fashion, right at my feet. I am thankful that I am an oak, and that though I may be wind-broken or uprooted, hewn or sawn, at least I cannot, under any circumstances, be squashed.

With the presence of many motorcars on the road at once, a new level of skill was required of me. As a mere seedling, as soon as I got my head above the weeds, I had learned the basic trick of going two directions at once. I learned it without thinking about it, under the simple pressure of circumstances on the first occasion that I saw a walker in the east and a horseman facing him in the west. I had to go two directions at once, and I did so. It's something we trees master without real effort, I suppose. I was nervous, but I succeeded in passing the rider and then shrinking away from him while at the same time I was still jogging toward the walker, and indeed passed him (no looming, back in those days!) only when I had got quite out of sight of the rider. I was proud of myself, being very young, that first time I did it; but it sounds more difficult than it really is. Since those days of course I had done it innumerable times, and thought nothing about it; I could do it in my sleep. But have you ever considered the feat accomplished, the skill involved, when a tree enlarges, simultaneously yet at slightly different rates and in slightly different manners, for each one of forty motorcar drivers facing two opposite directions, while at the same time diminishing for forty more who have got their backs to it, meanwhile remembering to loom over each single one at the right moment: and to do this minute after minute, hour after hour, from day-break till nightfall or long after?

For my road had become a busy one; it worked all day long under almost continual traffic. It worked, and I worked. I did not jounce and bounce so much any more, but I had to run faster and faster: to grow enormously, to loom in a split second, to

shrink to nothing, all in a hurry, without time to enjoy the action, and without rest: over and over and over.

Very few of the drivers bothered to look at me, not even a seeing glance. They seemed, indeed, not to see any more. They merely stared ahead. They seemed to believe that they were "going somewhere." Little mirrors were affixed to the front of their cars, at which they glanced to see where they had been; then they stared ahead again. I had thought that only beetles had this delusion of Progress. Beetles are always rushing about, and never look up. I had always had a pretty low opinion of beetles. But at least they let me be.

I confess that sometimes, in the blessed nights of darkness with no moon to silver my crown and no stars occluding with my branches, when I could rest, I would think seriously of escaping my obligation to the general Order of Things: of *failing to move*. No, not seriously. Half seriously. It was mere weariness. If even a silly, three-year-old, female pussy willow at the foot of the hill accepted her responsibility, and jounced and rolled and accelerated and grew and shrank for each motorcar on the road, was I, an oak, to shirk? *Noblesse oblige*, and I trust I have never dropped an acorn that did not know its duty.

For fifty or sixty years, then, I have upheld the Order of Things, and have done my share in supporting the human creatures' illusion that they are "going somewhere." And I am not unwilling to do so. But a truly terrible thing has occurred, which I wish to protest.

I do not mind going two directions at once; I do not mind growing and shrinking simultaneously; I do not mind moving, even at the disagreeable rate of sixty or seventy miles an hour. I am ready to go on doing all these things until I am felled or bulldozed. They're my job. But I do object, passionately, to being made eternal.

Eternity is none of my business. I am an oak, no more, no less. I have my duty, and I do it; I have my pleasures, and enjoy them, though they are fewer, since the birds are fewer, and the winds foul. But, long-lived though I may be, impermanence is my right. Mortality is my privilege. And it has been taken from me.

It was taken from me on a rainy evening in March last year.

Fits and bursts of cars, as usual, filled the rapidly moving road in both directions. I was so busy hurtling along, enlarging, looming, diminishing, and the light was failing so fast, that I scarcely noticed what was happening until it happened. One of the drivers of one of the cars evidently felt that his need to "go somewhere" was exceptionally urgent, and so attempted to place his car in front of the car in front of it. This maneuver involves a temporary slanting of the Direction of the Road and a displacement onto the far side, the side which normally runs the other direction (and may I say that I admire the road very highly for its skill in executing such maneuvers, which must be difficult for an unliving creature, a mere making). Another car, however, happened to be quite near the urgent one, and facing it, as it changed sides; and the road could not do anything about it, being already overcrowded. To avoid impact with the facing car, the urgent car totally violated the Direction of the Road, swinging it round to north-south in its own terms, and so forcing me to leap directly at it. I had no choice. I had to move, and move fast—eighty-five miles an hour. I leaped: I loomed enormous, larger than I have ever loomed before. And then I hit the car.

I lost a considerable piece of bark, and, what's more serious, a fair bit of cambium layer; but as I am now seventy-two feet tall and about nine feet in girth at the point of impact, no real harm was done. My branches trembled with the shock, enough that a last-year's robin's nest was dislodged and fell; and I was so shaken that I groaned. It is the only time in my life that I have ever said anything out loud.

The motorcar screamed horribly. It was smashed by my blow, squashed, in fact. Its hinder parts were not much affected, but the forequarters knotted up and gnarled together like an old root, and little bright bits of it flew all about and lay like brittle rain.

The driver had no time to say anything; I killed him instantly.

It is not this that I protest. I had to kill him. I had no choice, and therefore have no regret. What I protest, what I cannot endure, is this: as I leaped at him, he saw me. He looked up at last. He saw me as I have never been seen before, not even by a child, not even in the days when people looked at things. He saw me whole, and saw nothing else—then, or ever.

He saw me under the aspect of eternity. He confused me with eternity. And because he died in that moment of false vision, because it can never change, I am caught in it, eternally.

This is unendurable. I cannot uphold such an illusion. If the human creatures will not understand Relativity, very well; but they must understand Relatedness.

If it is necessary to the Order of Things, I will kill drivers of cars, though killing is not a duty usually required of oaks. But it is unjust to require me to play the part, not of the killer only, but of death. For I am not death. I am life: I am mortal.

If they wish to see death visibly in the world, that is their business, not mine. I will not act Eternity for them. Let them not turn to the trees for death. If that is what they want to see, let them look into one another's eyes and see it there.

Michael Bishop

THE WINDOWS IN DANTE'S HELL

1/ the combcrawlers

WE RECEIVED notification of the woman's death on the Biomonitor Console in the subsidiary control room on West Peachtree. A small cherry-red light went on; it glowed in the blue halflight that hangs about the console like the vague memory of fog. "Someone's dead," Yates' son said. "That light just came on." Yates' son is fourteen years old. His broad face was purplish in the fog of the control room, the sheen of flesh over forehead reflecting back a small crescent of the red that had just come on. Only a moment before, the boy had entered the building, stopped at my elbow, and waited for an opportunity to talk. Yates is my boss, the head of the city's Biomonitor Agency. Because our interests were similar, his son frequently came around to talk to me: I girderclimbed on the weekends, and the boy was just learning. But he had never come into the console area before, and when the red light began faintly pulsing on the monstrous board, his lank body had stooped toward it.

"Yes," I said. "Someone's dead. The board don't lie. Deed it don't." To sentimentalize the death of a cubicle-dweller is a soul-destroying business. I try to keep it light.

"I've never seen a dead person. Papa says that people get sick,

that the board reports that all the time—but people don't die very often."

"People die all the time."

"I've never seen a dead person," Yates' son said. "Never at all."

"You're lucky you haven't seen a girderclimbing accident, Newlyn. You'd see death and terror and plummeting human beings all in one fell swoop." I am nine years older than Newlyn, and those nine years have taught me one or two things that I'm not always capable of communicating to those younger than myself. But I try—for their benefit, not mine. "When I was your age, I saw a party of six combcrawlers, hooked together with a glinting golden cord, lose either the magnetic induction in their girderboots or else all sense of the teamwork involved in dome-traversing."

Newlyn looked away from the board. His heavy forehead turned toward me; his African lips framed a faint exhalation: "What happened?"

"The climbers," I told him, "had reached a section of honeycombing about three hundred yards from the very apex of the Dome. Their backs were down, and inside the spun-iron gloves their hands were probably clinging like crazy to the track of the navigational girder they had chosen. They had worked out a complicated, a truly beautiful assault on the apex. They were high above the city, bright specks on the artificial sky, and suddenly the fourth man in the contingent fell away from the group and bobbed on the elastic gold cord that held them together—bobbed just like a spider weighting the center of its web.

"From the top of the new Russell Complex, my father and I watched them—even though we hadn't gone up there for that purpose.

"The combcrawlers couldn't recover, Newlyn. The fifth and sixth men broke away, flailing their arms around. It was amazing how slowly—how really distinctly—their fates overtook them. The first three men in the chain were sucked down toward us, and the whole broad sky under the Dome seemed to hold them up for a while. Then they fell, twirling around and around each other like the strands of one of those Argentine *bolas*, hypnotizing everybody in the streets. At last they fell through the canyon of buildings to our north and disappeared toward the concrete that

I could *feel* impacting against them. It was terrifying, but it was beautiful. I resolved to become a combcrawler myself. All unbeknownst to my father, of course—he'd've suffered a multiple aneurysm if he'd known about that resolution. You see, Newlyn, you're lucky. Your father approves."

"But did you see them after they fell?" Newlyn asked, unawed. "Did you see them lying in the street, dead?"

Annoyed, I said: "Hell no, I didn't see them! If my father was the sort to frown on combcrawling, do you think he'd bundle me off to ogle six crumpled, blood-spattered husks of humanity in some crappy alley?"

Newlyn smiled. "Then you haven't seen a dead person, either."

"Certainly I have."

"Where?"

"On the board," I said, smiling too. "There's one right there, that pulsing red light."

"And who is it, then?" the boy said, continuing his interrogation. "And where does he live?"

"Just a minute, lad." I leaned forward, recorded the coordinates of the light, and at last gave it permission to go dead, its dull cherry sheen fading out of the naked crystal and leaving us, the boy and me, swimming in the blue dimness. (Wherever possible, you see, the city conserves its resources.) I ran the coordinates through the appropriate computer and found that the dead person lay in a cubicle somewhere on Level 8. To be exact: Concourse E-16, Door 502, Level 8. Another computer gave me the corpse's name, age, and vital statistics—though there weren't many of the latter.

"Well, who is it?" Newlyn asked.

"Almira Longhope. One hundred and seven years old. Unmarried. No relatives. Caucasian. Came into the city at the age of thirty-one with the refugees of the first Evacuation Lottery. . . ."

"Let's go see her!"

"What?"

"Let's go see her. Somebody's got to go get her, don't they?"

"Somebody. Not us."

"Look, Mr. Ardrey, that old woman died down on Level 8 because she was old and alone, probably. I've never seen a dead

person, you've never seen a dead person. Let's go and retrieve her and keep them servo-units from eating her up like a wad of dust. Okay?"

"Newlyn, we're not going anywhere to gawk at an old woman who couldn't get any higher than Level 8 in seventy years."

"It wouldn't be any gawking," Newlyn said. "It wouldn't."

And with that as a prologue and only a little more argument, I finally consented. The Biomonitor Agency does not ordinarily send human beings to dispose of the human beings who have died in their cubicles—nor does the Agency refrain from want of sufficient manpower or out of callousness. The problem is that human beings are invariably *too* compassionate; they represent feeling, and when that feeling confronts a corpse and all its attendant suggestions of loneliness, the living human beings suffer—and suffer profoundly. Therefore, the Agency usually dispatches servo-units to the cubicles of the kinless and the forgotten. It is best.

I appointed Arn Bartholomew to take my place at the console. I gathered from our files and resource rooms some of the things we would need. Then Newlyn and I went into the street.

Because it was winter and because our meteorologists maintain internal conditions that correspond with the external passing of the seasons, we wore coats. Newlyn, in his navy pea jacket, strode ahead of me like an adolescent tour guide, spindly, purposeful, curt. We walked across one marble square, circumnavigated a huge fountain whose waters were frozen in fantastic loops and falls, and jogged toward the monolithic lift-terminal that dispatches its passengers up and down the layered levels of the city in crystal lift-tubes. We jogged because it was cold. We jogged because it is difficult to talk while jogging, and we did not believe that we had, in actuality, committed ourselves to the viewing and the disposal of a . . . *dead person*. Jogging, we tried not to look at each other.

The Dome glowered above us; it seemed that it hung down with the weight of its own honeycombing, threatening to crush us. No one was up there. No one was crawling over the girders.

Then we reached the lift-terminal, found an open tube, and descended into the great hive of the city—descended in utter silence, descended through a nightmare halflight, a halflight

freaky as the cold simulation of dawn. On Level 8, one stratum above the nethermost floor of the hive, we disembarked.

2/ *the glissadors*

We found the concourse; we found the corridor. The people we passed in the corridor refused to look at us, passing us like wisps of smoke against the smudge-red illumination that contained us all.

Many of those who passed us were ghostly glissadors, hive inhabitants who spend so much of their time going up and down and about and through the various hallways that they have donned nearly soundless skates to conserve their energy and speed their labors. The skates are pieces of simulated cordovan footwear with a multitude of miniature ball bearings mounted in the soles. The city issues these glierboots to its sublevel employees. And Newlyn and I watched the graceful glissadors sweep past us through the gloom, their heads down.

Each time that one went past, Newlyn turned in a slow circle to watch. He said, "That looks like fun."

"It gets to be work," I said. "Everything gets to be work."

Still, I caught the next effortlessly volplaning figure by the elbow and spun him about before he could disappear into the dim distance. A small sound of protest escaped his lips, but he controlled his turn and wheeled about like a mute ballet performer. He was tall. Like Newlyn, he was the intense color of ripe wet grapes.

"Almira Longhope," I said. "Do you know her cubicle?"

The glissador stared at me: "What's her number, *surfacesider*?"

I told him.

"Then you keep following these here doors till you reach it." He threw up his arm and spun away. He looked at us briefly. Turning with sinuous skill, he strode out forcefully and skated off, off forth on swing.

"Why'd you stop him?" Newlyn asked. "We knew where we were."

I said nothing for a moment, trying to pick out the departing glissador's figure in the crimson light.

Newlyn said: "Well? Why'd you do that?"

"I wanted one of them to . . . to acknowledge us. I wanted to watch how one of them resumed his skating. Maybe it is fun," I said. And stopped. Newlyn was watching me. "Never mind. Let's follow the goddamn doors."

We did. We walked. Our feet *tap-tap-tapped* on the tiles, mundanely coming down one foot after another. In this fashion we eventually reached Door 502, a door which looked uncannily like the two doors on either side.

I extracted from my pocket the obscenely rubberoid sheath upon which were embossed the whorls of Miss Almira Longhope's right thumbprint, and slipped this sheath over my forefinger so as not to distort the print with my own outsized thumb. Then I held my forefinger to the electric eye for scanning, and the panel slid back, admitting us to the cubicle in which the dead woman must necessarily lie: unwept, unhonored, very nearly unborn. Newlyn preceded me into the odd closet just inside the cubicle's door.

At first we saw nothing. After our trip through the murky, glissador-haunted catacombs, the room's bright midday glare struck at us cruelly. We squinted. We blinked. And then there was the inevitable resolution of detail (in itself a haunting experience) as our eyes came back to us.

We found ourselves in an environment immensely strange. We were in a cramped artificial foyer. The walls on the inside of the cubicle had been altered so that they formed an octagonal area of space rather than a square one. Moreover, just inside the cubicle's doorway Newlyn and I stumbled upon a crude wooden step which we had to mount in order to see more than the tops of the wall sections opposite us. We climbed the step.

We stood then on a narrow dais, approximately one foot from the cubicle's real floor, that made an octagonal circuit about the entire room and provided an odd catwalk for the unexpected, and certainly unexpected, intruder into Miss Longhope's splendidly insane sanctuary. It was a sanctuary unlike any that one would expect to find on the lower levels of the hive—or anywhere else, for that matter.

Banks of computerlike gadgetry, from which there emanated the faint and fitful winking of orange and red lights, stood against

two facets of the octagonal wall. Against two more sections—the two flanking us—we saw tall glass cylinders that were polarized so that we could not see into them; these cylinders could have been anything, from models of the city's lift-tubes, to gigantic chemical beakers, to containers for space travelers in suspended animation. The mystery intrigued us, but something else drew our attention away. In the remaining four facets of the octagonal wall, directly across the room, we looked upon four distinct and different windows: view screens that permitted us to see panoramas that no living inhabitant of the Dome had ever gazed upon, unless he were possessed of a vivid clairvoyance.

Newlyn and I drank in these panoramas quickly.

From left to right these "windows" demonstrated a progression based on an expanding consciousness of the universe. The screen on the far left depicted a view of our own domed city, but from the *outside*, as if from a distant hilltop in the wilderness that we had so long ago fled; and darkness swirled over the Dome's imposing hump like a disturbed gas, uneasily hovering.

The second window showed us the dead face of the Moon from about ten thousand miles away. No man had set foot there for more than eighty, ninety, perhaps one hundred years.

The third window gave us the ethereal aloofness of Saturn and its incandescent rings.

And the fourth window, the one on the far right, made us look into the cruel depths of outer space—where the glassy indifference of a thousand sharp stars somehow stung us back into the here-and-now, sucking away our breaths. And since the biomonitors in the cubicle had begun to refrigerate the air to compensate for the onset of the old woman's physical decay, our breaths were chill.

Newlyn reacted noisily: "What kind of place does this old woman live in, Mr. Ardrey? What's it supposed to be?" As in the hallway, his body revolved out of the impulse of sheer wonder. "What the heck is all this stuff for?"

"I don't think it's exactly *for* anything."

"Everything's for something, Mr. Ardrey. What's this stuff supposed to be? What's it do?"

I tried to make sense of my suspicions. We had stumbled into what was evidently an elaborate mockup, and the octagonal room

could have been a wide variety of things: the hall of planets in a second-rate surfaceside museum, some sort of wildly improbable computer chamber, or—

“—The command pit of a spaceship,” I said. “It’s supposed to be the command pit of—”

Newlyn cut me off with a cry that might have come out of the mouth of someone a great deal younger: “Look, there she is!” He pointed down into the pit which I had been trying to identify; he pointed at the back of the huge swivel chair that dominated this intriguing area. Visible above the back of this chair, the back of a woman’s head, matted over with frowzy iron-grey pleats, caught my eye and sent a cold wrinkle unwinding up my spine. Newlyn jumped from the dais, jumped into the command pit before I could say anything. As I had spun the glissador about in the hallway, he spun the arm of the chair and turned the ruined face of Almira Longhope, glassy eyes open, lower lip twisted, toward me—toward *me!*

I stared at the dead woman, feeling her accusation.

“She’s really dead,” Newlyn told me excitedly, running a finger over the silver lamé sleeve of her gown. “She’s really dead.”

“I know. I can see that.”

Newlyn turned impulsively around, forgetting the old woman. He did not spin the chair in the direction of his turn. Instead, he simply walked around the chair and paused momentarily at the semicircular panel of “instruments” over which the dead woman had been gazing before he had disturbed her. He looked toward the four viewing screens. Dome, Moon, planet, stars. The last three could have meant almost nothing to Newlyn, even though he had undoubtedly seen the night sky in visicom presentations and read about the “promise of space” in pre-Evacuation literature. Besides, the four windows had no reality. The stars on the far right were sharp and cold, yes, but they existed only as glossy points on a piece of lusterless mounted silk. Each window, in fact, was just such a piece of lusterless mounted silk. Despite this, Newlyn stared at the viewing screen on the far right for a long while. “Look at that,” he said before turning away. “Look at all that distance, all that space.” At last he did turn away. He brought his attention back to the semicircular console in front of the old woman’s command chair.

Reaching over it, he pushed buttons. One or two of them seemed to operate lights in the walls. He fiddled with levers. One of the levers controlled two mobiles that hung from the ceiling, seemingly as navigational devices, since each one represented a miniature spaceship moving gyroscopically inside a glass sphere divided into sections by thin blue lines. "Look at all this stuff," Newlyn said over and over again. He made low whistling noises, articulations of pleased astonishment.

Meanwhile, the corpse of Almira Longhope continued to stare at me. I was certain now that the bitch's stare was singlemindedly accusatory, even though her sunken features contained less malice than disappointment.

But for Newlyn's oblivious cluckings, the room was deathly still. And cold. The orange and red lights on the phony computers made no noise; none of the instruments on the semicircular panel hummed, or clicked, or whirred. I grew uneasy.

"Newlyn!"

He did not even look up. "What?"

"Get away from there. We've got things to do."

"Just a second, Mr. Ardrey. This thing's got a purpose, I can tell." He was manipulating a dial on the command console. Soundlessly the scenes depicted in the four windows opposite us slipped into another continuum; to take their places there came the images of (1) an alien planetscape, (2) the craggy moon of a world not belonging to Sol, (3) an eerie double binary, and (4) a minute spiral galaxy as seen from the loneliness of open space. How far outward the old woman had permitted herself to venture! These new images—or perhaps simply the changes he had worked—exhilarated Newlyn. "Climbersguts!" he said; a bit of irritating slang.

"God damn it, Newlyn, will you get away from there!"

He looked up hurriedly and faced me, his chin tilted a little. I had never spoken to him like that before. His eyes betrayed his hurt and bewilderment.

"You were the one," I reminded him, "who said we weren't going to come down here to gawk. Do you remember that? You were the one who wanted to make sure the servo-units didn't vacuum her up like a piece of dirt."

The boy dropped his head, chastened.

I was still angry. My fists were clenching and unclenching of their own accord. It was difficult not to look into the corpse's vein-woven eyes, lose all resolution, and return surfaceside to the control room on West Peachtree. Especially since we had stumbled on the mausoleum of an aged lunatic with an adolescent pituitary where her brains should have been. No wonder that Almira Longhope, at the age of one hundred and seven, still resided in a three-room cubicle on Level 8: she had exhausted her monetary and spiritual resources constructing a tomb with faster-than-light-speed capabilities, patching together an epitaph out of old screenplays and pulp magazine stories, paying homage to the very worst of the products of the pre-Evacuation mass media. No wonder that she stared at me with accusation and disappointment; the dream, too, had finally died, and we had walked in on its naked remains.

Still chastened, Newlyn said: "All right, Mr. Ardrey, what do we have to do now?" Finally he looked up. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I—"

This time I cut *him* off. "Don't be sorry. It was a natural response, Newlyn, a very natural response." Then I told him that the first thing I wanted him to do was face the old woman toward her windows once again, and he did this for me. "The computer said that she had no relatives," I went on, "so we don't have to try to contact anyone. All we have to do is go through her belongings and determine if she's left a will or any papers. Then we must see that her body goes into the waste converter on Level 9 and file a report so that her cubicle can be sprayed. All this junk will have to be destroyed."

"It doesn't look like junk, Mr. Ardrey."

"*It's junk.*"

He didn't protest a second time, but his eyes, though superficially still penitent, cut away from me at an angle of vague reprimand. I ignored this silent cavil. He was young.

It took us a little while to find the entrance into her sleeping quarters because the artificial hull of her "spaceship" had been erected in front of the cubicle's internal doorways. (The entrance from the outer corridor, through which Newlyn and I had originally come, was disguised as the facing of an airlock, for the artifices of Miss Longhope were nothing if not thoroughgoing.)

We walked around the catwalk that circled the vessel's command pit. We tested the firmness of the walls with our hands and knees. We scrutinized the phony computer banks and puzzled over the two tall glass cylinders. And, at last, we did find the doorway to the old woman's bedchamber.

Newlyn made the discovery. Running his hands over the surface of one of the cylinders, he was surprised to find a vertical seam. He pressed this seam, and the cylinder split apart and opened out. "Mr. Ardrey!" he called. I went to him. Together we found that the other half of the cylinder also opened out, but in the direction of the concealed sleeping chamber.

We went through this unorthodox portal, down a single step, and into the old woman's private alcove. Newlyn dialed up the lights.

The alcove contained a low bed, a study area, and the standard visicom console on which one can display reading material or run his choice of entertainment visuals. However, the visicom's screen was silver-grey. And dead. The fanaticism manifested so tangibly in the main living area did not appear so virulent here. I looked at Newlyn. The disappointment on his face mirrored the look on the old woman's corpse. In truth, however, he had nothing to be disappointed *about*. Almira Longhope's ruling passion had merely secreted itself away into drawers, boxes, diaries, packets of photographs, and a heavy blue ledger. One or two testimonies of this passion remained shamelessly in the open, although Newlyn had not noticed them.

"Cheer up," I said. "Look there."

Beside the old woman's bed, resting on her night table, there was a spherical lamp mounted on a tripod base. The lamp had hundreds of tiny holes in its surface, for in reality it was not a lamp at all but a simple version of the star-projectors that one of the old networks had marketed in such profiteering quantities before the Last Days of our great-grandfathers. Newlyn asked what the thing was: I told him. Then he wanted to see how the thing worked. Therefore, after he had dimmed the lights, I turned the projector on. At once stars appeared on the walls and ceiling—the constellations all misshapen and askew, however, because Miss Longhope had apparently not been able to devise a curved surface on which to project them. To Yates' son, the resulting

distortion made no difference. Even after I had made him dial the lights up again, he stood over the star-projector with all the solicitude of a nursing mother for her newborn whelps. His face was silly with concern.

"How did she think up all these things?" he asked.

"She didn't. She just copied them."

"From what?"

"From a style of entertainment that existed before the Domes went up—similar to our visual entertainment tapes. Most of this stuff has its origin in one of their *shows* . . . back when they believed in interstellar travel and galactic civilizations. Or at least when some of them did. She's just copied everything from that one particular series of tapes—and from magazines and movies."

"When was it? When was all this stuff thought up?"

"Eighty years ago. Ninety years ago. I don't know, Newlyn."

He stared at the star-projector. He looked back toward the half-open cylinder beyond which lay the spaceship's command pit. His lips scarcely moved. "It's neat," he said pontifically. "It's some of the neatest stuff I've ever seen."

"That old woman wasted her life," I said. "She wasted it."

Turning my back on Yates' son, I sat down at the study center and began pulling drawers open. What I found confirmed my judgment. Newlyn, sullen and belligerent now, looked over my shoulder as I arranged the contents of the drawers and of several crumpled manila envelopes on the surface of the desk. The stench of another time flew out of these envelopes like the moths that still flutter from the surfacside grasses in April. I coughed. Like moths, the photographs and slips of precious paper seemed to beat about my head with their dusty hard-edged wings. In Miss Longhope's blue ledger I flipped randomly to one of the pages of broad childish handwriting.

I read one of the paragraphs on the page.

Log entry: Tonight I saw the episode entitled "Between the Star Mirrors" for the third time. Is there an alternate Almira somewhere in the universe? I wish that I could break through for a moment and visit my other self. The Rigelian first officer is an honorable man in both universes. What would I be? Sometimes I am afraid that I am empty of stars in both

places, but this is not true. Even my other self, just as I do here, would have all her alternate universe to reach into and to wonder at. But she would probably need to have help to reach out—just as I do. I hate the image that the mirror I hold up to the world returns to me. The image in the mirror clouds over every day, like the dirty sky and people's ugly wrinkled unhappy faces.

I read this passage aloud to Newlyn. "Neat, huh?"

He said nothing. He picked up one of the laminated photographs, bent and yellowed in spite of the lamination, and ran his finger over the heavy intense face of one of the actors who had been in the series. In the photograph, the actor had a smooth triple-lobed cranium and no discernible eyebrows; he had signed his name across the bottom of the picture. Newlyn touched the signature, too—or tried to touch it; the dull plastic prevented him. Stymied, he studied the face.

"Look at this man's head, Mr. Ardrey." He had forgotten his resentment of my skeptical attitude toward Miss Longhope's memorabilia. "Look at his head, Mr. Ardrey. Where did this man come from?"

"A makeup room, Newlyn. It's just an actor pretending to be a member of a humanoid species that never existed. A nonexistent friendly alien."

He continued to look at the actor's picture. "Can I have this?"

"No," I said. "It isn't mine to give you. What do you want with it, anyway?" I took it out of his hands, gently.

He shrugged and looked at the other items on the desk. He feigned an interest in the ledger containing the old woman's "log entries," but I could tell that the writing there bored him.

I sorted the papers and photographs and put them back into the dingy manila envelopes. There was nothing in the old woman's possessions of any conceivable value to the city. We had innumerable collections of such maudlin remnants of the pre-Evacuation days, should anyone actually wish to see such things. Museums. Chronos galleries. Pedestrian corridors lined with glass cases and curioboards. No one was denied information about the past. And if Almira Longhope had anything at all worth saving, I supposed it to be the blue ledger. However miserable and

cramped, at least it was a document of human suffering and therefore of some small value to the urban archives.

But as I had mentally predicted he would, Newlyn had grown weary of this document. He had left the sleeping cubicle and gone back to the command pit of the *Sojourner II*. I finished putting away the old woman's possessions, the inconsequential leftovers of a lifetime misspent and horrifyingly sad.

Everything but the ledger.

That I carried with me, out to where Newlyn prowled among the winking lights and the ghostly crewmen who rode their drifting derelict through the ruinous voids of that lifetime.

Newlyn said: "What do we have to do now?"

"Find a telecom unit. The old bitch must have tried to make it an integral part of the equipment on this 'vessel.' Why don't you see if you can find it?"

This request pleased Yates' son; it gave him an excuse to finger the dials and levers, to examine the intricacy of the total construct. Meanwhile, the old woman surveyed us regally from the command chair. I realized that she was attired after the fashion of some anonymous producer's concept of a Rigelian priestess; a sort of scepter, or abbreviated staff, lay across her thin thighs. How magnificently, how pettily, she had met her death. In the cubicle's cold air her face seemed to be carved of ice. I had just looked away from her twisted lower lip when Newlyn called, "Here it is, Mr. Ardrey. In this box over here. Where it says 'Communications.'"

"Where it says 'Communications,'" I echoed. "Very apt."

I mounted the catwalk, sat down, and made three brief calls. One to the main control room. One to the office of the administrative head of the glissadors on Level 8. One to the city agency of Flame-Decontamination and Refurbishing.

Newlyn said: "You're going to have them burn out the old woman's cubicle? You're going to let them set fire to all this stuff she's made?"

"She's done with these things, Newlyn. Somebody else should have access to what she can't use anymore. Even though this is Level 8, there are people waiting to live here. People from the level beneath us."

"Maybe they'd like it the way she has it now."

"Grow up," I said.

He wouldn't talk to me through the waiting that followed. He wouldn't talk to me when the glissadors came with their silent cart to carry Miss Almira Longhope's corpse through the murky corridors to the pneumatic scaffolding that would drop her to the waste converters on Level 9. He remained silent through the waiting that followed the glissadors' departure.

And when the men from F-D&R came into the cubicle with their canisters of bactericidal combustgens, and their flame-suits, and their unbelieving goggled-over eyes, Newlyn cut his own eyes in reprimand and stalked out. He went into the corridor—went with blatant contempt for my colloquy with these men—and waited outside in the smoky halfight that drifted there. I explained the situation to the men from F-D&R. I gave directions. They nodded their insectlike heads. My explanation done, I went into the silent corridor and, with considerable difficulty, found Newlyn leaning in a crimson shadow against the opposite wall. I said something, but he wouldn't talk to me.

"All right," I said. "I'm going up. You can do what you like."

The *tap-tap-tap* of my footfalls was overwhelmed, just then, by the carnivorous *whooshing* of the F-D&R handtorches. The corridor filled with this noise, and the tightly closed panel of cubicle 502 gave me the momentary illusion that the panel itself was glowing with unnatural heat, unnatural light. I hesitated briefly. Then I resumed walking. Seconds later, it became apparent that another series of footfalls was echoing my own, albeit in a reluctant and irregular way: *taptap tap taptaptap*.

3/ *the hoisterjacks*

In the domed cities (not simply in Atlanta, but in all the Urban Nuclei) there exist among the affluent surfacesiders, particularly among the adolescent boys of the wealthy and/or enfranchised, a significant few who have more leisure and more adrenalin than they can intelligently deal with. These few release their energy and defile their time in inutile pursuits that frequently terrorize the innocent, the unprepared, the preoccupied. They do not

pick pockets. They do not engage in vandalism. They do not kill.

Instead, they practice the grotesque art of instilling a wholly meaningless terror in all those whom they assault with mad gestures and mad nylon-distorted faces. These boys—and, sadly, these few perverse adult males—go by the name of *hoisterjacks*, primarily because of their inclination to leap out of the darkness of the catacombs, to cling reasonlessly to the crystalline face of a lift-tube, arms full out, fingers gripping the maintenance handles on either side of the lift-tube door, and to scream like ravening hyenas as they press their already misaligned features against the glass.

One can in no way make adequate psychological preparation for the coming of a hoisterjack—even if one sees him beforehand.

I had entered the central concourse on Level 8, the concourse leading to the lift-station from which we had earlier disembarked, when I became aware of an echo on the tiles. An echo in addition to Newlyn's tentative *taptaptapping*. The echo was coming to me from the direction in which I moved, not from behind me. I looked down the ill-lit corridor, through the haze of red light. I saw the deeper glimmering of the lift-station and the translucent outline of the waiting lift-tube itself. I thought the cylinder's presence a fine piece of luck; we would not have to wait for transportation—and I would not have to make inane conversation to cover the depressing childishness of Newlyn's funk.

Then I saw, or believed I saw, two wraithlike figures cross the the glimmering backdrop of the lift-station and disappear into an auxiliary hallway. I could not be sure. I paid little heed.

When I reached the lift-tube, I entered and held my thumb on the thin silver operating panel so that the door would not close. From out of the fog of halfight Newlyn came. He entered the cylinder and stood to one side, away from me. I did not remove my thumb from the operating panel.

"Let go of it," Newlyn said. "Send us up."

"What do you mean, 'Let go of it'? Who are you talking to?" Newlyn didn't answer. I repeated my self-defeating straightline: "*Who are you talking to, Newlyn?*"

"A bigshot fireman. A burnheaded topsider."

He spoke with such incredible malice, enunciating each consonant and each vowel as if they would carve flaming signs in the air, that I could say nothing. My thumb was on the panel; the door remained open. At last, gathering a little strength against my embarrassment, I said: "You knew what we had to do. And what we found in Almira Longhope's cubicle didn't make any difference. In fact, it deserved the combustgens and the spray even more than the ordinary furnishings of one of these places. What a waste, Newlyn! That sort of thing, that sort of crap, has to be burned out, cut away, buried. Everyone goes through that, Newlyn."

Yates' son sprang toward me and knocked my hand away from the control panel. The glass door slid into place. I dropped the old woman's blue ledger.

Then a number of things happened simultaneously.

A huge shadow leaped at us from the corridor and affixed itself to the surface of the lift-tube. Another shadow, less quick, fell away behind the first and disappeared as the lift-tube began, seemingly of its own accord, to ascend. An hysterical, mocking scream pierced the thin wall of glass that contained the boy and me.

And then (beneath the terrifying scream) another sound: Newlyn was trying to quench the sobs that rose in his throat. Unsuccessfully.

"It doesn't have to be—" he said. "It doesn't have to be . . . to be . . . unless you make it—"

I'm afraid that I pushed him. He was leaning into my chest, and all my attention had shifted from him to the droop-lipped, acromegalic hoisterjack who clung to our lift-tube, leering, insupportably leering.

I shoved Newlyn aside and began pounding on the glass between me and the hoisterjack's hooded face. I wanted him to lose his grip. I wanted him to fall down the terminal shaft to the concrete of Level 9, there to split and pulp open like an over-ripe radish. I wanted to murder his iconoclasm and turn his impudence to bile.

Then I felt a fist against the side of my head and heard Newlyn shouting and sobbing at once: "Leave him alone, you bastard! Leave him alone!"

We grappled. The boy struck me again. I pushed him down. He came back and pummeled my chest. Now I realized exactly what I was doing, and the pain that it gave me could not have been more real, more cruel, more excruciating. I knew that we would not go combcrawling with each other this weekend, nor any weekend to come. I struck Newlyn solidly under the chin, and it was like striking myself.

He crumpled and sat on the crystalline floor, making low noises.

The lift-tube continued to ascend. I picked up Almira Longhope's ledger. I raised my eyes. The hoisterjack clinging to our little prison was grinning at me, grinning at me in cryptic triumph.

Brian W. Aldiss

FOUR STORIES

SERPENT BURNING ON AN ALTAR

THE CRANES flying south at window level were a splendid omen for the getting and giving of amatory gifts. Accordingly, after the morning's rehearsal, my friend Lambant decided he would order a nuptial present for his sister, whose marriage date had been announced. This chanced to be on the first day of the autumn fair or mop.

Lambant and I visited a glass-engraver's studio to order some glass goblets as a gift befitting the great family occasion. The studio stood beyond the city wall. The paint on its orange door flaked and fell like frost-nicked leaves as we heaved it open. The entrance was narrow and the stairs as crooked as any in Malacia, leading to Master Giovanni Bledlore's studio.

He came out on the landing to us, an ague-ridden old figure, closing his creaking workshop door behind him.

"You young fellows are a nuisance to an honest craftsman," he said. "You disturb the dust, and dust will spoil my colours. What do you want of me? I shall have to go back and sit still for a quarter hour before the dust settles and I can open my palettes again!"

"Then you should keep cleaner premises, Master Bledlore," I said. "Open up the windows—even your bluebottles are crying for escape."

"I need you to make me a dozen goblets with local scenes on them, such as you designed for Thiropol of Tera a twelve-month ago," Lambant told him.

The old man threw up his hands and wagged his beard in our faces. "Spare me your needs! Every one of those designs aged me by a lifetime. Nor has Thiropol paid me yet. My eyesight's too bad for any more of that sort of order. My hand shakes too much. Besides, my wife is ill and I must care for her. My foreman has deserted me and gone over to that rogue Dapertuto . . . No, no, I could not possibly attempt . . . Besides, when would you require them?"

He took much persuading. Before we had signed our bond on the deal and paid him a token in advance, the old craftsman had shown us the treasures of his workshop, and the beautiful miniatures on which he had worked with so much pain and skill, their tiny figures incised on glass and glowing with colour.

"Ah, what accomplishment!—It's nothing short of alchemy," Lambant said, as we passed through the narrow doorway and strolled, hands on each other's shoulders, across the green to where the pedlars were putting up the frail stalls of their autumn fair. "You saw his azure vase with its vignette? You saw those two children sporting by the whale's skeleton, with the hurdy-gurdy man playing in the background? What could be more beautiful in such small compass?"

"Indeed, it was beautiful. And isn't perfection greater for being so small? He confirms what I have heard rumoured, that he studies everything from life. The broomstick is copied from one in his niece's yard, the hurdy-gurdy belongs to an old man living over by the flea market, and no doubt the two urchins are running ragged-assed about the gates even now!"

"What a decadent age we live in! Giovanni Bledlore is the last of the grand masters, and he scarcely recognised except by a few cognoscenti!"

"Such as ourselves, Lambant!"

"Such as ourselves, Prian! People are so blind in these last years of the century—the lees of time!—that they only appreciate merit on a grand pretentious scale. Write a history of the universe and it will be applauded, however lousy and steeped in errors factual

and grammatical; yet paint a tiny perfect landscape on your thumb and nobody will cheer."

A pleasant warbling filled the air. A flute seller was moving toward us, bearing his tray full of flutes and playing one as he came. As we circled him, I snatched a flute and played a quick echo to his own charming tune, "When the Still Air Hath Waked."

"Flutes would be no better if they could be heard half a dozen valleys off—you're not suggesting that Bledlore should take to monstrous frescos in his old age, to make his name?"

"I'm condemning the general taste, not Bledlore's. He has found perfection because he has first found his correct scale. I'm regretting that he does not receive the just acclamation due to him. Thirty kopits per glass!—He should demand and get ten times that!"

We had stopped by the marionette stall, to watch both puppets and their childish audience. "I feel as you do on that score. Better paid, he could fight his dust obsession with a vacuum cleaner. But in that we are perhaps merely children of our admittedly decadent age. Should not the real reward of a true artist be his ability, and not the applause it merits him?"

