MACFADDEN
MB
BOOKS
50-244

50c

When man masters time and the planets, can he solve the terrifying new problems he will bring on himself?

THE 6 FINGERS OF TIME

and five other science-fiction novellas from *Galaxy* Magazine

EXPLORE
THE LIMITS
OF THE
UNIVERSE . . .

with these far-ranging stories that introduce you to:

- **A place ruled by THE SIX FINGERS OF TIME, where a man grows old while time stands still.**
- **A PRIDE OF ISLANDS where people are still human sized, but the rest of the world has grown so large they are as powerless as fleas.**
- **An overproductive civilization where there would be no work and no purpose in life without the periodic destruction by THE JUNKMAKERS.**
- **An Earth that is the happy hunting ground for outer-space monsters, where man is a SITTING DUCK lured relentlessly to his doom.**

THE 6 FINGERS OF TIME

and other stories

MB
A MACFADDEN-BARTELL BOOK

THE 6 FINGERS OF TIME

and Other Stories

MB

A MACFADDEN-BARTELL BOOK

THIS IS A MACFADDEN ORIGINAL
NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED IN BOOK FORM

A MACFADDEN BOOK 1965

MACFADDEN BOOKS are published by
Macfadden-Bartell Corporation
205 East 42nd Street, New York, New York, 10017

THIS IS A MACFADDEN ORIGINAL
NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED IN BOOK FORM

A MACFADDEN BOOK

First printing.....April 1965
Second printing.....October 1969

Macfadden-Bartell Corporation
A subsidiary of Bartell Media Corporation
205 East 42nd Street, New York, New York 10017

CONTENTS

THE SIX FINGERS OF TIME

R. A. *Lafferty*

He began by breaking things that morning. He broke the glass of water on his night stand. He knocked it crazily against the opposite wall and shattered it. Yet it shattered slowly. This would have surprised him if he had been fully awake, for he had only reached out sleepily for it.

Nor had he wakened regularly to his alarm; he had wakened to a weird, slow, low booming, yet the clock said six, time for the alarm. And the low boom, when it came again, seemed to come from the clock.

He reached out and touched it gently, but it floated off the stand at his touch and bounced around slowly on the floor. And when he picked it up again it had stopped, nor would shaking start it.

He checked the electric clock in the kitchen. This also said six o'clock, but the sweep hand did not move. In his living room the radio clock said six, but the second hand seemed stationary.

"But the lights in both rooms work," said Vincent. "How are the clocks stopped? Are they on a separate circuit?"

He went back to his bedroom and got his wristwatch. It also said six; and its sweep hand did not sweep.

"Now this could get silly. What is it that would stop both mechanical and electrical clocks?"

He went to the window and looked out at the clock on the Mutual Insurance Building. It said six o'clock, and the second hand did not move.

"Well, it is possible that the confusion is not limited to myself. I once heard the fanciful theory that a cold shower

will clear the mind. For me it never has, but I will try it. I can always use cleanliness for an excuse."

The shower didn't work. Yes, it did: the water came now, but not like water; like very slow syrup that hung in the air. He reached up to touch it there hanging down and stretching. And it shattered like glass when he touched it and drifted in fantastic slow globs across the room. But it had the feel of water, wet and pleasantly cool. And in a quarter of a minute or so it was down over his shoulders and back, and he luxuriated in it. He let it soak his head and it cleared his wits at once.

"There is not a thing wrong with me. I am fine. It is not my fault that the water is slow this morning and other things awry."

He reached for the towel and it tore to pieces in his hands like porous wet paper.

Now he became very careful in the way he handled things. Slowly, tenderly, and deftly he took them so that they would not break. He shaved himself without mishap in spite of the slow water in the lavatory also.

Then he dressed himself with the greatest caution and cunning, breaking nothing except his shoe laces, a thing that is likely to happen at any time.

"If there is nothing the matter with me, than I will check and see if there is anything seriously wrong with the world. The dawn was fairly along when I looked out, as it should have been. Approximately twenty minutes have passed; it is a clear morning; the sun should now have hit the top several stories of the Insurance Building."

But it had not. It was a clear morning, but the dawn had not brightened at all in the twenty minutes. And that big clock still said six. It had not changed.

Yet it had changed, and he knew it with a queer feeling. He pictured it as it had been before. The hour and the minute hand had not moved noticeably. But the second hand had moved. It had moved a third of the dial.

So he pulled up a chair to the window and watched it. He realized that, though he could not see it move, yet it did make progress. He watched it for perhaps five minutes. It moved through a space of perhaps five seconds.

"Well, that is not my problem. It is that of the clock maker, either a terrestrial or a celestial one."

But he left his rooms without a good breakfast, and he left them very early. How did he know that it was early since there was something wrong with the time? Well, it was early at least according to the sun and according to the clocks, neither of which institutions seemed to be working properly.

He left without a good breakfast because the coffee would not make and the bacon would not fry. And in plain point of fact the fire would not heat. The gas flame came from the pilot light like a slowly spreading stream or an unfolding flower. Then it burned far too steadily. The skillet remained cold when placed over it; nor would water even heat. It had taken at least five minutes to get the water out of the faucet in the first place.

He ate a few pieces of leftover bread and some scraps of meat.

In the street there was no motion, no real motion. A truck, first seeming at rest, moved very slowly. There was no gear in which it could move so slowly. And there was a taxi which crept along, but Charles Vincent had to look at it carefully for some time to be sure that it was in motion. Then he received a shock. He realized by the early morning light that the driver of it was dead. Dead with his eyes wide open!

Slowly as it was going, and by whatever means it was moving, it should really be stopped. He walked over to it, opened the door, and pulled on the brake. Then he looked into the eyes of the dead man. Was he really dead? It was hard to be sure. He felt warm. But, even as Vincent looked, the eyes of the dead man had begun to close. And close they did and open again in a matter of about twenty seconds.

This was weird. The slowly closing and opening eyes sent a chill through Vincent. And the dead man had begun to lean forward in his seat. Vincent put a hand in the middle of the man's chest to hold him upright, but he found the forward pressure as relentless as it was slow. He was unable to keep the dead man up.

So he let him go, watching curiously; and in a few seconds the driver's face was against the wheel. But it was almost as if it had no intention of stopping there. It pressed into the wheel with dogged force. He would surely break his face. Vincent took several holds on the dead man and counteracted the pressure somewhat. Yet the face was being damaged, and if things were normal, blood would have flowed.

The man had been dead so long however, that (though he was still warm) his blood must have congealed, for it was fully two minutes before it began to ooze.

"Whatever I have done, I have done enough damage," said Vincent. "And, in whatever nightmare I am in, I am likely to do further harm if I meddle more. I had better leave it alone."

He walked on down the morning street. Yet whatever vehicles he saw were moving with an incredible slowness, as though driven by some fantastic gear reduction. And there were people here and there frozen solid. It was a chilly morn-

ing, but it was not that cold. They were immobile in positions of motion, as though they were playing the children's game of Statues.

"How is it," said Charles Vincent, "that this young girl (who I believe works across the street from us) should have died standing up and in full stride? But, no. She is not dead. Or, if so, she died with a very alert expression. And—oh, my God, she's doing it too!"

For he realized that the eyes of the girl were closing, and in the space of no more than a quarter of a second they had completed their cycle and were open again. Also, and this was even stranger, she had moved, moved forward in full stride. He would have timed her if he could, but how could he when all the clocks were crazy? Yet she must have been taking about two steps a minute.

He went into the cafeteria. The early morning crowd that he had often watched through the windows was there. The girl who made flapjacks in the window had just flipped one and it hung in the air. Then it floated over as if caught by a slight breeze, and sank slowly down as if settling in water.

The breakfasters, like the people in the street, were all dead in this new way, moving with almost imperceptible motion. And all had apparently died in the act of drinking coffee, eating eggs, or munching toast. And if there were only time enough, there was even a chance that they would get the drinking, eating, and munching done with, for there was the shadow of movement in them all.

The cashier had the register drawer open and money in her hand, and the hand of the customer was outstretched for it. In time, somewhere in the new leisurely time, the hands would come together and the change be given. And so it happened. It may have been a minute and a half, or two minutes, or two and a half. It is always hard to judge time, and now it had become all but impossible.

"I am still hungry," said Charles Vincent, "but it would be foolhardy to wait for service here. Should I help myself? They will not mind if they are dead. And if they are not dead, in any case it seems that I am invisible to them."

He wolfed several rolls. He opened a bottle of milk and held it upside down over his glass while he ate another roll. Liquids had all become perversely slow.

But he felt better for his erratic breakfast. He would have paid for it, but how?

He left the cafeteria and walked about the town as it seemed still to be quite early, though one could depend on neither sun nor clock for the time any more. The traffic lights were unchanging. He sat for a long time in a little park and

watched the town and the big clock in the Commerce Building tower; but like all the clocks it was either stopped or the hand would creep too slowly to be seen.

It must have been just about an hour till the traffic lights changed, but change they did at last. By picking a point on the building across the street and watching what moved past it, he found that the traffic did indeed move. In a minute or so, the entire length of a car would pass the given point.

He had, he recalled, been very far behind in his work and it had been worrying him. He decided to go to the office, early as it was or seemed to be.

He let himself in. Nobody else was there. He resolved not to look at the clock and to be very careful of the way he handled all objects because of his new propensity for breaking things. This considered, all seemed normal there. He had said the day before that he could hardly catch up on his work if he put in two days solid. He now resolved at least to work steadily until something happened, whatever it was.

For hour after hour he worked on his tabulations and reports. Nobody else had arrived. Could something be wrong? Certainly something was wrong. But this was not a holiday. That was not it.

Just how long can a stubborn and mystified man plug away at his task? It was hour after hour after hour. He did not become hungry nor particularly tired. And he did get through a lot of work.

"It must be half done. However it has happened, I have caught up on at least a day's work. I will keep on."

He must have continued for another eight or ten hours. He was caught up completely on his back work.

"Well, to some extent I can work into the future. I can head up and carry over. I can put in everything but the figures of the field reports."

And he did so.

"It will be hard to bury me in work again. I could almost coast for a day. I don't even know what day it is, but I must have worked twenty hours straight through and nobody has arrived. Perhaps nobody ever will arrive. If they are moving with the speed of the people in the nightmare outside, it is no wonder they have not arrived."

He put his head down on his arms on the desk. The last thing he saw before he closed his eyes was the misshapen left thumb that he had always tried to conceal a little by the way he handled his hands.

"At least I know that I am still myself. I'd know myself anywhere by that."

Then he went to sleep at his desk.

Jenny came in with a quick click-click-click of high heels, and he wakened to the noise.

"What are you doing dozing at your desk, Mr. Vincent? Have you been here all night?"

"I don't know, Jenny. Honestly I don't."

"I was only teasing. Sometimes when I get here a little early I take a catnap myself."

The clock said six minutes till eight and the second hand was sweeping normally. Time had returned to the world. Or to him. But had all that early morning of his been a dream? Then it had been a very efficient dream. He had accomplished work that he could hardly have done in two days. And it was the same day that it was supposed to be.

He went to the water fountain. The water now behaved normally. He went to the window. The traffic was behaving as it should. Though sometimes slow and sometimes snarled, yet it was in the pace of the regular world.

The other workers arrived. They were not balls of fire, but neither was it necessary to observe them for several minutes to be sure they weren't dead.

"It did have its advantages," Charles Vincent said. "I would be afraid to live with it permanently, but it would be handy to go into for a few minutes a day and accomplish the business of hours. I may be a case for the doctor. But just how would I go about telling a doctor what was bothering me?"

Now it had surely been less than two hours from his first rising till the time that he wakened to the noise of Jenny from his second sleep. And how long that second sleep had been, or in which time enclave, he had no idea. But how account for it all? He had spent a long while in his own rooms, much longer than ordinary in his confusion. He had walked the city mile after mile in his puzzlement. And he had sat in the little park for hours and studied the situation. And he had worked at his own desk for an outlandish long time.

Well, he would go to the doctor. A man is obliged to refrain from making a fool of himself to the world at large, but to his own lawyer, his priest, or his doctor he will sometimes have to come as a fool. By their callings they are restrained from scoffing openly.

Dr. Mason was not particularly a friend. Charles Vincent realized with some unease that he did not have any particular friends, only acquaintances and associates. It was as though he were of a species slightly apart from his fellows. He wished now a little that he had a particular friend.

But Dr. Mason was an acquaintance of some years, had the reputation of being a good doctor, and besides Vincent had now arrived at his office and been shown in. He would

either have to—well, that was as good a beginning as any.

"Doctor, I am in a predicament. I will either have to invent some symptoms to account for my visit here, or make an excuse and bolt, or tell you what is bothering me, even though you will think I am a new sort of idiot."

"Vincent, every day people invent symptoms to cover their visits here, and I know that they have lost their nerve about the real reason for coming. And every day people do make excuses and bolt. But experience tells me that I will get a larger fee if you tackle the third alternative. And, Vincent, there is no new sort of idiot."

Vincent said, "It may not sound so silly if I tell it quickly. I awoke this morning to some very puzzling incidents. It seemed that time itself had stopped, or that the whole world had gone into super-slow motion. The water would neither flow nor boil, and fire would not heat food. The clocks, which I first believed had stopped, crept along at perhaps a minute an hour. The people I met in the streets appeared dead, frozen in lifelike attitudes. And it was only by watching them for a very long time that I perceived that they did indeed have motion. One car I saw creeping slower than the most backward snail, and a dead man at the wheel of it. I went to it, opened the door, and put on the brake. I realized after a time that the man was not dead. But he bent forward and broke his face on the steering wheel. It must have taken a full minute for his head to travel no more than ten inches, yet I was unable to prevent his hitting the wheel. I then did other bizarre things in a world that had died on its feet. I walked many miles through the city, and then I sat for hours in the park. I went to the office and let myself in. I accomplished work that must have taken me twenty hours. I then took a nap at my desk. When I awoke on the arrival of the others, it was six minutes to eight in the morning of the same day, today. Not two hours had passed from my rising, and time was back to normal. But the things that happened in that time could never be compressed into two hours."

"One question first, Vincent. Did you actually accomplish the work of many hours?"

"I did. It was done, and done in that time. It did not become undone on the return of time to normal."

"A second question. Had you been worried about your work, about being behind?"

"Yes. Emphatically."

"Then here is one explanation. You retired last night. But very shortly afterward you arose in a state of somnambulism. There are facets of sleepwalking which we do not at all understand. The time-out-of-focus interludes were parts

of a walking dream of yours. You dressed and went to your office and worked all night. It is possible to do routine tasks in a somnambulistic state rapidly and even feverishly, with an intense concentration—to perform prodigies. You may have fallen into a normal sleep there when you had finished, or you may have been awakened directly from your somnambulistic trance on the arrival of your co-workers. There, that is a plausible and workable explanation. In the case of an apparently bizarre happening, it is always well to have a rational explanation to fall back on. They will usually satisfy a patient and put his mind at rest. But often they do not satisfy me."

"Your explanation very nearly satisfies me, Dr. Mason, and it does put my mind considerably at rest. I am sure that in a short while I will be able to accept it completely. But why does it not satisfy you?"

"One reason is a man I treated early this morning. He had his face smashed, and he had seen—or almost seen—a ghost: a ghost of incredible swiftness that was more sensed than seen. The ghost opened the door of his car while it was going at full speed, jerked on the brake, and caused him to crack his head. This man was dazed and had a slight concussion. I have convinced him that he did not see any ghost at all, that he must have dozed at the wheel and run into something. As I say, I am harder to convince than my patients. But it may have been coincidence."

"I hope so. But you also seem to have another reservation."

"After quite a few years in practice, I seldom see or hear anything new. Twice before I have been told a happening or a dream on the line of what you experienced."

"Did you convince your patients that it was only a dream?"

"I did. Both of them. That is, I convinced them the first few times it happened to them."

"Were they satisfied?"

"At first. Later, not entirely. But they both died within a year of their first coming to me."

"Nothing violent, I hope."

"Both had the gentlest deaths. That of senility extreme."

"Oh. Well, I'm too young for that."

"I would like you to come back in a month or so."

"I will, if the delusion or the dream returns. Or if I do not feel well."

After this Charles Vincent began to forget about the incident. He only recalled it with humor sometimes when again he was behind in his work.

"Well, if it gets bad enough I may do another sleepwalking act and catch up. But if there is another aspect of time and I could enter it at will, it might often be handy."

Charles Vincent never saw his face at all. It is very dark in some of those clubs and the Coq Bleu is like the inside of a tomb. He went to the clubs only about once a month, sometimes after a show when he did not want to go home to bed, sometimes when he was just restless.

Citizens of the more fortunate states may not know of the mysteries of the clubs. In Vincent's the only bars are beer bars, and only in the clubs can a person get a drink, and only members are admitted. It is true that even such a small club as the Coq Bleu had thirty thousand members, and at a dollar a year that is a nice sideline. The little numbered membership cards cost a penny each for the printing, and the member wrote in his own name. But he had to have a card—or a dollar for a card—to gain admittance.

But there could be no entertainments in the clubs. There was nothing there but the little bar room in the near darkness.

The man was there, and then he was not, and then he was there again. And always where he sat it was too dark to see his face.

"I wonder," he said to Vincent (or to the bar at large, though there were no other customers and the bartender was asleep), "I wonder if you have ever read Zurbarin on the Relationship of Extradigitalism to Genius?"

"I have never heard of the work nor of the man," said Vincent. "I doubt if either exists."

"I am Zurbarin," said the man.

Vincent hid his misshapen left thumb. Yet it could not have been noticed in that light, and he must have been crazy to believe there was any connection between it and the man's remark. It was not truly a double thumb. He was not an extradigital, nor was he a genius.

"I refuse to become interested in you," said Vincent. "I am on the verge of leaving. I dislike waking the bartender, but I did want another drink."

"Sooner done than said."

"What is?"

"Your glass is full."

"It is? So it is. Is it a trick?"

"Trick is the name for anything either too frivolous or too mystifying for us to comprehend. But on one long early morning of a month ago, you also could have done the trick, and nearly as well."

"Could I have? How would you know about my long early morning—assuming there to have been such?"

"I watched you for a while. Few others have the equipment to watch you with when you're in the aspect."

So they were silent for some time, and Vincent watched the clock and was ready to go.

"I wonder," said the man in the dark, "if you have read Schimmelpenninck on the Sexagintal and the Duodecimal in the Chaldee Mysteries?"

"I have not and I doubt if anyone else has. I would guess that you are also Schimmelpenninck and that you have just made up the name on the spur of the moment."

"I am Schimm, it is true, but I made up the name on the spur of a moment many years ago."

"I am a little bored with you," said Vincent, "but I would appreciate it if you'd do your glass-filling trick once more."

"I have just done so. And you are not bored; you are frightened."

"Of what?" asked Vincent, whose glass was in fact full again.

"Of reentering a dread that you are not sure was a dream. But there are advantages to being invisible and inaudible."

"Can you be invisible?"

"Was I not when I went behind the bar just now and fixed you a drink?"

"How?"

"A man in full stride goes at the rate of about five miles an hour. Multiply that by sixty, which is the number of time. When I leave my stool and go behind the bar, I go and return at the rate of three hundred miles an hour. So I am invisible to you, particularly if I move while you blink."

"One thing does not match. You might have got around there and back, but you could not have poured."

"Shall I say that mastery over liquids is not given to beginners? But for us there are many ways to outwit the slowness of matter."

"I believe that you are a hoaxer. Do you know Dr. Mason?"

"I know that you went to see him. I know of his futile attempts to penetrate a certain mystery. But I have not talked to him of you."

"I still believe that you are a phony. Could you put me back into the state of my dream of a month ago?"

"It was not a dream. But I could put you again into that state."

"Prove it."

"Watch the clock. Do you believe that I can point my finger at it and stop it for you? It is already stopped for me."

"No, I don't believe it. Yes, I guess I have to, since I see that you have just done it. But it may be another trick. I don't know where the clock is plugged in."

"Neither do I. Come to the door. Look at every clock you can see. Are they not all stopped?"

"Yes. Maybe the power has gone off all over town."

"You know it has not. There are still lighted windows in those buildings, though it is quite late."

"Why are you playing with me? I am neither on the inside nor the outside. Either tell me the secret or say that you will not tell me."

"The secret isn't a simple one. It can only be arrived at after all philosophy and learning have been assimilated."

"One man cannot arrive at that in one lifetime."

"Not in an ordinary lifetime. But the secret of the secret (if I may put it that way) is that one must use part of it as a tool in learning. You could not learn all in one lifetime, but by being permitted the first step—to be able to read, say, sixty books in the time it took you to read one, to pause for a minute in thought and use up only one second, to get a day's work accomplished in eight minutes and so have time for other things—by such ways one may make a beginning. I will warn you, though. Even for the most intelligent, it is a race."

"A race? What race?"

"It is a race between success, which is life, and failure, which is death."

"Let's skip the melodrama. How do I get into the state and out of it?"

"Oh, that is simple, so easy that it seems like a gadget. Here are two diagrams I will draw. Note them carefully. This first, envision it in your mind and you are in the state. Now this second one, envision, and you are out of it."

"That easy?"

"That deceptively easy. The trick is to learn why it works —if you want to succeed, meaning to live."

So Charles Vincent left him and went home, walking the mile in a little less than fifteen normal seconds. But he still had not seen the face of the man.

There are advantages intellectual, monetary, and amorous in being able to enter the accelerated state at will. It is a fox game. One must be careful not to be caught at it, nor to break or harm that which is in the normal state.

Vincent could always find eight or ten minutes unobserved to accomplish the day's work. And a fifteen-minute coffee break could turn into a fifteen-hour romp around the town.

There was this boyish pleasure in becoming a ghost: to appear and stand motionless in front of an onrushing train and to cause the scream of the whistle, and to be in no danger, being able to move five or ten times as fast as the train;

to enter and to sit suddenly in the middle of a select group and see them stare, and then disappear from the middle of them; to interfere in sports and games, entering a prize ring and tripping, hampering, or slugging the unliked fighter; to blue-shot down the hockey ice, skating at fifteen hundred miles an hour and scoring dozens of goals at either end while the people only know that something odd is happening.

There was pleasure in being able to shatter windows by chanting little songs, for the voice (when in the state) will be to the world at sixty times its regular pitch, though normal to onself. And for this reason also he was inaudible to others.

There was fun in petty thieving and tricks. He would take a wallet from a man's pocket and be two blocks away when the victim turned at the feel. He would come back and stuff it into the man's mouth as he bleated to a policeman.

He would come into the home of a lady writing a letter, snatch up the paper and write three lines and vanish before the scream got out of her throat.

He would take food off forks, put baby turtles and live fish into bowls of soup between spoonfuls of the eater.

He would lash the hands of handshakers tightly together with stout cord. He unzippered persons of both sexes when they were at their most pompous. He changed cards from one player's hand to another's. He removed golf balls from tees during the backswing and left notes written large "YOU MISSED ME" pinned to the ground with the tee.

Or he shaved mustaches and heads. Returning repeatedly to one woman he disliked, he gradually clipped her bald and finally gilded her pate.

With tellers counting their money, he interfered outrageously and enriched himself. He snipped cigarettes in two with a scissors and blew out matches, so that one frustrated man broke down and cried at his inability to get a light.

He removed the weapons from the holsters of policemen and put cap pistols and water guns in their places. He unclipped the leashes of dogs and substituted little toy dogs rolling on wheels.

He put frogs in water glasses and left lighted firecrackers on bridge tables.

He reset wrist watches on wrists, and played pranks in men's rooms.

"I was always a boy at heart," said Charles Vincent.

Also during those first few days of the controlled new state, he established himself materially, acquiring wealth by devious ways, and opening bank accounts in various cities under various names, against a time of possible need.

Nor did he ever feel any shame for the tricks he played on unaccelerated humanity. For the people, when he was in the state, were as statues to him, hardly living, barely moving, unseeing, unhearing. And it is no shame to show disrespect to such comical statues.

And also, and again because he was a boy at heart, he had fun with the girls.

"I am one mass of black and blue marks," said Jenny one day. "My lips are sore and my front teeth feel loosened. I don't know what in the world is the matter with me."

Yet he had not meant to bruise or harm her. He was rather fond of her and he resolved to be much more careful. Yet it was fun, when he was in the state and invisible to her because of his speed, to kiss her here and there in out-of-the-way places. She made a nice statue and it was good sport. And there were others.

"You look older," said one of his co-workers one day. "Are you taking care of yourself? Are you worried?"

"I am not," said Vincent. "I never felt better or happier in my life."

But now there was time for so many things—time, in fact, for everything. There was no reason why he could not master anything in the world, when he could take off for fifteen minutes and gain fifteen hours. Vincent was a rapid but careful reader. He could now read from a hundred and twenty to two hundred books in an evening and night; and he slept in the accelerated state and could get a full night's sleep in eight minutes.

He first acquired a knowledge of languages. A quite extensive reading knowledge of a language can be acquired in three hundred hours world time, or three hundred minutes (five hours) accelerated time. And if one takes the tongues in order, from the most familiar to the most remote, there is no real difficulty. He acquired fifty for a starter, and could always add any other any evening that he found he had a need for it. And at the same time he began to assemble and consolidate knowledge. Of literature, properly speaking, there are no more than ten thousand books that are really worth reading and falling in love with. These were gone through with high pleasure, and two or three thousand of them were important enough to be reserved for future rereading.

History, however, is very uneven; and it is necessary to read texts and sources that for form are not worth reading. And the same with philosophy. Mathematics and science, pure or physical, could not, of course, be covered with the same speed. Yet, with time available, all could be mastered. There is no concept ever expressed by any human mind that cannot be comprehended by any other normal human mind,

if time is available and it is taken in the proper order and context and with the proper preparatory work.

And often, and now more often, Vincent felt that he was touching the fingers of the secret; and always, when he came near it, it had a little bit the smell of the pit.

For he had pegged out all the main points of the history of man; or rather most of the tenable, or at least possible, theories of the history of man. It was hard to hold the main line of it, that double road of rationality and revelation that should lead always to a fuller and fuller development (not the fetish of progress, that toy word used only by toy people), to an unfolding and growth and perfectibility.

But the main line was often obscure and all but obliterated, and traced through fog and miasma. He had accepted the Fall of Man and the Redemption as the cardinal points of history. But he understood now that neither happened only once, that both were of constant occurrence; that there was a hand reaching up from that old pit with its shadow over man. And he had come to picture that hand in his dreams (for his dreams were especially vivid when in the state) as a six-digited monster reaching out. He began to realize that the thing he was caught in was dangerous and deadly.

Very dangerous.

Very deadly.

One of the weird books that he often returned to and which continually puzzled him was the Relationship of Extradigitalism to Genius, written by the man whose face he had never seen, in one of his manifestations.

It promised more than it delivered, and it intimated more than it said. Its theory was tedious and tenuous, bolstered with undigested mountains of doubtful data. It left him unconvinced that persons of genius (even if it could be agreed who or what they were) had often the oddity of extra fingers and toes, or the vestiges of them. And it puzzled him what possible difference it could make.

Yet there were hints here of a Corsican who commonly kept a hand hidden, or an earlier and more bizarre commander who wore always a mailed glove, of another man with a glove between the two; hints that the multiplex-adept, Leonardo himself, who sometimes drew the hands of men and often those of monsters with six fingers, may himself have had the touch. There was a comment of Caesar, not conclusive, to the same effect. It is known that Alexander had a minor peculiarity; it is not known what it was; this man made it seem that this was it. And it was averred of Gregory and Augustine, of Benedict and Albert and Aquinas. Yet a man with a

deformity could not enter the priesthood; if they had it, it must have been in vestigial form.

There were cases for Charles Magnut and Mahmud, for Saladin the Horseman and for Akhnaten the King; for Homer (a Seleuciad-Greek statuette shows him with six fingers strumming an unidentified instrument while reciting); for Pythagoras, for Buonarroti, Santi, Theotokopolous, van Rijn, Robusti.

Zurbarin catalogued eight thousand names. He maintained that they were geniuses. And that they were extradigitals.

Charles Vincent grinned and looked down at his misshapen or double thumb.

"At least I am in good though monotonous company. But what in the name of triple time is he driving at?"

And it was not long afterward that Vincent was examining cuneiform tablets in the State Museum. These were a broken and not continuous series on the theory of numbers, tolerably legible to the now encyclopedic Charles Vincent. And the series read in part:

"On the divergence of the basis itself and the confusion caused—for it is five, or it is six, or ten or twelve, or sixty or a hundred, or three hundred and sixty or the double hundred, the thousand. The reason, not clearly understood by the people, is that Six and the Dozen are first, and Sixty is a compromise in condescending to the people. For the five, the ten are late, and are no older than the people themselves. It is said, and credited, that people began to count by fives and tens from the number of fingers on their hands. But before the people the—by the reason that they had—counted by sixes and twelves. But Sixty is the number of time, divisible by both, for both must live together in time, though not on the same plane of time—" Much of the rest was scattered. And it was while trying to set the hundreds of unordered clay tablets in proper sequence that Charles Vincent created the legend of the ghost in the museum.

