

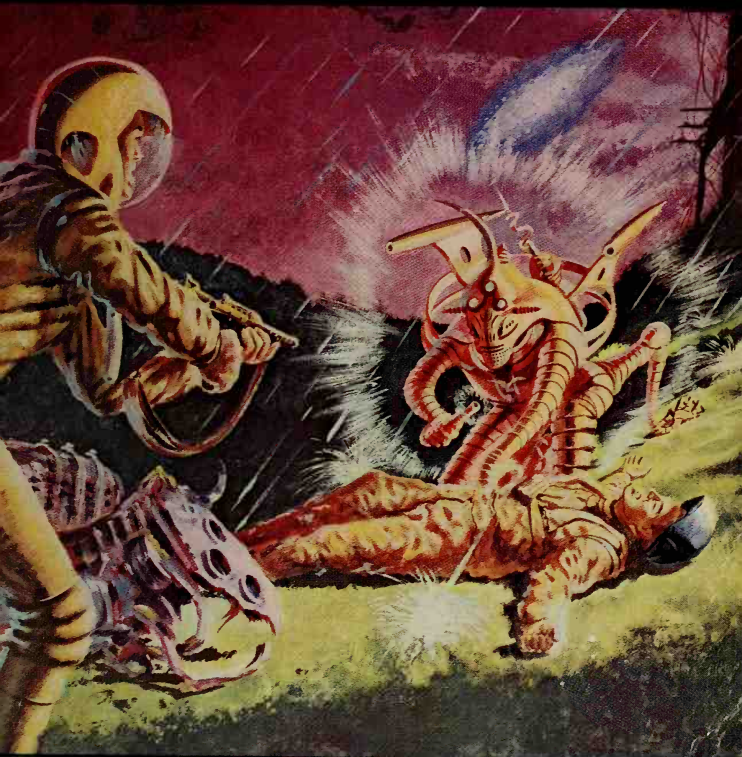
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DR. CYCLOPS

BY HENRY KUTTNER

THRILLING SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC—
A CRAZED SCIENTIST MASTERS AN UNEARTHLY POWER...



also: TOO LATE FOR ETERNITY by Bryce Walton
and THE HARPERS OF TITAN, a Captain Future story
by Edmond Hamilton



PEOPLE TRANSFORMED INTO MICROSCOPIC CREATURES . . .

Dr. Bulfinch, Bill Stockton, beautiful Mary Phillips, and the Mexican, Pedro, did not remember what had happened after the furious scientist caught them snooping in his secret room.

Now they did not know where they were. They rose, shakily, breathing in great gasps. Everything was dark.

"Where are we?" Mary cried out.

Suddenly horror grew in Pedro's eyes as he remembered something. He gasped, "He made my Pinto, the mule, little. Now I know . . . He has made us little like my mule . . ."



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DR. CYCLOPS

CHAPTER I

Camp in the Jungle

Bill Stockton stood in the compound gate, watching Pedro driving the mules down to the river pasture. The swarthy half-breed's face was split by a broad grin; he twirled his black mustache and sang loudly of a *cantina* in Buenos Aires, thousands of miles to the east.

"How the devil does he do it?" Stockton moaned, shaking the perspiration out of his eyes. "I can hardly drag myself around in this heat. And that guy actually sings—"

Yet it wasn't only the heat, Stockton knew. There was more to it than that. A feeling of sombre menace—hung heavy above this wilderness encampment. During the weeks of jungle travel from the Andes, through tropical swamp and pest-infested jungle, the feeling had grown stronger. It was in the humid, sticky air. It was in the sickly-sweet, choking perfume of the great orchids that grew outside the stockade. Most of all, it was in the actions of Dr. Thorkel.

"He's supposed to be the greatest scientific wizard of

the age," Stockton thought skeptically. "But for my money he's nuts. Sends a message to the Royal Academy demanding the services of a biologist and a mineralogist, and then asks us to look into a microscope. That's all. Won't even let us get inside that mud house of his!"

There was reason for Stockton's bitterness. He had been literally forced into this adventure. Hardy, the mineralogist, had been taken ill at Lima, and Dr. Bulfinch, his colleague, had sought vainly for a substitute. None was available. None, that is, save for a certain beachcomber who was going rapidly to hell with the aid of a native girl, bad gin, and rubber checks.

Bulfinch's assistant, Dr. Mary Phillips, had solved the problem. She had bought up the bad checks, threatened Stockton with jail if he refused to come along. Under the circumstances, the one-time mineralogist had shrugged and acceded. Now he was wondering if he had made a mistake.

There was menace here. Stockton sensed it, with the psychic keenness of a professional adventurer. Secrecy was all around him. Why was the mine yard generally kept locked, if the mine actually was worthless, as Thorkel contended? Why had Thorkel seemed so excited when Stockton had mentioned the iron crystals, crystals Thorkel had been unable to see because of his weak vision?

Then, too, there was the matter of the *Dicotylinae*—certain bones Mary Phillips had found. They were the bones of a native wild pig, but the molar surfaces had proved it a species of midget swine entirely unknown to science—four inches long at maturity. That was odd.

Finally, only an hour ago, Thorkel had blandly said good-bye, only twenty-three hours after the arrival of his guests. Bulfinch had, Stockton mused with a chuckle, thrown a fit. The goatish face had gone gray; the unkempt Vandyke had bristled.

"Are you attempting to intimate that you summoned me—Dr. Rupert Bulfinch—ten thousand miles just to look into a microscope?" he had roared.

"Correct," Thorkel had answered, and went back to his mud house.

So far, so good. But there was trouble ahead. Neither Bulfinch nor Mary would think of leaving, even though that meant defiance of Thorkel. And Thorkel, Stockton felt, was a dangerous customer, cold-blooded and unscrupulous. His round face, with its bristling mustache and bald dome, could settle into grim, deadly lines.

Moreover, from the first a quiet, unspoken sort of conflict had arisen between Thorkel and Baker, the guide who had accompanied the party from the Andes. Stockton shrugged and gave it up.

Dr. Bulfinch came up behind Stockton and touched his arm. There was repressed excitement in the biologist's goatish face.

"Come along," he said softly. "I've found something."

Stockton followed Bulfinch into a nearby tent. Mary Phillips was there, mounting the bones of the midget pig. She was, Stockton thought, much too pretty to be a biologist. A wealth of red-gold hair cascaded over her shoulders, and she had a face that belonged on the silver screen rather than in the lab. She also had a hell of a temper.

"Hello, beautiful," said Stockton.

"Oh, shut up," the girl murmured. "What's the matter, Dr. Bulfinch?"

The biologist thrust a rock sample at Stockton.

"Test this."

The younger man's eyes widened.

"This isn't—hell, it can't be!"

"You've seen pitchblende before," Bulfinch said with heavy sarcasm.

"Where'd you get it?" Stockton asked, excited.

"Baker found it near the mine shaft. It's uranium ore,"

he said quietly, "and it's a hundred times richer than any deposit ever discovered. No wonder Thorkel wants to get rid of us!" Mentally Stockton added, "And I'll bet he wouldn't stop at murder to shut us up!"

"Good God!" Bulfinch whispered. "Radium! Think of the medical benefits of such a find—the help it can give to science!"

There was an interruption. A black streak shot into the tent, followed by a gaunt, disreputable dog, barking wildly. The two circled a table and fled outside again. There was the sound of a scuffle.

Hastily Stockton raised the tent-flap. Pedro, Thorkel's man-of-all-work, was holding the dog, while a cat retreated hastily into the distance.

The half-breed looked up with a flash of white teeth. "I am sorry. This foolish Paco—" He pulled the dog's tail. "He does not know he can never catch Satanas. He just wants to play, though. Since Pinto went away, he is lonesome."

"Yeah?" Stockton asked, eyeing the man. "Who was Pinto?"

"My little mule. Ah, Pinto was smart. But not smart enough, I suppose." Pedro shrugged expressively. "Poor mule."

A man came out of the gathering twilight—a tall, rangy figure, with a hard-bitten, harsh face—a Puritan gone to seed.

"Hello, Baker," Stockton grunted.

"Bulfinch told you about the radium?" Baker said, without preamble. "It's valuable, eh?"

"Yeah. Plenty valuable." Stockton's eyes narrowed. "I've been wondering about that. Wondering why you were so anxious to come along when you could have sent a native. Maybe you'd heard about this radium mine, eh?"

Baker's harsh face did not change, but he sent a glance of sheer black hatred toward the house.

"I don't blame you," he said under his breath. "It does look screwy. But—listen, Bill, I had a good reason for wanting to come here. If I'd come alone, Thorkel would have been suspicious—shot me on sight, maybe. I'd have had no chance at all to investigate—"

"Investigate what?" Stockton asked impatiently.

"I used to know a little native girl. Nice kid. Mira, her name was. I—well, I thought a lot of her. One day she went off to act as Thorkel's housekeeper. And that was the last I ever heard of the girl."

"She isn't here now," Stockton said. "Unless she's in the house."

Baker shook his head. "I've been talking to Pedro. He says Mira was here—and disappeared. Like Pinto, his albino mule."

The swift tropic night had fallen. A bright moon silvered the compound.

And suddenly the two men heard the faint, shrill neigh of a horse, from the direction of Thorkel's house.

Simultaneously the figure of Pedro appeared, running from behind a tent. He cried, "Pinto! My mule Pinto is in the house. He has come back!"

Before the half-breed could reach the door of the house, it opened abruptly. Thorkel appeared. In the moonlight his bald head and gleaming, thick-lensed spectacles looked oddly inhuman.

"Well, Pedro?" he asked quietly, in a sneering voice.

The other jerked to a halt. He moistened his lips.

"It is Pinto, *Senor*—" he whispered.

"You are imagining things," Thorkel said, with cold emphasis. "Go back to your work. Do you think I'd keep a mule in the house?"

A new voice broke in.

"Just what do you keep in there, Doctor?"

It was Bulfinch. The biologist emerged from the tent and approached, a lean, gaunt figure in the moonlight. Mary was behind him. Baker and Stockton joined the group. Thorkel held the door closed behind him.

"That is nothing to you," he said, icily.

"On the contrary," Bulfinch snapped, "as I told you, I intend to remain here until I have received an explanation."

"And as I told *you*," Thorkel said, almost whispering, "you do so at your own peril. I will not tolerate interference or prying. My secrets are my own. I warn you: I shall protect those secrets!"

"Are you threatening us?" the biologist growled.

Thorkel suddenly smiled.

"If I showed you what I have in my house, I think you would—regret it," he observed, a suggestion of subtle menace in his silky tones. "I wish to be left alone. If I find you still here tomorrow morning, I shall take . . . protective measures."

His eyes, behind the thick-lensed spectacles, included the group in one ominous glance. Then, without another word, he reentered the house, locking the door behind him.

"Still staying, Doc?" Stockton asked. Bulfinch growled.

"I certainly am!"

There was a brief pause. Then Pedro, who had been listening intently, made a commanding gesture.

"Come with me. I will show you something—"

He hurried around the corner of the house, trailed by the dog Paco. Bulfinch, his thin lips working, followed, and so did the others.

A tall bamboo fence blocked their way. Pedro pointed, and applied his eye to a crack. Stockton tested the gate,

which had previously been open. It was barred now, so he joined Pedro and the others.

"Wait," the half-breed whispered. "I have seen this before."

They could see the mine-shaft, with a crude windlass surmounting it. And then a gross, strange figure entered their range of vision. It resembled, at first glance, a man in a diving suit. Every inch of the stocky body was covered with the rubberlike fabric. A cylindrical helmet shielded the head. Through two round eye-plates could be seen the heavy spectacles of Dr. Thorkel.

"Uh-huh," Stockton whispered. "Protective suit. Radium's dangerous stuff."

Thorkel went to the mine and began to turn the windlass. Abruptly Stockton felt a hand touch his arm. He turned.

It was Baker.

"Come along," the other said softly. "I've opened the door. Cheap lock—and Mary uses hairpins. Now we'll be able to see what he's got hidden in that house."

"Si! The doctor will be busy in the yard for a long time—" Pedro said, nodding.

Silently the group retraced their steps. The door of the mud house was ajar.

From within came the sound of a shrill neigh, incredibly high and thin. . . .

CHAPTER II

The Little People

The room was disappointingly bare. Across from the front door was another, apparently leading to the mine

yard. Another door was in the right-hand wall, and a small mica window was let into it.

There were heavy wooden chairs, a work-bench, and a table bearing microscope and notebooks. On the bench were several small, wicker baskets. Littered carelessly about the floor were a rack of test-tubes, books, a beaker, two or three small boxes, and a dirty shirt or two.

Pedro pointed to the floor.

"Hoof prints—Pinto was here, yes!"

Mary bent over the microscope, while Bulfinch examined the notebooks.

"Thieves!"

Thorkel stood in the doorway leading to the mine yard, his eyes glaring behind the glasses. He was whitely livid with rage.

"So you would steal my discoveries. You have no right here! You are merely my employees whom I have discharged and instructed to leave!" He saw the notebook in Bulfinch's hand, and his voice rose to a scream of rage.

"My notes!"

Stockton and Baker seized him as he sprang at the biologist. Bulfinch smiled coldly.

"Restrain yourself, Dr. Thorkel. Your actions are not reassuring."

Thorkel relaxed, panting.

"I—you have no right here."

"You are behaving irrationally. For your own good, and for the benefit of science, I must demand an explanation. To leave you here in the jungle would be nothing short of criminal. You are grossly overworked. You are not"—he hesitated—"not in a normal state mentally. There is no reason to be suspicious or to fear persecution."

Thorkel sighed, removed his glasses, and rubbed his blind eyes with a weary gesture. "I am sorry," he murmured.

"Perhaps you are right, Doctor. I—I am experimenting with radioactivity." He went to the mica-paned door and opened it, revealing a small closet, plated with lead. From the ceiling hung a projector, resembling the type used medically to treat cancer by radium rays.

"This is my condensor," Thorkel said. "You may examine it, Dr. Bulfinch. I must trust you—I have shown this to no one else in the world."

Bulfinch entered the closet. The others were at his heels, intently scrutinizing the projector which seemed the heart of the mystery.

Pedro paid no attention. He was opening, one by one, the boxes on the bench. And, abruptly, he paused, transfixed with astonishment. His lips formed the word, "Pinto!"

A while mule was within the box. An albino mule, no more than eight inches high!

"Pedro!" Thorkel called sharply. The half-breed sprang up. His elbow overturned the box, which clattered to the floor.

The midget mule was flung out. Only Thorkel and Pedro saw the beast as it struggled up and raced across the floor.

The door was still ajar. The mannikin animal fled out into the night.

For a second Thorkel's eyes clashed with Pedro's.

"Come here," the scientist said tonelessly. "I want you to see this, too."

The half-breed went toward Thorkel, his face blank with amazement. "What—what has happened to—"

Thorkel smiled. He pointed to the closet where the others were still examining the projector. Pedro turned to look.

Thorkel moved with the swiftness of an uncoiled steel spring. He struck at Pedro. Caught unawares, the half-

breed was hurled into the closet. The door slammed shut behind him.

Thorkel locked it with a swift movement. His hand closed on one of the switches nearby; he pulled it down. Instantly there was a low hum, which rose swiftly to a sibilant crackling buzz.

Green light blazed through the mica window.

From a shelf Thorkel took a heavy helmet and donned it. He leaned forward to peer through the mica pane.

"Thieves!" he whispered. "I told you to go! I could not force you—but if you insist on staying, I must be sure that you will not interfere with my experiments or try to steal my secret. So you wished to help me, Dr. Bulfinch? Well, you shall—but not quite as you expected!"

Thorkel's laughter rose above the crackling snarl of the condensor. . . .

The infra-red lamp suspended from the ceiling sent down a rich, warm glow. Beneath it was a glass dish, containing a colorless liquid that was boiling gently, warmed by an electrode. From the dish steamed a whitish vapor which shrouded the floor, almost hiding the dim outlines nearby.

One of these figures writhed and sat up, tearing away the silken wrappings that bound it. The swart face of Pedro appeared. He sprang up, knee-deep in the white vapor, coughing and chocking for breath.

Beside him another form stirred. Bill Stockton rose shakily, breathing in great gasps.

"Air—air's better up here . . . what the hell!" Discovering that he was naked save for the silk shroud, he adjusted it, looking rather like a Roman, with his harsh eagle face and keen eyes.

Mary and Baker were the next to appear. Then came

the grim face of Dr. Bulfinch. For a moment each was busy adjusting their makeshift garments.

"Where are we?" Pedro gasped. "I cannot see—" He choked and coughed.

"Calm down," Bulfinch said curtly. "We won't be asphyxiated." He sniffed and glanced at the light above. "Ozone, ammonia, humidity, temperature—calculated to revive consciousness."

"Where are we?" Mary asked. "In the mine?"

They could not see beyond the small circle of light. Stockton gripped Pedro's arm.

"You know this place better than we do. Where are we? What's Thorkel done?"

Suddenly horror grew in Pedro's eyes as he remembered something. "Pinto," he gasped. "He has made Pinto—*little!*"

"Nuts," Stockton grunted. "Let's grab hands and feel our way around. Come on!"

"He has made me little like my mule!" Pedro whispered.

Without warning the faint red glow of the lamp faded and died. It was almost utterly black. Stockton felt Mary's hand tighten in his own, and squeezed it reassuringly.

Light shafted in whitely. Instantly Stockton saw that they were in a cellar, at the foot of a flight of stairs that led up to an opening door. On the threshold stood Dr. Thorkel, looking down at them. Satanas, the cat, crouched by the scientist's feet.

"He has made us little!" Pedro screamed.

And it was true! Thorkel was—a giant! A thirty-foot titan towered over them! The cellar door seemed as big as a two-story house; Satanas was a sabre-toothed tiger!

Bulfinch was chalk-white. He sprang back suddenly as Satanas spat down at the tiny group. Thorkel hastily bent

down and picked up the cat. His voice was booming thunder.

"No, no—you must not frighten them," he told the cat. Thorkel stepped down into the cellar, and the others shrank from this colossus. Mary's voice rose in a scream.

"Good," said Thorkel. "Vocal cords unimpaired, eh? You have no temperature? Dr. Bulfinch, will you be good enough to take the pulse of your companions?"

Pedro broke and raced for the stairway. Thorkel nodded, smiling.

"Little creatures—their first instinct is to escape. Run if you like, then."

And the wee folk fled. . . .

Climbing those stairs was a feat. Each tread came up to their breasts. But, pushing, pulling, scrambling, the miniature humans swarmed up toward the light. Soon they were gone from sight. Thorkel put down the cat and followed, shutting the cellar door. He turned to glance around the room. The little people had hidden themselves.

"Come out. You have nothing to fear," he said smoothly.

Thorkel waited, and then sank down into a chair.

"Where is your scientific spirit, Dr. Bulfinch?" He smiled. "Did you not wish to join me in my experiments?" He mopped perspiration from his bald head and slid the chair away from the patch of sunlight that slanted in through the window fronting the mine yard.

Bulfinch's head appeared cautiously from behind one of Thorkel's discarded boots. He walked toward the giant.

"Come closer," Thorkel urged.

Bulfinch obeyed, staring up at the other.

"What is the matter?" Thorkel said fearfully. "Can you not speak?"

The biologist's voice was thin and high.

"Yes, I can speak. What have you done—and why?"

Thorkel leaned forward, his huge hand reaching toward the tiny figure on the floor. Bulfinch retreated in alarm.

"I only wish to weigh and measure you," he said softly. He rose and settled back in his chair. "Come out. I won't eat you. As you can see, I have reduced your size."

His pale eyes, behind the thick glasses, watched intently as, emboldened, the others appeared one by one. Pedro had been hiding behind a chair leg; the others behind a stack of books on the floor. They advanced until they were in a group with Bulfinch.

"You should be proud," Thorkel said. "You are almost the first successful experiment—Pinto was the first, Pedro. Too bad you let him escape. Again I thank you, Mr. Stockton, for identifying the iron crystals. They gave me the last clue."

He blinked down at them. "Till you came, I could reduce organic substances, but life could not be preserved in them. It is a matter of electronic compression of matter under ray bombardment. The radium in the mine gave me unimaginable power. Look." He lifted a sponge from the table and squeezed it in his fist. "That is it. Compression. But energy is required, rather than brute force—"

Baker spoke up suddenly. "Did you do this to Mira?"

"The native girl—my housekeeper? Why, yes. But I failed—she was reduced in size, but she was dead. How do you know of her?" Thorkel did not wait for an answer. He rubbed his eyes wearily. "I am very tired. It has taken days to reduce you, and I have not had one moment's sleep . . ." His voice trailed off wearily. Sleep smothered him.

Stockton was staring around.

"We've got to get out of here. Do you realize that this fiend intends to kill us all?"

Bulfinch looked a question. "That scarcely—"

"He told us he murdered the native girl, didn't he? He's a cold-blooded devil."

Instinctively they glanced at the door. The bar that locked it from the inside was thrice the height of Stockton's head.

Human beings—scarcely more than half a foot tall!