"Real . . . True . . . Your adjectives baffle me, Prian! Who was it said that Reality and Truth are weapons in the dialectical armoury of all schools of thought?"

The school of thought whose activities we were now negligently observing was a primitive one, designed to elicit immediate and uproarious pleasure from its unreflecting spectators. Robber Man came on with red-masked eyes and tried to break into Banker Man's big safe. Banker Man, fat and hairy and crafty, appeared and caught him at it. Robber Man socked him with his sack, to the plaudits of the children. Banker Man pretended genial, asked to see how much money Robber Man could get into sack. Robber Man, despite warning cries of children in front, climbs obligingly into safe. Banker Man slams safe shut, laughs, goes for Police Man. Meets Allosaur Man instead. Children roar with merriment, open and honest, as Allosaur Man gets multitudinous teeth round Banker Man's nose. Space Man descends, traps Allosaur Man in helmet. During fracas, Banker's Lady, toggled to nines, enters to take some cash from safe. Releases and

is walloped by Robber Man. And so on. Continuous entertainment.

Two cool girls near us in frocks that hover between innocence and indecency comment to each other. She to her: "Disastrous lowbrow hokum! I can't think how we laughed at it last year!"

She to her: "Hokum maybe, Chloe, but brilliant Theater!"

I had propped myself against the stones of a fallen arch. Lambant had hoisted himself up and now sprawled on them. He said in my ear, "Be warned by that exchange!—Thus, enjoyment in youth gives way to criticism in old age!"

His casual words were caught by the girls, who failed to join in the general laughter then prevailing as Judy, the Law Man's Daughter, tried to kiss Allosaur Man—mistaking him, still trapped in the helmet, for Space Man. They turned to us, and one turned rosy and one pale at Lambant's affront, so that I was vexed to think which colouring effect took me most.

"We also overheard *your* conversation, cavaliers, but less insultingly, since our overhearing was involuntary, and caused purely by the loudness and coarseness of your voices," one of these delicate creatures indited. "We found your remarks as amusing as you appear to have found ours!"

She it was whose sister had addressed her as Chloe. She was the smaller and the more rounded of the two, with pretty chestnut hair and soft brown eyes—though they attempted to pierce both Lambant and me at that moment. She it was who had turned to so fair a shade of rose, her sister who bore cheeks that temporarily resembled ivory.

Her sister, whose name we soon discovered to be Lise, was no less ferocious, but of a more willowy physique, slender and dark, with hair as black and shining as midnight reflected down a well, and eyes as blue-grey as the flower of speedwell. Neither of them could have been much more than halfway through their second decade, and neither was empty of words; for Lise, following swift on her sister's jibe, cried, with stormy brows—but I saw the moon shine through the storm—"To hear brainless gallants like you discussing the just rewards of artists! I'd as lief go to my maid for instruction in the True Religion!"

Lambant slid from his stone to his feet, saying, "Your maid

should instruct me in anything she liked, Miss, if she were one-half as fair as you!"

"She should instruct me in nothing, were either of you princesses present to teach the lesson!" I said, looking from one to the other to decide which one of them had my heart more firmly in sway, and perceiving that the dark and willowy Lise had its chief custody.

"Your compliments are as feeble as your insults!" Chloe said.

She spoke among the general applause of the little audience, for the show had now ended, the Banker's Lady had gone off with the Space Man, the Banker had rewarded the Police Man, the Joker had had his way with Bettini, the Banker's Daughter, and the Allosaur Man had devoured the Robber Man. Now the puppet master came round with his wooden plate, thrusting it hopefully among the dissolving auditory. As he leveled it at us, I tossed in a *kopetto*, and said, "Here's one true artist at least believes his reward should be neither ability nor applause alone."

"Faith, master," he quoth, rolling his eyes, "I need fuel as well as flattery for my performance. So do my missus and our six children!"

"Six children!" said Lambant. "Then you also need a *lettro* for your performance!"

Our two young beauties looked abashed at this pleasant crudity and, perhaps to hide their embarrassment, Chloe said, "These carnival men deserve money possibly, but not the title of artist."

Boldly, I took her sister's arm and said, "Since the subject of artistry interests you, let's stroll awhile and see whether you have an equivalent knowledge of it. Our main topic—of which the theme of artistic reward was merely a subtopic—was whether this was not a decadent age."

"How very strange, sirs," said Chloe, smiling, "for we had been saying to each other how *creative* this age was, although our seniors little realised the fact."

"Stabbed to the heart!" I cried, clutching at my chest and falling against Lambant. "You hear that, brother? 'Our seniors' . . . that's for us, at least six years the senior of these two old maids. Poor croaking greybeards, they must think us!"

Taking the cue, Lambant began to hobble before us, clutching one knee and limping like an old man.

"Quick, quick, Prian, my embrocation! My rheumatics are killing me!"

"Tis your wit rather that will be the death of us!" exclaimed Lise, but she and Chloe were laughing prettily, making their youthful bosoms shake like fresh-boiled dumplings. So pleasant was the sight that Lambant redoubled the vigour of his parody of senility, somewhat spoiling the effect.

"Hokum, Lambant, maybe, but brilliant Theatre!" I said. "Now take your bows before we take these ladies somewhere where we may have out our argument in peace. Let's stroll to the river."

The girls were looking doubtfully at one another when we saw, distantly, one of the winged women take off gracefully from the city walls and come flying in our direction. As was often the fashion of her kind, she wore long ribbons in her hair which trailed out behind her in the tranquil air. She was both young and naked and the sight of her overhead was in sunlight very pleasing; as she passed behind the Big Cornet to alight, we heard the solemn flutter of her wings, like some transvestite Jove seeking an hermaphrodite Leda.

No doubt the sight inspired Lise. "We'll come with you if we can fly," she said, resting a pretty hand upon my sleeve.

"Done," said Lambant and I together. "Let's go and find the carpet man!" And we swept them along, whistling "When the Still Air Hath Waked" in march-time, Lambant taking the melody and I the counterpoint, past the booths of chance and cheiromancy.

Since it was by now growing late in the afternoon, the crowds at the fair were thickening. The most crowded and the gayest time would come after dusk, when flares were lit and masks were donned, and the Eastern dancers started their contortions on the open stage. We soon found our way to the nearest carpet man. His carpets were of plastic and too brilliantly coloured for our liking; but they carried a six-hour guarantee, and we were in no mood to be particular. We paid the man's fee and a deposit besides, mounting his rickety little scaffold with a good deal of jesting.

As the meter showed, our carpet had a twelve-foot ceiling, but it bore us swiftly enough, flapping above the motley heads of the people and avoiding other fliers. The girls squealed and laughed

prettily, so that Lambant and I looked at each other behind their delicious backs, nodding in silent agreement that we were lucky in finding—and so soon—the two prettiest and most intelligent girls in the autumn fair.

We left the stalls behind and threaded our way through a grove of slender birches. Ahead lay the river and, beyond, the foothills of the Vokoban Mountains. Lambant pointed to them.

"Let's go to a nest I know, safe from interruption!"

"No, take us no further than the river!" cried the girls. Perhaps they recalled the old legends about what happens when one flies over water on a fine day.

Lambant would not hear argument, and we sailed across to a mossy ledge high up a slope on which wild autumn crocus grew, pink on pink. So high were we that we could still clearly see the tiny bright booths of the fair, and the fortifications of the town, and even hear, now and again, the strepitation of a tinsel trumpet. Above us, to one side, we could see the jagged grey slates of a mountain village—Heist was its name—and peasants toiling with their man-lizards among the vines below its walls.

"This is supposed to be an evil mountain," Chloe said. "My father tells me that the Exiles are imprisoned within the entrails of these peaks!"

"Are you girls apprenticed to sorcerers that you believe such tales?" I asked. "If there are indeed Exiles, then they are imprisoned in each one of us, and not in mere rocks."

"Mere rocks!" said Lise. "Mere rocks throw out stranger things than men, since men themselves were thrown from rock. Only last year, on the coasts of Lystra, a new sort of crab was born from the earth which climbs trees and signals to its friends and enemies with a claw especially enlarged for the purpose."

Lambant laughed. "That sounds a very old sort of crab to me! What we require by way of newness in crabs is a species that will crow like a cockerel, yield milk every Monday in the month, and raise its carapace when requested to reveal beautiful doll's-house jewellery underneath. Or a really big tame land crab the size of that boulder but with a better turn of speed, which we could train to gallop like a stallion."

"Marvellous! And it would be amphibious and carry us across the seas to lands of legend!"

"And not only across the seas but under them, for we could creep inside its carapace and be secure from the waters outside."

"Then we should see the lairs of the ancient sea monsters, where they are still supposed to hide, growing as civilized as men and conveying sea lore to one another."

"I'd grow ivy and bright creepers and ferns all over my crab, until it looked like a fantastic itinerant garden."

"Mine would have musical claws that played as it ran!"

"Girls, girls, you take up the silly game so violently, you'll batter your brains out on your imaginations!"

We laughed again, and sat together beneath a plaque let into the rock, on which was written a legend in the Old Language. They asked me to translate it and with some effort I did so.

"This sculptured stone has a melancholy voice. It bears an inscription to a friend who appears, from the dating, to have passed over into shade at least eleven centuries ago. It's a sort of verse. It says . . ."

I hesitated, and then spoke firmly.

"Shall I forget Phalanda? Yea, I shall,
For Death is a forgetting which contains
Forgetfulness for mourned and mourner; so
My tear but not its prompting yet remains;
The thought of Death dies in a youthful heart
Or, living, seems but savour to Life's art.
Now to my autumn, Death's remembered lot
Brings more forgetting than my spring forgot."

Chloe laughed politely, hand halfway to her pretty mouth.

"Well, it is certainly elegiac, even if it doesn't make sense. Of course, such verses don't rely too strongly on sense for their impact."

"Nothing about Death makes sense," said Lambant, striking a pose. "For Death is the negative of sense; we know it not until it bears us hence—and then 'tis positive we know it not . . ."

". . . For it and we are both a load of rot!" completed Lise, and we hugged each other and laughed. Meanwhile, Lambant had swung the old plaque open and drawn from behind it a piping and highly spiced dish for our lunch, the saffron rice grains

amply punctuated with dates and sultanas and little fish, their gaping mouths stuffed with bunny-cloves, in the Phrustian fashion. We cried with pleasure to the gods and, feeling deeper into the rock, brought out wine in clay bottles and a cream-coloured cloth.

"All we need is some of Master Bledlore's glasses, and we have here a feast for a king—or a prince, at the least. After all, even princes have to slim on some occasions. Now, Prian, while we eat, we must talk of more serious matters than Death, whose very existence is suspect on such days as this—besides which, there are spells against him, which is why I wear this serpent's fang tied by a thread of scarlet cotton at my buttonhole . . . So, let's begin our debate."

"Maybe the girls don't want to talk about decadence," I said, helping myself to a handful of rice, as the others were doing. "And I for my part would rather talk about the girls."

"That's real decadence for you!" said Chloe. With her ravishing mouth full, she added, "But the fish are delectable!"

Addressing myself to her sister, I said, "I notice that your sister is the bolder of you in speech. In action, which is the bolder?"

"Pooh, Chloe is not my sister! Does she look like me? Does she speak like me? Do you suppose she thinks like me?"

"You are alike in beauty and wit, but perhaps, on reflection, both your sentences and your skirts are a bit shorter. And you eat faster!"

"We should have guessed they aren't sisters, Prian! How could one matriarchal womb manage to coin two such masterpieces?"

"Thank you, Master Lambant, we will leave wombs on one side."

"Such asymmetry would spoil the look of you ladies."

"This decadent conversation proves it a decadent age," I said, tipping the wine bottle. "How can there be further argument? Girls, concede it cannot be a creative age and we'll say no more on the subject."

"No, no, Prian!" cried Lambant. "I must side with the girls, for was not our decadent conversation about wombs, and what is more creative than a womb? Therefore it is proved a creative age!"

I gestured largely, spilling yellow grains over them all. "No, I

won't allow it. You don't follow your own argument deeply enough, Lambant! For how is a womb made to be creative? To give you not too anatomical an answer and spare dear Chloe's blushes and dear Lise's divine pallours, it is made creative by the male's search for ever newer and more intense sensations. And what is the search for ever newer and more intense sensations but the essence of decadence? Thus, in this climax my conception is proved to the hilt."

"But you cannot conceive what a mistake you make," said Lise. "Your argument is abortive, for you are merely chopping logic."

"Yes, following your own private meaning," added Chloe.

"No, for you are privy to it, too. Do you think I want to conceal my movements? My droppings of wisdom all mount to the same thing—that this age is a decadent one. I for one rejoice in it. One is comfortable in a decadent age. There are no wars, no major questions to be answered, no cold winds blowing from a religious north."

I had steered the conversation to a less facetious turn, having almost wrecked it in the whirlpools of wit. Lise answered me seriously, "But you are not correct. This is what Chloe and I were talking about indirectly before we visited the marionettes. There are always wars—if not between nations, between households, between classes, between ages, between sexes, between one side of a person's nature and the other. And there are always major questions to be answered, and will be as long as life is staged in our outrageous universe. Even the marionette show raised questions in my breast I could not answer. Why was I moved by those trumpery wooden dolls? They did not seek to imitate or satirise or even parody people. They were just wooden dolls. Yet I found a part of myself cheering first for Banker Man and then for Robber Man. Was that artistry at work? And if so, then whose artistry? The puppeteer's or mine, that I used imagination despite myself? Why do I weep over characters in a book, who have no more flesh and blood than the thirty characters of the printed language? As for your absurd religious winds blowing from the north, Prian, are we not all the time in a storm of beliefs? What has all our talk been but different kinds of belief and disbelief?"

We heard music far off of a tinkling and involved kind, ignoring it as Lambant took over the discourse.

"You are admittedly right, Lise, yet right in such a small way that you must let me enlarge the argument on your behalf. It is true that even in a decadent age mankind is assailed by major questions—mysteries, I would prefer to call them. In a decadent age, of course, men simply turn their silken backs on such mysteries, or use them as stage settings. But there are mysteries much bigger than those you list. Look—I'll name one. Before we met you two angels, my devilish friend and I had been to visit an artist, a miniaturist who engraves his masterpieces on glass, Giovanni Bledlore. He works obsessively for a pittance. Why? My theory is that he feels Time is against him, and so he builds monuments to himself in the only way he knows how, almost like a coral insect whose anonymous life creates islands. Time makes Master Bledlore create Art. Suppose he had all the time in the world! Suppose he could live forever! I'll wager he would not raise his hand to cut one single goblet! Time is one of those big mysteries which drives all before it with its lash."

The music was nearer now, coming and going about the mountainside as intricately as its own measure. And its effect on me was measureless.

"Whoever the rogue is who plays, he has Time where he wants it," I said, rising to my feet. "I've eaten enough. Lise, though it be the devil himself at his music, I must dance with you!"

She came into my arms, that beautiful willowy girl, and we danced, so that I felt for the first time the warmth of her vulnerable front against my body, and knew the delicate perfume of her in my nostrils. Her movements against me were so light, so taunting and in tune, that a special spring primed my step, powered by more than music. With a cry, Lambant and Chloe also jumped up and moved into each other's embrace.

So we were stepping lightly before the musician came into sight. When he rounded the rock, we scarcely heeded him, so rapt were we in our art, so much a part of our company he had become. I only saw that he was old and small and stocky, playing very gaily on his hurdy-gurdy, and that a man-lizard accompanied him.

As long as the music went, so went we. It seemed we could

not stop, or had no need of stopping. It was more than dance we made; it was courtship, as the music told us, as our own closeness, our own movements, our own looks told us. When we fell apart gasping, and the music died, we were together more intimately than before.

We took up the bottles of wine and passed some to the gallant old musician and his friend. The hurdy-gurdy player was small and densely built, so that he seemed in his fustian clothes as thick as the city wall. His complexion was swarthy and we saw how old he was, his eyes sunken and his mouth receding, though there were black locks yet on the fringes of his white head. My friend and I recognised him at once. We had seen his likeness that very day.

"Do you not live by the flea market, O tuneful one?" asked Lambant.

"It's undeniable, sir." His thin, used voice had none of the brilliance of his music. "I have a poor shack there, if it's all the same to you."

"We saw you portrayed on one of Master Bledlore's glasses."

The old musician nodded. He came forward, holding out his instrument. It was painted all over yellow and bore a picture on its casing. We looked and saw there two children, chasing each other with arms outstretched. They were laughing. We knew the workmanship at once—and the children.

"This must be Bledlore's art! These children—they are the same ones on the azure vase in his studio?"

"As you so rightly say, sirs! The very same, bless their lovely hearts. Since Giovanni used me as his model to paint, he painted these other models here as his fee. They are my little grandchildren—or at least I should say they were, and the apple of my eye, until the thrice-cursed chills of last winter carried them both off. They would dance all day to my music if you let them, pretty little things. But the magicians at the North Gate put a spell on them and now they are no more than compost, alas!" He began to weep. "I have nothing left of them but their little picture here," and he cuddled his hurdy-gurdy to his cadaverous cheek.

"How fortunate you are to have that consolation," said Chloe pertly. "Now give us another tune, for we can't dance so nimbly to your tears as to your music."

"I must make for Heist, to earn myself a few kopettos," he said. "For it will soon be winter, however hard you young people dance." He shuffled on, and the lizard-man followed, upright on his two sturdy legs and giving us the smile of tight-lipped kindness which belongs to his kind. As for Lambant and me, we fell to kissing and petting our pretty dears when the others were scarcely out of sight.

"Poor old man, his music pleased us but not himself," said Lise's beautiful lips, close to mine.

I laughed. "The object of art is not always consolation!" I pulled her dark hair about my face.

"I don't really know what the object of art is—but then, I still don't know what the object of life is, either. Fancy, Prian, those little children dead, and yet their images living on after them, engraved on something as fragile as glass!" She sighed. "The shadow so eclipsing the substance . . ."

"Well, art should be enduring, shouldn't it?"

"Yes, but you might say the same about life."

"You girls are so morbid! You talk so, when what you are enduring is only my hand groping up your silken underclothes . . . Ah, you delightful creature!"

"Oh, dearest Prian, when you do that . . . No art can ever . . ."

"Ah, sweet bird, now if only . . . yes . . ."

But there is little merit in reporting on a conversation as incoherent as ours became for, of all the arts, none translates into words less readily than that we then pursued. Suffice it merely to say that I—in the words of my most favourite poet—"’twixt solemn and joke, enjoyed the lady."

So much for us. As for the meteorological phenomena, the beautiful anticyclonic weather brought down a sunset of ancient armorial gold, so that the world glowed like an old polished shield before night sank in upon it, and scarcely a wind stirred meanwhile. The six-hour spell on our flying carpet was allowed to run out, until it lay there limp and useless, incapable of further transports—and, at last, the same condition held for lucky Lambant and me, relaxed in the arms of our still loving ladies.

We slept there in a huddle, the lamps of the distant fair our nightlights, with kisses for prayers.

A cold predawn stirring woke us. One by one, we sat up and laughed at our negligence. The girls attended to their hair. In one corner of the sky the cloud cover had opened like a reluctant jaw, showing light in its gullet, but the light was as chill as the breeze that moved about our temples. We rose and made our way down the mountainside, following the path among the goosefoot, the amaranthus, and the gaudy spikes of broom. No movement or illumination showed from the city; up near the grey walls of Heist, however, where the mountain dialect was still spoken, dull-gleaming lanterns showed that peasants were already astir, going to a well or making for their slanting fields. Birds were beginning to call, without breaking the mountain hush.

We came down to the riverside and headed for a wooden bridge. An old wooden wizard still stood guarding it, leaning and well weathered as an ancient goat—but I saw that flowers had been laid fresh in his wormy hand, even this early in the day, and the symbolism was cheering. Taking Lise about the waist, I said, “However early you wake, someone is awake before you. However light you sleep, someone sleeps lighter. Whatever your mission, someone goes forth on an earlier one.”

Lambant took it up, and then the dear girls, improvising, starting to chant and sing their words as we crossed over the creaking slats of the bridge.

“However light your sleep, the day is lighter. However bright your smile, the sun is brighter.”

“However overdue the dawn, no dues delay it. . . . And what it owes the morn, in dew ’twill pay it.” My clever little puss!

“However frail the blossoms that you bring, year after year, they still go blossoming.”

“The water runs below our feet, ever-changing, ever-sweet, the birdlings burble and the brittle beetles beat!”

“However long night breezes last, day overthrows them, though day’s overcast.”

“And what a world of never-never lies in that little word, However. . . .”

We skirted the closed booths of the fair, which looked tawdry in the dregs of night, and moved toward the portal of the city. A first watery ray of sun, piercing over the chilly meadows, lit

the huddle of buildings beyond the wall. Its beam was thrown back by a window. Looking up, I perceived it was Master Bledlore's casement, tight closed. He would be sleeping still, obsessed and stuffy, his lungs scarcely moving for fear of stirring dust in his studio.

As I breathed deep of the air, an ancient musty odour came to me as of something being singed. Lise clutched my arm tighter, and I saw Chloe snuggle nearer to Lambant. We were moving toward two magicians and would have to pass them by to enter the portal.

The day favoured them in their cloaks and tall hats, directing one of its first rays onto them, so that they were lit almost as artificially as characters in some old painting, appearing dramatically from the bitumen of night. On two huge and ungainly blocks of stone, fallen from some long-forgotten variant of the city's geometry, they had built a smouldering fire; beside it, they proceeded on their arcana, their eyes squint as a cat's, their faces square and malign. I turned away my head abruptly, not to see the serpent burning on the altar. It gave off a blue smoke which hung at heart level. None of us said a word.

The magicians moved their archaic bodies stiffly. Beyond the first arcades, daylight was still scarce, but people were moving in the shadows. We passed in under the gate of the city, the four of us, where torchlight was.

WOMAN IN SUNLIGHT WITH MANDOLINE

The gardens of Count Rinaldo had been laid out in a fanciful way and decorated with pleasant pavilions. It was toward one of these pavilions that my friend Caylus and I now made our way, following the path that led among the glades of aspen and tall cypress. Since he was distantly related to the Count, we were permitted into this paradise.

Now and again a statue peeped from the foliage, generally in the form of a goddess, or a chained animal lolled in the sun-

shine. We passed by a splendid mandrill, imported from Africa, squatting on a low branch and observing us down its gaudily striped cheeks.

"It wears its fantastic mask," said Caylus lightly, "and one cannot tell from the beast's scrutiny what sort of face lies underneath—a savage's, clown's, lover's, or an old grey scholar's."

"That reminds me, Caylus. Now we are so close, I must go to see my father. I hear he has been unwell lately." The mandrill shook his silver chain at us as Caylus began to move off.

"Fathers are generally unwell, in my experience. We'll go and lunch with Gersaint, unless any sport more enticing presents itself."

"I'd better to my father instead."

"Think of Gersaint's board, postpone your decision—preferably for a week or two—and let's eye some pictures or whatever comes."

We had never been far distant from the music of water, for the Count had employed a great engineer, Argenteuil, to design fountains and streams and waterfalls in his grounds. To these pleasant noises was now added the note of strings as we climbed a flight of marble steps leading to the art pavilion.

At the top of the steps, among the *putti* and alabaster Pans, stood two women with musical instruments, a girl with a mandoline, an older woman with a viol. They rendered a *furlana* of earlier times. A velvet-clad man in saffron hose leaned against a column, idly listening. He wore a plumed hat and animal mask, and idly tapped his foot to the music.

One of the women was well in the toils of time, her hair white and her skin flecked with brown. Although her hands on the strings were firm, her wattle hung like a lizard's and her mouth had begun to recede towards her throat.

Her companion was of greater interest. She was scarcely more than a girl, but well built for all that, with golden hair piled at the top of her head—though there may have been some artifice in its colour, for to her cheeks and brow she had added rouge and powder which, in the bright sunshine, looked, I thought, the least pleasing thing about her. She would be, I supposed, one of the Count's young ladies, to judge by her manner and her dress. She eyed us direct as we came abreast of her, though she did not

cease her playing. She wore a gown of shimmering white silk, slightly soiled about its hem, from under which one softly shod foot looked out. About her throat was a lace collar, and a low-buttoning russet jacket adorned her elegant bosom. This was not day attire, even in these elegantly overdressed circles; I dismissed her for all her beauty, turning instead to the paintings under the low colonnade. Caylus paused to eye her and take in her melody, so I went ahead of him.

The Count had collected many elegant and exotic things on his travels, the most treasured of which adorned his palace, the least treasured of which decorated his pavilions. The company to which I belonged was due to perform the comedy of Fabio and Albrizzi at the wedding of my friend Lambant's sister. I was playing the role of Albrizzi and needed a costume for the part. My hope was that I should find an idea for one among the Count's pictures.

Light and grace had been in the mind of the genius who built the art pavilion, perched on its artificial hill. He had so contrived the perspectives of his columns and little courtyards that one vista looked toward the steps where the women played, and the pastoral scenes beyond them, while the other vista took in at once the ruin of an old palace, with ferns sprouting from its crumbling pediments, and the baroque splendours of the Count's residence; so that, with these two contrasting reminders of nature and art, one turned readily to their echoes in the canvases ornamenting the walls.

Caylus caught up with me, humming the air plucked out by the mandoline, gazing without exertion at the pictures.

"A pretty little painted creature down there, and no mistake . . . With sweeter music to make than comes from wooden instruments. She looked boldly at me. Who's the fellow, I wonder, hiding under his wolf-mask? A favourite of Rinaldo's, I suppose. What's she to him?"

"What do you think of this Landscape in Arcadia, Caylus? What a perfect little background behind the huntresses . . ." I indicated the mythical scene before me, but he scarcely gave it a glance.

"Too misty for my taste! If I could get her to one side . . . my rooms are near. She'd surely need no persuasion, once that fop

has disappeared. A man has a duty to pay his tribute to Venus every day."

"My duty to my father . . ."

"Come, Prian, we'll stroll upstairs, where the older pictures are. Tell me not about your precious father again."

The keeper of the place lolled on the stairs, feeding titbits to his little dog. He jumped up and bowed to us as we passed. On the small upper floor, the paintings were fewer, and the views all round even finer than those below. I was feeling out of sorts that day, although the paintings pleased me. Caylus, my most high-born friend, was less easy to please.

He loitered at a low casement, looking down. "Come and see this depiction of an outdoor concert," I called to him. "By a forgotten artist. How poignant the stances of the musicians as they hold an hour's attention! And what words could describe that tender colour—though it's faded—and the mistiness so perfectly expressing a dream of youth and happiness . . . the freshness of the clouds in the background, the blond clarity of the foreground with its grouped figures . . ."

"Mmmmm . . ."

"True to nature, yet more true . . . the tableau living still, its creator long since dust . . . Only relegated to this pavilion by a stain in one corner. Who executed such a sweet design? How long ago, and in which country? The fashions are not of Malacia . . . This gallant here, Caylus, in the grand green coat . . ."

I ceased. Here was the costume I needed: unfamiliar yet not unfashionable, stylish yet without too much pretension, and not without its humour, as befitted the character of Albrizzi.

The gallant in the picture wore a white wig, although his features were youthful. His coat was of damask with silver buttons. The coat was long, shaped in at the waist and then ample, with ample pockets, terminating just below the knee, to reveal elegant hose from which ribbons hung. It had wide cuffs and was embellished deeply with silver braid. Beneath the coat, a waistcoat of brocade, decorated with landscapes done in—I surmised—petit point. A white tie tight to the throat completed the ensemble. That was it!—Albrizzi to the life! I would send the tailor to copy it.

"See, Caylus, my morning's labour bears fruit!" I said. "There's no calling this fine gentleman back to life to establish who he was, but his costume shall be restored in time for our festivities next month!"

Caylus sprawled half out the window, unheeding. I gazed out over his shoulder. Below, the women still stood, still playing at their instruments. The girl with the golden hair was singing quietly. The favourite, if such he was, was making off down the steps.

"She's alone now," said Caylus. "Look at her lovely hands!"

Indeed, they were fine: so slender and supple that they seemed an integral part of the music, plucking out vibrant notes with a light tortoise-shell plectrum. From where we stood, I could note the unusual design of the plectrum, with two little horns to one side, as if it were fashioned in the likeness of a satyr. This touch seemed characteristic of the girl, about whom I felt somewhat dubious.

"Prian, I'm going down to her before another rival appears!" said Caylus, standing and regarding me, smiling as he pulled at his little beard. "I declare I'm out of my mind about her already!"

"Caylus—" I wished to say to him that my feelings told me the girl was someone to beware of; and yet, why should my distrust of her be important to him? And what did I know against her, save that she allowed herself to parade in sunlight with a painted face? He misinterpreted my hesitation.

"Don't say it! You're going to visit your father in any case . . ." Still smiling, he turned and started down the stairs. As he went, he called over a shoulder, "I'll be in my rooms this afternoon. Come to me when you're ready, and we'll go together to the rehearsal—unless I have good fortune now!"

For a while I stood at the top of the stairs and chewed my lips.

Glancing out of the window, I saw the girl with mandoline turn and look at Caylus approaching, although I could not see him. I noted again her brazen glance and her fingers unfalteringly holding the plectrum. Then I also went downstairs and out at the opposite door.

Beyond Count Rinaldo's palace, the grand way with its lines of trees quickly petered out in a maze of alleys, through which

I picked my course, avoiding the rubbish in the middle gutters. At this hour of the morning, there were few people about, though I could glimpse women working in the rooms close on either side of me. From the nearby canalside, I heard a barrel organ; the tune it played, "This Sweet Perspective," was one familiar to me from my childhood; its notes brought me a vivid picture of a fellow in ragged uniform who pushed the organ, and the monkey that used to dance upon it.

At length, I came out on a wider avenue and, beyond that, the street of the goldsmiths. At the far end stood my father's house, behind its tall tiled walls.

Beppolo, the old servant, let me in and closed the gates behind me. Doves took wing and clattered away to the streets. Familiar scents and corners of the mansion surrounded me immediately. I walked through the side courtyard, cool in shadow, noticing how overgrown it had become, and how shaggy were the bushes of laurel on either hand, once so neatly clipped. The stable was empty; no hounds frisked here as in bygone years. The windows of the house, those not shuttered, looked down featurelessly on the scene.

At the other end of the court the green door stood open. When I went in, it was to be enfolded by the silence of the house. I looked in at what we had called the Garden Room as I passed; the light through the jalousie revealed it only in monochrome, its informal furniture pushed to one side as if awaiting sale.

My father would be in his study at this hour—or at any other hour, for that matter. I hesitated for a moment, studying the cabalistic signs painted on the panels, listening for a sound from within. Then I tapped upon the door and entered.

So recently had I come from the sunlit outer world that I failed to see him standing in the shadow of an alcove, poring over an ancient manuscript. He turned so slowly and raptly to me that what my perceptions first gave me was only an old grey scholar and then, faintly under that, the lineaments of my father. I went to him and took his hand in my hands.

"It's a long time since you came to see me, my boy. It's so dark in here! Didn't you know I have been unwell with the colic?"

"When I heard, Father, I came at once. You are better now?"

"If it isn't the colic, it's the stone. If it isn't the stone, it's the spleen, or the ague. You know I am never better. I can eat nothing. At least I am not afflicted by the plague, which I hear gathers strength in the markets of the saddlers. Malacia has its share of earthly woes, to be sure."

"Plague is always there, and in the tanneries—it is part of the nature of those trades, just as darkness seems part of yours. Let me open a shutter! How can you see to read in this twilight?"

He went before me, spreading his hands to bar my way.

"Whether horseflesh doesn't spread the plague is a question some scholar should look into. How can I think when the light is hurting my eyes? And what's all this about the tanneries? Why aren't you working?"

"I have worked all morning, Father."

"And what have you to show for it? So you came at once, did you? . . . Do you know what I have found out this very morning?" He extended an arm with one grand faltering gesture towards his shelves and towards the folios of Pythagoras, Solomon, and Hermes lying there, as well as many ancient histories. "I have at last discovered what a *maati* is, beloved of Philip of Macedon."

"Father, leave your books and let's eat together at Truna's as we were used to do—you look starved." Indeed, as he leaned against his table by the window, I noticed how thin he had become.

"Do you attend me? A *maati* is not just any delicacy but a specific one, first introduced in Athens at the time of the Macedonian Empire. Philip was assassinated during a wedding feast, you know. I have unearthed reference to a treatise on it, which claims it was a dish beloved of the Thessalians. As you know, the Thessalians have a reputation for being the most sumptuous of all the Greek peoples."

"I suppose you'd come with me to Truna's if we could eat a *maati* there?"

"Do you mark what I say? All you think about's food! I have made a contribution to learning this day, and you just want to eat at Truna's. You won't always be young, you know! You won't always be able to dine at Truna's." He looked angry. His hands

shook, and he wiped his brow with the hem of his cloak. For an instant he closed his eyes tightly, as if in pain.

I saw how pale his skin was, and glistening. Going over to him, I placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "You need a cup of wine, Father. Sit down. Let me ring for the housekeeper."

"No, no, I'll not disturb the woman—she may be busy. So you worked all morning, did you? And what did you achieve?" He brushed his hair back shakily from his forehead.

"I was intending to tell you. Lambant's sister, Marana, is to marry, and we are to perform a comedy for the nuptials. I shall play the chief role of Albrizzi, and, this morning, after days of search, I discovered—"

"Truna's? Why do you mention him? Old Truna is dead this twelvemonth, and his tavern sold. That shows how often you come to visit your father. You prattle on about performing comedies and all the time Truna is one with historic personages!"

"Father, Philip of the Macedonians is dead, yet people are still marrying. Come out down the street with me and enjoy the bustle of humanity about you, as you used to do—it may set your mind on more cheerful things."

"They're still playing Albrizzi, are they? By the caduceus of Mercury, that farce was old thirty years ago, when I first saw it! And they had good actors in those days. Why do you think I should enjoy to be jostled in the alleys, I with my calculus troubling me?"

I moved over to the shuttered window and peered into a neglected inner court, where the ornamental Triton no longer blew a fountain from his conch.

"We shall insert topical matter, Father, as no doubt they did in your young day. If not the tavern and not the street, then at least take a turn in the garden with me. The air's so stale in here."

"No, no, the air's pure in here, guaranteed so. All sorts of illnesses lurk outside. I don't even let Beppolo enter here now, for fear he contaminates the place. When you get old, you have to take care of yourself."

"Did you hear that Lambant's sister is to be wed to a gentleman from Vamonal, Father? He comes of the military house of Orini."

"Beppolo says the well's run dry. I've never heard of the Orinis. If he's not lying it's the first time that ever happened—in your mother's time, we had water in plenty. Everything seems to go wrong. Who are the Orinis, I'd like to know!"

"The well often runs dry at this time of year, but I'll see to it on my way out."

"You're off already, are you? You never told me what you've been up to. Well, I suppose there's nothing to keep you here." He went over and sat in his battered leather chair, heavily carved with mythical beasts and lizards. "Yes, I saw Albrizzi as a student. You've been working this morning, eh? What were you working at? More play-acting with the players, I suppose. Why don't you join the *pantomimi*, as approved by Hadrus and Seneca and Lucian, and become a proper tragic actor, eh?"

I moved towards the door, saying, "There's no taste for tragedy in this age, Father."

"You should become a tragic actor. As long as there's tragedy in life, tragedy is needed on the stage. You see, the housekeeper doesn't always come when you ring—it's the way with housekeepers. Actors should hold a mirror up to nature, and not just indulge triviality. I don't know what the world's coming to . . ."

Taking proper leave of him, I quitted the chamber and walked along the corridor. From its panels came an aroma of something like resin which took me so far back to those years when I depended on the good humour of others that I quickened my pace.

As I crossed the court, Beppolo emerged from the empty stable, hurrying round-shouldered to see me out of the gate, his right hand already thrusting itself forward, inch by shaking inch, cupping itself in a receiving attitude.

"Your illustrious father is cheerful this morning, sir! As well he might be, sir, according to his prosperous station. He tells me he has found out who Philip of Macedon is, to his great benefit!"

"Where's the housekeeper?"

"Why, sir, is she not in the house? No? Then perhaps she has gone out. There's not much for her to do. If she's not in the house, then she has gone out."

"And I suppose that if she has not gone out, then she is in the house?"

"You could very likely be right, sir."

"Tell her I shall be back tomorrow, expecting to see the house cleaned and a proper meal set before my father. Understand?"

"Every word, sir, as I stand here wearing my old patched breeches." He bowed low and dragged the gate open. I tossed him a sequin. I heard the gate squeal closed again; its lock turned wearily as I made down the street.

"'Even in their ashes live our wonted fires . . .'" I quoted to myself.

The bells of St. Marco's were chiming one of the afternoon. A pack of ragged children were teasing a thecodont against a wall. The little yellow-and-red creature barked at them like a gruff dog—a habit it had no doubt learned from the local mongrels, for several of the smaller kinds of dinosaur, wandering in from the wilderness, had come to an alliance with the canine inhabitants of Malacia. Pigeons were waddling in the street, getting almost underfoot, fluttering up at the last moment; I kicked at them and headed past Truna's for the next taverno.

The Cellar of the Small Goldsmiths was built into an old ruined triumphal arch. I sat outside it and was served wine and meat, speaking to no one, although there was a cheerful meeting of fellows at the table next to mine. Finally, as I was leaving, and they were singing and bellowing, one of them leaned back to pluck my sleeve.

"You must have a solemn philosophy, cavalier, to keep so straight a face with your wine!"

Looking down at him, I said, "There you are correct, sir. Henceforth, I mean to pursue pleasure as a serious business."

They called to me to join them, but I would not. As I walked down the street, their voices faded, although there were other taverns, other voices. At one was a woman, singing as sweetly as a bird, with dark-red lips and a black skin. I turned in the direction of Caylus' chambers.

Under the archway of his house, an old hag in black stood in the shadows selling paper charms—little birds, shields, flowers, pterodactyls, boats, animals. The little tissues fluttered in a slight draught blowing under the archway. Behind her, she had lit a smouldering charcoal enchanter's fire; wisps of smoke rose from a tibia and a sprinkle of chicken bones. On impulse, I bought a paper shield and then mounted the wide stair.

No answer came to my call at his door. I pushed it open, vexed that he might not be here after what he had said. Company I needed, and Caylus' easy laughter.

In his chambers all lay quiet. Something told me that the room in which I stood had but recently been vacated—some vibrance in the air, some disturbance in the golden motes floating between window and rug. Sunlight created its grid pattern on a limited area of floor by his couch. In the air, a faint scent was discernible, faint but luxurious, so that I stood there in a pleasant reverie, as still as the room itself.

Once I said his name aloud. I remained where I was in the middle of the gold-flecked room, the door still open behind me, the cries of the street coming to me only distantly. I looked about me, bewitched by the flavours and the room's sense of rest. Caylus' few books, his many engravings, his altar, his table with a flask and two empty glasses on it, his fernery, his phonograph, his water clock, and his couch, covered by a rumpled silken spread. On top of the spread lay an amber object no bigger than a sparrow's wing.

Even before reaching the article, I recognised what it was. The tortoise shell glowed in slatted light, its two little horns thrusting upward like the tender retractile eyestalks of a snail. It was a plectrum of rare design, and I let it rest in my hand.

Caylus' time had been better occupied than mine! Pulling up a chair to the table, I set the plectrum in the middle of the table and sat down. Sprawling there, taking up his quill and ink, I composed an ironic quatrain to greet him on his return, whether alone or no. I tucked it under the plectrum.

Then I left the room. Strolling slowly downstairs, I passed the old hag and so into the afternoon street, heading toward my tailor.