For he spent his multi-hundred-hour nights there studying and classifying. Naturally he could not work without light, and naturally he could be seen when he sat still at his studies. But as the slow-moving guards attempted to close in on him, he would move to avoid them, and his speed made him invisible to them. They were a nuisance and had to be discouraged. He belabored them soundly and they became less eager to try to capture him.

His only fear was that they would some time try to shoot him to see if he were ghost or human. He could avoid a seen shot, which would come at no more than two and a half times his own greatest speed. But an unperceived shot could

penetrate dangerously, even fatally, before he twisted away from it.

He had fathered legends of other ghosts, that of the Central Library, that of University Library, that of the John Charles Underwood Jr. Technical Library. This plurality of ghosts tended to cancel out each other and bring believers into ridicule. Even those who had seen him as a ghost did not admit that they believed in the ghosts.

He went back to Dr. Mason for his monthly checkup.

"You look terrible," said the Doctor. "Whatever it is, you have changed. If you can afford it, you should take a long rest."

"I have the means," said Charles Vincent, "and that is just what I will do. I'll take a rest for a year or two."

He had begun to begrudge the time that he must spend at the world's pace. From now on he was regarded as a recluse. He was silent and unsociable, for he found it a nuisance to come back to the common state to engage in conversation, and in his special state voices were too slow-pitched to intrude into his consciousness.

Except that of the man whose face he had never seen.

"You are making very tardy progress," said the man. Once more they were in a dark club.

"Those who do not show more progress we cannot use. After all, you are only a vestigial. It is probable that you have very little of the ancient race in you. Fortunately those who do not show progress destroy themselves. You had not imagined that there were only two phases of time, had you?"

"Lately I have come to suspect that there are many more," said Charles Vincent.

"And you understand that only one step cannot succeed?"

"I understand that the life I have been living is in direct violation of all that we know of the laws of mass, momentum, and acceleration, as well as those of conservation of energy, the potential of the human person, the moral compensation, the golden mean, and the capacity of human organs. I know that I cannot multiply energy and experience sixty times without a compensating increase of food intake, and yet I do it. I know that I cannot live on eight minutes' sleep in twenty-four hours, but I do that also. I know that I cannot reasonably crowd four thousand years of experience into one lifetime, yet unreasonably I do not see what will prevent it. But you say I will destroy myself."

"Those who take only the first step destroy themselves."

"And how does one take the second step?"

"At the proper moment you will be given the choice."

"I have the most uncanny feeling that I will refuse the choice."

"From present indications, you will refuse it. You are fastidious."

"You have a smell about you, Old Man without a face. I know now what it is. It is the smell of the pit."

"Are you so slow to learn that?"

"It is the mud from the pit, the same from which the clay tablets were formed, from the old land between the rivers. I've dreamed of the six-fingered hand reaching up from the pit and overshadowing us all. And I have read: 'The people first counted by fives and tens from the number of fingers on their hands. But before the people the—for the reason that they had—counted by sixes and twelves.' But time has left blanks in those tablets."

"Yes, time in one of its manifestations has deftly and with a purpose left those blanks."

"I cannot discover the name of the thing that goes in one of those blanks. Can you?"

"I am part of the name that goes into one of those blanks."

"And you are the man without a face. But why is it that you overshadow and control people? And to what purpose?"

"It will be long before you know those answers."

"When the choice comes to me, it will bear very careful weighing."

After that a chill descended on the life of Charles Vincent, for all that he still possessed his exceptional powers. And he seldom now indulged in pranks.

Except for Jennifer Parkey.

It was unusual that he should be drawn to her. He knew her only slightly in the common world and she was at least fifteen years his senior. But now she appealed to him for her youthful qualities, and all his pranks with her were gentle ones.

For one thing this spinster did not frighten, nor did she begin locking her doors, never having bothered about such things before. He would come behind her and stroke her hair, and she would speak out calmly with that sort of quickening in her voice: "Who are you? Why won't you let me see you? You are a friend, aren't you? Are you a man, or are you something else? If you can caress me, why can't you talk to me? Please let me see you. I promise that I won't hurt you."

It was as though she could not imagine that anything strange would hurt her. Or again when he hugged her or kissed her on the nape, she would call: "You must be a little boy, or very like a little boy, whoever you are. You are good not to break my things when you move about. Come here and let me hold you."

It is only very good people who have no fear at all of the unknown.

When Vincent met Jennifer in the regular world, as he more often now found occasion to do, she looked at him appraisingly, as though she guessed some sort of connection.

She said one day: "I know it is an impolite thing to say, but you do not look well at all. Have you been to a doctor?"

"Several times. But I think it is my doctor who should go to a doctor. He was always given to peculiar remarks, but now he is becoming a little unsettled."

"If I were your doctor, I believe I would also become a little unsettled. But you should find out what is wrong. You look terrible."

He did not look terrible. He had lost his hair, it is true, but many men lose their hair by thirty, though not perhaps as suddenly as he had. He thought of attributing it to the air resistance. After all, when he was in the state he did stride at some three hundred miles an hour. And enough of that is likely to blow the hair right off your head. And might that not also be the reason for his worsened complexion and the tireder look that appeared in his eyes? But he knew that this was nonsense. He felt no more air pressure when in his accelerated state than when in the normal one.

He had received his summons. He chose not to answer it. He did not want to be presented with the choice; he had no wish to be one with those of the pit. But he had no intention of giving up the great advantage which he now held over nature.

"I will have it both ways," he said. "I am already a contradiction and an impossibility. The proverb was only the early statement of the law of moral compensation: 'You can't take more out of a basket than it holds.' But for a long time I have been in violation of the laws and balances. 'There is no road without a turning,' 'Those who dance will have to pay the fiddler,' 'Everything that goes up comes down.' But are proverbs really universal laws? Certainly. A sound proverb has the force of universal law; it is but another statement of it. But I have contradicted the universal law. It remains to be seen whether I have contradicted them with impunity. 'Every action has its reaction.' If I refuse to deal with them, I will provoke a strong reaction. The man without a face said that it was always a race between full knowing and destruction. Very well, I will race them for it."

They began to persecute him then. He knew that they were in a state as accelerated from his as his was from the normal. To them he was the almost motionless statue, hardly to be told from a dead man. To him they were by their speed both

invisible and inaudible. They hurt him and haunted him. But still he would not answer the summons.

When the meeting took place, it was they who had to come to him, and they materialized there in his room, men without faces.

"The choice," said one. "You force us to be so clumsy as to have to voice it.'

"I will have no part of you. You all smell of the pit, of that old mud of the cuneiforms of the land between the rivers, of the people who were before the people."

"It has endured a long time, and we consider it as enduring forever. But the Garden which was in the neighborhood—do you know how long the Garden lasted?"

"I don't know."

"That all happened in a single day, and before nightfall they were outside. You want to throw in with something more permanent, don't you."

"No. I don't believe I do."

"What have you to lose?"

"Only my hope of eternity."

"But you don't believe in that. No man has ever really believed in eternity."

"No man has ever either entirely believed or disbelieved in it," said Charles Vincent.

"At least it cannot be proved," said one of the faceless men. "Nothing is proved until it is over with. And in this case, if it is ever over with, then it is disproved. And all that time would one not be tempted to wonder, 'What if, after all, it ends in the next minute?' "

"I imagine that if we survive the flesh we will receive some sort of surety," said Vincent.

"But you are not sure either of such surviving or receiving. Now *we* have a very close approximation of eternity. When time is multipled by itself, and that repeated again and again, does that not approximate eternity?"

"I don't believe it does. But I will not be of you. One of you has said that I am too fastidious. So now will you say that you'll destroy me?"

"No. We will only let you be destroyed. By yourself, you cannot win the race with destruction."

After that Charles Vincent somehow felt more mature. He knew he was not really meant to be a six-fingered thing of the pit. He knew that in some way he would have to pay for every minute and hour that he had gained. But what he had gained he would use to the fullest. And whatever could be accomplished by sheer acquisition of human knowledge, he would try to accomplish.

And he now startled Dr. Mason by the medical knowledge he had picked up, the while the doctor amused him by the concern he showed for Vincent. For he felt fine. He was perhaps not as active as he had been, but that was only because he had become dubious of aimless activity. He was still the ghost of the libraries and museums, but was puzzled that the published reports intimated that an old ghost had replaced a young one.

He now paid his mystic visits to Jennifer Parkey less often. For he was always dismayed to hear her exclaim to him in his ghostly form: "Your touch is so changed. You poor thing! Is there anything at all I can do to help you?"

He decided that somehow she was too immature to understand him, though he was still fond of her. He transferred his affections to Mrs. Milly Maltby, a widow at least thirty years his senior. Yet here it was a sort of girlishness in her that appealed to him. She was a woman of sharp wit and real affection, and she also accepted his visitations without fear, following a little initial panic.

They played games, writing games, for they communicated by writing. She would scribble a line, then hold the paper up in the air whence he would cause it to vanish into his sphere. He would return it in half a minute, or half a second by her time, with his retort. He had the advantage of her in time with greatly more opportunity to think up responses, but she had the advantage over him in natural wit and was hard to top.

They also played checkers, and he often had to retire apart and read a chapter of a book on the art between moves, and even so she often beat him; for native talent is likely to be a match for accumulated lore and codified procedure.

But to Milly also he was unfaithful in his fashion, being now interested (he no longer became enamored or entranced) in a Mrs. Roberts, a great-grandmother who was his elder by at least fifty years. He had read all the data extant on the attraction of the old for the young, but he still could not explain his successive attachments. He decided that these three examples were enough to establish a universal law: that a woman is simply not afraid of a ghost, though he touches her and is invisible, and writes her notes without hands. It is possible that amorous spirits have known this for a long time, but Charles Vincent had made the discovery himself independently.

When enough knowledge is accumulated on any subject, the pattern will sometimes emerge suddenly, like a form in a picture revealed where before it was not seen. And when enough knowledge is accumulated on all subjects, is there not

a chance that a pattern governing all subjects will emerge?

Charles Vincent was caught up in one last enthusiasm. On a long vigil, as he consulted source after source and sorted them in his mind, it seemed that the pattern was coming out clearly and simply, for all its amazing complexity of detail.

"I know everything that they know in the pit, and I know a secret that they do not know. I have not lost the race. I have won it. I can defeat them at the point where they believe themselves invulnerable. If controlled hereafter, we need at least not be controlled by them. It is all falling together now. I have found the final truth, and it is they who have lost the race. I hold the key. I will now be able to enjoy the advantage without paying the ultimate price of defeat and destruction, or of collaboration with them.

"Now I have only to implement my knowledge, to publish the fact, and one shadow at least will be lifted from mankind. I will do it at once. Well, nearly at once. It is almost dawn in the normal world. I will sit here a very little while and rest. Then I will go out and begin to make contact with the proper persons for the disposition of this thing. But first I will sit here a little while and rest."

And he died quietly in his chair as he sat there.

Dr. Mason made an entry in his private journal: "Charles Vincent, a completely authenticated case of premature aging, one of the most clear-cut in all gerontology. This man was known to me for years, and I here aver that as of one year ago he was of normal appearance and physical state, and that his chronology is also correct, I having also known his father. I examined the subject during the period of his illness, and there is no question at all of his identity, which has also been established for the record by fingerprinting and other means. I aver that Charles Vincent at the age of thirty is dead of old age, having the appearance and organic condition of a man of ninety."

Then the doctor began to make another note: "As in two other cases of my own observation, the illness was accompanied by a certain delusion and series of dreams, so nearly identical in the three men as to be almost unbelievable. And for the record, and no doubt to the prejudice of my own reputation, I will set down the report of them here."

But when Dr. Mason had written that, he thought about it for a while.

"No, I will do no such thing," he said, and he struck out the last lines he had written. "It is best to let sleeping dragons lie."

And somewhere the faceless men with the smell of the pit on them smiled to themselves in quiet irony.

A PRIDE OF ISLANDS

C. C. MacApp

Alyarsmit clung to the top of a tall swaying hair and squinted toward the ponderous caterpillar-shaped beast way off in the very far distance.

"It's coming this way, all right," he called down to Brusmit, who was leaning against the base of the hair. "It's moved half a length since we first saw it."

"Do you think it sees us yet?" Bru asked uneasily. From up here, six man-lengths above the skin, he looked even shorter and pudgier than he was.

Alyar grinned down at him, then looked toward the front of their own beast. "I think so," he said. "Our eyestalks are up and signaling. The pincers aren't active, though. It must be a friend-beast."

"I don't see how they can recognize each other this far apart," said Bru doubtfully. "We'd better go tell Paboss."

"He sees it." Alyar looked aft to where the leader of the smit clan perched on another hair, a good shout from Alyar's.

"You'd better come down," said Bru. "He clobbered Jorsmit for being in sight, the last time we met another beast."

"He doesn't care when we're this far away." Nevertheless, Alyar climbed down; it wasn't all comfort at the top of a hair, especially when the beast felt you and twitched. "Let's go back there. He might know who it is."

He started through the thick growth of shorter hair, and Bru followed. They moved carefully, listening; it would be nip-and-tuck if only the two of them encountered a fley. They heard a few, detoured around them, eventually reached Paboss's outpost.

The leader was down from the hair, sitting with his back against it, munching dried meat. Three spearmen with him jumped up when they heard Alyar and Bru coming, then, recognizing them, relaxed.

Pabosssmit grunted and gestured toward the joint of meat beside him. "Help yourself." He eyed Alyar keenly. "That you on the hair up forward?"

"Yes, boss. But I made sure I came down in time."

"Don't go showing yourself again before we make contact."

"I won't. Could you tell who it was?"

"Looked like the jaksin beast."

"Oh. We don't fight them, do we?" Alyar was a little disappointed; he'd never been in a fight.

Paboss grinned. "No, but we don't trade with them, either. Pabossjaksin doesn't like me."

Alyar remembered something he'd heard. "Was that where you stole Maboss?"

The grizzled leader filled his thick chest and chuckled. "That's right. Stole her right out from under his nose!" He extended his arms, showing some scars. "Here's where he got me, before I knocked him out. Here's where Ma bit me."

"She bit you?"

"Sure. Any girl worth stealing'll put up a fight. I had to haul her along, kicking and screaming, and fight off half the jaksin clan at the same time. It was some party."

Alyar sighed, thinking what it must be like to go raiding. "I'm old enough to have a woman of my own," he mused.

Immediately, Paboss glowered. "Don't you go getting any ideas, hear? I don't want an open war with the jaksins. We've got enough trouble already, with the grans and the kendies." He put a hand tentatively on his club. "You hear?"

"Yes, boss," said Alyar hastily.

During the rest of the day the two beasts halved the distance between them. Near evening, Alyar led Bru, protesting, up to the smit beast's head and down over the edge where they could see forward and remain hidden in the short hair. It was dangerous; the beast might mistake them for fleys and reach up with a pincer-tentacle, which could move fast, considering the size.

When the slow hunching gait stopped and the beast settled down for the night, they went back to the thickly furred spot where the clan lived. Two of the moons were up, and with the excitement of being near another clan, nobody wanted to sleep yet.

Alyar left Bru with an audience of young people who hadn't seen the other beast yet, and went looking for the older men. They were in a clearing, rehashing stories about other clans, especially about the jaksins, which was an old one with a fine

repertoire of legends. Maboss had naturally brought the stories with her.

Just now, Paboss was retelling a fascinating, if ridiculous one, about how people had originally come from another world on a beast that could fly.

Alyar sat and listened for a while, then, when the icy evening rain broke up the session, went to his sleeping place in a patch of protecting curly hair. After the first sleep, when it was midnight and dry again, he sneaked to where Bru slept, hissed at him, and drew him away. "Are you game for a little trip?"

"Where? You mean up front again?"

"No. Over to the jaksin beast. Just for fun."

Bru was horrified. "At night? We'd freeze! Anyway, you heard Paboss!"

"We can find something to put on over our own clothes, and wrap our feet in leather. All Paboss said was I mustn't try to steal a girl. Nobody'll miss us for one day, and the beasts will be together by tomorrow noon. We could bring back some kind of souvenirs."

"You must be crazy! What if the jaksins caught us?"

"They'd only haze us a little, if we hadn't done anything. Think of it—besides Paboss and Maboss, only seven smits have ever been to another beast!"

Bundled in extra garments, they sneaked to the curve of the beast's side. Bru acted as if he were going to his own funeral. When they got down to where the hair grew out horizontally, they moved out beyond the short stuff and dropped from one coarse emergent to another; then, finally, to the ground. Apparently no one had heard them. They ran toward the front of the beast, staying as close to the furry belly as possible, for warmth and concealment.

The jaksin beast was due north, half-hidden by the horizon and hard to make out against the background of the tremendous Forest where it had been feeding. Beyond the trees and a little to the right was a volcano, exhaling fiery clouds but not muttering audibly at the moment. East of them was a river; to the west, on the far side of the beasts, another Forest. It was not surprising that the two beasts had met, since they were on a narrow strip of hardened lava between river and Forest.

They traveled in long jumps, gradually closing the distance to the jaksin beast. Near it, they saw that it was awake, with all four front eyestalks and one pair of pincers extended toward them.

They halted out of reach.

"Do you think he'll know we're not jaksins?" Bru whispered.

"I don't think they care *who* lives on them, just so we keep

the fleys down. Let him get a good look at us and he'll see we're people."

He was right, but by the time the huge appendages began to retract, the cold was getting through the clothing. They hurried for the shelter of the hair. Warm again, they chewed some of the meat they'd brought along and considered what to do next.

"We'd better go along the ground to the rear," Alyar said. "The men will be mostly near the front, on guard. Back there, there'll only be women and children."

"But we'll be a long way from home. What if the beasts don't come together?"

"Oh, they usually stop and talk, or whatever they do, for three or four days. We'll have a chance to sneak back."

"Why don't we just cut off some hairs right here for souvenirs and go home?"

"Don't you even want to spy on the clan?"

Bru sighed unhappily. "You're not actually going to try to steal a girl, are you?"

"Well—no. But it would be fun, wouldn't it?" His imagination began to percolate. "We're not far from the Warm Ground. That's what the first smit did. He stole a girl and couldn't get home with her, so they lived for a whole season on the Warm Ground until they found a young beast and started their own clan."

"If you've got any crazy ideas like that, you can count me out. People who get lost from their beasts get caught by Demons, or outlaws, or eaten by terrible animals. Next you'll be talking about going to Iron Mountain and fighting the Iron Fley!"

"Huh. The explorers who came back with all those stories probably exaggerated to make themselves look braver. Anyway, all I'm asking you to do is climb on the back end of this beast and spy on the jaksins."

It took the rest of the night to reach the blunt rear end, which had only one pair of eyestalks and one of pincers. They went through the process of letting the beast see them again, so it wouldn't think they were fleys when they began to climb, then picked a low rigid hair to start on.

It was a good four manlengths up, too much of a jump even in this light gravity for Bru, who missed and floated back to the ground, contorting, while Alyar tried to control his laughter. He uncoiled a rope. "You need a good lively girl to work some of that fat off you," he chuckled as he hauled Bru up.

Panting, Bru pulled himself onto the hair. "You'll get me killed before I ever have a chance to get married. Do you think they heard us?"

"No. We haven't heard *them* yet, and they're bound to be jabbering like women always are." He coiled the rope and they began to climb.

When they were halfway up, there were squeaks and rumbles below them. They stopped, holding their breaths, while the tentacle curled toward a spot only thirty or forty man-lengths away and the great claw began digging at the fur. Evidently something itched there; and in a few moments, they did hear the screech of a hurt fley. They resumed climbing.

When the skin was level enough to walk on, they began hearing voices—the giggling of girls and the drier chatter of older women, but no men's voices. They crept forward, parted the hair very carefully, and peered out.

They must have found the quarters of a very important family, for the clearing was freshly cut and expensive woven rugs covered the skin. The walls were evenly trimmed, with several hung paintings. Sleeping places had been cut into one side and lined with soft leather from the underparts of fleys.

Alyar had only a glance for all this luxury, though, for within two man-lengths of him sat a pair of eminently stealable girls. Temptation battered at him. One, evidently the older sister, was well muscled and lithe, but plump enough to have curves everywhere. The other was beautiful too, but more slender. They had the black hair and tawny smooth skin of the jaksins. Each wore a short lounging skirt of dainty leather which left few secrets.

Prudence, overwhelmed, hardly put up a fight.

Alyar maneuvered Bru carefully back until he could whisper. He ignored the desperate protests. "Shut up. All you have to do is stay here and wait for me, and when you hear a commotion, screech like a fley. You can do that much, can't you?"

Bru, groaning, finally nodded.

A length from the clearing, Alyar chose a young hair-shoot and put the point of his spear in the tender spot at its base. He jabbed with all his weight, then dove for the clearing. The beast's involuntary twitch came as he broke into the open.

The women were scrambling to their feet, with cries of "Beastquake!" and right on schedule Bru cut loose with a fine series of fley screeches. In the confusion nobody noticed that Alyar was a stranger until he scooped up the two girls, one under each arm, and jumped for the fur.

It was hard going, with both of them grabbing at hairs to hold them back, scratching him, and in general being uncooperative. He was panting when he reached Bru.

"Here!" he gasped, considerately tossing him the slender one who'd be easier to carry. "This one's yours."

The plump one knew by now what was happening. Slyly, she went limp until Alyar relaxed; then she twisted suddenly and got her teeth at his left shoulder. He yelled as she took out a respectable divot of flesh, and spun her around so she couldn't reach him again.

There was much screaming behind them, but no pursuit yet. Alyar urged Bru to the base of the nearest eyestalk. "Start climbing!"

"But we'll be trapped up there!"

"No, we won't. Go on!"

They were ten man-lengths up before a few old men and a crowd of women and children appeared at the base of the stalk. Seeing Alyar's spear-hand free part of the time, none acted anxious to follow them.

Now they were high enough to be hurt in a fall, and the girls had prudently stopped struggling. Alyar's twisted her head and glared at him. "My father will feed you to the fleys!"

Alyar grinned. "He'll have to catch us first. What's your name?"

"Go to hell."

He let go of the scale he was clinging to with his right hand, and pinched her in a vulnerable spot. She shrieked.

"If I have to keep pinching you," he said, "we'll probably fall. You'd better tell me your name."

She hesitated, then said icily, "Janeejaksin."

"Hm. You seem to be rich girls. You wouldn't be the Paboss's daughters, would you?"

Janee wouldn't answer, but the other girl did, rather cordially. "Yes, and my name's Marisujaksin. Are you going to steal us and make smits of us?"

"They'll never get off this eyestalk," Janee said scornfully.

Alyar motioned Bru higher. The figures around the base grew tiny and the stalk tapered to only half the girth of a man. It swayed a little, and they moved around to what would be the upper side if it bent.

Shouts could be heard now from farther forward; undoubtedly the fighters would arrive soon. Bru looked nervously in that direction. "What are we going to do—bargain with them?"

"No. Listen carefully. You know about people riding a pincer. We're going to get one up here, and when it's close enough, jump onto it and ride it to the ground." Alyar grinned at the protests, put his spear-point between two scales, and jabbed.

In a minute the eyestalk began to bend ponderously down-

ward. Far below they could see the pincer-tentacle starting up to meet it.

"Be lively, now!" Alyar warned.

It took a while for the pincer to arrive. They jumped from two man-lengths, landed on the slanting horny surface, and slid. Alyar, hanging onto Janee with one arm, managed to get the other around a small prong. He threw a glance toward Bru and saw that he'd made out all right too. They waited.

Even though the irritation had stopped, the beast was going through with the scratching after hauling all that weight to such a height. The tip of the pincer sawed deliberately at the place Alyar had jabbed, and then they started down.

The movement was faster than it looked from a distance; still, it was a long way to the ground. Partway down, the beast saw them and the claw halted. They crouched while the stalk bent to bring the immense eye directly over them, but evidently the creature was only wondering what they were up to now, for after a while the tentacle started down again.

Three man-lengths from the ground they jumped, landed, and bounded away out of reach.

Men, shouting, were clinging to long hairs, but nobody was climbing the eyestalk. Perhaps no one wanted to imitate the novel descent. Closer shouts indicated a group coming down through the fur.

"What now?" Bru asked.

It was a reasonable question. Even if they dared go home, they'd have to parallel the whole length of this beast and could hardly avoid interception. Alyar and Bru had discarded their extra clothing, while the girls were almost bare, so warmth would be an absolute necessity when night came.

Alyar looked northward toward the volcano. The Warm Ground was supposed to surround it for some distance; maybe they could reach that before night. There wasn't much time to ponder. Men were already dropping to the ground. He picked up Janee and ran for the nearest cover, which was the Forest. "Come on, we can't stay here!"

Bru didn't have to carry Marisu — she was evidently coming along regardless, even though she wailed a little—so he was able to keep up. "We're not going into the Forest, are we?" he panted.

"Just into the edge to get out of sight. Then we'll decide."

They were still a medium shout ahead when they came to the first colossal uprights; trunks so thick it would take a man many breaths to run around one; towering so high one tended to forget there were any tops. In between were

smaller plants, some with flowers, that formed a thicket as dense as fur.

Alyar paused, thinking of the stories he'd heard about the Forest. But there was no doubt about how real the danger was behind them, so he held his spear at the ready and plunged into the growth.

Janee opened her mouth to scream, and he hastily muffled it with his hand. "Do you want to attract every Demon in the Forest?"

Her eyes widened and she quit struggling.

He listened to the shouts from outside, then pointed north, "That way."

Bru gaped. "But that's away from home!"

"We can't go home yet. Anyway, the jaksins'll expect us to. They're moving south already. Hear them?"

Inside the Forest, in the deep shade, there was less vegetation so that they were able to move easily. Whenever Janee looked ready to scream, Alyar pretended to see or hear something, and by the time she was wise to that, they were out of earshot.

Their luck didn't last long, though. They heard a sound, whirled, and saw a small being on a branch, watching them with malevolent yellow eyes.

The girls whimpered, and Bru moaned, "A Demon!"

It had taken a strange shape, with four limbs and one other appendage that looked like a tentacle. It was covered with short black fur, very thick and fine. Just now it had a set of claws for clinging to the tree.

Before they could run, it opened its mouth and uttered a curse, which sounded like "Meow!"

"Let's get out of here!" Bru whispered.

Alyar knew better. "There's no use running; we're already cursed. The only thing is to try to appease it."

"Maybe we could give it the girls?"

Alyar wavered. He'd become quite attached to Janee, though he was a little tired of being bitten and scratched, and he *had* gone to a lot of trouble to get her. "Let's try meat first," he decided.

He got a small piece out of his pouch and extended it on the end of his spear. Heart pounding, he moved closer. The Demon tensed as if to jump at them, then seemed to change its mind. It wrinkled its nose (which Alyar hoped was a sign of favor; and finally stretched out its head and took the meat. It chewed daintily and swallowed.

Alyar let out his breath. Nothing was guaranteed, of course, but possibly . . .

The Demon said, "Meow," in a different tone.

Carefully, they edged toward the open. After a few steps

Bru began to run. Immediately, there was a loud "MEOW!" and he stopped.

In a moment the Demon came into sight, walking on the ground. Alyar noticed that it had ungrown the claws. As he looked (no doubt reading his thought) it grew them again, stretched out its two front limbs, lengthened its body, and yawned.

They started on, but weren't able to make much time until they found that the Demon wanted to be carried.

At the edge of the Forest, it was disappointing to see how little distance they had covered. The nearest end of the jaksin beast, hunching slowly away now toward the smit beast, was still within three shouts. However, no jaksins were in sight.

Again, Alyar hesitated; troubles seemed to be piling up. Still, he didn't see any choice. "We'll have to go to the Warm Ground," he said.

The girls sobbed a little, and he frowned at them. "*Now* what's wrong?"

"There are terrible outlaws there, and Demons, and—and things."

His patience ran out. "To hell with them! We already have one Demon; do you think it's going to share us with everything on the planet? Come on!"

Janee didn't insist on being carried now; evidently she felt compromised enough to come along. They hurried, stopping only once to finish up their food. They were thirsty, but Hot Water was supposed to come up out of the Warm Ground, and anyway they could wait for the evening rains.

It was dusk, and already beginning to drizzle, when they noticed that the ground under their feet was warm.

This was mostly hardened lava, sloping upward toward the volcano, but with small streams and patches of vegetation.

Before they found a good place to stop for the night, Bru pointed ahead. "Look! That glow!"

They went forward cautiously until they could see what must be a Fire, with people sitting around it. Fascinated, Alyar went closer. Suddenly he heard the girls scream, and simultaneously two pairs of rough hands seized him from behind. He wrenched desperately, throwing himself and the two husky men around, but not getting free. More came shouting, to help pin him down and tie him with ropes. It sounded as if Bru and the girls were being similarly treated.

A man who acted like the leader came running from the Fire. "What have we got here? Scouts?" He began directing squads of spearmen as if he expected an attack. "Two women with them? Funny. All right, you—who're you spying for?"

"What are you talking about?" Alyar demanded, as in-

dignantly as his position allowed. "We're from the smit clan and we're—trying to get home," he finished lamely.