On the floor nearby a book stood on end—"Human Physiology," by Granger. Stockton went to stand beside it. His head scarcely came to the top of the volume.

"Well?" he asked bitterly. "Any suggestions?"

Bulfinch nodded. "Yes. Books are handy things. If we can pile them up and reach the door-latch . . ."

It took time, but Thorkel did not awaken. A pencil, used as a lever, opened the door a crack. And then the little people were outside in the compound. Strange sight! A cactus patch not far away was taller than the tallest tree. The camp tables were fantastically high. A chicken was moving jerkily in its quest for food—and its bobbing comb rose higher than Stockton's head!

If it saw them, it made no hostile move. Slowly the tiny group moved forward, toward Bulfinch's tent. Each box and crate was a mountain to be skirted. The rough ground hurt their bare feet.

Pedro was glancing around nervously. Abruptly he cried out and pointed. Stockton whirled with the others, and he showed his panic.

Out of a crumbling hole in the mud hut's base Satanás, the cat, was crawling. The creature's eyes were intent on the little people. More formidable than a tiger, it wriggled free and bounded toward them, sharp fangs bared!

CHAPTER III

Death in the Jungle

Stockton seized Mary by the hand and dragged her toward the shelter of the cactus clump. The others were not slow in following. Baker paused to hurl a pebble at the cat, but the gesture was futile.

Snarling, Satanás came on. The cacti were too far away for safety. Hopelessness tore at Stockton as he realized that none of them could reach the clump. He could almost feel sharp fangs sinking into his flesh.

The cat spat viciously. There was an uproar of furious barks. As the little people miraculously found concealment amid the cactus spines, they turned to see Satanás fleeing from Paco, Pedro's dog.

"Whew!" Baker gasped. "That was a close one."

Bulfinch regarded him sombrely, tugging at his Vandyke. "There will be more 'close ones,'" he said with grim meaning. "Every creature larger than a rat is apt to be a deadly menace."

"What can we do?" Mary asked.

"First—food, weapons," Stockton said. "Then we'll deal with Thorkel and find some way out of this."

The day dragged on, and Thorkel still slept. Satanás did not reappear. Mary engaged herself in making sandals, a difficult task at best, and worse when the knife is larger than you are.

As for Stockton, he managed to take the screw out of a pair of scissors, and one blade provided him with a serviceable weapon, about the size of a sword.

Thorkel's voice startled them when it came. He was leaning out the window, like a giant in the sky, regarding them.

"You are resourceful, my small friends," his voice boomed out. "But now come back. I must weigh and measure all of you."

The group drew together. Thorkel laughed evilly at them.

"I won't harm you. Come, Dr. Bulfinch," he said silkily.

"I demand that you restore us to our normal size," the biologist snapped.

"That is impossible," the other said. "At present, anyway. All my energies have been devoted to the problem of atomic shrinkage—compression. Perhaps, in time, I can find the antidote, the ray that will turn men to giants. But it will take months of research and experiment—perhaps years."

"Do you mean we must remain like this—"

"I shall not harm you," Thorkel smiled. "Come—" He leaned forward. Bulfinch drew back, and, with an impatient grunt, Thorkel disappeared from the window. His feet thudded across the floor. Bulfinch hastily fled back to the others.

"The cactus," he gasped, panting. "Let's hide!"

But already Thorkel was emerging from the door. His figure loomed gigantic. A few quick strides, and he had cut off the retreat of his quarry. He crouched down, spreading his fingers wide.

Escape was impossible. Mary and Baker were gathered up in one titan hand. With the other Thorkel reached for the fleeing Bulfinch.

Pedro had secured a fork from somewhere, and held it like a spear. He thrust at the huge hand.

Chuckling, Thorkel brushed the weapon aside, knock-

ing Pedro headlong. Contemptuously he stood up, still gripping Mary and Baker.

"Dr. Bulfinch!" His voice was thunderous. "Listen to me!"

The biologist was peering out from the depths of the cactus. "Yes?"

"I wish to weigh and measure you. You are a scientist; your reactions will be more valuable than those of the others. I am conducting an experiment for Germany—my fatherland. If my reduction method proves successful, we will be able to reduce our armies to miniature size. Our men will be able to steal into enemy territory, sabotage industrial centers. And no one will suspect the destruction due to—men in miniature. You will not be harmed. I promise you that. Will you come out?"

Bulfinch shook his head stubbornly. His whole being revolted at the ruthless plan outlined by this sinister genius. A plan that might mean the death of thousands of innocent civilians.

"No? Then, perhaps, if I apply a little pressure—a very little—to these tiny people I hold so gently in my hand—"

The constricting fingers tightened. From Baker's lips came a grunt of pain. Mary's voice rose in a scream.

"Oh, damn!" Bulfinch snarled. "All right, Thorkel. You win. Put them down." He emerged from the cactus as the scientist gently deposited Baker and Mary on the ground. They were unharmed, but so giddy from the rapid descent that they could scarcely stand.

Calmly, Thorkel picked up Bulfinch's tiny figure. The biologist made no resistance. The others were left staring as Thorkel walked back to the mud house; then, swiftly, they fled into the cactus. There was silence.

"He won't hurt him," Pedro said, without conviction.

Stockton stepped out from the protection of the

cactus. "I'll just make sure. Wait here." He started toward the house, gripping his scissor-blade harder than was necessary.

It was minutes later when he reached the door, still slightly ajar. He peered through the crack, just in time to hear Bulfinch's cry and witness the murder of the biologist.

Thorkel was seated at his table. With one hand he gripped the tiny Bulfinch; with the other he pressed a wad of cotton down over his victim's face.

Then, swiftly, he dropped the limp body into a glass beaker. Stockton drew back, sick with horror, and his improvised sword made a noise against the door. Thorkel glanced down and saw the small watcher.

"So you would spy on me?" he asked quietly, and without haste picked up a butterfly net from the table. As he rose Stockton fled.

Thorkel got to the door just in time to see him disappear into the cactus. Nodding, he found a shovel and followed his quarry.

It took ten minutes to clear and break down the cactus bed. And then Thorkel realized that he was looking at the outlet of a tile drain pipe that extended to and under the compound wall. He straightened, staring nearsightedly across the barrier.

"You had better come back!" Thorkel shouted. "You cannot live an hour in the jungle—and there is a storm approaching!"

Storm in the jungle—the greatest rain forest in the world. Bear, deer and monkey fleeing from thunderbolt and unchained devils of the lightning. The screaming of parrots clinging to their wind-buffed perches.

The black hell of night closed upon the jungle.

Through that madness fled the little people. And, by sheer luck, they found a cave in which they cowered through the eternal, dragging hours of shaking fury,

helpless, hopeless beings in a world of gigantic menace. . . .

It was dawn. Chilled, dispirited, and shivering, the little people emerged from their refuge. In the dawn light they examined each other.

"We look like hell," Stockton said.

"I'm glad you include yourself," Mary told him, trying to adjust her tangled hair. "I wish I had a few pins."

"They'd be as big as you are, about. What now?"

Baker had been talking to the half-breed. Now he turned to face the others.

"Pedro has an idea. If we can get to the river and find a boat, we can float downstream to civilization. There'll be help there."

"That's an idea," Stockton nodded. "Which way is the water, Pedro?"

The half-breed pointed, and without delay they set out, plodding through the rain-wet jungle. Once a monkey, larger to them than a gorilla, swung down uncomfortably close, and once the inconceivable ferocity of a bear crossed their path, luckily without seeing them. They kept to a well-trodden path, but on all sides the monolithic trees stretched up, higher than skyscrapers. The weedy grass rose above their heads. It was a world of stark fantasy and lurking menace.

Once Stockton, lagging behind the others, saw Paco, the dog. He was frisking about an albino colt which was diligently cropping grass. For a second Stockton considered the idea of catching and riding the colt, but gave it up immediately. The beast was much too large. He shrugged and followed the rest of the band.

The river bank did not prove an insurmountable obstacle, though it took time to descend. They went upstream to a little cove, where Pedro, he said, had moored his canoe. Picking their way around a thick patch of weeds, they reached the craft. It was gigantic. Beached on the

sand, it remained immovable no matter how they strained and pushed.

"Great idea," Stockton grunted. "It's like trying to move a steamship."

"Well, even that can be done," the girl told him. "If you use rollers."

"Isn't she smart?" Pedro said with naive admiration. "We can cut bamboo—"

"Sure!" Baker joined in. "We can rig up a lever and windlass—it'll take time, but that's all right."

It took even more time than they had thought. With their crude tools, and the unexpected toughness of the plant-life to tiny hands, it took hours, and the morning dragged on with little accomplished.

Pedro lifted his head and dashed sweat from his dripping mustache. "I hear—Paco, I think," he said doubtfully.

"Never mind Paco," Baker told him. "Lend a hand with this windlass."

"But Paco—he is a hunting dog. Dr. Thorkel knows that. If he—"

"Time to rest," Stockton decreed, and straightened, rubbing his aching back. Mary, who had been toiling with the rest, sank down with a groan. She tossed her red-gold hair back from her tired young face.

Stockton made a cup out of a tiny leaf and brought the girl water from the river. She drank it gratefully.

"No use to boil it," the man explained. "If there're any germs in the water, we can see 'em without a microscope."

Pedro and Baker flung themselves down full length on the sand and lay panting. "This is devil work," the half-breed observed with conviction. "If I live, I shall burn twenty candles before my patron saint."

"If I live, I'll kill twenty bottles," Baker said. "But

there's one guy I'd like to kill first." His face darkened. He was remembering Mira, the native girl, whom Thorkel had murdered so casually. And poor Bulfinch.

"What about you, Bill?" Mary asked.

He glanced at her. "I know what you mean. Well—I wouldn't even make a good beachcomber now. I might go native with the field mice."

Abruptly Stockton turned to face her. "No. I didn't mean that. This is pretty terrible, but it's shown me something. All this—" He flung out an arm toward the towering grasses in the background. "Wonder and strangeness, which we never quite realize—until we're small. I—I was a good mineralogist once. I could be again. Remember those checks I tore up, Mary? I'm going to pay you back every cent they cost you. That's rather important to me now. . . ." He frowned. "If we come out of this alive—"

In the distance Paco barked again. Pedro stood up, shading his eyes with a calloused palm. "It is Dr. Thorkel," he stated. "He carries a specimen box, and Paco leads him."

"Damn!" Stockton snapped. "We've got to hide. Take to the water, to break the trail."

"No," Pedro said. "There are alligators." He nodded toward the tall patch of grass near them. "We can hide in—" He stopped, and horror grew in his eyes.

Mary, following his glance, gave a little gasp and recoiled.

For something was coming out of the high grasses. Dragonlike and hideous it slid forward, cold eyes intent on the little people. The sunlight gleamed on rough, warty scales.

Only a lizard—but to Thorkel's victims it was like a triceratops, a dinosaur out of Earth's ferocious past!

Stockton barely had time to snatch up his scissor-blade

sword before the reptile rushed. He was bowled over by that blind charge. Gasping, still clinging to his weapon, he scrambled to his feet.

Mary was backed up against a tall weed-stem, her eyes abrim with fear. Before her Pedro had planted his squat form.

He gripped a bit of wood, holding it like a cudgel—a matchstick in the hands of a mannikin!

The lizard came back, jaws agape, hissing. Baker had found a sharpened splinter of bamboo, and held it as a spear. He thrust, and the point glanced off the reptile's armored flank.

The barking of Paco was thunderously loud. A shadow fell on the group. Something seemed to swoop down out of the sky—and the vast face of Dr. Thorkel stared at them as the man crouched down.

"So there you are!" he boomed. "What is this? A lizard? Wait—"

In his left hand he gathered the struggling forms of Mary and Pedro. They struck vainly at the huge, imprisoning fingers. He reached toward Stockton.

Simultaneously the lizard rushed again. Stockton drove his blade at the gaping jaws; Baker thrust at the wattled throat. The creature gave back, writhed aside. Thorkel's hand reached out—

The reptile's jaws closed upon it! Thorkel screamed in pain as he jerked back, cursing with agonized fury. Mary and Pedro dropped unnoticed from the scientists's other hand.

Stockton fled toward them. "The bushes! Quick!"

Habit made him say that. Actually, they darted into the concealing stems of the high grasses, thicker than a forest of bamboo. Behind them they heard Thorkel cursing; then he fell silent.

Paco barked.

"That damn dog of yours," Baker growled. "He's a hunter, all right."

Thorkel's voice sounded. "Come out! I know you're in the grass. Come out or I'll fire it."

Stockton glanced at Mary's white face, and whispered an oath. Baker's thin lips were grim. Pedro rubbed his mustache.

"Paco—he will follow me," the half-breed said. "You stay here."

And he was gone, racing through the grass forest.

There was a moment of silence. Then Stockton, galvanized into activity, crept forward, parting the fronds till he could see Thorkel. The scientist was holding a match-box in his fingers.

Blood dripped from one hand to the ground.

Paco's bark came from further away. Thorkel hesitated, looked around, and then extracted a match.

From downstream came Pedro's voice.

"Paco! *Fuera! Fuera!*"

Thorkel, lighting the match, looked up.

Abruptly he dropped it and snatched at the rifle he had laid down. He took steady aim.

The boom of the gun was deafening thunder.

Pedro screamed once. There was a faint splash from far away.

Sickness tugged at Stockton's stomach as he saw Thorkel go striding off. He went back to the others.

"Pedro's done for. That leaves three of us."

"Damn Thorkel!" Baker ground out. Mary said nothing, but there was both pity and sorrow in her eyes. They heard Paco go racing past, to leap into the river and swim out.

Then the first coiling tendrils of smoke drifted through the grasses.

Instantly Stockton remembered the lit match that

Thorkel had dropped. He seized Mary's hand and urged her forward.

"Come on, Steve," he said urgently to Baker. "He's trying to smoke us out. We can't stay here—"

"Come out!" roared the bellowing voice of Thorkel. "Hear me?" His huge boots stamped through the grass patch.

And the fire spread, remorselessly, hungrily.

Mary was gasping with strain. "I can't—go any further, Bill."

"That's right," Baker seconded. "If we come out in the open, he'll see us. We're trapped."

Stockton stared around. The flames were closing in upon them. Black smoke billowed up. Abruptly Stockton saw something that made his eyes widen.

The specimen-case!

Thorkel's box, lying at the edge of the grasses!

Without a word Stockton raced toward it. He still had his improvised sword, and, leaping to a rock beside the box, he used it as a lever to pry the lid open. Instantly the others saw his intention.

Awkwardly, frantic with the need for haste, they clambered in. The lid had scarcely fallen before a jolt and a sense of swinging movement told them that Thorkel had remembered his property.

Through the small ventilators, covered with copper-wire mesh, daylight slanted in vaguely.

Would Thorkel open the case? They wondered.

CHAPTER IV

The Cyclops

It was night before Thorkel gave up the search. Wearily he pushed open the door of the mud house, put the shotgun on a chair, and dropped the specimen case on the table.

"They must be dead," he groaned. "But I must be sure. I must!"

He polished his spectacles, peering at them vaguely. His watery eyes blinked in puzzlement. Then he went to the door of the radium room and peered through the mica panel. Something he saw there made him turn to the mine-yard door. He flung it open, switched on a floodlight, and went out, leaving the door ajar.

As soon as he had left the lid of the specimen case lifted. Three tiny people emerged. Fearfully they clambered out, crossed the plain of the table-top, and leaped down to the seat of Thorkel's chair. They gained the floor, and went toward the open door.

"He's busy with the windlass," Mary whispered. "Hurry!"

Stockton halted suddenly. "Okay," he said. "But—I've stopped running. You two go on. I'm going to stay and—kill Thorkel, somehow."

The others stared at him. "But Bill!" Mary gasped. "It's impossible! If we reach civilization—"

Stockton laughed bitterly.

"We've just been fooling ourselves all along. We can never reach civilization. If we launched a boat, we could

never get ashore. We'd starve to death, or crack up in the rapids. We're imprisoned here, as surely as though we were in jail. We can't get away."

"If we—" the girl began. Stockton cut her short.

"It's no use! We can't live long in the forest. Only luck has saved us so far. If we were savages—Indians, perhaps—but we're not. If we go out in the jungle again, it means death."

"And if we stay here?" Baker asked.

Stockton's smile was grim. "Thorkel will kill us. Unless we murder him first."

"All right, suppose we manage to kill Thorkel," Mary asked quietly. "What then?"

"Then? We live." Stockton nodded, a queer look in his eyes. "I know. The projector only works one way. We can't regain our normal size, ever. Even if we were large enough to operate the machine, if we could rig up some windlass or lever, it wouldn't help. Thorkel is, I think, the only man in the world who could work out the formula for returning us to our normal size. There's not much chance of his doing that."

Baker said slowly, "If we kill Thorkel, we'll have to remain—like this—forever?"

"Yeah. And if we don't—he'll get us, sooner or later. Well?"

"It's a—a hard choice," Mary whispered. "But at least we'd be alive—"

Baker nodded, and pointed to where Thorkel's discarded gun lay across the chair.

It was aimed at the scientist's cot.

"By God!" Stockton grunted. "That's it!"

Having come to a decision, the three acted quickly. They climbed the chair, and using books as props and the scissor-blade as a lever, adjusted the shotgun.

"Sight it at his pillow," Stockton told Baker, who was

looking down the gun barrel. "Up a little . . . there! Right at his left ear!"

Mary was tying a piece of thread to the gun. "Can you cock it, Bill?"

"Yeah." He was straining with the lever. "Okay." But, despite Stockton's apparent assurance, he was feeling slightly sick. The choice was—horrible! To die at Thorkel's hands, or else to remain in this world of little-ness forever. . . .

"Thorkel's coming back!" There was panic in Mary's voice.

The three scurried to cover. Stockton managed to capture the thread's dangling end, and ran with it around a box, out of sight. Mary and Baker found shelter beside him.

The scientist's shadow fell across the threshold. He entered, yawning wearily.

Carelessly he scaled his hat on a corner and sat down on the cot, unlacing his boots.

Stockton's hand tightened on the thread. Would the titan notice the altered position of the shotgun?

Thorkel dropped his boots to the floor and started to lie down. Then, struck by a thought, he rose again and went to a cupboard, taking from it a dish of smoked meat and some cassava bread.

Placing this on the table, he drew up a chair and began to eat.

Apparently his eyes ached. Several times he polished his glasses, and presently discarded them entirely, substituting another pair which he took from a tray on the table. He ate slowly, nodding with weariness. And at last he removed the new pair of spectacles and slumped down, pillowing his head in his arms.

He slept.

"Oh, damn!" Baker said with heart-felt fury. "We

can't use the gun now. We couldn't prop it up at the right angle. It looks like the jungle, after all—unless maybe we can use a knife on him."

Stockton looked speculatively at the scissor-blade. "Wouldn't be sure enough. We've got to kill him, not disable him."

"Disable him—that's it!" Mary said suddenly.

"Bill, he's blind without his glasses!"

The three stared at each other, new hope springing to life within them. "That's it!" Stockton approved. "We can hide them, and bargain with him, perhaps—"

"We must be quiet," Mary warned.

But Thorkel slept heavily. He did not stir when the little people climbed up to the table, and, one by one, handed down the spectacles till they could be thrust out of sight through a hole in the floor.

"That's the last pair," Mary said with satisfaction, peering down into the depths. "He won't find them in a hurry."

"The last but one," Baker denied. "Bill—" He stopped. Stockton was gone.

They saw him back on the table-top, tip-toeing toward the sleeping Thorkel. He skirted the specimen-box and approached the spectacles, gripped in the scientist's huge hand.

Gingerly he attempted to disengage them. Thorkel stirred. He mumbled something, and his head lifted, slow with sleep.

Fear tightened Stockton's throat. On impulse he jerked the spectacles from Thorkel's hand and fled behind the specimen-box.

Blinking, Thorkel felt around for the glasses. His pale eyes stared unseeingly.

There was a little thud. Stockton, crouching at the table-edge, saw the spectacles hit the floor, without

breaking. He did not see Thorkel rise and fumble toward the specimen-box.

Mary's voice was ice-shrill.

"Jump, Bill, jump!"

Hastily, Stockton slipped over the edge, hung by his hands, and dropped. The floor rushed up to meet him. He landed heavily, but sprang up and fled before Thorkel could see the movement.

The scientist said, a curious tremor in his voice,

"So you've come back. So you are here, eh?"

There was no answer. Thorkel stumbled to the back door, closed it, and put his back against it.

And, for the first time, Thorkel knew fear.

Thorkel tugged at his mustache. His voice shook when he spoke.

"You would dare attack me? Well, that is a mistake. You are shut up in this room. And I will find you—" He whirled at a fancied movement or sound, glaring blindly, swinging his bald head from side to side with a slow, jerky motion.

"I will find you!"

Stockton pulled Mary back farther into their place of concealment behind a crate. "He's crazy with fear. Keep quiet!"

Thorkel began to stumble around the room, kicking aside apparatus, boxes, clothing.

He fell, and when he rose there was blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

His hand closed on the shotgun. He snatched it up, and stood silent, waiting.