Dear Caylus! Those discordant Age hath laid
 Aside lack games harmonious as hers—
 As, mute while she a wilder Music stirs,
 Her mandoline in shadow lies unplayed.

THE YOUNG SOLDIER'S HOROSCOPE

Within the shade of a ruinous triumphal arch sat an astrologer. I sometimes passed his way when going to the theatre, if I was seeking to avoid my creditors.

We had astrologers enough in the city; the reason why I liked and noticed this one was his plumpness. Considering his trade, he was a cheerful-looking man. He sat in a creaking chair upon a little rough platform on which a rug of Oriental design had been flung, his books beside him, and gazed out across the rooftops to the trees beyond, with an expression suggesting he was on good terms with his own mysterious universe.

One day in the eighth month, as I passed that way, a girl with golden hair was consulting the astrologer. Near the top of the arch, a ragged hole fringed by ferns let in shafts of sunlight, which chanced to gleam on the girl's hair as she stood below; or perhaps it was that she had stationed herself in that position deliberately. I saw how the sunbeams lent her an aura of additional gold about her head and how a posy of flowers had been bound in with the ribbon which confined her tresses. Only then did I recognise her as La Singla, enchanting star of our company.

She thanked the astrologer with pretty and well-rehearsed gestures and, as she turned away, I crept up and caught her about the waist, kissing her velvet cheeks.

"Oh, Prian, I pray—Do not kiss me in the public view! My husband is jealous enough already!"

"But your husband trusts *me*!"

"My husband does not trust *me*, and that's the whole trouble! You know him for what he is—an old fox who smells mischief even when there's none about. He says I'm too pretty, but I don't believe that."

Ah ha, thought I to myself, there's a little mystery here! La Singla was married to Lemperer, manager of our company, and I well knew that both he and she consulted an astrologer who lived almost opposite their house, which we called our theatre. Why was she speaking with the plump astrologer? Did her first words not give me a clue: "My husband does not trust me?" Crafty and watchful though Lemperer was, he must recently

have had fresh reason not to trust his pretty wife. So—perhaps she had a lover. I wondered which of the actors it might be.

“Well, now, my pretty Singla, it is common knowledge that your beauty is unrivalled, particularly at night by limelight, so it is natural that Lemperer should want reassurance. If you’ll come down a side way with me, and give me a kiss, then I’ll testify to him of your entire faithfulness and set his mind at rest.”

“Nonsense!”

“That way, we shall all do each other a kindness!”

She looked up at me with her somewhat blank stare, so that I could notice—as had I not done scores of times before—that her eyebrows were a little too heavy and a crop of fine golden hair lay along her upper lip. Far from deterring my ambitions, these details merely spurred me on.

“You are coming with us to the *ombres chinoises* at noon? You will say a good word to him then, on my behalf?”

I nodded and led her down an alley which led to a side canal. There stood a house where horses were kept for towing barges. Taking her arm, I pulled her just inside the stable door and there exacted payment, plus a slight extra levy in the form of a hand down the front of her bodice, which I thought she could well afford, her exchequer being in such good condition; besides, the transaction was not our first. We were old customers, each of the other. Yet she drew away and made me walk on, although I knew the smell of hay and leather would never deter her from such dealings. So there very likely was another lover!

Over the bridge we went, she with her dainty feet twinkling, keeping her thoughts to herself, I with an eye on the world, thinking how well it looked and how reasonably everyone was occupied, whether walking or working or merely spitting down off the parapet of the bridge, as two blackamoors were doing, to the amusement of a nearby baby. A travelling man playing a little phonograph for kopettos leaned against a tree and doffed his hat ironically to La Singla.

“You have admirers everywhere, I see,” I remarked.

“He always comes to watch my performances. He is penniless, yet once he declared his love for me!”

“As every man must who cannot control his tongue.”

“That rogue could not control his fortune. He hasn’t a bean left

and is reduced to playing *phonografo* in the street, yet his illustrious parents lie in a marble tomb topped by an azure dome on the banks of the Savoiardi Lagoon!"

"If I had to choose between the two occupations, his preference would be mine. His illustrious parents have a mouldy job by comparison!"

"Dear Prian, you forget that I know by heart the comedies from which you resurrect your old jokes."

"Am I likely to believe that, when I've heard you dry up so often on stage?"

The Lemperer house stood in a fashionable street containing many prosperous houses, as well as several decayed ones. There were always people hanging about in its outer court, waiting to see Lemperer, hoping to secure his favours—not to mention beggars and poor entertainers who competed for favours from those who hoped for Lemperer's. In his fashion, he was a man with influence.

Yet his household was like a disordered warehouse. Hardly a room or hall that was not filled with some property he had acquired or some costume he was thinking of acquiring. So kind was his heart that many rooms were occupied by impoverished relations or actors; yet so irritable was his spleen, that these dependents were always changing, arriving with laughter or leaving with tears and threats, so that there was a perpetual coming and going, and one long hoo-ha in the house.

At the centre of it all was Lemperer, wizened, fussy, deft, light-footed, articulate, angular, amusing, never entirely dressed, prancing round in his satin slippers and waistcoat, his peruke on the tilt, words, words, words pouring from his narrow lips. A figure of fun a good deal funnier than many of the figures of fun he played. A dangerous figure of fun.

He was making a spectacle of himself as La Singla and I entered, prancing round a tall man in an ankle-length cloak and his follower, a lizard-man who held on a leash two fine panthers from the Orient.

"Go away, I tell you—apply at the menagerie in the square, where they are eager to take anything with fur on its body, however mangy! Just get those cats out of here, fast! They'll stink

the house out and eat all my actors, too, by the way they're licking their chops."

In fact, the beasts were yawning, from boredom or illness. The man in the long cloak answered in a melancholy voice, "Sire, I have supplied theatres from Rome to Tolkhorm in the North, and sometimes with beasts less fine, less docile, less fragrant, than these two elegant pussies, and I can assure you that animals do adorn whatsoever entertainment you put on. I guarantee you that from the bottom of my convictions."

"You may guarantee me from the bottom of your boots, you mountebank, and it will make no difference to me. My entertainments entertain without the necessity for animals widdling against the scenery, let me tell you!" As he pranced about, one of the panthers moved forward by perhaps the length of a whisker, and immediately Lemperer went sprawling backwards and landed in an armchair, exactly as in the scene in *The Year-Long Feast*.

"The monster's going to eat me! Help, help! Oh, the brute went for me, you set him on me! Help! Get out, you swindler, before I have you thrown out! Do you think we all want a dose of rabies? Where's my wife?"

But La Singla was already running to him, throwing out her arms and shrieking. She shrieked considerably more than the average human being, and somewhat musically. The man in the long cloak turned, beckoned impatiently to his assistant, and stalked out. The panthers trotted off with relief.

Several of the players were standing about, laughing in an idle way. I clapped my friend Portinari on the shoulder and made to move, saying, "I must go upstairs and prepare myself for Albrizzi"—that being the name of the character I was currently getting up.

"No, no, spare yourself, my friend—it's all been changed. Albrizzi is postponed! We are to do *The Visionaries* next! Word has just come summoning us to play *The Visionaries* next week at Vamonal."

I clutched my forehead. "Are we players or serfs! Lemperer swore to us we would never do *The Visionaries* ever again. We were almost pelted off the stage last time!"

"You know the taste of audiences in Vamonal. A visiting Duke

of Ragusa is to be present and he has specially requested the piece."

"Then I know *his* taste as well. The thing's at least a century out of fashion. And my part of Phalante the Bankrupt is so small. How did Lemperer come to consent to such a degrading idea?"

Lemperer came up panting, still wearing La Singla about his neck, in time to hear what I said.

"Prian, Prian, my dear fellow, you know how funny you are as Phalante, the old apothecary. Juggling your wooden spoons and shouting, 'Why, this table silver alone is part of the fabled treasure of Troy and worth an entire ransom—half a ransom . . .' And Melissa thinks you a conqueror of the world and falls in love with you! Oh, come now, admit it's droll and nobody could take the part but you!"

"Nobody is fool enough," I said. "Let's at least drop that business with the spoons!"

"In Vamonal, they won't know how foolish you are, I promise! There—my promise as a genius of the theatre! They'll all be Mellissas and truly believe you a conqueror!"

So he cajoled us, and so we gathered ourselves together and went into the courtyard to rehearse, with poor simple Gilles holding the prompt book. Standing about, we went through our lines as well as we could.

It was a comedy of illusion, with all the characters mad or deluded and believing themselves to be other than they were. The old father with his three daughters had to see them married off between four competing suitors—a simple piece that had to be taken at a fast pace for its jokes to work at all.

At twelve noon, when the bell of the nearby church was chiming, Lemperer cried enough and released us. He buried his head in his hands.

"That I should live to see men of straw mouthing like men of wood! Pity the poor Duke of Ragusa who will have to sit through your terrible bout of arthritis, my dear friends! All right, come back early tomorrow and we will try it again. Meanwhile, I shall scour the city for a man who can hire me two panthers to bring a little life to the proceedings!"

For all Lemperer's reproaches, we were a cheerful crowd who

pushed in to see the *ombres chinoises*. On our way to the shadow theatre, we refreshed ourselves with wine at Nicol's tavern before going into the little shady garden, where performances were held in a large Oriental tent, covered with carpets and tapestries to make the darkness inside more intense.

These shadow plays were coming into fashion so much that we feared it might affect our business, though it was hard to imagine that audiences would prefer the shades of puppets to real live actors, once the novelty was over. Now here was the Great Charino's Ombres Chinoises, newly set up, and offering the public *The Saga of Karagog*, preceded by *The Broken Bridge*—and charging high admission prices.

As we filtered into the gloom, Lemperer plucked me aside and whispered in my ear, "Prian, darling fellow, you sit by me, if you will, for of course I want your criticism of the performance."

"Then you should have paid for my ticket, if you are retaining me in a professional capacity."

"Your criticism is too amateurish for that luxury. Don't go above yourself, that's my sincere warning, or you could find yourself landed with playing the dog the next time we do *Beppo's Downfall* . . . No, you see, I also need a more personal word with you about my little naughty wife." He squeezed my wrist hard, indicating the need for silence.

A lizard-girl came round selling comfits, and we made ourselves as comfortable as possible until harpsichord music struck up and the curtains parted. We were pleased to see that scarcely a dozen people were attending the show, apart from our own company.

The screen was a sheet some four feet long by three high. On it shadows pranced, picked out by brilliant flares behind. Principal characters moved near to the screen, and so were densely black, while lesser characters and the scenery were moved at a greater distance, so that they appeared in greyer definition. In this way, great variety was achieved, and the scenic effects were striking, with clouds and water well imitated. The Great Charino's chief novelty was that parts of his puppets, such as their faces, and the clothes of the more important personages, were cut away and replaced by coloured glass, to give dazzling effects on the screen.

Although few of the puppets were jointed, their movement was

good and the commentary reasonably funny, if time-honoured. What was most amazing was the way in which, after a moment of watching the screen, one accepted the puppets for reality, as if there were no other!

"I don't want to do her an injustice in any way at all, and the Virgin herself knows that I cherish the tiresome baggage dearly, but my darling Singla is too fond of hopping in and out of beds that really aren't fit for her lovely and unruly body. Now she's hopped into one bed too many . . . I've been hearing rumours, Prian . . ."

At that moment, La Singla, acting perhaps on some disconcerting feminine intuition, thrust her pretty head between ours and said, "What are you two whispering about? Isn't it a dainty show?"

"Go away, my love, my honey pot," whined Lemperer. "Go and flirt in the dark with Portinari—he knows where to stop, if you don't! Prian and I are talking business."

La Singla snorted like a cute little pig and withdrew.

"You need to be more coaxing than that to a wife to keep her faithful, maestro!" I said.

The Broken Bridge was reaching its conclusion. I had seen it many times in many forms, but never so well done. The boatman was rowing across the river with every appearance of reality; his back was cunningly jointed to make the movement lifelike. Behind him, snow sparkled on high mountains. The only snag was that sweat poured off the faces of the audience, so intense was the heating of the flares which achieved the lighting effects.

"I am tired of coaxing the jade! Would not any woman give her maidenhead to be married to a successful man like me, a creative man? But now she's gone too far—much too far, Prian. I can be a vindictive man when the spirit moves me, you understand!" To help me understand this point, he pinched me hard on the wrist, so that I cried out with surprise and pain just as the plesiosaur began to munch up the ill-natured labourer mending the bridge. At that, the audience burst into laughter.

"This time she has had the impertinence to fall in love with some worthless coxcomb—yes, I know not who he is, but I found one of his impertinent letters to her, tucked in with her chemises—just this morning, when I was looking for spare laces to my

corset. I mean to have the coxcomb waylaid and beaten soundly. No man meddles with my wife's affections and fails to pay the price!"

Each of these points he emphasised with further pinches. I was careful not to give the audience further cause for laughter—an intention the more easily carried out because, in his agitation, Lemperer had seized me by the throat and pushed my head backwards over the seat, so that, like Paul Rivière in the farce of the three kings, I was "trapped between chocolate-time and eternity."

At last I broke away and slapped down his hand.

"We may be the best of friends, maestro, but this is no reason to kill me outright! Do you imagine I am the coxcomb you seek? Faith, for my honour, I would as leave climb into bed with you as with your spouse, so great is my respect for you."

"Pardon, pardon, I am naturally a man of passion and I forget myself. I trust you implicitly or I would not be taking you into my confidence. It's no joke to be cuckolded—even worse to have to admit it. Why, I'm as virile as ever I was—No, no, Prian, before this wretched shadow play ends, listen!—I have my thugs and my spies to my command, never fear, but I want you to tell me if you have seen La Singla acting in any way untoward. *In any way!* I want you to watch her closely, since you are her friend and she trusts you, as I do."

"I won't add to your number of spies."

"No, no, damn you, nothing dishonourable—just tell me what you see that's suspicious, and keep watching, eh? And I'm thinking we should build up the part of Phalante the Bankrupt. Such a funny part, especially when you play it. You've seen nothing untoward with her?"

It was not for me to mention La Singla's visit to the plump astrologer, which was innocent for all I knew.

"I find it hard to believe such a virtuous woman would deign to deceive her husband, especially such a husband as you!"

He dug me in the ribs with an elbow notorious for its lethal bone structure.

"She doesn't get much peace from a hot-blooded fellow like me, let me tell you here and now, but every woman is a rake at heart. Men are souls of virtue compared."

Peace had not fallen on the river. The broken bridge remained unrepaired. Sunset was coming on. Sweet aromatic herbs were lit to one side, to affect the audience with their pleasant odours. A fleet of plesiosaurs cruised placidly up the stream, and the tips of the mountains turned pink as the valley disappeared in shadow. It was suddenly affecting, and it was over.

"Rubbish, rubbish!" Lemperer cried, jumping on his chair. "Not a witty line in the whole thing! *Karagog* had better improve on that dismal performance or I shall not be able to sit it through!"

But most people were amused. Now they cried for cold drinks to slake their thirsts, so hot was it in the tent. Portinari came to sit next to me and we drank sherbet together.

"Well, it was a bagatelle, but very pleasing—and it had novelty!"

"When I was a boy, an old man on the Stary Most used to give *The Broken Bridge* in a barrel, with a candle for light. It is probably many centuries old."

"Like *The Visionaries* . . . All the same, this had artistry."

"Artistry enough. 'Hokum maybe, but striking theatre,'" I quoted. "It reminded me of reality without making any ineffectual attempts to imitate it slavishly."

"Besides, reality is so unpleasant . . . Think how we sit here in—well, moderate comfort, watching a succession of pictures, while behind the screen poor sweating half-naked wretches feed flares hot enough to roast themselves with."

"Isn't that the nature of all art—that the artist should suffer agonies to yield his audience one single twitch of delight!"

"Ah, then you have agreed to play *Phalante* once more! What else was old Lemperer talking about?"

Fortunately, I was spared telling any lies by a resounding series of chords on the harpsichord and the lighting up of the screen, onto which diverse dazzling figures burst, full of life and colour. Out jumped *Karagog*, with his long arms and his funny red hat such as they wear still in Byzantium, and the fun began. Although the story was little enough, plots are always less important than what they are stuffed with, and here the stuffing was of the richest.

Karagog tried to become a schoolmaster, but failed so miser-

ably that the scholars chased him from the school; tried to join the circus, but fell from the high wire into a soup tureen; joined the army, but became terrified at the sound of cannon. Images pelted across the screen. The puppet master had contrived a zoe-trope effect, so that, in the circus scenes, acrobats and jugglers skipped, leaped, and danced across the screen, some of them tossing clubs and balls as they went. And the parade of the soldiers, all in their great plumed hats, was magnificent, for they swung their arms as they went and the music played lillibullero.

The battle scene commenced. The screen darkened. Shots and screams were heard, and vivid cries of "Fire!" A lurid flickering light crossed the battlefield, where soldiers stood ready. Smoke was in the auditorium now—I heard Lemperer coughing and cursing. All at once the screen itself burst into flames, and the puppet operators were revealed behind, running madly from the flames. The whole tent was ablaze!

"You see—realism carried too far!" Portinari said, gasping with laughter as we ran out. A pile of broadsheets stood by the exit and I grabbed one as we went by. Outside, all was pandemonium. The puppets were being flung unceremoniously into a cart, while the assistants threw buckets of water at the blaze and the manager screamed. The flames were spreading to some bowers with trellises where wisteria grew.

"This will improve our attendance figures, I imagine," Lemperer said, rubbing his hands. "What a blaze! It was madness to have flares inside a tent, as they did! Let's just hope they don't get it under control too quickly!"

Ashes of burnt tent were falling like autumn leaves. One settled on La Singla's shoulder, she screamed, and Lemperer beat at it with blows which would have extinguished Vesuvius, so that his poor wife fell away from him shrieking in pain. Turning to me, gesturing ferociously, he said, "What an end to worry if she too went up in flames, eh?"

Portinari and I, and some of the others in the cast of *The Visionaries*, went to cool down in the nearest wine shop. In its darkest recess stood a keg of Bavarian beer, and of this the pair of us ordered two tankards. With mutual pledges, we lifted it foaming and amber and living to our lips.

"What an old bastard Lemperer is!" said Portinari, wiping his mouth and sighing.

"I wonder we work for him."

"Yet he has his humorous points. I recall when I first applied to him, I asked if he had any hints for a young actor and he said, 'Yes, one above all: keep the sunny side of forty.'"

"Good advice—which I for one mean to follow." I pulled out from my shirt the broadsheet I had picked up in the pleasure gardens and showed him the rhyme in black letters set at its foot:

Our Shadow Figures, with their mimic strife,
They are but to Amuse or chase your Care,
And beg Indulgence from you Phantoms there,
Within the greater Raree-show of Life.
From Orient and Far Cathay come they.
Even like you, Someone behind the Screen
Controls their Acts—so think, when you have seen,
Your Life like theirs is but a Shadow-Play!

We roared with laughter over it. "It was this inflammatory stuff, and not the flares which set the tent alight," I said.

"I could do as well before you drain your tankard," said Portinari.

"You have little faith in my capacity for Bavarian beer!"

I raised my tankard to my lips and commenced to drink, while my portly friend screwed his face into a ghastly enough grimace to make his Muse cower in submission. As I set the tankard down, he raised a hand, uttering a cry of triumph.

"There's no Free Will—or if so, 'tis as rare
As is Free Beer! Our puppets teach you this.
But this analogy is neither here nor there . . ."

"Yes, 'For puppets have no Hearts to give the Fair.'"

"No, no, wait—'Since Humans, unlike Puppets, Drink and Piss.' It has to be an A,B,A,B, rhyme scheme!"

"I concede victory, my fabulous fat friend, and will prove to you that free beer is not so scarce as you may think . . ."

Eventually I made my way home for a siesta, going slowly by

way of the coolest and most shadowed alleys. Much was on my mind besides the beer, for the shadow play had given me a splendid notion for our own comedy.

So the surprise was not entirely as pleasant as it might have been when I turned in at my archway in the Street of the Woodcarvers. A female form slipped out of the shadows toward me, to reveal itself as La Singla. She was full of apprehension that she might have been followed and insisted on coming upstairs with me—not that I long resisted the idea, for her perturbation lent her added prettiness. How demurely and professionally she turned her bangled Iberian wrists in expressing that disquiet!

Of course, she wished to find out from me what her husband had been saying before the fire started—wished so insistently that she pressed me against the door of my own bed chamber.

“Ah, so you are involved in some deep affair, Mistress Lemperer! Else why should you be so anxious! You delightful creature, you have certainly come to a man who can take your mind off your troubles.”

“Do not sport with me! Tell me what my husband said—you know as well as I that he cannot be trusted. Tell me, and I will give you a kiss and go.”

“It’s a friendly opening offer. Firstly, you must tell me who your fortunate lover is, then I will help you.”

She looked very unhappy. “That I cannot do, for I do not trust you entirely.”

“Sol! Whom do you trust? Well, who could trust you?” But I began to feel sorry for her and eventually told her what her husband had said, confirming that I had not revealed her visit to the plump fortune-teller. She gave me my reward—and largesse beyond—and when I had seen her out, I fell on my bed and went at once to sleep.

That evening I left the Street of the Woodcarvers rather later than usual. I had spent some while working on my idea, conceived in the *ombres chinoises*. My inspiration was this: that I should play Phalante as a soldier rather than as an apothecary, and we could then bring in some contemporary business referring obliquely to the bankrupt military state of Byzantium, which would naturally amuse a Duke of Ragusa.

I rummaged in my chest and produced most of the uniform needed, even to a fine pair of soft cuffed boots. I equipped myself with a wooden sword in scabbard, which hung from a heavy scarf crossing over the coat from one shoulder, and a fine cravat dividing in two and falling near to my waist, in the fashion of Croatian mercenaries.

Regarding me in my cheval glass was a gallant military figure! He saluted me. All he lacked for true effect was a plumed tricorne hat. What battlefield would not have been enhanced by his apparition on it? He was fully as colourful as any puppet—and I could work all his joints with greatest flexibility!

I began to work them, marching my gallant soldier back and forth before the mirror. What a swagger he had! How alert and fierce he was, fit to cut down fifty Ottomans! How speedily and yet gracefully he drew his sword, tempered from best Toledo timber!

There lay one of the pleasures of being a player. I could be who or what I would, merely by changing my outer clothes. An old man, a young man? Rich or poor? Soldier, judiciary, cut-purse, monk, apothecary, noble, beggar, miller . . . ? All trades, professions, ranks, and degrees were within me—wise man or fool, it needed only the appropriate dress for the appropriate character to be called forth, to take me over, to live my life for a brief hour. I had been such a necromancer that my every mouthful of food had been eaten by the correct star, such an elder statesman that my every limb had trembled and creaked for weeks after, such a jackanapes that all my friends shunned me while the piece was running! By no more than the trifling adjustment of my hat, I had plumbed the wells of folly or scaled the mountains of truth. I was that instrument, an actor, which could strike out all the chords of human feeling.

Only one trifling disability attended this great gift: among the dazzling concourse within me, my own self was often lost to view.

The next morning I allowed the cockerels to rouse me earlier than usual. Today I would be a soldier, and go to Lemperer's rehearsal as a soldier. In that fashion, I could persuade him more readily to my idea; he could resist a costume no more than I. It was a shame I would have to borrow a plumed hat from him. But

would not La Singla love me a little more for seeing me in these wondrous feathers?

While dressing, I gazed down at the street, which the bustle of the day had already wakened. Apprentices were coming and going, often with food and drink, laundry women were about, and the milk cart was rumbling along the street, pulled by an ox with silver bells on its horns. And I saw a soldier there, happening to catch his gaze as he glanced up at my window. He wore a plumed tricorne such as I coveted!

Going down at leisure, I bought a pasty at the baker's shop, still hot from the oven, and munched it as I went along. I would be in time for Mass, for once . . . *Resurget igitur caro* . . . But before getting to the cathedral, I could not resist turning off, as customary, to walk under the ruined arcade and see the Night Guard dismiss in the square.

I stood munching at one end of the arcade, sunning myself and watching the bright uniforms and smart movements of the Guard. Nearby, in ferny shade, two magicians crouched in an alcove, muttering over a great bronze globe. Their two corrupt boys played barefoot by them with caduceus and other implements. In the shadows behind, among their tarpaulins, a sacrificial goat stared fixedly up at a rent in the masonry, through which a tattered and blasted pine grew. One of the magicians had a malign and stupid face, which stretched sideways like a toad's in a smile as he turned and beckoned to me.

As I moved away, I was aware of someone following. I stepped back behind a crumbling column. Past hurried the very same young soldier I had seen from my window walking in the street below!

So military were my thoughts that, on impulse, I drew my sword and confronted him.

"Spare me!" he cried, throwing out his arms. "I intend you no harm. It was your acquaintance I wanted, not your life, by any means."

He was a handsome little figure, if a trifle gaunt, and no more than a couple of years my senior. I envied him his curly brown moustache, although there was something none too trustworthy in his look. Liking the situation and his anguish, which I noted for future rendering, I kept my sword point at his throat. This tab-

leau was broken by one of the magicians. Under his black enveloping gown, he must have been a cripple, for he crawled across the paving stones, thrusting out one gnarled brown hand and saying to us, with a display of yellow fangs, "Take heed, young masters, for you two are unknowingly involved in one bed, and trouble is about to befall one or other of you!"

I put up my sword and ran, and the soldier ran too.

"That wizard lies!" cried the soldier. "I have less than no inclination to climb into your bed!"

"Nor I into yours! Sooner into a river bed!"

We halted and glared at each other. Then he reluctantly smiled and held out his hand. "I never take the word of whores or soothsayers. I am Captain Pellegrino de Lasinio, black sheep of the Lasinio family of Dakka, and I admit I was following you."

"And I am the actor Prian, appearing on the boards as Bryan de Chirolo, star of the merchants' company. Unlike you, I am a soldier only in dress."

"As a professional soldier can observe . . . But of course the deception would take anyone else."

"By the same token, I observe you are the black sheep of your family. Tell me why you follow me. I covet your hat—what of mine do you covet?"

His manner became downcast, he stared gloomily down at his boots. "Your peace of mind I mainly covet. In what a carefree manner did you stroll along, eating your cake! As for me—well, I am desperately in love!"

I burst out laughing. "Come, Lasinio! Did my manner so easily deceive you? Every day I am in love anew. Every hour some fresh beauty takes my heart by storm. Why, only last afternoon—no, only my ability as an actor conceals the perfect turmoil in which I live!"

"My turmoil is very far from perfect. You see, the love of my life is already married—and to such a mean and lecherous old curmudgeon that her every hour is a misery. Come, let's walk—it will help me conceal my agitation! Yes, she breaks her heart for my sake but dare not leave this antique satyr of hers."

"It's a sad tale, my friend, but your course is clear—you must either love elsewhere or winkle her away from the antique satyr."

We had begun to walk in the general direction of Lemperer's,

but almost at once Lasinio stopped again and grasped me by the arm.

"This is desperate, for tomorrow I must leave Malacia and go with my regiment to fight against the forces of Suliman the Magnificent, which even now besiege the gates of Tuscady. So by tonight I must have definite pledges from my love, and bear her hence. You can help—you must help!"

"You need a wily attorney!"

"I need you, Bryan de Chirolo, for you know the lady of my affections. She visited your apartments last afternoon; I followed her. She is the beautiful, the divine, the ever-adorable La Singla!"

The hussy! A captain of mercenaries! It was now my turn to start walking. My present companion was the rogue Lemperer was making all the fuss about; he had delivered himself into my hands, just as had La Singla! What a sheepish black sheep! As I wondered how the situation could be turned to my advantage, the fellow began to resolve that question too.

"I know that her senile old goat of a husband trusts you, Bryan. You will soon be again in her presence. Take her a message from me. You see, I fear him, in case he sets his followers on me. I'll stay here. You go to her, tell her how desperate in love of her I am—will you do this!"

"Say on."

"Tell her I have my pistol primed and stand with its muzzle ever and anon at my temple, so acute are my fits of despair. Will you do this?"

"Say on."

"Tell her—out of the venerable old twit's hearing, naturally—that I will have a Paris waiting at the Stary Most at midnight tonight, that I shall be in it, waiting to bear her away—"

"To Tuscady?"

"To Tuscady, for there goes our regiment."

"Am I to inform this divine, this adorable, this ever-lovely creature that her tryst is with you or with Suliman the Magnificent?"

An unsoldierly pout, which the moustache was totally unable to conceal, stole over his features.

"What I need is help, not mockery! Suppose you were to give your life in a foreign field on the morrow? Would you feel so jovial as now you do?"

We had paused again, the better to maul each other conversationally, and I saw, glancing over my shoulder, that we were being watched from behind an ancient obelisk bearing only the letters S.E.X.T.U.S. Why should the lame magician follow us? I felt uneasy and knew it was time to make a deal with my soldier friend.

"I sorrow for you, Captain Lasinio—though I trust that if you sincerely believed you were to fall under a swinging scimitar tomorrow, you would be on your knees in San Marco's now, rather than ordering indiscreet Parises."

"Just recall that you are playing the soldier now, not the priest! Will you take my message persuasively to the irresistible possessor of my heart?"

"I will, truthfully and exactly, omitting no detail of your masterly plan—on one condition. You must lend me your hat—no, I know you can hardly fight and bleed without it, but she shall return it to you at midnight tonight. By then, it should have worked my purpose with Lemperer or not, as the case may be. Lend it to me today!"

"If your purpose distracts him from his darling wife, then yes, a thousand times."

"Once suffices, if it carries your tricorne with it!"

So I put his hat upon my head, where it fitted well and certainly felt as nobly as on his. We shook hands and parted, and he stepped away immediately into the deep shadow of a side lane, and was lost.

For a moment I stood there; but the notion that a beady sorcerer's eye was upon me made me move. There was much I wished to ponder upon concerning the most favourable disposition of my knowledge. Since the hour was still early, I decided I would muster my thoughts over a glass of hot chocolate.

Choosing a table as well hidden from common view as possible, I sat myself at one of the cafés by the canal side. It was agreeable to be addressed as "Captain," and to receive more spirited service than usual. I stroked my upper lip. For the part of Phalante, if Lemperer accepted my idea, I would grow as brave a moustache as any member of the Lasinio family ever sported. If I played the cards in my hand right, not only would Lemperer be forced to accept my idea, but his wife should be mine at mid-

night, and let who would oppose the affairs of the Turkish sultan!

As I threw down a denario on the table and left, two thugs ran out from a nearby doorway and pinned my arms before I could draw my sword. As may be imagined, I fought with audacity, yelling for help at the same time—yet was powerless to resist every kick behind and clout over the shoulders that the two vagabonds chose to give me.

They made no attempt to snatch my purse. Instead they dragged me toward the canal. Inch by inch I battled against them—uselessly! My offers to pay them rather than ruin my uniform fell on their senseless ears with no effect. *Splash!* Oh, swans, oh, geese!—How sorry was I to disturb your territory in that rude way!

Rising like a demonstration of the hydraulic art, I came to the surface in time to see my two assailants running off. Almost within my reach stood a monumental block of stone from which the lion's head jutted above the water line; the lion carried an iron ring in its mouth. I grasped the ring and pulled myself up with the aid of patrons of the café who came to my assistance now that danger was past. A nearby bargeman fished out Lasinio's hat and set it on my head, where it continued to pour water down my face for some while. I was surrounded by a crowd which showed its sympathy by laughing so much that I was obliged to break through their ranks and run.

In the early moments of my ducking, I imagined that this was some scheme of Lasinio's, obscurely furthering his purpose. Then the truth dawned on me: this was Lemperer's work! Anxious to see that his wife remained faithful, by force if necessary, he had found out about Lasinio and set his traps for that soldier of fortune. And his thugs had mistaken me for Lasinio. Why not? Did I not look every inch the military man?

Very well. The maestro should be confronted with the evidence of what his men had done to an innocent man! I squelched in the direction of his house, intent on humiliating him.

How promptly, I thought to myself, the lame magician's prophecy (which I now fully understood) had been carried out! There was something suspect in that promptness; perhaps the magician himself drew a modest retainer from Lemperer—such things were not unknown. Now I meant to pay him out.

My way lay past the ruinous triumphal arch under which sat the plump astrologer on his little platform. As I came up to it, I halted in surprise. There before the astrologer, just as yesterday—for the hour was about the same—stood the golden La Singla, on whose account I had just been ducked. I stepped behind one of the fallen capitals and watched her, spotlighted in the same ray of sunshine as the day before.

How pliant her movements, how expressive her gestures! Only a skilled actress could have been so affectingly natural. I saw the astrologer bend toward her as if fascinated. I saw them speak, although their low-spoken words did not reach me. But, so telling were her gestures, I understood everything going on between them.

She told him that she had returned as promised yesterday to receive from him the horoscope he was going to cast for her. What delicate expression! The girl should have joined the *pantomimi*, who use no words! Yet she was not so much a mistress of gesture that I could grasp at first whose the horoscope was; only as he tugged a scrip of paper from his sleeve and handed it to her did I understand that this was not hers but the young soldier's horoscope! She was receiving Lasinio's fate!

With precise timing, La Singla produced from the pocket tied by ribbon to her skirt one single silver coin and pressed it into the astrologer's palm. Her posture as she reached upward was beautiful to see. The man managed to bow without rising from his chair. Straightway, she opened his scrip and cast her fair eyes down at what was written there. The exquisite droop of her wrist! The delicate retreat of colour from her face! The pretty way her lips opened and her affrighted fingertips flew in dismay to her brow! Her melting look of sorrow! What art!

From where I, a distant groundling, stood, the actress' subtle cheironomy made the contents of the soldier's horoscope as clear as if I scanned them myself.

Lasinio's hours in the shadow play of life were numbered! She and the astrologer gestured, looked almost fearfully toward the east. Ah, Suliman, thy cruel sword! Thy conquering power against the *giaour*! Alas, poor Lasinio! So young! So soon! And the stars so rudely conjoined against thee!

With trembling limbs, with ashen countenance, La Singla

tucked the paper into her breast and ran from the place, as in her last exit in the Albrizzi piece. And, at the last moment, her glances toward my place of concealment!

As I suspected—instinctive little actress though she was, her best was called out only by an audience; she had been aware all along that I watched her! A moment before—no more than a moment—and I had thought that she would rush straight to Lasinio with her grim tidings and persuade him to let the mercenaries leave at midnight without him. Now, weighing the meaning of that last glance of hers, I knew she was more art than heart!—Real though her anguish was, her delight in pantomime was more real. The Paris might well trundle off at midnight, but La Singla would not be inside; she preferred to play out her roles, not to eyes glazing in death before the walls of Tuscady, but to eyes that could appreciate to the full her capabilities. Her nature was such that military necessity would always have to bow before artistic temperament. In other words—the pleasure I had had with her the previous afternoon was but a beginning. . . .

Drenched though I was by my ducking, it was a Prian full of high hope who marched in to humiliate Lemperer and to berate him for his mistake. I noticed that La Singla slipped in at the side doorway. I made a grand entrance and confronted Lemperer before a dozen witnesses, dripping dramatically upon his carpetings.

“My dearest Prian, what a misfortune!” Up went his withered hands, expressing sorrow and remorse, as he skipped before me. “You of all people to be beaten up in the street like a common adulterer! What a sight you must have made, to be sure, and how the heartless wretches who saw you launched among the fishes must have bellowed with uncouth laughter! What a reluctant Neptunel! What a paltry Poseidon!”

Arming myself against the titters of my friends, I said to him, “It’s no use apologising, Lemperer! You and I are parting company from this hour unless I have full recompense for such a villainous error by your henchmen!”

He grasped my arm, though daintily, and dragged me toward his inner office. “Come into my sanctum, dear boy, my poor aquatic dragoon, and let us talk privately. Why, even your

feather's drooping! We can sort this out with no hard feeling, I'm certain!"

Once we were in the room he closed the door behind us and locked it, continuing to talk with no change in tone, though a certain amount of venom mixed with the rheum in his eyes.

"But I would hate you to think my henchmen made any sort of error, my fishy loverboy! They don't make errors. Oh, no! They'd know you in any getup, however unbecoming. They followed my dear little wife yesterday at noon, *and* saw you coax her up to your desperate room, *and* counted the hours before she left again, *and* then watched her meeting with that goat-blooded mercenary, Lasinio, *and* reported all to me. . . ."

With each conjunction, he was clouting me fiercely round the shoulders with his stick for emphasis.

"*And* I took appropriate action to deal with you both, *and* I paid the astrologer to cast a false horoscope for Lasinio, *and* I paid the bodyguard to pitch you into the canal, *and* I'm delighted to see that all went so well!"

"*And* you realise I am soaking your lovely Persian carpet! Is this what I get for trusting you? Why, I told Captain Lasinio to stay away from your wife, and now this is my reward!"

He burst into laughter. "You are for all the world like Karagog! In every role you have little success! Your lover was not much of a performance, your soldier was—if I may say so—a washout! You'd better stick to acting!"

I began to sneeze. "The chill of that canal has done for me. Like Lasinio, I'll die young!"

"No catching cold!" His expression changed. "We don't want you laid up—you aren't getting out of *The Visionaries* as easily as that!" He ran forward to try and help me take off some of my wet clothes, snatching down a golden robe he had used for the part of Prospero not two weeks before. I sneezed the harder. Gradually his false concern turned real. Unlocking the door, he burst from the room crying for La Singla to come.

"Bring a compress! Minister to this palsied player—and try to keep your hands off him! We must have him fit for the evening's performance, if he's fit for nothing else!"

Two minutes more, and she was in my arms. But Phalante the

Bankrupt was played before the Duke of Ragusa as an apothecary as usual, in ordinary apothecary's clothes, without uniform.

CASTLE SCENE WITH PENITENTS

The days in which I was recovering from a fever under my sister's care seemed like a long afternoon in childhood, when eternity begins punctually after the midday meal, to linger on long beyond twilight in an odour of flowers and warm rooms. Their comfort and idleness were almost more enslaving than the fever.

The chamber assigned me as a nest was high in the Mantegan castle, overlooking the ragged roofs of an inner court. Despite its height, honeysuckle had climbed up to the window and beyond, to the eaves, clinging wirily to the pitted stonework. During my time in bed, the sound of bees filled the room, together with the pale scent of blossoms.

My sister Katerina sat by my bed for hours. She allowed nobody but her personal servant to attend me. Mostly, she looked after me herself. Katerina was my one surviving sister. I would rouse and open an eye and there she would be, patiently sitting; I would drift off into a realm of feverish dreams, imagining her gone, and then open my eyes again, to the luxury of finding her still there. As I recovered, she took to sitting by the window, stroking her lovely amber-coloured cat, Poseidon, or working at her embroidery.

She still remained during my convalescence, tranquil by the sunlight, while I lolled in the shade of the room, weak from the effects of my illness, and we turned old times into spasmodic conversation.

"I'm truly grateful for your care, Katie. Now the summer is here, let's see more of one another than we have managed recently."

"I'm glad of the wish—and yet forces operate in life to separate people, whatever they wish."

"We'll take care that those forces avoid us. We'll remain light-hearted and rise above them."

Silence save for the industrious bees, and then Katerina said, gesturing outside, "These elegant birds with forked tails are flying about our towers again. They arrive every year from somewhere—some say from the bottoms of ponds. They never alight on the ground. I believe they have no feet or legs, according to Aristotle."

"They're called cavorts, and are supposed to come from a continent of southern ice which no man has ever seen."

She made no answer, instead producing a small white comb with which she commenced to comb out the lustrous amber coat of Poseidon, till his purr was as loud as the noise of the bees.

"It's hard to imagine a land that no living person has ever seen."

"Is it? I believe *we* live in such a land. Close at our hand, everything is mysterious, undiscovered."

She laughed. "I'm sure that's a line from one of your plays!"