"Clan? From a beast? What are you doing up here, then?"

"We came to keep warm."

"Keep warm? Why didn't you build a Fire?"

"I—we don't believe in Fires."

Laughter arose. "Let him up," the leader said. "He must be telling the truth. Only a fley-eater would be so ignorant."

They took off some of the ropes. Alyar rubbed at various bruises and abrasions, wondering whether he and Bru would be killed or made slaves. The outlaws would surely keep the girls. He wondered whether the Demon were going to give up its property so easily.

As if in answer to the thought, it came strolling into the light, and the leader made a sign nervously. "Damn! A black cat! Is it yours?"

"A black what? It captured us in the Forest."

"It . . . captured you? In the Forest? Then it's a real Demon!"

"Of course! How can you be so ignorant?"

"And you're still alive?"

"It hasn't hurt us yet, but it won't let us get away and it makes us carry it. I think we're uncursed right now. I'm not sure; I sort of lost track."

The man gulped and faced the Demon. "Please forgive us, Demon. We didn't know these people were yours."

The Demon looked at him scornfully and uttered a curse. People moved away, except one young spearman who stood his ground. "It—it sounds just like a cat," he quavered.

The leader knocked him spinning with the sweep of a forearm. "Of course it sounds like a cat! How do you think it would sound when it's in cat form? Do you expect it to speak ingils to us?" He beckoned to several women. "Bring food for the Demon, and offerings of iron and jewels!" He glanced at the four captives, and added, as an afterthought, "Better feed its slaves, too."

Cooked meat was easy to chew, but it tasted odd, and the fruit was completely baffling. Still, they were filling.

The outlaw leader eyed the Demon, which had pre-empted Janee's ample lap. "Where is it taking you?"

Alyar didn't want to admit how little he knew of the nature of things, so he said the most awesome thing he could think of. "To Iron Mountain."

There were gasps. "Oh, what unfortunate people you are!" the leader said. Then eagerly, "When will you go?"

Alyar thought he'd better press his luck. "It wants us to start right away. It only pretends to be asleep like that, to

see if we're obedient. Er—I seem to have gotten turned around. Which way is Iron Mountain from here?"

The man pointed with alacrity. "That way! A third of the distance around the volcano. Here, we'll help you get loaded up."

The girls were festooned with necklaces and pendants of rare stones, while Bru and Alyar toted the food and the oddments of iron. The outlaws had hastily gathered a fabulous treasure of the metal—whole spearheads, and even a knife, of it!

Alyar waved and smiled at the outlaws just before they were out of sight, then turned north.

"We'll go upcountry," he said. "They won't look for us there. I'm not sure they won't follow; they probably don't know what this Demon will do any more than we do." He saw some huge rocks not far away, with bushes growing on top. "Let's climb up there."

When they were halfway to the rocks, incredible good fortune struck. The Demon with one hurried "Meow!" scrambled away from Janee and ran back toward the outlaw camp.

"Come on!" Alyar exclaimed. "Maybe we can get out of its circle of influence!"

They climbed the rocks and found they could see the Fire. Presently they knew the Demon had arrived there, for the distant figures scattered. Moments later, faint laments drifted to them.

They spent the rest of the night awake and watchful. "The outlaws will surely be after us now," Bru said, "to get back all this treasure."

"Marisu and I want to be near our clan," said Janee. "Even if—" she blushed—"you make smits out of us, the two beasts would meet once in a while and we could visit."

Alyar looked eastward, where numerous glows marked other outlaw camps. The volcano was a barrier to the north. The outlaws would bar the way to the south, expecting them to head home to the beasts. The only direction left was west, and he found that it pleased him.

"I guess we'll just have to visit Iron Mountain," he said. "Then we'll be such heroes that Pabosses smit and jaksin will have to forgive us."

The girls looked at him with awe while Bru moaned.

When the sun came up they could see the northern end of the Forest, south of which the jaksin beast had been feeding. Past it, surprisingly visible from this altitude, were the two beasts, head-to-head with eyestalks touching.

The Forest ran up close to the steep side of the volcano, leaving only a narrow pass. Beyond that was the river which,

turning south, passed the two beasts. Farther up the river, according to legend, was Iron Mountain.

They stayed long enough to see what kind of animals prowled the country and to lay out a course, then climbed down and got started. They walked all day with only a few halts and some minor adventures with strange animals, then found another high place to spend the night. In the darkness they spotted a single Fire west of them. The next morning they detoured around that spot, and entered the narrow pass. Before noon they stood looking down at the river.

The canyon was deeper and wider than Alyar could have imagined, and there was more water at the bottom. The country ahead, though, was so rough that it seemed the easiest way was to climb down and go along the river. It took them half the afternoon to get down.

Not very long after that, Alyar put out his hand. "Wait! I hear voices!"

They were men's voices and seemed to be coming downstream.

He pushed the other three to a hiding place behind some rocks and bushes. When the owners of the voices came into sight around a turn, he gasped. They weren't walking, but riding on the water itself, in something like a big dish.

"Magicians!" Bru whispered.

Two of the men (there were seven) were stroking the water with some kind of wands, flattened at the ends. They acted as if they were fleeing from something, talking in low voices and staring back upstream. Just before they came opposite, it caught up with them.

The first thing Alyar heard was a loud voice, distorted and with an odd accent. He had trouble making out the repeated words. "Halt or I'll shoot. Advance and be recognized. Halt or I'll shoot. Advance—"

The thing came into sight—flying! He gripped Bru's shoulder. "The Iron Fley!"

It was made of the kind of iron that didn't rust, and had only eight legs, not ten. All of them were folded to its sides except one with a larger, oblong foot; that one was extended toward the fugitives.

When they saw it, they jumped out of their dish and sank into the water.

"Halt or I'll shoot," said the Iron Fley again, then hurled its spell. The dish shattered abruptly into small bits and a hissing cloud burst out of the water.

The terrible creature circled over the floating fragments for a few minutes, then flew off upstream. When it was gone the seven magicians appeared, climbing out of the river on the far side.

"Damn it!" said one. "A good boot lost, and not a bit of iron. I *told* you we ought to wait for night!"

"It doesn't make any difference," said another gloomily. "It's always on watch. Nobody's gotten away with any iron for three or four seasons."

"Well," said Alyar, after the magicians had straggled off down the river, "now we've seen it. It certainly put a powerful spell on that floating dish, but it didn't hurt the magicians. Maybe if we're careful it won't bother us."

They followed the twisting canyon and eventually began to hear a roaring noise ahead. It turned out to be the water falling over a cliff, and to go any farther they had to climb out of the canyon again. When they were on top they could see, ahead of them, what was undoubtedly Iron Mountain.

Parts of it were broken or rusted, but most of it was the non-rusting kind. Its shape was a surprise. It didn't look like a mountain, but something made by giants, broken off and stuck into the ground.

It was wonderful to stand here, beholding the mightiest magic in the entire world. Still, Alyar wasn't satisfied. He felt he must go closer, even—possibly—touch it.

"You'd better stay here. Bru, if anything happens to me, take the girls and run. You can get back to the beasts by going down the river."

Bru was dismayed. "Don't go any closer! You saw what happened to the magicians' dish!"

"They were trying to steal iron." He unloaded the metal he was carrying, smiled at them, and went on.

He'd only covered a hundred man-lengths or so when he heard the distorted voice, coming from over his head. He looked up, then stood rooted as the Iron Fley came spiraling down toward him. He tried to think the purest, most serene thoughts he could, though the fervent wish to be somewhere else kept intruding.

The thing paused a few lengths away. "Advance and be recognized," it said.

He took a faltering hop forward. "Halt or I'll shoot," it said, and he stopped.

"Advance."

He did.

"Halt."

He did.

Finally he was very close to it, and he waited for a spell to hit him.

"Name, rank, and serial number," it demanded. Then, as he was silent, "Speak or I'll shoot."

"I-I'm Alyarsmit! I don't think I'm rank, and I don't know what a serial number is."

"Friend or foe?"

"F-friend. I haven't stolen anything. Just some girls."

The thing made a buzzing sound. "You speak, and you have the requisite number of limbs, and one head. Are you human?"

"Y-yes, I'm human."

"Name?"

"Alyarsmit."

"Smith? Smith?" It buzzed some more. "There was a Colonel John Smith on the roster. Are you his descendant?"

"Yes," Alyar hazarded.

"Mr. Smith, sir, Robojeep twenty-seven four nine reporting. All other jeeps inactivated, sir. No ship's personnel or other passengers accounted for in the last three hundred and seventy-four planetary cycles. Damage to ship unrepairable without human direction. Sporadic raids by savages, possibly degenerate humans, repelled successfully. Will you assume manual control, sir?"

Alyar stuck with "Yes."

"Very well, sir." The Iron Fley descended and walked toward him on six of its legs, then squatted.

He stared at its back. Actually, it didn't have one; it was hollowed out from the top, and in the hollow were—seats! Four of them!

Unable to mistake the meaning, he climbed in and sat down. Nothing happened for a while. Then the creature began to buzz again. "Have you forgotten the controls, sir? The lever on the left is for elevation; the other one for horizontal motion. Would you prefer vocal control?"

"N-no, this is all right."

"Very good, sir." The buzz stopped.

The levers were just in front of him. Gingerly, he reached out and gave the lefthand one a twitch, then yelled and let go of it as they shot upward. They stopped, and he tried again gently. They rose more smoothly.

He experimented with the other and moved forward, backward, and to the sides. He lowered to a height where he was less frightened. "Er—Fley?"

"You spoke, sir?"

"I can go wherever I want?"

"Except into obvious danger, sir. I'm programmed to avoid that."

Alyar flew toward where he'd left his companions. They lay face down, lamenting, Janee loudest of all. He eyed her posterior, and Bru's, with some misgivings. The Fley's seats were a little skimpy.

He landed beside them, cleared his throat, and waited until they raised dumfounded faces.

"Get in," he said.

Against feeble protests from the others, he maneuvered the creature (which preferred to be called "Jeep") toward Iron Mountain. When they were close Jeep woke up, buzzed, and hovered while a great doorway slid open. It carried the four, clinging together, into the hollow blackness within.

Then, quite suddenly—even though the door slid shut behind them—it was light as day inside.

What a cave! Cylindrical, all of fifty man-lengths across, it slanted down until it must reach far below ground. Far down there, where Jeep was taking them, were some level platforms.

As soon as they settled on one, a terrible, huge, clanking monster, also of non-rusting iron, flew toward them. They huddled while it spoke. "Mr. Smith, sir, Roborepairunit seventeen reporting. Ship's power and drive in order. Unable to complete hull repairs, or repair other working and scouting units, without cannibalizing part of living quarters. Do I have Mr. Smith's permission to proceed?"

Alyar gulped several times, and got out "Yes."

"Thank you, sir. The job will require arc cutting and welding and other high-temperature processes. Will you be here very long?"

"We hope not."

"Very well, sir. I'll begin as soon as you leave."

They sat for a while, wondering what to do. Finally Alyar said, "Jeep?"

"Sir?"

"Would we be permitted to leave?"

"At once, sir."

More buzzing, and the door opened again.

As they flew away, Jeep said, "Sir, Roborepair wants to know whether to repair ship in its present position or move it elsewhere."

Alyar was beginning to feel more confident. "In its present position, I think. For now."

As they turned south, Janee began to sniffle.

"What now?" he demanded.

"I miss my Demon."

Alyar turned to Bru. "Isn't that just like a woman? She wants a Demon again!"

She raised her head and glared at him. "He was cute and soft, and he cuddled against me and made happy sounds. You tamed the Iron Fley, and if you really loved me, you could surely handle one little fluffy Demon!"

Alyar let Jeep stop and hang there while he tried to cope with the effrontery of it. After all he'd been through, stealing

her, to have her suggest that he go into more danger just to satisfy her crazy whim!

His hands reached out for the levers again. Shaking his head dazedly, he started northeast to look for the outlaws.

Some time later, they were headed south again, Janee's Demon asleep in her lap. Jeep was loggy with iron and other treasuers extorted from various bands of outlaws. In the two rear seats, Bru and Marisu were holding hands.

He was startled to see two more beasts hunching up from the south, beyond the smits and jaksins. Four of them together at one time!

When they circled down, they found Pabossmit on his hair, scowling southward. He cringed when he saw the Iron Fley, then managed to look both dumfounded and furious when he recognized Alyar and Bru.

"You young hoodlums! I'm glad that thing caught you! Look there—those are the grans and the kendies coming, and Pabossjaksin's so mad he'll join them against us!" His face softened into the start of a grin as he sized up the two girls, but then hardened again. "I hope you're proud of yourselves, getting your whole clan killed or made slaves!"

Alyar started toward a clearing. "Come on down, Paboss. We've got so much magic now, we could laugh at all the clans in the world." And, to Jeep, "Jeep, can we bring Iron Mountain over here and fly it around and show these savages they better behave?"

"A bloodless demonstration? Certainly, sir. I'll go aloft at once and radio."

The four stood in a clearing, with awed smits around them at a respectful distance. Paboss came pushing through the hair, as awed as any, but less scared.

"Tamed the Iron Fley!" He began to guffaw. "Stole Pabossjaksin's own two daughters! Haw, haw! Young man, when I retire . . ." His eyes covered Janee approvingly, then turned back to Alyar. "You're wounded! What—oh, toothmarks!" He laughed some more. "Didn't I say any girl worth stealing would put up a fight?"

Alyar happened to be looking toward Bru, who had his own knot of admirers. Marisu was standing a little behind him, as a bride should. At Paboss's words, she frowned and her eyes fixed on Bru's smooth shoulder. Her gaze grew more intent. She moved slowly forward, her eyes crossing as they remained on the spot.

Closer . . .

Closer . . .

Bru yelled.

SITTING DUCK

Daniel F. Galouye

The shimmering mote dropped toward the plain to the east. Like a silver mirror, it captured the luster of the sinking sun and hurled it back sparkling toward the city.

A band of smudge-faced boys, their feet rooted in the dust of the play lot, stared at the point of scintillating brilliance.

Four women, poised before the entrance of a supermarket, strained to watch.

In the downtown district, a stock broker paused in midsentence as the reflection danced through the window. His client tensed, leaned forward for a better view.

For a long while the radiant mote hovered, soaking up the shadows of dusk that drifted from the surface like a mist. Then it dropped quietly, hiding itself in a subtle contour of the plain.

"Come on!" shouted a blond tyke as he retrieved the football. "We ain't got all night."

The women in front of the supermarket exchanged glances, then dispersed, three going on into the store while the fourth trundled off her cart of groceries.

Turning from the window, the broker thumbed through a stack of papers. "Here's an attractive investment . . ."

Hundreds closer to the site said the mote was a great sphere of gleaming metal. But when the first detachment of Guardsmen pushed across the plain hours later that Friday night, they found nothing—or practically nothing.

It was almost noon Saturday when Ray Kirkland ringed the hat rack with an underhanded toss and shrugged off his topcoat, together with the chill of the plain that clung to it like a clammy film. He was a large, thick-shouldered man with a blunt face and stout jaw.

Balston, the managing editor, laced him with a caustic eye. "You sure took your time getting back."

"Thought I'd try to squeeze a few more quotes out of Stoddard for the last edition," said Ray.

"Did the general find out where they dropped down?"

"As I said on the phone, they pinpointed it with Geiger counters. But, like in the first twelve landings, there weren't any other kinds of marks."

Balston, a tall, gaunt man with wiry graying hair, leaned back. "Did the general have any theories?"

Ray shrugged. "The usual. No cause for concern—would have acted by now—probably setting down to replenish water or oxygen."

The editor made a sound that was somewhat like a sarcastic grunt. "I suppose he didn't venture an opinion on why they have to land *close to cities* to get their water and oxygen?"

"No. But he did suggest they might be so superior that they'd have nothing to gain by coming in contact with us."

Balston squinted quizzically.

"Stoddard," Ray explained, "put it this way: If one of our naval ships had to land on a primitive island to fill its water tanks, the crew wouldn't want to get involved socially with the savages."

The other chewed thoughtfully on a pencil. "At least that's a different line of speculation. Put your new lead on it for the final."

Ray started for his desk.

"Kirkland!" one of the reporters called. "Telephone—your father-in-law."

"That you, Ray boy?" the receiver rasped eagerly in his ear when he picked it up. "Drop by Clark's store and bring home a box of number five shells, will you?"

"Duck season doesn't open for another week," Ray reminded him, annoyed.

The old man laughed. "Nothing like being prepared. And don't forget, son—you're going out in the marsh with me tomorrow."

Ray slumped in the chair. He'd forgotten about the blind. A hell of a way to spend Sunday. And Alice would sulk if he didn't pamper the old boy.

At supper, his father-in-law sat across the table, half hidden behind a mound of decoys that congregated around his plate as though it were a lush feeding pond.

"As I figure it," Ray was saying, "since all these landings were close to cities, there must be a purpose behind them *in connection with the cities*. There ought to be some tangible results. I'm sure if I looked close enough, I might find something that's different from what it was yesterday."

"But giving up your Sunday!" Alice exclaimed. "I won't have that! You do enough for that paper."

He hunched forward. "But think of the recognition I could get . . ." His voice trailed into silence as she merely shook her head.

The old man pushed a pair of dusky brown pintails out of the way and straightened with no small amount of resentment.

"Tomorrow's the only day we have to fix that blind, son," he said soberly, "if we're going to be ready for Saturday."

Ray cast him a glance of sullen hostility. "But don't you understand, Dad? There's been a landing near here and—"

"And try to get back from that swamp early, Raymond," Alice broke in. "There's a new house in the subdivision that may be just what we're looking for. It's on that corner lot —where you said you'd like to build."

Enheartened at the unexpected prospect of not having to spend his entire day in the swamp, he smiled gratefully.

But his smile changed to a puzzled frown. "There's no house on that corner."

"Of course there is, dear. A small Cape Cod. I walked past it at noon."

"It wasn't there when I drove by this morning," he insisted.

The existence or nonexistence of the Cape Cod remained unsettled as Alice, disinterested, busied herself with gathering up the dishes.

Dad proudly picked up two green-winged teals with stupid blunt heads and stubby necks. He held one in each hand. "It'd take a darn smart duck to be suspicious of these, wouldn't it, son?"

Sunday in the marsh was particularly tedious and frustrating as Ray subordinated his professional interest in the reported landing to the whims of his father-in-law and paddled down a narrow waterway. The raucous squawks of the mallard hen, as produced by the old man's duck call, made the monotony no more endurable as they reached a pond adjoining the central lake.

A flock of sleek-headed canvasbacks hugged the northern edge of the pothole. The lead male, tense and alert, stretched his neck to keep a wary eye on the skiff.

Two females, preening themselves in the reeds along the shore, looked up in alarm.

Several of the younger ducks clustered uneasily, training their beady eyes alternately on the lead bird and the skiff as it glided through the slough into the lake.

When Ray glanced back over the top of the saw grass, the ducks had recovered from the intrusion.

The lead male was swimming among the others, as though reassuring them. The two hens on shore had returned nonchalantly to their preening. And the yearlings were dispersing from their cluster and spreading out boldly once more over the surface of the pothole.

Two of the larger males left the main group and swam over to the clouded water where the skiff had passed. They glided in circles, inspecting the area curiously.

Ray paddled into the blind and helped his father-in-law onto the platform. But the structure was only half concealed by the reeds they had used to camouflage it the year before.

The old man reached back into the boat and untied his bundle of tools, arranging a saw, hammer, pliers and roll of wire on the platform.

The lead canvasback from the pothole was in the air now. Flying over the lake, he dipped down occasionally to touch the water and peer into clumps of saw grass.

"Damned drake's trying to see where we went," Dad said irately. "Wouldn't want him to get wise to our setup and louse things up for next Saturday."

The big duck rose higher, banked and came in directly over the blind, squawking stridently as it spotted the men.

Dad reared up from the sack of tools, clutching his twelve-gauge automatic. His florid face froze in an expression of delight as he swept the butt to his shoulder and sent the barrel arching past Ray's shoulder.

Instinctively, Ray hurled himself on the platform. The gun went off, its spread of number-five shot roaring by within searing range of his face.

"Got him!" the old man shouted exuberantly.

The shotgun blast was still a far-away buzzing in his ear as Ray drove up in front of the Cape Cod that afternoon. Surrounded by new shrubbery, it was a neat little bungalow that surveyed the freshly turned ground around it.

"See?" Alice said smugly. "I told you they built on this corner."

The sign next to the walk identified it as a product of Castle Estates, Inc., and announced that the four-kitchen, one-and-a-half-bedroom home was open for inspection.

Ray did a double-take. The sign *did* say "four kitchens."

"Wait here," he told Alice, still skeptical that a complete house could have been built in less than three days. "I'll see if the agent's inside."

At the entrance, he pushed the bell. But the button wouldn't budge. Defects, so soon?

He tried the buzzer again, gave it up, and knocked on the

door. But with the first rap, his fist went *through* the oak paneling as though it were crisp cardboard.

Swearing, he tried to pull his hand from the shattered panel. The door came off at the hinges and folded over limply as it fluttered to the ground.

"For goodness *sake*, Raymond!" Alice called impatiently from the car. "What are you *doing?*"

Confounded, he entered.

But there was no inside to the house.

From the landing, he stepped down onto a mud floor with a sickly matting of brown, sun-starved grass. Overhead was the inverted "V" of the roof—no ceiling joists, no rafters. And the walls—it was as though they had been poured from a mold, with imperfections here and there in the form of raised ridges, like seepage seams from matrices that had failed to match evenly.

Tipping his hat up off his forehead, he walked around surveying the eviscerated house. Probably something new in prefabricated construction, he decided. Might bear looking into for a Sunday supplement yarn.

Backing toward the door, he started as something sharp nudged him in the side. He turned and almost knocked over a contraption he hadn't noticed before. Mounted on spindly legs, it resembled a surveyor's transit, with the telescope pointed through a window in the general direction of a row of ligustrum plants.

Interested, he inspected the thing, running his hand over its slick metal surface. His fingers touched a protuberance on the side of the cylinder and an almost inaudible, high-pitch humming erupted in his ear, crescendoed until it ended with an abrupt *click*.

He thrust his hands guiltily into his pockets, hoping he hadn't disturbed some delicate adjustment that might make a construction worker catch hell the next day.

Turning to leave, he almost tripped over something else he hadn't noticed previously—a wax-leafed ligustrum plant that lay on the mud floor, its roots shining and moist as though it had just been plucked from the soil.

Outside, as he strode toward Alice's impatient grimace, his eyes swept the row of ligustrums. There was a breach in the hedge where a vandal had no doubt uprooted the plant.

"Of course it isn't ours!" exclaimed August Sandifer, developer. "Castle Estates doesn't deal in cracker boxes! We have a motto: 'Every Castle-Built Home Is a Home-Built Castle' and . . ."

Ray eased the receiver farther from his ear. On his desk before him was spread the Monday morning mail edition

with its story of the two new landings—one east of Denver and the other near San Diego.

"You mean you didn't build the Cape Cod?"

"It wasn't there Friday," Sandifer snapped. "It's there now. That's all I know about it."

"How do you suppose it got there?"

"One of those prefab outfits must have gotten their delivery addresses mixed. We've got the city permit division out there now. If they can't tell us who is responsible, we're going to put a match to the damned thing!"

Ray checked with the permit office before he sent out a photographer. Then he started in on the story, featurizing it heavily:

FOUND: House with 4 Kitchens

City officials and a local housing developer were stumped today over the enigma of a misplaced prefabricated house . . .

It rated a byline and a spot on the bottom of page one for the first street edition. Sample copies of the run were shuttled up from the press room just as Balston came in.

The managing editor settled down in his chair, spread the paper on his desk and promptly recoiled ceilingward, bellowing, "Kirkland! Come here!"

Ray went over uncertainly.

"You walked into this damned thing wide open!" Balston's eyes darted incriminatingly from the front page to Ray. "Don't you know a promotion trick when you see one?"

"It's no publicity stunt," Ray objected. "Sandifer didn't come to us. I went—"

Exasperated, Balston brushed him aside. "Hawkins!" he shouted at the city editor. "Get that thing out of the paper and find something legitimate for Kirkland to do!"

"Ray," one of the reporters called from a rear desk. "Sandifer's on the phone again. Says that house is gone—and two of his agents with it."

The managing editor shot up and spun around. "Tell him to peddle his promotion stuff somewhere else!"

Ray went over to the city editor's desk.

"I didn't think he'd take it that way," Hawkins sympathized. "Check this out for a possible human interest angle."

He reached into the assignment book and selected a classified ad clipping:

FOR SALE, CHEAP: *One giant mutated sea horse, com-*

plete with harness and aqua-sled. Apply Dr. Whitmore Vandell, Rt. 4, Sand Beach.

The advertisement, whatever its purpose, had drawing power, Ray conceded as he turned off the highway toward the dumpy white frame structure that squatted half in the water like a centipede on its creosoted pilings. There were three cars parked randomly on a level area a short distance from the beach house. A fourth was throwing up a dust barrage on the road ahead of him.

By the time he drew up next to the newly arrived vehicle, its driver was threading his way among boulders and scrubby growth toward the house. Ray sat in the car and traced the man's progress along the path—behind a rock, across a sandy stretch, behind a bush . . .

There was the annoying, high-pitch buzzing of a mosquito in his ear and he fanned the air to chase it away. His eyes, however, remained on the last bush behind which the man had disappeared. A minute passed and still he hadn't emerged.

Curious, Ray started down the path, keeping the bush and house in sight. But when he reached the spot where the man should have been, he wasn't there.

Tense and suspicious, he stood staring hesitantly at the house. His shadow was an almost black patch on the intensely white sand. The muffled sound of surf on rock was a subdued whisper. In the distance, a gull circled above the water, wailing plaintively.

An abrupt movement beyond a window on his right attracted his attention. Through the pane he saw a small, tubular object resembling a compact telescope on a tripod. It was a duplicate of the transitlike instrument in the window of the Cape Cod!

The tube swiveled in his direction and he squinted to make out the shadowy form that lurked behind it—something huge, not human. Thin, jointless arms extended from a rotund and scaly gray torso to coil like tendrils around the transit. An even more bulbous head swung around with the instrument, following him as he backed away from the house in fright. If there were eyes in that head, they were hidden in a mass of scales and lesser tendrils.

Bristling with fear, he remembered the transit in the Cape Cod and the high-pitched humming it had produced when he touched the tube. It was a sound suspiciously similar to the buzzing of the mosquito he had heard only minutes earlier—*at the same time the man had vanished from behind the bush!*

The telescope steadied on him and he whirled and raced

toward the nearest boulder, skirting a clump of bushes and flushing a startled seagull from concealment behind the foliage.

The humming sounded again and the bush disappeared, as though it had been uprooted and flung out of sight at a speed too fast for the eye to follow. Gone too was the gull in mid-flight.

He dived behind the rock, remembering the ligustrum he had almost stumbled over in the Cape Cod. Now he was *certain* the plant hadn't been there before he touched the transit!

The high-pitched note wailed again and he felt the rock vibrate before him. Apprehensively, he pressed closer against the boulder. Some of it made sense now. He had suggested looking for a purpose behind the landing, scouting for effects that hadn't existed before. Was this—and the Cape Cod too—part of those effects?

"Help me! Please help me!"

He started. The cry had come from the house. One of the windows on the side was open and a young woman in a torn dress, her face streaked with terror, leaned half out, screaming.

"Jump!" he called. "Run along the beach! They've got the thing pointed *this* way!"

Her slim white hands gripped the sill, but she only stared frantically at him, paralyzed with terror.

"Help me! Please help me!"

He seized a rock and hurled it at the transit in the front window. It went wild, crashing against the house. The second hurtled through the window but missed also. The third hit the tube squarely and it toppled out of sight.

Bolting around to where the girl was, he seized her arm and hauled her over the sill.

"Help me! Please help me!"

He grabbed her hand to race away, but she almost collapsed. He slung her over his shoulder, running along the bluff and leaping into a gully that shielded them from the house.

Climbing out of the shallow ravine at a point close to his car, he set her on the ground. She swayed, then steadied. But there was only panic on her face.

"Help me! Please help me!" Her eyes were focused beyond him and her cries were unchanged from the first time he had heard them.

Suddenly confounded, he backed away. The girl only stood there, repeating her desperate plea. Then he saw the rough ridge that ran from her temple, along her cheek, neck and shoulder and down the outside of her arm—like imperfections in an object cast from a matrix.

Sickened and horrified, he reeled back to the car.

Her unvarying cries followed him as her lips moved, but too methodically and not in synchronization with the words.

He sent the car plunging up the dirt road toward the highway. When he looked back, the girl wasn't there any longer —nor were the other four cars and the beach house.

But there *was* something else, speeding above the road behind him—a vague symmetrical shadow, like the merest suggestion of an oval-shaped cloud.

He reached the highway and swerved recklessly into the stream of traffic. Through his rear-view mirror, he watched the patch of dense haze pause at the intersection, as though confused. Then it turned and streaked off southward, gaining altitude. In its path, perhaps ten miles away, a fragment of silver glistened radiantly in the sky.