Without warning Thorkel flung up the gun and fired. The crashing echoes filled the room. Stockton peered out, saw that there was a gaping, splintered hole in the bottom of the back door.

Thorkel waited. Then a grim smile twisted his lips. He felt his way to the table and sought for the tray of extra

glasses. His hand encountered nothing. The room was utterly still.

"Then—this is war?" Thorkel asked slowly. With a sudden furious motion he broke down the shotgun and gripped the barrel, holding it like a club.

He dropped to hands and knees and felt beneath the table. Slowly he advanced. In a moment, Stockton realized, he would find the glasses where they lay.

Stockton's sandaled feet made no sound as he raced forward. Before Thorkel could react, the geologist had sprung beneath his nose, snatched up the glasses, and smashed them against the table-leg.

Thorkel swung viciously with the gun-barrel.

Stockton, perforce, dropped the glasses and fled. The huge metal club missed him by inches. He vanished into the shadows.

Crouching in their hiding-places, the three little people stared, frozen, as the titan form of Thorkel rose above the table edge. He was donning his glasses. One lens was splintered and useless.

Blood-stained, dirt-smeared, and terrible, the giant towered there. His voice rose in a shout of laughter.

"Now!" he roared. "Now you can call me Cyclops!"

Swiftly he strode forward. With methodical haste he began to search the room, overturning boxes, flinging the cot aside to examine some cases beneath it. Stockton made a peremptory signal. Mary and Baker dashed out from their hiding-place between Thorkel's discarded boots. They followed Stockton swiftly toward the back door.

"Outside, quick!" he whispered. "He can't see us. The cot's in the way."

They clambered through the gaping hole the shotgun charge had made. It was not easy, and Mary's clothing caught on a sharp splinter.

The cloth ripped as Stockton jerked at it.

Footsteps thudded across the floor. The door was flung open. Thorkel switched on the floodlight.

His shadow momentarily hid the three as they raced forward. The mouth of the mine-shaft loomed up before them, a plank stretched across the pit.

"Down there!" Stockton gasped. "It's our only chance."

It was the only possible place of concealment. But Thorkel's one good eye did not miss the little people's movements as they scrambled over the brink and down the steep rock of the shaft-walls. Skirting the windlass, he fell to his hands and knees and crawled out upon the plank, steadying himself with one hand on the rope that ran down into black depths.

Stockton, clinging to a rock, realized that he still held his scissor-blade sword.

He lifted it in futile threat.

There was a splintering crack as Thorkel struck at his quarry. The gun-barrel clashed on rock. And, abruptly, the plank caved in and dropped.

Thorkel still gripped the windlass-rope with one hand, and that saved him. For a second he swung wildly, while the echoing crash of the falling wood and the gun-barrel echoed up from the depths. Then his grip became surer. Panting, he hung there briefly, his bald head gleaming with sweat.

He began to climb up the rope.

Stockton glanced around quickly. Mary was clinging to a sloping rock, her white face turned toward the giant.

Baker was looking at the mineralogist, and his gaunt gray features were twisted with hopeless fury.

Stockton made a quick gesture, pointed to his sword, and began to swarm back up to the surface.

Instantly Baker caught his meaning. If the rope to which Thorkel clung could be cut—

But it was thick, terribly thick, for a tiny man and a scissor-blade!

Thorkel pulled himself slowly upward. In a moment Baker saw, he would reach safety. The trader's lips drew back from his teeth in a mirthless grin; he abruptly rose and edged forward a few paces.

Then he sprang.

Out and down he went, and his clutching hands found Thorkel's collar. Before the scientist could understand what had happened, Baker was clawing and snarling like a terrier at his throat. Thorkel almost lost his grip.

Gasping with fear and rage, he shook his head violently, trying to knock his assailant free.

"You dirty killer!" Baker snarled.

He was tossed about madly, once almost crushed between Thorkel's chin and chest. And then, suddenly, Thorkel was falling. . . .

With a whine and a whirl the windlass ran out as the rope was severed. A long, quavering cry burst from Thorkel's throat as he dropped away into the darkness. Higher and higher it rose—and ended.

Stockton ran to the brink and peered over. Mary was clambering weakly up toward him. And, behind her, was Baker.

Bill was standing beside an upright book, a curious expression on his face. He looked around vaguely.

"The machine—" he told Mary. "Can you work it?"

Mary was poring over Thorkel's notebooks. She said despondently, "It's no good, Bill. The device is only a condensor. It can't bring people back to normal size. We'll have to remain this size the rest of our lives. And now, we've got to get back to civilization, somehow—"

"As we are?" Baker's face fell. "That's impossible."

"Wait a minute," Stockton interrupted. "I've a hunch—do you remember when we first saw Thorkel, after he reduced us?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"He wasn't trying to kill us then. He just wanted to weigh and measure us. But after he examined Dr. Bulfinch, he turned into a vicious killer. Why do you suppose that happened?"

"He probably intended to kill us all along. For trying to steal his secrets," Baker suggested. "He was probably afraid that we would warn the Allies of his plans."

"Maybe. But he wasn't in any hurry at first. He knew he could dispose of us any time he wanted. Only after he examined Dr. Bulfinch he—found out something that made it necessary to get rid of us in a hurry."

Mary caught her breath.

"What?"

"I saw a white mule in the jungle a while ago. A colt. Paco was playing with it. At first I figured it might be Pinto's colt, but mules are sterile, of course. That meant two albino mules here—which isn't very probable—or else it was Pinto. Remember, Pedro said the dog used to play with the mule."

"How big was the mule?" Baker asked abruptly.

"The size of a half-grown colt. Listen, Steve, when we first came out of the cellar I measured myself against that book—'Human Physiology.' It was just higher than my head. But now it only comes up to my chest!"

"We're growing!" Mary whispered. "That's it."

"Sure. That's what Thorkel found out when he examined Dr. Bulfinch, and why he tried to kill us before we grew back to normal size. I think it's a progressively accelerative process. In two weeks, or perhaps ten days, we'll be back to normal."

"It's logical," the girl commented. "Once the compressive force of radium power is removed, we expand—slowly but elastically. The electrons swing back to their normal orbits. The energy we absorbed under the ray will be liberated in quanta—"

"Ten days," Baker murmured. "And then we can go back down the river again!"

But it was a month before the three, once more normal in size, reached the Andean village that was their first destination. The sight of human beings, no longer gigantic, was warmly reassuring. Indians leaned against the huts, scratching lazily for fleas.

Peering down the archway along the street, a ragged Bill Stockton turned to grin at Mary.

"Looks good, eh?"

Baker was absorbed in thought. "We've got to decide," he said, scratching his stubbled cheek. "One way, we get our pictures in the paper and tanks of free *pulque*. But it's just as likely we'll end up in a padded cell if we tell the truth. If we don't tell the truth—"

He paused, stiffening. A mangy cat had appeared from beyond the arch. Baker's muscles tensed; his breath burst out in an explosive "*Scat!*" as he sprang forward.

The cat vanished, shocked to the core.

Baker's chest inflated several inches. "Well," he said, with the quiet pride of achievement, "did either of you see *that*?"

"No," murmured Stockton, who was seizing the opportunity to kiss Mary. "Go away. Quietly. And quickly."

Baker shrugged and followed the cat, a predatory gleam in his eye.

THE HARPERS OF TITAN

CHAPTER I

Shadowed Moon

His name was Simon Wright, and once he had been a man like other men. Now he was a man no longer, but a living brain, housed in a metal case, nourished by serum instead of blood, provided with artificial senses and means of motion.

The body of Simon Wright, that had known the pleasures and the ills of physical existence, had long ago mingled with the dust. But the mind of Simon Wright lived on, brilliant and unimpaired.

The ridge lifted, gaunt and rocky, along the rim of the lichen forest, the giant growths crowding to the very crest and down the farther slope into the valley.

Here and there was a clearing around what might once have been a temple, now long fallen into ruin. The vast ragged shapes of the lichens loomed above it, wrinkled and wind-torn and sad. Now and again a little breeze came and set them to rustling with a sound like muted weeping, shaking down a rotten, powdery dust.

Simon Wright was weary of the ridge and the dun-gray forest, weary of waiting. Three of Titan's nights had passed since he and Grag and Otho and Curt Newton, whom the System knew better as Captain Future, had hidden their ship down in the lichen-forest and had waited here on the ridge for a man who did not come.

This was the fourth night of waiting, under the incredible glory of Titan's sky. But even the pageant of Saturn, girdled with the blazing Rings and attended by the brilliant swarm of moons, failed to lift Simon's mental spirits. Somehow the beauty above only accentuated the dreariness below.

Curt Newton said sharply, "If Keogh doesn't come to-night, I'm going down there and look for him."

He looked outward through a rift in the lichens, to the valley where Moneb lay—a city indistinct with night and distance, picked out here and there with the light of torches.

Simon spoke, his voice coming precise and metallic through the artificial resonator.

"Keogh's message warned us on no account to go into the city. Be patient, Curtis. He will come."

Otho nodded. Otho, the lean, lithe android who was so exactly human that only a disturbing strangeness in his pointed face and green, bright eyes betrayed him.

"Apparently," Otho said, "there's a devil of a mess going on in Moneb, and we're liable to make it worse if we go tramping in before we know what it's all about."

The manlike metal form of Grag moved impatiently in the shadows with a dull clanking sound. His booming voice crashed loud against the stillness.

"I'm like Curt," he said. "I'm tired of waiting."

"We are all tired," said Simon. "But we must wait. From Keogh's message, I judge that he is neither a coward nor a fool. He knows the situation. We do not. We must not endanger him by impatience."

Curt sighed. "I know it." He settled back on the block of stone where he was sitting. "I only hope he makes it soon. These infernal lichens are getting on my nerves."

Poised effortlessly upon the unseen magnetic beams that were his limbs, Simon watched and brooded. Only in a detached way could he appreciate the picture he presented to others—a small square metal case, with a strange face of artificial lens-eyes and resonator-mouth, hovering in the darkness.

To himself, Simon seemed almost a bodiless ego. He could not see his own strange body. He was conscious only of the steady, rhythmic throbbing of the serum-pump that served as his heart, and of the visual and auditory sensations that his artificial sense-organs gathered for him.

His lenslike eyes were capable of better vision under all conditions than the human eye, but even so he could not penetrate the shifting, tumultuous shadows of the valley. It remained a mystery of shaking moonlight, mist and darkness.

It looked peaceful. And yet the message of this stranger, Keogh, had cried for help against an evil too great for him to fight alone.

Simon was acutely conscious of the dreary rustling of the lichens. His microphonic auditory system could hear and distinguish each separate tiny note too faint for normal ears, so that the rustling became a weaving, shifting pattern of sound, as of ghostly voices whispering—a sort of symphony of despair.

Pure fancy, and Simon Wright was not given to fancies. Yet in these nights of waiting he had developed a definite sense of foreboding. He reasoned now that this sad whispering of the forest was responsible, his brain reacting to the repeated stimulus of a sound-pattern.

Like Curt, he hoped that Keogh would come soon.

Time passed. The Rings filled the sky with supernal

fire, and the moons went splendidly on their eternal way, bathed in the milky glow of Saturn. The lichens would not cease from their dusty weeping. Now and again Curt Newton rose and went restlessly back and forth across the clearing. Otho watched him, sitting still, his slim body bent like a steel bow. Grag remained where he was, a dark immobile giant in the shadows, dwarfing even Newton's height.

Then, abruptly, there was a sound different from all other sounds. Simon heard, and listened, and after a moment he said:

"There are two men, climbing the slope from the valley, coming this way."

Otho sprang up. Curt voiced a short, sharp "Ah!" and said, "Better take cover, until we're sure."

The four melted into the darkness.

Simon was so close to the strangers that he might have reached out one of his force-beams and touched them. They came into the clearing, breathing heavily from the long climb, looking eagerly about. One was a tall man, very tall, with a gaunt width of shoulder and a fine head. The other was shorter, broader, moving with a bearlike gait. Both were Earthmen, with the unmistakable stamp of the frontiers on them, and the hardness of physical labor. Both men were armed.

They stopped. The hope went out of them, and the tall man said despairingly, "They failed us. They didn't come. Dan, they didn't come!"

Almost, the tall man wept.

"I guess your message didn't get through," the other man said. His voice, too, was leaden. "I don't know, Keogh. I don't know what we'll do now. I guess we might as well go back."

Curt Newton spoke out of the darkness. "Hold on a minute. It's all right."

Curt moved out into the open space, his lean face and red hair clear in the moonlight.

"It's he," said the stocky man. "It's Captain Future." His voice was shaken with relief.

Keogh smiled, a smile without much humor in it. "You thought I might be dead, and someone else might keep the appointment. Not a far-fetched assumption. I've been so closely watched that I dared not try to get away before. I only just managed it tonight."

He broke off, staring, as Grag came striding up, shaking the ground with his tread. Otho moved in from beyond him, light as a leaf. Simon joined them, gliding silently from among the shadows.

Keogh laughed, a little shakily. "I'm glad to see you. If you only knew how glad I am to see you all!"

"And me!" said the stocky man. He added, "I'm Harker."

"My friend," Keogh told the Futuremen. "For many years, my friend." Then he hesitated, looking earnestly at Curt. "You will help me? I've held back down there in Moneb so far. I've kept the people quiet. I've tried to give them courage when they need it, but I'm only one man. That's a frail peg on which to hang the fate of a city."

Curt nodded gravely. "We'll do all we can. Otho—Grag! Keep watch, just in case."

Grag and Otho disappeared again. Curt looked expectantly at Keogh and Harker. The breeze had steadied to a wind, and Simon was conscious that it was rising, bringing a deeper plaint from the lichens.

Keogh sat down on a block of stone and began to talk. Hovering near him, Simon listened, watching Keogh's face. It was a good face. A wise man, Simon thought, and a strong one, exhausted now by effort and long fear.

"I was the first Earthman to come into the valley, years ago," Keogh said. "I liked the men of Moneb and they

liked me. When the miners began to come in, I saw to it that there was no trouble between them and the natives. I married a girl of Moneb, daughter of one of the chief men. She's dead now, but I have a son here. And I'm one of their councilors, the only man of foreign blood ever allowed in the Inner City.

"So you see, I've swung a lot of weight and have used it to keep peace here between native and outlander. But *now!*"

He shook his head. "There have always been men in Moneb who hated to see Earthmen and Earth civilization come in and lessen their own influence. They've hated the Earthmen who live in New Town and work the mines. They'd have tried long ago to force them out, and would have embroiled Moneb in a hopeless struggle, if they'd dared defy tradition and use their one possible weapon. Now, they're bolder and are planning to use that weapon."

Curt Newton looked at him keenly. "What is this weapon, Keogh?"

Keogh's answer was a question. "You Futuremen know these worlds well—I suppose you've heard of the Harpers?"

Simon Wright felt a shock of surprise. He saw incredulous amazement on Curt Newton's face.

"You don't mean that your malcontents plan to use the *Harpers* as a weapon?"

Keogh nodded somberly. "They do."

Memories of old days on Titan were flashing through Simon's mind; the strange, strange form of life that dwelt deep in the great forests, the unforgettable beauty wedded to dreadful danger.

"The Harpers could be a weapon, yes," he said, after a moment. "But the weapon would slay those who wielded it, unless they were protected from it."

"Long ago," Keogh answered, "the men of Moneb had

such a protection. They used the Harpers, then. But use of them was so disastrous that it was forbidden, put under a tabu.

"Now, those who wish to force out the Earthmen here plan to break that tabu. They want to bring in the Harpers, and use them."

Harker added, "Things were all right until the old king died. He was a man. His son is a weakling. The fanatics against outland civilization have got to him, and he's afraid of his own shadow. Keogh has been holding him on his feet, against them."

Simon saw the almost worshipful trust in Harker's eyes as he glanced at his friend.

"They've tried to kill Keogh, of course," Harker said. "With him gone, there'd be no leader against them."

Keogh's voice rose, to be heard over the booming and thrumming of the lichens.

"A full council has been called for two days from now. That will be the time of decision—whether we, or the breakers of tabu, will rule in Moneb. And I know, as I know truth, that some kind of a trap has been set for me.

"That is where I will need you Futuremen's help, most desperately. But you must not be seen in the town. Any strangers now would excite suspicion, and you are too well known and—" he glanced at Simon and added apologetically, "distinctive."

He paused. In that pause, the boom and thunder of the lichen was like the slatting of great sails in the wind, and Simon could not hear the little furtive sound from behind him until it was too late—a second too late.

A man leaped into the clearing. Simon had a fleeting glimpse of copper-gold limbs and a killer's face, and a curious weapon raised. Simon spoke, but the bright small dart was already fled.

In the same breath, Curt turned and drew and fired.

The man dropped. Out in the shadows another gun flashed, and they heard Otho's fierce cry.

There was a timeless instant when no one moved, and then Otho came back into the clearing. "There were only two of them, I think."

"They followed us!" Harker exclaimed. "They followed us up here to—"

He had been turning, as he spoke. He suddenly stopped speaking, and then cried out Keogh's name.

Keogh lay face down in the powdery dust. From out his temple stood a slim bronzed shaft little larger than a needle, and where it pierced the flesh was one dark drop of blood.

Simon hovered low over the Earthman. His sensitive beams touched the throat, the breast, lifted one lax eyelid.

Simon said, without hope, "He still lives."

CHAPTER II

Unearthly Stratagem

Grag carried Keogh through the forest and, tall man that Keogh was, he seemed like a child in the robot's mighty arms. The wind howled, and the lichens shook and thundered, and it was growing darker.

"Hurry!" said Harker. "Hurry—there may still be a chance!"

His face had the white, staring look that comes with shock. Simon was still possessed of emotion—sharper, clearer emotions than before, he thought, divorced as

they were from the chemical confusions of the flesh. Now he knew a great pity for Harker.

"The *Comet* is just ahead," Curt told him.

Presently they saw the ship, a shadowed bulk of metal lost among the giant growths. Swiftly they took Keogh in, and Grag laid him carefully on the table in the tiny laboratory. He was still breathing, but Simon knew that it would not be for long.

The laboratory of the *Comet*, for all its cramped size, was fitted with medical equipment comparable to most hospitals—most of it designed for its particular purpose by Simon himself, and by Curt Newton. It had been used many times before for the saving of lives. Now the two of them, Simon and Curt together, worked feverishly to save Keogh.

Curt wheeled a marvellously compact adaptation of the Fraser unit into place. Within seconds the tubes were clamped into Keogh's arteries and the pumps were working, keeping the blood flowing normally, feeding in a stimulant solution directly to the heart. The oxygen unit was functioning. Presently Curt nodded.

"Pulse and respiration normal. Now let's have a look at the brain."

He swung the ultrafluoroscope into position and switched it on. Simon looked into the screen, hovering close to Curt's shoulder.

"The frontal lobe is torn beyond repair," he said. "See the tiny barbs on that dart? Deterioration of the cells has already set in."

Harker spoke from the doorway. "Can't you do something? Can't you save him?" He stared into Curt's face for a moment, and then his head dropped forward and he said dully, "No, of course you can't. I knew it when he was hit."

All the strength seemed to run out of him. He leaned

against the door, a man tired and beaten and sad beyond endurance.

"It's bad enough to lose a friend. But now everything he fought for is lost, too. The fanatics will win, and they'll turn loose something that will destroy not only the Earthmen here, but the entire populace of Moneb too, in the long run."

Tears began to run slowly from Harker's eyes. He did not seem to notice them. He said, to no one, to the universe, "Why couldn't I have seen him in time? Why couldn't I have killed him—in time?"

For a long, long moment, Simon looked at Harker. Then he glanced again into the screen, and then aside at Curt, who nodded and slowly switched it off. Curt began to remove the tubes of the Fraser unit from Keogh's wrists.

Simon said, "Wait, Curtis. Leave them as they are."

Curt straightened, a certain startled wonder in his eyes. Simon glided to where Harker stood, whiter and more stricken than the dead man on the table.

Simon spoke his name three times, before he roused himself to answer.

"Yes?"

"How much courage have you, Harker? As much as Keogh? Am much as I?"

Harker shook his head.

"There are times when courage doesn't help a bit."

"Listen to me, Harker! Have you courage to walk beside Keogh into Moneb, knowing that he is dead?"

The eyes of the stocky man widened. And Curt Newton came to Simon and said in a strange voice, "What are you thinking of?"

"I am thinking of a brave man who died in the act of seeking help from us. I am thinking of many innocent men and women who will die, unless . . . Harker, it is

true, is it not, that the success of your fight depended on Keogh?"

Harker's gaze dwelt upon the body stretched on the table—a body that breathed and pulsed with the semblance of life borrowed from the sighing pumps.

"That is true," he said. "That's why they killed him. He was the leader. With him gone—" Harker's broad hands made a gesture of utter loss.

"Then it must not be known that Keogh died."

Curt said harshly, "No! Simon, you can't do it!"

"Why not, Curtis? You are perfectly capable of completing the operation."

"They've killed the man once. They'll be ready to do it again. Simon, you can't risk yourself! Even if I could do the operation—no!"

Something queerly pleading came into Curt's gray eyes. "This is my kind of a job, Simon. Mine and Grag's and Otho's. Let us do it."