"Whenever I say anything profound, or even sensible, everyone tells me I stole it from some wretched comedy or other. Don't you recall how clever I was as a child?"

"I recall how you used to do living statues for us, and we had to guess whom you were supposed to represent. And you nearly drowned in the lagoon when you were doing Triton! I ruined my new dress, helping to rescue you."

"It was worth it for the sake of art. You were always the best at guessing, Katie!"

As she collected a combful of fur, she would pull it away and flick it out of the window. Combful after combful poured out of Poseidon's coat and drifted out into the warm air beyond.

"Could it be unlucky to see cavorts on a certain day, do you think?"

"I never heard so. Who told you that?"

"Perhaps it's an old wives' tale. They say that if you see a cavort on a certain day of the year, you will think about it ever after, and gradually the thought becomes so obsessive that you can think of nothing else."

"I've heard that theory expounded of other things, but surely not of a mere bird. It's ridiculous!"

"Possy, look at all this fur you are wasting, you silly cat! Peo-

ple's thoughts are funny affairs—perhaps they could be attracted to one special thing, as a lodestone enchants metals.”

I stretched and climbed off the bed, groaning and yawning pleurably.

“Certainly I know people whose thoughts are obsessed by horses or precious stones or women or—”

“Women are different!”

“Different each from each other, sister, I agree—”

“And then there's poor father, whose thoughts are obsessed by his books . . .”

She released yet another handful of fur through the window. I went over to her, lolling against the side of the window and tickling the cat's head, saying idly, “I suppose we are all obsessed with something or other, even if we don't recognise the fact.”

Katerina looked up at me. With a hint of reproach, she said, “You still generalise about life. You take it so lightly, don't you? You think everything's arranged for your amusement.”

“I have no evidence to the contrary so far. You used to be care-free enough, Katie. Is Volpato unfaithful to you? Does he beat you? Why does he leave you here alone for so long?”

She did not remove her gaze from me for a while. Then she looked down at her slender hands and said, “I was fascinated by Volpato and the Mantegan family even as a carefree child. On my eighth birthday, an old soothsayer told me I would grow up to marry him. I did so, and I love him, so that's all there is to it.”

“Predestination! Have you no will of your own, Katie?”

“Don't tease me! You are better, I see. You can leave the castle tomorrow, if you desire.”

I kissed her hand and said, “Sweet sis, don't be cross with me! You are such a beautiful person and I have much liked being pampered by you. I shall marry a girl as much like you as possible—and I will leave the castle tomorrow in search of her!”

She laughed then, and all was well between us, and Poseidon purred more loudly than ever.

The window at which we all were was deep-set within its embrasure. Its ledge was fully wide enough for Katerina and her cat to sit there in comfort and gaze out at the world below. Or a man might stand there and, with no inconvenience to himself, discharge a musket from the coign of vantage. The wood-

work round the window was lined like an aged peasant's brow with the ceaseless diurnal passage of sunlight; perhaps some such thought had crossed the mind of an old unknown poet who, with many a flourish, had engraved two tercets of indifferent verse on one of the small leaded panes of the window:

What twain I watch through my unseeing eye:
Inside, the small charades of men; outside,
The tall parades of regulating skyl!

Thus I a barrier am between a tide
Of man's ambitions and the heavens' meed—
Of things that can't endure and things that bide.

Poseidon changed his position and lay stomach upward on my sister's lap, so that it was now combsful of white fur which were released on the breezes to join the brown. The afternoon had created within the courtyard a bowl of warm air which spilled outward and upward, carrying the cat's fur with it; I was surprised to find that not a single strand had reached the ground. Instead, the brown and white tufts floated in a great circle, moving between the façades of the rooms on this side of the courtyard and the next, the stables and lofts with their little tower opposite us, and the tall and weather-blasted pines which stood on the fourth side, by the wall with the gatehouse. A whole layer of air, level with our window, and extending to each of the four limiting walls, was filled with Poseidon's fur. It floated like feathers on water, but in a perpetual stir. Katerina squeaked with amazement when I pointed it out; with her attention fixed on me, she had not noticed the pleasant phenomenon.

The cavorts were also busy. There were perhaps six pairs of them, and they swooped up from their positions in eaves and leads, tearing at the layer of fur, and whisking it down again to line their nests with. We stood watching, delighted by their activity. So intent were the little birds on their work that they often blundered almost near enough to our window to be caught. Majestically round and round floated the fur, and erratically up and down plunged the birds.

"When the baby birds are born, they'll be grateful to you, Po-

seidon!" said Katerina. "They'll be brought up in proper luxury!"

"Perhaps they'll form a first generation of cat-loving birds!"

When at length we went downstairs, the fur was still circulating, the birds still pulling it to shreds, still bearing it back to their aerial nests.

"Let's play cards again tonight . . . Birds are so witless, they must always be busy—there's nothing to them but movement. I never find that time hangs heavy on my hands, Prian, do you?"

"Oh, I adore to be idle. It's then I'm best employed. But I wonder time doesn't hang heavy for you here, alone in the castello."

Placing a hand on my sleeve, smiling in a pleasant evasive way, Katerina said, "Why don't you employ yourself by visiting our wizard of the frescoes, Nicholas Dalembert? There's a man with a mind obsessed by only one thing, his art. Like his wife, he's melancholy but interesting to talk to—when he feels disposed to talk."

"Dalembert's still here! It's many a moon since I last saw him, and then he was threatening to leave the castle on the morrow! The man is probably one of the geniuses of our age, if unrecognised."

As we descended to her suite of rooms, and her pretty black maid, Peggy, ran to open the doors for her, Katerina said, "Dalembert is always threatening to leave. I'd as soon believe him if he threatened to finish his frescoes!"

"How can your husband afford to pay him?"

She laughed. "He can't! That's why Dalembert still lives here. He is so lazy! At least he has a free roof over his head. And he's safer here in isolation now there's plague again in Malacia."

"It always comes with the hot weather."

"Go and talk to him. You know the way. We'll meet this evening in the chapel."

It was always pleasant to stroll through the irregularities of the Mantegan family castle. Its perspectives were like none I knew in the world, with its impromptu landings, its unexpected chambers, its dead ends, its never-ending stairs, its descents from stone into wood, its fine marbles and rotting plasters, its noble statues and ignoble decay.

The Mantegan family had never been rich within memory of living man; now they were positively bankrupt, and my brother-

in-law, Volpato, was the last of the line. It was whispered of him that he had poisoned both his elder brother, Claudio, and his elder sister, Saprista, in order to gain control of what little family wealth remained—Claudio by spreading a biting acid on the saddle of his stallion, so that the deadly ichor moved from the anus upward to the heart, Saprista by smearing a toxic orpiment on a golden statue of the Virgin which she was wont to kiss during her private devotions, so that she died rotting from the lips inward. If all this was true or not, Volpato did not reveal. Evil stories clustered about him, but he acted kindly enough in his treatment of my sister, as well as having the goodness to be away for long periods, seeking his fortune among the megatherium-haunted savannahs of the New World.

Meanwhile, his castle on the banks of the Toi fell into decay, and his wife did not become a mother. But I was proud of it, and of my dear sister for marrying so well—the only one of us to marry into court circles.

The way to Dalember's quarters lay through a long gallery in which Volpato displayed some of his treasures. Rats scuttled among them in the dim light. Among much that was rubbish were some fine blue-glazed dishes brought back from the lands of the Orinoco; ivories of mastodon carved during the last Neanderthal civilization for the royal house of Itssobeshiquetzilaha; parchments rescued by a Mantegan ancestor from the great library at Alexandria (among them two inscribed by the library's founder, Ptolemy Soter) and portraits on silk of the seven Alexandrian Pleiades preserved from the same; a case full of Carthaginian ornament; jewels from the faery smiths of Atlantis; an orb reputed to have belonged to Birsha, King of Gomorrah, with the crown of King Bera of Sodom; a figurine of a priest with a lantern from the court of Caerleon-on-Usk; the stirrups of the favourite stallion of the Persian Bahram, Governor of Media, that great hunter; tapestries from Zeta, Raška, and the courts of the early Nemanijas, together with robes cut for Miluitin; a lyre, chalice, and other objects from the Mousterian Period; a pretty oaken screen carved with dim figures of children and animals which I particularly liked, said to have come from distant Lyonesse before it sank below the waves; together with other items of some interest. But all that was of real worth had been sold off long ago,

and the custodian sacked, to keep the family in meat and wine.

Tempted by a whim for which I could not account, I paused on my way among the mouldy relics and flung open an iron-strapped chest at random. Books bound in vellum met my gaze, among them one more richly jacketed, in an embroidered case studded with beads of ruby and topaz.

Taking it over to the light, I opened it and found it had no title. It was a collection of poems in manuscript, probably compiled by their creator. At first glance, the poems looked impossibly dull, odes to Liberty and the Chase, apostrophes to the Pox and Prosody, and so on. Then, as I flicked the pages, a shorter poem in terza rima caught my eye.

The poem consisted of four verses—the first two of which were identical with those adorning my bedroom window! Its title had reference to the emblematic animal over the main archway of the castle: “The Stone Watchdog at the Gate Speaks.” Whoever had transcribed part of the poem onto the window had been ingenious in accrediting its lines to the transparent glass. Amused by the coincidence, for coincidences were my daily dish, I read the final verses.

No less, while things celestial proceed
 Unfettered, men and women all are slaves,
 Chaining themselves to what their hearts
 most need.
 Methinks that whatsoe’er the mind once craves,
 Will free it first and then it captive take
 By slow degrees, down into Free Will’s graves.

Alas, Prosody had not replied when addressed! Yet the sentiment expressed might be true. I generally agreed with myself on the truth of the moralising in poems. Perhaps very little could be said that was a flat lie, provided it rhymed. Thoughtfully, I tore the page from its volume and tucked it in my doublet, tossing the book back into the chest, among the other antiquities.

Beyond the long gallery was the circular guard room, with its spiral stair up to the ramparts. Although the guard room had once been a building standing alone, it had long since come within the strangling embrace of the castle which, like some

organic thing, had thrown out galleries and wings and additional courts, century by century, engulfing houses and other structures as it went. The old guard room retained something of its outdoor character despite being embedded inside the masonry of the castle; a pair of cavorts skimmed desperately round the shell, trapped after venturing in through carelessly boarded arrow slits on the inside-facing wall. On the floor lay a shred of Poseidon's fur which the birds had dropped in their panic.

The character of the building changed again beyond the guard room. Here were stables, now converted to the usages of the Mantegan family's resident artist, Nicholas Dalembert. Dalembert worked up in the loft, while his many children romped over the cobbles below.

I called to him. After a moment, his head appeared in the opening above, he waved, and began to climb down the ladder. He started to speak before he reached the bottom.

"So, Master Prian, it's almost a year—it's a long while since we've seen you at Mantegan. As God is my witness, this is an inhospitable place. I wonder what can have brought you here now. Not pleasure, I'll be bound."

I explained that I had been ill, that my sister was caring for me, and that I might be leaving on the morrow. "At first I thought it was the plague troubling me! There's much of it in Malacia, especially in the Stary Most district—brought from the East, the medicos say, on the backs of the Turkish armies. Whenever you fall into a fever these days, you fear the worst."

"You're safe from the plague here, that at least I'll say. The plague likes juice and succulence, and there's nothing of that in this place." He cast a gloomy eye down on his children, then busy flogging an old greyhound they had cornered; certainly they were not the plumpest of children.

Dalembert was a hefty fellow, as befits an artist who spends much time dissecting men, horses, and dinosaurs. The years had bowed his broad shoulders and trained a mass of grey hair about his shoulders. He had a huge cadaverous face with startling black eyes whose power was reinforced by the great black line of his eyebrows.

"I came to see how the frescoes were progressing, Nicholas."

"They're as incomplete as they were last Giovedi Grassi Festi-

val, when you and the players were performing here. Nothing can be done—I can't work anymore without pay and, although I don't want to complain to you about your own brother-in-law, Milord Volpato would be better employed setting his lands in order than involving me in his schemes for self-aggrandisement. I'm so hard up I've even had to sack the lad who was colouring in my skies for me."

As he was making this dismal speech, he was leading me through a side door and across a narrow court. His steps were heavy, his manner slow and deliberate. I wondered at him and his situation. I had no doubt that he was among the greatest painters in the land, and not just in Malacia; yet he had wasted a decade here—indeed, seemed to have settled here, forever dawdling on the Mantegan frescoes, forever experimenting with a dozen other arts. Sometimes he quarrelled with Volpato and threatened to leave. All the while, he complained of Volpato's stinginess. Yet Volpato also seemed to have some justice on his side when he, in his turn, complained that he housed and supported an idle painter and got no reward for it.

We entered the banqueting hall, with its pendant vaulting and splendid lattice window, fantastic with carved transoms, overlooking the River Toi. Dalembert's unfinished frescoes took their orientation from this window, and their lighting schemes. The theme was the Activities of Man and the Prescience of God. Only one or two pastoral scenes and the dinosaur hunt were complete; for the rest, one or two isolated figures or details of background stood out in a melancholy way behind the scaffolding.

As Dalembert plodded to and fro, expounding what he intended to do, I could see something of his vision, could see the entire hall as a sweet elegiac rhapsody of Youth, as he planned it to be. The cartoons scattered about showed that his wonderful phantasies, his glorious and ample figures, drawn together in grandiose colour orchestrations, opened new horizons of painting. In the marriage scene, sketched in and part painted, the wedding of an early Mantegan to Beatrice of Burgundy was commemorated. What delicacy and perception!

"The secret is the light," I said.

For light seemed to linger on the princess with a serene if sad

intimacy, and on her banners and followers with no less lucidity. The church with its galleries and the view beyond were carefully drawn in, proof of Dalembert's marvellous command of perspective.

The artist paused before a military scene, where soldiers were shooting birds and a peasant boy stood comically wearing a large helmet and holding a shield. In the background rose a small fantastic city, drawn and washed over.

Dalembert dismissed it all with a curt wave of one hand.

"That's all I've done here since we last met. The whole task is impossible without adequate funds. Adequate talent, too."

"It's beautiful, Nicholas. The city, with its ragged battlements, its towers, domes, and overhanging garde-robes—how well it's set amid its surroundings!"

"Well enough, perhaps, yet there's nothing there which my master, Albrecht, could not have done thirty years ago—fifty years ago."

"Surely perfection is more important than progression?"

He looked at me with his dark and burning eyes. "I didn't take you for a man who preferred a stagnant pond to running water. Ah, I can do nothing, nothing! Outside beyond these crumbling walls is that great burning world of triumphs and mobilities, while I'm here immobile. Only by art, only through painting, can one master it and its secrets! Seeing is not enough—we do not see until we have copied it, until we have faithfully transcribed everything . . . everything . . . especially the divine light of heaven, without which there is nothing."

"You would have here, if you could only continue with your work, something more than a transcription—"

"Don't flatter me. I hate it sincerely. I'll take money, God knows I'll take money, but not praise. Only God is worthy of praise. There is no merit anywhere but He gives it. See the locks of that soldier's hair, the bloom on the boy's cheek, the bricks of the walls of the fortification, the plumage of the little bird as it flutters to the sward—do I have them exact? No, I do not! I have imitations! You don't imagine—you are not deceived into believing there is no wall there, are you?"

"But I expect the wall. Your accomplishment is that through perspective and colouring, you show us more than a wall."

"No, no, far less than a wall . . . A wall is a wall, and all my ambition can only make it less than a wall. You look for mobility and light—I give you dust and statuary! It's blasphemy—life offered death!"

I did not understand him, but I said nothing. He stood stock still, fixing his gaze in loathing on the fortified city he had depicted, and I was aware of the formidable solidity of him, as if he were constructed of condensed darkness inside his tattered cloak.

Finally he turned away and said, as if opening a new topic of conversation, "Only God is worthy of praise. He gives and takes all things."

"He has also given us the power to create."

"He gives all things, and so many we are unable to accept. We stand in a new age, Master Prian. This is a new age—I can feel it all about me, cooped up though I am in this dreadful place. Now at last—for the first time in a thousand years, men open their eyes and look about them. For the first time, they construct engines to supplement their muscles and consult libraries to supplement their meagre brains. And what do they find? Why, the vast, the God-given continuity of the world! For the first time, we may see into the past and into the future. We find we are surrounded by the classical ruins of yesterday and the embryos of the future! And how can these signs from the Almighty be interpreted save by *painting*? Painting gives and therefore demands universal knowledge . . ."

"And, surely, also the instincts are involved—"

"Whereas I know nothing—nothing! For years and years—all my life I've slaved to learn, to copy, to transcribe, and yet I have not the ability to do what a single beam of light can do—here, my friend, come with me, and I'll show you how favourably one moment of God's work compares with a year of mine!"

He seized my tunic and drew me from the hall, leaving the door to swing behind us. Again we retraced the court, which echoed to his grudging step. We returned to the stable that housed him. The little children sprawled and played. Dalemberb brushed them aside. He climbed the ladder to his loft, pushing me before him. The children cried words of enticement to him to join their play; he shouted back to them to be silent.

The loft was his workshop. One end was boarded off. The rest was filled with his tables and materials, with his endless pots and brushes of all sizes, with piles of unruly paper, with instruments of every description, with geometrical models, and with a litter of objects which bespoke his intellectual occupations: an elk's foot, a buffalo horn, skulls of aurochs and hypsilophodon, piles of bones, a plaited hat of bark, a coconut, fir cones, shells, branches of coral, dead insects, and lumps of rock, as well as books on fortifications and other subjects.

He brushed through these inanimate children too. Flinging back a curtain at the rear of the workshop, he gestured me in, crying, "Here you can be in God's trouser pocket and survey the universe! See what light can paint at the hand of the one true Master!"

The curtain fell back into place. We were in a small, stuffy and enclosed dark room. A round table stood in the centre of it. On the table was a startling picture painted in vivid colours. I took one glance at it and knew that Dalember had happened on some miraculous technique, combining all arts and all knowledge, which set him as far apart from all other artists as men are apart from the other animals with which they share the globe. Then something moved in the picture. A second glance told me this was nothing but a camera obscura! Looking up, I saw a little aperture through which the light entered. Directed by a lens, it shone in through a small tower set in the roof of the stable.

"Can our poor cobwebs of brains counterfeit a picture as vivid and perfect as this? Yet it is merely a passing beam of light! The lens in the roof has a better mastery of experience than I! Why should a man—what drives a man to compete against Nature itself? What a slave I am to my hopes!"

As he bewailed his lot, I stared at the scene laid out so curiously and captivately on the table. From the perspectives of the rooftops, we looked down on a stretch of track outside the castle, where the Toi ran beside a dusty climbing road. By the river, resting on grass and boulders, sat a group of people as dusty as the road, their mules tethered nearby. So enchanted was I to observe them, and to overlook such details as an elderly man who mopped his bald head with a kerchief and a widow woman in black who fanned her face with a hat, that it was a minute before I identified

them as a group of pilgrims or penitents—evidently embarked on a long journey and making life hard for themselves.

"You see how they are diminished, my friend," said Dalember. "We see them as through God's eye. We believe them real, yet we are only looking at marks on a table, light impressions that leave no stain! Look, here comes my wife, toiling back up the hill—yet it is not my wife, only a tiny mark on the tabletop which I identify with my wife. What is its relation to her?"

"If you knew that, you would hold the secret of the universe, I daresay."

His great brows drew together.

"She has been copied by a master painter, who uses only light."

I watched as the small figure of his wife, in climbing up toward the castle gate, slowly traversed an inch or two of tabletop. I did not answer Dalember, not having his religious convictions; but he never needed prompting to speak.

"We stand—our generation, I mean—on the verge of some tremendous discovery. All things may be possible . . . And yet, what man can say if we aren't ourselves little more than reflections of light."

"Or shadows, as Plato says in the seventh book of his 'Republic' . . . As an actor, I've often thought it—I seem most substantial when I'm being a fictitious creature."

"Actors—they're nothing, they leave no trace."

"If that is so, then they are like Plato's shadows on the wall of his cave."

"Those that observed the shadows were captives, chained where they sat since childhood. That much at least is not allegory."

"Shall we go down to greet your wife?"

"She has nothing to say. She probably has nothing to eat either, poor jadel!" As if to dismiss her, he stepped back and turned a handle, causing the lens or mirror attached to it to be moved. At once, the labouring woman and the penitents were swept away. Rooftops and gables appeared in our enchanted circle, and then an inner court.

The sharp diminution, the steep perspective, and the amazing brilliance of the scene gave the buildings so novel an air that at

first I did not recognise where we were. Then I uttered a cry of surprise.

All at once the whole panorama was known and interpreted. Minute birds flittered here and there. These were the very cavorts I had watched with my sister. I could even see a haze of cat's fur, spread out like a web and stirred by the warm circulating breath of the courtyard. I looked for my bedroom window. Yes, there it was, and on the open sill Poseidon herself, glaring out at the creatures who were making so free with her abandoned coat! How bright and minute the colours were, like some living Schwabian miniature in enamel! The entire window with its parched woodwork was less than half the size of my little finger's nail, yet I saw every detail of it, and the cat, to perfection. What images of peace! I was watching them still when—with startling speed—the whole view was blotted out by a rapidly growing bird, which rose and rose, as if from the depths of the table, until it blotted everything out. A scrabbling sounded overhead, and a cavort fluttered down between Dalember and me.

"Wretched creatures! How clumsy they are!" Dalember said, lumbering about and striking at the bird—nearly clouting me in the process. "This isn't the first time one has tumbled in here. Get out of the way while I kill it!"

I descended the ladder while he hit out at the luckless bird, circling round and round in the darkness.

Below, the children were all crying in delight. Their mother had just entered by the street door. She greeted me wearily and sat down.

She was a heavy woman. Her face was withered now and had lost much of its former beauty. Her name among men was Charity; she was, in fact, a flying woman. Our laws in Malacia governing the flying people were very strict, but Charity, as child and young girl, had been one of those favoured few allowed to nest on top of the campanile, on account of her great beauty. I could recall her being pointed out to me as a boy, flying with some of her sisters—a lovely and remarkable sight, though the subject of lewd boyish jokes, for the flying people scorned clothes.

Now Charity kept her pinions folded. Since marrying her lover, Dalember, for whom she had modelled, she never flew and had perhaps lost the art.

Seeing me, she rose and offered a hand in welcome. The children tugged at her robe so vigorously that she sat down again before pouring me a glass of wine. I accepted gladly—her husband had been too mean to offer me one.

"I hoped you would come to see us, Master Prian. Your good sister told me you were almost recovered from your fever."

"I would never come to Mantegan without visiting you and Nicholas. You know that. As ever, I have a great admiration for your husband's work."

"How do you find Dalembert?"

"As bursting with genius and ideas as ever!"

"*And* as religious, *and* as despairing?"

"A trifle melancholy, perhaps . . ."

"And as unable to paint a wall!"

Picking up a couple of the children, she went over to the water bin, dipped a ladle, and drank from it. The children then called out for a similar treat, and she gave to each in turn, the boys first and then the girls. Over their clamour, she said, "He is too ambitious, and you see the results. I've just been out washing for a wealthy family to earn enough to buy bread. How we shall manage when the winter comes, I don't know. . . ."

"Genius seldom cares to earn its bread."

"He thinks he will be famous in two hundred years' time. What good will that do me or his poor children, I don't know! Come, I must find them something to eat. . . . I shouldn't complain, Master Prian; it's just that I don't see matters in the same light as Dalembert, and the road up to the castle grows steeper week by week, I swear."

As I leaned against a wall, sipping the wine and watching how she managed to work while keeping the children entertained, I wondered if she still recalled the aerial views she had had of our city as a young girl—how enchanting it must have looked before she had to walk it! But I said nothing; it was best not to interfere.

It seemed as if the artist had forgotten me. I heard him pacing overhead. He would be working again at his figures.

Passing her the empty glass, I said to Charity, "I must go and rest now. Tell your husband that I hope to come and see him

again before I leave the castle. And I'll ask my sister if she can get Volpato to pay him a little more money."

She shook her head and gestured dismissively with her hands in a gesture reminiscent of her husband's.

"Let well alone! Don't do that! You may not know it, but Volpato has threatened to throw us out, frescoes or no frescoes, if he is pestered ever again on the subject of money."

"As you wish, of course."

"It is not as I wish but as I must."

I went to the door. She pulled a long grey feather from her wing and stooped to give it to the smallest baby to play with. I was out of the door before she straightened up again.

The day was moving toward evening. The shadows were climbing the sides of the courtyard. As I crossed to my sister's quarters, I noticed that the cavorts had all gone. High above my head, the panes of my window were still catching the eye of the sun, but Poseidon had vanished. All was still. The fur had sunk down at last to the ground—a dusty twist of it rolled across the flags under my feet. Now only light filled the tranquil air.

I was well again: tomorrow I would probably quit the castle.

Kate Wilhelm

THE RED CANARY

SOMETIMES the baby played with old blocks that Tillich had found. The blocks were worn almost smooth, so that the letters and numbers were hard to read. You had to turn them this way and that, catch the light just right. The corners were rounded; there was no paint on them. Tillich remembered blocks like them. He thought the old, worn ones were much nicer than the shiny, sharp-cornered new ones had been. He never watched the baby play, actually. He would see it on the floor, with the blocks at hand, and he would busy himself somewhere else, because there was the possibility that the baby's movements with the blocks were completely random. In Tillich's mind was an image of the baby playing with blocks. He was afraid of shattering the image.

There had been another image. The baby sleeping peacefully, on its side after its morning bottle; its forefinger and index finger in its mouth. Tillich glanced at it each morning before leaving for work, in case it had wriggled out from its covers, or was under them completely. Always, in the dim dawn light, the baby's sleep had been peaceful and Tillich had left quietly. One morning, for no reason, Tillich entered the room, went to the other side of the bed to look at the infant. It wasn't asleep. It was staring, not moving, hardly even blinking, just staring at nothing at all, the two fingers in its mouth. It shifted its gaze to Tillich and stared up at him in an unfathomable look that was uncanny, eerie, inhuman and somehow evil. Tillich backed away, out of its line of

sight. At the partition that separated that end of the bedroom from the rest of it, he paused to look back. The baby looked asleep, unmoving, peacefully asleep.

"Tillich," he said at the dispensary. "Norma Tillich."

The dispensary nurse read the card he handed her.

"Any change? Does she need an appointment?"

"No. No change."

"Two a day, morning and night. Fourteen capsules. Please verify fourteen and sign at the bottom."

He hated the young woman on duty in the dispensary. If he could get there during his lunch break, she wouldn't be on duty. He never could make it until after work, however. She had a large, bony face. Her hands were large, strong fingers flicking out capsules, pills, moving deftly, sure of themselves. No need to verify the count when she was on duty. The computer card went back into the machine. He moved on. The line was always there, might always have been the same people in the same order. He hurried home. She would be hungry. The baby would be hungry and crying.

"Good morning, Mr. Rosenfeld."

"Good morning, Mr. Tillich. You are well, I trust?"

"Quite well, thanks." He poured boiling water over the soup powder, spread two large crackers with Pro-team and put them on the tray. He filled Mr. Rosenfeld's water pitcher and got some fresh cups out and put them on the bed stand. "Anything else, Mr. Rosenfeld?"

"No. No. That'll do me. Thank you kindly."

"You're welcome. I'll just drop in this evening."

"Not if you're busy, my friend."

"No trouble. Have a good day, Mr. Rosenfeld."

The old man nodded. He was eyeing his tray, impatient for his breakfast, too polite to begin until Tillich was gone.

The baby was always wet and usually soiled as well when he got home. Tillich changed it and put it in its bed with its bottle propped by it. Its color was greyed yellow.

"Norma, did he eat anything today?"

She looked vague. Then her face folded in somehow and collapsed in tears. "I don't know. I can't remember. You left the formula, didn't you? Did you forget its formula?"

"I didn't forget. The bottle's gone. You must have put it in the disposer. Did he take the milk?"

She wept for another minute or two, then jumped up, peeking at him between her fingers. She sang, "*I had a red canary. He couldn't sing. I left the window open and he flew away. Would that be a bad thing to do? Let it fly away, I mean.*"

"No, that wouldn't be bad."

"Because I would. And I'd watch him fly away. Fly away. Fly away."

Sometimes she brought him her brush. "Would you like to do my hair?" It was long and silky when it was clean and brushed, alive with red-gold highlights in the dark blond. Her eyes were blue, sometimes green, her skin very pale and translucent. Blue veins made ragged ray patterns on her breasts which were rounded, firm, exciting to him. She had nursed the baby for months. One day she hadn't, then another and another. It took days and days for her milk to stop, and all the while it seemed to puzzle her. She would come show him her wet clothes, or drying milk on the bedding, on her belly. When he tried to put the baby to her breast again, she recoiled as if terrified. He awakened one night to find her kneeling over him trying to force the nipple between his lips. There was a taste of sweet milk on his mouth.

Mrs. De Vries lived on the same floor; he met her often. She usually had a child by the hand when they met. She was very thin and tired-looking. When he opened the door to an insistent knock, she was there.

"Mr. Tillich, will you please come? Please. I need someone."

He glanced back inside; Norma hadn't even looked up. She was watching the TV with a rapt expression. He hesitated a second, then stepped out into the hall, closing the door behind him. "What's wrong?"

"One of the kids. God, I don't know." She hurried him down the hall to her apartment. A girl about ten stood in the doorway. He had seen her before in the hall, down in the lobby. She had

always seemed normal enough. She held the door open and moved aside as they came near.

Mrs. De Vries pushed Tillich past the girl, through the living room to a bedroom that had mattresses all over the floor. Two more children stared at him, then he saw the other child, alone on a mattress against the wall. The child, a boy, four, five, was having a convulsion. His back was arched, his tongue protruded between clamped jaws, blood and foam on his chin. He was already cyanotic.

Tillich turned to the woman. "Don't you have any medicine for him?"

"No. He never did this before. My God, what is it?"

"Call Pediatrics, Emergency." She stared. "Do you have a phone?"

"No."

"I'll go. What's his name? Symptoms?"

"Roald De Vries. Fever a hundred and four, all day."

He called Pediatrics, Emergency. "I'm sorry. We are already over capacity. Please leave patient's identification number, name and reason for calling. Take patient to nearest hospital facility at eight A.M. Thank you. This is a recording."

He didn't have the number.

"I'll stay here," he told Mrs. De Vries. "Call them back and give his file number. Or they won't see him tomorrow."

The oldest child was the girl he had seen before. Waiting for her mother to return, he saw the welts on her arms, her neck. She seemed to have conjunctivitis. The next two children, boys about six and five, were very thin, and the larger of the two peed on the floor. The girl cleaned it up soundlessly. There were two bedrooms. A man slept in the other one. He had the dry, colorless skin of long illness; his sleep was unnatural. He was heavily sedated. Tillich looked at the sick child. His body was limp now and dripping sweat. The woman came back and he left. He saw her again a week later. Neither of them mentioned the child.

Tillich brought in the trains in section 3B. He picked them up fifty miles from the city, each one a brilliant speck of white or green light. His fingers knew the keys that opened and closed

switches, that stopped one of the lights, hurried another. It was like weaving a complex spiderweb with luminous spiders.

He worked three hours, had a twenty-minute break, worked three more hours, had forty minutes for lunch, then the last three hours. He worked six days a week. He compared his work with a friend, Frank Jorgens, and both agreed it was harder than the air-traffic control job that Jorgens had.

"I have to have a raise," Tillich said to the union representative.

"You know better than that, Tillich. We don't ask for a raise for just one guy and his problems. Every sod has them."

He tried to apply directly to the personnel department; his application was rejected, accompanied by a notice that he could appeal through his union representative. He threw the application and the notice away.

"Tillich. Norma Tillich."

"Any change? Does she require an appointment?"

"Yes, we need to see her doctor."

"Please take your card and this form to one of the tables and fill it out. When you have completed it, return it to one of the attendants in Section Four-N. Thank you." The young woman looked at him directly; he frowned and snatched the form sheet.

Name. Age. Copy code from Line 3 of patient's identity card. Copy code from Lines 7, 8, 9. . . . Reason for request to see physicians. Check one. If none apply, use back of application to state reason.

He rubbed his eyes. He should have written it out at home so he could simply copy it here. *She can't take care of the child. She neglects it. She doesn't eat or feed the baby, or keep it clean. It might injure itself. Or she might.* He read it, dissatisfied. It was true, but not enough. He added only: *injure herself.*

"Thank you, Mr. Tillich. You will be notified next week when you come back. Report to this desk at that time. Fourteen capsules. Will you please verify the count and sign here."

His request was turned down. There was a typed message attached to her card. Tillick (they had misspelled the name), Norma. Nonaggressive. A series of dates and numbers followed. The times she had seen doctors, their diagnoses and instructions, all unintelligible to Tillich. Request denied on grounds of insuf-

ficient symptomatic variation from prognosis of 6-19-87-E-D-P/S-4298-MC.

"Fourteen capsules. Verify count please and sign here."

The baby learned a new cry. It started high, wailed with increasing volume until it hit a note that made Tillich's head hurt. Then it cut it off abruptly and gasped a time or two and started over.

"You have to feed it while I'm gone," he said. "You can hold its bottle. Remember. Like this."

She wasn't watching. She was looking beyond him, past the baby, smiling at what she saw between herself and the streaked blue wall. He looked at the child who was taking formula greedily, staring at him in his unblinking way. Tillich closed his eyes.

After the baby was through, Tillich made their dinner. Tastimeat, potatoes, soy-veg melange. She ate as greedily as the baby.

"Norma, while I'm at work you could eat some of the crackers I bought for you. The baby could chew on one. Remember them, Norma?"

She nodded brightly. The baby stared to wail. She seemed not to hear it. While he cleaned up the dishes she watched TV. The baby wailed. Its next clinic appointment was in two months. He wondered if it would wail for the whole eight weeks, fifty-nine nights. He broke a plate, each hand gripping an edge painfully. He stared at the pieces. They were supposed to be unbreakable.

The baby wailed until twelve, when he fed it again. Gradually it quieted down after that, and by one it seemed to be sleeping. He didn't go past the partition to see.

Norma was waiting for him on their bed. Her cheeks were flushed, her nipples hard and dark red. He started to undress and she pulled at his clothes, laughing, stopping to nip the flesh of his stomach, his buttock when he turned around, his thigh. She crowed in delight at his erection, and he fell on her in savage coitus. She cried out, screamed, raked his back, bit his lip until it bled. She clung to him and tried to push him away. She called him names and cursed him and whispered love words and gutter words. When it was over, she rolled from him, felt the edge of the bed and crept from it, staring at him in horror, or hatred. She

backed to the door, crouching, ready to bolt. At the doorway she shrieked like a wild animal mortally wounded, again and again. He buried his head in the bedding. Presently she became silent and he took a cover from the bed and put it over her on the couch where she slept very deeply. He knew he could pick her up, carry her to bed, she wouldn't wake up. But all he did was cover her. He looked at the baby. It hadn't moved. He shivered and went to bed.

"Fourteen capsules. Verify fourteen, please, and sign . . ."

"There are only thirteen."

The long, capable fingers stopped. Tillich looked up. She returned his glance with no expression, then looked again at the pale-green capsules. Her fingers moved deliberately as she counted, ". . . twelve. Thirteen." She pushed another one across the counter. "Fourteen. Please verify fourteen, Mr. Tillich." Again she met his gaze. Her eyes were grey, her eyelashes were very long and straight.

"Fourteen," he said and signed, and moved on.

The baby hated the park. It wailed and wouldn't be propped up. Tillich picked it up and for a time it was silent, staring at the bushes. Children were swinging, shouting, laughing, screaming. The spring sun was warm although the air still had a bite. Forsythias were in bloom, yellow arms waving. The baby stared at the long yellow branches. Soon it grew bored and started to cry again.

"I'm cold." Norma clung to his arm, her gaze shifting nervously, rapidly, very afraid. "I want to go home."

"You need some sun. So does the baby. Let's walk. You'll get warm."

He put the screaming child back in the baby carriage. The carriage was older than Tillich; it squeaked, one wheel wobbled, the metal parts were all rusty, the plastic was brittle and cracked. He knew they were very lucky to have it.

He wheeled the yelling baby and Norma clung to his arm. No one paid any attention to them. "I'm cold. I want to go home!" Soon she would be crying too. He walked a little faster.

"We'll go home now. This is the way." He didn't look at the

people. The trees were leafing out, bushes in nearly full leaf, blooming. The grass was richly green. White clouds against the endless blue. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes a moment. For four weekends they hadn't been able to get out because of rain, or cold weather, or Norma's sniffles. Always something.

"I want to go home! I want to go home! I'm tired. I'm cold. *I want to go home!*" She was beginning to weep.

"We're going home now. See? There's the street. Just another block, then onto the street and a little more . . ." She wasn't listening. The baby screamed.

He saw the girl from the dispensary. She was wheeling a chair-bed, with a very old, frail-looking man on it. His face was petulant, half-turned, tilted toward her, talking. She was walking slowly, looking at the trees, the flowering shrubs, the grass. A serene look on her face.

Tillich turned the carriage to a path that led out of the park. The baby screamed. Norma wept and begged to be taken home.

Mrs. De Vries was in the hall outside his apartment. He thought she had been waiting for him.

"Mr. Tillich, is your wife better? Such a pretty girl."

"Yes, yes. She's coming along."

"I heard her screaming. Couple nights ago. Poor child."

He started to move on. She caught his arm. "Mr. Tillich, I'm only thirty-three. Would you believe that? Thirty-three." She looked fifty. Her fingers on his arm were red and coarse. "I . . . You need a woman, Mr. Tillich, I'm around. Wouldn't charge you much."

"No. Mrs. De Vries, I have to go in. No. I'm not interested."

"What am I to do, Mr. Tillich? What? They won't give us more money. I have two jobs and my kids are in rags. What'm I to do?"

"I don't know." He moved forward a step. She motioned and her daughter approached.

"She's a virgin, Mr. Tillich. Been having periods for six months now. All grewed up inside. Five dollars, Mr. Tillich. Five dollars and you can keep her all night." She motioned the child closer. The girl pulled up her shift. Pale fuzz covered the mound. She

turned around to show her round buttocks. They were covered with hives.

Tillich pushed Mrs. De Vries aside. "Bitch! Bitch! Your own daughter!"

"What'm I to do, you bastard? You tell me that. What'm I to do?" He saw her yank the child to her and slap her hard. "Go get some pants on. Pull down your dress."

Tillich got his door open and slid inside. He was breathing hard. Norma didn't look up. She was watching TV. The baby was on the floor with the smooth blocks.

"Mr. Rosenfeld, don't you have any relatives?"

"None able. Brother's been in a house for twenty years."

"No children?"

"Son's dead. Cancer of the larynx. They didn't have a bed for him. He had to wait almost two years. By then it was Katie bar the door." He looked thoughtful. "Two daughters, you know. Don't know where they are. Their husbands won't let them come around. First one shows up, state says I'm hers." He chuckled.

"Mr. Rosenfeld, don't you read the newspapers?"

"Watch it on TV."

"They miss some things, Mr. Rosenfeld. Starting next month there won't be any visiting nurse service. Too expensive. Not enough nurses."

Mr. Rosenfeld looked frightened. After a moment he said, "Not the necessary visits."

"All of them, Mr. Rosenfeld."

"But . . . Look, son, I've got a tube in me that has to be changed every day. Y'know? Every day. Takes someone who knows how. Good clean tubes. Dressings. Who's going to do all that except a nurse?" He picked at his sheet. "And change that? And give me a bath? Who?"

They stared at each other.

"Not you. Not you. I didn't mean that," Mr. Rosenfeld said. "You've been good to me. But you're not qualified for the tube job. Takes special training." He was paralyzed from the waist down.