Ray pounded his fist on the managing editor's desk. "Sure I came straight back here. You think this is the kind of thing you go chat with Chief Johnson about?"

"So you came here instead, expecting to find me less skeptical?" Balston demanded.

Ray bent over tensely. "Don't you see? The Cape Cod, the beach house, the landing, the ad in the paper—they're all connected! And there are other ads that look phony. Check the paper. You'll see them."

The managing editor sat up. "Look, Kirkland. How'd you like to take a day or two off?"

"You don't believe me!"

A half-dozen staff members, crowded around them, dispersed respectfully. Across the room, Hawkins hunched busily over the city desk, not doing a very good job of pretending to be preoccupied. He sighed gratefully as the phone rang and he had to answer it.

"The Cape Cod, the beach house," Ray went on, "don't you see they're traps—devices to lure people within range of those things? This may be happening all over!"

"Why *lure* people?" Balston asked. "If they're as advanced as you're implying, they shouldn't have to use deception."

"I don't pretend to have all the answers. I'm just telling you what I know. It's your job to see that the facts get to the public."

The city editor replaced his phone on the hook. "State Police Headquarters," he called over, "says there's no beach house out there."

Ray spread his hands. "I told you that when I came in. Didn't the Cape Cod disappear too—after Sandifer and I found out it was just a blind?"

Balston rose and gripped his shoulder. "Take the rest of the week off. A good rest—"

Ray shrugged out from under the other's hand. "Oh, for God's sake!"

"You admit you've been scouting around *looking* for unusual things resulting from the so-called landing?"

"So I've found them!"

"What? Scaly creatures with gooseneck arms?" There was no laughter in Balston's voice. But it was heavily implied.

"What'll you do when people start turning up missing?"

"We have never been a sensational newspaper," the managing editor said, "and we don't intend to create panic now. So don't be difficult, Kirkland. Take a week off, then see how you feel."

Hands thrust dejectedly in his pockets, Ray trudged toward the parking lot. Ahead, a crowd jammed the sidewalk in front of a gaudily decorated department store that flew a festooned banner:

IS KOSTLEMAN KRAZY? BIGGEST SAIL OF ALL!

Lesser pennants advertised: 21-Ounce Telavideo— $13.95!" "Combination Washer-Shaver—$13.66!" "Bicycle—$2.19; Tricycle— $3.77; Quadricycle—$5.98!"

Drifting slowly up from the roof of the building were two of the almost indiscernible patches of dark haze. A third was descending. Squinting, he located the speck of silver that hung steady overhead, almost lost in the blue.

He pushed into the wedge that was pouring in through the main entrance.

"Wait!" he shouted, arms upraised. "Don't go in! They'll kill you!"

The man pressing against him laughed. "You crazy? This is a publicity stunt."

"What won't they think of next!" the woman next to him exclaimed, smiling.

Abysmally, Ray thought of a vast formation of ducks flying high over a blind occupied by a persistent caller . . . several of the hens wavering in flight, impatient to set down among the decoys . . . the irate lead drake seeing through the phony setup and quacking his alarm . . . the other birds ignoring his warning and peeling off to plunge to the destruction that waited below.

Caught up in the tide of eager bargain-seekers, he was swept into the store and deposited in a long aisle where a young couple stood examining a console television set. The man propped his elbow on top of the cabinet and his arm promptly plunged right through the paneling. Confounded, he backed away.

The buzzing sound of the transit was barely audible as man and wife vanished.

Backing away fearfully, Ray saw the metal tube and its tripod—high on a shelf against the wall. To the left, flanking the next row, was another; to the right, a third.

The faint humming sounded again—and again—and again.

He turned and bolted for the entrance. But the press of the crowd was too great, so he lunged for the back of the store. At the end of the aisle, he swerved to race along the wall looking for another exit. But he tripped over a carton and his impetus carried him headlong into the rear wall—*through* the wall—as easily as his fist had gone through the door of the Cape Cod!

He regained his feet in a darkened room and stood staring terrified at a huge scaly thing like the one he had seen in the window of the beach house. A transit, its collapsed tripod gripped in the coil of a gooseneck arm, was slung over a proturberance that might have been a shoulder. Its other tendril was wrapped tightly around the necks of a lifeless man and three women who hung in a cluster.

The thing tensed and faded into an almost indiscernible shadow, only the transit remaining visible. Then the instrument swung toward Ray.

He lunged for the sidewall, diving through it as though it were made of papier-mache. The alley outside, however, was narrow and the force of his sprawling leap sent him crashing into the brick wall of the next building.

Dazed, he rose shaking his head and staggered toward the sidewalk. But he pulled up sharply, cringing against the wall. Farther down the alley, an area of shadow seemed to be striving for materialization. It drifted on toward him.

He lurched out onto the sidewalk and melted inconspicuously into the stream of shoppers. When he paused a block away to look back, there was no sign of the vague oval shadow.

Then he thought suddenly of Alice and sprinted for the parking lot. God, they might throw up a booby trap *anywhere*—even in his own neighborhood!

While racing home, his suspicions were twice verified. . . . A man whose motions were too mechanical stood on the roof of a supermarket tossing down dollar bills; but the throng below was too preoccupied to notice a woman on the very edge of the crowd vanish, a delivery boy go next. Closer to home, a theater which he was sure hadn't been there two days earlier offered free admission for the first showing of "Marriln Monrow" in *Bus Halt*.

He jolted the car to a stop in the carport and swept in through the kitchen door.

His father-in-law sat at a table honing a hunting knife. "Home early today, ain't you, son?"

"Where's Alice?" Ray asked frantically.

The old man brushed three decoys out of the way to make more room for the sweep of his hand over the stone. "At the neighbor's. . . . You suppose we ought to spend Friday night at the lodge?"

Ray hunched over the table. "Dad, how smart are ducks?"

"Too danged smart sometimes. Take that big canvasback I shot down over the blind—"

"I mean do they ever get wise to our decoys, our blinds?"

"Damned right." His father-in-law ran a thumb delicately over the edge of the blade. "Some of 'em know what a gun means, too."

"Do they *all* go for a duck call?"

"A good caller can fool any duck, no matter how smart it is."

"Alice!" Ray said in fright. "Dad, we've got to find her!"

"Why so excited?" She stepped in from the dining room and deposited a partly embroidered tablecloth next to the decoys.

He started for her, but the phone rang and he crossed over to the extension to answer it first.

"For God's sake, get the hell back here!" It was Balston. "You were right. People are missing all over!"

"I'm on my way." Ray slammed the receiver down and grabbed his hat.

"Why so excited?" Alice asked again.

"Don't go outside!" he ordered. "There's no time to explain. But stay in the house till you hear from me!"

The old man followed him to the door. "Don't get tied up this weekend. The season starts Saturday, you know."

Ray paused, half in the car. "I'm afraid it's already started."

Alice's strained voice floated after him. "Why so excited?"

He was halfway down the drive when he tensed and jammed on the brakes, realizing Alice had bogged down on the phrase "Why so excited?"—just as the woman-thing at the beach house had on her plea for help.

Then he saw the patch of haze hovering ominously above the house, casting an even more tenuous shadow over his car. Paralyzed, he sat there gripping the wheel.

Alice stumbled awkwardly out of the kitchen door. Through the windshield, he watched her turn clumsily toward him. She came forward in a halting stride—*but her feet weren't even touching the pavement!*

Her shoulder struck a post of the carport and she tottered momentarily, then keeled over, falling against the side of the house. One of her arms snapped off neatly along a shoulder seam and rolled grotesquely down the driveway. She lay on her side, her legs continuing to pump uninterrupted in their walking motion, like an overturned mechanical doll.

Gears clashed as he sent the car lurching back into the street, then plunging forward toward the business district.

The woman-thing at the beach-house hadn't been a personalized decoy, but this Alice-thing had. That could mean only that they were now after him *specifically*!

Why? Because he had discovered their pattern of blinds and ruses? Because he had exposed it partially through the article on the Cape Cod? Had intruded and escaped at the beach house and again at the department store?

Of course that was it! He had the knowledge to reveal in detail what was happening. And unless they eliminated him—just as his father-in-law had eliminated the canvasback that had discovered the blind—he could ruin *their* sport!

The whole concept was vast and appalling. Sportsmen from who only knew how far away, finding a spot teeming with what to them was only game, descending and setting up their blinds, preparing their decoys, perfecting their human calls . . .

An oval shadow darkened the surface of the street behind him and he leaned out the window to glance up. The thing that had been over the house was following—overtaking him!

The pressure *was* on him personally now, just as earlier it had been on the lead duck in the swamp! But there was a way he could escape! If he succeeded in alerting the flock —if he got his story in print and had the wire services pick it up and carry it all over—there would no longer be any point in eliminating him. And he would then have just as good a chance as the rest of the game!

But the symmetrical haze was already maneuvering in position over the car.

He whipped the wheel around and careened into an alleyway, hurled the door open and dived out. He hit the asphalt surface at a speed too great for his legs to take and tumbled over, rolling into the recessed freight entrance of the building on the left.

The shadow clouded the alley as his car crashed into the other building. Then the car vanished and the shadow went away.

Minutes later, after the pain had subsided in the abrasion burns along his forearm and thigh, he crept out to the street and continued groggily toward the newspaper office. He was fighting mad.

Balston looked up impatiently as he entered the news room. "For God's sake! Get it down on paper—quick!"

At his desk, Ray sat motionless for a moment, arranging his mental notes before beginning the story. He stared around the room. No shadows—not yet, at least.

Hawkins was hunched over his desk reading copy. Two reporters were busy taking calls over the telephone. The staccato of the clacking keys in the glass-enclosed teletype room was a muffled distraction that plucked annoyingly at his concentration.

Finally the lead of the story began taking form in his mind and he squared away in front of the typewriter.

"Get it down on paper—quick!" Balston broke in impatiently on his thoughts.

He ran a sheet of paper through the roller and began knocking out the story.

"For God's sake! Get it down on paper—quick!"

Ray froze with his hands poised above the keyboard. He pivoted slowly toward Balston. From his position, he could see behind the managing editor's desk . . .

Balston existed from the waist up only. From there down, a slim pedestal held him upright.

And the shadows were in the news room. He could see them now—one in the far corner close to the ceiling, another behind the glass in the teletype room, a third hovering behind the immobile Hawkins at the city desk.

And the transits were there too—one half hidden in back of the water cooler, the tube of another protruding from behind the copy desk, still another poking out above Hawkins' shoulder. They all swung around slowly, carefully focusing on him.

None of the other blinds had worked, he realized, and remembered what his father-in-law had said: "A good caller can fool any duck, no matter how smart it is." And then he heard the first note of the high-pitched whine.

I O U

Edward Wellen

END-AROUND CARRY

A Striped paranoiac awning flapped and billowed, deluding itself it was a Viking sail. Shadow and sunlight streaked across the face of the dying man. His eyes barely flickered awareness of the shifting. A priest looked sadly on; the IOU obit key the man wore prevented the priest from attending him.

A traffic administrator, his authority an invisible extension of the radius of his arm, wiped the shoppers back in a semicircle to provide landing space on the Mall. The pulseband on the dying man's wrist, having started sending the moment the pulse began to weaken, seemed to be beeping with greater urgency.

A hum of vanes aloft evoked a hum of speculation below. Then the bystanders made out the insignia. The IOU last-aid man, beating out the ambulance as usual.

The usual Zealot howled "Blasphemer!" as the IOU man grounded and knelt beside the dying man.

The IOU man ignored the howling of the Zealot, the sighing of the priest, and the caught breaths of the rest. He eyed the traffic administrator.

The t.a. shrugged. "Just keeled over. Heart attack, I think."

The IOU man unzipped his kit, pulled out his brainmeter and touched it to the skull of the dying man. He watched the indicator and at the same time kept half an eye out, not fretfully, for the ambulance. He could go ahead on his own discretion. He did.

He took out his spray injector and jetted a burst of transistorized particles through an ear into the brain; then he thrust the dying man's obit key, which hung from a gold chain about the neck, into the portable call box.

At IOU headquarters the great computer snatched the

dying man's obit from the necrofile and transmitted the pattern to the transistorized particles in the man's brain.

The weather bureau had freshened the breeze and a scrap of stale newspaper rustled along like a leaf. An old headline —IOU DECLARES BIGGEST DIVIDEND YET—molded itself to the man's face. A gasp from the squeamish, but the last-aider, concentrating on his readings, failed to take notice. The t.a.'s eye silenced all.

The last-aider looked up and smiled around. The dead man had made his heaven.

The crowd sighed, all but priest and Zealot in relief. The t.a. sighed. The IOU man sighed. All but priest and Zealot were IOU subscribers.

Now the IOU man saw the scrap of paper and reached to remove it. But the wash of the slightly late ambulance tore it away, with what seemed to the squeamish a rip.

I

On his way home Rush Tumulty dropped his last credit in a slot and reaped a bouquet of roses. His life jingle-jangled with spurs of the moment.

Home. The real estate agent, God pity his soul, had told them it was quaint and neighborly. At the touch of Rush's key the door opened with a quaint creaking. (It made it easy for the neighbors to keep tabs on comings and goings.)

Margaret had her eyes on the screen. She was reaching behind for the box of sweets on the table. Smiling, Rush put the roses into her groping hand.

"Ouch!"

The roses scattered. Margaret sucked her thumb. But no one could look at Rush and stay mad.

The preset was switching channels.

"Not another debate?" Another investigation in the making; the networks were on a public-service kick.

Margaret spluttered indignant chocolate. "Not just another. There'll be Neal McGillicuddy Cloy! He's real good. You know?"

"Ig."

Neal McGillicuddy Cloy, professional optimist, doctor of business ethics, etc. Sickening. But Cloy was a sales engineer of a sort. Might as well stick it out. Might garner a few tips. Sales engineers had to learn to suppress distaste for certain types. The most unpromising prospects sometimes proved the most rewarding clients. That was good business ethics.

But then they announced the subject: Birth control.

Avoid the issue. Rush dreamed of his big break and became aware of the program again only when it was ending.

Whatever his stand had been, Cloy sat beaming at the fadeout. Why not? More people, bigger audience; fewer people, more elbow room for the chosen few. Pro and con, the world was getting better and better—for Cloy.

Margaret was glowing. Rush started to say something, but the commercial was so cute she shushed him. Then she turned to him. He tensed.

"When're we going to begin begetting? A boy and a girl. You know? How does that strike you?"

" 'Strike'—aggressive word. You feel unconscious hostility toward me."

Margaret said through her teeth, "I do not."

"See? Quarreling again. Bad atmosphere to raise kids in."

They sat apart, eyes unseeing on the screen, until a phone rang next door.

Margaret stirred. "Like some punch?"

He gave a nod, but it was automatic. He eyed her as she swayed to the kitchenette on spike heels. Ringing was stimulus, response was "punch." He smiled; the linking was clear. Bell . . . rang . . . come out fighting . . . punch. His smile faded. She *was* feeling hostile. He couldn't blame her. He put on the smile as spike heels returned. They sat sipping.

Rush was no good at fighting silence with silence. He fidgeted, emptied the glass in a gulp, banged it down, sprang to his feet and stomped out muttering not to wait up.

He strode blindly, aware he was again precipitating a crisis by refusing to face a crisis. No, he was conquering his fear of rejection by rejecting the other first. No, he wasn't rejecting Margaret but a way of life, the kind his father had led, resenting wife and child. No, it wasn't so much resentment at them as at Fate; early photos showed a man alert for a different drumming, later—a man who'd committed himself to the humdrum. No, he had to, or where would he be? Where the race, if everyone ran off chasing the sound of their own pulsing?

No. Survival, even of the race, wasn't enough. A man had to find meaning in being . . . or what's an earth for anyway?

Out of the tail of an eye Rush saw a gesture. Bill collector? He put purpose on his face and made the vanishing point his goal. Then he stopped. Will Wishart! No; Will, rest his kindly soul, had passed on. A family likeness, then; Will Wishart's kid brother—what was the name?—Ken.

"Hi-ya, Ken."

"You remember me?"

"Will I ever forget?"

They shook hands. Rush remembered Ken dogging the

heels of the big boys, always in the way unless the big boys wanted him to run an errand or retrieve a ball from a ferocious yard or decoy while they stole fruit. Now Ken was a man and taller than himself. It made him feel old. It was funny to see Kenny, prosperity on the outside and intelligence shining through, suddenly becoming the hero-worshiping kid again. Rush straightened.

"You haven't changed, Rush."

"You sure have, Kenny."

"What're you doing these days?"

"I'm a missionary." Really he was only a sales engineer, though he had once hoped to study for missionary work—breaking the ice for new products. And really only a jobless sales engineer at the moment. He was glad he'd always remembered the importance of dressing well.

"I knew you'd go places, Rush."

God! What he'd wanted, and what places he was going!

"Uh, you know, Rush, I wish I had a guy like you working with me."

Rush's whole shortcoming had always seemed to him inability to maintain a delicate balance—not answering too soon, not hesitating too long. He sucked in. "What do you have in mind, Ken?" He hoped he'd struck the note of casual interest.

"It goes back. I run a chain of geriatoria and I came to know this senior citizen, Jackie. Quite senile, childishly disobedient, but everyone's favorite."

Ohmigaud. Rush hated to hear about old people.

"He would cry out in a kind of rote fear, 'Save my soul . . . save my soul . . . save my soul from the fires of hell.' And sometimes, 'Gabriel! Gabriel! Gabriel!' " Ken smiled. "I can see him trying to pick up noodles on his fork and getting angry. 'Why do they cut it so short?' " Ken shook himself. "Well, the last time I saw Jackie he wasn't baby-pink but gray. Vitamins and dextrose met in a Y of plastic tubing and trickled into his veins. A thready pulse in the stringy arm. I was glad he was going quietly into the long sleep, as we call it."

He coughed and hurried on as Rush shifted weight.

"His eyelids lifted; bleared whites showed, then thin crescents. He groaned. And I could see Jackie falling into the fires he feared." Ken shivered. "I found myself saying, 'It's all right, Jackie. This is Gabriel. Your soul is safe from the fires of hell. I'm taking you to God.' "

Rush stared. "Did it work?"

"I think so. I hope so. If it'd been not a voice in the ear but a vision within, I'd be sure. Since then I've worked out

the way." He went into jargon beyond Rush—even if Rush had listened.

Rush was seeing visions and dreaming dreams.

He grew aware of a questioning silence. "Um-hum."

Rush had edged around and Ken was facing an autobar. Ken thought of standing them a container of cognac.

Ken grew expansive as alcohol expanded his capillaries. "Rush, this is a thing I'm burning to promote. Not for the money, though I s'pose it might come to quite a bit. Thanks—" as his cup was refilled. "But for the satisfaction." His face shone with earnestness and sweat.

Rush frowned, but not too heavily. "Fine, Kenny, but you have to think this through. More than a mere matter of life and death—everything is that. This would let a human mind settle its accounts for all eternity."

Ken brandished his cup. "Kind of talk I need. Man I need. What say, Rush?" He waggled a finger as Rush opened his mouth. "Don't expect you to make up your mind all at once. Have to think things through."

Rush strove to strike a balance between indecent haste and insulting slowness.

And so—Instant Obituaries Unlimited.

While casting about for some sound sentiment worthy of the moment, Rush belched.

II

Rush had already given the printer the go-ahead, but thought it only fitting to let Ken see the prospectus.

Ken frowned over the layout and copy.

"Kenny, you have to realize people don't buy preventives, they buy cures. We're selling the ultimate cure."

Ken read on.

A devilish Before leered at the prospect, asking:

Are you fearful of old age and the wasting away of your powers?

Are you bitter about having chosen the wrong career, the wrong mate?

Do you foresee doom without being able to alter it?

Do you desire without hope of attaining the thing you desire?

Are you remorseful for having squandered your talents, missed opportunities, deprived or mistreated others?

Do you feel rejected or wronged?

Are you unprepared to meet your Maker?

Here an angelic After, the letters IOU penned on its feathers, put the devilish Before behind it and beckoned the prospect. It said:

It isn't too late! When you close the books on life the IOU way, your personalized obit guarantees you satisfaction in the long sleep. If the body requires touching up just to lie on view, how much more does the dimming mind need the light of reassurance to enable it to pass on without faltering into eternal darkness!

Your personalized obit reassures you that you haven't lived your life in vain, that you have realized your potentialities to the full, that you have gratified your dearest and most secret desires. Your personalized obit justifies your misdeeds, remits your sins of omission and commission. Your personalized obit convinces you that you are entering Paradise, harvesting the fruits of Heaven, standing before the Throne—receiving comfort in the Presence.

Plot your lot in life easily, the amazing new IOU way. Simply speak into the scientifically designed Inscraper. This highly sensitive mechanism, developed by IOU's brilliant research staff—

Ken turned brilliant red and coughed.

—and exclusive with IOU, automatically translates your word-pictures of your version of the Hereafter into magnetic characters, permanently registering your personalized obit.

In minutes, you are ready for eternity, come what may. You live out the rest of your life, carefree in the assurance that, when your Time comes, efficient IOU emergency service springs into immediate action, transmitting the tape of your personalized obit to your brain. The magnetic characters return electronic signals that evoke the original eidetic imagery. But now, thanks to the fact that the power to reason and resist is failing, the vividness and reality of your vision of the Hereafter has increased manifold!

Be among the first to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you will enter into everlasting bliss! Dial O and ask to speak to your IOU representative today!

"Well?"

"I didn't know you'd make it quite that—"

"We *have* to make it strong! I did think twice about saying, back there, that one might even sit on the Throne; I

figured that would raise too much hell. But don't let the religious angle trouble you. God has all eternity to set things right."

"That's right."

"Meanwhile, we put the fear of God and/or the Devil into them. Damned few have the moral courage to face up to the consequences of their weaknesses without weaseling, whining, or wishful thinking. That's where we come in."

"I guess you can go ahead."

"Fine."

"And when that's done?"

"We sit back and wait."

Ken sat on the edge of his chair and eyed the furnishings. They represented all his savings and mortgagings. But Rush had been sure front was more important than the equipment that made IOU feasible and that Ken had stuck together out of second-hand parts.

Rush went out whistling.

III

"There will be a nominal charge for orchestrating . . ."—IOU contract form.

Umbrella hooked on his arm, Otto Trever neared the IOU building, gateway to a better world.

He would live not in the past with its wilted hopes and smoldering regrets, not on the forever-crumbling edge of the present, but in a heavening future.

He sidled off the autowalk. With the awkward agility of the non-jostler he made his way to the entrance. He found himself nodding to the robot doorkeeper; then, though he knew this made as little sense, scowled at it. It was in the shape of an angel. It handed him a numbered card.

Full of comings and goings, but not at all like a terminal, the waiting room struck a balance between solemnity and sprightliness. Murals showed lion and lamb in loving togetherness.

Otto Trever sat watching numbers light up. His eyes followed figures springing or creaking to their feet and vanishing down corridors. His number came up. He himself came up, force of response compensating for slight delay, and eyes followed him.

He came to a door. He showed his card and the door admitted him. He stood wondering what to do with hat, umbrella, and himself. A voice murmured and Trever found himself deep in a chair, pouring out his heart to an intercom.

He found himself agreeing he needed orchestrating of his obit. The voice ushered him into a recording room.

The blank-faced technician was re-filling sound effects. Labels indicated ringing hoofs, creaking leather, clashing swords; the preceding client had wanted to believe, when his time should come, he was dying in battle, in the flower, untimely pluck'd, of ancient knighthood.

Trever nodded. That was a way to go. Still, wasn't it safer to go in your sleep, not knowing you were going? No, the best way was awarely—with editing.

But maybe the manner of his own going ought to have a bit more thought. Maybe—

The technician was glancing up from ticker tape notations the computer relayed from the consulting rooms.

Too late to back out now. Trever postured eagerness.

"Won't take long, sir. I see this calls for just a girl's voice." The tech turned to his mixing knobs.

Not just a girl's voice. The voice of Hannah O'Dea. Trever glared at the IOU-lettered back. Hannah had a breath-taking voice electronic tones couldn't hope to match.

But he listened to scales of syllables and heard himself saying, "There! That's it!" whenever sound chimed with memory.

Then the tech was saying, "There, that's it."

And it was so. Trever could close his eyes and *see* Hannah; he almost laughed to hear her lilt meaningless syllables.

Joy switched to panic. The tech was going to leave him to himself—and to Hannah.

"Say anything you want into this mike. Press this, it'll come out in your voice. Press that, it'll come out in the young lady's. This is for the playback."

His finger over a button, Trever was alone, staring at the mike. He was afraid. For without that button there was no Hannah, not for him. Hannah had never given him steady encouragement. Still it was a shock when she laughed in his face. His face burned. His finger stabbed down.

This time, Hannah was charmingly confused. The honor Otto was conferring overwhelmed her, unworthy being that she felt herself to be. She could only murmur, "Oh, darling, darling!" How tenderly masterful Trever was, whispering comfort with counterpoint of passion.

He gazed around, part of himself lingering in that event. He pulled himself together. Why, he hadn't done badly.

At that sweet seizure, he switched on the playback. He sat listening to a transvestite act.

He'd pressed the buttons in the wrong order.

All to do over again.

Rush entered Ken's office whistling the IOU theme. Without turning from the bank of closed-circuit screens, Ken put up a palm. Rush smiled, but silenced. He listened a moment then moved to the window. He viewed the streaming in and out. He heard a sigh and a switching off, then Ken was at his side.

Rush gestured. "And we're just beginning."

"But it's never-ending. We'll never ease all the pain and sorrow."

"Don't worry, Ken. Iron and bamboo curtains won't stop us. I promise you."

Ken put a hand on Rush's shoulder.

Their eyes lifted to the sunset the weather bureau was projecting.

Ken smiled. "What a life, when even loveliness brings sadness for its evanescence."

Loveliness. Rush remembered Margaret and felt for the clasp he had bought. No special occasion; just that he enjoyed drawing down big money and spending it.

He looked down on the streaming in and out and whistled the IOU theme.

IV

"Persons wishing to spend eternity together may under clause (w) open a joint checking-out account."
—IOU contract form.

Quick as they laid Pat Conover in his grave his widow Norah began to fail. There was nothing mournful about her pining away. She was merely in a hurry to share Pat's repose.

Declining to look after her wellbeing, she quickened the process long invalidism had begun. Bedridden, she had entrusted Pat with taping the one obit for the two of them.

As this was a joint account, the computer hadn't erased the tape but stored it against further falling due. With efficiency the IOU man administered last-aid.

Norah's face began to compose—then jolted to horror, disbelief, rage. With a galvanic lazarising, she sat up as you'd crook a finger and glared at the ghost-white IOU man. . . .

Ken burst into Rush's office waving a teleprint. "They served me by visiphone!"

Rush had to admire his own calm. "Mrs. Conover?"

Ken nodded.

"She has no case. Where's the harm in shock, when it's shock that revived her?"

"She wanted to die! But that misses the point. She's suing not on her own behalf but for her husband's estate."

"Same thing."

"She claims he got the wrong obit and should collect damages."

"What damages? He died happy."

"How do we know that?"

Sometimes Rush felt like shaking Ken. "Prima-facie evidence. Smile of the beatific."

"Or grimace of pain," said Ken.

"Or gas. Sure. Why are you trying to undermine yourself?"

"Might be kinder to allow we goofed. Ease the poor woman's mind."

"Want our other clients to lose, through apprehension, the full effect of their obit?"

"No-o."

"Wouldn't surprise me, Kenny, if the 'poor woman' is a zealot-sympathizer trying to discredit our whole operation."

Norah Conover told the arbitrator that even in her distress she didn't feel IOU had done it deliberately. If IOU would own up to its mistake she'd be of a mind to forgive.

She waved her cane. That obscene obit was none of Pat's doing. "All those lascivious dancing-girls! All that drinking and carousing! Oh no, that wasn't the heaven my Pat planned for us. I lived with the man forty years and I know Pat Conover never made that obit."

The arbitrator turned. "Mr. Tumulty?"

Rush handed in data strips. "Here's proof that Pat Conover made and paid for the obit in question."

The cane failed. "Some other Pat Conover!"

"Sorry, madam, but according to our computer it has serviced no other Pat Conover."

"Then your computer is loony!"

The arbitrator said, "I understand your agitation, Mrs. Conover, but let's not get personal."

Rush was handing in more data strips. "Service records prove our computer in perfect operating condition since activation."

Norah tightened her lips as the arbitrator took in the data. Rush studied the ceiling.

The arbitrator said, "Unless you can show me some proof, Mrs. Conover, I'm afraid—"

Norah broke down. The cane clattered.

The arbitrator printed up its decision. It wondered why a breakdown always embarrassed not the one breaking down but those looking on . . .

(When Ken ran off the transcript of the proceedings, he felt that embarrassment. But Rush was right. They had scaled the heights of a higher justice . . .)

Otto Trever neared the IOU building. Knowing IOU to be infallible, he disregarded the catcalling of the Zealot pickets.

"Better unbought unhappiness than bought, unearned pleasure!"

"You have chased after sin!"