"And how will you do it?" Simon asked. "By force? By reasoning? You are not omnipotent, Curtis. Nor are Grag and Otho. You, all three of you, would be going into certain death, and even more certain defeat. And I know you. You *would* go."

Simon paused. It seemed to him suddenly that he had gone mad, that he must be mad to contemplate what he was about to do. And yet, it was the only way—the only possible chance of preventing an irretrievable disaster.

Simon knew what the Harpers could do, in the wrong hands. He knew what would happen to the Earthmen in New Town. And he knew too what retribution for that would overtake the many guiltless people of Moneb, as well as the few guilty ones.

He glanced beyond Harker and saw Grag standing there, and Otho beside him, his green eyes very bright, and Simon thought, I made them both, I and Roger Newton. I gave them hearts and minds and courage.

Some day they will perish, but it will not be because I failed them.

And there was Curt, stubborn, reckless, driven by the demon of his own loneliness, a bitter searcher after knowledge, a stranger to his own kind.

Simon thought, We made him so, Otho and Grag and I. And we wrought too well. There is too much iron in him. He will break, but never bend—and I will not have him broken because of me!

Harker said, very slowly, "I don't understand."

Simon explained. "Keogh's body is whole. Only the brain was destroyed. If the body were supplied with another brain—mine—Keogh would seem to live again, to finish his task in Moneb."

Harker stood for a long moment without speaking. Then he whispered, "Is that possible?"

"Quite possible. Not easy, not even safe—but possible."

Harker's hands clenched into fists. Something, a light that might have been hope, crept back into his eyes.

"Only we five," said Simon, "know that Keogh died. There would be no difficulty there. And I know the language of Titan, as I know most of the System tongues.

"But I would still need help—a guide, who knew Keogh's life and could enable me to live it for the short time that is necessary. You, Harker. And I warn you, it will not be easy."

Harker's voice was low, but steady. "If you can do the one thing, I can do the other."

Curt Newton said angrily, "No one is going to do anything of the sort. Simon, I won't have any part of it!"

The stormy look that Simon knew so well had come into Curt's face. If Simon had been able to, he would have smiled. Instead, he spoke exactly as he had spoken so many times before, long ago when Curt Newton was a small red-headed boy playing in the lonely corridors of

the laboratory hidden under Tycho, with no companions but the robot, the android, and Simon, himself.

"You will do as I say, Curtis!" He turned to the others. "Grag, take Mr. Harker into the main cabin. See that he sleeps, for he will need his strength. Otho, Curtis will want your help."

Otho came in and shut the door. He glanced from Simon to Curt and back again, his eyes brilliant with a certain acid amusement. Curt stood where he was, his jaw set, unmoving.

Simon glided over to the cabinets built solidly against one wall. Using the wonderfully adaptable force-beams more skilfully than a man uses his hands, he took from them the needful things—the trephine saw, the clamps and sutures, the many-shaped delicate knives. And the other things, that had set modern surgery so far ahead of the crude Twentieth Century techniques. The compounds that prevented bleeding, the organic chemicals that promoted cell regeneration so rapidly and fully that a wound would heal within hours and leave no scar, the stimulants and anaesthetics that prevented shock, the neurone compounds.

The UV tube was pulsing overhead, sterilizing everything in the laboratory. Simon, whose vision was better and touch more sure than that of any surgeon dependent on human form, made the preliminary incision in Keogh's skull.

Curt Newton had still not moved. His face was as set and stubborn as before, but there was a pallor about it now, something of desperation.

Simon said sharply, "Curtis!"

Curt moved then. He came to the table and put his hands on it beside the dead man's head, and Simon saw that they trembled.

"I can't," he whispered. "Simon, I can't do it. I'm afraid."

Simon looked steadily into his eyes. "There is no need to be. You will not let me die."

He held out a glittering instrument. Slowly, like a man in a dream, Curt took it.

Otho's bright gaze softened. He nodded to Simon, across Curt's shoulder, and smiled. There was admiration in that smile, for both of them.

Simon busied himself with other things.

"Pay particular attention, Curtis, to the trigeminal, glossopharyngeal, facial—"

"I know all about that," said Curt, with a peculiar irritation.

"—pneumogastric, spinal accessory, and hypoglossal nerves," Simon finished. Vials and syringes were laid in a neat row. "Here is the anaesthetic to be introduced into my serum-stream. And immediately after the operation, this is to be injected beneath the dura and pia mater."

Curt nodded. His hands had stopped shaking, working now with swift, sure skill. His mouth had thinned to a grim line.

Simon thought, He'll do. He'll always do.

There was a moment, then, of waiting. Simon looked down at the man John Keogh and of a sudden fear took hold of him, a deep terror of what he was about to do.

He was content as he was. Once, many years before, he had made his choice between extinction and his present existence. The genius of Curt's own father had saved him then, given him new life, and Simon had made peace with that life, strange as it was, and turned it to good use. He had discovered the advantages of his new form—the increased skills, the ability to think clearly with a mind unfettered by useless and uncontrollable impulses of the flesh. He had learned to be grateful for them.

And now, after all these years . . .

He thought, I cannot do it, after all! I, too, am afraid—not of dying, but of life.

And yet, beneath that fear was longing, a hunger that Simon had thought mercifully dead these many years.

The longing to be once again a man, a human being clothed in flesh.

The cold, clear mind of Simon Wright, the precise, logical unwavering mind, reeled under the impact of these mingled dreads and hungers. They leaped up full stature from their graves in his subconscious. He was shocked that he could still be prey to emotion, and the voice of his mind cried out, I cannot do it! No, I cannot!

Curt said quietly, "All ready, Simon."

Slowly, very slowly, Simon moved and came to rest beside John Keogh. He saw Otho watching him, with a look of pain and understanding, and—yes, envy. Being unhuman himself, Otho would know, where others could only guess.

Curt's face was cut from stone. The serum-pump broke its steady rhythm, and then went on.

Simon Wright passed quietly into the darkness.

CHAPTER III

Once Born of Flesh.

Hearing came first. A distant confusion of sounds, seeming very dull and blurred. Simon's first thought was that something had gone wrong with his auditory mechanism. Then a chill wing of memory brushed him, and in its wake came a pang of fear, and a sense of *wrongness*.

It was dark. Why should it be so dark in the *Comet*?

From far off, someone called his name. "Simon! Simon, open your eyes!"

Eyes?

Again that dull inchoate terror. His mind was heavy. It refused to function, and the throb of the serum-pump was gone.

The serum-pump, Simon thought. It has stopped, and I am dying!

He must call for help. That had happened once before, and Curt had saved him. He cried out, "Curtis, the serum-pump has stopped!"

The voice was not his own, and it was formed so strangely.

"I'm here, Simon. Open your eyes."

A long unused series of motor relays clicked over in Simon's brain at that repeated command. Without conscious volition he raised his eyelids. Someone's eyelids, surely not his own! He had not had eyelids for many years!

He saw.

Vision like the hearing, dim and blurred. The familiar laboratory seemed to swim in a wavering haze. Curt's face, and Otho's, and above them the looming form of Grag, and a strange man . . . No, not strange; he had a name and Simon knew it—Harker.

That name started the chain, and Simon remembered. Memory pounced upon him, worried him, tore him, and now he could *feel the fear*—the physical anguish of it, the sweating, the pounding of the heart, the painful contraction of the great bodily ganglia.

"Raise your hand, Simon. Raise your right hand." There was a strained undertone in Curt's voice. Simon understood. Curt was afraid he might not have done things properly.

Uncertainly, like a child who has not yet learned coordination, Simon raised his right hand. Then his left. He looked at them for an endless moment and let them fall. Drops of saline moisture stung his eyes, and he remembered them. He remembered tears.

"You're all right," Curt said shakily. He helped Simon

raise his head and held a glass to his lips. "Can you drink this? It will clear away the fog, give you strength."

Simon drank, and the act of drinking had wonder in it.

The potion counteracted the remaining effects of the anaesthetic. Sight and hearing cleared, and he had his mind under control again. He lay still for some time, trying to adjust himself to the all but forgotten sensations of the flesh.

The little things. The crispness of a sheet against the skin, the warmth, the pleasure of relaxed lips. The memory of sleep.

He sighed, and in that, too, there was wonder. "Give me your hand, Curtis. I will stand."

Curt was on one side, Otho on the other, steadying him. And Simon Wright, in the body of John Keogh, rose from the table where he had lain and stood upright, a man and whole.

By the doorway, Harker fell forward in a dead faint.

Simon looked at him, the strong stocky man crumpled on the floor, his face gray and sick. He said, with a queer touch of pity for all humanity, "I told him it would not be easy."

But even Simon had not realized just how hard it would be.

There were so many things to be learned all over again. Long used to a weightless, effortless ease of movement, this tall rangy body he now inhabited seemed heavy and awkward, painfully slow. He had great difficulty in managing it. At first his attempts to walk were a series of ungainly staggerings wherein he must cling to something to keep from falling.

His sense of balance had to undergo a complete readjustment. And the dullness of his sight and hearing bothered him. That was only comparative, he knew—Keogh's sight and hearing had been excellent, by all human standards. But they lacked the precision, the selectivity, the clarity to which Simon had become accustomed. He felt

as though his senses were somehow muffled, as by a veil.

And it was a strange thing, when he stumbled or made an incautious movement, to feel pain again.

But as he began to gain control over this complicated bulk of bone and muscle and nerve, Simon found himself taking joy in it. The endless variety of sensory and tactile impressions, the feeling of life, of warm blood flowing, the knowing of heat and cold and hunger were fascinating.

Once born of flesh, he thought, and clenched his hands together. What have I done? What madness have I done?

He must not think of that, nor of himself. He must think of nothing but the task to be done, in the name of John Keogh who was dead.

Harker recovered from his faint. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "It was just that I saw him—you—rise up and stand, it—" He did not finish. "I'm all right, now. You don't have to worry."

Simon noticed that he kept his eyes averted as much as possible. But there was a dogged look about him that said he told the truth.

"We ought to get back as soon as you can make it," Harker said. "We—Keogh and I, have been gone too long as it is."

He added, "There's just one thing. What about Dion?"

"Dion?"

"Keogh's son."

Simon said slowly, "No need to tell the boy. He could not understand, and it will only torture him."

Mercifully, he thought, the time would be short. But he wished that Keogh had not had a son.

Curt interrupted. "Simon, I've been talking to Harker. The council is tonight, only a few hours away. And you will have to go alone into the Inner City, for there Harker is not allowed to enter.

"But Otho and I are going to try to get around Moneb and into the council hall, secretly. Harker tells me that

was Keogh's idea, and it's a good one—if it works. Grag will stay with the ship, on call if necessary."

He handed Simon two objects, a small mono-wave audio disc and a heavy metal box only four inches square.

"We'll keep in touch with the audios," he said. "The other is a hasty adaptation of the *Comet's* own repeller field, but tuned for sonic vibrations. I had to rob two of the coil units. What do you think of it?"

Simon examined the tiny box, the compact, cunning interior arrangement of oscillators, the capsule power unit, the four complicated grids.

"The design might have been further simplified, Curtis—but, under the circumstances, a creditable job. It will serve very well, in case of necessity."

"Let's hope," said Curt feelingly, "that there won't be any such case." He looked at Simon and smiled. His eyes held a deep pride and admiration.

"Good luck," he said.

Simon held out his hand. It was long and long since he had done that. He was amazed to find his voice unsteady.

"Take care," he said. "All of you."

He turned and went out, going still a bit uncertainly, and behind him he heard Curt speaking low and savagely to Harker.

"If you let anything happen to him, I'll kill you with my own hands!"

Simon smiled.

Harker joined him, and they went together through the lichen forest, ghostly under the dim, far Sun. The tall growths were silent now that the wind had died. And as they went, Harker talked of Moneb and the men and women who dwelt there. Simon listened, knowing that his life depended on remembering what he heard.

But even that necessity could not occupy more than one small part of his mind. The rest of it was busy with the other things—the bitter smell of dust, the chill bite of the air in the shaded places, the warmth of the sun in the

clearings, the intricate play of muscles necessary to the taking of a step, the rasp of lichen fronds over unprotected skin, the miracle of breathing, of sweating, of grasping an object with five fingers of flesh.

The little things one took for granted. The small, miraculous incredible things that one never noticed until they were gone.

He had seen the forest before as a dun-gray monochrome, heard it as a pattern of rustling sound. It had been without temperature, scent or feel. Now it had all of these things. Simon was overwhelmed with a flood of impressions, poignant almost beyond enduring.

He gathered strength and sureness as he went. By the time he breasted the slope of the ridge, he could find pleasure in the difficulty of climbing, scrambling up over treacherous slides of dust, choking, coughing as the acrid powder invaded his lungs.

Harker swore, shambling bearlike up the steep way among the lichens. And suddenly Simon laughed. He could not have said what made him do so. But it was good to laugh again.

They avoided the clearing by common consent. Harker led the way, lower down across the ridge. They came out onto open ground, and Simon was touched beyond measure to find that he had a shadow.

They paused to get their breath, and Harker glanced sidelong at Simon, his eyes full of a strange curiosity.

"How does it feel?" he asked. "How does it feel to be a man again?"

Simon did not answer. He could not. There were no words. He looked away from Harker, out over the valley that lay so quiet under the shadowy Sun. He was filled with a strange excitement, so that he felt himself tremble.

As though suddenly frightened by what he had said, and all the things that were implicit in that question, Harker turned suddenly and plunged down the slope, almost running, and Simon followed. Once he slipped and

caught himself, gashing his hand against a rock. He stood motionless, watching with wondering eyes the slow red drops that ran from the cut, until Harker had called him three times by Keogh's name, and once by his own.

They avoided the New Town. "No use asking for trouble," Harker said, and led the way past it down a ravine. But they could see it in the distance, a settlement of metalloy houses on a shoulder of the ridge, below the black mouth of the mines. Simon thought the town was strangely quiet.

"See the shutters on the windows?" Harker asked. "See the barricades in the streets? They're waiting, waiting for tonight."

He did not speak again. At the foot of the ridge they came to an open plain, dotted with clumps of grayish scrub. They began to cross it, toward the outskirts of the city.

But as they approached Moneb a group of men came running to meet them. At their head Simon saw a tall, dark-haired boy.

Harker said, "That is your son."

His skin a lighter gold, his face a mixture of Keogh's and something of a softer beauty, his eyes very direct and proud, Dion was what Simon would have expected.

He felt a sense of guilt as he greeted the boy by name. Yet mingled with it was a strange feeling of pride. He thought suddenly, I wish that I had had a son like this, in the old days before I changed.

And then, desperately, "I must not think these things! The lure of the flesh is pulling me back."

Dion was breathless with haste, his face showing the marks of sleeplessness and worry.

"Father, we've scoured the valley for you! Where have you been?"

Simon started the explanation that he had concerted with Harker, but the boy cut him short, racing from one thing to another in an urgent flood of words.

"You didn't come, and we were afraid something had happened to you. And while you were gone, they advanced the time of the council! They hoped you wouldn't come back at all, but if you did, they were going to make sure it was too late."

Dion's strong young hand gripped Simon's arm. "They're already gathering in the council hall! Come on. There may still be time, but we must hurry!"

Harker looked grimly over the boy's head at Simon. "It's come already."

With Keogh's impatient son, and the men with him, they hurried on into the city.

Houses of mud brick, generations old, and towering above them the wall of the Inner City, and above that still the roofs and squat, massive towers of the palaces and temples, washed with a kind of lime and painted with ocher and crimson.

The air was full of smells—of food and the smoke of cooking fires, acrid-sweet, of dust, of human bodies oiled and fragrant and musky, of old brick crumbling in the sun, of beasts in pens, of unknown spices. Simon breathed them deeply, and listened to the echo of his footsteps ring hollow from the walls. He felt the rising breeze cold on his face that was damp with sweat. And again the excitement shook him, and with it came a sort of awe at the magnificence of human sensation.

I had forgotten so much, he thought. And how was it possible ever to forget?

He walked down the streets of Moneb, striding as a tall man strides, his head erect, a proud fire in his eyes. The dark-haired folk with skins of golden copper watched him from the doorways and sent the name of Keogh whispering up the lanes and the twisting alleys.

It came to Simon that there was yet another thing in the air of Moneb—a thing called fear.

They came to the gates in the inner wall. Here Harker

dropped helplessly back with the other men, and Simon and the son of Keogh went on alone.

Temple and palace rose above him, impressive and strong, bearing in heroic frescoes the history of the kings of Moneb. Simon hardly saw them. There was a tightness in him now, a gathering of nerves.

This was the test—now, before he was ready for it. This was the time when he must not falter, or the thing he had done would be for nothing, and the Harpers would be brought into the valley of Moneb.

Two round towers of brick, a low and massive doorway. Dimness, lighted by torches, red light flaring on coppery flesh, on the ceremonial robes of the councilors, here and there on a helmet of barbaric design. Voices, clamoring over and through each other. A feeling of tension so great that the nerves screamed with it.

Dion pressed his arm and said something that Simon did not catch, but the smile, the look of love and pride, were unmistakable. Then the boy was gone, to the shadowy benches beyond.

Simon stood alone.

At one end of the low, oblong hall, beside the high, gilded seat of the king, he saw a group of helmeted men looking toward him with hatred they did not even try to conceal, and with it, a contempt that could only come from triumph.

And suddenly from out of the uneasy milling of the throng before him an old man stepped and put his hands on Simon's shoulders, and peered at him with anguished eyes.

"It is too late, John Keogh," the old man said hoarsely. "It is all for nothing. They have brought the Harpers in!"

CHAPTER IV

The Harpers

Simon felt a cold shock of recoil. He had not looked for this. He had not expected that now, this soon, he might be called upon to meet the Harpers.

He had met them once before, years ago. He knew the subtle and terrible danger of them. It had shaken him badly then, when he was a brain divorced from flesh. What would it do to him, now that he dwelt again in a vulnerable, unpredictable human body?

His hand closed tightly on the tiny metal box in his pocket. He must gamble that it would protect him from the Harpers' power. But, remembering that experience of years ago, he dreaded the test.

He asked the old councillor, "Do you know this to be true, about the Harpers?"

"Taras and two others were seen at dawn, coming back from the forest, each bearing a hidden thing. And—they wore the Helmets of Silence."

The old man gestured toward the group of men by the king's throne who looked with such triumphant hatred at he whom they thought to be John Keogh.

"See, they wear them still!"

Swiftly, Simon studied the helmets. At first glance they had seemed no more than the ordinary bronze battle-gear of a barbaric warrior. Now he saw that they were of curious design, covering the ears and the entire cranial area, and overlarge as though padded with many layers of some insulating material.

The Helmets of Silence. He knew, now, that Keogh

had spoken truly when he told of an ancient means of protection used long ago by the men of Moneb against the Harpers. Those helmets would protect, yes.

The king of Moneb rose from his throne. And the nervous uproar in the hall stilled to a frozen tension.

A young man, the king. Very young, very frightened, weakness and stubbornness mingled in his face. His head was bare.

"We of Moneb have too long tolerated strangers in our valley—have even suffered one of them to sit in this council and influence our decisions," he began.

Here there was a sharp uneasy turning of heads toward "Keogh."

"The strangers' ways more and more color the lives of our people. They must go—all of them! And since they will not go willingly, they must be forced!"

He had learned the speech by rote. Simon knew that from the way in which he stumbled over it, the way in which his eyes slid to the tallest of the cloaked and helmeted men beside him, for prompting and strength. The dark, tall man whom Simon recognized from Harker's description as Keogh's chief enemy, Taras.

"We cannot force the Earthmen out with our darts and spears. Their weapons are too strong. But we too have a weapon, one they cannot fight! It was forbidden to us, by foolish kings who were afraid it might be used against them. But now we must use it.

"Therefore I demand that the old tabu be lifted! I demand that we invoke the power of the Harpers to drive the Earthmen forth!"

There was a taut, unhappy silence in the hall. Simon saw men looking at him, the eager confidence in young Dion's eyes. He knew that they placed in him their desperate last hope of preventing this thing.

They were right, for whatever was done he must do alone. Curt Newton and Otho could not possibly have

yet made their way secretly by back ways to this council hall.

Simon strode forward. He looked around him. Because of what he was, a kind of fierce exaltation took him, to be once more a man among men. It made his voice ring loud, thundering from the low vault.

"Is it not true that the king fears, not the Earthmen, but Taras—and that Taras is bent not on freeing Moneb from a mythical yoke, but in placing one of his own upon our necks?"

There was a moment of utter silence in which they all, king and councilors alike, stared at him aghast. And in the silence, Simon said grimly:

"I speak for the council! There will be no lifting of tabu—and he that brings the Harpers into Moneb does so under pain of death!"

For one short moment the councilors recovered their courage and voiced it. The hall shook with the cheering. Under cover of the noise Taras bent and spoke into the king's ear, and Simon saw the face of the king become pallid.

From behind the high seat Taras lifted a helmet bossed in gold and placed it on the king's head. A Helmet of Silence.

The cheering faded, and was not.