"You'd better apply for a home," Tillich said finally.

"Did. Four years ago. I'm on the list."

"Well," Tillich said, "I have to go. I'll be by in the morning."

"Sure. Sure. Good night. Good night." Before Tillich got out he asked, "Your wife? I guess she wouldn't be able to have the training?"

"No. She's ill. Impossible."

"Oh, yes. Of course." He was staring fixedly at the ceiling when Tillich left.

"Do you walk here often?"

"When I can. That isn't very often." She looked at him. "How about you?"

"Not often enough. Not enough time."

"I've seen you a few times. Your wife is very pretty."

He didn't reply. There was nothing he could say. They were getting near the exit path that he would take. "Do you suppose you'll have time tomorrow to take a walk?"

She was silent so long he thought she hadn't heard. Then: "I think I will tomorrow."

"Maybe we'll see each other. I always come in at path number one-oh-two."

"That's near where I enter. Ninety-six."

"I'll wait for you at ninety-six."

She crouched in the doorway staring at him and shrieked. She didn't close her eyes. He could see her stomach muscles tighten, her hands clench, then the shriek came. There was a glistening streak across her white thigh. Her legs were beautifully shaped. She shrieked. He pulled the cover over his head, pressing it against his ears. Twice or three times he had tried to comfort her, to quiet her, and it had been worse. He pressed harder on the covers. When she fell asleep on the couch, he covered her. She was thinner than she had been in the winter.

"Please verify fourteen . . ."

"You weren't in the park all week."

"Please sign. I was busy."

"When do you get off? I'll wait for you."

"Ten. Your wife and child. They need you. Who will make

their dinner? Please, you must sign the forms and move on. Don't wait for me. I don't want to see you. I'm busy."

He signed and moved on.

The waiting room of the pediatrics center was an auditorium with all the sections filled to capacity. Tillich had to stand with the baby for half an hour before there was a vacant seat. The din in the hall was constant, very much like the sound of a high-powered motor. The loudspeaker was on steadily: "UN three seven four two A one twelve. UN two two nine seven A/C seven nine seven. UN one two nine six A/F seventeen. UN three nine one six D two thousand."

The smells of formula, vomit, urine, feces hung in the air, combining and recombining. The baby's screams were hardly noticeable here.

"Please refresh your memory regarding your child's identification number. You will be admitted to the doctor's examination rooms by number. Please refresh your memory regarding your child's identification number." "UN six nine four A/D four nine two one. UN seven one two nine A/F one nine six eight."

He had to wait nine hours before he heard his number. He started; he had dozed; holding a screaming baby in the stinking auditorium amidst the bathroom and sickroom odors, he had dozed.

"Please strip the child and place it on the table. Keep on the far side of the table. Do not ask any questions, or give any medical detail at this time. Thank you." It was a recording, activated by the closing of the door.

Tillich had barely finished undressing the baby when the second door opened and a woman came in. She was stooped, white-haired, with a death's-head face. The baby was screaming more feebly now, exhaustion finally weakening him. He was revived by her approach.

She held him with one hand and did a rapid and thorough eye, ear, nose and throat examination. She went to his genitals, studied his feet. She pushed his legs up to his chest, then spread them apart. She sat him up and felt his back, then tried unsuccessfully to stand him up. Finally she made notations on his card. Only then did she glance at Tillich.

"We must make other tests. You will wait outside, please." She pressed a button. The door she had used was opened and an orderly motioned for Tillich to follow him.

"Why? What's wrong? What is it?"

The orderly touched his arm and wearily Tillich followed him. The baby wailed. This waiting room was even more crowded than the auditorium had been, but there was only a scattering of children; most of them were somewhere inside undergoing specialized diagnostic procedures. His head ached and he was very hungry.

He didn't know how long he waited this time. Finally the orderly motioned for him to come.

"Please dress your child as quickly as possible and exit through the door marked B. An attendant on the other side will be happy to answer any questions. The time for your next appointment is indicated in the upper right-hand corner of your child's identification card. Thank you for your cooperation."

He carried the baby into the other room. The baby was listless now, no longer crying. Overhead a light sign flashed on and off. "If you have any questions, please be seated at one of the desks." He sat down.

"Yes, Mr. Tillich." It was a young man, an orderly, or nurse, not a doctor.

"Why has his classification been changed? What does the new number and designation mean? Why is his next appointment a year from now instead of six months?"

"Hm. Out of infant category, you see. There will be medication. You can pick it up at pediatrics dispensary, a month's supply at a time, starting tomorrow. Twenty-three allergens identified in his blood. Anemic. Nothing to be alarmed about, Mr. Tillich."

"What does the 'R/MD one nine four two seven' stand for? He's retarded, isn't he? How much?"

"Mr. Tillich, you'll have to discuss that with his doctor."

"Tell me this, would you expect a P/S four two nine eight MC to be able to care adequately for an R/MD one nine four two seven?"

"Of course not. But you're not . . ."

"His mother is."

• • •

"Why did you decide to come, after all?"

"I don't know. I guess because you look so miserable. Lonely, somehow." She stopped, looking straight ahead. A young couple walked hand in hand. "You do see people like that now and then," she said. "It gives me hope."

"It shouldn't. Norma was twenty-two before she . . . She was as normal as anyone at that age."

She started to walk again.

"What's your name?"

"Louisa. Yours?"

"David," he said. "Louisa is pretty. It's like a soft wind in high grass."

"You're a romantic." She thought a moment. "David goes back to the beginning of names, it seems. Bible name. Do you suppose people are still making new names?"

"Probably. Why?"

"I used to try to make up a name. They all sounded so ridiculous. So made-up."

He laughed.

"You turn off here, don't you? Good-bye, David."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Norma slept. The baby lay quietly; he didn't know if it was asleep. He remembered laughing in the park. The sun shone. They walked not touching, talking fast, looking at each other often. And he had laughed out loud.

"No one came," Mr. Rosenfeld said. His voice rose. "No one came. They know I need a nurse. It's on my card. I signed over my pension so they'd take care of me. They agreed."

"Can I do something?"

"No!" he said shrilly. "Don't touch it. You know how long I'd last if an infection set in? Call them. Give them the numbers on my card. It's a mistake. A mistake."

Tillich copied the numbers, then went out to make the call. The first phone was out of order. He walked five blocks to the next one. Traffic was light. It was getting lighter all the time. He could remember when the streets had been packed solid, curb

to curb, with automobiles, trucks, buses, motorbikes. Now there were half a dozen vehicles in sight. He waited for the call to be completed, staring toward the west. One day he'd make up a little back-pack, not much, a blanket, a cup, a pan maybe, a coat. He'd start walking westward. Across Ohio, across the prairies, across the mountains. To the sea. The Atlantic was less than five hundred miles east, but he never even considered starting in that direction.

"Please state patient's surname, given name, identification number and purpose of this call."

He did. There was a pause, then the same voice said, "This data has been forwarded to the appropriate office. You will be notified. Thank you for your cooperation. This is a recording." So no one would argue, he knew. He stood staring westward for a long time, and when he got back to his building, he went directly to his own rooms.

"And so he died."

"He didn't just die. They killed him. I killed him. They were smart. They saw to it that he had a full week's supply of those pills. He took them all."

"I guess most of them had saved enough pills or capsules, same thing."

"So now they can claim truthfully that everyone who needs home nursing gets it." He kicked a stone hard. She walked with her head bowed.

"If they had known about you, your daily visits to the old man, probably they would have discontinued his nursing service sooner."

"But I'm not trained to insert a drainage tube."

"You learn or you lose whoever needs that kind of care."

He looked at her. She sounded bitter, the first time he had heard that tone from her. "You had something like that?"

"My husband. He needed constant attendance after surgery. On the sixth night I fell asleep and he hemorrhaged to death. I had learned how to change dressings, tubes, everything. And I fell asleep."

He caught her hand and held it for a moment between both

of his. When they started to walk again, he kept holding her hand.

"When I get well, we'll have a vacation, won't we? We'll go to the shore and find pretty shells. Just us. You and me. Won't we?"

"Yes. That would be nice."

"Will they hurt me?"

"No. You remember. They'll look at your throat, listen to your heart. Weigh you. Take your blood pressure. It won't hurt." He held the baby because he hadn't dared leave it. They might be there all day. The baby cried very little now. It slept a lot more than it used to and when it was awake it didn't do anything except suck its fingers and stare fixedly at whatever its gaze happened to focus on. Tillich thought he should cut down on the medicine for it, but he liked it better this way. He didn't know what the medicine was for, if this effect was the expected one or not.

"You'll stay with me! Promise!"

"If I can."

"Let's go home now." She jumped up, smiling brightly at him.

"Sit down, Norma. We have to wait." The waiting room held over a hundred people. More were in the corridor. In this section few of the patients were alone. Many of them looked normal, able, healthy. Almost all had someone nearby who watched closely, who made an obvious effort to remain calm, tolerant, not to excite the patients.

"I'm hungry. I feel so sick. I really feel sick. We should go now." She stood up again. "I'll go alone."

He sighed, but didn't reply. The baby stared at his shirt. He moved it. One eye had crossed that way. She went a few feet, walking sideways, through the chairs. She stopped and looked to see if he was coming.

"Don't shriek," he prayed silently. "Please don't shriek."

She took several more steps. Stopped. He could tell when the rush of panic hit her by the way she stiffened. She came back to him, terrified, her face a grey-white.

"I want to go. I want to . . ."

Over and over and over. Not loud, hardly more than a whis-

per. Until her number was called. They didn't admit him with her. He had known they wouldn't. She could undress and dress herself.

The trains came in from Chicago; from New York; from Atlanta. Fruit from the South. Meat from the West. Clothing from the East. A virulent strain of influenza from the Southwest. Tillich had guided it in.

"Cleanliness and rest, nature's best protection." The signs appeared overnight.

"If it gets worse," the superintendent said, "we'll have to quarantine our people here at work."

"But my wife is sick. And my child."

The superintendent nodded. "Then you damn well better stay well, don't you think?" He stomped off.

He thought of Louisa at the dispensary, in constant face-to-face contact with people. After work he was shaking by the time he reached gate ninety-six, and saw her standing there. He began to run toward her. She came forward to meet him. She looked frightened.

"Are you ill?" she asked.

"No. No. I'm all right. I got it in my head that you . . ." He took her face in his hands and examined her. Suddenly he pulled her to his chest and held her hard. Then he loosened his arms a bit, still without releasing her, and put his cheek on her hair, and they stayed that way for a long time, his cheek on her hair, her face against his chest, both with closed eyes.

He called the hospital about Norma. He told the recording about her shrieking fits after intercourse; about her sexuality that was as demanding as ever, about her neglect of self, of the baby. "Thank you for your cooperation. This is a recording." He called back and told the recording to go fuck itself. It thanked him.

"You should have reported an adverse reaction immediately," the nurse said. "Decrease the dosage from twenty drops to ten drops daily." She read the prescription from a computer print-out.

"And if that doesn't help?"

"There are several procedures, Mr. Tillich. These are doctor's orders. Report back in two weeks. You will be given a two-week supply of the medication."

"Can't someone just look at him?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tillich."

The baby wasn't eating. He moved very little and slept sixteen hours or more a day.

"You're killing him," he told the nurse. He got up. She would merely summon an orderly if he didn't leave. There was nothing she could do.

"Mr. Tillich, report to room twelve-oh-nine before you leave the building." She was already looking past him at a woman with red eyes.

"My baby, she's been vomiting ever since she took that new medicine. And her bowels, God, nothing but water!"

Tillich moved away, back to the dispensary for the baby's medicine. He had been there for three hours already. The line was still as long as before. He took his place at the end.

Ninety minutes later he received the medicine. The dispensary nurse said, "Report to room twelve-oh-nine, Mr. Tillich."

In 1209 there was a short line of people. It was a fast-moving line. When Tillich entered the room, a nurse asked his name. She checked it against a list, nodded, and told him to get in line. When he came to the head of the line, he was given a shot.

"What is it?" he asked.

The doctor looked at him in surprise. "Flu vaccine."

He saw the nurse at the door motioning to him. She put her forefinger to her lips and shook her head.

As he went out she whispered, "Louisa slipped your name in. For God's sake keep your mouth shut."

A fast-moving freight from Detroit derailed when the locomotive's wheels locked as it slowed for a curve. Sixty-four cars left the track, tearing up a section a quarter-mile long. It happened during the night, the specks of light were still motionless in that section when Tillich arrived.

"No more direct connection with Detroit," the superintendent said. "We're working on alternate routing now."

"Aren't they going to fix the tracks?"

"Can't. No steel's being allotted to any nonpriority work. Just keep a hold on section seven until the computer gives us new routing. What a goddamn mess."

Detroit was out. Jacksonville was out. Memphis was out, Cleveland. St. Paul.

Tillich wondered what a high priority was. Syringes, he thought. Scalpels. Bone saws. He wondered if steel was still being produced.

"Can you get away at all?" he asked her desperately.

She shook her head. "No more than you can."

"I'll leave them. She isn't helpless. It's an act. If she got hungry enough, she'd get something."

She continued to shake her head. "I looked her up. She is very ill, David. She isn't malingering."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Primary schizophrenia. Acute depressions. Severe anemia, low blood sugar, renal dysfunction. There was more. I forget."

"Why don't they treat her? Try to cure her?"

She was silent.

"They know they can't. Or it would take too long to be worthwhile. Is that it? *Is that it?*"

"I don't know. They don't put reasons on the cards."

"Is there someplace we can go? Here, in the city?"

"I don't have any money. Do you?"

He laughed bitterly. "Your apartment?"

"Father, Mother, my brother Jason. He has tuberculosis, one lung collapsed. We have two rooms."

"I'll get some money. I'll get us a room somewhere."

He heard the baby wailing halfway down the hall. It was making up for the weeks of drugged silence. As he got nearer he could hear the TV also. Norma was watching it, singing, "*I had a red canary, it wouldn't fly.*" She didn't look at him.

If it weren't for them, he thought clearly, he could take another job. Able-bodied men could work around the clock if they wanted to. All those hours in lines waiting for her medicine, wait-

ing for the baby's medicine, waiting for her examination, the baby's examinations. Shopping for them. Cleaning up after them. Cooking for them.

He shut his eyes, his back against the door. For a long time he didn't move. He felt a soft tug on his shirt and opened his eyes. She was there, holding out the hairbrush.

"Would you like to do my hair?"

He brushed her pale silky hair. "After I'm well, we'll have a vacation, won't we. Just the two of us. We'll go to the seashore and find pretty shells."

The baby wailed. The TV played. She sat with tears on her cheeks and he brushed her pale silky hair.

Mel Gilden

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH HERBIE?

NERT WAS a small, three-legged creature with a pair of manipulative claws and Herbie was a creature closely resembling a serving of very old raisin gelatin. They sat together in a small rustic tavern that tried to look ancient and natural by using new synthetic materials. The low-beamed ceiling was plastic and the tables and chairs were made of formulon. The flickering of the torchlight was electrical. The bartender, a glowing aquamarine ball that floated four feet above the floor, asked, "What'll it be, boys?"

A diaphragm centered on top of Herbie said, "Your best. We're celebrating tonight."

"Oh?" The bartender floated down a little nearer.

"This fellow," Herbie said, pointing to Nert with a pseudopod, "saved my life. Isn't that right, Nert?"

"Well—" He blushed blue, and Herbie went on. "He's modest. I was trapped in one of those damned Ardonian cul-de-sacs by a gramut-fowl. I tell you, I was whispering my last thoughts to Frooth when I felt something grab me by the merkin"—he touched a spot on his back—"and I was out of there so fast it singed the bird's feathers."

The bartender's light pulsed, and he said, "I am honored you chose my establishment to celebrate in. And I would like to hear the story in greater detail, but my other customers grow impa-

tient." Nert saw a ton-and-a-half flomox in a booth in the back beginning to steam. "Order and let him go, Herbie."

Herbie's wildly gesticulating pseudopodia wilted back into his body. "All right," he said. "Antarian glovo, third level."

The bartender said, "A very good choice, sir," and jetted toward the flomox, leaving a faint smell of helium in the air.

Herbie burbled happily. "That flomox will be after him for at least half an hour taking germ counts and checking health permits."

"Why?"

"You'd think anything that size, with a hide you couldn't bust through with a dynamic-M desynthesizer, would be able to eat anything. But those fellows have stomachs so delicate, Terrans use them to test their food. But I don't trust 'em. Too big. Too powerful."

"It's a good thing I decided to sign on when I did instead of waiting till I finished my degree in gerbis farming like everybody wanted me to," Nert said. "If I hadn't met you I might be spending my first evening in port at a co-op."

"Lucky for me, you mean. I'd have been somebody's dinner."

They watched their waiter lead the flomox into the back room, probably to check his legal papers, while another floater came toward them dangling their order beneath him in a tangle of grassy tentacles. It left the drinking equipment and a bottle full of cool blue liquid. Nert poured a little of the liquid into their glasses. He picked up his long tubelike glass of glovo and stuck his tongue in it, while Herbie dangled a delicate finger of protoplasm into his own glass, a shallow trough. When they'd finished the first round, Herbie said, "You know, the Terrans have a ritual when friends drink together. They call it a 'taste.'"

"What's that?" Nert's voice did not sound right to him. He looked into his glass to see if he could find the reason.

"A 'taste' is when the friends all taste together what they're drinking, and say a few words over it."

"What kind of words?"

"Oh, something like 'hot jets' or 'happy landings.' Something like that."

Nert started to refill the glasses. He said, "Reminds me of the time a human visited my brindle's farm when I was just a klarn.

Forever trying to grab everybody's claws and pump them up and down whenever he met them."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. We just let him do it."

"Eccentric, that's what they are. You wonder how they were smart enough to get off their own planet."

They looked at their drinks for a moment. Then Herbie said, "What should we say over our drinks?"

"'Happy landings' sounds nice."

"No. It's got to be something original." He thought for a few minutes. Nert could tell he was giving it all his concentration because his food vacuoles were moving quickly from place to place like the flits on his brindle's farm. "Something like, 'Soak it up.'"

Nert wanted to get back to his drinking, so he said, "Not bad." He lifted his glass to his tongue and said, "Soak it up."

"Soak it up."

Herbie could drink and talk at the same time, and he kept up a running commentary on the beings around him. He talked about odd creatures and stranger habits, digressing often into lectures on galactography and his opinions on everything. "Soak it up," he said. Nert became more placid as he drank. After a while Herbie's voice was a soft buzz overlying the other noise in the bar—

And suddenly Nert was wide awake. The olfactory nerves on his shoulders bristled as he tried to find what had disturbed him. It was an odor he'd smelled before, and it was coming from the flomox who'd just returned from the back room. But a flomox shouldn't smell that way. And the floater who had been with him shouldn't either. Nert had almost decided it was the influence of the glovo when he suddenly identified it. Mittlebran—stuff, snort, Antrop white.

"Smell that?" Nert said.

"What?" Herbie had stopped lecturing and was content to let a flaccid pseudopod lie in his trough soaking up his glovo.

"Mittlebran. Don't you smell it?"

Small bumps raised themselves all over Herbie's body. They soon subsided, and he said, "You're crazy. Stuff's illegal."

"Since when did being illegal stop people from doing some-

thing?" Nert pushed his glass away. He'd tried mittlebran once and he didn't like it. He couldn't sleep. And now it turned out it made him cold sober. "Herbie, can we leave?"

"Leave?" Herbie said, as if it were a new word.

Nert gently lifted the pseudopod out of the trough. "Come on. We have to find somewhere to spend the night anyway. We can celebrate some more later."

"Don't want to leave."

Nert tried to push Herbie out of the depression in his chair, but the protoplasm just flowed around his claws until he was engulfed up to his joints. "Come on, Herbie. Cooperate."

"Celebrate some more later."

Nert found that the best way to deal with Herbie was to plunge both claws into him and carry him to the floor draped over his arms like taffy. One of the blue globes approached them and said, "Trouble, sir?"

"Just trying to get my friend home." Nert didn't like mittlebran, but he didn't want to cause any trouble. If people wanted to sprinkle the stuff, that was their business, but Nert didn't like to be around when they did it. Because of his race's finely developed sense of smell, he knew when someone across the room had done it hours ago, and he was uncomfortable even then. When someone in such a small, stuffy place had done it only moments before, it was almost intolerable.

"Would you like a shot of denebriant?"

"That would be helpful, but I don't know what kind." Nert put Herbie carefully on the floor, where he tried to divide himself in two against a table leg.

"Do you know where he's from?"

"Let me think." Nert snapped his claws like castanets. "I think he said he was from Tramitode—uh, Arkis IV."

"Very good, sir. I'll be right back."

While the waiter was gone, Nert tried to ignore the smell of the mittlebran. It made his olfactory nerves raw, as if they had been immersed in hydrochloric acid all day. As time went on he began to notice a kaleidoscope of smells coming from the creatures around him. He could close his bulging eyes and still get a picture of the room. The flomox was stinking in the corner and the floaters came and went like wisps of peppermint. A musky

ornt had just come in the door. The odors swirled around making him almost as giddy as the glovo had.

The floater returned with a small vial of dark amber fluid. He said, "According to my tables, this should work for all beings from Arkis IV." He wrapped his tentacles around a small part of Herbie and squeezed until he'd made a small armlike projection. He then plunged the appendage into the vial and waited until all the liquid had been absorbed. "There. That should do it. In a few moments he should be as sober as ever."

"Thanks very much. How much extra do I owe you?"

"Nothing. Just for the drinks. We find small special services pay off in the long run." He took Nert's money, about twice what he'd expected to pay for even third-level glovo, and floated back to the bar, where the ornt was complaining about the shape of the glass in which his drink had been served.

Herbie congealed little by little, and in a few minutes he said, "What's the problem?"

Nert said, "I can't stand the mittlebran. We've got to leave."

"What mittlebran?"

Nert was on the verge of screaming. He was already an aquamarine very nearly the shade of the floaters. Carefully, with great control, he said, "I'll explain outside. Come on. Please!"

"Sure, Nert. Sure. Let's go." He began to move toward the door, the lower part of his body undulating in peristaltic waves. Nert caught up and beat him to the door.

The hotel was one Nert would never have had the nerve to choose. It was called the Hotel Galactica, and it was equipped to accommodate visiting dignitaries from a thousand worlds who came to Spangle for a good time. It rose more than a hundred stories, and was built around a central court where a realistic artificial park lay under a sunny sky, no matter what the weather was like outside.

The porter dropped their bags in the room and stood waiting at the door. "Yes?" Herbie said.

"I hope you enjoy your stay at the Galactica," the machine said. Its voice was programmed to drip with a sincerity that might have convinced the superrich who were used to flattery, but which Nert found artificial.

"I'm sure we will," Herbie said. "Thank you."

"Shall I dilate your windows for you?" the machine said, not moving.

Nert whispered, "What does he want?"

"A tip. Extra money." Herbie started to move toward his pool. "Pay him, will you? There's some money behind the flap in my case." He sighed with relief as he settled into the pool of muddy water that served as his bed.

"How much?" Nert asked as he picked through the change.

"I figure two credits ought to do it."

"Two credits!"

"Would you like me to adjust the climate of your room for you? It can be changed to anything from a rain forest to Q-type ice flow. Choice of atmospheres include methane, ammonia, oxy-nitrogen—"

Nert dropped the money in the tray on top of the porter. It gurgled and stopped in midsentence. Then it swiveled one hundred eighty degrees, and as it rolled from the room it said, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you . . ." until the door finally slid shut behind it.

"We could have had a live porter, but it costs an extra two hundred credits a day," Herbie said. He did not sound well. His voice had been growing weaker ever since they'd left the bar. Nert had asked him about it, but Herbie told him not to worry, that everything was under control. Nert was unconvinced, but he respected Herbie's privacy.

Nert said, "Speaking of money, after three days here, we'll have to start drawing from our gerbis fund."

Herbie had begun to thaw and soften as he had in the bar when he was drunk. He slowly spread to the circumference of his pool.

"Herbie?"

"Hmm?"

"I said we're not going to have any money left."

"That's good."

"Herbie. Herbie, listen to me. Are you sure you're supposed to have that big bulge on your side? You told me not to worry, but I don't know."

"Everything's fine. . . ." His voice trailed off into an airy whisper that Nert couldn't hear. Then suddenly his voice was back

again with nearly its usual strength. "Don't worry about me. I'll be all right. I'll be better if you just go out and have a good time."

"But I can't leave you like this—"

"You not only can, you must. It's important that I be alone. I'll have a surprise for you when you get back."

"But the bulge—"

"That's part of the surprise. Now please go."

Nert stood silently for a few minutes, trying to make up his mind whether he should go, or if Herbie was just being noble and really needed him. "Herbie?"

Herbie didn't answer. Nert prodded him gently once with a claw and his entire gelatinous bulk shivered. He was relieved to see that Herbie had stopped melting, and after a while he went out.

The Galactica had both elevators and drop-shafts, to give it an atmosphere of anachronistic charm. The leisurely ride down in the elevator from the one hundred fifty-third floor gave Nert time to think. He shared the cubicle with a transparent pressure-sealed tank that held what looked like a sloppy knot of wildly writhing hemp rope, and an overweight Terran female who looked as if she were going to faint. At floor one hundred five, a large purple dracoid got on, crushing everyone else into corners. It rode with them to the ground floor.

Nert left the elevator and walked across the chrome-and-blue-fluff lobby and out into the synthetic parkland. If he hadn't read the brochure left on the nightstand he would have thought it was real. Colors and smells from all across the galaxy surprised him with their variety at every turn. Overhead, the stars were beginning to peek out near one wall, and on the other, the sky was fading slowly from blue to deepest purple, to black. He walked, crunching along the wandering gravel pathways, and thought about what had just happened in the room upstairs.

Herbie had told Nert to have a good time, but for Nert that would be difficult, if not impossible. The main thing that bothered him was that hump, but he was also disturbed by Herbie's attitude about their gerbis fund. The first night after Nert had saved his life, they'd gotten to talking about what they wanted to do when they got too old to space. Nert had told Herbie about how he'd studied gerbis farming on the home world and how he

planned to have a farm of his own some day. Herbie thought that was a fine idea, and they'd put their money together so they could invest it later as equal partners. Maybe Herbie seemed unconcerned about the money because the swelling on his side made him feel sick and distant. It had been smaller back on the ship, but even then it had looked unhealthy to Nert. "Don't worry about it," Herbie had said, and had gone on to talk about something else. It was possible that having a bulge like that was natural for a Tramitodean, but maybe Herbie didn't realize that it might be malignant. After all, diseases were natural too. Was it possible that Herbie was dying?

Dying?

It wasn't like Herbie to keep quiet about a thing like that. He usually liked to air every problem he had. Nert remembered the time he had thought his cytoplasm was curdling and had sent to the captain to ask to be disposed of in free space when he died. The captain was agreeable, and when he lived Nert thought Herbie was disappointed. No, he wasn't dying. It wasn't likely, anyway. Maybe he was only changing sexes, as Nert's own race did, and hoped Nert would be surprised at his new form. Nert liked that idea. And the more he thought about it, the more he liked it. And the more he liked it, the more he wanted to take Herbie's advice and go out to have a good time. Nert decided he would be extraordinarily surprised for Herbie when he got back.

He ran across the park and through the lobby, using his back leg to push off from the ground and his two front legs to pull himself forward, and out onto the street where he joined the milling crowds. Yes, he thought he would be very surprised at Herbie when he got back.

There was no room on the slideway so Nert decided to walk. Besides, he didn't know where he was going, and if he were moving too quickly, he might miss an interesting place. Following the crowd, he set off toward Amusement Central.

Not that he couldn't have gotten almost anything within a few feet of where he stood. Grespel to drink, altrink to creeble with, a mate, even mittlebran. The entire planet was given over to recreation in all its forms, perverted and otherwise. The laws were necessarily lenient, because what might be wicked for one

race might be perfectly acceptable to another, and physically impossible for a third. Even so, there were places on that world, in that town in particular, which had reputations for offering more spectacular pleasures than any other world. Nert clicked his claws in anticipation.

The buildings were alternately iridescent and lustrous black. One complemented the other, and strangely enough, the dark buildings, reflecting the glitter and glow around them, were sometimes more striking than their kaleidoscopic neighbors. The Galactica was not the tallest building, and the smallest was barely larger than a shack. Curious about what such a small place could offer, Nert was about to enter it when a sudden gust of wind pulled at his body and he was stranded in the eye of a small cyclone. As the wind blew harder, beings brushed past Nert unnoticed, and a nictitating membrane covered his eyes so that the lights dimmed, and a primal and uncontrollable fear grew like a weed strangling reason out of his mind. He lay flat on the ground, shivering. As suddenly as it had begun, the wind stopped.

Someone spoke very close to his ear. "I got something for you, friend." The words burbled as if they were spoken underwater.

Nert got to his feet, using his claws like crutches, and slowly the nictitating membrane slid back up out of the way. He turned his head and saw a small grey-green feathered creature with a long, thin body wrapped around his arm, looking at him with black compound eyes.

"What?" Nert was still recovering from his fear. "Who are you?"

"I'm Arvin." He waited a moment and when Nert didn't respond, went on, "the Moretam?" He flapped his wing membranes slowly, as if that would explain everything.

"Strange name for a hurricane. What do you want?"

"Don't you know?"

"How should I—"

"What are you, a numby or something?"

"A what?"

"A policeman." Arvin levitated his head a little and looked around.

"No. What do you want?"

Arvin spoke directly into Nert's earhole. Someone two feet away couldn't have heard them. "Kwishing," was all he said.

"Frooth save you."

"What?"

"You cleared your breathing tract and I said, 'Frooth save you.'"

The Moretam flew around Nert's head a few times, his long body dangling limply below his wings, and settled on Nert's other arm. "Frooth and breathing tracts have nothing to do with it. Haven't you ever heard of kwishing?"

"No." Nert shook his arm violently and started to walk, hoping to give Arvin the idea that he wasn't interested in kwishing, no matter what it was. If the Moretam wanted to sell him something, he'd made a bad start. Nert came from a planet where high winds blow the razor-sharp flowers off the jelbum tree and whip them through the air at tremendous and dangerous speeds. His race had adapted to that by getting as close to the ground as possible and shielding their eyes during windstorms. Usually Nert was able to control his reaction, but he could not when the wind came as suddenly as it had.

Arvin said, "How can you say no if you don't know nothing about it?" Nert jumped onto the slideway behind a windscreen. "I don't want to know," he said. "It isn't necessary that I know." He ignored the Moretam and watched the city flinging itself backward around him.

"You're here for a good time, right?"

After a moment Nert admitted that he was.

"Well then, you're here for kwishing."

They passed a large rorschach building proclaiming in letters slithering across the façade that inside were prepared the most unusual foods in the galaxy: BOILED GREEB, OUR SPECIALTY. Nert leaped off the slideway and went into the restaurant. He sat down at a long counter and said to the waiter, "One boiled greeb, please." The waiter was a mobile pair of antlers with eyes and small sets of tentacles arranged apparently at random on the points. It said, "Yeth, thir," and clattered away on its innumerable stiff limbs.

Nert took a thick booklet from the pouch slung around his neck and turned to the index. "Let's see," he said. "Kwishing . . . kwishing . . ." Arvin said, "You won't find it," and began to scratch under one of his wings with his teeth.

At last Nert said, "Here is it. 'Kwishing, along with sprinkling mittlebran, is one of the few illegal activities on Spangle. It consists of electronically turning a being inside out through the fourth dimension. Frequently the initial change is free, while the operator (usually, though not always, a Moretam) charges a high price to change the victim back. Though seriously disorienting to most other beings, this treatment is no more than mildly stimulating to the Moretam, and if necessary they can even change themselves back without any mechanical help.'"

Arvin had tried to leave when Nert began to read, but Nert grabbed him just behind the head and held him despite all Arvin could do. Nert snapped the book shut and slowly put it away. "What am I going to do with you?" He shook the Moretam.

"You could let me go." It was almost a question.

"If Herbie were here, he'd know what to do."

"Herbie?"

A policeman, a round, stringy ball, more like a tumbleweed with an official stick-pin as an axis than a minion of the law, rolled in. Nert and Arvin watched, one with indecision, the other with fear, as he came to rest two seats away from them. Arvin's wings rested lightly on his body as if he were about to take flight.

The policeman rustled. "Something the matter?" It was impossible to tell which way he was facing. Maybe he faced in all directions at once.

Arvin looked at Nert. Nert let go of him and said, "No. Nothing. Is there?"

"No. No, no," Arvin said, eyes wet with thanks.

"Good to hear it." A waiter, ticking against the floor as he walked, approached the policeman. They got into an animated discussion about something called creetoth. The policeman finally ordered one, and the waiter went away.

Another waiter stopped in front of Nert with a large pan balanced among his horns like a nest in a tree. It was filled with a hot violet liquid surrounding white doughy lumps. Floating in it was something that looked very much like a small version of Herbie. Small black spots were crawling all over it, and it smelled like unprocessed waste material. Nert said, "What's that?"

"Boiled greeb. Best in the galaxy."

Putting down a few bills, Nert said, "You eat it. My compliments." He left with Arvin still coiled around his arm.

When they were outside, Arvin said, "Why'd you do that?"

"Do what?" Nert began to walk slowly toward Amusement Central.

"You know. You could have turned me in. The numbies are ready to believe almost anything about Moretams, especially when it comes to kwishing." He flew around to Nert's other arm.

Nert said, "You don't understand. I wasn't angry about you trying to sell me on kwishing. That's your business. I was upset first about the hurricane you made when you found me, and second that you wouldn't tell me what kwishing is."

Arvin buried his head under a wing. He said, "You never asked."

"I did."

"You didn't, but all right. I owe you a favor."

"No, you don't. Why should I care how many silly beings you sell on kwishing? Besides, if I'd reported you, I'd have to wait around until the trial. I might never get off this rock." He'd heard Herbie call planets "rocks" and the word had a professional and rough-and-tumble sound that Nert liked.

"I still owe you a favor."

They traveled in silence for a while. Nert thought about Herbie back in the hotel room, missing all this excitement. He was probably all right, but Nert couldn't be sure, and he was still worried.

Maybe Arvin knew a good doctor. In a city this size Nert might search for days before he found one he could trust. If Arvin told him, that would take care of two things: It would cancel the debt before Arvin forgot there was one, and it might save Herbie's life—if it needed saving.

Nert told Arvin what he wanted. Arvin said, "A doctor? Sure, I know a doctor. For you?"

"No. It's for my friend Herbie." Nert explained his friend's condition.

Arvin said, "It sounds serious. Come on, we'll go there right now." He unwound himself from Nert's arm and flew down a side

street so quickly that Nert couldn't see him until he stopped and hung in midair, his wings a blur.

"I can't follow if you go that fast. Why don't you just give me directions and I'll find the place myself?"

"Ever been on Spangle before?"

"No."

"Then I better stay with you. There's all kinds of characters who would take advantage of a new Blue." Arvin settled back around Nert's arm and said, "All right, straight ahead."

Arvin led him away from Amusement Central and down increasingly dark and narrow streets. It was a good thing Nert had not insisted he go alone, because he was already lost many times over. They were in a part of town Nert never would have gone to alone, and he felt none too safe even with Arvin around. The farther from Amusement Central they went, the fewer brightly lit buildings there were, and soon it was not unusual to see an entire block of dark buildings crouching beside the street like a line of ragged beggars.

The smell of the city had changed, too. Near the Galactica Hotel the air had been full of the scent of beings from all across the galaxy, mixed together in a pleasant muddle. There had been warm and cool pockets of odor where restaurants catered to as many different tastes as there were beings. In the part of the city they were in now, the air smelled mostly of age. Natural and synthetic building materials decomposed in buildings put up when Spangle was still a struggling colony. Old creatures waited for death. And there was the occasional smell of mittlebran. The smells came and went with the night wind, playing tag with Nert's olfactory nerves. "It looks deserted," he said.

"Just an illusion. There's a pair of eyes, or something that does the same thing as a pair of eyes, looking at us from almost every black hole."

Nert nervously clicked his claws. He hoped they looked formidable enough to anybody watching to make them think twice about attacking.

"This doesn't look like the kind of place I'd look for a doctor," he said. "Not one I'd trust, anyway."

Arvin said, "You can trust Dr. Billingsley. He's a personal friend of mine."

Nert considered asking Arvin if Dr. Billingsley helped him with kwishing, but decided he didn't want to start an argument there, in unfamiliar territory. They traveled in silence, watching for sudden movements in the shadows. Nert tried to trace by scent anyone lurking close by, but the overwhelming stench of age and ancient fear was too strong.

Arvin said, "Stop here." He let go of Nert's arm and hovered, bobbing gently in the air.

They were in front of a narrow, dark passageway with steps that led down into a pool of obscurity. On either side of the opening were posters and handbills advertising the virtues of products that had long since gone out of use. They were marked up with sketches and indecipherable phrases whose meanings Nert guessed were in violation of some local taboo, but meant nothing to him. The smell of mittlebran, though faint, was all around and was mixed with the constant smell of decaying buildings, bodies, and minds.

"Here? What kind of a doctor is he, anyway?"

"I vouch for him personally. Just down the steps and a sharp turn to the right. Dr. Billingsley is the name. There'll be a blue-and-white light over the door."

Nert peered down into the darkness, his eyes bulging more than usual. He said, "Are you sure about this?" He heard the small, skittering sounds of the local vermin. "Arvin?" When no one answered, Nert turned around to find the street empty.

Didn't even say good-bye, Nert thought. The shadows seemed, if anything, more menacing than before. But Nert had no idea where Amusement Central was, and hunting for it would be fruitless. Besides, Herbie *did* need a doctor. It was just possible that Dr. Billingsley was a good one. Nert looked around and wished again that Arvin hadn't left him alone.

Cautiously he walked down the stone steps, one tripod leg at a time. The darkness closed around him like a blanket and stifled him with unmoving air. He looked back and saw the street a few feet above him glistening with dew. It looked almost friendly, compared with the unknown well below.

In the few moments it took to reach the bottom of the stairs, Nert's eyes adjusted to the darkness. The walls were made of synthetic bricks mortared with what looked like the local mud,

though in the dim light it was hard to be sure. A walkway, separated from the open lot beyond by a low concrete wall, crossed the passage at the bottom. Nert looked to the left and saw a series of identical doorways which faced the alley growing smaller monotonously into the distance. On the right, a rusty metal stairway which looked as if it had once been a fire escape led precariously up to a second-floor door with two lights over it—one blue, the other white.

His footsteps echoed between the walls as he walked through the alley and clanged up the metal stairs. He wondered if rooms here were at a premium because of the impossibility of sneak attack. From the landing in front of the door, Nert could look out over the dormant city to the brilliant splash of Amusement Central. He convinced himself that he could pick out the Galactica Hotel, and it made him feel less alone.

Nert turned his back to the city and knocked on the door. It had an elegant mahogany sign screwed to it on which was cut the name, "Arthur Billingsley, MD." The paint on the door was chipped and weatherworn, and Nert could just barely see the remains of a colorful and optimistically implausible drawing of a naked Terran female.

In a few moments a small panel slid open and a pair of eyes stared blearily out at him. The owner of the eyes said, "What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Dr. Billingsley. I was told—"

"Who sent you?"

"Arvin the Moretam."

"Come back in the morning." The panel slid shut with a loud bang that echoed back from the walls and made it sound as if a hundred people had turned Nert down instead of one.

He pounded on the door, and when the slide opened he threw in a ten-credit note. The pair of eyes disappeared for a moment and left the peephole a dark square. He heard the being on the other side of the door scratching around and mumbling strings of mild profanity. Nert shouted up at the hole, "It's an emergency," and a thousand Nerts called out their predicament.