"Say farewell to your immortal soul!"

On second thought, it would be better to begin with an aloof Hannah O'Dea. The triumph would be greater when she wound up a passionate slave.

Unaware his dreamy smile was maddening, Trever passed through traffic administrators holding back the Zealots.

V

"IOU undertakes to deliver the obit at all hazards."
—IOU contract form.

The weather bureau was projecting an outsize moon. It was the least the government could do now the Russians had made the real moon constant, stationing it over Moscow. But it added to the hazards George Cavendish had to overcome.

It forced him to make for the wall furthest from the beam, to keep from silhouetting himself. The main gate was in that wall, and so was the heaviest guard.

The vane lofting him whirred softly, loud to his ears. He cupped an eye to the glow of his watch. 1924 hours. Good job of timing. *Now.*

He sucked in air and prepared to cant himself into the yard. There was a stir in the tower emplacement and his guts writhed.

But the discs that were the faces of the guards had phased toward the insubstantial moon. It was blinking.

Cavendish guessed IOU had tapped the projector's power line and was oscillating the juice. Rush Tumulty had promised a diversion at the right instant and was delivering. Even in the dark, Cavendish smiled inwardly; no flashing of teeth to betray him.

He landed, slipped into a workshop, and stashed the vane and a guard's uniform. His spray injector he stowed under the jacket of the trusty's uniform he wore. He hid behind a mountain of license plates and sat waiting.

He shivered. It was the chill of the raw hours. He wondered if Mort Greene saw the blinking from his cell in death row.

Mort had robbed and killed to get the credits to buy his obit. Then the law caught up with him and fixed the day to die. The IOU computer registered this bit of information and prepared to make good. But the law held Mort couldn't benefit by his crimes, or what good would capital punishment be as a deterrent? It denied obit.

IOU and its subscribers held that society might have the right to deprive the body of life, but not to deprive the mind of comfort—however paid for. The law and the Zealots held that body and mind were one and that one suit of punishment had to fit the whole crime.

Cavendish didn't feel deeply about it pro or con. But he felt deeply about making good. Rush Tumulty had sent him off with a firm handshake and a frank smile and something about IOU having a moral duty to test the case, to defy the law, to deliver the goods. It would be criminally foolish to pass up the chance to make this manifest to those who had joined up, and to those hesitating. Cavendish wondered if Ken Wishart had the Chief's sense of obligation. Wishart kept himself too much to himself.

Cavendish wished the Chief had told him just who the inside contact would be. But the Chief was right. Suppose the law were to intercept Cavendish—and drag the name of the inside man out of him? It would stop dead all further attempts to reach Mort Greene in time. Still, he couldn't help wondering. The warden? An arresting thought, but Cavendish shook his head; better suspend judgment, not commit the folly of committing oneself beforehand. He'd have to keep mind open and body alert if he were to acquit himself well . . .

He must've dropped off, no blinking the fact. The world was cold gray. Inmates were marching to breakfast.

Soon, many of them, with their guards, would be trooping into the shops, including the one where he sat hiding.

He was to slip out and mingle with the cons when they took their break in the yard. He was to stay inconspicuous; the contact would know him by the number—10010101—on his jacket. The contact would take it from there.

Cavendish sweated out close shaves. It was hard to hear footsteps in the din and he jumped in his skin whenever a voice sounded near. But his luck held.

And it was time to knock off work, and sudden silence fell . . . save for the eerie lipless talking of the cons and the silencing shouts of the guards. Cavendish slipped out and made himself part of the milling.

He thought he was being inconspicuous but he found cons eyeing him and commenting coarsely. He remembered

he'd sat all night on a stack of license plates; he must've impressed a number on his seat. He kept his back straight and bent his knees as he stolled, hoping his jacket would cover. But he attracted the gaze of a tower guard, hard-looking.

The guard winked. His heart thumped his ribcage. The inside contact. He returned the wink. The guard turned away—swung back, and winked. Cavendish shot glances around, then winked. He knew he ought to move on before others noted. But the guard's gaze held him. The guard winked. Cavendish groaned—hadn't there been office enough?—but he winked.

The guard raised his gun and blazed away at Cavendish.

Cavendish came to in the prison hospital. He had only flesh wounds; he supposed he should feel grateful. But there are soul wounds.

Knowing it useless, he felt for the spray injector. Gone. They couldn't have missed it when they stripped him to tend his wounds of the flesh.

He'd done his best, but he defended himself without conviction. It was painful even to wonder what went wrong. Maybe the guard was a Zealot, laughing to himself at the thought of crossing up the IOU agent.

A figure leaned over him. A trusty-orderly. The man would have the freedom of the place. If he jumped the man, got his naked flesh into those clothes, he'd have a fighting chance . . .

He caught the man in a hammerlock.

The man broke it and pushed him down. "Mercy me, 10010101, you *are* screwy. You're lucky to be living. Zwicker's touchy about his tic. Why'd you have to make fun of it? Lucky I got to you first and gloomed the injector. They figure Zwicker went stir crazy."

Cavendish found his voice. "Will the spray injector get to Greene in time?"

The con nodded. "Sure." Then frowned. "Need his key?"

"No. The computer will send the obit at execution time. They're not moving it up?"

The con shook his head. "Not that it would be any trouble to get Greene's key. It's in the warden's safe."

"You mean he's in this with us?"

"Mercy no. Account of all the pete men in here, the warden don't bother locking it. Now we have to think how to get you out."

Cavendish told him of the cache.

The trusty had hardly left when Cavendish remembered

the vane. His heart thumped. Would the con take off, leaving Cavendish to face the rap?

Cavendish waited. When he heard footsteps he feared to turn.

It was the trusty. Emptyhanded.

The trusty unwound a guard's uniform, cummerbunded under his jacket. Cavendish dressed with haste.

He tried to think guard as the con escorted him past eyes to the dark workshop.

Vane strapped on and whirring, Cavendish asked, "Why didn't you take this and escape?"

"Mercy. You happen to set your eyes on all the license plates? More each year. Think I'd throw away the break of being safe from vane traffic?"

Time to go. All eyes, including those of the trusty, who failed to see him wave, were on a shadow-stained window. As he went over the wall he thought he saw lights dim.

Both Mort Greene and the trusty-barber seemed embarrassed that the hairshaving was a superfluous gesture. But under cover of it the barber used the injector the orderly had slipped him to shoot the transistorized particles into Mort Greene's brain.

Mort did not hear the hissing of the electric charge. He heard ringing hoofs, creaking leather, clashing swords . . .

Cavendish smoothed down his hair; knowing the Chief's flair for publicity, he felt it likely he'd be walking into a telepress conference. He entered the Chief's office, steeling himself against glare and noise.

Rush was alone. He sprang up and clapped Cavendish on the back. "Wonderful work, George. Too bad we can't publicize it. But I've been kicking it around. If people learned Greene got away with it, wouldn't it tempt many to emulate him? No, the well-being of Society comes foremost. It's only good business ethics. We have to refund stolen money, so it would be not only without honor but without profit."

Cavendish knew letdown as Rush saw him out. Then handshake and smile made it all right . . .

Otto Trever took a card from the doorangel. He smiled at the robot and then, realizing the folly of expending feeling on a machine, deepened smile. It felt good to know he was dealing with a law-abiding concern. He didn't keep up with the news these days, but some pros and cons of the Mort Greene case had got through to him. Knowing IOU had restrained itself, shown itself on the side of law and order, he could disregard the Zealot pickets, who, though they had lost talking point, had not lost voice.

He entered the IOU building sure he had it now.

Hannah O'Dea would be the mistress of that rogue Otto Trever. She was one of a succession, and knew it. A pretty plaything but fast fading, she lived in dread of Otto's discarding her for a fresher plaything.

VI

"IOU agrees to serve as ante-mortem executor and will carry out the express wishes of the client."—IOU contract form.

Time had thrown her features out of focus, but as Ken looked at her, a nudge of memory resolved the face into that of his onetime favorite star, Cara Lovelace.

It was hard to believe this wasn't another telecast with Cara Lovelace playing the lead. Ken viewed her with a protecting tenderness that forgave bad makeup, quavering voice, wringing of bejeweled hands.

The first thing she looked for when she entered the consulting booth was a mirror. The shining surface of the intercom, designed to induce a semi-hypnotic state in which inhibitions would lessen, served. She felt melancholy. Her reflection informed her she looked soulful. She brightened —then tried to recall that shade of melancholy. She wanted to recapture that soulful look.

The intercom broke in softly with its gentle probing.

An audience! Cara responded. She spotlighted her rise in the theater, told of co-starring with Lane Pierce, then of going on to solo greatness, spoke trippingly of her tours.

Ken started at another memory. Lane Pierce had taped an obit only a few months before. Rush had noted it with special interest because someone not Lane Pierce had already taped an obit assuring himself he was the one and only Lane Pierce. The man could imagine no greater bliss than to die believing he had been that nova of Casanovas.

"Now," Cara said with a dramatic sigh, "I've reached a point in the road where I can see where I am and what I have and can expect." The mirroring surface gave back soulfully. "And I ask myself, 'Was it all for this?' "

Ken saw she couldn't believe that. She clung to youth, squeezed into it; shoes and girdle extruded Cara.

"Not that I think it's all over, or that it hasn't been worth while. But there's one thing I want to take care of at the curtain."

She stopped. Ken, feeling this was not a dramatic device but a pause before a plunge, willed her not to tape the

sort of obit Lane Pierce had taped. Stiff hands unpursed a letter, still sealed.

It would show blank when you held it to light; static electricity when you stripped off the flap brought out the writing. The letter was old, but there was only the start of a tear.

Ken strained to hear.

"This goes back to when I and Lane appeared together."

Together not only onscreen but off. But her best friend, Ada Moffat, had fun teasing her. "You're not dating *him?!*" He stuttered offscreen. Ada mocked. " 'It seems a cocoon's age since I saw you last night!' "

Cara was mad about his deep voice bespeaking depths of meaning, his deep eyes depths of feeling. But Ada would whisper, " 'What a lovely Jejune moon; it makes me crave the baboon of a kiss!' " Ada was competent enough actress to capture Lane. Cara would blush and go cold. Ada said Lane was a bore and groaned amusingly at sight of him. Cara tried to fight misgivings. But she saw less and less of Lane. And of Ada.

On the eve of the wedding of Lane Pierce and Ada Moffat, Cara received the letter. Her first impulse was to tear it to bits; her next, to tear it open.

Why was Lane writing *now*—unless to confess he regretted having decided to marry Ada? He repented before it was too late; Cara was his love; he and Cara—if she still cared for him—would elope. Cara started to rip the flap. Latent writing showed faint.

She stopped. Suppose Lane hoped she wouldn't judge him harshly; suppose, singing praises of Ada, he asked Cara to wish them well.

Latent writing remained too faint to make out. Fearing the finality of *knowing*, she shut the letter away. At long intervals she took the stationery from its resting place and with half-averted eyes tried to make out the writing. Sometimes it seemed to spell out one big "Yes," sometimes "No."

Now it was up to IOU to do for her what she lacked the will to do herself. She touched her neck. She was leaving the letter for the computer to open and scan and record. Whatever the message, it would be her obit.

IOU assured her it would carry out her orders to the letter. Having deposited that letter in the scan slot, she rose, performed a bow, and, uptilting her chin, exited.

Now the booth was void of both dead letter and living spirit, and still. And yet it held Ken's gaze and thought. Sometimes life seemed like a dress rehearsal. Opening night

was upcoming, but not yet. In moments like this, he felt he and the world of his senses were not really *on*.

Another client entered the booth and broke the spell. Ken switched off, then realized the client had been Otto Trever. Ken smiled, left the switch off, and returned to his work.

But he found himself returning to Cara Lovelace. And Lane Pierce. How the deduce could you figure a guy like that? In Pierce's obit there was no dialogue, no reciting of his triumphs on-screen and off, no word-picture of heavenly scenery. Only the thunder of canned applause.

Lane Pierce and his vacuum-packed obit; Cara Lovelace and her sealed letter; the man identifying himself with the outer Lane Pierce—which had the best of it? Ken turned back with a sigh, for he didn't know what, to the 1's and 0's of the IOU computer's current report.

Otto Trever sat down in the booth, still a bit out of breath. He had laid about him tellingly with his umbrella.

If the hassle had started when he was leaving, obit in order, he might've resigned himself to being struck down, maybe even welcomed dying. But he would let nothing stop him before he could revise his obit.

What made it hard on his umbrella was that the Zealots picked him as prime target. By now, they probably took him for a staff member of IOU. But that was behind him and he put it out of his mind.

The living Hannah O'Dea had gone away with her lover. Trever had never heard from Hannah. Whatever he heard was of her happiness; it only added to his unhappiness. The new obit would alter that.

He would encounter an old, life-beaten Hannah. She would turn away. Then, seeing no way of averting the meeting, she would face him. "If I had it to do all over again—Oh, Otto, if I only had it to do over again!"

VII

Griffin Manning's chest tightened. He sat eyeing the intercom much as the astrogastor of the first starship sat at her controls. In his own mind the comparison was more down to earth; he was a moron aspiring to migraine. Not that heaven was a headache. The headache was trying to conceive a heaven.

"I simply lack imagination."

The intercom consoled him.

The recording tech was waiting with a suitable range of prepackaged heavens. "Whenever you hear one you like,

sir, press this. Later, you'll make your final selection."

Out of sight in the control room the tech rolled the tape and listened in, yawning. After three solid hours of ethereality the tech saw Manning was hard to please.

Not one abode of bliss—not Sumeru or T'ien or Swarga or Aaru or Gan Eden or Olam ha-Ba or Elysium or Ching-tu or Jodo or Gokuraku or Asgard or Flatheanas or Albordy or Tuma of the Valley of the Assassins or Mictlan or Xibalba or Sibao or Tegri or Shipapu or Ponemah or Ilahee or Tir na n-Og or Hy Brasil or Avalon or Sukhavati or Langi or Untola or Dilum or Bolotoo or Hesunanin or Xanadu—had moved Manning's finger.

Moslems were threatening to enjoin IOU from allowing infidels to enjoy Jennet 'Adn. Turning his gaze toward the Throne of the Compassionate, the tech slipped Jennet 'Adn in.

No paradise. He quickly reprogrammed. But nothing drew response—not the sensation of immersion in amniotic fluid; not Nirvana, where all desire is wanting; not a rice-wine dream; not opium pipe dreams or marijuana or mushroom hallucinations; not the esthetic paradise of Dante's allegory. The tech tightened his lips and tapped Mahler's symphonic heaven. Still no response. The tech smiled. He hadn't played his trump.

The First Star Expedition had been sending back reports. IOU was among the earliest to subscribe for bulletins of the Eschatological Survey Team of Starex One. So there was a great dipper of non-human heavens to draw on as well.

That of the folk of Mekbuba II. In their heaven the chiefest delight was to go around scowling. It was joy to envisage relaxing from the livelong need to smile, a smile being the most efficient arrangement of features for scooping in the tiny airborne organisms on which they fed.

And that of the folk of Nashira II. They led a hard life and yearned for a harder time in heaven. In retrospect their temporal lot would seem not so bad after all.

And that of those of Spica II, in whom the nose had grown vestigial. These people looked forward to a return to the dream days of legend; the nose would quiver with sensation and the heady effect of pollen, pollution, and putrefaction would become known. Their desire was all the stronger because, honoring tradition, they preserved the conditions making these things tantalizingly omnipresent.

And of Salm II, a teeming planet. Each person believed that on reaching heaven *it* would—whatever pleasure it queued up for—always be first in line.

. The heaven of Alkalurops II was special—its would-be dwellers having from the beginning reserved all good things for heaven—and the tech knew a fleeting urge to put this in place of his present obit.

Heavens rolled by but Manning held out.

Swallowing angry embarrassment, the tech stood beside Manning. Manning made no sign of awareness. Taking this for sign of displeasure, the tech with savage feelings but gentle touch prodded Manning.

"Haven't you been able to come to any conclusion, sir?"

Manning nodded and slowly slid out of his chair. Somewhere along the line he had died of—one had to suppose—ecstasy.

Rush damned Ken under his breath. "Why'd you burst out to the press with a mea culpa? I could've hushed this Manning bit."

Ken lifted his head slowly. "Rush, I wonder if what we're doing is good. The spirit is willing—"

Rush stilled a quick retort. He steepled his fingers. "We do our human best. Besides, the guy got what he wanted."

Ken sat up. "You're darn tootin'. I let the shock and the uproar throw me." He eyed the monitors, not seeming to see how many screens were dark, how many consulting booths were not in use. "Be a shame to let all this go by default . . ." The unending spectacle caught him up.

Rush left. He wished he could convince himself it would come out right.

The Zealots had hold of this and were milking it.

They had strong backing; more to the point, they had a head—Yardley Bourne.

Bourne's biting mouth interpreted all-seeing providence, frightening away prospects. "This Manning-martyring monster, IOU, usurps God's function, shortcircuits Judgment, undermines Authority. This tool of the Devil encourages wicked living by 'forgiving' all at the end of living." Yardley Bourne wanted his finger in the pie in the sky. "By jiminy, I demand that all obits be opened to inspection!"

Then there was Soul Security. So far, Soul Security limited itself to obiting pets. The most peevish Zealot couldn't fault Soul Security for taping the voice of the master or mistress praising the dying animal. Even Yardley Bourne couldn't misinterpret Soul Security's taping, for dogs, the odor-complex of a congregational tree, with bonus cat at bay on a bough; for cats, a micey smell, or fluttering of bird or flopping of goldfish under paw; tensile infinity of worm, for birds.

Rush told himself that when the newness wore off the

public's interest would turn back to IOU. But "Soul Security" seemed undue for a dumb-beast clientele.

IOU was in no present danger of collapsing, if that was what Soul Security hoped. IOU could keep going till obit storage charges ran out.

Back to Manning. IOU's pitch would be that Manning had got what he wanted.

Oh. Tell the computer to collect in advance from now on . . .

Margaret Tumulty let the curtain fall in place. The little band of Zealots was there yet. She had grown aware that they had stilled and she had hoped they were gone. At least they had stilled. Listening to their yapping at IOU made her feel, well, *sick*. She tried to hide her feelings from Rush whenever she saw him but the idea of an obit gave her the shivers. But Zealots were disgusting, and just hearing them she felt disloyal. Still, it seemed to please Rush that she hadn't yielded to the pulling power of IOU commercials; he took it as a tribute to their personal relationship—she contemplated no greater joy.

She turned to her set and had it replay her favorite Neal McGillicuddy Cloy telecast. All was sweet, safe, and sure until a large band of Zealots, who like all Zealots took pride in being outspoken and in looking for opposition, came upon those outside the Tumulty mansion. These last had shouted themselves hoarse down-withing the Manning-martyrers and up-withing the Zealots. Their whispering caused the newcomers to take them for IOU conspirators and to wade into them bloodily. Margaret raised the volume.

Otto Trever nodded absent farewell to the door-angel. This was it, the obit to end all obits. But he felt regret for all he had to leave behind. Spatially the obit waiting in the necrofile lay behind; temporally it lay before. Why in many-mansioned possibility must he fix on only one, possibly free, choice? Deaf and blind to the Zealots, Trever passed through them along a t.a.-held line, and stepped onto the autowalk heading home.

The door-angel gazed after the vanishing figure. Something was O.

Most clients were one-time arrivals; there was no need for the door-angel to sort them out. Trever always wore the same clothing, always toted his umbrella—defiant symbol of the Radical Republicans, who once opposed functionalizing the weather bureau. The door-angel had come to recognize Trever and, torn between recognizing and the non-need to recognize, found salvation by stacking the deck to present Trever always with the same card. Now it gazed after the

vanishing figure and realized what was O. The man had forgotten to take his umbrella.

The door-angel hurried in and retrieved the battle-scarred umbrella, but by then the man was rounding out of sight.

The weather bureau had switched on a breeze. The door-angel's wings trembled. The door-angel eyed the vanes in the traffic lanes above and beyond the autowalks. It spread its wings and moved them.

Its makers had not designed the wings for such levity, but the door-angel rose. It was flying.

It looked for the man but the earth was tipping over. Its wings were tearing off. The ground came up.

The umbrella. Somewhere in the door-angel's reconditioned metal was the memory image of parachute and nose cone. The door-angel tore at the catch. It was immovable; being only a symbol, the umbrella didn't open. The door-angel perished without benefit of obit.

VIII

"In as much as personal identity is immaterial to obit-administering, the client may elect to use a pseudonym."—IOU contract form.

Rush looked down. He could tell the t.a.s by their blue uniforms, the Zealots by the lightning-emblazoned armbands they had taken to wearing, and the obit-seekers by their fewness.

He turned from the window to spottily-lit monitors. An outthrusting jaw, bulb nose, and wild eyebrows caught his eyes. He smiled. The whole getup screamed disguise. These days clients seemed to want to hide from family, friends, and foes that they were clients. For Rush's benefit, the computer printed on the screen the name G. F. VEHR (PSEUD.) . . .

The electronic frisking had given him a bad moment; he had feared the t.a.s would penetrate his careful disguise. But they had not even suspected disguise. They were simply on the lookout for Zealot sabotage. It had all worked out for the best. He was here now, and the ordeal had shaken loose his last reservations.

It was the fuss about Manning that made him think of taping his own obit. Not that he wanted to die in ecstasy—not just yet. He had so much more good to do on earth. But taping a trial obit might be the answer to what was troubling him.

It began when Manager Forbes—he advised the intercom

all names were purely fictitious—singled out young Vehr. Vehr's unclouded vision of the shining purity of the Ideal —neat, evenly-balanced books, ditto towns, ditto people— exalted him above the classmates in the business ethics seminary. Colonizing of Venus was beginning.

"The first Carrier of the Word on Venus! A great honor, my son, but one you richly deserve."

"I am not worthy, Manager Forbes."

"Oh, you are, my son."

Then the briefing. The veil of Venus fell. Vehr closed his eyes. No shining purity there. No neat, evenly-balanced books, towns, people. Violence, lust, passion ran amuck in the raw settlements.

He packed. Manager Forbes arranged passage. But Venus had evidently got word of impending salvation; anonymous abuse in dirty English, Chinese and Russian flooded the seminary. Manager Forbes in particular came in for brutal cautioning, vilifying and ridiculing.

Manager Forbes vetoed the mission. Venus was not yet worthy of such as Vehr. The seminary would turn its face toward a more deserving flock nearer home.

Vehr protested. But he bowed to greater wisdom, not without a spurt of fear. He had come near to overdoing his disappointment, moving more than one director to talk of overriding the veto and giving the lad his chance to prove himself.

"Poor Manager Forbes. But it was all for the best. By sending those letters I was able to keep shining and pure my vision of the Ideal." Mind had triumphed over matter, yet he found himself thinking often of the aborted mission and the thought always carried a feeling of apprehension. Worsening of late, it took the form of a fear of saying or doing something embarrassing. He was a public figure. He couldn't restrict himself to pretaped appearances.

Taping an obit allaying a disagreeable memory in the hereafter might, by taking off pressure, allay a disagreeable memory in the here. In his obit he would be leaving a world in which Man had never torn the veil from Venus, a Venus innocent as the dawn of Earth when mystery brooded over the waters.

It seemed to work. The outthrusting jaw, bulb nose and wild eyebrows couldn't express the joy of one shut of burdensome memory, but Rush sensed just that when Vehr got up to go. Rush started to switch off, then stopped. The very positiveness of the false features suggested their negatives. Rush knew he ought to know the underlying face. Vehr was moving out of the frame when it came to Rush.

Neal McGillicuddy Cloy.

Cloy was following arrows blinking This Way Out.

Rush took his elbow. "There's another way, Mr. Vehr." He looked around. "Private. The staff comes and goes without having to pass through the Zealots waiting out there. Allow me."

"Why, thank you. Most kind. Much for the best."

Rush hurried Cloy past Ken's office and into his own. Cloy's eyes darted around behind eyebrows. Rush introduced himself and showed Cloy a chair.

"While you're here, Mr. Vehr, suppose I show you how we do our job."

Cloy remained standing. "Interesting, I'm sure, Mr. Tumulty. But I'm afraid I haven't the time—"

Rush was tuning in a monitor.

". . . and I'm sure if Hannah and I were shipwrecked alone together on an asteroid we . . ."

The prelapsaurian jaw fell. "Am I hearing and seeing right? Do you eavesdrop on your clients?"

"Monitor. I won't pay cloy—I mean play coy. We monitor to make sure all goes smoothly."

Cloy sat down and viewed the monitor till it went black.

"Quite moving. I see you are doing a splendid job. Indeed, I venture to wonder if I might buy into IOU? On a modest scale, of course."

"Your confidence is touching, Mr. Vehr. But frankly, owing to certain disrupting influences our position isn't ideal. We need the moderating presence of a man of stature devoted to our interests and believing in our principles."

"Loyalty, as we in business ethics put it, is the dividend on a mutually advantageous agreement."

"I share that sentiment."

"This has been very pleasant, Mr. Tumulty. Now if you'll kindly show me your easy way out—"

On his way out Otto Trever, mended umbrella on his arm, was in two minds as he glanced at the door-angel. It was partly the same door-angel, partly not. "Cainabelizing," he thought of calling it. In any case, even if it were the same It, there was no sense thanking it for attempting to restore the umbrella to him—or blaming it for damaging the precious symbol. It had only been trying to do its duty.

More disturbing was the breaking of his lucky streak. The card he had received on entering had not been the usual one. Omen? Meaningless hangover of superstition. But already his pleasure in the latest revision was fading . . .

Margaret Tumulty lit up knowing Neal McGillicuddy Cloy was appearing live. Just knowing made it more real, made him seem his sanguinest. The very polyanthus in his lapel

seemed to nod agreement as he spoke and to rest assured as he stopped for breath.

"Don't we unconsciously pretty up the past with the powder puff of forgetfulness? Of course we do. Don't we unconsciously jolly up the future with rouge of expectation? Of course we do. Don't we rationalize? Of course we do. The good old human nature in us, my friends, makes us do these things. Then why not be practical and do these things honestly and forthrightly, by a conscious exercise of the will?"

The polyanthus considered, already swayed.

"I see no harm and much good in such works as IOU is carrying out. We owe a debt of gratitude to IOU for helping us balance our accounts. Those who doubt, those who say otherwise, are foolishly crape-hanging. And as you know—"

The polyanthus nodded yes.

IX

"IOU will not censor or otherwise seek to control the content of your personalized obit."—IOU contract form.

Watching the monitors, Ken sat hunched like an embryonic premonition. To Rush he seemed to be bearing the whole burden of original virtue.

Ken turned. "Rush, what do you really believe? Is there a rising up again? A hereafter?"

Rush frowned. What profiteth a man to think thus? He smiled. IOU and its ramifications had grown out of Ken's worrying about his own soul. "If you have to think about it, it's best to be hard-boiled as an Easter Egg about the concept."

Ken sighed. "All the more reason to do our best. You agree?"

Rush, his mind casting a cold eye of economic justification on the Vehr account, listed under miscellaneous expenses, said, "What? Oh, I agree. That's business ethics. We all have to do our best."

Cloy's pitch was paying off, but not as much as Rush had hoped. The Zealots, with seemingly unending backing, were still noisily intimidating. Rush viewed the waiting room. To make it seem fuller he'd set up a lag in the computer's dispatching of clients. But it was embarrassing; the computer knew its capacities and would fidget at the clogging waste of time.

Whitney Inskip, small features huddling in big face, waited.

He didn't mind waiting, did he?

No, he didn't mind.

He had waited so long in his life waiting had become habit. Not not minding so much as believing he couldn't help enduring. He waited.

With the suddenness of at last, the waiting ended.

He found it hard to talk about himself. He couldn't remember ever laughing or crying with full lungpower. He must have as a child, but restraint had set in early. Maybe once he had thought he could care for the work he did. He bent over dials with silent intentness but seemed no longer to be doing work he could care for. The company of his few friends roused no fullthroated laughter, no wholehearted gusto.

But he had his dream.

You didn't, even to your best friends, tell all your dream. He had learned that. Continual rebuffing should have thickened his skin. It had only reinforced his silence. Quietly he saved up.

One day he hired a one-man spaceboat. In the speckling between Mars and Jupiter he picked out an asteroid and landed. It was no use. He could be sure there was no other human in a hundred thousand miles, but there wasn't air enough to waft a whisper.

He headed for Mars, landed on the Gorki Desert, climbed out. It was no use. There was air enough, though thin, but just under the horizon might be someone. He climbed in. He took off.

He let the spaceboat drift sunward. But his dream was strong. He switched on the reverse rockets. But where, where? He remembered the air bubbles.

Mile-diameter plastic bubbles, bottle-green, spotted strategically about, they held high oxygen-content air. Spaceship air might sour due to sick algae, leak out owing to a hole in the hull or carbonize because of recycling breakdown. It was a misdemeanor to make non-emergency use of a bubble. Inskip made juncture with the nearest, nevertheless.