The king said hoarsely, "Then for the good of Moneb, I must disband the council."

Taras stepped forward. He looked directly at Simon, and his eyes smiled. "We had foreseen your traitorous counsels, John Keogh. And so we came prepared."

He flung back his cloak. Beneath it, in the curve of his left arm, was something wrapped in silk.

Simon instinctively stepped back.

Taras ripped the silk away. And in his hands was a living creature no larger than a dove, a thing of silver and rose-pearl and delicate frills of shining membrane, and large, soft, gentle eyes.

A dweller in the deep forests, a shy sweet bearer of destruction, an angel of madness and death.

A Harper!

A low moan rose among the councilors, and there was a shifting and a swaying of bodies poised for flight. Taras said,

"Be still. There is time enough for running, when I give you leave."

The councilors were still. The king was still, white-faced upon his throne. But on the shadowy benches, Simon saw Keogh's son bent forward, yearning toward the man he thought to be his father, his face alight with a child's faith.

Taras stroked the creature in his hands, his head bent low over it.

The membranous frills began to lift and stir. The rose-pearl body pulsed, and there broke forth a ripple of music like the sound of a muted harp, infinitely sweet and distant.

The eyes of the Harper glowed. It was happy, pleased to be released from the binding silk that had kept its membranes useless for the making of music. Taras continued to stroke it gently, and it responded with a quivering freshet of song, the liquid notes running and trilling upon the silent air.

And two more of the helmeted men brought forth silvery, soft-eyed captives from under their cloaks, and they began to join their music together, timidly at first, and then more and more without hesitation, until the council hall was full of the strange wild harping and men stood still because they were too entranced now to move.

Even Simon was not proof against that infinitely poignant tide of thrilling sound. He felt his body respond, every nerve quivering with a pleasure akin to pain.

He had forgotten the effect of music on the human consciousness. For many years he had forgotten music. Now, suddenly, all those long-closed gates between mind

and body were flung open by the soaring song of the Harpers. Clear, lovely, thoughtless, the very voice of life unfettered, the music filled Simon with an aching hunger for he knew not what. His mind wandered down vague pathways thronged with shadows, and his heart throbbed with a solemn joy that was close to tears.

Caught in the sweet wild web of that harping, he stood motionless, dreaming, forgetful of fear and danger, of everything except that somewhere in that music was the whole secret of creation, and that he was poised on the very edge of understanding the subtle secret of that song.

Song of a newborn universe joyously shouting its birth-cry, of young suns calling to each other in exultant strength, the thunderous chorus of star-voices and the humming bass of the racing, spinning worlds!

Song of life, growing, burgeoning, bursting, on every world, complicated counterpoint of a million million species voicing the ecstasy of being in triumphant chorus!

Something deep in Simon Wright's tranced mind warned him that he was being trapped by that hypnotic web of sound, that he was falling deeper, deeper, into the Harpers' grip. But he could not break the spell of that singing.

Soaring singing of the leaf drinking the sun, of the bird on the wing, of the beast warm in its burrow, of the young, bright miracle of love, of birth, of living!

And then the song changed. The beauty and joy faded from it, and into the sounds came a note of terror, growing, growing . . .

It came to Simon then that Taras was speaking to the thing he held, and that the soft eyes of the Harper were afraid.

The creature's simple mind was sensitive to telepathic impulses, and Taras was filling its mild emptiness with thoughts of danger and of pain, so that its membranes shrilled now to a different note.

The other Harpers picked it up. Shivering, vibrating

together and across each other's rhythms, the three small rose-pearl beings flooded the air with a shuddering sound that was the essence of all fear.

Fear of a blind universe that lent its creatures life only to snatch it from them, of the agony and death that always and forever must rend the bright fabric of living! Fear of the somber depths of darkness and pain into which all life must finally descend, of the shadows that closed down so fast, so fast!

That awful threnody of primal terror that shuddered from the Harpers struck icy fingers of dread across the heart. Simon recoiled from it, he could not bear it, he knew that if he heard it long he must go mad.

Only dimly was he aware of the terror among the other councilors, the writhing of their faces, the movements of their hands. He tried to cry out but his voice was lost in the screaming of the Harpers, going ever higher and higher until it was torture to the body.

And still Taras bent over the Harper, cruel-eyed, driving it to frenzy with the power of his mind. And still the Harpers screamed, and now the sound had risen and part of it had slipped over the threshold of hearing, and the super-sonic notes stabbed the brain like knives.

A man bolted past Simon. Another followed, and another, and then more and more, clawing, trampling, falling, floundering in the madness of panic. And he himself must flee!

He would *not* flee! Something held him from the flight his body craved—some inner core of thought hardened and strengthened by his long divorcement from the flesh. It steadied him, made him fight back with iron resolution, to reality.

His shaking hand drew out the little metal box. The switch clicked. Slowly, as the power of the thing built up, it threw out a high, shrill keening sound.

"The one weapon against the Harpers!" Curt had said. "The only thing that can break sound is—sound!"

The little repeller reached out its keening sonic vibrations and caught at the Harpers' terrible singing, like a claw.

It clawed and twisted and broke that singing. It broke it, by its subtle sonic interference, into shrieking dissonances.

Simon strode forward, toward the throne and toward Taras. And now into the eyes of Taras had come a deadly doubt.

The Harpers, wild and frightened now, strove against the keening sound that broke their song into hideous discord. The shuddering sonic struggle raged, much of it far above the level of hearing, and Simon felt his body plucked and shaken by terrible vibrations.

He staggered, but he went on. The faces of Taras and the others were contorted by pain. The king had fainted on his throne.

Storm of shattered harmonies, of splintered sound, shrieked like the very voice of madness around the throne. Simon, his mind darkening, knew that he could endure no more . . .

And suddenly it was over. Beaten, exhausted, the Harpers stilled the wild vibration of their membranes. Utterly silent, they remained motionless in the hands of their captors, their soft eyes glazed with hopeless terror.

Simon laughed. He swayed a little on his feet and said to Taras,

"My weapon is stronger than yours!"

Taras dropped the Harper. It crawled away and hid itself beneath the throne. Taras whispered,

"Then we must have it from you, Earthman!"

He sprang toward Simon. On his heels came the others, mad with the bitter fury of defeat when they had been so sure of victory.

Simon snatched out the audio-disc and raised it to his lips, pressing its button and crying out the one word, "Hurry!"

He felt that it was too late. But not until now, not until this moment when fear conquered the force of tradition, could Curt and Otho have entered this forbidden place without provoking the very outbreak that must be prevented.

Simon went down beneath his attackers' rush. As he went down, he saw that the councilors who had fled were running back to help him. He heard their voices shouting, and he saw the boy Dion among them.

Something struck cruelly against his head, and there was a crushing weight upon him. Someone screamed, and he caught the bright sharp flash of darts through the torchlight.

He tried to rise, but he could not. He was near unconsciousness, aware only of a confusion of movement and ugly sounds. He smelled blood, and he knew pain.

He must have moved, for he found himself on his hands and knees, looking down into the face of Dion. The shank of a copper dart stood out from the boy's breast, and there was a streak of red across the golden skin. His eyes met Simon's, in a dazed, wondering look. He whispered uncertainly:

"Father!"

He crept into Simon's arms. Simon held him, and Dion murmured once more and then sighed. Simon continued to hold him, though the boy had become very heavy and his eyes looked blankly now into nothingness.

It came to Simon that the hall had grown quiet. A voice spoke to him. He lifted his head and saw Curt standing over him, and Otho, both staring at him anxiously. He could not see them clearly. He said, "The boy thought I was his father. He clung to me and called me Father as he died."

Otho took Dion's body and laid it gently on the stones.

Curt said, "It's all over, Simon. We got here in time, and it's all right."

Simon rose. Taras and his men were dead. Those who

had tried to foster hatred were gone, and not ever again would Harpers be brought into Moneb. That was what the pale, shaken councilors around him were telling him.

He could not hear them clearly. Not so clearly, somehow, as the fading whisper of a dying boy.

He turned and walked out of the council hall, onto the steps. It was dark now. There were torches flaring, and the wind blew cold, and he was very tired.

Curt stood beside him. Simon said, "I will go back to the ship."

He saw the question in Curt's eyes, the question that he did not quite dare to ask.

Heartsick, Simon spoke the lines that a Chinese poet had written long ago.

"'Now I know, that the ties of flesh and blood only bind us to a load of grief and sorrow.'"

He shook his head. "I will return to what I was. I could not bear the agony of a second human life—no!"

Curt did not answer. He took Simon's arm and they walked together across the court.

Behind them Otho came, carrying gently three small creatures of silver and rose-pearl, who began now to sound ripples of muted music, faint but hopeful at first, then soaring swiftly to a gladness of prisoners newly freed.

They buried the body of John Keogh in the clearing where he had died, and the boy Dion lay beside him. Over them, Curt and Grag and Otho built a cairn of stones with Harker's help.

From the shadows, Simon Wright watched, a small square shape of metal hovering on silent beams, again a living brain severed forever from human form.

It was done, and they parted from Harker and went down through the great booming lichens toward the ship. Curt and the robot and android paused and looked back at the tall cairn towering lonely against the stars.

But Simon did not look back.

TOO LATE FOR ETERNITY

CHAPTER I

The Old Man

That night, a little after ten, Henry Joad went out for a walk. Fall's brisk wind buffeted his head. It pulled at his feet and the dry leaves fingered his shoes. It was a brave man, he thought, who would walk in such a wind, wearing a toupee without a hat.

The light from the front porch of his country house fled back into the dark. Henry stood for a long time there in the moonlight. The ground slanted down into the darkness of a gully. He could hear water sighing over stones as though running from the ice of winter. Denuded trees and Henry's stooped figure made similar silhouettes against the autumn sky above the hill.

The walk had brought color to his face, driving away the former waxy look of complete fatigue. But the fear; he hadn't left that behind.

Fear always came to him this time of year. Through winter he forgot it completely. And then the apprehension began with Spring. By late summer he could hear the death rattle of October.

He kept on standing there as though afraid to move, aware of the shallowness of his breath and the loneliness of the night among the skeletal trees, feeling the dryness of his bones.

Jeanette. Suddenly he needed his wife. He thought of her warm body, soft and waiting in the Snug-L cover. She had everything he needed now, health, youth, energy. He had never felt such a violent need for her before.

He imagined Jeanette's breasts pressed against his cheek. He remembered the living smell of her skin.

He ran. He forgot his heart which had acted up again rather badly last week. He ran, slipping and sliding. He blundered into a tree. He ran faster.

He was gasping and the cold bit viciously at his lungs as he reached the rock wall of the patio. He went through and leaned against the icy rock to catch his breath.

Joy, anticipation was a warmth in him then as he saw the soft candle light in Jeanette's bedroom, shining its gentle fingers to him through the French windows.

That was the candle she always burned when she wanted him.

She wanted him tonight. Oh God, Jeanette, wanting him. It had been a long time since she had burned the candle in the window.

He was walking almost stealthily, carefully, as though afraid the candle light would go out. The empty swimming pool blinked, and dry leaves swirled at the bottom of it.

He slipped along the wall until he was almost to the window. And then he heard Jeanette's whispering laughter.

And then a man's voice said: "But why did you pick me?"

"Oh, don't be silly, Larry. Don't pretend—"

"I mean it. Why me? I never really thought—"

"You know you're young and handsome and sure for a quick advancement, and anyway, Joady recommended you. I've learned to take old Joady Bear's advice. He said that when the time came, you would be my best bet."

Henry heard the long pause, and then a long sigh.

"—and you are, Larry. Oh, you are!"

The candle went out.

Henry could hear the dry leaves swirling round and round in the concrete grave of the empty pool, the feeble stirrings and beatings of the dead refuse of eager spring and dead summer.

Boneless and nerveless, Henry sank against the side of the house. Then he moved, carefully at first so as not to make any noise, sliding along the wall, shivering and feeling the cold blowing empty spaces through him, and then he ran around the house and in through the front door, stumbling blindly through the darkness and a numbing cloud of sickness.

He felt without body as he lay down on his bed. He seemed only a mass of cloudy feeling.

He lay there shivering like something raw and bleeding. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. But they would hear him and they would know. He had some dignity left, somewhere surely, inside of him. Some self-respect.

He lay there a long time trying to think about it, clarify it, calm himself, be realistic. But he could only feel about it.

His pride came fierce and hard, stiffening his limbs. Then the wave of fear and loneliness, the sudden awareness that he was alone and old. Put aside at last. Finally replaced.

It was true, he had recommended Larry Johnson.

It was true, a man got old and had to be replaced by a younger and more vigorous mate.

True, all true. But until tonight somehow it had been something that would never happen to him, something he never dared to think about much. Something he had pushed down, rationalized, tried to ignore. Like death.

When he got up and shuffled into the bathroom to get a sedative, he seemed boneless, his body shambling like an old man's. *Like an old man's*, he thought. Oh, he had thought about it plenty of times before. Sometimes he had even gotten very mad thinking about himself having to get old and finally die, and be replaced by a young man, and his wife and the other women all staying young and beautiful and full of eager life. Several times he had wanted to protest against what had seemed a rank injustice. But each time there was this fear, a visit to the Psychotherapist soothed things and made him calm again.

Grateful for his young beautiful wife. Proud of her. Dependant on her. She had made him feel younger, and through her he had staved off the inevitable image of old age and death. A man will put up with injustice, the most terrible kind of injustice, if he's afraid to change it, afraid that things could be even worse. Tradition was a hard thing to question.

But now, facing it, against the wall, looking the bitter end directly in its grinning face, he was ashen. Frightened by his own sudden, unleashed hatred for the way things were.

He couldn't sleep.

He got up and stood near the window. God, where was he now? Where could he live now? The fear flooded in all around, covering him with sweat. He was afraid of his own inability, his uselessness, loneliness. Afraid of himself, of Jeanette, of her opinion of him. And Larry—his best friend, one of the younger executives at the office—afraid of Larry too because of his young handsomeness.

Jeanette and Larry in there in the dark, whispering together—

He sank down onto the floor by the window. In memory he touched the slender casement of her breast. The skin with its warmth and softness, his hands gliding over the curvature of her hips, gripping the narrow waist, feeling her intensely wanting breath against his hands.

He began to sob, holding his hand over his lips, choking on his own defeat.

A young smiling man with blond hair, moving lithely, eagerly, danced across the room. It wasn't Larry. It was a ghost. It was Henry Joad, a long, long time ago. Sure, he remembered. He'd remembered many times when he had been young. But it was getting harder to remember because it was so long ago.

Henry lay there and tried to think about it, tried to get things clear, calm himself with the kind of resignation that would enable him to stand the shock of replacement.

Henry was now 125 years old, going on 126. The retirement age, meaning he had maybe another five years to go—if he were lucky. Retirement wasn't a lengthy loneliness any more as he understood it had once been centuries before. You could work now almost right up to the door of the crematorium. You were, in fact, expected to do so.

The women expected it.

With his bad ticker, Henry didn't feel lucky.

He had married at twenty.

He rubbed his eyes as though he were sleepy. He'd been married to Jeanette 105 years! Foggily, his brain probed through layers of dust, cobwebs, old walls and dead gardens. And vaguely, almost like a faceless shadow, he could dimly remember the old man he had replaced in

Jeanette's life. The shadow had never been very real, but it was real now. Horribly real.

Longevity. Since the nineteenth century, life expectancy had steadily increased. And from the start, women's life expectancy had been greater than men's.

A long time back, Henry had been very curious about why women should live so much longer than men, so much longer that a man could grow old and die in the service of a woman, and be replaced by a younger man, and the woman still looking and acting as young as ever.

He had looked into it, filled with a timid but persistent protest.

Back sometime, he couldn't remember what year, but sometime in the twentieth century a woman's life expectancy was seven years greater, on the average, than a man's. The discrepancy had increased with alarming steadiness after that. It had been a cause for much alarm, particularly on the part of men. They had studied it, tried to figure out the reason for it.

Heart trouble. High blood pressure. It increased among men, declined among women. Extreme forms of damaging psychosis increased for men, dwindled among women.

It had all boiled down to what seemed to have been a simple evolutionary fact. Women were just more rugged, more enduring, tougher than men.

But why?

And then the third World War. Records, statistics destroyed. A lot of men destroyed too. And after that, three women for every man.

Matriarchy. The women had taken over. And a lot of those women hated men and hated science. Some of them formed anti-male cults. Who needs men?

They took over everything, Joad thought, lying there with his face pressed against the floor. Everything. They

got everything. The women inherited all the money, all the property and power.

And that last war—maybe that had done something incalculably bad and final to men, to their souls as well as their hearts.

Loneliness, that was the hardest thing to take now, now at the end of the road. If only he had his kids here, he thought vaguely, and the unorthodoxy of his thought frightened him even more.

That was the way things were. The women had taken over. The kids too. Practically everything. He remembered being raised in a Child Care Clinic somewhere out in Vermont. Not very well, but he remembered it now. Raised by women, processed, indoctrinated in all the ways to be a good husband and provider and lover. Taught how to take care of women, and make them even happier than they already seemed to be.

And when he was eager and young and virile being sent out so the women could look him over. And he remembered now the old man he had replaced in Jeanette's scheme of things 105 years ago. An old man bowing out and dying slowly away in the corner, in the shadows. But then, Henry had been too young and eager and well-conditioned to care.

But he cared now. Now that it seemed somehow too late even to care, he cared.

When a man grew old, way back in a different time, he had had his children. His flesh and blood, going on. A kind of immortality of the species and the spirit that made one's own death easier.

But he didn't even have that now. His own kids had been born somewhere and raised in a Processing School somewhere. He had never seen them, and Jeanette had never mentioned them.

That was the women's world.

His children taken away. Youth, love taken away. His

life taken away. It had been that way a long time, but suddenly now he hated it with a frightening intensity. He hated *them*. He hated the way things were. He hated his own impotence and the need for resignation.

He had never dared really think about it much before, and when he had questioned it, or even tried to protest, the Psychemothers had placated him, made him realize that this was the way things were. Made him realize the uselessness of fighting against the inevitable. Made him again grateful for what he had.

But he had nothing left now. Maybe a few more years, if he were lucky. He wanted to rise up, scream out, fight back at whatever it was.

And then the fatigue flowed over him. And the October moonlight lay white and cold over Henry Joad's face. He went to sleep thinking, I woke up too late.

CHAPTER II

Smile and Look Alive

He lay looking out the window into early dawn. He watched the dead leaves dancing unashamedly away on the drift of the season. They knew when it was time to go. They didn't care. He cared. That was his misfortune. He cared too much now.

He groped, found his dentures, sucked them against his gums. The molars snapped together. He felt a little better, a bit more substantial. He had had very bad dreams last night. They had left some kind of raw strangeness in him that was frightening. Last night had ripped

something, torn him out of place. Something was spilling loose inside him. He was afraid of it.

There was real danger in questioning the way things were. You learned that when you were a kid in the Processing Schools. That was why you didn't remember much about the past, even when you tried to remember. There was pain connected with it. Moments of rebellion, then the pain of punishment from the matriarchy. Pretty soon you just didn't think anything at all but what you were supposed to think. Conditioned reflex that ended up being hardly any reflex at all.

But now he was replaced. Now he had very little to lose, nothing really except a few dusty years of humiliating dependency on Jeanette and the handsome young Larry.

The hell with them. The hell with them all.

He flinched at his own rebellion. He wanted to laugh at himself. By his own logic it was too late. If he had nothing to lose, by the same token he had nothing to gain.

He had to be realistic about it. This was the way things were. He had known how they were and how they were going to be. Now he had to live with them—a few more meaningless years.

Through the window he could see the bubble of Larry's heliocar just on the other side of the wall. He tried to ignore the closed door of his wife's bedroom as he shuffled toward the bath.

Careful, careful, Henry. Love can turn into hate. When something like this happened then the real test of love began. That was what they had taught him in the Processing Schools. He had been prepared psychologically for this. He had to see it clear. A man could go on thinking something was love, and not know he had a knife in his hand waiting to caress love's throat.

He stopped, listened. His heart was ticking away inside

him with a precarious tenseness. His stomach hurt too. He had forgotten to take his vagaspill last night. He had forgotten a lot of things last night. And remembered a lot of things too. Things he had been conditioned to ignore, suppress.

He hurried. Not against time or long-established ritual. Being late at the office wasn't so important anymore. Jeanette had appointments all day, of course, starting at nine a.m. But Henry hurried against a suddenly sharp awareness of internal machinery wearing down.

Funny how a man pushed down some distasteful certainty out of sight and mind, just because all his life he had been taught, conditioned, processed to do it, and then all at once it hit him squarely in the face, in the heart, in the stomach.

In the heart first of all.

There was something in a man, evidently, that never burned out, no matter what they did to him.

He looked at the sunken tub in the bathroom, then he dropped into it, clung to its side, then paddled in the therapeutic bubble-bath that fizzed and popped about him. He gazed up into the mirrored ceiling to see himself bobbing his too-prominent, white-skinned belly like a squeezed-up melon above the surface. The water contained a so-called Rejuvo-Salts. Supposed to 'pep the old man up after ninety', but nothing could make any difference now.