The being said through the peephole, "Damn all emergencies." He slammed the panel shut, and Nert was about to knock again when he heard the sound of bolts being drawn back, locks being

jiggled, and the slow whine of a dying privacy shield. The door opened and Nert crossed the threshold into a large, dark room. The spindly legs of unseen tables and chairs made long shadows in the light that came through the doorway from the room beyond. Nert followed the Terran as he shuffled along the illuminated path between the ranks of furniture into the brightly-lit examining room.

A desk and a long wooden table stood close together in the center. A powerful wave of mittlebran washed over his olfactory nerves, leaving him more awake than he wanted to be and a little lightheaded. There was a glass-fronted cupboard against one wall which the doctor was locking with a thin metal key. A few lighting panels were out, making parts of the ceiling look like a checkerboard.

The man walked wearily to the desk, sniffing, and sat down. He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the desk. For a while he just stared at Nert wide-eyed. "So you're a friend of Arvin's," he said at last.

It sounded more like a statement than a question, but Nert said, "Actually, I just met him this evening. He said you might be able to help my friend."

"Good old Arvin," the man said.

"Can you help?" Nert began to pace around the room nervously. The mittlebran was taking effect and he hoped the doctor wouldn't take long to decide whether or not he wanted the case.

"Don't rush me, boy. I'm a doctor. Never rush a doctor." He smiled pleasantly and said, "Tell me about this 'friend.'"

Nert suspected from the way Dr. Billingsley spoke that he didn't believe it was a friend who had the problem. It was fortunate Nert had been exposed to Terrans early, on his brindle's farm, or he would have been angry that he wasn't trusted. But he knew that with Terrans it wasn't a matter of trust but of understanding. No matter how much contact a Terran had with other races, he could never quite believe their thought-processes and logic patterns were any different from his own. It was a bad assumption, but Nert accepted it, and told him about Herbie.

Dr. Billingsley said, "A most interesting case. Reminds me of one similar to it that I treated out in the Sack. Most interesting. Very." He gnawed gently on his knuckle while he thought.

Nert was beginning to turn blue. His oversensitive nerves could smell things other than mittlebran now. If he'd known their names he could have told Dr. Billingsley every drug in the medicine cabinet. Dr. Billingsley himself gave off a strong armpit odor that smelled to Nert much too much like boiled greeb. He pirouetted three-legged around the room working off his excess energy, and Dr. Billingsley said, "Will you stop that, please?"

"Sorry." Nert stood in one place clicking his claws. "What do you think?"

"It could be serious. I think I'd better go take a look."

Nert spun leg-by-leg toward the door saying, "Good. Let's go."

"That'll be twenty-five credits. For the house call. In advance."

Nert fumbled through his pouch with overeager claws and handed Dr. Billingsley a twenty-five-credit note, which he took and locked in a desk drawer. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine." Nert ran for the door again. "Let's go."

Dr. Billingsley led Nert through the dark labyrinth of the city with the same easy grace Arvin had displayed. They rounded a corner, and to Nert's surprise, the Galactica Hotel stood not more than half a block away. "How'd we get here so fast?" Nert said.

"I know a shortcut."

"I thought Arvin knew the city as well as anyone."

Dr. Billingsley said, "He knows it well enough, but the instincts of a con man aren't sufficient for a complete knowledge of anything. You have to have intelligence, too."

They walked through the early morning crowd. There were not as many beings as there had been when Nert had first gone out. Nert and the doctor entered the Hotel Galactica and crossed the blue-fluff-and-chrome lobby. Creatures dressed in the height of fashion—draped moss for the lizards of Ancheschloss II, dangling plastic baubles for the low, stocky creatures from Slix, hundreds of variations of fabric, light, shimmer, smoke and skin—haughtily watched the Droshi and the Terran, neither of whom were dressed in the height of any fashion whatsoever, cross the lobby to the lift-shaft and fall upward.

Nert tried not to scream at the roar of the passing air as they

ascended, and his body remembered sharp objects thrown at it by the wind on his home world.

The gravity flux dribbled off and held constant at the one hundred fifty-third floor. They got out of the shaft, and the plush-padded hallway seemed very quiet. Nert said, "You mean Arvin does everything by instinct?"

The doctor nodded. "You should see Arvin's home world. There are creatures there with just enough intelligence to be fooled by a smooth talker, and vine highways whose destinations it takes instinct to remember because their weavings and criss-crossings are too complex for a rational mind to follow."

"You mean Arvin is crazy?"

"Just a little. Compared to the rest of his race he's probably as reasonable as a Granoshian."

Nert thought about Arvin leading him through the dark, bewildering city and was amazed that he'd come out with his carapace intact. He wondered if he'd do it again.

They came to the room where Nert had left Herbie. Nert said, "Right in here." He put his claw into a small recess near the door and allowed the lock to scan it. The light flashed green and he pushed the "Open" button.

Dr. Billingsley followed Nert into the room and nearly ran into him. They stood transfixed. It took Nert a moment to comprehend what was happening; then suddenly it was clear. A strange creature that looked a lot like Herbie, but had a much lighter color and a shiny skin stretched tightly over its cytoplasm, was in the pool engulfing the last of Herbie with a bloated pseudopod. Even as they watched, the swelling thing finished sucking Herbie in, and when its pseudopod had relaxed back into its body it sat motionless in the center of the pool like a great implacable scoop of dirty glass.

Nert ran toward it screaming, but reeled back when he was a few feet away, suddenly feeling nauseous; a fire ignited in all his muscles. He staggered back to where Dr. Billingsley stood, and the pain went away.

"What is it?" Dr. Billingsley whispered hoarsely.

"It got Herbie," Nert whimpered. "I knew if I went away something horrible would happen. It got Herbie!" The last word was a whoop such as members of Nert's race make when a situation is

almost hopeless and the only choice left is to throw themselves in a rage at their enemy. Nert ran toward the pool, claws raised and snapping frantically. When he began to feel the nausea and the fire, he leaped forward, hoping to do some damage before he was forced to retreat. He splashed into the pool claws first, and immediately curled up in agony as cramps gripped and twisted his insides.

"Help!"

"I—" Dr. Billingsley didn't move.

"Help me, dammit!"

The doctor ran forward and dragged Nert back to the door, clutching his own stomach. They lay on the floor panting; Dr. Billingsley took great mouthfuls of air, while the breathing slits on Nert's chest flapped madly.

"What was that?" Dr. Billingsley asked.

"Frooth knows. You're the doctor." Nert crawled forward until he just began to feel the ill effects of Herbie's murderer and stared at it as he rocked up and back.

"I can't examine it if I can't get close to it."

"It's too late for that," Nert cried. "Don't you understand? Herbie's dead. He's . . ." Nert's eyes flattened until they looked like two saucers embedded in his head. More quietly, he added, "Thank you for coming. You can keep the money. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He never took his eyes off the thing in the pool.

Dr. Billingsley was at the door when Nert said, "Please don't report this to the police."

The doctor turned. "Why not?"

"Herbie . . ." Nert swallowed. "Herbie told me that sometimes a policeman who's used to rich beings will give a spacer a bad time just for the fun of it. But even if there's no trouble they'll want me to stay until they're done with the investigation. I want to get away from here as soon as possible. Besides, I want to take care of this in my own way."

Dr. Billingsley said, "Murder is permissible for some creatures, but even then it must be reported." He sat down on one of the all-purpose benches and crossed his legs casually. "Not reporting a murder can mean a lot of trouble, especially for a doctor."

"It can't keep up that barrage forever. When it stops I'll be

sitting here ready for it. If you tell the police, they'll get in the way."

"There is a way to keep them from finding out."

Nert turned to look at the doctor. "What's that?"

"For a small extra fee, I might be persuaded to keep this to myself."

Nert turned back to the creature in the pool and said, "And if there is an investigation, the numbies might possibly find out a thing or two about you."

The Terran stiffened. "Oh? What's that?"

"You stink of mittlebran."

"Oh, that." He smiled. "How did you find out?" He paused and said, "No matter. You'll have to do better than that. There are any of a dozen ways I could fight a possession charge."

Nert took a long time answering. "How much?"

"One thousand credits, even."

Nert thought it over. A thousand credits was almost all the money he had set aside for his gerbis farm. Even so, it was worth any amount to be able to pay the creature back for Herbie's death. He wondered, though, if Dr. Billingsley's unconcern about the police was real. Though he'd learned a great deal about the city that evening, he knew nothing about the corruptibility of its police. But he did know from his childhood that it was almost impossible for anyone, sometimes even another Terran, to tell when a Terran was lying. Nert didn't want to take a chance of guessing wrong.

He counted out the thousand credits and put away the woe-fully small pile of bills that were still his. He hoped the monster would crack soon. The hotel room was only rented for three more days, and after that he would have to find a berth on a ship. Nert didn't like to leave Herbie's murderer behind, but there would be nothing else he could do. It looked like Herbie would never get the burial in space he'd always wanted.

"Here's your money," Nert said. Dr. Billingsley took the bills and counted them. "Fine," he said. "The numbies will never know."

Nert sat down a few feet away from the pool and watched the unmoving creature. The doctor said, "Well, I must be going now. I have other patients who need me."

Nert was silent.

The doctor said, "Well, good luck."

Nert heard the door slide open and shut a moment later.

It was very quiet, and Nert had been up for many hours more than he was used to. The monster blurred and Nert had to fight to focus his eyes again. He found himself looking at the being with clinical detachment. As he alternately dozed and started awake, the monster became more than an evil thing—it became evil itself.

Despite all he could do, Nert rested on his tripod legs and fell asleep. He dreamed about drinking third-level glovo, but he didn't enjoy it because it tasted like mittlebran. He wanted to ask Herbie about it, but he couldn't because he was alone in the middle of a dark street that stretched both ways to infinity. A hurricane that went "kwish . . . kwish . . ." blew up the street and Nert had to climb a metal stairway to get away from it. But the rungs were rusty and he fell forever until he landed, *kuish!* on a mushy animal with a tight transparent skin that made him sick when he touched it and it smelled like boiled greeb. Dr. Billingsley threw money at him and asked, "Does it feel better now? Does it feel better now? Does it feel better now . . ."

Nert took a swipe at the doctor, but his claw went right through his face. Nert fell back onto the monster and woke up.

His three legs were sprawled around him like spokes of a wheel. The monster hadn't moved. Nert gathered himself up and walked toward it. Either the night's sleep had done him some good, or the field had weakened, because he could advance to within touching distance of the pool without feeling more than mild discomfort.

The thing in the pool groaned, and Nert backed off a few paces.

"Nert." The voice was too low, but it was unmistakably Herbie's.

"Herbie, is that you?"

When the thing spoke, there were frequent long pauses as if it was a special effort for it to say each word. "Who else would it be?"

Nert found he had no trouble getting as close to the thing as he wanted to. He said, "I thought you were dead."

"Obviously a mistake. What's going on?"

Nert explained what had happened to him since he'd left their room, and when he was done, Herbie said, "You mean you actually gave that sheet-mender one thousand credits?"

"Even," Nert said sadly.

Herbie's voice had been growing stronger as he interrupted Nert's story with questions and explanations. It was nearly normal now, and though the being in the pool didn't exactly look like the friend he'd left behind, Nert was sure it was Herbie.

"You had no way of knowing, of course," Herbie said, "but the police on Spangle are chosen as much for their incorruptible natures as they are for their blank stares. If Dr. Billingsley has any connections in high places, you can bet it's not in the police department. Criminals have been looking for a way around the numbies, without success, for at least a thousand years. If he's found the way, he ought to bottle it."

They sat quietly for some time, while Nert felt sorry for himself. At last he said, "One thousand credits, out the tube."

"Maybe not."

"What?"

"Just thinking out loud."

"Oh." The only sound was the quiet *pop, pop* of bubbles as they escaped from Herbie's underside and broke on the surface. Suddenly Nert said, "Great Frooth! I got so busy telling you what happened to me that I didn't ask what happened to you. *You* tell *me* what's going on."

"I was wondering when you'd get around to that. You remember that growth on my side you were so worried about?"

"Of course."

"Well, I'm it."

Nert got off the bed and shook each leg in turn. That sometimes helped relax him. He said, "I don't think I understand."

"That growth, that bulge was a child. We Tramitodeans grow buds, from one to about six of them, depending on how favorable circumstances are, and when they're mature enough they break off and eat the parent."

"Then you're really *not* Herbie."

"Sure I am. Or I'm as good as Herbie, anyway. The children have all the memories of the parent—all the parents back to the

primeval soup. Of course the recollections get a little dim after the fourth generation or so, thank Frooth. Things are complicated enough as it is."

"So everything me and Dr. Billingsley saw was normal?"

"Right."

"Then all the pain we felt must have been protection for the new being—uh, for you."

"Right. I'm a little telepathic too, more so now I'm in this new body. But don't worry about the pain field. When I'm awake I can control it—my mazoola, that is—pretty well."

Nert sat back down on the bed. He said, "Why didn't you tell me all this before it cost me one thousand credits and a night's sleep?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

"You certainly did that."

"I didn't really expect you back so soon. I thought I'd be all done. I know about you Droshi and your wild sexual practices. Four sexes, great Frooth!"

Nert turned a pale shade of blue.

"Besides," Herbie went on, "I certainly didn't expect you to bring a doctor. If you thought I needed one, why didn't you get the one the hotel keeps on call?"

Nert clicked a claw. He said, "I didn't even think of that. Does this place have a doctor?"

"This place caters to rich people. And when rich people want something, they want it yesterday. This hotel probably provides services we never heard of."

Nert understood their predicament wasn't entirely his fault, and from the way Herbie spoke, he knew Herbie understood it too, and that was enough. Bickering would have been pointless.

"What do we do now?" Nert asked.

A small tremor shook Herbie and little concentric wavelets broke against the edge of the pool. He said, "There are two things we have to do."

"Yes?"

"First, we have to find a ship that's leaving very soon and get two berths on it. And second, we have to get our money back."

"That second thing seems pretty impossible, and even the first

is questionable. How soon will you be able to move and hold down a billet on a ship?"

"I could move now if I had to, but another day or so in the pool would be safer. And don't give up on our money. Herbie's changed, but he's just as clever as he used to be—"

"We won't talk about how clever that was—"

"Clever, I say! And I'm beginning to feel an idea tickling the back of my mind. Give me a while to work it out."

Nert dumped his wastes and went downstairs to the restaurant to get something to eat. He smothered the memory of boiled greeb with familiar food from the home world, frigul with grum-muce and proshmingles. He overpaid for everything.

When Nert got back to the apartment, Herbie said, "I have an idea," and explained it to him. Nert agreed that it was an interesting plan, but wondered if it was necessary.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Nert said, "we already know Dr. Billingsley uses mittlebran. Why go to all that trouble trying to prove it?"

"Well, we don't really know it was Billingsley. One of his patients could be using it. You know how fast clothing soaks up the smell, how difficult it is to get rid of. Besides, I think we'll have more of a psychological advantage if we catch him with his pod in the punch."

Herbie sent Nert out to the spaceport to get them each a berth on a ship leaving on one of the next few nights. Herbie had specified nights because they would have to leave as soon as possible after their meeting with Dr. Billingsley, and the plan had to be used in the early evening.

Nert rode the slideways to the edge of town, skirting the forbidding area he'd traveled through the night before. The daylight washed away the dark demon magic from the streets and buildings, and left old wooden walls weather-blasted and peeling; tired beings lounging on front steps and in gutters as if they'd been there as long as the buildings. It was no longer terrifying, it was depressing.

Nert ignored the invitations, inducements, and promises of skyboards and beings who all had good times awaiting him at a modest fee. But the dancing melee of color and sound was pale compared to the way Nert remembered it was at night, when the

advertising no longer had to compete with the sun. He got to the spaceport and followed the signs to where spacemen could sign up on outward-bound ships.

Signing up for a post on an outward-bound ship always disturbed Nert. On the home world when he was just a klarn, Nert had once read *Moby Dick*, a Terran classic. Though it had been translated from late middle English into Droshi, he'd found the reading so difficult that he'd never finished it. Somewhere during the first few chapters the hero and his alien companion signed up on a ship whose captain, they were warned, had an obsession about a large local aquatic creature. Nert had been told that later the ship was lost with all hands except for the hero. Signing up for a post on an outward-bound ship always reminded him of *Moby Dick* and what had happened to its crew. He knew it was not rational, but his subconscious was unconvinced until it was aboard his ship and could see there was no resemblance between it and the ship in the book.

He signed Herbie and himself onto a freighter carrying towels and blankets, each stamped in red with the words HAVE A SPREE ON SPANGLE! The mate who signed them up claimed he had room in the crew for only one more. Nert convinced him otherwise with a few credits from his dwindling capital reserve.

It was early evening. The sun was low on the horizon, silhouetting the peaks and spires of the city against the sky. They'd left the slideways and were deep in Oldtown. They were following the route Herbie had pulled telepathically out of Nert's mind. Nert looked like an ambulatory baby blue cone. It was a disguise.

They both knew that if Dr. Billingsley saw Nert he would be suspicious. Herbie had hung a camera around Nert's neck, wrapped him in one of the blankets from the hotel and pinned it closed with a fastener he found in the complimentary toilet kit in the bathroom. Herbie told him he looked like a being from Fomalhaut VII. Nert said he felt as if he were walking inside a tent.

Herbie walked down the steps to the alley where they found the long row of closed doors and the rusting metal stairway. Nert saw with one eye through a slit Herbie had cut in the blanket. The blanket gave Nert's view of the world a fuzzy frame. Yellow

light from the setting sun threw the rough unevenness of the walls into high relief, made them seem too sharp and well defined to be real. The metal stair looked as if it had been forged from gold. Even from the foot of the stairway they could see the overdeveloped Terran female on the doctor's door looking proudly out over the city. The blue-and-white lights above her head were pale and ghostly in the onslaught of sunlight.

"This is the place," Nert said. "Right up there."

"Right up there, hmm?" Herbie moved forward and inspected an old wooden door in the brick wall.

Nert was nervous. It was difficult for him to stand still. But when he moved, the bony knobs on the ends of his legs clicked against the sidewalk and were answered by an echo with a million feet.

Herbie said, "This is it."

Nert clattered forward, stepping as lightly as he could. The blue blanket billowed around him, and he could smell his own body over the odor of the synthetic fiber. The camera swung against him on its cord—bump, bump.

The door had been boarded up many years before and was now a rooming house for small insects. It was festooned with their filmy nests and webs. A sign painted on the door said **KEEP OUT. NO TRESPASSING.** The lettering was more faded than the painted woman upstairs.

Nert said, "Can we get in?"

"I think we can push a hole through it." Herbie took a dull metallic cone from his bag and aimed its point at the door. It was smooth except at the point, where there were shallow concentric grooves. Herbie reached inside the machine and made a cradle out of his body to support it.

"What about the sign?"

"From the looks of it," Herbie said, "I'd guess the beings who made that sign are long past caring what happens to this building."

A low whistle soared up and out of hearing range, and the door rattled for a moment. Suddenly an even round hole appeared in it.

Herbie put the drill away and they looked inside. The late af-

ternoon sunshine made the large rectangular shapes within cast long shadows, striping the room. Noodles of pipe stretched across the ceiling and down the walls. Dust covered everything.

"Laundry room," said Herbie.

Nert agreed, and they moved back from the opening. "Don't forget," Herbie said, "when you're all alone with him, stamp on the floor three times. That'll be our signal."

"Right. You sure you can control that pain field of yours?"

"Positive. Don't worry. Good luck." Herbie let his body relax and flowed through the small hole into the room beyond.

Nert said, "Good luck," and started up the stairs, clicking his claws nervously.

At the top, he looked down at the long alley, just as empty now as when he'd first seen it, and at the city beyond, sparkling like a lake in the setting sun. He wondered why he'd never seen any of the beings who lived behind the many doors along the corridor. Maybe they were shy. Or maybe there weren't any. Nert thought it was all very beautiful, and he would have stood there longer if there hadn't been work to do. His mission made him not brave but determined, and his claws were quiet. When Nert felt he could put it off no longer, he pushed the latch release on the door and went inside.

Nert's eyes grew big in the darkness. There were no windows and the only light came from three dust-laden imitation hurricane lamps with cracked and chipped glass.

The waiting room was large and square. Dusty red velvet drapes with faded yellow fringes hung on the walls, and the room was filled with archaic wooden furniture that looked as if it had been built only with humans in mind.

Three creatures were in the waiting room, and the human furniture did not accommodate them well. One of them was a purple dracoid like the one he'd ridden with in the elevator two nights before. It lay on the floor like a small mountain, sleeping. The armored tail curled around its body, and the scaly tip languorously fanned its snout. A slimy creature with too many legs squirmed as it tried to get comfortable in a chair that cramped it no matter which way it turned. Occasionally a stalk carrying an eye at the top rose out of the writhing mass. The eye blinked and then dropped back among the appendages.

The third creature was a blue cone that Nert hoped was not a native of Fomalhaut VII. Nert walked to a shadow in the corner, getting as far away from the being as he could.

For a long time the only sound was that of the uncomfortable creature rearranging its legs. Every time it moved, it made a squealing noise, like rubber rubbing against rubber. The squealing was punctuated by its soft grunts. Antiseptic doctor's office smell covered everything.

Nert saw the room through a slit cut in the blanket. The darkness, the overclean smell, and the constant unsettled sound made Nert feel trapped. He wanted to go down the stairs and tell Herbie that he didn't want the thousand credits back. It was not a strong urge, but it was a pleasant one. Thinking about it occupied Nert's mind while he was waiting.

The uncomfortable creature tried to start a conversation with him but Nert didn't know how Fomalhautians sounded. When he didn't answer, the creature, who had introduced itself as Cavendish, was discouraged and left Nert alone.

A few moments later the door at the back of the room opened and a being shaped like a large barrel rolled out, followed by Dr. Billingsley. The doctor stood in the doorway and said as it crossed the room, "Watch your ethylene intake for a while and you'll be all right in no time." An arm extended from either end of the barrel and pulled the door open. A moment later Nert heard the being bouncing down the stairs.

"Next!"

"That's me, Doc," Cavendish said as it dropped rung by rung off the chair. It slithered across the floor, complaining of fading color and puffy growths at the roots of its tentacles. The doctor nodded, and Cavendish was still explaining when the door to the examination room closed behind him.

A white sheet that had been sitting on the back of a couch flapped into the air, landed, and draped itself over the back of the chair Cavendish had just left. It twittered for a moment and then was silent. Nert had thought it was part of the decor. He studied it closely now and saw that things he had taken for small holes in the fabric were really eyes.

While he waited his turn, Nert watched the Fomalhautian. It was a light-blue cone with a small eyehole near the top, the

pointed end. It hadn't moved since Nert came in. Nert remembered what he'd looked like in the mirror with his disguise on, and decided he could pass for one of them for as long as he had to. Hoping to hear its voice, Nert said, "How are things on the home world?"

There was a long silence. Nert thought the being was ignoring him or hadn't heard, but it finally said, "The gorbash is blooming. All the locals have translated. Summer is a-comin' in, birdie sing coo-coo." Its voice was little more than a modulated grunt. Nert would be able to imitate it without much trouble. He said, "Glad to hear it," and was relieved when the creature didn't try to continue the conversation.

After a while the multilegged creature came out of the doctor's office. It walked stiffly, wrapped in white tape. At the front door it said a muffled, "Thanks, Doc," and left.

"Next!"

The Fomalhautian extended a jointed tentacle from beneath its base and pointed at the dracoid. "I believe he was next."

Dr. Billingsley walked to the sleeping creature and kicked it in the side, making its scales jingle. In a moment the dracoid yawned, stretched, and looked around with its eyes half-closed. When it stretched, it knocked over an overstuffed chair and nearly demolished a lamp; Nert jumped out of the way before its tail could poke out one of his eyes.

The dracoid squeezed through the door into the inner office, and its scales cut deeply into the wooden doorframe.

When it came out, the sheet creature and the Fomalhautian argued about who should go in next. The Fomalhautian said it would be with the doctor a long time, so the other creature should go first. Nert didn't care who went first, as long as they hurried. The freighter left in a few hours and he wanted to be on it. Besides, it couldn't be very pleasant for Herbie down in that dark, dusty cellar.

At last the sheet creature was convinced and flapped after the doctor into the office.

"It's a personal matter, really," the Fomalhautian said when it was gone.

"Yes?" Nert tried to copy the other's gruff voice.

The Fomalhautian went into a long explanation of how its arbis

had been bothering it ever since it had come to Spangle, how it was afraid the thing might become inflamed and have to be cut out, leaving him without any means of corvaling. Nert had no idea what any of those things were, but he agreed that the Fomalhautian was wise to see a doctor.

The sheet creature flapped weakly out of the office. It had a grey splotch on its underside that it treated gingerly as it pulled the door open and left.

"Next!"

Nert knew the Fomalhautian would invite him to go first. If Nert argued with it politely, they would be there all night. Before the being could say anything, Nert said. "Your turn at last. And a good thing too. All that about your arbis sounds pretty serious."

"But it'll take so long."

"That doesn't make any difference. Your health is the important thing."

Dr. Billingsley said, "Come on. You've put this off long enough," and extended his hand to the Fomalhautian.

"Well—" The being landed on the floor in one jump and took little hopping steps into the examination room. Nert felt victorious when the door closed at last. The Fomalhautian would leave, and Nert would have Dr. Billingsley all to himself.

In the quiet, he could hear the Fomalhautian explaining what was wrong with itself, and Dr. Billingsley now and again asking a question or giving an answer. Nert opened the outside door and looked over the city. The sun was gone but the sky was ablaze with advertising. Projectors at the tops of tall buildings threw pictures on low clouds of beings eating exotic foods, doing entertaining things, performing stimulating acts. A light, cool breeze played with his olfactory nerves and washed away the smell of disinfectant while carrying soft and hard smells, and the tinkling sound of beings enjoying themselves a long way off. He thought about Herbie, down in the dusty murk of the abandoned laundry room, and wondered if he really could control his mazoola the way he said he could.

The door of the inner room opened and Nert turned back into the oppressive darkness and smell. "Well, how are you feeling now?"

The Fomalhautian leaped onto the couch and said, "I don't know yet. The doctor is doing some tests."

Dr. Billingsley looked at Nert. "You can come in now."

Nert said, "Aren't you going to finish with your other patient first? You know how the arbis is—"

"I can't do anything until I know the results of those tests. While we're waiting I have time to take care of you."

As Nert hopped weakly into the examination room, he hoped things were not as disastrous as they suddenly appeared. He closed the door and faced Dr. Billingsley, who sat behind the desk. The faint smell of mittlebran pricked Nert like a million little needles and he involuntarily clicked his claws. They clattered like a ratchet wheel.

"What was that?"

"Nothing— Or, rather, that's what I've come to see you about." He stamped on the floor three times. "You see," he said, watching the doctor closely, "every so often, for no reason at all my second stomach on the left starts chattering like that. It's—"

He stopped. The doctor's eyes got big and round and he desperately clutched his middle. He made small gagging sounds and tears began to drip from his eyes. He ran, half crouched, to the medicine cabinet and fumbled with the key in the lock. Dr. Billingsley was in no condition to notice anything but his own pain, or to concentrate on anything but relieving it.

Nert took the camera from under the blanket and recorded the doctor as he reached behind vials, bottles, and pill boxes and retrieved a small grey carton from which he took large pinches of fine white powder and rubbed it all over his face. The doctor coughed, caught his breath, and rubbed more powder into his face. Slowly he straightened up. He noticed Nert's camera for the first time. "What are you doing?"

Under the blanket, Nert was turning a delicate blue. He clicked his claws and whirled around the room like a dervish, trying to work off the burst of nervous energy given him by the mittlebran. When he spoke, his voice shook.

"Pictures, doctor. I'm taking pictures. Clear shots of a certain Dr. Billingsley sprinkling mittlebran."

"Who are you?"

"Nert, the Droshi. Remember? Two nights ago at the Galactica Hotel?"

Dr. Billingsley sat heavily on the side of the desk and stuck his legs out for support. "I told you," he said between heavy breaths, "that doesn't worry me. I've got a lot of friends. You went to a great deal of trouble for nothing."

"That's not what I hear." Nert was nearly hysterical from the mittlebran, and his olfactory nerves felt as if they were burning. It helped to know the symptoms would pass when he got out of the room, but it seemed he'd been with Dr. Billingsley for hours. "You can have the film. For one thousand credits, even."

"I see." Dr. Billingsley walked casually around the desk to the examination table behind it. "A little blackmail, eh? But then, I suppose, it's only fair after what I did to you." He rested his hands on the edge of the table and suddenly was holding a blip-gun.

"Now," he said, "put that camera on the desk and get out of here."

Nert screamed and stamped on the floor three more times.

Dr. Billingsley's face contorted as if it were a carved apple drying in the sun, and he groaned and dropped the gun. "Now," shouted Nert, "the thousand credits!"

The doctor crawled across the floor to the desk where he opened the bottom drawer and thumbed open a metal box. He counted out a thousand credits and struggled to his knees to put it on the desk top.

Nert took the film magazine out of the camera and exchanged it for the money. Bright points of light sparkled on everything in the room. It was the first sign of mittlebran shock. If he began to hear bells he would need a doctor and he wouldn't be able to leave the planet for many days.

He said, "Thank you," and ran out of the room.

With the quick three-legged lope the Droshi use when in a hurry he ran across the waiting room, threw the empty camera to the Fomalhautian, opened the door and ran down the rusting stairway.

The Fomalhautian bounded after him, shouting, "Wait. What am I supposed to do with this?" It yelped in surprise as Dr. Bill-

ingsley suddenly grabbed it from behind and pulled it into the waiting room.

Nert went to the hole in the old wooden door and said, "Come on! It'll only take him a few seconds to find out that the Fomalhautian isn't me." He went to the passageway and climbed the stone steps two at a time. Herbie rolled past him like a soft living wheel and beat him to the top.

"Which way?" Nert said.

"There." They ran across the street and hid in the shadows of the grotesque sculpture of an old portico, while Dr. Billingsley ran toward the city chased by the Fomalhautian, still waving the camera and shouting wildly about tests.

When they were gone, Nert and Herbie walked out of the shadows and looked down the empty street. Herbie said, "Being taken by a new Blue probably hurts him more than losing the thousand credits." He looked at Nert. "By the way, you *did* get the money, didn't you?"

"Sure did." He flipped through the sheaf of bills.

"In an hour or so every shady character on Spangle will be looking for us. If we're going to make that ship, we'd better hurry."

They walked and undulated toward the nearest slideway. The stink of the mittlebran was almost gone and Nert felt better with every step. He said, "Herbie?"

"Um?"

"You don't ever have to retire to a gerbis farm or any other place, do you?"

After a while, Herbie said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean you can just keep turning into your own children forever. Isn't that right?"

There were streetlights around them now and the buildings did not look so forbidding. "Almost forever, yes," Herbie said.

"Then why did you buy a gerbis farm with me for your old age if you never will get old?"

"Oh, I'll get bored with being a spaceman after a while, and I'll want to do something else. I might as well do it with a friend."

They were silent as they walked among the gathering crowds near the slideway. Nert finally said, "If we're friends, next time

you're going to do something like becoming your own child, please don't try to surprise me."

Herbie laughed and said, "If you think *I'm* unusual, you should see how the Terrans produce offspring."

"How's that?"

Herbie told him.

"I don't believe it," said Nert.

"Frooth's truth," said Herbie.

They thought of Dr. Billingsley doing that and laughed about it all the way to the spaceport.

Edward Bryant

P I N U P

IT STARTS, I think, with Lucia and her Lucite block full of the exploded watch. If I could lie at peace and sleep I'm sure I would dream of cogs and springs and escapements and crystals wheeling about me in eccentric orbits.

But I can't. I cannot sleep. I hang suspended, manacles chafing the skin of my wrists, chains angling up to darkness, body pulled uncomfortably downward by the weight of plaster at my loins. It could be a scenario for Torquemada, or a Gahan Wilson cartoon.

Eyes of Bogart, Jagger, Fonda (Peter), Morrison, Nimoy, Dylan stare at me passionlessly. The lights are primary colors and they flash randomly, only occasionally assuming patterns during my hallucinations. Most of the pain stopped some time ago. There's still a dull pressure that throbs almost subliminally.

I suspect the odor of incense is vervain, but my olfactory nerve synesthizes to leaf of oregano and I want to throw up.

Love, vain love. When I was eighteen and a virgin, I went off to college both timidly expectant and fearful that I somehow could never partake of the fantasies I had seen in the X-rated films. Four years later I was jaded. Only a few years more in the matter-of-fact environment of communicative arts, and I was bored. All the one-night understandings, all the meaningful ententes were misunderstood and meaningless. Then dear Lucia love flew in from Rochester and refinted my Ronson.

I had recalled Lucia from a book about holiday customs around

the world. I'd read it, I think, in the third grade. Each year in the spring Saint Lucia would appear in alpine villages and meadow huts. The eldest girl-child of each family, she would dress in a white robe and crown of lighted candles. Tall and golden-haired and quite Nordic, she would haunt the early-morning hours of Saint Lucia's Day, putting out strudel and cheese and making coffee for her parents. The real Saint Lucia had undoubtedly been martyred centuries before in some messy fashion by the Magyars or Slovaks or whomever. But the book didn't cover that ground. Rereading the story usually made me hungry, and at recess I would pull the orange or apple from my lunch pail and covertly devour it behind the swings.

My Lucia was tall and blond and her eyes had the requisite hue of unsmogged sky. She ran up behind me that particular day in Chicago as I was walking along North Michigan Avenue on my lunch break.

"Jim! Mr. James W—. I love you. Stop."

Sophisticated as I was (I am employed as an assistant editor for a flourishing and well-paying men's magazine) I stopped and turned. Coolly I appraised my accoster.

"I'm Lucia," she said, eyes level with mine. "James W—, I adore you."

"Quite right," I said, my wit somewhat dulled by my late lunch of a reuben sandwich at Renaldo's. The sauerkraut had been undistinguished.

"May I?"

"Uh," I said.

She flung her arms around me and kissed my lips passionately. Something angular in her left hand painfully dug into the base of my neck. The paisley overnight case in her right hand caught me in the small of the back. The girl was stunning.

She stepped back, smile broad, and said, "You will come with me. For a drink."

"I'm due at the office at two," I said.

"Come," she repeated.

It continues, I believe, at Lucia's apartment. Just as I'm quite unsure about the precise location of this darkened room in which I hang, swaying slightly in a draft of unknown origin, so I am

similarly disoriented about my eventual destination that day on North Michigan. I vaguely remember three bus transfers and many flights of stairs. Then my memory blurs completely.

At last, music. The boredom of watching those lights is unbelievable. And giant photo-posters remain mute, even under the most urgent pleas for conversation. But now the music starts, chords swelling in gentle progression from a hidden speaker. It is jazz, quite progressive. I don't recognize the group, though I'm sure I should. I have listened to nearly all the candidates in our recent jazz poll. The guitar is superb, the guitarist a master. And the piano! I'm certain the fingers belong to Hundley.

My lucid recollections placed me across a gray formica-surfaced kitchen table from Lucia. Each of us held a tall glass, dark-amber liquid inside, dappled condensation outside. Between us was a four-inch cube of clear Lucite. Inside, the disassembled movement floated in a litter about the handless face.

"It's the only way I like to see clocks," she said.

I made a non sequitur remark about Dali.

"I'm in love with entropy," said Lucia.

I didn't understand and didn't want to display my ignorance; she didn't offer to explain.

"Utter stasis . . ." she mused. "Now there's a goal."

I nodded and took another sip from my glass. The liquor was unfamiliar; the taste reminded me of cinnamon and licorice.

"Well, come on," she said, draining her glass.

And led me to her bedroom.

Somewhere I missed a transition. I was lying there on her bed, naked, waiting for some rush of hedonistic experience. The quilt was cold against my buttocks. I must have been somewhat drunk; I could hear my watch where it lay on the dresser and its beat was irregular.

Lucia knelt beside the bed and began to massage me. "Nice," I said. "I'm sure I love you."

"Of course," she said. Lucia set a silver bucket on the bed by my hip. She dipped into it with her hand and began to pack something white and gooey around my—"Hey!" I said.

"Don't worry," said Lucia, packing. "It's only plaster."

Something didn't seem logical. "Oh," I said.

"Plaster of Paris. I'm taking a cast."

"Um," I said. "I, uh, I thought you people only did that with rock stars."

"Oh, I did. I got all the big ones. Hendrix and Morrison and all the rest. I'm extending my collection."

At the time it seemed plausible.

And continues. I occasionally wonder whether my prolonged absence has been noted or remarked upon by the guys at the office. Probably not. Tenure at the magazine is tenuous even at the top. And probably the theory has been offered that the upstairs killer got me at lunch on that particular day.

I've discovered that I can alleviate the numbness by twisting my body slightly. The muscles in my sides can do it. The slight torque flexes new muscles in turn. But the pain is so intense that I seldom bother to alleviate the numbness.

Instead I dip into my cornucopian past:

I recall awakening and half-opening my eyes and feeling the *déjà vu* of that Easter demonstration when I first saw the Washington Monument in the dawn. Then my perspectives rushed inward and I knew I was not looking at the Washington Monument.

My movements were very slow, but I crept my hands like spiders up across my flanks and wonderingly touched the hard plaster. I touched. I tapped. I grasped. I wrenched. And stopped, pained. The plaster had a myriad firm anchors.

"I regret the inconvenience," said a voice behind me. "I forgot to apply the Vaseline first. Terribly stupid of me."

I tried to turn my head to look at Lucia, but the exertion was too much. She moved into the line of my vision. She had an ice pick in her hand. "Don't worry," she said. "I'm not going to hurt you. This is for obvious sanitary reasons." She leaned over the apex of the monument and began to chip a hole.

I fainted.

There is a distorted montage of wakenings. Once my eyes opened and I saw Lucia kneeling at my waist, her lips in a horizontal plane with the peak of the plaster. She was blowing gently across the opening and I could hear the deep bird-whistle of a cockatoo.

• • •

It will end, I suspect, soon. Here. The feedings of water and drugs and cookies have been more infrequent of late. I hear the invisible tone arm *scrutch* across the jazz album and there is transitory silence. Something new begins; an acid raga. I would like to dance and my feet make a few sympathetic twitches.

Ah love, there were so many fruitless dialogues:

"Who are you?"

"Who are you."

"Why am I here?"

"Why am I here."

"What are you going to do?"

"What are you going to do."

"Are you a kidnapper for ransom? A twisto? A radical? In league with a Conspiracy? From women's lib?"

"Who are you."

The music is louder and faster.

Eyes of Gable, Garbo, Fonda (Jane), Hopper, some Kennedys, Baez stare at me passionlessly. The patterns of light are extinguished and a door opens in the poster wall. My eyes sting with the brightness and I must squint to see.

I am looking through a bomb-bay door at the mountain lake below. The dark island in the center is surrounded by scaled ripples. Perspectives slide back to the apartment in Chicago.

Staring in at me through the diminished doorway is one blue eye.

Vonda N. McIntyre

THE GENIUS FREAKS

DARTING into a lighted spot in a dim pool—

Being born—well, Lais remembered it, a gentle transition from warm liquid to warm air, an abrupt rise in the pitch of sounds, the careful touch of hands, shock of the first breath. She had never told anyone that her easy passage had lacked some quality, perhaps a rite that would have made her truly human. Somewhere was a woman who had been spared the pain of Lais' birth, everywhere were people who had caused pain, and, causing, experienced it, paying a debt that Lais did not owe. Sleeping curled in fetal position in the dark gave her no comfort: the womb she was formed in had seemed a prison from the time she was aware of it. Yet the Institute refused to grow its fetuses in the light. The Institute administrators were normal and had been born normally. If they had ever been prenatally aware, the memory had been obliterated or forgotten. They could not understand the frustration of the Institute Fellows, or perhaps the thought of fishlike little creatures peering out, watching, learning, was too much even for them to bear.