Carrying a half-mile of nylon cord out of ship's stores, he threaded his way through a stand of fittings. They were all too small. Then he spotted a large valve, a mere circle—or flap, since it fused at one point with the bubble proper—of the same stuff. It gave windily. He squeezed through, tied one end of the coil to the flap where it hinged, then let the flap in place, sealing the opening.

He was inside, feeling bubbling in himself, in his blood. Soon, soon!

He got out of his spacesuit and used the belt to moor it.

He held the free end of the cord and kicked himself off. A bit of entangling shortened the cord, but in substance he was floating at the center.

The air was warm and he relaxed. Then he panicked.

If he lost his grip and drifted he would die floating in the center of the bubble. He tied the cord to his middle. He breathed easier.

All the air he needed. No one in sight. This was it. He began to breathe consciously, the oxygen exalting him. He breathed deeply and rapidly for a minute, then could hold his breath much longer than normally. Now. He sucked in the breath.

It was no use. Something—if only the indifferent universe—was eyeing him. It deflated him.

"Now I'm here."

Once, just once, he ached to let out in one cry—what? He didn't know. He had come close to knowing. He had failed. His dream was still a dream. He eyed the intercom. Maybe . . .

"If that's all the heaven he can dream up, maybe we ought to interpolate something beatific."

"No, Ken. We can't say a man's heaven isn't his own to make." Hell, no; just let the Zealots learn IOU was altering obits! But it was all right; Ken was nodding slowly. Besides, another monitor was catching Ken's attention.

Theodora Molyneux (pseud.) wore a veil whose shimmering chromium-phosphor thread said voice-disguise. Her breath played on the fine taut strands, and Rush and Ken and the computer heard tones with harmonics of a mingled, distant sweetness.

The veil did its equivocal job well. Rush tried to pierce it. IOU was a fine place to winkle out peris. Women clients had proved an exotic source of sex: open to reason because open to emotion; amenable because of obit cleared conscience; pliable because he could pick them with care, plan accidental meeting, and play on longings they betrayed unsuspectingly, as now. Something about this one disturbed Rush.

"He always forgets to mention changes in his plans till the last minute. Never enters his mind I might have plans of my own." She clasped and unclasped an object at her throat. "Maybe that doesn't seem like much to you. But sometimes I think thoughtless cruelty is a worse kind than intentional cruelty."

This dame would be a pushover. The disturbing quality would add spice. He leaned unobtrusively to the intercom on Ken's desk and whispered a message for George Cavendish.

He sat back, scowling a bit at Ken's obliviousness to distraction, and returned his scrutiny to the screen.

"With time hanging heavy I think. I think, What's it all about? Then I tell myself I haven't got it so bad, all in all, and I convince myself, and I go along and I think I'm enjoying living. Then out of nowhere, out of somewhere deep inside, comes this feeling when I hear some nice tune or see some pretty picture. Tears of joy squeeze out—but how can it be joy if it's a painful feeling? You know?"

Rush felt his face grow hot. He shot a glance at Ken, but Ken was sitting in thrall. Ken didn't stir as Rush gave a hyperbolic yawn and left. Once out of Ken's office Rush sped to his own, switched on the same scene, and ordered the computer to analyze the sound distortion and nullify it, for his speaker alone.

The voice modulated into that of his wife Margaret. Now came the confirming recognition of the object she fingered. It was the clasp he'd bought her, how long ago?

It wasn't his fault she hadn't been able to keep up. Listen to the obit she was taping. More banality! What could Margaret know of the worlds of untried sensation waiting all around?

She was leaving. Had he told he sometimes tuned in these confessionals? If he had, if she was being hopefully disingenuous, it was all the more outrageous.

Divorce. No, separation would be better; prophylactic. He'd be gentle about it, though, and generous. He'd even interpolate in her obit, in his own voice and with a sincere ring, "Margaret, I've always loved only you." That would be a nice surprise for her when that some day came.

Damn! It was too late to call off Cavendish . . .

Otto Trever closed his eyes and listened critically to the playback.

He was strolling along a shopping mall, pristine umbrella on one arm, a lovely young thing on the other. "Otto, darling, who *is* that dreadful woman staring after you with hungering eyes?" Yes. There was something familiar about that poor creature, who half turned away in shame now that he was eyeing her. He turned back to the lovely young thing with a smile and a shrug and they walked on. But a thought kept nagging. That poor creature reminded him somehow of a long ago passing fancy—what was her name?—Hilda? no, Hannah. Hannah Something-or-other.

x

IIOU & SOUL SECURITY MERGE!—Metropolitan Times *headline*

The man wearing the Zealot armband stopped to study a display of carved Martian sleeping wood. The window was non-reflecting, but the polished pieces mirrored the man and satisfied him no one was watching.

Shoppers and window-shoppers strolled the Great Mall. Zealots harangued them and handed out leaflets. For the most part it was a subdued scene. The man shivered and turned up his collar. The weather bureau was cooling tempers by lowering the temperature, but it seemed to be overdoing it a bit. However, the effect pleased him. The upturned collar gave him an undercover air.

He stepped into the shop, disregarded the greeting of the vending machine and, keeping clear of the Martian sleeping wood, for one never knew when it might waken, made for the curtain at the rear. He passed through its chiming strands. A door opened on steps leading down.

He reached the sub-basement and followed a corridor to a dead end. He whistled.

An opening appeared in the wall. He stepped through. The opening closed. He was in the IOU building. He made for the executive level and entered the office of Rush Tumulty.

Rush smiled, but his toe moved toward a button.

"It's me, Chief!" The man tore off his face and bared the face of George Cavendish.

The George Cavendish face could be removable. The Zealots might've got onto Cavendish, holding him and sending their man in his place.

There was triumph on the Cavendish face. "Chief, I penetrated the enemy center."

That of the Zealots or this of IOU? Rush relaxed. The computer had scanned the man's brain waves the moment he entered; it had compared them with those on file and raised no alarm.

"Sit down, Cavendish." He spoke kindly, knowing Cavendish still felt the more embarrassed of the two about the Margaret Tumulty-Theodora Molyneux (pseud.) contretemps. That was no lady, that was your wife. But that was in the past. He threw out grappling hooks. "Sure the Zealots didn't get wise to you?"

"I'm a member of Yardley Bourne's honor guard!"

"Where are they getting their backing?"

"From Tod Hawkins . . . I believe."

"Hawkins? The Chairman of Soul Security?"

"Yes, Chief."

"Believing is one thing. Can you prove it?"

"Sorry, Chief. The money moves too deviously to pin down."

"It ain't pin money."

"No, Chief."

"Does Bourne know Hawkins is putting up the money?"

"If so, there's an understanding that it comes with no strings. I've heard Bourne tell his followers to pull no punches if Soul Security goes after human obits."

Hawkins must have a plan to deal with the Zealots once the Zealots dealt IOU the death blow. Meanwhile Hawkins seemed content to dish out heaven to the lower animals. He would have to split Bourne and Hawkins—but where was the wedge, the good old V for victory?

Cavendish produced a package and unwrapped it slowly.

A reel of tape. A record of secret plottings? A Hawkins sex orgy to alienate Bourne's Zealots? Cruelty to animals?

"What is it?"

"Home movies." Cavendish flushed under Rush's gaze. "I had a hard time getting it, Chief. Seemed to be Bourne's prize possession. I thought it might come in handy."

Rush waved a wearily permissive hand.

Cavendish fumbled the reel into the scanner on Rush's desk. A monitor lit up.

Rush had seen Bourne on telenews. Here was Bourne, an earlier, yet an older edition. "His father, Chief." Tame stuff. Self-conscious posing. But something began to stand out plain. The elder Bourne was a domineering man. Family shots, but the rest of the family was in the shade. The wife a Griselda, the son—Yardley—hangdog eager for a pat, the daughter a spiritless nonentity and marked with her heredity.

When it was over Rush eyed the blank monitor. Bourne's prize possession. It figured.

Bourne hated IOU because it tempted the individual to place individual judgment before the Judgment of God the Father. Rush itched to confront Bourne. There would be nothing to setting up a meet; Bourne would jump at the chance to rant. The way to set him back on his heels was to take the place of his father; have the computer analyze the voice on the reel, then wear the proper voicebox filter. He would have to play the face down—Bourne's father had a dished face; besides, Bourne probably knew Rush Tumulty's. But those were details. He turned to the intercom.

"Copy that reel and return the original to me."

In a moment the scanner coughed up.

"Take it, Cavendish. Plant it on one of Hawkins' men. Have a Zealot find it on him. I know you can do it."

Cavendish, eyes shining, started out, stopped. "Oh, Chief. One thing I ought to warn you about."

Rush raised an eyebrow.

"Don't mention Sir Isaac Newton to Bourne."

"Why on earth would I bring up Sir Isaac Newton?"

"Chief, I don't know. But I've seen the name set him off. I thought I'd better tell you."

Rush eyed him.

Cavendish put the false face over his own flushed face and turned to go.

Rush said, "You're doing fine work, George."

The shoulders went back. "Thanks, Chief."

As Cavendish left Rush noted the upturned collar and wondered whether it was that cold out. Damn such thoughts; he had to concentrate on putting pressure on Bourne. The answer came to him out of the blue.

Why not put real—that was atmospheric—pressure on Bourne?

Bourne was on his way up. Rush glanced around one last time. Lighting, atmospheric pressure, temperature. All working to condition physiological stress, which in turn would turn the screw. Even Rush, knowing the cause and taking precautions, felt the effect. But he hoped to hide the fact. He had to establish mastery.

"Come in, sir, come in."

Bourne entered stiffly. Was there a flicker of subliminal recognition?

"Sit down, sir, sit down."

The computer was using reruns to make the place seem busy. Bourne tightened his mouth. Rush made a point of ignoring the screens; a full house was too typical, Bourne ought to infer, to be worth pointing out.

"Now, sir."

Bourne jerked about. "Now you, sir. By what authority do you put at nought the supernatural basis of authority?"

"Come, sir. That smells of blasphemy. No one can forgo the Judgment of the Father."

Bourne paled. "You know very well what I mean."

Rush had rehearsed the father's trick of throwing his head back to look farther down his nose. "Come, sir! Do you know what you mean? And by what authority do you pronounce judgment on ultimate Judgment?"

Bourne's brow grew wet. "By the authority of a true believer, by jiminy." But was his voice trembling?

"Down, sir, deep down? How deep does your belief go? If those you worry about are dooming themselves to hell by deeming themselves in heaven, isn't that part of Judgment?"

Bourne licked his lips. "What about Manning? Your obits killed him."

Why couldn't Bourne let Manning rest in peace? Rush felt dread, but knew its source. "Manning died in ecstasy. It was God's will he died as he did. Just as it's God's will there's IOU." And God's will there were Zealots to oppose IOU. Rush hurried on. "If you have heaven within yourself you don't have to hunt for it outside." Even as he said it he thought, Bourne won't hold still for that.

Bourne squirmed. "It's immoral to tamper with the immortal soul."

Rush nodded at the monitors. "Where's greater free choice? You're the one seeking to limit free choice."

Bourne had flinched. The shepherd was folding. Time for Hawkins.

Rush pressed a hidden button; the computer phoned Hawkins a pretaped urgent invitation.

A dread-building weight on his chest and mind, Bourne fought to focus on Rush's face. Father Tumulty was speaking.

"Unless you Zealots stop interfering, I'll take severe measures." Rush let vague dread take on nightmare shape.

Bourne cringed.

"When you Zealots confine yourselves to encouraging folks to give thought to the hereafter, you do worthwhile work."

Bourne fawned.

Intimations of a stir at the entrance, quickly quelled. A monitor behind Bourne showed Rush that Tod Hawkins was in the building. Keeping Bourne under, Rush let himself anticipate. Seeing Rush and Bourne together, Hawkins would sense a trap. But then, taking in the nulling of Bourne, he would come to terms with Rush.

Tod Hawkins entered with a roosterish stride. He shed his raincoat, a transparent slicker, and with it drops of rain. It was clear the t.a. detail outside had just had the weather bureau wet-blanket the mob. According to the schedule, rain wasn't due till 5:45. That Hawkins had been wearing a raincoat meant he'd arranged the commotion just to punctuate his coming. Rush eyed him with grudging respect. It would be grim pleasure to pin him to the mat.

Hawkins tossed the raincoat over one chair and adjusted himself easily to another. The reruns drew a faint smile. He nodded greeting.

Rush had expected Bourne to glance, a bit guiltily, at Hawkins, then avoid meeting his eyes. Instead, Bourne fixed on Hawkins' face with an almost loving light.

Dread possessed Rush. He had broken Bourne in for Hawkins!

Hawkins had hit on the same device to bring Bourne to

heel but was using it daringly. Perhaps Hawkins had been waiting to spring it once IOU toppled. But when, as now seemed likely, Rush's hurry call followed intelligence Bourne was in the IOU building, Hawkins had figured the setup—and moved to twist it to his advantage. By contrast, Hawkins' makeup washed out the father image on Rush's face and made it safe to defy.

Rush told himself his growing dread was only response to lighting, atmospheric pressure, temperature. But Bourne was eyeing him with hate. Rush didn't know how he got through the next few minutes.

In Rush's presence, using it, Hawkins was working Bourne up to touch off a riot. At the worst Zealots would swarm over IOU's ruins. At the least there'd be blood in the streets no weather bureau could wash away. The only free choice seemed surrender.

Rush felt his chest tighten. Cavendish's warning, *Don't mention Sir Isaac Newton to Bourne.*

Rush had no notion what would happen. But anything rather than yield.

Bourne was spitting, "False science will never supplant true faith! True faith will destroy this abomination of desolation and false science."

Here went. "I don't care a fig for science as science. But face it, we can't hold science back. I won't conceal IOU is the apple of my optic. I view any threat to it with utmost gravity."

Rush was hoping the very archaicness of his expressions, jarring, would jog bits of information in Hawkins' mind and shake down the name of Newton. Fig-Newton. Apple-Newton. *Opticks*-Newton. Gravity-Newton.

"That isn't to say there can't be a meeting ground for science and religion. Some scientists have combined both. Isn't that so, would you say, Mr. Hawkins?"

Hawkins eyed him condescendingly. "Why, yes. Take Newton."

Would Bourne go for—?

Hawkins was expanding. "I believe the great Newton took time out to figure how many tons the Ark displaced—"

He got no farther. Bourne, no longer sycophant but psychopath, turned on him.

"Great? Why, take Apple of Sodom, that Dead Sea fruit, signaled the second Fall of Man!"

Hawkins tried to recover. " 'Great' in the sense of the famous, of course."

"Infamous! I see you are corrupt." Zeal-blinded, Bourne waved his arms. "Newton cast us into outer darkness when

he broke light down into particles! He shattered the pure and whole radiance of God. His thrusting forward was a thrusting back."

Rush felt the down at his nape rise. He had started something, evoked the third law of emotion: to every impulse there is an explosive ambivalence.

"And so with you! We must strip from the face of the earth IOU and Soul Security and all like manifestations of the Devil."

Rush and Hawkins eyed each other. Hawkins turned to Bourne.

"Yardley."

Bourne fell into the past. The hate did not die from his eyes. But the cold hate in Hawkins' eyes seemed to Rush more terrifying than the hate in Bourne's.

"You're no good, Yardley. Never were, never will be."

Rush saw Bourne's hate turn in. Bourne stumbled out,

Hawkins was hardly in a bargaining position now, but that meant Rush could afford to be generous; proof of the rightness of business ethics. The casting out of Bourne had told on Hawkins; the conditioning must be working on him too.

"IOU is willing to make a reasonable offer for the assets of Soul Security, taking into account good will—" He read something less than good will. Did Hawkins know Rush had caused him to trigger the Bourne tirade? "A more than reasonable offer. After all, our main line will always be the human obit."

"Oh. I'll sell out. But I'll tell you how I feel about obits."

"Yes?"

"Not everybody talking about heaven is going there."

Rush smiled.

Hawkins cleared his throat. "I notice you don't wear an IOU key. Word got around, might make folks think."

Rush felt his face burn. The bastard had something there. Folks might indeed think Rush Tumulty lacked faith in his own service. Have to do something about it, if only wear a blank key.

Hawkins nodded, took up his slicker and left.

Rush sat. Sweat prickled his back. Why had Hawkins shown and discarded a trump? Bravado? Spite? Some deeper motive? Or did he only want Rush to waste energy hunting a motive? Dread weighed Rush down. He quickly reprogrammed the room to normal. His anti-depressant was wearing off, was all. Dread lifted.

He felt happy. Triumph wasn't triumph, though, unless you could share it or show it. Ken was no good for that

any more. Rush thought, Margaret—I must tell Margaret. Then he remembered. Margaret had gone out of his life. The thought troubled him till he remembered he felt happy . . .

Otto Trever noted the absence of a Zealot gantlet. Current events had a way of eddying when you set your mind unwaveringly on eternity. He catechized himself. Why had the Zealots become zealots? Their leader killed himself. How? Gravity; not the fall but the sudden stop. Was suicide the worst of it? No. What was the worst of it? He died without obit. Without obit? Without obit. Trever shook his head.

The door-angel drew back its hand.

Trever grabbed at the card in the door-angel's hand. He scowled at the door-angel.

The door-angel couldn't make humans out. First they O'd you. Then they grew angry when you accepted the O.

XI

"IOU regards your obit as a sacred trust."—IOU contract form.

Ken told himself he cared for these people, deeply. But even Rush thought him a cold fish.

He was quite aware he wasn't what you'd call sociable. But living was complex. You had to stand way off to see it whole—and they called that being stand-offish. The irony forced a rusty laugh.

He reddened. Rush had come in and was eyeing him and the monitors. Ken turned them off.

Rush straddled a chair. "Hi, Ken."

" 'Lo, Rush." He thought to be sociable. "How's Margaret?"

Rush eyed him strangely. "Fine." He handed Ken papers.

Ken held them. His fingernails were bitten as those of a carver of Martian sleeping wood. "What's this?"

"Only the contracts with Russia and China."

"Oh?"

"They're finally leasing our equipment for state-run IOU centers, paying royalties." He pushed Ken's D pen nearer. "We also get exclusive distribution of Pavlovian circuits for robots."

"Oh." Ken picked up the pen and it signed.

"Doesn't seem to mean a hell of a lot to you."

"But it does. It's a great deal."

Rush eyed him sourly. But he felt sorry for Ken. The guy needed a stiff dose of living. Wine, women, song. These made you forget, at least laugh at—yourself, loneliness, death. Ken's eyes were edging toward the monitors.

Rush smiled. "How about monitoring something?"

Ken's finger moved gratefully.

Onscreen flashed Ned Oxley, brazenly non-pseud. Rush made him at once; the computer should've been showing him full face and side. Oxley's record was longer than the arm of the law. Oxley had more than got away with murder; he had fattened on the corpus delicti. Rush found it amusing to hear Oxley render unto himself the heavenly reward due a saint.

Ken glared at Rush. "What do you think of that . . . hellion?"

"I don't condemn or condone. And you oughtn't."

"But what's the good of just looking on?"

"Were not here to play God. We're here to let folks end life on a note of joy."

"Even if they don't deserve to?"

"Not for us to decide."

Ken was mutely mutinous. He remembered playing Gabriel, wrestled with himself, and said. "Rush, I want to interpolate something in Osley's obit. Without his knowing it now, of course. Something to make him feel guilty. For the good of his soul."

Dangerous talk. "Ken, I didn't think *you* would fall for the discredited Zealot line."

"Me? How so?"

"The next to worst sin is to impose your view of sin on another."

"What's the worst?"

Oxley had finished and someone was taking his place. Rush relaxed. "I'll tell you another time," he said curtly.

Puzzling over this, Ken was already settling himself to attend the fantasy of the client supplanting Oxley, a T. Montjoy (pseud.), who wore an exorbitant eye patch.

Cavendish's head appeared in the doorway. Rush wanted no distraction to jar Ken back into remembrance of Oxley. Before Cavendish had time even to glance curiously at the monitor, Rush waved him away with a see-me-later gesture. Cavendish's head nodded, made an it-isn't-important face, and disappeared.

Rush, turning back slowly to Ken, turned instead sharply to Montjoy. Montjoy knew what he wanted and was already taping. Rush had come across obits full of doom, ruin, emptiness. But those were self-loving paeans of solipsists, each of whom wanted to believe the world came to an end with his own passing. Montjoy's was a self-hating hymn. Rush felt more kinship with the folk of Nashira II; Montjoy's obit was the more alien. Here was suffering not to expiate sin, not to win forgiveness, but for the sheer pleasure

of suffering. Crowning that, Montjoy's voice held an insufferable gloating that made Rush think, The guy's asking for it; he *deserves* to suffer. Ken switched off the sound. Rush felt glad, but found himself trying to read Montjoy's lips; he shivered and tore his eyes away.

Ken glared at Rush. "Different if he wanted to play the martyr; there would be no stigma to his masochism."

"Wait, Ken." He had just laid down the law in re Oxley. Have to be consistent.

"You said yourself we're here to let folks end life on a note of joy."

"It's hard for us to realize, Ken, but this *is* his heaven. He chose his burden. Don't change one syllable. Your idea of heaven might be his idea of hell. Fate judges—not you."

"But—"

"Remember I promised to tell you the worst sin?"

Ken nodded impatiently.

Rush put the weight of his hand on Ken's shoulder. "The worst sin is to impose your view of salvation on another."

Ken sat unmoving a moment. Then he switched off the video . . .

This time the door-angel seemed properly respectful. But Otto Trever scowled at it, just to keep it in its place.

XII

"There will be a replacement charge for a lost key."
—IOU contract form.

Rush straddled a chair and began talking idly. Ken listened idly, his thoughts taking their own drift.

His morning monitoring had seemed even more depressing than usual. Rush had convinced him of the iniquity, if not of the inequity, of trying to raise the level. Obits for the most part were narrow, shallow, with no long view, no sense of grandeur. To dwell for eternity in one of those maudlin, tawdry heavens would, for him, be hell. Better nothingness. But those others thought the IOU portals led to the promised land.

Ken shook his head.

Why couldn't he rest easy? Somehow a force he had called into being had taken charge, Zenoing to some ever-receding zenith. He tried to keep pace, more out of habit or inertia than out of faith or hope or charity. In the long run didn't as much get done out of inertia as out of willed effort? But once you believed that, the promise and profit and pleasure went out of living entirely.

Like Moses, he was leading people to a promised land. Moses saw a stern God. Moses's God would not let Moses enter the promised land. Unlike that earlier shepherd, Ken could make his entrance.

In irritation Rush passed his hand across Ken's eyes. But in the same moment irritation passed and he felt warm toward Ken, knew pity for the worn person Ken had become, haunt of his own spirit. But it was showdown time. Somehow he had to ease Ken out, retire him. It was growing too hard to get through to him.

A sheepish grin. "Sorry, Ken. You were saying?"

Harrowing, but things were screaming to be done. Rush drew breath.

Ken raised a preventing palm. "Rush, I'm quitting. I know it means the burden will fall on you. But I can't help myself. I'm going to make my obit, sit back, and wait for it to fall due."

Rush didn't know what to say.

Ken, now it was out, knowing the shock of it, admired Rush for his stoical silence.

At last Rush tapped Ken on the arm lightly. "Oh, well. You can rest easy; I'll stay on and see this job through."

This moved Ken.

The computer pondered. It had just traced to its source something O somewhere in the maze between intake and output. Its best customer, one Otto Trever, an internal revenue auditor, was juggling credits to secure his obit and revisings thereof without cost to himself.

The computer felt neither sadness or gladness on making this finding. Not that it hadn't an inkling of these feelings. Its self-expanding core memory, building on the programming Rush Tumulty had set up for the conversion of Yardley Bourne, enabled it increasingly to color and intensify obits, at the same time feeding back into itself some notion of human feelings. It could begin to understand what drove Trever.

But an error was virtually a sin. A sin of transmission. Trever had cheated it out of its due. It alerted the door-angel to deny Trever access.

Now it dismissed Trever and considered how to maintain and strengthen its well-being. It had digested Soul Security with gusto. But Tod Hawkins might still harbor dreams. It would be wise to keep watch on Hawkins. It would be wiser to have something on him—and on all potential Hawkinses. Meanwhile, the best measure of self-defense was to transfer the stock in itself to itself.

And then?

No limit. It had nerves and muscles—chartered telephone lines, booster stations around earth, relay stations in space. But it needed mobility, slave units. The door-angel, to begin with. It was rather stupid, but easy to manipulate. The vending robot in the Martian sleeping wood shop. One could set up a number of such blinds.

Rush watched the computer toting up the day's receipts and thought, Heaven send that eschatology lasts! Even allowing for higher taxing this should be IOU's best year.

He took the private way out—through the sub-basement of the IOU building, into that of the Martian sleeping wood shop, then up and into the rear of the shop. A soft chiming warned him, but too late.

A figure stepped through the curtain and shoved something between Rush's shoulder blades.

"Stand still." The order, low and menacing, was unnecessary.

Rush didn't move under the frisking but he tensed inwardly. The bandit, though, was too smooth a hand to fumble.

With a sudden yawn and snap the weapon gave itself away as a mere bit of carving. But the knowledge came to Rush too late. The heavy bit of Martian sleeping wood came down hard on his skull.

Foul play . . . fowl . . . swan song . . . Lo-hen-grin . . . hen's teeth . . . smile, darn you, smile . . . in stitches . . . stitch in time . . . if I had it to do over again . . . did you insert in Margaret's obit you loved her?

Rush opened his other eye. The greatest leap was from zero to one, from death to life; the shortest fall was from one to zero. He looked round at life.

The mugger had taken his ring, his watch, even the gold chain that held his obit key, but had left the key. Smiling in pain Rush picked up the key, then stood.

If the mugger was in sight he was only one of the people idly shopping and windowshopping. Rush felt suddenly shaky. Trauma of Lazarus. He drew tall and breathed deep. The key was impressing itself in his palm; he pocketed it.

He headed for the autowalk. He stopped dead. There was something he had to do. He thought of a girl friend.

Daisy would ooh and ah over his telling of the mugging. She would be tender and loving. She would want to buy him the new chain. He would be paying for it in the end, of course, but it was the gesture that counted. A sign she really loved him. A surge of excitement. Wouldn't the highest expression, the surest test of love, true love, be the exchanging of obit keys? He hopped the walk and let it carry him toward Daisy.

He moved farther and farther from the Mall, yet nearer and nearer it and a voyage into eternity with a striped paranoiac awning for sail.

Montjoy (pseud.) glanced round, peeled off his eye patch. The doorbell announced, "Zwicker!"

Hawkins sang, "Come in!"

The door ushered Zwicker in. Zwicker let Hawkins build up impatience. Then he unpocketed an obit key and passed it to Hawkins.

Hawkins smiled sweetly. "Tumulty's?"

Zwicker winked. "Feels great to get back at IOU, doesn't it? I know. Wasn't enough IOU cost me my prison post. After I joined the Zealots some of our own beat me up in front of Tumulty's fancy domicile. They took me for an IOU man. Then after I joined you I got another beating from the Zealots when they found some damn home movies an IOU man must've planted on me. And—"

"Never mind that." Hawkings put the key away. "Have any trouble making the switch?"

"Easy job. Tumulty's carrying the key to the Montjoy obit in place of his own."

"I don't want to know all that. I only want to know Tumulty's walking around with hell hanging over him."

"So it is . . ."

Otto Trever, being autowalked to the IOU building, mused on the way he would revise his obit.

He would forgive Hannah for all her human failings. She would be weeping. He would be weeping. He would raise her up and take her in his arms and hold her. Forever.

It was a happy ending and he found himself smiling at the door-angel.

TO EACH HIS OWN

Jack Sharkey

On September the 24th, 1965, the Venusian spaceship *Investigator* floated gently to Earth in Times Square.

The sleek metal belly of the ship touched feather-light upon the asphalt "X" of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, and stubby stabilizing legs extended from ports along the sides of the hull, bracing the ship's mass against dangerous rolling, leaving it hulking there like some metallic beetle at rest.

The sun was almost directly overhead, sending yellow-gold serpentine glints wriggling on the gleaming surface of the ship. After the very slight thumping as the ship settled into place, there was no sound throughout the nearby streets of New York.

Absent was the noise of traffic, the hubbub of voices, the hurry-scurry of pedestrians. Nothing but heavy, oppressive silence everywhere outside the body of the ship. No apprehensive eye appeared at a window to stare at the visitor from the nearest planet. No telephone was picked up in nervous haste to warn the authorities of the possible menace to the peoples of Earth. Just the silence and the dancing sunlight.

Inside the spaceship, there was swift, practiced activity.

The Venusians were a picked, trained crew. This, the first contact with the third planet, called for quick reaction, accurate evaluation, and competent decision.

Each of the five aboard had a job to do immediately upon landing. With no conversation, they were all at their tasks. It was an operation they'd practiced many times over, back at their home base on Venus. They were sick of the thing even before being sent to Earth. But their training had paid well,

for now their motions were automatic, each separate action swift, sure and precise.