He had been replaced.

The mirrors reaffirmed the shock of last night. There were reflections of the reflections shining atrociously from his wet skin. There was even a particularly ludicrous angle of him reflected in the ceiling now. A kind of buffoon treatment of Henry Joad standing on his bald pate.

Mirrors lining the walls, the ceilings, the floors. Jean-

ette's idea of a work of art. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?

He was conscious only of the sagging grayness now. The entire fleshly castle sagging under the bombardment of time's invisible particles. He climbed out of the tub and postured. He grimaced. He examined various angles of himself in a little private orgy of self-imposed humiliation. A kind of ironic defiance of the inevitable.

And then he leaned forward to the mirror. He touched his face. He watched the brown loose skin stretching without tension and moving back slowly to its place.

"Joady honey!"

Jeanette.

"Hey, Joady. Surprise, huh?"

Larry.

Frantically, Henry grabbed, slapped the toupee on his head. He was adjusting the hair with one hand and draping a towel around his middle with the other, when Jeanette's and then Larry's reflections were abruptly there, all over, everywhere, beside his own.

Easy. Easy does it. This is the way things are.

He spread beard-eradicator over his jaws. Without turning, he said, "Good morning, Snuggle-Bunny. And how are you, Larry? How's the young exec?"

"Great," Larry said. "I feel great this morning!"

"I'll bet you're surprised, aren't you, Joady Bear," Jeanette said. "Finding Larry all moved in."

"Well, I figured it was about time for it," Henry said. "I'm glad to see it's you, Larry. I was pulling for you."

"Guess I should have told you," Jeanette said. "But after you went out for the walk, I thought of Larry. I—I knew then I needed him." She finished softly, "I knew I needed him last night for sure."

Larry's voice was loud with enthusiasm. "I guess I'll get that advancement any day now."

"Sure you will," Henry said. "In another ten years

you'll be Junior Exec. I've been plugging for you in there."

He could see Jeanette leaning against Larry, her hands caressing him as she smiled in the mirrored walls.

Henry's hand was shaking a little as Jeanette's and Larry's firm naked young figures danced with splendid vitality beside his own reflections, around the four walls and over the ceiling, and then into the sunken tub.

He should be grateful. After all, Larry was the best bet for Jeanette. She had been a devoted and loving wife to Henry all these years. He should be grateful. She had been the challenge, the symbol, the pusher that had kept him going, been his incentive.

Smile, old Joady boy.

Smile and look alive.

Jeanette went to prepare breakfast for the three of them. Larry was doing push-ups on the bathroom floor. His lean tanned body moved fluidly. He was breathing easily.

"She's a wonderful woman, Joady."

"You like her."

"She's wonderful. I wanted her to pick me out, but I never really thought she would!" He jumped to his feet and put his arm over Henry's shoulder. It was sore from running into that tree last night. "Thanks for putting that plug in for me, Joady. She respects you. If it hadn't been for you—"

"Sure," Henry cut in quickly. "Don't mention it any more. Forget it. You're in. I've always tried to get the best for Snuggle-Bunny."

"Snuggle-Bunny!" Larry laughed. "That's a good one. I'll have to go some to equal that one."

"I checked your processing chart, Larry. And then I've known you for years. I knew how healthy you were, and how dependable. I knew how much you loved Jeanette. I knew what a live-wire you are around the office."

"God, I'm lucky, Joady! I only hope I can keep things going halfway as good as you have. I hope I can provide for Jeanette in the style you've accustomed her to!"

"It'll take time. Don't expect too much at first. You've got a long, long time, Larry."

Henry's toupee was on straight as he hurried to get the nylex work suit out of the closet. It covered a lot. It took ten years from his age. But ten years wasn't much, not any more.

"See you!" Larry yelled out of the shower spray.

"Hurry, or you'll be late for breakfast," Henry said.

And as Henry walked toward the kitchen, he remembered part of the dream he had had last night. In this dream he had hit Jeanette over the head with a rock and kicked her out of a cave. In the dream, however, the woman had hardly resembled Jeanette. She had been sagging and hairy in the dream. And giving off a markedly unpleasant odor from having been chewing on animal hides. Ugly worn teeth too, worn down to little yellow nubbins. It had been some other year. Some other time. He couldn't even imagine what year because there weren't any calendars hanging on the cave walls. Just dried skins all curled up and stiff and clattering in a flapping wind.

But it had been a man's little world, hidden away somewhere in a cave a million years ago.

And the woman had crawled and whined on her knees to him like a dog.

He had struck her violently with a rock and flung her from the cave. And she had rolled yelling and kicking into an anonymity for which Henry had been grateful.

He tried to laugh. That had been a million years ago when might made right. That was a dead dead time to remember.

He was afraid of the deeper part of him that had dreamed such a thing.

He would have to discuss that dream with his Psychemother during his regular appointment between one and two p.m.

This is the way things are, Joady Bear. This is the way things have to be.

Men just got older and older. They moved on and gave their place to an eager, younger, more capable male.

That's the way it is, old Joady Bear. Sit as comfortable as you can on the shelf. Make the best of what little is left of the season.

Killing wouldn't change anything. Death wouldn't bring youth back to Henry Joad. Hate brought nothing back. Nothing could bring any of it back.

He had to see his Psychemother. She would make things easier.

Jeanette was singing little songs. She seemed a new woman this morning. Younger and more alive than ever. In the kitchen, her little flowered apron on over her sun-shorts, her tanned legs and bare shoulders and breasts brown and firm as she served Joady his egg-nog and his vitamin pills for breakfast, and prepared Larry his ham and eggs.

Sometimes Jeanette's thigh brushed against Henry as he tried to down the insipid foam of the egg-nog. He could feel her warmth calling to him in his loneliness and hunger.

"Joady, honey! You're just going to be late as rain if you don't hurry!"

Hate won't bring love back.

Death won't bring youth back and the ardent nights.

"I'll be officially retired anyway," he mumbled, "in another year, maybe less. So it doesn't matter much."

"And then you can just loaf around here, Joady. And Larry and I can take care of you."

"I'm coasting now," Henry said, staring into his glass.

"On many years of exemplary service. A pillar of *International Beauty Aids Unlimited*."

All the time conscious of her tight young-looking body with the firm breasts, small like a girl's, dancing everywhere through the looking glass walls of his mind. Now he kept thinking of that old man he had replaced 105 years ago. Had he felt the way Henry was feeling now? Maybe worse. But he had shambled back into the shadows like an old dog and died there without even a whimper that Henry could remember.

Hell, that was the thing that was wrong about it! Taking it that way. Crawling away without even a whine into the corner, lying down and dying like a dog without even a whimper of defiance!

"But Joady Bear! I've got simply hundreds of appointments today! And the one with the *Bright-Eyes Clinic* is at nine-thirty! You get a move on now!"

Slow old Joady Bear. Her images joined in the mirrored walls of the kitchen, joining and re-joining in a giggling ballet. And the little bit she was wearing made her seem more desirable now to Henry than she had ever seemed to have been before. Vital, alive. The girl I married.

Impulsively, he reached over, gripped her wrist, hard. "Bunny—"

She bent down and kissed him on the forehead. He felt the full shine of her hair breathing youth and life over his face. He heard Larry's footsteps on the kitchen floor. Jeanette started to move toward Larry. Henry felt the raw trembling resentment exploding in his arm as he tightened his grip. His fingers dug in hard. Jeanette pulled away slowly, still smiling, a movement somehow a mixture of impatience disguised with a bright smile.

Uneasiness converted into a sophisticated giggle.

He jerked his hand back and stood up. He tried not to look at them as he went out and down the hall. He had to

find the self-respect to meet this head on! When he flew away across the fall landscape in his heliocar, Jeanette and Larry, their arms around one another, waved goodbye to him from the walled patio.

But where, how, could he find the self-respect, the strength? Did he really want to be calm, resigned to it? Was this growing desire to destroy something, this feeling of feverish hatred really Henry Joad? This crazy flame flaring up in him now when it was too late?

This light flickering up in a crumbling lamp.

For the first time in his life he felt a lack of confidence in his Psychemother.

CHAPTER III

It's Fun to Be Young

Al Jenkins, the Office Manager, asked it again around noon. "What's the matter, Joady boy?"

"Nothing."

"Ulcer acting up again?"

"My ulcer was cured. I told you that!"

"Why the belly pills then?"

"That's something else. Kidneys."

"How's the ticker?"

"It's still ticking, or obviously I'd have been cremated."

"Hey, Joady boy, you are upset today. Come on, fess up, fess up, boy! What's the trouble?"

Henry turned toward the window. He hadn't even looked at the ad-charts, they didn't seem important now that he would soon retire, or finish retiring.

"What's happened to the old gusto, Joady?"

Henry grinned automatically. A facility acquired after so many years in the business winning people and influencing the right friends. "Jeanette just retired me."

For one brief naked moment, fear looked out of Al's eyes.

"Well, Joady. Who's the lucky fellow? Larry?"

"Sure, I recommended him."

"Great guy. Coming up fast. Larry'll be Junior Exec of *Face Creams and Hormones* in another ten years."

"I know. Larry'll be a good replacement. But—Al—I don't know, it hit me pretty hard. Upset me a little."

Al cut in. "Don't let it bother you, boy." He slapped Henry on the back.

"I can't help it. Retirement from home. Retirement from work. Retirement from life. For some reason, I just thought I'd be retired from work first. I'd thought of having all that time at home with Jeanette."

"So that's it!" Al laughed. "You're too old to be bothered with that kind of thought. Sure, it's bound to upset you a little. But you'll get used to it fast enough. You'll be retired soon. You'll have plenty of time for lots of other kinds of fun. You'll get a big kick out of just watching Jeanette and Larry make a go of it!"

"But it's being left alone, Al."

"Take up hobbies, stuff like that."

"I mean people. I even had this crazy thought last night about wanting to have kids around. My kids, like it was supposed to have been in the old days."

"Huh?" Al's mouth dropped open.

"Yeah, that's what I thought, Al. About my kids. Maybe that would help. A man could live on, through them—"

Al looked around quickly, and lowered his voice. "Joady—listen now. That's dangerous talk. You've sounded off like that a few times before, and I don't want to listen to it."

"But good Lord, they ought to leave us *something!*"

Al forced a laugh. He was good at that, Henry thought. Turning anything into a gag. "Better cut the reb talk, Joady. When we controlled the kids we made soldiers and atomic physicists out of them and damn near blew up the world! Let's face it, Joady. Like I said before, we didn't do so good when we ran things. We're lucky to be around at all after what happened. Don't forget that after the big war, a lot of those women decided they get along without us."

Al looked anxiously at the door as though he wanted to get back to his own office in a hurry. "You'd better go see your Psychemother," he said.

Sure, Henry thought, I'd better shut up, or I'll be retired sooner than I'm supposed to be, and that'll be another year of nothing to do. His job was all he had left. He shrugged. Al wanted to feel young. He didn't want to think about anything that would make him feel his age. That was the trouble with all of them, Henry thought. Al was ten years younger than Henry. But he was trying to hold on to youth. He worked hard at it too. It made him look twenty years older than he really was. He kept his skin tightened up with lotions so that it resembled cheap bronzed armor threatening to flake away like plaster from a cast.

"You have to think the right thoughts, Joady boy! Take the old positive attitude!"

"Sure," Henry said.

He looked out of the window over the neat square metal blocks of Central City, the heart of distribution for Midwest.

How would it have been, he thought, to have seen kids out there, all ages, growing up, laughing, playing, giving life a sense of continuity and meaning? How would it have been to have seen them and known some of them were yours and gotten a feeling of deathlessness from

knowing that. It would have been better, he thought. A lot better.

But the males only came out when they were ready to replace somebody. And the girls? He remembered that there had been no girls at all at his school. They were educated someplace else. The curricula would, of course, be vastly different.

Henry wanted to tell Al to get the hell out. But Al was Manager, and Henry was too used to being nice. Al was very important socio-businessly. Henry wasn't yet retired. There was another thing to consider too. If he was retired ahead of schedule, he would have that much more time to brood about what he considered an injustice.

Without turning, Henry asked. "Al, how old is your wife?"

"Old enough," Al said. He laughed. Henry smiled dutifully. Suddenly Al stopped laughing. "How old? How should I know? You know that's a delicate question with the gals? Why?"

"Just curious."

The wall behind Al Jenkins seemed to dissolve like a splintered mirror.

"You're too damn curious sometimes, Joady!"

Sure, they lived a lot longer than we do, Henry was thinking carefully. Year after year stretching the margin wider and wider. That was the way nature had decided to work things out.

But how much longer, he thought? What's the margin now?

"Joady, I've never heard anybody else bring up subjects like this! You're getting morbid! I don't want to talk about it! I don't want to think about it any more!"

"I know," Henry said. "No one does."

"So you've been replaced!" Al sounded tired. He had never sounded tired to Henry before either. "This is the way things are, that's all!"

Henry's stomach jumped. He felt the raw explosive force again, threatening to burst free. That damned tone of resignation. Did it *have* to be the way it was? Why?

Or more important, he thought suddenly, how *was* it? Was it really the way it *seemed*?

"Well, I just got a helluva shock last night, Al. I've got a bad headache. It doesn't seem right, just bowing out like this. Sure, you can be told you've got to die tomorrow at noon, but you don't want to die then. You don't want to believe it. You try to get out of doing it, try to squeeze out. Maybe you even try to prove it's a lie!"

"You'd better run over to see your Psychemother, boy! Fast!"

Henry turned away from the window and forced a thin laugh. "What a funny trickster nature turned out to be, Al. Maybe one of these days the little ladies won't need us at all."

Al laughed too. It seemed high and almost shrill. "That's funny all right. I'd like to see the day when my little sugar bun won't need a guy around."

Henry blinked. The splintered mirror went away. He didn't say anything else about that. He wanted to change the subject. Al was beginning to sweat.

Al expanded his chest, and flexed his pects. "Anyway, snap out of it, you old vet. Think and grow young."

"Sure," Henry said. He sat down and squeezed his eyes shut hard. "I'll watch the old attitude, Al. I really will."

Al slapped Henry's shoulder. "Got to get the old gusto, Joady. When you retire from business there's all those years to just have fun in!"

Al left Henry's office. He seemed in a hurry. He seemed anxious to get out.

None of them want to think about it, Henry thought. That's the trouble. I didn't. Al doesn't. No one wants to think about it. And pretty soon you're too old and tired to care.

But maybe he wasn't too old. Or too tired. Anyway, Henry cared. He had always cared. Sometimes he had popped off, timidly of course, and in a minor key. But then he had been younger, grateful, glad to be alive and young, glad to have a beautiful vital wife who loved him and seemed to be staying young and beautiful just to make him happier.

That's one thing you could say for them. The women. The Matriarchs. They were damn nice about it.

On the surface.

But what was underneath the lovely cosmetic surface? That was one thing Henry Joad had never dared ask himself or any one else? Not consciously.

But what did he have to lose now except his lumbago, a worn-out heart, and a few more years of meaningless loneliness?

What *was* under the glittering surface?

At twelve-thirty, Jeanette called. She was always good about that. Calling, relieving the monotony of a man's office day.

"Joady, honey. I'll be late getting home tonight. Behind on appointments again. I'll be over at the *Reducto Clinic* pretty late. I've already told Larry you two can play some gin rummy or something 'til Snuggle-Bunny gets home."

"Well, don't forget the Dingo party at Jenkins' house tonight."

"I've not forgotten. Only thing is, Larry says he may have to go back to the office after dinner. You know how he's bucking for Junior Exec?"

Sure, Henry thought, but was that just a game too? A little game you let the boys play to keep them happily feeling that it's worth the time and trouble? Keep the boys alert and active while they're young so you'll have someone to come home to you at night?

"I know," Henry said. "Larry's a real up-and-comer.

Well then, you and I'll go on over. And later, Larry can—"

"No," she cut in quickly. "Honey, you know how it is. Larry's just moved in. You remember how it was when you first moved in?" She giggled. "You remember how ardent you were, Joady Bear. I think I ought to be here, waiting for Larry when he comes in tonight."

He nodded several times. "Sure, I remember," he whispered. "Where are you now?"

"At the *Bust Works*. Then over to the *Reducto Gym*. My clinic advisor said I was getting a little too fatty around the you-know-whereie!"

"I hadn't noticed."

"But Larry did. Last night. Well, you might not notice that—*now*."

"No, I guess not."

"Honey, don't you brood now. I'll take care of you. Larry and I'll never stop thinking about you."

"Thanks, Snuggle-Bunny."

"We're going to take care of you every minute from now on."

He hung up fast on what he had almost blurted into the phone.

He sat there in a remarkable rigidity for some time after that. Like a rock precariously balanced on the side of a hill.

Later when he dictated a letter to the *Jiffy-Latex Women's Body Conforming Company*, and another to the *Forever Slim Corporation*, he kept staring at the long firm legs of the secretary. He felt the stirrings of desire, but the pushing of his frightening curiosity was stronger.

He noticed a mischievously coy quality in her eyes. She thought he was making a pass. He dropped his eyes, dictated more letters, hardly thinking about the *Ladies'*

Rejuvo-Cream Corporation, the Stay-Sexy Company, Smiles Unlimited, and a number of others.

The secretary paused in an enticing pose at the door, turning the ritual into an unvoiced bit of irony. The word had already gotten around that he had been retired at home. Publically emasculated. A kind of old ghost.

"Will that be all, Mr. Joad?"

"How long have you worked here, Miss Deuse?"

"About forty-eight years, Mr. Joad. May I please ask why?"

"You came here from the *Dalsan Youth Eternal Cream Company*, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"How long did you work there?"

"About sixty years."

When she came from the Dalsan Company she had been an employee there with a long and distinguished service record.

The words came out all at once as though they had been hung up on the roof of his mouth. "Miss Deuse, how old are you?"

Her expression didn't seem to change. But somehow there was a subtle if intangible difference. Her lips stretched thinner over strong white teeth.

"That, Mr. Joad, is a woman's secret."

"Of course," Henry said. "It always has been."

He sat there a while longer looking at the door she had shut in his face. His tired enzymes gurgled. His heart seemed a mild thunder. She hadn't told him. Somehow, Henry was glad.

He was beginning to be really afraid of finding something out.

He kept thinking of that dream last night. Something exploding.

Sure, that's the way things were. And if they weren't

really that way at all, it was too late now, Henry thought, for me to care.

Get out, get out old Joady Bear. It's your time. You've been retired. Replaced. Get on the shelf. Get on the rocking chair. Get in the old hammock and they'll take care of you.

On the way from the heliolot landing to Doctor Marian's office, Henry found himself looking with a new, almost virginal intensity at the women.

Beauty. Beauty and fresh vital youthfulness and glowing aliveness shining everywhere and showering the afternoon.

He felt like a man waking up in the middle of a jewelry shop. He had accepted it all, blindly grateful for it, never questioning it. Like a pretty dream you don't want to question for fear it will run away.

Suddenly now it was all flashing on like a bright neon bleeding suddenly out of darkness. All this blinding intense beauty glittering like little nodes of sunlight in the autumnal haze.

Oh he'd seen it all before. But through a different pair of glasses. Last night he'd been given another pair of glasses and he'd seen death through them. And death cast a different light over all the other things. An autumnal haze. How beautiful and bright the sun looks when you'll never see it again.

He had always noted the fact that there were very few men compared with the number of women on the streets. But he hadn't dared think about what it really meant. He had been unconsciously aware of the inconsistency in the men's ages and appearance too. Young, middle-aged, the very old. All spotted here and there though now, like appendages, he thought for the first time, like appendages among the brightly glowing women. Like bubbling riv-

ers of light flowing happily with some male refuse floating in it.

If the imminence of death brightens the sun, it also makes even more bitter the awful tragedy of death, that while one lives and hopes, he lives only to die, to grow creaky and old and spent and hurt and rotten.

You can hate the sun then. It will come up again and again, but not for you.

And the absence of old women. He had known that; all his life he had seen this absence of older women.

Then Henry Joad suddenly stopped walking.

He moved a little, swinging his head around like something on a string. There was a cold sensation trickling into his stomach, and a loud pounding in his head. He stared into the display window of the department store. His eyes dimmed as though reluctant to look. Everything he saw now as through these new hazed glasses of rejection and decay. He didn't want to look. But he had to look.

The window, devoted to women's merchandise. The newer styles, some partly clothed dummies, one section displaying a vast sea of beauty-aids. Surprisingly life-like heads suspended in an odd pattern in a surrealistic design. And beside each head, rotating around it, numerous small jars, tubes, bottles, gadgets, all circling into view just as little spotlights of shifting color splashed. Creams, jellies, powders, lotions, astringents, syringes, sponges, gloves, pills, inhalers, masks, nets, vari-colored fingernails, perfumes, shoes, jewels, eyelashes, fleshine lip-sheaths, fleshine breasts, various-sized earlobes. A lot of items Henry had never seen before.

A huge sign blinked off and on the length of the window, like trapped lightning beating and striking and sometimes merely flickering over tattered spangles:

ITS FUN TO BE YOUNG

Henry closed his eyes a moment.