Lais' quiet impatience with an increasingly cramped world was only relieved by her birth, and by light, which freed a sense she had felt was missing but could not quite imagine. Having reasoned that something like birth must occur, she was much calmer under restraint than she had been only a little earlier.

When she first realized she was trapped, when she first grew large enough to touch both horizons of her sphere, she had been a wild and intelligent carnivore, suspicious and easily angered. She had thrashed, seeking escape; nothing noticed her brief frenzy. The walls were spongy-surfaced, hard beneath; they yielded slightly, yet held her. They implied something beyond the darkness, and allowed her to imagine it. All her senses were inside the prison, so she imagined being turned inside out to be freed from her tether. She expected pain.

As she waited, she sometimes wished she were still a lower primate, small and stupid enough to accept the warm salty liquid as the universe. Even then, as she kicked and paddled with clumsy hands and feet, missing the strong propulsion of her diminishing tail, she was changing. That was when she first thought that the spectrum of her senses might lack a vital part. Her environment was more alien now than it had been when she was a lithe amphibian, barely conscious, long-tailed and free in an immense world. Earlier than that, her memories were kinetic impressions, of gills pumping, heart fluttering, the low, periodic vibration that never changed.

—the silver-speckled black fish settled in a shadow at Lais' feet, motionless but seeming to ripple beneath the mist and the disturbed surface of the water. Lais hunched down in her thick coat. The layered branches of a gnarled tree protected her from the sleet, but not from the wind. She shivered. Overhead, the vapor rising from the pool condensed in huge drops on the undersides of dark-green needles, and fell again. The tree smelled cool and tart. Beyond her shelter, the shapes of sculpture and small gardens rose and flowed between low buildings and sleet-cratered puddles that reflected intermittent lights. Except for Lais and the fishes, the flagstone mall was deserted. People had left their marks, bits of paper not yet picked up, sodden; placards and posters the haranguers had abandoned in the rain, leaning against each other like dead trees. Lais let her gaze pass quickly over them, trying not to see the words; in the dim light, she could almost pretend she couldn't read them.

If she left this place she could walk downtown for perhaps half an hour in the warmed, well-lit night, before an agent saw

her smoothing people and chased her out, or had her held and checked. That she could not afford. She stayed where she was. She pulled her coat over her knees and put her head down. Staying outside was her own choice. The dump nearby would give her one of the transients' beds, but out here the cold numbed her, a free anesthetic that otherwise she might be driven to buy in more destructive form.

A scuffing through slush on the flagstones roused her. Lais crawled stiffly from beneath the tree. Pain clamped on her spine before she could straighten. She leaned against the garden's retaining wall, breathing the thin air in shallow cut-off gasps. The man was almost opposite her when she moved into the mall. "Hey, you got any spare change?"

Startled, a little scared, he peered down at her through the rain. His face was smooth, without character, the set and seemingly plasticized face of a thousand betrayers, a face she would not live to share. He had nothing to be frightened of but mercifully rapid senility and a painless death that could be over a century away. His life-span would be ten times hers.

"You're dressed well to want money."

She moved closer to him, so close that she had to conceal her own uneasiness. She needed, if anything, more distance around her than other people, but she understood the need and controlled it. The man succumbed to it and moved away from her until gradually, as they talked, she backed him against the wall. He was odorless, a complete olfactory blank, firmly scrubbed and deodorized at mouth and armpits and feet and groin, as clean as his genes. Even his clothes had no smell. Lais hadn't bathed in days, and her clothes were filthy; her damp coat smelled familiarly of wool, and she herself smelled like a warm wet female animal with fur. The remembered instincts of her short time as a carnivore built an image of herself preying on others. It amused her, because they had been preying on her all her life.

"Some people are more generous," she said, as if someone had given her the coat. Wisps of hair clung in damp streaks across her forehead and at her neck.

"Why don't you sign up for Aid?"

She laughed once, sharply, and didn't answer, turned her back

on him and guessed two steps before he called her. It was one. "Do you need a place to sleep?"

She made her expression one of disdain. "I don't do that, man."

Cold rain beading on his face did not prevent his flush: embarrassment mixed with indignation. "Come now, I didn't mean—"

She knew he didn't mean—

"Look, if you don't want to give me anything forget it." She stressed "give" just enough.

He blew out his breath and dug in his pockets. He held out a crumpled bill that she looked at with contempt, but she took it first. "Gods, a whole guilder. Thanks a lot." The insolence of her mock gratitude upset him more than derision. She walked away, thinking that she had the advantage, that she was leaving him speechless and confused.

"Do you like hurting people?"

She faced him. He had no expression, only that smooth, un-lived-in look. She watched his eyes for a moment. They, at least, were still alive.

"How old are you?"

He frowned abruptly. "Fifty."

"Then you can't understand."

"And how old are you? Eighteen? It isn't that much difference."

No, she thought, the difference is the hundred years that you've got left, and the self-righteous hate you'd give me if you knew what I was. She almost answered him honestly, but she couldn't get the words out. "It is to me," she said, with bitterness. Only fifty. He was the right age to have had his life disrupted by the revolt, and if he did not hate her kind, he would still fear them. Deep feelings were no longer so easily erased by the passage of time.

He seemed about to speak again, but he was too close; she had misjudged him and he had already stepped outside her estimation of him. Her mistakes disturbed her; there was no excuse for them, not this soon. She turned and fled, slipped to her hands and knees in the slush. She struggled to her feet and ran again.

Around a corner she had to stop. Even a month earlier she would not have noticed minor exertion; now it exhausted her. The Institute could at least have chosen a clean way to murder

its fellows. Except that clean deaths would be quick, and too frequently embarrassing.

The wind at Lais' back was rising. On a radial street leading toward the central landing pad, it seemed much colder. Sleet melted on her face and slid under her collar. Going to the terminal, she risked being recognized, but she didn't think the Institute could have traced her here yet. At the terminal she would be able to smooth a few more people, and maybe they would give her enough for her to buy a ticket off this mountain and off this world. If she could hide herself well enough, take herself far enough, the Institute would never be sure she was dead.

Halfway between the mall and the landing terminal, she had to stop and rest. The café she entered was physically warm but spiritually cold, utilitarian and mechanical. Its emotional sterility was familiar. Recently she had come to recognize it, but she saw no chance of replacing the void in herself with anything of greater meaning. She had changed a great deal during the last few months, but she had very little time left for changes.

The faint scents of half a dozen kinds of smoke lingered among the odors of automatic, packaged food. Lais slid into an empty booth. Across the room three people sat together, obviously taking pleasure in each other's company. For a moment she considered going to their table and insinuating herself into the group, acting pleasant at first but then increasingly irrational.

She was disgusted by her fantasies. Briefly, she thought she might be able to believe she was insane. Even the possibility would be comforting. If she could believe what she had been taught, that Institute geniuses were prone to instability, she could believe all the other lies. If she could believe the lies, the Institute could remain a philanthropic organization. If she could believe in the Institute, if she was mad, then she was not dying.

She wondered what they would do if she walked over and told them who and what she was. Lais had had no experience with normal humans her own age. They might not even care, they might grin and say "So what?" and move over to make room for her. They might pull back, very subtly, of course, and turn her away, if their people had taught them that the freaks might revolt again. That was the usual reaction. Worse, they might stare at her for a moment, look at each other, and decide silently among

themselves to forgive her and tolerate her. She had seen that reaction among the normals who worked at the Institute, those who needed any shaky superiority they could grasp, who made themselves the judges of deeds punished half a century before.

A lighted menu on the wall offered substantial meals, but despite her hunger she was nauseated by the mixed smells of meat and sweet syrup. The menu changed a guilder and offered up utensils and a covered bowl of soup. She resented the necessity of spending even this little, because she had almost enough to go one more hard-to-trace world-step away. The sum she had and the sum she needed: they were such pitiful amounts, pocket money of other days.

For a moment she wished she were back at the Institute with the rest of the freaks, being catered to by pleasant human beings. Only for a moment. She would not be at the Institute but hidden in their isolated hospital; those pleasant human beings would be pretending to cure her while sucking up the last fruits of her mind and all the information her body could give them. All they would really care about would be what error in procedure had allowed such a mistake to be brought to term in their well-monitored artificial wombs. Fellows were not supposed to begin to die until they were thirty, though that would be denied. Nothing had warned the Institute that Lais would die fifteen years too early; nothing but the explanation, and perhaps not even that, could tell them if any of her colleagues would die fifteen or fifty years too late, given time by a faulty biologic clock to develop into something the Institute could no longer control, let alone understand. Their days would be terror and their sleep nightmare over that possibility.

And her people, the other Fellows, would hardly notice she was gone: that brought a pang of guilt. People she had known had left abruptly, and she had become so used to the excuses that she had ceased to ask about them. Had she ever asked? There were so many worlds, such great distances, so many possibilities: mobility seemed limitless. Lais had never spent as much as a year in a single outpost and seldom saw acquaintances after transient project collaborations or casual sexual encounters. She had no emotional ties, no one to go to for help and trust, no one who knew her well enough to judge her sane against contrary evi-

dence. Fellows were solitary specialists in fields too esoteric to discuss without the inducement of certain intellectual interaction. The lack of communication had never bothered Lais then, but now it seemed barbarous, almost inconceivable.

Clear soup took the chill away and let minor discomforts intrude. The thick coat was too warm, but she wore it like a shield. Her hair and clothes were damp, and the heavy material of her pants began to itch as it grew warmer. Her face felt oily.

Trivialities disappeared. She had continued the research she had started before she was forced to run. She was crippled and slowed by having to do the scut-work in her mind. She needed a computer, but she couldn't afford to line one. It was frustrating, of course, exhausting, certainly, but necessary. It was what Lais did.

A hesitant touch on her shoulder awakened her. She didn't remember falling asleep—perhaps she had not slept: the data she had been considering lay organized in her mind, a new synthesis—but she was lying on her side on the padded bench with her head pillowed on her arms.

"I'm really sorry. Mr. Kiviat says you have to leave."

"Tell him to tell me himself," she said.

"Please, miz."

She opened her eyes. She had never seen an old person before; she could not help but stare, could not speak for a moment. His face was deeply lined and what little hair he had was stringy, yellow-white, shading at his cheeks into two days' growth of grey stubble. He was terrified, put in the middle with no directions, afraid to try anything he might think of by himself. His pale, sunken eyes shifted back and forth, seeking guidance. On the thin chain around his throat was a child's identity tag. Pity touched her and she smiled, without humor but with understanding. "Never mind," she said. "It's all right. I'll go." His relief was a physical thing.

Groggy with sleep she stood up and started out. She stumbled, and the malignant pain crawled up her spine where eroded edges of bone ground together. She froze, knowing that was useless. The black windows and the shiny beads of icy snow turned scarlet. She heard herself fall, but she did not feel the impact.

She was unconscious for perhaps a second; she came to calmly

recording that this was the first time the pain had actually made her faint.

"You okay, miz?"

The old man knelt at her side, hands half extended as if to help her, but trembling, afraid. Two months ago Lais would not have been able to imagine what it would be like to exist in perpetual fear.

"I just—" Even speaking hurt, and her voice shocked her with its weakness. She finished in a whisper, "—have to rest for a little while." She felt stupid lying on the floor, observed by the machines, but the humiliation was less than that of the few endless days at the hospital being poked and biopsied and sampled like an experiment in the culture of a recalcitrant tissue. By then she had known that the treatments were a charade, that only the tests were important. She pushed herself up on her elbows, and the old man helped her sit.

"I have . . . I mean . . . my room . . . I'm not supposed to . . ." His seamed face was scarlet. It showed emotion much more readily than the dead faces of sustained folk, perhaps because he aged and they did not, perhaps because they were no longer capable of deep feeling.

"Thank you," she said.

He had to support her. His room was in the same building, reached by a web of dirty corridors. The room was white plastic and scrupulously clean, almost bare. The bluish shimmering cube of a trid moved and muttered in the corner.

The old man took her to a broken sandbed and stood uncertainly by her. "Is there anything . . . do you need . . . ?" Rusty words learned by rote long before, never used. Lais shook her head. She took off her coat, and he hurried to help her. She lay down. The bed was hard: air was meant to flow through granules and give the illusion of floating, but the jets had stopped and the tiny beads were packed down at the bottom, mobile and slippery only beneath the cover. It was softer than the street. The light was bright, but not intolerable. She threw her arm across her eyes.

Something awakened her: she lay taut, disoriented. The illumination was like late twilight. She heard her name again and

turned. Over her shoulder she saw the old man crouched on a stool in front of the trid, peering into the bluish space of it, staring at a silent miniature of Lais. She didn't have to listen to know what the voice was saying: they had traced her to Highport; they were telling the residents that she was here and that she was mad, a poor pitiful unstable genius, paranoid and frightened, needing compassion and aid. But not dangerous. Certainly not dangerous. Soothing words assured people that aggression had been eliminated from their chromosomes (that was a lie, and impossible, but as good as truth). The voice said that there were only a few Fellows, that they confined themselves to research. Lais stopped listening. She allowed early memories to seep out and affect her. The old man crouched before his trid and stared at the picture. She pushed the twisted blanket away. The old man did not move. At the foot of the bed, Lais reached out until her fingers almost brushed his collar. Beneath it lay the strong thin links of his identity necklace. She could reach out, twist it into his throat, and remove him as a threat. No one would notice he was gone. No one would care. A primitive anthropoid, poised between civilization and savagery, urged her on.

When he recognized her, he would straighten. His throat would be exposed. Lais could feel tendons beneath her hands. She glanced down to those hands, outstretched like claws, taut, trembling, alien. She drew them back, still staring. She hesitated, then lay down on the bed again. Her hands lay passive, hers again, pale and blue-veined, with torn, dirty fingernails.

The old man did not turn around.

They showed pictures of how she might look if she were trying to disguise herself, in dark or medium skin tones, no hair, long hair, curly hair, hair with color. The brown almost had it: anonymous. And she had changed in ways more subtle than disguise. The arrogance was attenuated, and the invincible assurance gone; the self-confidence remained—it was all she had—but it was tempered, and more mature. She had learned to doubt, rather than simply to question.

The estranged face in the trid, despite its arrogance, was not cruel but gentle, and that quality she had not been able to change.

It had taken them two months to trace her. They could only

have followed her credit number to the last time she had used it, before cancellation. They would have known only how far she could get before her cash ran out. She had gotten farther, of course, but they had probably expected that.

Since they knew where she was, now was almost identical to later, and now it was still light outside. As she allowed herself to sleep again, she tried to imagine not recognizing a picture of someone she had met. She failed.

Lais woke up struggling from a nightmare in which the blue images of the trid attacked and overwhelmed her, and her computers would not come to her aid. The old man pulled his hands from her shoulders abruptly and guiltily when he realized she was awake. The room was overwarm, windowless and stuffy. Lais was damp all over with feverish sweat. Her head ached, and her knees were sore.

"I'm sorry, miz, I was afraid you'd hurt yourself." He must have been rebuffed and denigrated all his life, to be so afraid of touching another human being. "It's all right," she said. She seemed always to be saying that to him. Her mental clock buzzed and jumped to catch up with reality: twelve hours since the trid woke her up.

The old man sat quietly, perhaps waiting for orders. He did not take his gaze from her, but his surveillance was of a strange and anxious childlike quality, without recognition. It seemed not to have occurred to him that his stray might be the Institute fugitive. He seemed to live in two spheres of reality. When she looked at his eyes, he put his head down and hunched his shoulders. His hands lay limp and half-curved in his lap. "I didn't know what to do. They yell at me when I ask stupid questions." No bitterness, just acceptance of the judgment that any question he could ask must be stupid.

She forced back her own useless flare of anger. To awaken hate in him would be cruel. "You did the right thing," she said. She would have said the same words if he had innocently betrayed her. Two other lines of possible reality converged in her mind: herself of two months or a year before, somehow unchanged by exile and disillusionment, and an old man who called Aid for the

sick girl in his room. She would have told him exactly what she thought without regard for his feelings; she would have looked on him not with compassion but with the kind of impersonal pity that is almost disdain. But they would have been more similar in one quality: neither of them would have recognized the isolation of their lives.

"Are you hungry?"

"No." That was easier than trying to explain why she was, but could not eat. He accepted it without question or surprise, and still seemed to wait for her orders. She realized that she could stay and he would never dare complain—perhaps not wish to—nor dare tell anyone she was here. If he had been one of the plastic people she might have used him, but he was not, and she could not: full circle.

His hands moved in his lap, nervous.

"What's wrong?" Gently.

As an apology, he said, "Miz, I have to work."

"You don't need my permission," trying to keep her tone from sounding like a reprimand.

He got up, stood uncertainly in the center of his room, wanting to speak, not knowing the right words. "Maybe later you'll be hungry." He fled.

She unwrapped herself from the blanket and massaged her knees. She wandered uneasily around the room, feeling trapped and alien.

One station on the trid bounced down all news. She came on at the quarter hour. The hope that they had only traced her to this world evaporated as she listened to the bulletin: the broadcast was satellite-transmitted; unless they had known, they would not have said she was in Highport and risked missing her in another city. They kept saying she was crazy, in the politest possible terms. They could never say that the malignancy was not in her mind but in her body. No one got cancer anymore. People who related their birth dates to the skies of old Earth didn't even call themselves Moon children if they were born under the Crab. All the normals had been clean-gened, to strip even the potential for cancer from their chromosomes. Only a few of them, and now Lais, knew that the potential had been put back into the Institute Fellows, as punishment and control.

They used even this announcement to remind the people how important the Fellows were, how many advances they had made, how many benefits they had provided. Before, Lais had never known that that sort of constant persuasion was necessary. Perhaps, in fact, it wasn't. Perhaps they only thought it was, so they continued it, afraid to stop the constant reinforcement, probing, breaking old scars.

She turned off the trid. There was a small alcove of a bathroom off the old man's quarters; there was no pool, only a shower. She stripped and took off the dark wig. If there had been a blower she would have washed her clothes, but there were only a couple of worn towels. She turned on the shower and slumped under it with water running through her bright, colorless, startling hair, over her shoulders and breasts and back. Her bones were etched out at ribs and hips, and her muscles made a clear chart of anatomy. Her knees were black and purple; she bruised very easily now.

She left before the old man returned. Trying to thank him would embarrass him and force him to search for words he did not possess. If she waited she might lose her courage and stay; if she waited she might convince herself that she did not need to run again to defy the Institute. If she waited they might trace her to him. It would not matter to them or help their search if they questioned him, but it would confuse and hurt him. She felt strangely protective toward him, perhaps as he had felt toward her. As if people responded to helplessness in ways that had nothing to do with their capacity to think.

Outside it was dark again—could be still dark, for all the sun Lais had seen. But the sleet had stopped and it was a midnight-blue morning, cold and clear, and even the city's skyglow could not dim the stars. People strolled alone or in groups on the softly lit mall or sat on the bronze or stone flanks of prehistoric-beast sculptures. Lais stayed in shadows and at edges. No frozen-young faces blanched on seeing her; no one sidled toward the nearest communications booth to call the security agents. Many of the people, by their clothes and languages, were transients who had no reason to be interested in local news.

The haranguers were back after the rain, preachers for bizarre religions, recruiters for little outwoods colonies, proponents of

strange social ideals. Lais could ignore them all, except the ones who preached against her. She could feel the age about them: they remembered. Only a few kept that much hate, enough to stand on walls and cry that the freaks were a danger and a curse. Lais crept by them on the opposite side of the path, as if they could know what she was just by looking. Their voices followed her.

Drained, she stopped and entered one of the frequent CMU booths. The door closed over the sounds. She needed to rest. The money she had scrounged and smoothed could buy no ticket now past the watchers in the port, so she used it to open lines to the city's computers, and they returned to her the power of machines. Their lure was too great, measured against the delay. She had been straining so long at the problem she was working on when she left the Institute that the programs needing to be run sprang out full-grown. She did a minute's worth of exploration and put a block on the lines so she could not be cut off as soon as her money ran out. It should hold long enough. Into the wells she inserted the data cubes she had carried around for two months. Working submerged her; reality dissolved.

Later, while waiting for more important output, Lais almost idly probed for vulnerability in the city programs, seeking to construct for herself a self-erasing escape route. The safeguards were intricate, but hidden flaws leaped out at Lais and the defenses fell, laying the manager programs open to her abilities. It was hardly more difficult than blocking the lines. At that moment she could have put glitches in the city's services and untraceable bugs in its programs. She could see a thousand ways to disrupt things for mere annoyance, she could detour garbage service and destroy commercial records and mismatch mail codes and reroute the traffic, and there were a thousand times a thousand ways to disrupt things destructively, to turn a community of a million people into the ruined inhabitants of a chaotic war zone. Entropy was all on her side. Yet when the city was stretched out vulnerable before her, the momentary eagerness to destroy left her. The fact that she could have done it seemed to be enough. Taking vengeance on the plastic people would have been senseless and very much like experimenting with mice or rabbits or lower primates, small furry stupid beasts that accept the pain and

degradation with frightened resignation in their wide deep eyes, not knowing *why*. The emotional isolation that might have allowed her to tamper with the city was shattered in her own experience and existence as a laboratory animal, knowing, but not really understanding why.

She slammed at the terminal to close down the holes she had made in the city's defenses and touched it more gently to complete her work. She used an hour of computer time in less than an hour of real time.

The results came chuckling out: first one, then a second world ecosystem map in fluorescent colors, shading through the spectrum from violet for concrete through blue and green and yellow for high to low certainty to orange and red for theoretical projections. The control map was mostly blue, very little red: it looked good. Its data had been nothing but a sample of ordinary dirt, analyzed down to its isotopes, from the grounds of the outpost where Lais had been working when she got sick. The map showed the smooth flow of natural evolution, spotted here and there with the quick jumps and twists and bare spots and rootless branches of alien human occupation. Its accuracy was extraordinary. Lais had not thought herself still capable of elation, but she was smiling involuntarily, and for a few moments she forgot about pain and exhaustion.

The second map had less blue and more red, but it seemed unified and logical. Its data had been a bit of a drone sample from an unexplored world, and it showed that the programs were very likely doing what they were supposed to do: deduce the structure and relationships of a world's living things.

Lais' past research had produced results that could hardly be understood, much less used, by normals. It would be extended and built on by her own kind, eventually, not in her lifetime, or perhaps not even in the lifetime that should have belonged to her. This time she had set out to discover the limits of theory applied to minimal data, and the applications were not only obvious but of great potential benefit. When the hounds tracked her, they would find her last programs, and they would be used. Lais shrugged. If she had wanted to be vindictive, she would have tried not to finish, but her mind and her curiosity and her

need for knowledge were not things she could flick on and off at will, to produce results like handfuls of cookies.

The screen blinked. Her time had run out long since, and the computer was beginning to cut out the obstructions she had put in its billing mechanism. But they held for the moment, and the computer began obediently to print out the data blocks after the map and the programs. She reached to turn it off, then drew her hand back.

Among crystal structures and mass spectrum plots a DNA sequence zipped by, almost unnoticed, almost unnoticeable, but it caught her attention. She thought it was from the drone sample. She brought it back and put it on the screen. The city computers had all the wrong library programs, and who bothered to translate DNA anymore anyway? She picked a place that looked right and did it by memory; for *Lais* it was like typing. AUG, adenine, uracil, guanine. Start: methionine. Life is the same all over. The computer built a chain of amino acids like a string of pop-beads. 2D valiantly masqueraded as 3D. *Lais* threw in entropy and let the chain fold up. When it was done she doubled and redoubled it and added a copy of its DNA. The screen flickered again; the openings she had made in the computer's safeguards were beginning to close, and alarms would be sounding.

The pieces on the screen began the process of self-aggregation, and when they were done she had a luminous green reproduction, a couple of million times real size, of something that existed on the borders of life. It was a virus, that was obvious. She couldn't stay and translate the whole genome and look for equivalents for the enzymes it would need. She didn't really have to. It felt, to all her experience, and memory, and intuition, like a tumor virus. She glanced at the printout again and realized with slow shock, free-fall sensation, that this was from the control data.

There were any number of explanations. Someone could have been using the virus as a carrier in genetic surgery, replacing its dangerous parts with genes that it could insert into a chromosome. They didn't grow freaks at that outpost, but they might have made the virus stocks that the freaks were infected with when they were no more than one-cell zygotes. Someone could have been careless with their sterile technique, especially if they

had not been told what the virus was used for and how dangerous it was.

The looming green virus particle, as absurd and obscene that size as the magnified head of a fly, dimmed. The computer was almost through the block. Lais had been in the company of machines so long that they seemed to have as much personality as people; this one muttered and grumbled at her for stealing its time. It lumbered to stop her, a hippopotamus playing crocodile.

Lais had dug the virus up outside in the dirt, free, by chance, and there was a lot of it. If it were infectious—and it seemed complete—it could be infecting people at and around the outpost, not very many, but some, integrating itself into their chromosomes, eradicating the effects of clean-gening. It might wait ten or fifteen or fifty years, or forever, but when injury or radiation or carcinogen induced it out, it would begin to kill. It would be too late to cure people of it then, just as it was for Lais; the old, crippling methods—surgery, radiation—might work for a few, but if the disease were similar to hers, fast-growing, metastasizing, nothing would be much use.

The light on the screen began to go out. She moved quickly and stored the map programs, the maps, the drone data.

She hesitated. In a moment it would be too late. She felt the vengeful animals of memories trying to hold her back. She jabbed with anger at the keyboard and sent the control data into storage with the rest as the last bright lines faded from the screen.

The data was there, for them to notice and fear, or ignore and pay the price. She would give them that much warning. The normals might find a way to clean-gene people after they were grown; they might even set Fellows to work on the problem and let them share the benefits. Lais wondered at her own naïveté, that after everything a small part of her still hoped her people might finally be forgiven.

She left it all behind, even the data cubes, and went back out onto the mall.

A hovercar whirled a few streets back; sharp beams from its searchlights touched the edges and corners of buildings. She walked faster, then ran painfully, past firmly-shut doors to a piece of sculpture that doubled as a sitting park. She crawled into the

deepest and most enclosed alcove she could reach. Outside she could hear the security car intruding on the pedestrian mall. The sucks passed without suspecting her presence, not recognizing the sculpture as a children's toy, a place to hide and climb and play, a place for transients to sleep in good weather, a place that, tonight, was Lais' alone.

There was a tiny window by her shoulder that cut through a meter of stone to the outside. Moonlight polished a square of the wall that narrowed, crept upward, and vanished as the moon set.

Lais put her head on her knees and focused all her attention on herself, tracing lines of fatigue through her muscles to extrapolate her reserves of stamina, probing at the wells of pain in her body and in her bones. She had become almost accustomed to betrayal by the physical part of herself; but she was still used to relying on her mind. The slight tilt from a fine edge of alertness was too recent for her to accept. Now, forcing herself to be aware of everything she was, she was frightened by the changes to the edge of panic. She closed her eyes and fought it down, wrestling with a feeling like a great grey slug in her stomach and a small brown millipede in her throat. Both of them retreated, temporarily. Tears tickled her cheeks, touched her lips with salt; she scrubbed them away on her rough sleeve.

She felt marginally better. It had occurred to her that she felt light-headed and removed and hallucinatory because of hunger, not because of advancing pathological changes in her brain; that helped. It was another matter of relying on feedback from a faulty instrument. The thought of food was still nauseating. It would be harder to eat the longer she put it off, but, then, perhaps it was too late to matter anymore.

The sitting park restored her, as it was meant to; for her it was the silence and isolation, the slight respite from cold and the clean twisting lines of it, whatever reasons others had for responding. She would have liked to stay.

She walked a long way toward the edge of the bazaar. Her knees still hurt—it took her a few minutes to remember when she had fallen, and why; it seemed a very long time before—and her legs began to ache. Resting again, she sat on a wall at the edge of the bazaar, at the edge of the mountaintop, looking

down over a city of pinpoint lights (holes in the ground to hell? but the lights were gold and silver, not crimson). The lights led in lines down the flanks of the mountain, dendrites from the cell of the city and its nucleus of landing field. She knew she could get out of Highport. She believed she could run so far that they would not catch her until too late; she hoped they would never find her, and she hoped her body would fail her before her mind did, or that she would have courage and presence enough to kill herself if it did not or if the pain grew great enough to break her. All she really had to do was get to the bottom of the mountain, and past the foothills, until she reached lush jungle and great heat and a climate like an incubator, where life processes are faster and scavengers prowl, and the destruction of decomposition is rapid and complete. The jungle would conspire with her to deny the Institute what she considered most precious, knowledge. She slipped off the wall and started down the hill. Before her the sky was changing from midnight blue to grey and scarlet with the dawn.

Steve Chapman

BURGER CREATURE

FIRST I should tell you about our manager. He weighed about 300, composed of equal parts of grease and fat, like our burgers, except that our burgers weigh nothing. I would say that his most annoying habit (aside from chain smoking and making us counter girls pick up his butts, so he could look up our uniforms, or down them, or through them) was to put an inch of orange drink in a cardboard cup every morning, fill it up with vodka, and call it a screwdriver. "Screwdriver," he would say, wiping his greasy chin. After two of these, he was ready to face the day, lying on his back in the storeroom. "Never skip breakfast," he'd say, popping a french fry into his greasy mouth.

One day he delayed his breakfast to introduce me to a new girl. The last one had quit because of heat exhaustion aggravated by a growing fear of food. It had been pitiful to watch her. When fishburgers were introduced, she'd been robbed of the last form of protein she could still stomach. She'd show up for work with her eyeliner smeared across her bloodshot lids. She'd unwrap patties in her little hands and sweep a limp strand of blond hair out of her face, biting at her lip frost to get the smell out of her mouth. Some of us got it, and she got it bad. Finally, one noon rush, she threw her cage of fries down into the boiling grease and staggered out the service door, muttering, "The pickles are dyed green. The Coke is dyed brown. My hair is dyed blond. I'm turning into a cheeseburger." She never even picked up her last pay-

check. We did *smell* like cheeseburgers. Our uniforms *are* the same white as the paper bags. I don't want to think about it.

"This is Trudy," says the manager with a greasy hand on her shoulder. "She's going to be a novice here for a while, so we'll have to show her around."

Your hair is greasy, I thought at the manager. *Even your pimples are greasier than my pimples.*

The manager ran his hand down his tie. "Trudy, this is Maureen. She calls herself Girl Burger."

Even your eyes are greasy, I thought.

Trudy walks on over to me, looking the place up and down. I don't mind admitting she did things for that starched white shift I never conceived of. The weight I have in my rump and thighs, she has elsewhere. Her hair was short and black. Her eyeshadow was green and premeditated. "I worked at a burger place before," she said, pretending to chew gum. "You can call me Burger Queen."

I could see right then we were going to get along.

Burger Queen turned out to be excellent with shakes and male customers. We spent our lunch hours at the chicken place across the highway, conspiring to perfect a code for insulting the manager and yelling orders at the same time.

It was late one night shift. Everyone else had deserted. I was mopping the linoleum when I heard a scraping and whimpering at the service door. I opened the door and swung the mop into the thing's face.

With a sort of liquid snort, it eeled under my arm and fell in a heap against the grill. It looked like a tall, stringy man made of gritty, burnt hamburger meat in jeans, track sneakers, and a dirty undershirt. Its hair was a tangle of french fries. Its mouth, a wedge of onion smeared around the edges with ketchup. Its eyes were pickle slices, and it had no nose.

Since it wasn't making any moves, but only gibbering with its little head cocked sideways on the end of its neck, I beat it with my mop into the walk-in freezer and slammed the door. I figured the guy on the morning shift would attend to it the next day. I was on overtime already.

But the next afternoon, Burger Queen pulled some potatoes

out of the walk-in, and when I was gossiping to her over the fries pit, she put her mouth to one side and stared into her scoop and said, "Have you seen what we've got in the freezer?"

I said yes and suggested we call it Burger Creature.

When business was slow, and our manager was taking his afternoon coma, we looked in on Burger Creature again. He was crouched in a corner by the floor drain, nibbling at his fingers and drooling Coke syrup. Queen stood with one hand on her hip and massaged her eyes, unsticking one of her lashes. Then she leaned on the meat rack for support. I took another look at the Creature, scratching his french fries with his thin, brown fingers and smiling a sweet ketchup grin. Then I leaned against Burger Queen.

"What do we *do* with it?" she asked with the most mournful expression on her pretty, smeared face. "I mean, we can't *cook* it!"

"I suppose we could take it on as an apprentice." I still don't know why I said that. Genius probably. Genius.

The Creature turned out to be an obedient pet and helpful with simple tasks like after-hours mop-up. We let him out secretly, and he was content to look through the garbage or press his face to a window, watching the cars go by and gurgling to himself.

Burger Queen was very attached to him. She'd lead him by the hand to a counter she hadn't wiped, get him to spring his rear up there, and she'd rest her arms on his knees and bitch about the day's bastards. Then she'd mess his head of fries, say, "You're cute," and walk him back to the freezer with her arm slung around his waist. I'd just chew my split ends and watch the two of them.

During the day he lived among the buns, counting inventories on his fingers and wetly humming the commercials he learned from my radio. He had a talent for fitting himself into things, and if I opened the freezer without knocking, I'd catch his fingers folding the flap of some carton down over himself. His favorite hiding place, the box that came with the orange drink/purple drink fountain, was a reliable place to dump him out of when he was asleep.

A playful kick in the side would send him to his work, murmuring and squishing at his eyes.

We even bought a new undershirt for him. But we couldn't coax him into trying it on. He just stood in a corner with his arms pressed to his sides. We thought he might be modest, so we left him alone for a minute, but he stayed inside his old rag. I tried to pull it off him, but it came loose with a sucking, tearing sound, and I let go. Where the strap left his shoulder, I'd seen a rut. He whimpered for a while, and Burger Queen stroked his arm. I handed her a napkin, but instead of wiping her hands, she used it to dab some mustard off his cheek. I never messed with him after that. He was thin but tall.

We used to debate the question of Burger Creature's origin. Queen's theory was that he'd been a gawky, horny boy who'd stuffed himself with greasy food until he became a mass of acne and mail-ordered a pimple cream that turned him into Burger Creature. Unlikely.

I think he just assembled himself from the garbage at a landfill project. I can see him clawing up through the clay, running from a bulldozer, jumping into the scoop of an outbound garbage truck, and hitchhiking by instinct toward his source: a burger joint.

There is another possibility. There's the chance that Burger Creature was designed and molded by one of the corporations who own these franchises, but he escaped or was abandoned. He could be a reject from Research and Development. Maybe there's a whole race of them in production. Waiting to be released.

Behind the counter, life went on.

"Two big Cokes. One no ice. Two fries. Two double cheese vodka stinking drunk with no mustard."

"Girl Burger, I've been thinking," says my partner to me, "why not let Creature out in the open all day?"

I looked at her, opening a carton of foil wrappers, then at Creature, squeegeeing a window in the early morning light. Was he beginning to look normal to her?

"Because the customers would *see* him. How's that?"

"Would they really? I mean, think about it. I mean, do they see you?"

I knew what she meant. Nobody looks at you when you run counter. They look at your uniform. "Will that be all, sir?" "No, that'll be it." Unless you're built like Burger Queen, you could be anything.

"You mean have him take orders?"

"Why not?"

"Does he know how?"

"Of course he does. He's been watching." She proudly pecked him on the cheek and licked her lips. "I've been waiting to try it, and with the manager called in sick . . ."

"Hangover."

"Overdose of grease . . . there's no better time. People are groggy in the morning anyhow."

I took the squeegee from him. I was counting on one thing: nobody sees specifics at a burger place. Only a network of chromium and yellow parking lines and plastic cups and grilled meat. Who could possibly fit in better than Burger Creature?

While I unlocked the place, Burger Queen tied an apron on him. He stepped toward the customer window. His hands wandered unsurely up his front and into his mop of french fries. He looked around as if he'd lost something. He rummaged through some drawers and pulled out a disposable white two-corner cap. He fitted it on his head. He stood up straight. Something inside him snapped into place.

Our first customer pulled into the parking lot and climbed out of his Impala. He looked like a salesman on the road, the middle-class equivalent of a hungry truck driver. Creature was standing behind the counter. The man pushed through the door. We pretended to be busy. The man put his elbows on the counter and read the menu board.

"Double hamburger and a vanilla shake." He stared at the formica counter top. "And french fries."

Then the Burger Creature did three things at the same time and never slowed down. With one hand he grabbed a carry-out box and snapped it open with a flick of the wrist. With the other he slung two patties off their wrappers onto the grill. Flipping on the gas, he stepped to the frier, dumped fries, wiped counter,

pulled cup, pumped vanilla, pushed burger, shpritzed milk, shook fries. He was working in front of himself, beside himself with a frightening reach, opening shelves with his sneakers, casual, perfectly timed, unstoppable. He was in his element. Burger Queen was beaming. He set the order on the counter and rang it up on the register.

The man looked at the price on the register, pulled two dollars from his wallet onto the counter, scooped his change out of the change scoop, took his order in one arm, and pushed out through the door.

Burger Queen hugged Creature around the waist. He wiped his hands on the back of her uniform and seemed confused by the attention.

We sat and watched him through the noon rush. Years of training could never have produced such a short-order cook. He kept a dozen orders going at once, and still had time to sit on the sizzling grill and keep the burgers company. But we had a bad moment when he ran low on meat. I caught him ripping a chunk from the inside of his arm, and Queen used up half a tin of Band-Aids, trying to make one stick to him. Also, if you watched close, you'd see him use a healthy spit in place of the bottled ketchup. The customers loved the service regardless.

A couple of high-school kids even talked to him.

"You're new here aren't you?"

He nodded.

"I didn't think I ever saw you here."

He shook his head.

"Well, you sure are keeping busy."

He smiled.

"Yeah, I may try to get a job here over the summer."

The kids walked out, cracking jokes, giggling, chewing.

He fit in so well.

That night, humming softly, Burger Queen walked a weary Burger Creature to the freezer with her hand on his back. She tied his sneaker laces, folded his gangly legs into his box, and tucked him in with some brown wrapping paper. I left her there, watching over him under the dim buzz of the fluorescent light. I think she was waiting for me to go.

• • •

The manager showed up bright and early the next afternoon and pulled a thermos of ready-mix martinis out of his briefcase. He was back in the pink, and Creature was back in cold storage, whining like a lonely TV dinner.

"I'm celebrating!" quipped the manager, his thumbs feeling for his belt under his paunch. "I'd ask you to join me, but you girls have to face the public."

We smiled, teeth brushed, uniforms spotless. "Right, sir." Burger Creature howled behind his door.

"Do you know why I'm celebrating?"

We shook our heads. "No sir."

"Because next Friday at two o'clock, the regional manager is giving us a surprise inspection."

I slipped Creature one of his special favorite burgers with extra pickles. I heard him writhe in ecstasy against the other side of the door.

"I want the golden arches hosed down. I want the trash can lids oiled."

I slipped Creature some fries to wash down his burger.

"Maureen, look at me. I want the freezer cleaned up."

I slammed the door.

"What the *hell* is *that*?"

Four ground beef fingers were sticking out the door, tying themselves into knots of pain. Burger Creature said his first word: "*Ahnggg*."

I looked to Burger Queen for some instant genius. She dug her plastic nails into her blouse and screamed.

The manager yanked open the door, froze, then went reeling back into the grill, slamming the door, his greasy eyes wider than I'd ever seen them.