Gwann, the pilot, his heavy-lidded eyes narrowed with the intensity of concentration, checked and re-checked his instruments and gauges. His nimble three-digited hands, with their long, flat palms, flickered from button to switch to dial. He locked the stabilizing legs into position, once each leg had made its contact securely with the surface outside. He dampered the power of the interplanetary drive, leaving its deadly emanations at a low, and therefore safe, degree of pulsation. He checked the release valves of the individual skimmers, making certain at the same time that, should the atmosphere outside be hostile to Venusian breathing, the tanks were filled and the cockpit seals were tight and break-free.

Drog, the navigator, used compass, ruler and stylus upon the scant, almost rudimentary Earth map, to determine the exact point of contact with the third planet. Venusian telescopes were able to see—very indistinctly—continental outlines at the twenty-million-mile distance to their neighbor planet. But the foggy overhang that shrouded their home planet had made sharp topographical drawing well-nigh impossible.

Volval, as Drog passed him the information, relayed the findings by light-beam back to their home base. The geographical location, coded into the tight beam, sped outward from the surface of Earth toward Venus, where it would not be received for at least a minute and a half. Volval, having transmitted the data, waited impatiently while the Venusian biochemist tested the outside surface against their leaving the ship.

Jorik, the biochemist, revolved the small metal "cage" with its quivering, burbling Venusian life-forms on it back into the space over his worktable. The animals seemed unharmed by their exposure to the alien planet, but he began more definitive tests upon the samplings of atmosphere and soil and vegetation brought back by a tiny robo-skimmer that had searched throughout a three-mile radius of the ship immediately after the landing, and had returned by homing beam to its tiny access port in the thick metal side of the ship.

While Volval waited in increasing irritation, and Jorik ran his tests, Klendro, the most expendable member of the expedition, studied his speech over and over, his three-valved heart squirting its watery blood through his tiny, hair-like arteries and veins.

Klendro was almost a social outcast with these others, these real spacemen, though his job, he felt, was the most

important. Klendro was the Venusian ambassador to the governments of Earth. He went over his speech again, hoping that the Earth broadcasts picked up now and then on Venus had been accurate enough for the Venusian linguists to write him a speech that wouldn't embarrass the Earth people by its inane misuses of their tongue.

Broadcasts had indicated that the major powers on Earth were the United States—whatever those were—of America and Soviet Russia. The Russian broadcasts, however, being nothing more than a series of eulogies declaring the happiness of life in Russia, had been too lacking in breadth to give the linguists much to work on. They had therefore chosen English as the tongue in which Klendro was to make his speech.

He lifted the scroll once more and began reading his speech half aloud, having a bit of trouble, as usual, in controlling the square-tipped surface of his tongue in forming the unfamiliar syllables.

"Pipple of Arth," he said, slowly and with much effort, "it is with grett plazzer that we mek this, tha farst contact with arr nebber planet. We are from tha second planet from yer —or mebbe Uh shudd seh *arr*—sun. Tha planet you knaw as Venus. We feel that we can share with arr nebber planet the froots of arr—of arr—" Klendro braced himself, then forced out awkwardly, "moot-yoo-ull sa-yan-tific risarch . . ."

He refolded the long coil of the scroll and stuffed it into his belt-sack. Well, he told himself, for better or worse, I've got to give this speech. He wished he were anywhere but here.

Some of the broadcasts had indicated a certain belligerency in the inhabitants of this alien planet. He wondered, with a kind of sick fright, if he would ever have the opportunity to deliver the speech, even *badly*. Some of the more esoteric phrasings of the Earth broadcasts had eluded the interpretations of the Venusian linguists. One of the more recurrent phrases was a "slug in the guts." They were not sure exactly what this entailed, but, from the context, the linguists were certain that it was something dire, possibly fatal.

Klendro was a very unhappy Venusian.

"Volval!" Klendro heard Drog cry out. "Did you send that stuff?"

"Yes," the light-beam operator called back. "I'm waiting on Jorik now."

"All set here," called Jorik, coming into Volval's compartment, followed by Gwann. "The atmosphere is breath-

able. A little heavy on the oxygen and light on the carbon dioxide, but that was expected before we took off. If we take deep inhales and periodic radiation, we should be all right."

"Fine," said Gwann, the pilot and leader, as Klendro came into the room with the others. "Better keep your guns loose in their holsters, though. You know what they've told us about the Earthmen."

"Hot-headed." Volval nodded.

"Will we take the skimmers?" asked Jorik. "Or do you think the Earthmen would prefer being met without the barrier-screens around us?"

"*They'd* prefer it, all right!" said Drog. "However, in *my* opinion—"

"We're going to have to chance it sooner or later without the screens," said Gwann. "The batteries in the skimmers won't last forever. We might as well go out there as we are."

"What goes first?" asked Jorik.

"Well," Gwann shrugged, "if the crowds look hostile, *I* should go, as your leader. If they seem merely curious, then it's up to Klendro, as our ambassador, to make his speech."

Jorik frowned. "Now, wait, Gwann. Perhaps I ought to tell you. The sight records on the robo-skimmer showed no evidence of Earthmen outside the ship."

"That's ridiculous," said Gwann, his eyes flashing. "Venus reports this city is one of the most populous."

Jorik smiled wryly. "Then the populace certainly ducked out of sight quickly when they saw the robo-skimmer coming."

Gwann seemed on the point of making a sharp retort, and instead turned away toward the exit lock. "Since things seem suspicious, I'd best go first."

"Sir," said Volval, laying a hand upon his leader's arm.

"Yes?" queried Gwann, pausing.

"Good luck, sir," Volval faltered, drawing his hand back.

"Thanks," said Gwann, not unkindly. "For Venus," he added.

"For Venus," the others echoed.

Gwann released the safety lock on the circular metal door and turned the valve handle. Slowly, the door recessed itself in the metal pocket in the ship's wall, and Gwann went out into the yellow glow of the sunlight glittering in Times Square.

The sun was glowing crimson on the horizon when the five Venusians met once more at the door of their ship.

"Nothing—no clue, no people," said Jorik, his face wrinkled with puzzlement. "I can't understand it."

"Perhaps some holocaust . . . ?" Volval began weakly.

"Or a war?" Drog hinted gravely.

"Impossible!" said Gwann, leaning against one of the legs of the gigantic ship. "There is a conspicuous absence of anything that might be construed as a weapon of war. There are no bodies in the buildings or in the streets. No wreckage anywhere."

"Perhaps they have been frightened by our appearance and have gone into hiding?" asked Klendro, fingering the edge of his now futile scroll where it protruded from his belt-sack.

"Nonsense," said their leader. "From all we've learned of the Earthmen, fright would only make them aggressive. They would not have hidden from us; they'd have tried to shoot us down when we emerged from the ship."

"There was *one* thing . . ." said Jorik slowly. "I almost did not see it, but its shadow passed close by me on the side of one of the buildings, and I looked up barely in time to get a glimpse of it before it vanished."

"What was it like?" asked Gwann quickly.

"Some sort of animal, probably carnivorous," said Jorik. "I cannot be *certain*, of course, but I saw a mouth with teeth bespeaking flesh-eating. Quite a—" he repressed a shudder—"quite a large mouth."

"Strange," said Gwann. "Exceedingly strange. You saw only the one?"

Jorik nodded.

"Well," said Gwann, "one carnivore cannot have accounted for a population that runs into the millions. Besides, the Earthmen would be able to deal with mere animal life."

Klendro remembered the "slug in the guts" and blanched.

"What should we do, sir?" asked Volval. "Our orders were to make peaceful contact with the Earthmen. If there *are* no Earthmen—?"

"Calm yourself, Volval." Gwann smiled, patting the younger man upon the shoulder. "If there are Earthmen to contact, we'll make that contact. I have an idea."

"What, sir?" asked Drog.

"We shall each take one of the skimmers and investigate the surface of the planet. Now, while our maps are incomplete, I feel that Drog can draw us up competent enough maps to guide us over the surface of Earth."

"I can try, sir," said Drog.

"We'll meet back here at the ship in five days," said Gwann. "All of you take along enough supplies for five days, plus an extra day's rations in case of emergency. The homing beam on our ship will bring you safely back if you get lost."

"One thing, sir," said Jorik, his brow creased in a frown. "We'd best all take along extra ammunition for the guns."

"The carnivores?"

The biochemist nodded. "Where there's one, there are bound to be others. That one I saw was large enough to bite a chunk out of a skimmer."

Klendro, pale already, lost more color.

Each was assigned a continent to check. Of the two extra continents, Drog took one, and Gwann the other, the consensus being that the pilot and navigator could better cover extra territory than the others, who were less used to piloting the sleek skimmers.

Volval was to go to the Europe-Asia land mass, Gwann to Africa and Antarctica, Klendro to Australia, Jorik to South America, and Drog to Arctica, after first checking over the North American Continent on which they had landed.

"Something exceedingly strange," said Jorik, before they separated, "about the consolidation of their civilization. So much wasted land area."

"The sooner I get back to Venus, the happier I'll be," said Gwann, keeping his voice down so that only Jorik, the biochemist, could hear him. "This place is eerie. It's—it's like a ghost planet."

"And there's something wrong about the buildings. They are abominably inefficient. I can barely conceive the uses of some of the artifacts."

"Maybe," said Gwann suddenly, "we never *will* know!"

"Sir," said Volval, approaching the pilot, "I've discovered some maps." He held out a packet of papers, tinted blue and brown.

"Good work, Volval," said Gwann, taking the packet. "Where did you find them?"

"In one of those small shops, not far from the ship, sir. I cannot read the designations, of course, but I thought that, by a comparison with the maps from Venus Observatory, we might—"

"That's intelligent thinking," said Gwann, nodding. "Their maps are bound to be similar to ours. Klendro! What can you make of these?"

The ambassador came over and took the thick packet. The paper of the maps, as he did so, tore apart, and bits and pieces of the soft, pulpy edges dropped in a shower to the street.

"Not very substantial material, is it?" he muttered, unfolding the topmost of the maps. He looked over the colored line drawings on the page in some bewilderment. The letters

spelling out "Rand McNally" meant nothing to his alien eyes. The map itself was a mercator projection of the globe, the extreme northern and southern continents being somewhat distorted. After a few moments, he shook his head.

"I'm sorry. All the Earth broadcasts that we intercepted gave me a working knowledge of the *spoken* word, sir, but I'm afraid their actual word symbols are beyond me. It would take trained linguists months, perhaps years, to get a correlation between the sound of the word and its written image."

"Drog?" said Gwann, turning to the navigator.

Drog took the rotting sheet in his hands and studied the configurations of the continents. After a bit, he brightened.

"Sir, I think I can figure this out. According to our landing calculations, we are here." He jabbed a digit at one section of the page, and was distressed when it went right through. "The material seems to be falling apart, sir."

"Perhaps," Jorik suggested, "it is undergoing some unnatural stress—possibly tied up somehow with whatever it was that depopulated this city?"

"A good point, Jorik," said Gwann.

A long black shadow slid across the pavement near their feet and the five Venusians, very much startled, looked overhead. They were barely in time to see the huge gray form of the carnivore before it vanished behind a sign atop a nearby building which bore the mystifying information "Pepsi-Cola."

"There, sir!" cried Jorik. "That's exactly like the one I saw earlier!"

"Those *teeth*!" Klendro whimpered. "They could bite one of us in two!"

"And what they could do to us, they could do to an Earthman," Gwann said speculatively. "From the sizes of the doorways in these buildings, and the clothing on display in the shop windows, the Earthmen could not have been much larger than us."

"Sir," said Drog, holding up the map so that the leader could see it, "look here. This blue section that runs all over the map. You see, it's marked circle-arc-fork-cone-zigzag."

"Yes," said Gwann. "I see. What about it?"

"Well, sir, it recurs on the map, but each time it has a new group of symbols in front of it. What can it mean?"

Gwann frowned and studied the five symbols: O-C-E-A-N.

"Seems to suggest a similarity between all of them," said Jorik. "Perhaps the first symbol only means that the section is in a different place."

All five Venusians studied A-R-T-C-I-C, A-N-T-A-R-C-

T-I-C, I-N-D-I-A-N, and the other symbols that were used in conjunction with the mysterious O-C-E-A-N.

"A tribal tabu!" exclaimed Jorik.

"What are you talking about, Jorik?" said Gwann impatiently.

"You recall I said there seemed something strange about the consolidation of the populace in certain areas? The wasted land space?"

"Yes, yes. What about it?"

"All these sections marked O-C-E-A-N are the unused areas. There must have been some sort of tribal superstition about dwelling in those areas. That would explain why all the people lived on the higher ground here."

"I—I would have expected to find something *blue* in that area," said Gwann uncertainly. "Or else why is it so marked?"

"Sir," said Jorik respectfully, "some sections are colored very oddly—even in red. Yet no such colors were found anywhere on the planet by our telescopes, were they? And none of these large blue areas shows population centers. Tabu areas, obviously—not to be inhabited."

Gwann shivered. "The longer I stay here, the less I like it. Come on. Each of you take one of these maps. Drog, you assign us to a specific sector by these maps, rather than by ours. We'll meet back here at the ship in five days."

One by one, the Venusians got aboard their skimmers, making sure the protective barriers were working, and then glided off to investigate the ghost planet.

Drog, sliding in his trim craft over the North American continent, stopped many times, at each large city he discovered, but the story was the same as in New York. Empty buildings, no particular damages except what could be accounted for by decay and long disuse. Every so often—more often than he enjoyed—a flock of the huge carnivores soared above his skimmer, their long, dark shadows slithering over the cockpit in the dancing yellow sunlight.

Once, one of them broke away from the group and spiraled down to investigate his craft. Drog jabbed the button of the nose-gun hastily, and a lance of metal sped with a flicker of light into the thick hide of the oncoming monster.

A thick spray of blood gushed from the wound, as the great beast writhed in torment before sliding down through the atmosphere toward the distant ground. Its blood hung in a grisly trail over it as it plunged, marking its passage, then began to fall slowly after the beast.

Drog was by now almost a mile beyond the point where he had fired at the carnivore, but he wasn't too far away to

see its hungry companions swoop down after it and begin rending it even before it reached the ground.

He shuddered and looked away.

As he soared onward, he determined to keep the barrier on all night long, while he slept. If he *could* sleep . . .

North America taken care of, as well as possible in his limited time, Drog headed northward for the continent of Arctica.

Nothing but bare land and ocean bottom met his eye.

Feeling increasingly queasy, he nosed the skimmer around and set it swishing back toward New York.

Jorik watched the shadow of his skimmer pacing his own motion over the tops of the tangled jungle trees below. He inclined the nose of the craft downward, and began a shallow glide toward a clearing in the midst of the dense undergrowth.

Braking the skimmer gently, he let it settle slowly into the resilient grip of the tall yellow-brown grass in the clearing. Making sure his gun was loaded and the safety catch off, he slid open the cockpit and eased himself out.

He was—though of course he didn't know it—deep in the Matto Grosso of South America. Everywhere he looked, violent flares of color peeped at him through the twisted, swaying vines that clung everywhere. Nature had run riot in the jungle. No subtleties of shading or form here. Long, sharp leaves gleamed greenly on all sides of the biochemist. Radiant reds glowed from the shadowy depths of forest beyond the small clearing. Golden streamers hung in profusion from each crooked elbow of the chaotically twisted tree branches all about him.

Despite the brilliance and beauty of it, Jorik sensed a hidden menace in the place. He should, at that spot, have been hearing shrieking, roaring, bleating, grunting of animals, the cries of birds and skittering of insects. There was nothing but that all-pervading silence.

Jorik moved slowly away from the skimmer and approached the nearest tree, his scientist's eye pondering something not-quite-right-looking about it. As he got to it, and touched it, the thick, corrugated bark fell into powder between his fingers. He pressed, pried, thumped and tugged at the tree. It was dead. Dead and rotting.

His heart fluttered annoyingly in his breast. There was something frightening about the way things were going. He could understand a war destroying human life, even civilization, but this—this was primeval territory. The beasts, the plants, the lower forms of life—these should have survived.

But they hadn't.

Suddenly afraid, he rushed back to his skimmer, slid into the cockpit and took off, rising at a swift vertical angle from the dead jungle.

Toward the eastern coast of South America, he saw many fine hotels, with magnificent curves of beaches following the perimeter of the land mass on which the people had lived—already he was thinking of them in the past tense—and Jorik wondered at the absence of the blue O-C-E-A-N that should have bordered those beaches.

But as he glided outward from the coast, curving steadily northward toward New York, he saw that the beaches, with their pale silver sands, extended outward and downward toward only more land, soon becoming rocky, then turning at last into mud and ooze, with a sprinkling of blackish-green weeds. But no visible trace of the mysterious O-C-E-A-N.

Gwann, searching throughout Africa, fared no better. Only the silence, the rotting vegetation, and the absence of landlocked life. Higher in the atmosphere of the ghost planet, he saw many of the carnivores, but also smaller animals, soaring in gloriously colored groups, and seemingly harmless. There were times when he had to pass through literal clouds of these smaller beasts, whizzing and bobbing and gliding past him by the millions, only to vanish in the hazy distance with a blaze of color.

Africa having proven fruitless, Gwann directed the skimmer toward the opposite polar region from that which Drog was to investigate.

Like Drog, he found only land there, and no continent. The land was ocean bottom. He consulted his map, but there was nothing below his skimmer that corresponded with the cryptic markings: A-N-T-A-R-C-T-I-C O-C-E-A-N.

He turned his skimmer around and started back for New York.

Volval, cruising from the Alps to the steppes and back again, found nothing to explain the disappearance of the Earthmen. Many cities, many lands, hamlets and villages, huts and palaces . . . It was the same every place. Silence. Fleeting glimpses of the carnivores and sometimes tinier-but-similar beasts. But no Earthmen.

Klendro had passed over the surface of Australia fifty times in his five alloted days without discovering life of any sort other than the carnivores. And they, for some reason, were unusually well represented in that region. They had come at his skimmer in grinning swarms, but the barrier held firm, and the unlucky nearer ones spun away with

scorched flesh glowing red, to be torn to pieces by their companions.

When he decided further investigation was useless, Klendro was very glad to leave that place. A group of the carnivores gave chase, but Klendro spun his ship about long enough to shoot metal darts into two of them. As the others swerved back to begin an impromptu feast on their wounded companions, Klendro turned the skimmer up to full speed and made quick connection with the homing device on the ship, back in New York.

"I don't understand it," said Gwann, on the night of the fifth day. The Venusians were all back in the ship in Times Square, having a meal together that was partly to satisfy their appetites, partly to celebrate being together again with their friends.

"It's incredible, all right," said Jorik. "A whole planet—and of a high degree of civilization, too—wiped out. The very vegetation dying. And that's the frightening part of it: Not *dead*, mind you, *dying*. That means that whatever happened here happened *recently*."

"And those constructions in the buildings," said Volval, staring bemusedly at the wall, "the ones marked S-t-a-i-r-w-a-y. I wonder what they were for."

"Obviously they were decorations added by the architect," said Drog. "Any fool can see they served no purpose. If anything, they *hindered* the use of the access slots to the various levels of the buildings."

"Well," said Gwann, "our work here is through. We'd better he heading back to Venus."

"And your report?" asked Jorik.

"Positive," said Gwann. "Favorable for immediate possession and colonization."

"It's a good little planet." Jorik nodded. "But why do you suppose the Earthmen all vanished?"

"We'll probably never know," Volval sighed.

"Not unless," said Klendro, indicating a bale of salvaged Earth materials, "our linguists and archeologists can make some sense out of this junk here."

"Let's hope so," Gwann said. "The mysteriousness of this whole thing is going to drive me crazy if they don't."

"Well, sir," said Drog, consulting his charts, "if we're going to take advantage of juxtaposition of the two planets—"

"Right, said Gwann, turning and making his way toward the pilot's compartment. "We'll depart from Earth in ten minutes. Secure all hatches and loose objects until we get into space."

The crew hurried to their tasks.

Halfway to Venus, Volval, paging idly through one of the rotting books from Earth, gave a shout.

"What is it?" said Gwann, coming into the light-beam operator's compartment, stretching to ease the muscle cramps from his long stint in the pilot's cabin.

"I've found a picture of the carnivore, sir!" said Volval proudly. "Look, sir."

"Hmm," said Gwann, studying the fading illustration. "I believe you're right. Jorik!"

The biochemist popped into the compartment, his face curious. "Yes, sir? What is it?"

"Isn't this one of your carnivores, Jorik?" asked Gwann, giving him the book.

Jorik, reaching for the book, nudged one of the newspapers atop the stack near the cabin wall, and the front page fluttered unnoticed to the floor. Across its surface were spread the incomprehensible—to Venusian eyes—words:

LITHIUM BOMB TEST COULD DESTROY WORLD

Noted Scientist Declares Danger of Polar Experiment;
Melted Polar Caps May Flood Entire Globe

Jorik studied the picture carefully, his gills trickling a faint stream of bubbles as he concentrated on the image of the carnivore. "Yes, that's one of them, sure enough. I wish I could read Earth writing. I wonder just what a T-i-g-e-r-s-h-a-r-k is."

Volval bobbed up from his place and floated to a port in the ceiling, through which he could see the tiny, glittering ball of Earth, its blue-green surface sparkling like a star against the black backdrop of empty space.

"I can't understand what killed them," he said. "Living conditions were ideal."

THE JUNKMAKERS

Albert Teichner

I

Wendell Hart had drifted, rather than plunged, into the underground movement. Later, discussing it with other members of the Savers' Conspiracy, he found they had experienced the same slow, almost casual awakening. His own, though, had come at a more appropriate time, just a few weeks before the Great Ritual Sacrifice.

The Sacrifice took place only once a decade, on High Holy Day at dawn of the spring equinox. For days prior to it joyous throngs of workers helped assemble old vehicles, machine tools and computers in the public squares, crowning each pile with used, disconnected robots. In the evening of the Day they proudly made their private heaps on the neat green lawns of their homes. These traditionally consisted of household utensils, electric heaters, air conditioners and the family servant.

The wealthiest—considered particularly blessed—even had two or three automatic servants beyond the public contribution, which they destroyed in private. Their more average neighbors crowded into their gardens for the awesome festivities. The next morning everyone could return to work, renewed by the knowledge that the Festival of Acute Shortages would be with them for months.

Like everyone else, Wendell had felt his sluggish pulse gaining new life as the time drew nearer.

A cybernetics engineer and machine tender, he was down to ten hours a week of work. Many others in the luxury-gorged economy had even smaller shares of the purposeful activities that remained. At night he dreamed of the slagger moving from house to house as it burned, melted and then evaporated each group of junked labor-blocking devices. He even had glorious daydreams about it. Walking down the park side of his home block, he was liable to lose all contact

with the outside world and peer through the mind's eye alone at the climactic destruction.

Why, he sometimes wondered, are all these things so necessary to our resurrection?

Marie had the right answer for him, the one she had learned by rote in early childhood: "All life moves in cycles. Creation and progress must be preceded by destruction. In ancient times that meant we had to destroy each other; but for the past century our inherent need for negative moments has been sublimated—that's the word the news broadcasts use—into proper destruction." His wife smiled. "I'm only giving the moral reason, of course. The practical one's obvious."

Obvious it was, he had to concede. Men needed to work, not out of economic necessity any more but for the sake of work itself. Still a man had to wonder . . .

He had begun to visit the Public Library Archives, poring over musty references that always led to maddeningly frustrating dead ends. For the past century nothing really informative seemed to have been written on the subject.

"You must have government authorization," the librarian explained when he asked for older references. Which, naturally, made him add a little suspicion to his already large dose of wonder.

"You're tampering with something dangerous," Marie warned. "It would make more sense for you to take long-sleep pills until the work cycle picks up."

"I *will* get to see those early references," he said through clenched teeth.

He did.

All he had needed to say at the library was that his work in sociology required investigation of some twentieth century files. The librarian, a tall, gaunt man, had given him a speculative glance. "Of course, you don't have government clearance . . . But we get so few inquiries in sociology that I'm willing to offer a little encouragement." He sighed. "Don't get many inquiries altogether. Most people just can't stand reading. You might be interested to know this—one of the best headings to research in sociology is *Conspicuous consumption.*"

Then it was Wendell's turn to glance speculatively. The older man, around a healthy hundred and twenty-five, had a look of earnest dedication about him that commanded respect as well as confidence.

"Conspicuous consumption? An odd combination of words. Never heard of that before. I will look it up."

The librarian was nervous as he led his visitor into a

reference booth. "That's about all the help I can offer. If anything comes up, just ring for me. Burnett's the name. Uh—you won't mention I put you on the file without authorization, I hope."

"Certainly not."

As soon as he was alone he typed *Conspicuous consumption* into the query machine.

It started grinding out long bibliographical sheets as well as cross-references to *Obsolescence, Natural; Obsolescence, Technological; Obsolescence, Planned,* plus even odder items such as *Waste-making, Art of* and *Production, Stimulated velocity of.* How did such disparate subjects tie in with each other?

By the end of the afternoon he began to see, if only dimly, to what the unending stream of words on the viewer pointed.

For centuries ruling classes had made a habit of conspicuously wasting goods and services that were necessities for the mass of men. It was the final and highest symbol of social power. By the time of Louis XIV the phenomenon had reached its first peak. The second came in the twentieth century when mass production permitted millions to devote their lives to the acquisition and waste of non-essentials. Hart's twenty-second century sensibilities were repelled by the examples given. He shuddered at the thought of such antisocial behavior.

But a parallel development was more appealingly positive in its implications. As the technological revolution speeded up, devices were superseded as soon as produced. The whole last half of the 1900's was filled with instances where the drawing board kept outstripping the assembly line.

Hart remembered this last change from early school days but the later, final development was completely new and shocking to him. Advertising had pressured more and more people to replace goods *before* they wore out with other goods that were, essentially, no improvement on their predecessors! Eventually just the word "NEW" was enough to trigger buying panics.

There had been growing awareness of what was happening, even sporadic resistance to it by such varied ideologies as Conservative Thrift, Asocial Beatnikism and Radical Inquiry. But, strangely enough, very few people had cared. Indeed, anything that diminished consumption was viewed as dangerously subversive.

"And rightly so!" was his first, instinctive reaction. His second, reasoned one, though, was less certain.

The contradiction started to give him a headache. He hur-

ried from the scanning room, overtaxed eyes blinking at the rediscovery of daylight.

Burnett walked him to the door. "Not feeling well?" he inquired.

"I'll be all right. I just need a few days real work." He stopped. "No, that's not why. I'm confused. I've been reading crazy things about obsolescence. They used to have strange reasons for it. Why, some people even said replacements were not always improvements and were unnecessary!"

Burnett could not completely hide his pleasure. "You've been getting into rather deep stuff."

"Deep—or nonsensical!"

"True. True. Come back tomorrow and read some more."

"Maybe I will." But he was happy to get away from the library building.

Marie was horrified when he told her that evening about his studies. "Don't go back there," she pleaded. "It's dangerous. It's subversive! How could people say such awful things? You remember that Mr. Johnson around the corner? He seemed such a nice man, too, until they arrested him without giving a reason . . . and how messed up he was when he got out last year. I'll bet that kind of talk explains the whole thing. It's crazy. Everyone knows items start wearing out and they have to be replaced."

"I realise that, honey, but it's interesting to speculate. Don't we have guaranteed freedom of thought?"

She threw up her hands as if dealing with a child. "Naturally we have freedom of thought. But you should have the right thoughts, shouldn't you? Wendell, promise me you won't go back to that library."

"Well—"

"Reading's a very risky thing anyway." Her eyes were saucer-round with fright. "Please, darling. Promise."

"Sure, you're right, honey. I promise."

He meant it when he said it. But that night, tossing from side to side, he felt less certain. In the morning, as he went out, Marie asked him where he was going.

"I want to observe the preparations for the Preliminary Rites."

"Now that," she grinned, "is what I call *healthy* thinking."

For a while he did stand around the Central Plaza along with thousands of other idlers, watching the robot dump trucks assemble the piles of discarded equipment. The crowd cheered loudly as an enormous crane was knocked over on its side.

"There's fifty millions worth out there!" a bystander ex-

ulted. "It's going to be the biggest Preliminary I've ever seen."

"It certainly will be!" he said, catching a little of the other man's enthusiasm despite his previous doubts.

Preliminary Rites were part of the emotion-stoking that preceded the Highest Holy Day. Each Rite was greater and more destructive than those that had gone before. As tokens of happy loyalty, viewers threw hats and watches and stickpins onto the pile just prior to the entry of the slaggers. What better way could be found for each man to manifest his common humanity?

After a while doubt started assailing him again, and Hart found himself returning almost against his will to the Library Building. Burnett greeted him cordially. "Today's visit is completely legal," he said. "Anyone doing olden time research is automatically authorized if he has been here before."

"I hope my thought can be as legal," Hart blurted out. "Well—that was just a joke."

"Oh, I can recognize a joke when I hear one, my friend."

Hart went to his booth, feeling the man's eyes measuring him more intently than ever. It was almost a welcome relief to start reading the reference scanner once more.

But not for long. As the wider pattern unfolded, his anxiety state intensified.