It was fun. He remembered. It was a helluva lot of fun to be young.

He ran. He ran straight and fast toward his Psychemother's office without looking back.

CHAPTER IV

Psychemother

Mother was waiting.

Ever since Henry had gotten out of the Schools in which the Matriarchs had taught him to be a gentleman, Mother had been waiting for him here in the quiet sanctum with the vines trailing the walls and the green carpet gentle as grass.

Once a week for a hundred and five years, Mother had been waiting for Henry.

"Lie down on the couch, Henry. Just relax now and let the tension go."

And forget too, huh, Mother? Just forget, and let time sooth the troubled spirit.

Hello, Mother. When he woke up and the morning seemed gray, and there was another day at the office, colorless and futile, Mother waited to assure him that things were better than they seemed.

When he felt that he was going to fly into a million pieces of frustration and confusion, Mother waited to stick him back together again.

When he had felt age creeping into his bones, Mother waited to make him glad for what he had, for what he had been.

If he was mad, Mother had made him glad.

If he was filled with hate, Mother turned it into love.

When he was ready to scream out against things because they didn't seem right, Mother made him grateful just to be alive at all.

If he went eagerly into his wife's bedroom at night and had to sneak out again, embarrassed, frightened by impotence, Mother explained how this had to happen sooner or later, that a man just had to get old and wear out. Mother made degeneration not only bearable, but gave it a kind of bitter-sweetness.

He was never too old to come back to Mother. In fact, the older he got the more he needed her soothing touch—or did he?

As Henry lay down on the couch and stretched out on his back, in that customary supine and malleable position, he thought, things would probably have been a lot different if it hadn't been for Mother.

But he had never felt this way before. Nothing even remotely close to this feeling that the world was tumbling around him, that an emptiness was opening under him, that he was alone, squelched, helpless, useless, an old dancing creachy clown with laughter mocking in his ears. And this hatred, this suspicion and fear. Fear of her even. Even fear of his Psychemother!

He kept feeling as though some kind of alarm was about to go off in his chest.

He closed his eyes at the ceiling. He could still see Doctor Marian there the way she always was, her fleshy arms flabbing over the swollen mounds of her ballooning breasts. A big mound of warm flesh that seemed now never, never to have moved at all.

The questions. The answers. The vague stirrings. The fears.

"Well, what's happened now, Henry?"

"I've been replaced at home. Larry moved in last night!"

"You're bound to be a little upset for a while, Henry. But that's—"

He yelled suddenly. "—that's just the way things are! I know! I know how things are! Even the things I know about—I hate them. But now I know there are plenty of things I don't know about. And that's worse. That's a damn sight worse! I wanted to go in there and kill both of them! I dreamed about beating hell out of Jeanette . . . only it was in a cave and she was just an ugly hairy female serving me like a slave, and whining when I hit her. She crawled and whined and licked my hand and begged like a dog. I like that. I hate myself for it now, but still I like it too, thinking about it. I hate them all. *I hate you too, Mother!*"

"You don't really, Henry. But then you know that too."

Violently, he sat up. He couldn't lie there that way any longer. He felt too vulnerable. He sat stiffly, sometimes looking fearfully at the Psychemother, sometimes staring at the ceiling, the floor, or the wall.

"You're *their* doctor, the women's doctor. Not mine," he whispered.

"Henry! You're over-reacting—"

"No," he cut in with a yell. "You tell me. You know. You're their doctor really. You tell me—*how long do women really live?*"

There was an almost imperceptible tightening of her soft mouth in the kind maternal mask of her face.

"You think less about them, Henry. And more about yourself. It's your problem, and it's very real. You're old and you'll die, and you've got to face up to reality."

"Sure," he said. "But what *is* reality? Really, I mean, what is it? I might have found out, but you and the rest of them never gave me a chance. First I was shuttled off

to a damn processing school. Any time I wanted to figure things out, got curious, they worked on me. And then after that, I had to come in and see you every week, and you've kept everything held down, disguised, made me think one thing was something else. Even giving me a shock treatment now and then to shock any desire I might have had to find out how things really are!

"Admit it," he yelled louder. "Aren't all of us men just a bunch of kids to you, Mother, to you and the rest of them? Just stooges, things to be used? I'm beginning to get some idea of how—"

She cut in quickly. "You'll see things clearly soon. We'll work it out."

"You mean *you'll* work it out! You'll never give me a chance to do it. None of you will give me a chance. You never have, and now there isn't much chance left—for me."

"You've just got to face reality, Henry."

"Why? Why should I have to grow old and be put aside and have to watch them—listen to them being together? Jeanette's going to take care of me she says! She and Larry. All my life working and never thinking of anything but providing for Jeanette's future security, and getting things all set up for Larry to move in! But you tell me now. I've got to know! When did it really start? I was young once. I replaced someone else. I wasn't Jeanette's first. I'll bet I'm far from the last. Where, when did it start?"

"Henry! You know the answers. It started during the nineteenth century really, with general longevity and the Industrial Revolution. Maybe it started long before then even, when sheer survival stopped depending on brute strength, and depended instead on something deeper, more subtle, psychological factors. But this isn't your problem, Henry. Your problem is adjusting to what's happening—"

"The hell with adjusting to it. I've adjusted all my life. I'm sick of it!"

"Henry. If you really *loved* Jeanette, then you would be glad that she—"

"And does Jeanette really love me? What kind of a word is that any more? You've always made a big thing out of that word love, but what in hell does it mean to me—*now*? Used, thrown aside, blinded all my life by your damn machinations! Is pity and this putting me away on the shelf love? Is this Jeanette's *love* for me?"

"It's the only kind of love there is, Henry, for the way things have turned out."

"Sure," he whispered. He stood up stiffly. His knees ached. He slumped and pressed his hand over his eyes. "I don't mind so much, rocking away there on the shelf. It isn't that so much, though that's bad enough. It's—it's this feeling that something's been put over on me, and all men. Something horrible! I've got to find out something!"

"Henry, you'd better take the needle. Sleep for a while. You'll forget most of this. You'll feel so much better."

He could feel his skin crawling as he looked up. He saw the long hypodermic needle shining as the Psyche-mother leaned toward him.

He stumbled back toward the door, slowly, warily, watching the needle.

"Henry—"

"No thanks, Mother. Shove that hypo into some other poor devil who doesn't care any more. I've had it. I don't want to forget. I want to remember. *I want to find out!*"

"Henry, stop being childish now. It's only a sedative!"

"Is that all it is?"

"What are you afraid of, Henry?"

He wanted to laugh at that one. "Why the needle, Mother? What's the matter with healthy curiosity? Why

do you want to keep me from thinking about this thing?"

"I only want to relieve this tension."

"Sure. But why are all you tension-easers women? You tell me that? All head-shrinkers are women. All patients are men. Isn't that right? I've never heard of a woman getting her pretty head shrunk!"

"Henry, you lie back down there and take this sedative."

"Huh-uh, Mother. Not me. Not any more. Why should women need you? Happy, young, pretty all the time. They're taken care of. They get all the money, and we do all the work. They get the men they need when they're young and throw them away when they're old. The women take our youth, our strength, our seed, our earnings, our brains, everything and use them and when they're dried out, throw them away into the garbage dump! That's great—for them. The only thing women would need you for would be because of a guilty conscience. And I've decided something, Mother. None of you have any conscience!"

Mother was getting up. Mother was pressing a button on the intercom box on her desk. Mother didn't look very maternal all at once, Henry thought, as he ran for the door.

"Goodby, Mother!"

As he ran for the heliostat landing, he was aware of his shadow now. A shadow of fear over and behind him. He didn't know yet exactly why he was convinced that he had said too much, revealed too much to Mother. He didn't know what exactly he was so afraid of. But he knew it was there.

It stayed there. It followed him all the way back to his office. And somewhere it was waiting for him.

CHAPTER V

The Flame on the Heath

Henry dismissed his secretary, watching her with suspicion, feeling now that she was really only a spy, a master pretending to some kind of sophisticated subterfuge. He gave orders that he didn't want to be disturbed, that he had very important work to do. But it wasn't company work. It was Henry Joad work. Something he had been deprived of working at all his life.

Two hours later scratchpads were covered with figures. He had called five insurance companies, three banks, a number of hospitals, doctors' offices, companies specializing in women's beauty aids claiming to preserve youth, lawyers and investment brokers. By receiving no direct information, he learned a lot. Mainly, that they were withholding information. There had to be a reason.

In every case he found himself talking with younger, eager men. When the questions approached the area of Henry's main interest, his call invariably was shunted over to a woman.

The information, he was told, would be made available to Henry soon as the statistics were gathered, fully checked as to accuracy, etc. Later he would get the information. Later. Everything later. How much later? And how long before it would be too late for Henry to care? So Henry started to figure a few things out for himself. He felt no fear now comparable to the fears of the past. He felt an intense relief, an exhilaration. For the

first time that he could remember he felt really purposefully alive.

He started with himself. Being born, growing up hazily in the Matriarch's schools, learning how to be a good husband, a good provider, how to be considerate, and healthy and strong, and a good virile lover.

Longevity. It hadn't made a man's mind any sharper, his memory any better. Henry just had a lot longer road to look back down, and it was so hard to do that that a man seldom thought about it or discussed the past at all. Nostalgia was a dead emotion for most men; reminiscence like groping painfully in a fog with the rewards too insignificant to bother with.

The Matriarchs had seen to it that recall was difficult, even painful. The Psychemothers had helped too, they had helped a lot. But Henry didn't care any more. The moving finger had about written him out. But he had a few lines left, and by God he would make them good!

Let's see now. He had been born 125 years ago. Then the life expectancy for men had been a bit shorter. So the old man Henry had replaced probably had been around 100 years old. Maybe 110.

If the old man had married Jeanette around 20, that meant that now Jeanette was at least 215 years old. Make it approximately 220.

She was still as healthy, young, firm and alive, eager and ardent, as she had been when Henry had replaced that old inadequate, drained-out lover in a dim past. And apparently she was fully capable of running through Larry in the same way as Henry. Larry's life expectancy was a little longer. Say Larry would be replaced by younger blood in 130 years!

20 years old when she had married Henry.

105 years married to Henry.

130 years married to Larry.

140 years married to Larry's replacement.

395 years old!

But how was anyone to know how old Jeanette had been when Henry had replaced that old man 105 years ago? Surely more than 20! She had watched that fellow with the forgotten name grow old. Add another 90 years!

485 years! So women lived longer than men. That was an accepted fact. You could take that.

But how much longer?

Sometime, somewhere, there should be a limit. Unless—

Something in Henry's stomach seemed to turn completely over.

Henry had a daily 4 o'clock newssheet sent in. A telecast report didn't include obituary notices. The daily newssheet came out three times daily, mostly for last-minute checks on stock market and business trends. So forth. But Henry was running his finger shakily down the obituary column.

ANDERS, George. Suddenly on October 17 of Coronary thrombosis. Reposing at Sismo Crematorium, 662 Courtland Parkway, until Friday, 9 a.m.

HIRSCH, Clarence. On October 17. Reposing at Picasso Crematorium, 1727 Kenyon Avenue. Notice of funeral later.

KIRSCHENBAUM, Edmond. On October 17. Extreme senility. Reposing at the Chapel of A. Ribesto and Daughters, 683 Goldleaf Drive. Funeral Friday, 9:30 a.m. *Mass at Our Lady of Pity Church*, 10 a.m. Cremation St. Crown's Crematorium.

Henry went on down the list. A lot of old men dying. And then, almost at the bottom of the column, he found it.

A woman's name!

SCHEMMER, Anna. On October 16 of extreme senility and stroke. Beloved wife of Joseph, devoted Mother of Earl C., daughter of Beatrice Schemmer, sister of Charles Roget and Dehl Berti, Dorothy Schemmer, and Gabriel Schemmer. Member of the Central City Chapter, No. 134, D.O.E.M. Reposing at the Midway Chapel, 180 Country Lane. Religious and fraternal services yesterday at 8 p.m. Cremation today at *Flame on the Heath* Crematorium at 4:30 p.m.

Henry ran a circle round the name of Anna Schemmer and jammed the newssheet into his pocket as he checked his watch.

Ten of four.

He had never read an obituary column before in his life. Somehow, if he had ever thought about it at all, it had been almost impossible to imagine a pretty young woman ever being old enough to die. Or being old. Or *looking* old.

He tried to recall seeing really old women on the streets, at social functions, at work, anywhere at all. He had never seen any. There were the well-preserved middle-agers, like his Psychemother. But they were so well preserved you could scarcely tell the difference.

Vaguely he remembered hearing something—maybe seventy years ago or so, about the retirement homes for the really aging women.

Pride!

So much emphasis placed on youth and beauty, a woman wouldn't be seen in public if she were really old. She didn't have to work, run the important industrial wheels of the world. She just had to stay young and pretty. When the job got to be too difficult, she went away into retirement. Into the woods somewhere to hide. Out of sight, out of mind.

That was the way it was presented anyway.

So they did get old and die. Naturally. Of course. But by this time, Jeanette should be showing her age. Just a little. Maybe life-expectancy for women was increasing that fast. That kind of ratio accumulation could fool you. Like that one about moving a penny from one square of a chess board to the next, doubling it each time. After a few squares it became a fantastic figure. . . .

But Henry felt awfully good about that woman dying.

And I'd like, he thought, to see one of those sanitariums for old women too. He relished the thought.

I sure would like to see an old ladies' home.

He wanted to see an old lady dead too.

Anna Schemmer.

The Flame on the Heath resembled a small temple in the middle of a well-kept green lawn surrounded by winter trees ten miles out of Central City. The grass was continuing to be green because of warm pipes under the ground.

Henry dropped his heliocar on the small lot to the right of the temple. His hands were shaking as he sat there, hesitating about getting out and going any farther. It was almost 4:30. He felt this cold space opening in his stomach. And all the way out to the Flame on the Heath, he had felt this eerie sensation of eyes on him. Now he felt that somehow he was being watched from the line of bleak trees near the temple.

Maybe it was only his imagination. But the fact was that he felt that what he was trying to find out was very dangerous for him to know. That even the search was dangerous. If it had been covered up so well, then it was important for it to remain covered up.

Or on the other hand, maybe he was just pushing everything, blowing things up, trying to rationalize being replaced and put on the shelf. Maybe he just couldn't take the indignity. Maybe the fact that he couldn't see it

as much else but an indignity was his misfortune, and he had to justify it. Paranoia.

Assuming he was being maltreated and horribly put-upon, he could then go ahead and build up the justification for his own distortions.

His knees seemed dangerously insubstantial as he got out of the heliocar, walked across the grass, up the steps and into the Crematorium. A small flame burned from a taper in the wall.

An old man, a very old man, shuffled toward him and behind the old man, Henry could see the table with wheels on the legs, and the body lying on it under a silver lamé sheet.

Near the body was a door and beyond the door was the furnace.

The old man came up close and peered up into Henry's face. He was bent with some distortion of aging bones, and his eyes were watery. His white uniform was soiled at the knees and down the front of the jacket.

"You here to meditate maybe?" the old man asked.

"No."

"Some of the fellas come here to meditate."

"I came to look at Anna Schemmer. I missed the services yesterday. She was a dear friend of mine."

"Go on. Look," the old man said. "She goes in the fire in about three minutes. I like to keep things on schedule."

The old man slid his feet across the mosaic tile floor and pulled the silver lamé down to expose the face of Anna Schemmer. With his back to the old man so that his vision was cut off from the dead woman's face, Henry looked down at it.

It was old all right. Old enough to satisfy any kind of bitter and vindictive desire. It was like wax, with spots of artificial pinkness in the puckered cheeks, and a million wrinkles around the eyes and mouth. The hair was pure

white and the hands folded over the chest were almost transparent.

Standing there, Henry felt the seconds expanding like swollen hours. The taper flame shivered. A wind seemed to whistle through him. Finally, quickly, he touched her face, then jerked his hand away.

The fear rolled up into nausea.

"What's the matter?" the old man asked.

Words dried like clay in Henry's mouth. He forced himself around as the old man shrugged and started wheeling the table toward the furnace room door. And he stumbled down the steps and toward the heliocar.

It was a good job. It looked real enough. Its looks would fool any one. Even the feel of it was good. But that wouldn't fool everybody. It would fool that old attendant of the Flame on the Heath. It would fool most people. But Henry worked for the Company that manufactured that particular kind of fleshine. It didn't quite have the feel of real flesh, even dead flesh.

It wasn't Anna Schemmer's corpse. It wasn't anyone's corpse. It was fleshine, artificial flesh, that was now drifting up into the evening atmosphere in an almost invisible gas.

So Anna Schemmer wasn't really dead.

It was more than a possibility, Henry thought, that Anna Schemmer wasn't even old.

But the name would be dead now, he thought. Anna Schemmer is now someone else. He knew. He didn't have to inquire to check it. He knew that the Bureau of Vital Statistics handling birth certificates, deaths, and so forth would be staffed by naive young men who didn't question what seemed to be obvious. And women. Pretty, vital, ardent and alive young women.

If he did call to find out certain things he would be told that they would check and give him the information later.

As he headed the helio for home, fear jumbled his brain into numbed inefficiency. He felt full of dry and airless space. And his eyes stared into a dubious gray horizon. And he felt it all rushing toward him like an overwhelming cloud—the lost, overlapping boundaries of the years.

CHAPTER VI

The Diary

The country house of Henry Joad was dark. Larry had not gotten home yet. Jeanette had said she would be late because of beauty appointments.

Henry had the house all to himself.

The numbing shadows that had hung over Henry's brain were lifting. There was this strange fearful excitement that kept driving him, pulling him. He had parked the helio a quarter of a mile from the house and took a roundabout way to the house, then watched it for fifteen minutes.

Certain now that there was no one else hiding around there, he still felt that he was being followed, watched, kept under strict observation.

He slipped down the hall toward Jeanette's bedroom. Once he thought he heard a whirring sound just outside. When he rushed to the hall window and looked out, he could see nothing but the moonlight on the empty swimming pool, the leafless brush, and the bare black limbs of trees.

The moonlight was in Jeanette's room too, slanting and frail. Outside the window it lay like soft carpeting.

Standing in the perfumed air in the moonlight of her room, Henry remembered many other things that, psychologically he knew now, it had been easier to forget.

A number of years back he and Jeanette had taken separate rooms. That had been the beginning. But like everything else, happening so gradually and with seeming naturalness that it hadn't seemed to have meant anything at the time. But now he remembered just when that decision had been made, with appropriate preliminary counselling from women marital harmony experts, and executed finally with a blasé air denoting maturity and sophistication. Since then, with a gentle gradualness, sex had degenerated into only a mild and ever less frequent routine.

Now the pain he had felt then and many times after that, but which he had been unable to admit to consciousness, surged up in him, gorging his throat.

Now he felt the embarrassment, the humiliation he had not allowed himself to feel before. Now he could feel. He had nothing to lose now. Now he was already discarded, a ghost that could remember the living times.

He stood surrounded by ghosts, suppressed moments of anguished indignity. Those times when, because of contrast, he had been vaguely conscious of his age, his general inadequacy in the presence of eager but condescending but always sympathetic youth.

The anguish cushioned and repressed by little jokes and an attitude of buffoonery. Kind, understanding Jeanette never seemed to notice. Not caring really because someday he could be replaced.

Now, looking back, that hurt Henry the most. That pretended unawareness of his humiliation, the groveling buffoonery.

Feminine shadows parted as he moved with breathless caution across the room. He switched on the pink-shaded lamp that softly laved the rows of varied-colored per-

fumes, the bottles and jars. Charts on the wall too. Beauty charts.

He moved toward her little ivory desk. She had needed a desk. Ledgers, office machines. Keeping beautiful and young was a business. A full-time job. Financed by the profits of men in other kinds of business. Every woman in business for herself.

Charts, reminders of appointments, everything scheduled and bracketed for beautifying routines. Something about the room now seemed as bitter and close as mint under glass. Full and inscrutable as the feminine idea.

He broke open the desk with a poker from the fireplace. He broke open several drawers. And then he found them. The diaries in the bottom drawer. Fumblingly he checked the dates first, the years.

The earliest diary notation was 814 years ago. September 5, 1956.

He picked one of the leather books up at random. It was 600 years old.

SATURDAY—Having a Dega Oil Treatment to keep scalp and hair in condition. Morgan knows how to massage the scalp. And with that new oil, the results are certain. I was really *scared*!

SUNDAY—Not going out tonight, so thought I'd give myself a thorough home manicure. I've a new polish that matches my lipstick.

MONDAY—I must decide how I'm going to wear my hair with the new hat. Morgan says my waves will fall in place better if I plan hair style and have my hair cut in advance of the wave. Poor Everett. Poor old sweet Everett. He looked so tired last night. I must do everything I can to cheer him up. I found a wonderful *young man* at the banquet last night. I guess he'll be moving in one of these days soon. Everett's worked so hard all these years. I'll enjoy taking care of him in his declining years.

TUESDAY—The new posture guide came in today. Morgan urged me to go right to work on it, even though my posture is still nearly perfect. Ounce of prevention you know, Morgan said. Must give 15 minutes a day to exercise, then taper off after six months. Everett's so proud of me!