"*Aaauih!*" he said.

"Sir?"

"It's a . . . There's a . . . a goddam *thing* in there . . . a . . . *filthy ugly whatthehell* I don't know a pickle a meat a . . . with all *greasy* and . . ."

"Now, sir, it's true we haven't cleaned up in there for a while, but . . ."

"*No! Nooo!* Waving its arms! *Dancing* goddammit! It was *dancing!* Pouring ketchup over itself! I think it was *drinking*

the goddam *ketchup!* Bun on its . . . lettuce in its hair! *Thin . . . greasy . . . hamburger!*

I shrugged coyly.

The freezer banged open, and Queen jumped back, mouthing *my baby, my baby* in mute hysteria and bouncing everything she had. Pickle-eyes bulging, his french fries trembling, flushed like raw meat, Burger Creature filled the doorway, the front of him flattened by the slamming of the door. A burnt smell hit me. He roared the roar of an angry hamburger.

"It's going to eat me," the manager whispered. He sucked in his gut, lunged at the service door, and ran into the parking lot, throwing a straw dispenser behind him. He jumped in his convertible, backed over the curb into the side wall, shrapneling red and white tiles, and stripped gears out the entrance onto the highway. *"Police!"* he was yelling hoarsely. *"Police! Garbage!"*

In her distress, Burger Queen ripped the top button off her uniform.

"You better move on," I said to Creature. *"Try the drive-in ten miles west. Follow I-12. Get out!"*

Creature was panicked. I could tell. He dove over the grill, scrambled through the customer window, slid around a glass door, and staggered off across the asphalt toward the open highway.

Burger Queen ran after him, and I saw her pull his arm. She talked to him feverishly, biting on her lower lip. He bowed his little head and shook it slowly. Limp french fries brushed her nose. He started down the road with a wet glisten in his pickle-eyes.

He jammed his fists between his legs in terror and nearly swallowed his mouth when he saw the red convertible bearing down on him. The manager had U-turned, chrome grill gleaming in the sun, teeth bared behind the heat waves and manic gasoline whine. Creature stood frozen. The manager revved into fourth gear.

Waving her arms like a crazed cheerleader, Burger Queen ran into the path of the Corvair.

Creature's head shot out, his body snapping after. His sinewy legs coiled and sprang to new lengths. His head jammed down between his undershirt straps when it rammed Queen's shoulder.

The manager downshifted out of sight around the bend, and I was ready to see only a ragged patty on the blacktop, but Creature and Queen were lying in the roadside gravel in a cheerfully struggling pile of jeans and arms and ripped uniform.

He helped her to her feet, straightened her bobby-pinned two-corner cap, and gazed into her eyes.

Then he braced his sneakers, bent her over backward, and pressed his face to hers in the longest, most nose-breaking kiss it has ever been my pleasure to see. He stood her up. She stepped after him dizzily, her bodice rippling loose in the breeze, her makeup smeared under a mess of greasy sweet ketchup.

He jogged up to a passing truck, grabbed the gate with one hand, and swung aboard. They waved to each other, slowly and wistfully, though Burger Creature's arm was pulled slightly out of shape, until he disappeared in the smoggy distance.

Doris Piserchia

HALF THE KINGDOM

A BIG BRIGHT ring of gold took shape in the air five feet above the curb on Turner Street. Tom Wegler came along and saw it hovering there, became curious and poked his head through it.

A bare foot shot past his nose and he looked down. Sprawled on some impossible yellow grass was a skinny naked man who yelled in terror and tried to scoot away from a cluster of shiny objects that dipped and bobbed in space over him.

The shiny objects were silver dollars. Tom climbed over the rim of the ring, stepped onto alien ground, grabbed one of the dollars, started to close his hand around it, felt it fade away. Quickly he grabbed another. It dissolved. Then another. There were fourteen in all, and he stood watching in disbelief as the last one popped away in his palm. His head whipped up and around in time to see a mob of people appear over a low hill.

About to clamber back to Turner Street, he hesitated when he realized that not a single unclad soul in the mob was paying him any attention. They seemed interested only in the man on the ground.

The man was lifted and dusted off by solicitous hands, someone even lent him a bare shoulder to sob onto, so he was obviously somebody important.

Tom was still half in, half out of the ring when a hand touched his shoulder. A long-faced, shaggy-headed fat man stood grinning down at him.

"My name is Gute. Congratulations. You get a reward for saving our king from the Glof."

"Reward?"

The stranger pointed toward the skinny man who still wept and clung to the handiest shoulder. "Flax, our king. You're entitled to half his kingdom or his daughter."

Something far back in Tom's memory stirred. He said, "Why don't I get half the kingdom *and* the daughter?"

"We don't do it that way."

Swinging his feet around and sitting on the ring, Tom looked across the grass at Flax. "Does he have any gold?"

"We don't use it. But he has a twenty-story palace so full of zox he has to sleep in a hotel."

"Zox?"

"It's the equivalent of a compound in your world. I believe you call it clay."

"Your king collects clay?"

The fat man looked apologetic. "He plays with it."

"Oh? How about diamonds?"

Gute looked apologetic again. "Flax has mountains of diamonds but you couldn't get them through that measly ring. The smallest ones are bigger than houses."

"We'll break them."

"Impossible."

"We'll make the ring larger."

"Can't be done."

"Hmmm. What about rubies, sapphires, emeralds, jade, cameo, ivory?"

"Too big and hard."

"Platinum, silver . . ." Tom snapped his fingers. "The Glofs. They're silver dollars. I'll take all you have."

A pained expression grew on Gute's long face. "The Glofs create illusions. If you say they were silver dollars it's because you wanted to see silver dollars when you looked at them."

"They were right there. I had them in my hand."

"You thought you had. The Glofs have no three-dimensional form. They're basically harmless and are as much a natural part of our atmosphere as oxygen or this ring which is nothing more than a bit of ruptured space, but they can do considerable dam-

age to weak psyches. A lot of people panic when the Glofs come out to play. Flax panics. I don't know what he saw but it looked as if he was about to scare himself to death. However, you came along and now you get your reward."

Tom smiled without humor. "Do I? Why don't you just come right out and admit that you have nothing of value?"

"Oh, but we have. There's Delp."

"What's that?"

"The king's daughter."

"But I can get all the girls I want in my own world."

"Not like Delp."

"You're wasting my time. I'll think of something. How about radium or uranium or something like that?"

"We don't have enough to fill a hollow tooth."

"The fact is you haven't a nickel's worth of anything," said Tom. "This isn't a world, it's a balloon."

Showing no offense at the words, Gute shrugged and smiled. "It looks like you're stuck with Delp."

The crowd still milled about the king and Tom turned toward them. His indifferent glance slid over bare backs and chests, darted up and down bare legs, touched upon an impossible anatomy and moved onward only to swing back and become fixed.

What he stared at was a titan the likes of which made his lip curl in a sneer. Too much of anything was always undesirable, eh? She was more than six feet tall, this giantess with a face as fresh as new snow. Hair the color of a pear flowed down her satiny back and danced upon tremendous thighs. For once in his life Tom forgot money and found inspiration in fundamentals. Instinct told him there was nothing like this back home, that there was nothing like this anywhere.

"Who is that?" he said and pointed.

"That's Delp."

Slowly getting to his feet, Tom smiled. "Maybe we could make this a permanent arrangement. Maybe I could come back once in a while."

The fat man shook his head. "The ring won't stay where it is. It moves around."

"You mean I might be stranded here?"

"It isn't due to move for some time. When it does it'll show up somewhere else and we'll get some more visitors. I must say they aren't always pleasant. Some pretty weird things stick their heads through that hole."

"Then let's hurry and get on with it. Who's going to tell the king? I suppose he'll kick up a fuss."

"Goodness, no, we all do this," said Gute. He sounded surprised. "How else can folks discover the facts of lives? Wait here and I'll tell him."

Tom rocked on his heels and enjoyed the sun. After a while the object of his thoughts came gliding across the grass to him. She stepped up close and stared into his eyes and he was captured by a vision of a mountain, virgin and sleek, with the hot sun shining on it and the breezes blowing a whirlwind.

Without a word Delp turned and walked back to her father and Gute.

A minute later the fat man returned. "You wouldn't want to reconsider?"

"Why?"

"Frankly, the girl isn't too impressed with you."

"She backed out?"

"Nothing of the sort. I only thought I ought to tell you that she's reluctant."

"You've told me."

"In that case, shall we proceed?"

The crowd behind them, the two men followed a path through yellow weeds and pale-brown blossoms to a valley where a village sat glistening in the sun. In the center of the village was a white building and it was toward this that Gute led Tom. They left the crowd outside and went through a foyer into a large room.

With an expression of pride, Gute gestured toward the neat furnishings and immaculate walls. "This is our Recreation Center."

Tom didn't see what white slabs, test tubes and tables had to do with recreation.

The fat man took him by the arm and drew him to a cabinet that contained some small bottles.

"State your preference," he said.

"What?"

Gute opened the cabinet, removed four bottles and placed them on a nearby table. "Which one do you prefer? I'm afraid there are only the four. We have several others but they're for people with really wild anatomies."

Frowning at the bottles, Tom said, "I don't understand."

The glance Gute gave him was one of surprise. "You don't? I'll run through them to refresh your memory. This first bottle is labeled Primate. That, if you remember your elementary biology, is man. Naturally this one doesn't count in your situation but I always like to show off whenever I get a chance. The second one is Suidae. That's . . . darn and confound . . . for some reason I can't think of the beast's name. I'm sure you're familiar with it. It has unsanitary habits, rolls in mud and other revolting substances. Help me think of the name. This creature is fat, sloppy and filthy and people in your world eat it."

Tom began to scowl.

"It makes a noise that sounds like 'oink.'"

"Pig," Tom said automatically.

"Of course, a pig. How could I have forgotten? Well, we have that one cleared out of the way. This third label is Canidae. That's the dog species. And here we have the Arachnidae. That, I'm sure you recall, is the—"

"Spider, but just what—"

"I can understand if you're going to say you don't like the little demons. I don't care for them myself. But hurry up and tell me which of these species you like best. Time is scurrying away and we have a deadline to meet." Gute drummed his fingers on the tabletop and squinted through bright eyes.

Squinting back at him, Tom said, "Which do I like best? No gold, no jewels and a simple biological function is a complicated ritual." His own fingers drummed on the table. "Okay. Personally I can't stand pigs or spiders and since men don't count I guess that just leaves dogs."

Apparently satisfied, Gute nodded. "If you'll step into that cage over there and take off your clothes I'll go and fetch Delp. I think she'll like your choice."

As he started to walk away he looked back with a serious ex-

pression. "Just remember that this stuff is dynamite so don't get any funny ideas."

Tom felt his forehead. It was cool so he had no fever. He stuck out his tongue and though he could see only the tip it looked normal. He felt his pulse. It was rapid. He squared his shoulders and thumped his belly. Somewhere he had gotten off the right track. In a second or two he would get back on.

He stepped inside the cage in the corner. It didn't look much like a cage but was more like a big box with snow-white walls and flooring. He began pulling off his clothes.

It was a relief when he heard the outside door open and more of a relief when he heard Gute and Delp talking. He bent over to take off his sock just as something stabbed him in the rump. He leaped off the floor with a bellow. Gute stood beside him with a pleased smile on his face and an enormous hypodermic in his hand.

"Time for my discreet exit," said the fat man and went out and shut the cage door.

Tom launched himself at it. It was locked. He swore. He turned to snarl at Delp but backed away from her when he saw her face. Something was wrong with it.

"I hope you like what you're going to get," she said coldly.

He heard Gute yelling something outside the cage but it was hard to catch the words. "That damned girl changed the labels," was what he thought he heard. The door burst open and he discovered that he had to raise his head in order to see Gute's face. He knew he was taller than the other man, yet he had to look up . . . and up . . .

"Too late now," Gute said in a faraway voice. "But it will make no difference. If everything didn't get a kick out of it there wouldn't be anything."

The door slammed.

"I've changed my mind," yelled Tom. "I don't care about the reward. I don't want—" His voice suddenly cracked and broke off and his teeth began to chatter as if he had been dumped into a lake of ice. Off in a corner Delp was shrinking into a dark lump. Tom grabbed at his thundering heart and started spinning like a top. Just as the tips of his toes were all that touched the floor he pitched into a flat spiral and thudded to the floor.

When he came to, he was afraid to open his eyes. This made him angry so he looked down at himself. What he saw made him shriek. Extending before him and containing enough feeling to convince him that it was an appendage of his own was a long, crooked, hairy spider leg. He wriggled it and saw the tiny hairs sway in the breeze. He ducked his head to take a look at the rest but his practically nonexistent neck allowed him no more than a glimpse of a mound of hairy gruesomeness from which extended seven more legs.

He leaped up for a frantic rush across the floor. The two feet that his mind told him he possessed and the eight attached to his carcass clashed. Three legs slid backward while the remainder wound up like a licorice stick. He fell on his head.

Again he tried to run and took another fall, this time landing on his back. The sight of his eight legs pawing the air made him sick.

It was then that he remembered Delp and his legs miraculously untangled enough to let him stagger up. His span of perception was so narrow that he had to turn his body eight times in order to examine one corner. He found Delp sitting on his right.

She was hair-raising. She was also bigger than he, nearly twice his size, and the implications in this fact made him back away from her. He hoped she hadn't seen him but he had no sooner finished the thought than she raised her head and gave him a long stare.

Suddenly she arose and began moving toward him. He scooted on his tail and prayed for a hole to open in the floor. Quick annihilation was preferable to torture by a monster with a balloon for a body and incisors the length of darning needles.

But spiders didn't have teeth, he told himself. Correction: Earth spiders didn't have teeth. Delp continued to follow him. She undulated after him like a mountain balanced on toothpicks.

"Stop," he tried to say. A faint crackling sound came out of his mouth.

Then his back was against the wall and she was in front of him. As he tried to yell she lazily reached out with a feeler and touched him. His eyes widened in astonishment. He sighed and quivered. Rippling sensations shot through his fat body and he entwined his feelers and twitched three of his legs.

With a coy swing of her body Delp shoved him and he was knocked flat. His brain drugged with visions of moonlight and hot kisses, he reached out and clasped her to him. He couldn't have loved her more earnestly if she'd been human.

It seemed to him that it was a long time later when he sank back in an exhausted slump. He was wholly satisfied and pleased with himself. As Delp waddled away he leered at her and tried to whistle. She settled down a few yards away and washed her feet. While she did this he lay and admired the round curves of her figure.

He was surprised when she raised her head and gave him an ugly stare. She dipped her head at intervals to attend to her washing but she continued to sneak hard peeks at him. After minutes of this routine he grew uneasy.

Suddenly she stood up. He tensed. She came toward him again, slowly this time, and he backed against the wall. She stopped when she was an inch away, rose to her full height, then seemed to brace herself. It was then that he got a good look at her belly. Squarely in the center of that pulsating globe was a neat red hourglass.

He tried to yell.

She leaned over him, fangs dripping, and he raised one leg to fend her off. Her fangs closed on the sensitive tip of his foot. He felt an excruciating pain as the tip separated from the rest of him. A silent scream ripped from his mouth.

Delp took hold of the wounded leg and severed it at the base. Retreating a short distance, she sat on the floor, took a firm grip on the bloody limb and began to munch on it. As soon as she was finished she started back across the cage.

This time his scream had sound. Caught in a tornado of pain and terror he bellowed even after he had flopped over in a swoon.

He was his normal self when he opened his eyes. Delp lay in a corner blinking her eyes and kicking her long legs.

Taking time to check and make sure he was all in one piece, he bolted for the door. He hit it with the flat of his shoulder and tore it off the hinges in a charge that sent him hurtling across the lab and careening into a table. It buckled beneath his weight and dumped its contents into his lap as he fell. He was about to push away the debris when his hand touched a small bottle. Blinking

through tears of fright, he read the label: *Canidae*. His hand closed on the bottle before he looked up and saw Gute standing over him.

"You almost got me killed!"

The fat man stood pale and shaken. His hands plucked at his hairy chest. "I saw it through the scanner. Good grief, I didn't know it was widow modulate. I didn't even know we had any."

Tom saw his clothes on a bench and leaped for them.

"What a horrible mistake," groaned Gute.

"Mistake, my eye. You and that leggy slut planned this."

"I swear I had nothing to do with it. Delp did it. She must be crazy."

"I'm lucky to be alive. I'm getting out of this screwy world before you think up another reward."

Gute mopped his brow. "You'll probably never forgive us for this. That damned girl has ruined my reputation. I'm in for one hell of a political fracas."

"Don't expect me to shed any tears." Tom yanked his coat on and headed for the door.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" said Gute in a worried tone.

"Not a thing."

"Don't try to take the bottle."

"What bottle?"

"The one you put in your pocket."

Tom opened the door and ran out.

"Don't do it!" said Gute. "Leave it here."

"Not on your life."

The fat man hurried after him. "Don't be a goose. That modulate won't remain stable in any other dimension. It has a retro-active element that is controlled by our gravity."

Looking back over his shoulder, Tom yelled, "I'll make a fortune with this stuff. I got them both after all, half the kingdom *and* the girl, and she wasn't bad for a bug."

The streets were empty. Through the village and across the yellow meadow he ran with Gute staggering after him.

The ring was still there in the same place where he had first entered it. He lengthened his stride.

"I have to show you your angle!" cried Gute. "Don't—"

Tom launched himself into a low flat dive. He sailed through the ring and landed on the other side with a solid thump.

He stood up and dusted himself off, then looked back at the ring. It was beginning to shrink. Good riddance, he thought. He made as if to walk away and fell flat on his face.

For a second he lay in a daze before he sat up and hugged his right foot that was suddenly throbbing. A second more and pain ripped through him like a hundred hot needle pricks. He gingerly slipped off his shoe, then gulped when he saw his sock. It was soaked with blood.

He stripped off the sock and nearly fainted when he saw the hole where his little toe had been. Blood was pumping out in little spurts. It looked as if the toe had been torn out by the roots, as if something or someone had yanked it out or bitten . . .

He sucked in his breath. Retroaction. What the hell did it mean? It meant that things that were now affected things that were before. Or did it mean that now went backward and started all over again? Some of the stuff must still be in his body, it had a strong affinity to the bottle's contents, and the deadly element in each was about to defy the laws of sanity.

The ring was the size of a quarter, so small he could scarcely see it. He took the bottle from his pocket, hobbled across the intervening space and rammed the cap into the closing circle. He shoved and pushed while the circle grew smaller.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

He cursed. His thigh began to rip, just a tiny bit, and blood dripped down his leg. He doubled up his fist and beat on the end of the bottle, tried to force it through the narrowing hole.

A hand closed upon his shoulder and attempted to pull him away. He raised his good leg and kicked backward. He felt his shoe connect with something soft.

His thigh oozed at a faster rate and he raised his fist and smashed the bottle with all his strength. There was a loud popping noise as the bottle disappeared.

The pain in his foot and the tearing sensation in his thigh ceased at once. A roaring wind filled his brain and he collapsed to the ground with his head in his hands.

When at last the roaring subsided he opened one eye and peered between his fingers. He saw a purple meadow.

He couldn't believe his eyes. This wasn't Turner Street. This wasn't anywhere.

A sniffing sound made him turn his head. Six feet away sat a little brown naked man with blood on his mouth and fury in his eyes. Perched on top of his fuzzy head was a gold crown. Behind him Tom saw several other brown men dragging something across the purple grass. He squinted in order to make out what it was they were carrying toward him. It looked like a pot.

He took off running. There was really nothing else to do. And there was really no reason for too much despair. He had saved one king's life and almost gotten killed; now he had kicked another king in the teeth. He was bound to come out of this smelling like a rose.

Gene Wolfe

CONTINUING WESTWARD

CONTINUING westward until nearly sundown we came to a village of stone huts. Earlier it had been very hot, even with the wind from the airscrew in our faces. The upper wing had provided a certain amount of shade for me, but Sanderson, my observer, had nothing but his leather flying helmet between his head and the sun, and I believe that by the time we halted he was near delirium. Every few miles he would lean forward, tap me on the shoulder, and ask, "Suppose the landing gear goes too, eh? What then? What shall we do then?" and I would try to shout something reassuring over my shoulder as we jolted along, or swear at him.

Both the upper and lower wings had broken about midway on the left. The ends of them and what remained of the bamboo struts and silk trailed on the ground, the focal point of the long plume of dust we raised. I was afraid the dust might be seen by Turkish horse and wanted to get out and cut the wreckage away; but Sanderson argued against it, saying that when we halted it might be possible to effect some repairs. Every few miles one or the other of us would get out and try to tie it up onto the good sections, but it always worked loose again. By the time we reached the village there wasn't much left but rags and wires.

The sound of our engine had frightened the people away. We stopped in front of the largest of the huts and I drew my Webley and went up and down the village street looking into doors while

Sanderson covered me with the swivel-mounted Lewis gun, but no one was there. A hundred yards off, camels tethered in the scrub watched us with haughty eyes while we found the village well and drank from big, unglazed jars. It was wonderful and we slopped it, letting the water run down our faces and soak our tunics. Then we sat on the coping and smoked until the people, in timorous twos and threes, began to come back.

The children came first, dirty, very unappealing children with sad silent faces and thin or bow-bellied bodies; the smaller children naked, the larger in garments like short nightshirts, grey with perspiration and dust.

Then the women. They wore black camel's-hair gowns that reached their ankles, yashmaks, and black head shawls. Between shawl and veil their eyes looked huge and very dark, but I noticed that many were blind, or blind in one eye. They didn't touch us as the children had, or try to talk to us. They pulled the children back, whispering; and when they spoke among themselves, standing in small groups twenty yards away and gesticulating with flashing brown arms, the sound was precisely that of sparrows quarreling in the street, heard from a window several stories high.

The men came last, all of them bearded, wearing grey or white or blue-dyed robes. They had daggers in their sashes, and although they never touched them we kept our hands on our revolvers. These men said nothing to us or to each other or the women, but stood around us in a half circle watching and, I thought, waiting. Only the children seemed really interested by our aircraft, and they were too much in awe to do more than stroke the hot cowlings with the tips of their fingers. It came to me then that the scene was Old Testament biblical, and I suppose it was; people like this not changing much.

Eventually a man older than the rest came forward and began to talk to us. His beard was almost white, and he had a deep, solemn voice like an ambassador on a state occasion. I looked at Sanderson, who claims to parley-voo wog, but he was as out of it as I. We waited until the old boy had finished, then pointed to our mouths and rubbed our bellies to show that we wanted something to eat.

It was mutton stewed in rice when we got it, everything fla-

vored strongly with saffron and herbs. Not a dish that would have appealed under normal circumstances, but these were far from that, and for a time I dug in as heartily as Sanderson, sitting cross-legged and dipping the stuff up with my fingers.

The chief and two of his men sat across from us, trying to pretend that this was a normal social dinner. More of the men had tried to crowd in at the beginning, but Sanderson and I had discouraged that, cocking our revolvers and shouting at them until all but these had left. It had resulted, as they say, in a strained atmosphere; but there had been no help for it. At close quarters in the hut we couldn't have managed more than the three of them if they had decided to rush us with their knives.

When we had eaten all we could, a sweet was brought out, a sticky pink paste neither of us wanted. Then strong unsweetened coffee in brass cups, and the chief's daughter.

Or perhaps his granddaughter or the daughter of one of the other men. We had no way of really knowing; at any rate a young girl in linen trousers and vest, with her fingers and toes hennaed red-pink and her eyes heavily outlined by some black cosmetic. Her hair was braided and coiled high on her head, bound and twined with copper wire and little black disks like coins, and she wore more tinkling junk, hundreds of glass things like jelly beans, around her neck and wrists and on her fingers. She danced for us, jingling and swaying, while an older woman played the flute.

In cafés I'd seen that sort of thing done so often, and often so much better, that it was absurd that it should affect me as it did. Perhaps I can make it clear: think of a chap who's learned to swim, and done it often, in tiled natatoriums, seeing the sort of pool a clear brook makes under a willow. Better: a dog raised on butcher's meat feels his jaws snap the first time on his own rabbit. I glanced at Sanderson and saw that, stuffed as he was with rice and mutton (the man has eaten like a pig ever since I've known him and is a joke in our mess), he felt the same way. Once she bent backward and put her head in my lap the way they do, which gave me a really good look at her; she was a choice piece right enough, but there was one thing I must say gave me a bit of a turn. The little black thingummies I'd thought were coins were really electric dohickies of some sort, though you could see

the wires had been twisted together and nothing worked anymore. Even the glass jelly beans had wires in them. I suppose these wogs must have stolen radios or some such from the Turks and torn them up to make jewelry. Then she laid her head in Sanderson's lap, and looking at him I knew he'd go along.

They had pitched a tent for us near the plane, and after we had taken her out there the two of us discussed in a friendly way what was to be done. In the end we matched out for her. Sanderson won and I lay down with my Webley in my hand to watch the door of the tent.

In a way I was glad to be second—happy, you know, for a bit of a rest first. It had been bloody early in the morning when we'd landed to dynamite the Turkish power line, and I kept recalling how the whole great thing had flashed up in our faces while we were still setting the charge. It seemed such a devil of a long time ago, and after that taxiing across the desert dragging the smashed wings while mirages flitted about—a good half million years of that, if the time inside one's head means anything . . .

Mustn't sleep, though. Sit up. Now her.

She had taken off her veil when we had brought her in. I kept remembering that, knowing that no act however rash or lewd performed by an Englishwoman could have quite the same meaning that that did for her. She had reached up with a kind of last-gasp panache and unfastened one side of it like a man before a firing squad throwing aside his blindfold—a girl of perhaps fifteen with a high-bridged nose and high cheekbones.

I had thought then that she would merely submit unless (or until) something broke through that hawk-face reserve. Sitting there listening to her with Sanderson, I knew I had been wrong. They were whispering endearments though neither could understand the other, and there was a sensuous sound to the jingle of the glass beans and little disks that made it easy to imagine her hands stroking an accompaniment to words she scarcely breathed. It seemed incredible that Sanderson had not removed the rubbish when he undressed her but he had not. After a time I felt I could distinguish the locations from which those tiny chimings came: the fingers and wrists, the ankles, the belt over the hips loudest of all.

It reached a crescendo, a steady ringing urgent as a cry for

help, and over it I could hear Sanderson's harsh breathing. Then it was over and I waited for her to come to me, but she did not.

Just as I was about to call out or go over and take hold of her they began again. I couldn't make out what Sanderson was saying—something about loving forever—but I could hear his voice and hers, and I heard the ringing begin again. Outside, the moon rose and sent cold white light through the door.

They were longer this time; and the pause, too, was longer; but at last they began the third. I tried to stare through the blackness in the tent, but I could see nothing except when a wire or one of the glass beans flashed in the inky shadow. Then there was the insistent jingling again, louder and louder. At last Sanderson gave a sort of gasp, and I heard a rustle as he rolled away from her.

Half a minute and the jingling began again as she stood up; her feet made soft noises on the matting walking over to where I lay. She spoke, and although I could not understand the words the meaning was clear enough: "Now you." I holstered my revolver and pulled her down to me. She came willingly enough, sinking to a sitting posture and then, gradually it seemed to me, though I could not see her, lying at full length.

I ran my hands over her. In the half minute between Sanderson's gasp and the present I had come to understand what had happened; the only question that remained was the hiding place of her weapon. I stroked her, pretending to make love to her. Under the arms—no. Strapped to the calf—no. She hissed with pleasure, a soft exhalation.

Then it came to me. There is almost no place where a man will not put his hands when he takes a woman; but there is one, and thus this girl had been able to kill Sanderson after lying with him half the night.

A man will touch a woman's legs and arms everywhere, caress her body, kiss her lips and eyes and cheeks and ears. But he will not, if she is elaborately coifed, put his hands in her hair. And if he attempts to, she may stop him without arousing his suspicions.

She cried out, then bit my hand, as I tore away the disk-threaded wires, but I found it—a knife not much larger than a pen-

knife yet big enough to open the jugular. I knew what I was going to do.

I threw the knife aside and used the wires to tie her, first stuffing my handkerchief in her mouth as a gag. Then with my revolver in my hand I stepped out into the village street, looking around in the moonlight. I could see no one, but I knew they were there, watching and waiting for her signal. They would be too late.

Back in the tent I picked her up in my arms, drew a deep breath, then burst out sprinting for the aircraft. Even with her arms and legs bound she fought as best she could, but I stuffed her into Sanderson's place. They would be after us in moments, but I squandered a few seconds on the compass, striking a lucifer to look at it though it was hopelessly dotty as usual, having crawled thirty degrees at least away from the north star. The engine coughed, then caught, as I spun the airscrew; and before the aircraft could build up speed I had jumped onto the wing and vaulted into the cockpit. The roar of the exhaust shook the little village now. We rolled forward faster and faster and I felt the tail come up.

I knew she couldn't understand me, but I turned back to the girl shouting, "We'll do it! We'll find something tomorrow, bamboo or something, and repair the wing! We'll get back!"

Sanderson was running after us in his underclothes, so I had been wrong, but I didn't care. I had her and the aircraft, racing across the desert while meteors miles ahead shot upward into the sky. "We'll do it," I called back. "We'll fly!" Her eyes said she understood.

ARCS & SECANTS

Edward Bryant ("Shark" and "Pinup") once won a red ribbon at a Wyoming State Fair for a table lamp made from the smokestack of a John Deere tractor. Among his more recent distinctions is a tie for first place in the NAL awards for the best stories from the 1971 Clarion Writers' Workshop. He is thirty-three, a soft-spoken Westerner who wears a Wyatt Earp mustache. He has sold twenty-nine stories to original anthology series. This is probably a record.

Avram Davidson, author of "The Roads, the Roads, the Beautiful Roads" (*Orbit* 5), "Goslin Day" (*Orbit* 6), and "Rite of Spring" (*Orbit* 8), informed us that having been engaged in abstracting and transcribing from a work entitled *Egyptian Mummies*, by Dawson and Smith, in aid of his incessant and unending labor on the matrix of the Vergil Magus legends, he could not refrain from passing on the information that "the mummy of the ivth Ramesses (*sic*), an elderly man, probably about fifty years of age (and) well-preserved,' contains two features which must strike one as slightly curious. Or three. The anus is plugged with a ball of resin, and 'For artificial eyes small onions are used.' They give, say the authors, 'a surprisingly realistic effect.'" A month or so later, Mr. Davidson sent us a dinosaur coprolite. We asked him if he had ever thought of going into the manufacturing end.

Ursula K. Le Guin ("Direction of the Road") writes about herself: "I grew up in a city and a family both of which might be

characterized by saying that they combined a great deal of freedom with a great deal of order. Both provided plenty of intellectual stimulation, without social overhomogeneity or emotional aridity. Berkeley was very beautiful then, and was (and is) full of both strange and interesting people. Summers we went to the Napa Valley, where an intensive and individualistic kind of agriculture (vineyards) coexists with real wilderness and solitude. I had three older brothers, and mostly ran around after them. My father was a scientist, in the most humane of the fields where the scientific method really functions, anthropology; we absorbed his attitudes, and perhaps some of his *joie de vivre*; and the idea of science as antagonistic to esthetic, social, and spiritual concerns therefore seems merely a misunderstanding to me. As a child I wanted to be a poet and biologist. In college (where again my experience was of self-imposed discipline as a way towards personal and intellectual freedom) I studied French literature because I liked foreign languages, and specialized in the early French and Italian Renaissance, because I liked the 15th century. I had dropped the biology ambition because I could not do math, either through poor teaching or innate stupidity; I have no science now except what is available to the interested layman. I always wrote, and finished a first novel at twenty-one. In graduate school the imperative to write grew stronger, and though I liked research enormously it became all too clear that, for a woman, a Ph.D. in Romance literature was likely to mean at least twenty years of teaching freshman English and not much else, a dreary prospect. A Fulbright grant to France put off the problem for a year, and marriage to another Fulbright student while in Paris changed its terms altogether. It is very difficult for one person to undertake two lifetime jobs and do both well, but two people in partnership can handle three lifetime jobs. My husband is an historian, I am a novelist, and we are both householder/parents. It's Kropotkin's principle of Mutual Aid. It works beautifully if you don't mind working. I kept writing some while the children were little, but did not get anything published until I was over thirty. It did not worry me desperately because I knew I had a great deal to learn, and a lifetime job is very likely to take a lifetime. My life itself has been bourgeois and uneventful; the

events are there, but they're not the kind you can say much about. I have always written science fiction and fantasy, I suppose because life has always seemed a very strange business to me, and you can communicate that best by using what Darko Suvin calls the devices of 'estrangement.'"

Sample titles from the contents pages of the first two German editions of *Orbit*, published in January and February, 1972: "*Staras Flonderanen*," by Kate Wilhelm; "*Die Lulies sind unter uns*," by Allison Rice; "*Kängeruhgericht*," by Virginia Kidd; "*Baby, du warst fabelhaft*," by Kate Wilhelm.

Michael Bishop ("The Windows in Dante's Hell") teaches freshman English at Georgia State U. He is twenty-eight. His infant son Jamie, along with Mao Tse-tung and Francisco Franco, is a major character in a long story that will not appear in *Orbit*.

Leon E. Stover, author of "What We Have Here Is Too Much Communication" (*Orbit* 9), wrote a book on American SF for a French editor, who liked it so much that he invited Stover to attend a convention of Americanists in Paris in the spring of 1972. The topic was science fiction. Stover's editor is a professor at the Sorbonne, where he has taught American popular culture for twenty-five years.

Brian W. Aldiss ("Four Stories") has become a minor celebrity in England since the publication of his best-selling *The Hand-Reared Boy*. He recently visited the United States, where he spoke at California State College and then toured Tijuana with Harry Harrison. The four Malacia stories presented here were inspired by 18th-century Venetian etchings and engravings, and their titles are derived from that source, chiefly from Tiepolo. His latest work is a history of science fiction, *The Billion-Year Spree*, published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson in England and Doubleday in the United States.

Miss S. B. Davis, of Cottesloe, Perth, Western Australia, wrote to inform us that she is "a 'Special Being' such as is 'born only once in a million years'" and that God has told her he has made

her a little bit differently from the rest. "God has shown me I am able, with Me as His instrument, to put atmosphere on the Moon so we people of the earth may habitate it and possibly some form of light could be given to the dark side of the Moon."

Kate Wilhelm ("The Red Canary") was the winner of the 1968 Nebula Award for best short story—"The Planners," *Orbit* 3. Edward Bryant's "Jody After the War" (*Orbit* 10) and Vonda N. McIntyre's "Spectra" (*Orbit* 11) were responses to assignments she gave the authors at the Clarion Writers' Workshop. Her most recent book is a novel, *Margaret and I*, published by Little, Brown in 1971.

We heard from Jack M. Dann, author of "Whirl Cage" (*Orbit* 10), that he had just helped Gardner R. Dozois, a frequent contributor, move to Philadelphia. "It was one of our usual odysseys: I had to wire for money—I couldn't pay the tolls to get back to Binghamton. When I left Gardner he had two dollars cash and was in the process of opening a bank account."

Mel Gilden ("What's the Matter with Herbie?") attended the Clarion Writers' Workshop in 1970 and 1971. His first published story, written there, was "What About Us Grils?" It appeared in the anthology *Clarion* and has been reprinted elsewhere. Gilden was born in 1947: he spent his formative years watching Captain Video, Flash Gordon and Commander Buzz Corey of the Space Patrol. Until recently he lived with his parents in Los Angeles and wrote in the bathroom (the only place he could type at night without disturbing anybody). "I get funny looks when I tell people where I work, and some of them make crude jokes, but I guess that's the price an artist has to pay."

In response to a reader who praised "Heads Africa Tails America" by Josephine Saxton and expressed puzzlement about three other stories in *Orbit* 9, we wrote: "In 'Toy Theater' the narrator says he is going back into his own little box, *i.e.*, that in a way he is a puppet too, like thee & me, or/and if you want to read it that way, there is an anatomical reference to ladies which I will not spell out lest I make you blush. In 'Marigolds' the protagonist

is running toward a transcendental reality revealed by the rending of the veil of *māyā*. The ending of 'The Science Fair' deliberately forecasts another story—you know, like *After Worlds Collide*, or Flash Gordon on the planet Mongo. Now tell me what the hell 'Heads Africa Tails America' is about."

Vonda N. McIntyre ("The Genius Freaks") got a degree in biology from the U. of Washington "with honors, *cum laude*, all that stuff," and went into graduate work in genetics there, but dropped out when she began to notice that none of her experiments worked. Her story "Spectra," which appeared in *Orbit 11*, took second prize in the 1970 Clarion competition. Her own Clarion-type workshop at the U. of Washington is now in its third year.

In returning a story submitted by a New Orleans friend, we wrote: "Even the funny stories in *Orbit* tend to take themselves & the universe more seriously than this. *E.g.*, I got a feeling that if Don shot his pecker off, rubber would fly. In *Orbit*, it would have to be meat." And we added a footnote: "Ground chuck would be OK."

Steve Chapman ("Burger Creature") is twenty-one. He has had one story published previously, in *Analog*, and has a children's picture book coming soon from Follett. Two of his plays were produced in the 1971 Edinburgh Drama Festival. He has toured England with a mime troupe, and when last heard from was acting in a musical called "On Account of Sid Shrycock" in Chicago.

From Sonya Dorman, author of "Time Bind" (yet to be published) we heard the following: "I'm apalled at how much editing you had to do, and apologize for the rotten typos; I did proof it myself before sending it out, and don't understand how I missed so many, as well as absurd misspellings."

Doris Piserchia ("Half the Kingdom") was born in Fairmont, West Virginia, and worked as a lifeguard there while she earned

a teacher's degree in phys. ed. She realized that the next logical step was to get a job teaching, so she climbed on a bus to Pittsburgh and joined the Navy. Four years later she married an Army man, got out of the Navy, had "a baby or five," traveled all over the world, and then settled down in Utah while her husband took a tour in Vietnam. With nothing to do but baby-sit, she worked toward a master's in ed. psych. Thesis time came, and she realized she was again training to be a teacher. She kicked it all the way and began to write stories. After a few years' resistance editors began buying them. Her husband, meanwhile, came back from Vietnam with a wrecked heart, "and this spring or early summer [1972] he will undergo high-risk aortic reconstruction, so I can go nowhere for the duration. I live in a mad-house and my nerves are shot. Perhaps this is the reason why I rarely attempt a serious story. Such an attempt would be very easy for me, but I'm afraid to tap the vein right now."

Gene Wolfe ("Continuing Westward") writes as follows:

"I am forty.

"I try to look busy a lot.

"I remember sitting in English class listening to Texas City blow up. None of us knew what it was, so after five minutes or so Miss Collins said (effectively) the hell with it, we're going to go on with class, what did you (boom) boys and girls (boom, boom) think of *Silas Marner*?

"That's the sort of thing you're supposed to put down, right? Actually my character is, to at least an equal degree, being shaped right now by current pressures—by my thoughts, my own thoughts, most of all

"Wolfe (woolf), Charles, 1791-1823. Irish poet.

"—, Gene Rodman, 1931- . Am. writer.

"—, James, 1727-1759. Brit. gen.

"—, Thomas Clayton, 1900-1938. Am. nov.

"I am very conscious that a great deal of my behavior is genetically determined, yet at the same time conscious of the possession of a soul, a thing independent of heredity or environment. Also that this present is the distant past—that you and I, Damon, if we are recalled at all will eventually be thought of as contem-

poraries of Xenophon and Mark Twain. That this is a small world at the edge of its galaxy, tumbling through the night, a provincial and rural backwater."

Story submissions and letters of comment should be sent to Damon Knight, Box 8216, Madeira Beach, Fl., 33738.