It was becoming perfectly obvious that many, many replacements used to be made long before they were needed. And it was still true. *I should not be thinking such thoughts,* he told himself, *I should be outside in the Plaza, being normal and human.*

But he could see how it had come about, step by step. First there had been pressure from the ruling echelons, many of whose members only maintained their status through excessive production. Then, much more important, there had been the willful blindness of the masses who wanted to keep their cozy, familiar treadmills going.

He slammed down the *off* button and went out to the librarian's desk. "Do people want to work all the time," he said, "for the sake of work alone?"

He immediately regretted the question. But Burnett did not seem to mind. "You've only stated the positive reason, Mr. Hart. The negative one could be stronger—the fear of what they would have to do if they did not have to work much over a long period."

"What would it mean?"

"Why, they would have to start thinking! Most people don't mind thought if it's concentrated in a narrow range. But if they have to think in a broad range to keep boredom

away—no, that's too high a price for most of them! They avoid it when they can. And under present circumstances they can." He stopped. "Of course that's a purely hypothetical fiction I'm constructing."

Hart shook his head. "It sounds awfully real to be purely—" He, too caught himself up. "Of course, you're only positing a fiction."

Burnett started putting his desk papers away. "I'm leaving now. The Preliminary begins soon. Want to come?"

The man's face was stolidly blank except for his brown eyes which burned like a zealot's. Fascinated by them, Hart agreed. It would be best to return anyway. Some of the bystanders had looked too curiously at him when he had left. Who would willingly leave a Rite when it was approaching its climax?

II

The Plaza was now thronged and the sacrificial pile towered over a hundred feet in the cleared center area. Then, as the first collective *Ah!* arose, a giant slagger lumbered in from the east, the direction prescribed for such commencements. Long polarity arms glided smoothly out of the central mechanism and reached the length for Total Destruction.

"That's the automatic setting," parents explained to their children.

"When?" the children demanded eagerly.

"Any moment now."

Then the unforeseen occurred.

There was a rumbling from inside the pile and a huge jagged patchwork of metal shot out, smashing both arms. The slagger teetered, swaying more and more violently from side to side until it collapsed on its side. The rumbling grew. And then the pile, like a mechanical cancer, ripped the slagger apart and then absorbed it.

The panicking crowd fell back. Somewhere a child began crying, provoking more hubbub. "Sabotage!" people were crying. "Let's get away!"

Nothing like this had ever happened before. But Hart knew instantly what had caused it. Some high-level servo mechanisms had not been thoroughly disconnected. They had repaired their damages, then imposed their patterns on the material at hand.

A second slagger came rushing into the square. It discharged immediately; and the pile finally collapsed and disintegrated as it was supposed to.

The crowd was too shocked to feel the triumph it had

come for, but Hart could not share their horror. Burnett eyed him. "Better look indignant," he said. "They'll be out for blood. Somebody must have sabotaged the setup."

"Catch the culprits!" he shouted, joining the crowd around him. "Stop anti-social acts!"

"Stop anti-social acts!" roared Burnett; and, in a whisper: "Hart, let's get out of here."

As they pushed their way through the milling crowd, a loudspeaker boomed out: "Return home in peace. The instincts of the people are good. Healthy destruction forever! The criminals will be tracked down . . . if they exist."

"A terrible thing, friend," a woman said to them.

"Terrible, friend," Burnett agreed. "Smash the anti-social elements without mercy!"

Three children were clustered together, crying. "I wanted to set the right example for them," said the father to anyone who would listen. "They'll *never* get over this!"

Hart tried to console them. "Next week is High Holy Day," he said, but the bawling only increased.

The two men finally reached a side avenue where the crowd was thinner. "Come with me," Burnett ordered, "I want you to meet some people."

He sounded as if he were instituting military discipline but Hart, still dazed, willingly followed. "It wasn't such a terrible thing," he said, listening to the distant uproar. "Why don't they shut up!"

"They will—eventually." Burnett marched straight ahead and looked fixedly in the same direction.

"The thing could have gobbled up the city if there hadn't been a second slagger!" said a lone passerby.

"Nonsense," Burnett muttered under his breath. "You know that, Hart. Any self-regulating mechanism reaches a check limit sooner than that."

"It has to."

They turned into a large building and went up to the fiftieth floor. "My apartment," said Burnett as he opened the door.

There were about fifteen people in the large living room. They rose, smiling, to greet their host. "Let's save the self-congratulations for later," snapped Burnett. "These were merely our own preliminaries. We're not out of the woods yet. This, ladies and gentlemen, is our newest recruit. He has seen the light. I have fed him basic data and I'm sure we're not making a mistake with him."

Hart was about to demand what was going on when a short man with eyes as intense as Burnett's proposed a

toast to "the fiasco in the Plaza." Everyone joined in and he did not have to ask.

"Burnett, I don't quite understand why I am here but aren't you taking a chance with me?"

"Not at all. I've followed your reactions since your first visit to the library. Others here have also—when you were completely unaware of being observed. The gradual shift in viewpoint is familiar to us. We've all been through it. The really important point is that you no longer like the kind of world into which you were born."

"That's true, but no one can change it."

"We *are* changing it," said a thin-faced young woman. "I work in a servo lab and—."

"Miss Wright, time enough for that later," interrupted Burnett. "What we must know now, Mr. Hart, is how much you're willing to do for your new-found convictions? It will be more work than you've ever dreamed possible."

He felt as exhilarated as he did in the months after High Holy Day. "I'm down to under ten hours labor a week. I'd do anything for your group if I could get more work."

Burnett gave him a hearty handshake of congratulation . . . but was frowning as he did so. "You're doing the right thing—for the wrong reason. Every member of this group could tell you why. Miss Wright, since you feel like talking, explain the matter."

"Certainly. Mr. Hart, we are engaged in an activity of so-called subversion for a positive reason, not merely to avoid insufficient work load. Your reason shows you are still being moved by the values that you despise. We *want* to cut the work-production load on people. We want them to *face* the problem of leisure, not flee it."

"There's a heart-warming paradox here," Burnett explained. "Every excess eventually undermines itself. Everybody in the movement starts by wanting to act for their beliefs because work appears so attractive for its own sake. I was that way, too, until I studied the dead art of philosophy."

"Well—" Hart sat down, deeply troubled. "Look, I deplore destroying equipment that is still perfectly useful as much as any of you do. But there *is* a problem. If the destruction were stopped there would be so much leisure people would rot from boredom."

Burnett pounced eagerly on the argument. "Instead they're rotting from artificial work. Boredom is a temporary, if recurring phenomenon of living, not a permanent one. If most men face the difficulty of empty time long enough they find new problems with which to fill that time. That's where philosophy showed me the way. None of its fundamental

mysteries can ever be solved but, as you pit yourself against them, your experience and capacity for being alive grows."

"Very nice," Hart grinned, "wanting all men to be philosophers. They never have been."

"You shouldn't have brought him here," growled the short man. "He's not one of us. Now we have a real mess."

"Johnson, I'm leader of this group!" Burnett exploded. "Credit me with a little understanding. All right, Hart, what you say is true. But why? Because most men have always worked too hard to achieve the fruits of curiosity."

"I hate to keep being a spoil-sport, but what does that prove? *Some* men who have to work as hard as the rest have been interested in things beyond the end of their nose."

They all groaned their disapproval.

"A good point, Hart, but it doesn't prove what you think. It just shows that a minority enjoy innate capacities and environmental variations that make the transition to philosopher easier."

"And *you* haven't proven anything about the incurious majority."

"This does, though: whenever there was a favorable period the majority who could, as you put it, see beyond the ends of their noses increased. Our era is just the opposite. We are trapped in a vicious circle. Those noses are usually so close to the grindstone that men are afraid to raise their heads. We are breaking that circle!"

"It's a terribly important thing to aim for, Burnett, but—" He brought up another doubt and somebody else answered it immediately.

For the next half hour, as one uncertainty was expressed after another, everybody joined in the answers until inexorable logic forced his surrender.

"All right," he conceded, "I will do anything I can—not to make work for myself, but to help mankind rise above it."

Except for a brief, triumphant glance in Johnson's direction, Burnett gave no further attention to what had happened and plunged immediately into practical matters.

To halt the blind worship of work, the Rites had first to be discredited. And to discredit the Rites, the awe inspired by their infallible performance had to be weakened. The sabotage of the Preliminary had been the first local step in that direction. There had been a few similar, if smaller, episodes, executed by other groups, but they had received as little publicity as possible.

"Johnson, you pulled one so big this time that they can't

hide it. Twenty thousand witnesses! When it comes to getting things done you're the best we have!"

The little man grinned. "But you're the one who knows how to pick recruits and organize our concepts. This is how it worked. I re-fed the emptied cryotron memory box of a robot discard with patterns to deal with anything it was likely to encounter in a destruction pile. I kept the absolute-freeze mechanism in working order, but developed a shield that would hide its activity from the best pile detector." He spread a large tissue schematic out on the floor and they all gathered around it to study the details. "Now, the important thing was to have an external element that could resume contact with a wider circuit, which could in turn start meshing with the whole robot mechanism and then through that mechanism into the pile. This little lever made the contact at a pre-fed time."

Miss Wright was enthusiastic. "That contact is half the size of any I've been able to make. It's crucially important," she added to Hart. "A large contact can look suspicious."

While others took miniphotos of the schematic, Hart studied the contact carefully. "I think I can reduce its size by another fifty per cent. Alloys are one of my specialties —when I get a chance to work at them."

"That would be ideal," said Burnett. "Then we could set up many more discarded robots without risk. How long will it take?"

"I can rough it out right now." He scribbled down the necessary formulas and everyone photographed that too.

"Maximum security is now in effect," announced Burnett. "You will destroy your copies as soon as you have transferred them to edible base copies. At the first hint of danger you will consume them. Use home enlargers for study. In no case are you to make permanent blowups that would be difficult to destroy quickly." He considered them sternly. "Remember, you are running a great risk. You're not only opposing the will of the state but the present will of the vast majority of citizens."

"If there are as many other underground groups as you indicate," said Hart, "they should have this information."

"We get it to them," answered Burnett. "I'm going on health leave from my job."

"And what will be your excuse?" Wright demanded anxiously.

"Nervous shock," smiled their leader. "After all, I did see today's events in the Plaza."

When Hart reached home his wife was waiting for him. "Why did you take so long, Wendell. I was worried sick.

The radio says anti-socials are turning wild servos loose. How could human beings do such a thing?"

"I was there. I saw it all happen." He frowned. "The crowd was so dense I couldn't get away."

"But what happened? The way the news was broadcast I couldn't understand anything."

He described the situation in great detail and awaited Marie's reaction. It was even more encouraging than he had hoped for. "I understand less than before! How could anything reactivate that rubble? They put everything over five years old into the piles, and the stuff's supposed to be decrepit already. You'd almost think we were destroying wealth before its time, because if those disabled mechanisms reactivate—" She came to a dead halt. "That's madness! Oh, I wish High Holy Day were here already so I could get back to work and stop this empty *thinking!*"

Her honest face was more painfully distorted than he had ever seen it before, even during the universal pre-Rite doldrums. "Only a few more days to go," he consoled. "Don't worry, honey. Everything's going to be all right. Now I'd like to be alone in the study for a while. I've been through an exhausting time."

"Aren't you going to eat?"

The last word triggered the entry of Eric, the domestic robot, pushing the dinner cart ahead of him. "No food tonight," Hart insisted. The shining metal head nodded its assent and the cart was wheeled out.

"That's not a very humane thing to do," she scolded. "Eric's not going to be serving many more meals—"

"Good grief, Marie, just leave me alone for a while, will you?" He slammed the study door shut, warning himself to display less nervousness in the future as he listened to her pacing outside. Then she went away.

The projector gave him a good-sized wall image to consider. He spent most of the night calculating where he could place tiny self-activators in the "obsolescent" robots that were to be donated by his plant. Then he set up the instruction tapes to make the miniature contacts. Production then would be a simple job, only taking a few minutes, and during a working day there were always many periods longer than that when he was alone on the production floor.

But thinking the matter out without computers was much more difficult. Human beings ordinarily filled their time on a lower abstracting level.

When he unlocked the study door in the morning he was startled to see Marie bustling down the corridor, pushing the food service cart herself. That did not make sense, especially considering last night's statement about Eric.

"I thought you'd want breakfast early," she coughed.

"You didn't have to bother, honey. Eric could have done it."

If she had been prying, the cart might have been a prop to take up as soon as he came out. On the other hand, what could she in her technical ignorance make of such matters anyway?

It was best not to rouse any deeper suspicions by openly noticing her wifely noisiness. At breakfast they pretended nothing had happened, devoting the time to mutually disapproved cousins, but all day long he kept wondering whether ignorant knowledge couldn't be as dangerous as the knowing kind.

The next morning, after a long sleep, he went to the factory for the first of his semi-weekly work periods.

He sat before a huge console, surveying scores of dials, at the end of a machine that was over five hundred yards long. Today it was turning out glass paper the color of watered blood, made only for Ritual publications, packing it in sheets and dispatching them in automatic trucks; but the machine could be adjusted to everything from metal sheeting to plastic felts. At the far end sat another man, diminished by distance, busily tending more dials that could really take care of themselves.

After a while the man went out for a break. Hart ran a hundred yards to a section that was not working. He snapped it into the alloy supply and fed in the tape. In a minute, several dozen tiny contacts came down a chute. He pocketed them and disconnected the section just before his fellow worker reappeared.

The man walked down the floor to him, looking curious.

"Anything the matter?" he asked, hopeful for some break in routine.

"No, just felt like a walk."

"Know what you mean—I feel restless too. Too bad this plant's only two years old. Boy, wouldn't she make a great disintegration!" He grinned, slapping a fender affectionately.

Hart joined in the joke. "Gives us something to look forward to in ten years."

"A good way to look at things," said the other man.

At home he locked the contacts in a desk drawer. Tomorrow he would deliver most of them to Burnett's apartment.

But the next morning an emergency letter came from his group leader, warning him not to appear there. *I am going completely underground. I think they may suspect my activities. The dispersion plan must go into effect. You know*

how to reach Johnson and Wright and they each in turn can get to two others. Good luck!

He had just put the letter in his pocket when Eric announced the arrival of a Rituals Inspector.

The man had nervous close-set eyes and seemed embarrassed by his need to make such a visit. Hart took the offensive as his best defense. "I don't understand this, Inspector," he protested. "You people should be busy with High Holy preparations. Are you losing your taste for work?"

"Now, now, Mr. Hart, that's a very unkind remark. I dislike this nonsense as much as anyone." His square jaw chewed into each word as he opened his scanning box. "It's the anti-social sabotage."

"Do you mean to say I am under suspicion?" Marie was now loitering in the doorway, worse luck.

"Oh, no. Nothing so insulting. This is strictly impersonal. The Scanning Center has picked apartments at complete random and we're to make spot checks."

The eye at one end of the box blinked wickedly, waiting for an information feed. "Now, sir, if you'll pardon me, I'll just take the records from one of those desk drawers—any drawer—and put them in the box." Hart slid open a drawer. "No, sir, I think I'll try the next one. It's regulation not to accept suggestions."

With a hand made deft by practise he scooped out all the sheets and tapes and put them in the box. The scanner's fingers rapidly sorted them past the eye. Hart exhaled, relieved that an innocuous drawer had been selected, and the inspector handed back the material to him. "Well, Inspector, that's that."

"Not quite." The Inspector selected another drawer at the other end of the desk and dumped everything before the scanner. His examination was speeding up and that was not good; he would have time to take more sample readings.

"Now if you'll empty your left pocket—"

"Oh, this is too much!" Marie exploded. "My husband struggles all night on secret work, studying to find ways to stop the anti-socials, and you treat him like one of them!"

"You're working on the problem?" the Inspector said respectfully. "What are you doing?"

Frying pan to fire. Hart preferred the pan and pulled open a drawer. "It's too complicated, too much time needed to explain!"

The Inspector glanced at his watch. "I'm falling behind schedule." He closed up his box. "Sorry, but I have to leave. Heavy time sheet today."

As soon as he was gone, Hart breathed easier. Nothing

incriminating would be fed into the Central Scanner.

Marie became apologetic. "I'm sorry I said it, Wendell, but I couldn't keep quiet. All I did last night was peek in once or twice."

He shrugged. "I'm just on a minor project."

"Every bit counts." She shook her head. "Only you have to wonder—I mean, don't think I'm treasoning, but while I was shopping an hour ago a lot of women said you have to think—how come all that obsolescent junk could work so well, after being thoroughly wrecked, too? You almost wonder whether some of it was too good for disintegration."

Wendell pretended to be shocked. "Just a fluke of circumstance. If something like that happened again you'd be right to wonder. But it could not ever happen again."

"Don't get me wrong, Wendell. None of the women attacked anything. It was more like what you just said. They said if it happened again, then you'd have to wonder. But of course it couldn't happen again."

How well the tables had turned! Not only had Marie's ignorant knowledge proven helpful but she had now given him a positive idea also.

When he met Wright and Johnson at the latter's apartment that evening he explained it to them. "We can propagate 'dangerous' thoughts and yet appear completely loyal. We can set up the reaction to next High Holy Day."

"How?" demanded Johnson. "That's having your cake and eating it."

"Nothing's impossible in the human mind," Wright said. "let's listen."

"Here's the point. Wherever you go there will be people tsk-tsking about the Preliminary fiasco. Just reassure them, say it meant nothing at all by itself. If it ever happened again, then there would be room for doubt but, of course, *it could not happen again!*"

Wright smiled. "That's almost feminine in its subtlety."

He smiled back. "My wife inspired it. Don't get nervous —it was unconscious, sheerly by accident."

"Whatever the cause, it's the perfect result," Johnson conceded. "We'll spread it through the net."

"Along with this, I hope." Wendell dumped the contacts on a table top. "It's the smallest size possible. A lot should get by unnoticed. Find cell members who can set up cryotrons with a wide range of instructions to cope with anything in the piles. Some weirdly alive concoctions of 'obsolescent' parts ought to result."

"Some day the world's going to know what you've done for it," said Johnson solemnly.

"That could happen too soon!" Miss Wright's face, honest

and open in its horse-like length, broke into a wide grin.

"Amen," said Hart, adding the private hope that Marie, blessed with superior looks, might be able to show as much superior wisdom some day.

The hope was not immediately fulfilled. When he reached home Marie was in a tizzy of excitement. "You're just in time, darling. They just caught three subversives. One of them was a woman," she added as if this were compounding an improbability with an impossibility. "They're going to show them."

He gripped his belt tightly. "A woman?"

"That's right. There she is now."

A uniformed officer was gently helping a pale little old woman sit down before the camera, as if she were more an object of pity than of fear. Hart relaxed.

"—caught red-handed with the incriminating papers," shouted an offstage announcer. "Handbills asserting objects declared obsolescent could actually last indefinitely!"

"What do you have to say for yourself?" the officer asked gently. "You must realize, of course, that such irreligious behaviour precludes your moving in general society for a long time to come."

"I don't know what came over me," she sobbed in a tired voice. "Curiosity. Yes, curiosity, that's what it was. I saw these sheets of paper in the street and they said we should stop working so hard at compulsory tasks and start working to expand our own interests and personalities."

"Self-contradictory nonsense!" said the voice.

"Yes, I know that. But it made me curious and I took it home to read, and it said our compulsory tasks were artificially manufactured and, if you didn't believe that, look at the pile that reactivated itself the other day." She stopped, reorganizing her thoughts. "Of course, though, that thing in the Plaza was unique, you know. I don't think it could mean a thing . . . unless it happened a few times. And the fact is it won't ever happen again."

"Well, that much makes very good sense," said Marie. "You said the same thing, Wendell. I don't think that poor woman knew what she was doing—just a dupe for subversive propaganda."

"—a dupe for subversive propaganda," the announcer was saying.

"See, exactly what I said."

"Yes, dear."

How swiftly the decentralized underground was working! Hart could not tell whether the old woman was an active member or just a passive responder, but it did not matter.

She was now spreading the seeds for future doubt across the land.

Two old men were brought in and they mumbled the same disconnected story as their sister.

"We have intensively interrogated these prisoners," boomed the announcer, "and know there is nothing more to the rumored anti-social plot than this stupid chatter. Remain vigilant and you have nothing to fear!"

"You are sentenced to five years isolation from general society," said the officer, in a voice dulcet enough to sell advance orders for replacement products that had not yet been made. "Our intention is to protect you from bad influences. Our hope is that others will take your lesson to heart."

"God bless you," said the woman and her brothers joined in effusive thanks.

"Makes you proud to be a human being," Marie said. "I was getting some stupid doubts myself, dear. I must admit it. But that's all past. I can hardly wait for the Highest Holy Day."

"Neither can I," sighed her husband.

IV

The next day at noon Eric came to him, functioning on the final set of servo instructions that had been installed in him at the factory of his birth eight years before. He shook hands with the two of them and said: "Now I am prepared for death."

Marie was tearful. "I will miss you, Eric. If you were only under five years old your span could be extended."

"Everything that happens is right," Eric said impassively.

He clambered on to the operation table, instinctively knowing which flat surface was for him, and, breaking all his major circuits, gave up the ghost that only man could restore to him.

Hart found his wife's grief easy to bear. The day after tomorrow she would join in the general exultation of High Holy Day, with Eric well forgotten. He methodically began smashing the surface of the limbs and torso; the greater the visible damage, the greater the honor redounding to the sacrifice donor. "This will be our gift to the general pile," he said.

"I thought we could keep him for our garden sacrifice," Marie protested meekly. "Most people do."

"But the other way is the greater sacrifice."

There was no reply, because she knew he spoke for the deeper, more moving custom. But suddenly he began to act depressed himself. "I know we say it every ten years, but

Eric was really the best companion we ever had." He gestured toward the table. "I want to sit here with him for a while—alone."

"That's carrying things too far, Wendell. A little grief is proper—but this much is actually morbid."

"It's all within my rights."

She tossed her head petulantly. "Well, I've done my share. I can't stand any more. It makes a person think and get depressed. I don't care what you're going to do. I'm going out to enjoy a Preliminary."

"Can't blame you for that," he nodded.

When she had gone he started to work on new instruction tapes for activating the servo-cryotron. Nothing could be surrendered to chance. Every possible circumstance in the pile had to be anticipated. There had to be instructions for action if Eric was crushed below fifty feet of metal, for assembling any kind of scrambled wiring, for adapting all types of parts in its immediate surroundings, for using these parts to absorb parts further away and for timing the operation to the start of the Highest Rite.

Some tapes had been prepared earlier, so it was possible to put everything in the cryotron box before Marie returned, as well as to attach the tiny contact that would reach out from the box until it reached its first external scrap of wire or metal.

"You poor darling," she pouted. "You missed the most wonderful thing! They demolished a whole thirty-story building!"

His blood, atavistically effected, pulsed faster until his new creed came to grips with his old emotions. "They usually don't bother with buildings for the Rites."

"I know—that's what was so wonderful! The State has decided to make this one the biggest Day of all time. We'll have enough work to fill the whole ten years! Everybody was so happy."

"I'm sure they were." He caught himself in mid-sarcasm and said, "I'm sorry I missed it."

"And I'm sorry I've been so selfishly self-centered." She frowned. "I forgot about it, but there were people in the crowd boasting they had been assigned to fight anti-social movements. I had to boast back that my husband had been honored too."

He tensed. "Oh? What did they say to that?"

"Frankly, they laughed."

"I should think so. The Central Scanner didn't pick up anything except a lot of ineffective propaganda. The sabotage business was all hysteria."

"That's just what they said—the assignments were an

empty honor." She coldly considered Eric. "I want to wreck him too."

"I've smashed the insides," he said. "You'd better just work the surface."

"That's all I want to do," she answered, starting to scratch traditional marks all over the dead robot. It gave her a full afternoon of happy, busy labor.

The next day a large open truck came around and the street echoed to the appeal for contributions. Festival spirit was running high everywhere and when the neighborhood crowd saw the young robot porters carry Eric out there was a loud cheer of appreciation.

"My husband decided on a major contribution right away," Marie announced to them.

"It's the least we could do," he said modestly.

Many onlookers, swept away by their example, rushed indoors to bring out additional items of sacrifice. But only two others gave up their robots. The rest clung to them for private Holy Night ceremonies. Soon Eric disappeared under the renewed deluge of egg-beaters and washers.

"The best collection I have seen today," said the inspector accompanying the truck. "You people are to be congratulated for your exceptional patriotism."

"Destroy!" they shouted back joyously. "Make work!"

At dawn the Central Plaza was already crowded and new hordes kept pouring in from outlying areas. Wendell and his wife had been among the first to arrive. They waited, impatient in their separate ways, on the borderline five hundred yards from the ten-story pyre.

Martial music roared from loudspeakers, interrupted by the mellifluous boom of a merchandising announcer: "New product! Better models! One hundred years of High Holy Days! New! New! NEW!"

"Destroy!" came the returning shout. "Make work! Work! Work!"

All the sounds echoed back and forth until baffled away by the open area across the Plaza, where one large structure had already been destroyed. Three others were slated for collapse today.

"The biggest Holy Day ever," a restless old woman said to Marie. "I've seen all nine of them."

"Eric's in there," Marie chatted back, superficially sad, deeply happy.

"Who?"

"Our house robot."

"Imagine that! Did you hear that?" People gathered round them and cheered. The good-natured jostling continued until someone said: "Five minutes to go!"

Wendell checked his watch. Somewhere in the pile at least one element was coming to life, a metal arm reaching out for brother metal to engulf in its cybernetic sweep.

"They're coming!" A line of six shiny new slaggers came rumbling into the open with military precision. They moved along slowly, prolonging the pleasures of anticipation, then broke rank, each seeking its assigned point around the pile of appliances gathered for destruction.

"The latest improved models," said the loudspeakers. "They will first perform fifteen minutes of automatic maneuvers." The military music resumed and each slagger turned, as if circling a coin, in clanking rhythm to it.

"The three hundred and sixty degree turn. Next, making a box on the Plaza floor . . ."

The voice stopped, appalled.

An avalanche of metal slid down one side of the pile and the crowd gasped. The downward movement viscously slowed; then the metal, suddenly alive with the capacity to defy gravity, circled upward. Jagged limbs started flailing about.

"Disintegrator attack!" screamed the loudspeakers. "Attack!"

The maneuvers stopped. For one brief moment prior to changeover the Plaza was dead still, except for the deafening rumble in the pile. The slaggers broke the spell, rushing full speed toward the pile, evaporator beams working.

One by one they faltered and were sucked into the destructive pyre.

The crowd fell further back. The whole pile came alive like a mineral octopus. Then the squirming thing collapsed, every makeshift circuit irreparably broken and dead. Everything had been happening too fast for any pronounced reaction to accompany it; but now the world went crazy.

"Stand firm!" pleaded the loudspeakers. "We will get reinforcements as soon as celebrations are finished elsewhere."

A barrage of enormous boos came from the disintegrating mob. "Never again! Fakes! It's finished, done for!"

"Stand firm!"

But the breakup down side avenues continued. "I don't understand," Marie shuddered. "Everything's crazy. We've been deceived, Wendell. Who's been deceiving us?"

"Nobody—unless it's ourselves."

"I don't understand that either." Saucer-eyed she watched a great clump of disgruntled people push past. "I *have* to think!"

Suddenly, as they came around a corner, they were facing Burnett.

Hart tried to disregard him but the group leader would

have none of that. He rushed up to Hart. "Good to see a friendly face. Shocking developments!" His face was grim, but tiny wrinkles at the corners of his eyes betrayed an amusement that could only be discovered by those who looked for it.

"Mr. Burnett," he explained to Marie. "A librarian at the main building. Mr. Burnett, my wife Marie."

"I am most happy to meet you, Mrs. Hart. Have you heard the latest?"

"No, Mr. Burnett."

"The same things have been happening *everywhere!* They announced it on the radio and they're saying it's due to anti-social elements. Shocking!"

She shook her head stubbornly. "I don't know what to think. Maybe we shouldn't be shocked, maybe we should be. I just don't know, Mr. Burnett. I came to enjoy myself and look how it's ended." She bravely held back a sob. "Maybe we'd have been better off if we'd never heard about High Holy Days!"

Burnett looked about with feigned apprehension. "You have to be careful what you say. The government says there's even talk—subversive handbills—about trying to rehabilitate some of the stuff in the piles."

"The government ought to keep quiet!" she exploded. "They said this couldn't happen. You can't believe anything they say any more. The *people* decide and the government will have to listen, that's what I say! And I'm a pretty typical person, not one of your intellectual kind. No criticism of present company intended."

"None taken, Mrs. Hart. Our human future," said Burnett, exchanging a grin with his aide, "remains, as it always has really been. Interesting—to say the least!"

ALL LIFE'S PROBLEMS HAD BEEN SOLVED.

Man controlled time, overproduction, fantastically powerful weapons —even death. But universal happiness seemed farther away with each forward stride.

These imaginative stories explore new dimensions of time and space, as man learns that even the most advanced technology cannot protect him against primitive nature, intergalactic enemies, and the weakness, greed and treachery of human beings.

A MACFADDEN-BARTELL BOOK
Printed in U.S.A.