Henry sank deeper into the pink ruffled chair under the coral pink glow of the lamp.

He thumbed through the dead-alive monody of a woman's years. He skipped a couple of hundred of them and opened another diary. But the song remained the same. No ups or downs. No variations. Just a change of men, and there it was going on and on. A woman's world.

THURSDAY—Noticed my hands today. I got panicky. Will use more of the Alpha Lotion after my immersion in water. Bought a fragrant hand cream from The Dalsan Company. Highly recommended by my new beautician, Barton. Barton's not so good as Morgan was. But he's young and will improve. Morgan wasn't so efficient either during those last declining days of his. Poor dear.

FRIDAY—I took my beauty-angle treatment before the girls arrived for the D.O.E.M. meeting. The President, Therisa R., finally has gotten me to accept an office in the Daughters. I'm glad now. I know now that I'll always stay young and lovely to look at and heaven to kiss! 15 minutes in bed with feet against the headboard. Rests face so much. And exercises teaches me to keep on sitting and standing without fatigue.

SATURDAY—Hiked to the woods with dear old Hal. So sweet. My feet in such good shape that I could hike all day. But Hal's showing his age, poor darling. A pedicure is a *must* for me from now on. No more foot aches to spoil Hal's outings. But one has to be

careful not to make *them* hike too much. He looks so tired sometimes, but everything should be done so that he never thinks about it. I must make him forget. Therisa says the Psychemothers will take care of that pretty well. I was just made one of the Senior Secretaries of the D.O.E.M. They were thinking of changing the name of the Club, but decided not to. I think Daughters of Eternal Matriarchy is rather flowery. But they voted the name to stay.

SUNDAY—My pedicures are taking effect. My six daily appointments at the Clinics are getting more streamlined. Barton has everything balanced so one hardly realizes one spends so much time making oneself lovely to look at. But the men need it. It gives them the strength to go on.

Somewhere Henry seemed to hear the anxious winter calling down the night. The letters blurred slightly. A universe, an insular little world all one woman's own. He skipped many years. He was getting more up to date now. But the song remained the same. Only the names, the actors, were any different.

MONDAY—My new beautician, Pascal, gave us a wonderful new machineless method to fix the hair and scalp today. It takes much less time than any I've ever had, and no dull ache in the head either. Joady Bear should be glad. But no use telling him what trouble *we* go through to be attractive and an asset to his social and business career. Why right after this new machineless method, I can be chipper and go right out to a party. Must pick up some new Preservolotion—

WEDNESDAY—O, dear! My back and legs hurt a little from stooping. Panicked me until I remembered Pascal's advice about the constant need for the Youtho-Bubble Injections. Lord, there's so much one must remember in order to stay lovely and

young. What a job it is to remain worthy of their love.

Henry's eyes dug at the hazy moonlight beyond the glass walls. Probed beyond the patio and misty mirrors toward the distant hills of autumn. A sound filtered in. And something somewhere shifted with a clothly scratch.

FRIDAY—Found a new pinky-red shade of lipstick Pascal told me to try. Has harmonizing rouge and nail polish. I feel like a new girl since I tried out the new young *Man* last night. Larry's a wonderful lover, and he'll be a good provider too. I still think though, that of all of them, old Joady Bear was the best. So far anyway. I'll hate to see old Joady Bear go. He's been so sweet and thoughtful and plodding. I know he'll take replacement well.

SATURDAY—Off for a two-day vacation with Larry. Joady Bear has to work. I haven't told him I'm taking Larry in yet. I'll tell him in a few days.

SUNDAY—Pascal advised the new cosmetic kit when I told him Larry wanted to spend another weekend roughing it. Pascal pointed out how one mustn't miss a day! Sometimes I'd like to take a vacation, just forget how I look, feel, act! And if it weren't for Joady Bear and Larry needing me, needing my youth and vitality—

TUESDAY—Gorgeous day at the Club Pool. Felt awfully smart in my new playclothes, and glad I took the Sunoilo, the new Preservoil Pascal told me about. Maybe it's the new year's beauty plan, but something has made me feel better and younger than I've ever felt before. Maybe it's Larry—he's so ardent and demanding—

Henry stood up. He put the diaries back and closed the desk drawers. Shut the drawers tight on the unending calender of self-beautification, and self-justification. The story of a woman's life. A wife's life. A lifetime of devo-

tion, sacrificing old age and maybe whatever was supposed to lie beyond.

The moon through the windows gave them a soft yet cynical mirror look of time. A golden haze drifted over the floor. The bed was a flat white ghost beyond the moonlight that seemed to assume the thick texture of tired gold melting.

He thought he could hear Jeanette's eager bright young laughter calling to him from a thousand different doorways of so many yesterdays, peering out at him with different expressions on her face, her body in different postures. But always the same.

He backed toward the door. The room was still again. Nothing there. Only shadows and dust dancing in the near dark.

As he went into his study and got the Protector gun from his desk, he felt the pain at the base of his skull grinding and hot. He felt the waves of hopelessness so giddy and incomprehensible that it was almost like exhilaration, and he heard a noise—half-chuckle, half-groan—escape from between his labored breaths.

It had been many years since he had even so much as thought of the Protector. But its deadly charge was still effective enough. Time didn't change that any either. Few laws to be broken, practically no motivation for breaking them.

Then Henry slipped cautiously out a side window and dropped into the dry and brittle brush. He crouched, listening, looking through the moonlight. Maybe he was wrong. But he felt that they were watching him, that they would get him now. They may not have found out how much he suspected and knew, but they knew he was looking. He guessed that that was enough. Stupidly, blindly, he had made it clear enough that he was overly curious.

He walked through the woods, looking back, stopping now and then to listen, startled at the cracking of a dry branch, or the rustling of dry leaves.

Blood knocked angrily at his temples and behind his eyes. His knees and thighs, unaccustomed to so much pounding, were stiff and fatigued. He walked cramped and aching, stooped and bent over, and then his kidneys were aching as if they had been pounded with a mallet and he walked along with his hands on his waist.

His mind slipped off into fevered chaos and vagrant jigsaw images.

He had checked the register to be sure and he managed to keep up a plodding stubborn straight line across the shadowed fields and woods toward Pascal's house.

CHAPTER VII

Too Late For Eternity

He found the house pushed back into the hill, an intriguing note of organic architecture hardly distinguishable from nature. Dry leaves rustled as he walked nearer the pale light. When a gust of wind grabbed at his toupee and kicked it away among the drifting leaves, he never looked after it, nor even thought about his toupee again.

The glass panel slid back. Henry peered into the comforting soft light of the living room. A shadow slipped over the floor. A table suspended from rafters by three invisible wires held a goblet and two stained glasses.

"Come on in, Joad."

Henry stepped deeper into the room and half turned.

"You're Pascal?" The thin pale old man who sat by the window sipping a drink nodded.

"Hello, Joad." He was the tight gaunt kind so that it would be hard to figure exactly how old Pascal was. But he was old. His head was hairless, and puffy eyes blinked at Henry as the man got up, poured some wine into a glass from the goblet and handed the glass to Henry. "A para-ice, Joad?"

Henry declined. "You expecting me, or maybe someone else?"

Pascal put the glass back down on the table. "You. Doctor Marian told me. She had an idea you would end up here sooner or later. She gave me a precautionary buzz. The Mothers do a good job too. We're all in it, in one way or another."

Henry lifted the Protector. In defeat he knew at last that he would not be despondent, that he would retain one violent shred of life which would sustain him to the end—his fury.

Pascal didn't seem concerned. "You going to kill me, Joad?"

Henry nodded.

"Why?"

"You're one of the beauticians. You help them stay young."

"Go ahead, burn me. You don't have much time left anyway. And maybe it'll make you die a little easier too. Go ahead, Joad."

"Why do you help them, Pascal? You're a man—or look like one anyway."

Pascal shrugged. "You know all the answers by now, or most of them. Why ask me?"

"Maybe there's some things I don't know."

"Lots of things, but they don't matter now. Listen, Joad. God knows when it really started. I don't. You don't. Maybe even the ladies don't know. It raised a big

stink back in the 1950's. But they never really could isolate the reason why women kept living longer and longer than men. And then the Third World War—kaput. There weren't enough men left to do anything about it even if they could isolate the cause. The woman took over. They handled the statistics, they did the psyching. But there's the psychological angle, that's the most important. The man's world failed. The women lost all dependency or respect for men. A lot of those women wouldn't have anything to do with men at all. They took it over, everything. You've got to get that into your head, hard! *They took over everything, Joad!*"

"Not me, not entirely."

"Maybe not, but that little difference makes no difference. After that war, men were so damn grateful for the women they couldn't question much of anything. People might have thought it would be the other way. Three women to every man. Women fighting over the men. Huh-uh, Joad. Man was a marked minority and he was treated like one. You know all that. Why give me a sore throat repeating it?"

"Because I want to do something about it!"

"You're just one of the few rebels left. Once in a while there's one like you. But it's a dead end, Joad. Nothing you can do. No place you can go."

"There's more to it than that, Pascal. It's more now than the women just living longer. They live a lot longer. How much longer, Pascal?"

"How should I know?" Pascal tried to laugh. "They live a helluva long time. If it's five hundred years or forever, what's that to me? I'll be dead anyway."

"I can tell you, Pascal. Now I know. *They never die. They're immortal.*"

"Maybe. You sure of that?"

"They don't die or get old at all. That old lady—Anna

Schemmer—I went to see at the Crematorium. It wasn't a real corpse. It was artificial."

"So—" Pascal said. "They never die. Women are immortal. So what? We get old. We die. Maybe they're lucky. Maybe not. I have my doubts. But after I go up in smoke, will I care?"

"What does it, Pascal? The beauty treatments? Cosmetics?"

"Maybe that's part of it. Hormones, God knows what else in those cosmetics. But men never started using them soon enough maybe. And after a while it was too late. It got into the cellular process itself, maybe a kind of mutation. Maybe the atomic war pushed nature a little faster. But it was already going that way, Joad. Can't you see that? *Nature was already going that way*. Women living longer and longer. There was only one end to it, and this is it. Is nature really supposed to make sense in the long run?"

"They've been keeping immortality from us!"

"Look Joad. It's evolution. Men are just on the way out! There's a central core, a ruling body of women behind the scenes, and they really run the show. They've been helping push evolution a little too, helping it along. No—I don't know who they are or where they are and I don't give a damn either!"

"I want to know who they are, Pascal!"

"Who cares?"

"I care. We all ought to care!" Joad yelled. "They're killing us off, Pascal! They control the maternity wards. We never see our own kids. We never know who survives and who doesn't, how many are males and how many are females. They handle the bureaus of vital statistics, births and deaths! They've used us this far, they've needed us for a few things. But they're slowly getting rid of us!"

"That's right. But Joad, believe me, I don't care!"

Henry Joad jerked his head toward the window and the brittle October moonlight. "They've got the secret of immortality and they're keeping it from us. So that makes them the worst bitches that have ever lived, and will never die."

"I'm not arguing with you, Joad. They've needed men for certain jobs, for sexual gymnastics, for breeding purposes. But they've been weaning themselves, or weaning us; one way or the other, they're getting rid of us. I agree. A little while longer and they won't need any of us, Joad. Maybe they'll keep a few of the young ones on hand as a kind of souvenir."

Pascal sat down heavily. "They keep the facts pretty much buried because they don't want to be annoyed by a few old boys stirring up some dust. Any time we old birds start getting wise, seeing through the false fronts, the Psychemothers go to work on us, cleansing the unconscious, putting the lids on dreams, giving us the hypo three times a week."

Pascal looked up, and shrugged. A ghastly kind of humorless grin slid over his face. "You're not the first rebel, but you may be one of the last. We're out of the swim now, Joad. All of us. The young who've been conditioned and processed and who don't know it. And some of us old horses who do know it, but who can't do anything about it."

"We ought to do something about it!" Henry yelled. He felt a kind of electric shock in his neck. His hands tingled.

"Maybe we helped too, Joad. Maybe we did most of it ourselves. We damn near wiped ourselves out with cobalt bombs. So maybe now it's just a question of admitting we're dead. Man and his machines, his bombs and spaceships, his hell-bomb rockets, his hammers and pistons pounding out death, his aggressiveness. He built them all

up and maybe that's what's really done it, Joad. Part of evolution. Part of nature's process."

Pascal put his arm over Henry's shoulder. "Go ahead," he said softly. "But look at it this way, think about this. Remember that a long time back—thousands of years back—society was largely a matriarchy. Ruled by women. No science yet, no mutation, they needed men for breeding and a little fun once in a while. But the women ran the temples of worship, they ran the home, the kids carried the mother's name, not the man's. Women were the Earth Goddesses, and men crawled and rooted around in the earth, planted his seed, and crawled on his way, grateful for a place to sleep on a rainy night.

"Men were just studs going from village to village. Finally they got old and died and no one gave a damn. Well, this is about the same thing. Only we haven't been traveling anywhere except through time, Joad. We were young and we serviced the women. We got older and we built up wealth and security for them, and kept on breeding until now maybe they don't even need that any more, so we get old and wander away into whatever death is. Now they've probably got a good method of artificial parthenogenesis, or they would be having more of the young men around. Look at evolution with a long-range telescope, Joad. And who then is to say what's right or wrong? But go ahead and hate them if it makes you feel any better. Go ahead and kill them. But remember, Joad, it's too late. For us, it's too late for eternity."

CHAPTER VIII

Henry Joad, Retired

Henry Joad walked carefully along the outside of the wall. Once in a while he stopped, listened, tried to make out whether or not anyone was home. He peered through the opened gate and then he saw the faint glow of light in Jeanette's bedroom window.

I'll kill them, he thought. *I'd kill them all if I had the time.*

He had that much coming to him anyway. A good healthy unimpeded hate. One good strong positive feeling and action before they set fire to him. He had worked like a damn horse all his life to provide a home and give Jeanette whatever it was she needed him for. He'd never done anything more exciting for 125 years than play Dingo on Saturday nights.

God how he hated them now, those young beautiful bitches!

Immortal. Not only young and beautiful and vital and vibrantly alive. But they would always be that way. There weren't really any old ladies' homes because there weren't any old ladies. All a damn lie! The death notices were phony because the women never died. He was sure that there weren't any little girls in those Schools either. And that there hadn't been for a long time. Just less and less men being conditioned and processed for a role becoming less important every hour.

He peered in through Jeanette's bedroom. He could

see their bodies there in the shadows, locked and whispering together, moving like a slow fire.

He ducked back as though burned. The tension mounted. He felt the sweat burst out over his skin.

He stumbled back, back, and then the hate surged in him and he started to run toward the windows. He felt the flower box smash into his thigh, heard the ripping sound as he toppled over it and the flower box crashed into the swimming pool.

A panicky wash of blood came to his face as he blundered into the brush, and crouched there, his breath coming hard, a tormented beast in the cul-de-sac, a thing of baffled fury and grief, on the edge of defeat he could never admit.

Dimly he heard the windows opening, and Jeanette's eager voice, bright as sunlight, dancing over the moon-cooled chrome.

"YOOO—HOOO! That you, Joady Bear?"

He raised the Protector gun. She moved out and stood in the moonlight. He could see Larry moving up beside her, tall and lithe-moving, and his eager voice followed hers, probing about in the brush for Joady Bear.

"Hey, Joady. That you!"

Henry felt intolerably hot suddenly, with a heat that he attributed to his burning hatred.

"Bunny," he whispered. "Snuggle-bunny—"

She came toward him, past the glass walls across the patio, past the empty pool, bouncing all full of health over the mosaic tile, slipping like a young and eager animal among the leaves turning brown and the crisping vines as though toward some elaborate lair.

She wore the peasant blouse, swirling in the moonlight, an off-the-shoulder blouse, very low. He saw the firm high swell of her breasts. She peered closer through the shadows where Henry crouched in the brush.

"That is you, isn't it, Joady Bear?"

He moved back a little more into the protective bushes. Larry came toward him too, his white teeth shining. "Hey, Joady. You okay?"

She came closer. She reached in and down and patted his head like she would an old and whimpering dog. His heart was going too loud, he thought, it would break. It was too old to sound so loud.

Her lips were caressing his face as she pulled him from the bushes. "Don't worry now, Joady. We'll take care of you. You won't be lonely."

"Sure," Larry said. "Come on in and let's play Dingo!"

"Don't be blue, Joady Bear," Jeanette said. "Come inside where it's warm."

Sure. She had always thought of him, she had said, always kept herself up for him, including always looking her best no matter what the situation. She had always looked so bright, fresh, clean, cool, calm, prettier and prettier all the time. Smiling all through the years. And killing him. Killing all of them.

The pretty, pretty smiler with the knife.

He slipped deeper into the brush. He was afraid now of what he was going to have to do.

"Come on, Joady now," she said, tugging at his arm.

The moonlight shone on her smile. It flashed on and off like neon. It didn't look like a human face, he thought. Trying to analyze it, measure it, you wouldn't have seen anything wrong with the smile. But somehow it seemed odd and twisted, there was something horrible about it, because the expression didn't mean anything, if it ever had.

Henry came alive like a somnambulist abruptly knocked out of sleep. He lunged forward out of the brush with a wild and tormented scream. Jeanette fell back. He ran toward her, raising the Protector like a

club. He saw the stunned hurt look of confusion on Larry's face, and then he swung. He heard the thud and saw Larry's face sliding out of sight and heard him scratching and moaning down there in the bottom of the dry swimming pool.

He felt the sharp bitter pain somewhere inside him as he grabbed Jeanette and his breath was wheezing in his chest as he dragged her through the brush. His toupee was gone. His magno-dentures had come loose and he spat them away.

She stared up into his face and screamed. She was on her knees, her head bobbing between her shoulders. Her face was all white and twisting as she stared up at Henry. For a long time he stood there. He could hear a dog barking somewhere over the fields.

Jeanette's voice broke into crooning terror, then into sobs. He heard a scraping on concrete. Like something half dead coming out of the ground, Larry's blood-smearred face waggled up over the edge of the pool. His body wriggled out onto the side and he started climbing slowly and heavily to his feet.

"What's the matter with you, Joady?" Larry whispered. "You ought not to do a thing like that. You've been like a father to me, Joady—"

"We'll take care of you, Joady," Jeanette whispered. "I love you. I want to care for you now. Larry does too."

Henry stumbled back, a ponderous motion which resembled that of a man wretchedly spastic. They were ignorant of it all. Larry had never had a chance to learn any better. And Jeanette couldn't allow herself even to wonder about how Joady might feel about it.

Maybe a lot of the women didn't really realize how it was. They just took it all for granted. They just went along with it, glad to be young and healthy, alive, glad they would stay alive.

Do I envy them really, Joad asked himself? *Do they*

have anything in their heads to live forever for? They've spent all their lives staying beautiful, and living forever, but with what? How will their breasts look when no men are around to see?

Live forever? Joad shook his head. He'd never known a one of them ever to take any time out from being young and beautiful really to live.

They were right anyway. They had all crossed over into another time. Maybe Jeanette, maybe all of them were incapable of feeling or seeing things the way old Joady and a few other old men were seeing and feeling things now.

Henry felt as though he had awakened on another planet. Who felt pity for the dinosaurs that became extinct? It was better for the women, perhaps, that even the tender miracle of pity was unknown.

Henry backed farther away until their images blurred and he leaned against the rock wall and dropped the Protector on the ground. He chuckled a little. Then he laughed a while.

It was all theirs. Let them have it and live forever in it. Larry, you poor devil, you'll be in service for a while, but you'll have your day in hell, too. And Jeanette—he had seen into her world, sterile and meaningless, going on and on. And he was glad to get out of that one, too.

He turned and stumbled off out through the gate and into the woods, climbing the hill in the moonlight beyond the house. Deep in the woods somewhere he was still laughing a little.

And then he saw the figure standing there. A shaft of moonlight came through the skeletal trees and he saw that it was a woman. He saw the glint of metal in her hand. He had known he was being followed, watched. All the time they had been waiting for him.

They didn't want old Joady Bear stirring up any inconveniences.

Henry laughed again as he started running. Not because he was afraid. But because he could feel the pain starting in his heart, and he knew that this time he could only run a little way. And he was right.

He felt the pain clenching his chest inside, shutting off air, sending him into the leaves curled up with pain like a child.

He could see her face vaguely, cold and impersonal and he heard her say, "So now you find out."

She was young, young and very pretty, Henry thought. She raised the gun and pointed it at his head.

"You don't need to do that," Henry gasped. He felt his strength already gone. And he could no longer maintain himself on the slight incline and he started sliding down into the gully.

"You don't need to do that, lady." He could barely speak. "I'm already retired."

She lowered the gun. Somewhere below in the darkness, he could hear the whispering of water over stones.

The spasm in his chest seemed to wrench his soul apart and he closed his eyes and gave way to it. Dimly he heard the dying sound of his life throbbing away.

And he was still laughing.

This last thing they had not done for him.

He was already retired. He had managed it for himself. He could feel the dead dry leaves swirling around him as he rolled downward into the night.

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