No. 2
50c

THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION

From WORLDS OF TOMORROW

CORDWAINER SMITH
BRIAN W. ALDISS
FRITZ LEIBER
C. C. MacAPP
KEITH LAUMER
MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD
ROBERT F. YOUNG
JULIAN F. GROW
T. K. BROWN, III
JACK WILLIAMSON

EDITED BY
FREDERIK POHL

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Published by GALAXY PUBLISHING CO.

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KEITH LAUMER

The Long Remembered Thunder

I

In his room at the Elsby Commercial Hotel, Tremaine opened his luggage and took out a small tool kit, used a screwdriver to remove the bottom cover plate from the telephone. He inserted a tiny aluminum cylinder, crimped wires and replaced the cover. Then he dialed a long-distance Washington number and waited half a minute for the connection.

"Fred, Tremaine here. Put the buzzer on." A thin hum sounded on the wire as the scrambler went into operation.

"Okay, can you read me all right? I'm set up in Elsby. Grammond's boys are supposed to keep me informed. Meantime, I'm not sitting in this damned room crouched over a dial. I'll be out and around for the rest of the afternoon."

"I want to see results," the thin voice came back over the filtered hum of the jamming device. "You spent a week with Grammond — I can't wait another. I don't mind telling you certain quarters are pressing me."

"Fred, when will you learn to sit on your news breaks until you've got some answers to go with the questions?"

"I'm an appointive official," Fred said sharply. "But never mind that. This fellow Margrave — General Margrave. Project Officer for the hyperwave program — he's been on my neck day and night. I can't say I blame him. An unauthorized transmitter interfering with a Top Secret project, progress slowing to a halt, and this Bureau —"

"Look, Fred, I was happy in the lab. Headaches, nightmares and all, Hyperwave is my baby, remember? You elected me to be a leg-man: now let me do it my way."

"I felt a technical man might suceed where a trained investigator

could be misled. And since it seems to be pinpointed in your home area —"

"You don't have to justify yourself. Just don't hold out on me. I sometimes wonder if I've seen the complete files on this —"

"You've seen all the files! Now I want answers, not questions! I'm warning you, Tremaine, Get that transmitter. I need someone to hang!"

Tremaine left the hotel, walked two blocks west along Commerce Street and turned in at a yellow brick building with the words ELSBY MUNICIPAL POLICE cut in the stone lintel above the door. Inside, a heavy man with a creased face and thick gray hair looked up from behind an ancient Underwood. He studied Tremaine, shifted a toothpick to the opposite corner of his mouth.

"Don't I know you, mister?" he said. His soft voice carried a note of authority.

Tremaine took off his hat. "Sure you do, Jess. It's been a while, though."

The policeman got to his feet. "Jimmy," he said. "Jimmy Tremaine." He came to the counter and put out his hand. "How are you, Jimmy? What brings you back to the boondocks?"

"Let's go somewhere and sit down, Jess."

In a back room Tremaine said. "To everybody but you this is just a visit to the old home town. Between us, there's more."

Jess nodded. "I heard you were with the guv-ment."

"It won't take long to tell; we don't know much yet." Tremaine covered the discovery of the powerful unidentified interference on the high-security hyperwave band, the discovery that each transmission produced not one but a pattern of "fixes" on the point of origin. He passed a sheet of paper across the table. It showed a set of concentric circles, overlapped by a similar group of rings.

"I think what we're getting is an echo effect from each of these points of intersection. The rings themselves represent the diffraction pattern —"

"Hold it, Jimmy. To me it just looks like a beer ad. I'll take your word for it."

"The point is this, Jess; we think we've got it narrowed down to this section. I'm not sure of a damn thing, but I think that transmitter's near here. Now, have you got any ideas?"

"That's a tough one, Jimmy. This is where I should come up with

the news that Old Man Whatchamacallit's got an attic full of gear he says is a time machine. Trouble is, folk's around here haven't even taken to TV. They figure we should be content with radio, like the Lord intended."

"I didn't expect any easy answers, Jess. But I was hoping maybe you had something . . ."

"Course," said Jess. "there's always Mr. Bram . . ."

"Mr. Bram," repeated Tremaine. "Is he still around? I remember him as a hundred years old when I was a kid."

"Still just the same, Jimmy. Comes in town maybe once a week, buys his groceries and hikes back out to his place by the river."

"Well, what about him?"

"Nothing. But he's the town's mystery man. You know that. A little touched in the head."

"There were a lot of funny stories about him, I remember," Tremaine said. "I always liked him. One time he tried to teach me something I've forgotten. Wanted me to come out to his place and he'd teach me. I never did go. We kids used to play in the caves near his place, and sometimes he gave us apples."

"I've never seen any harm in Bram," said Jess. "But you know how this town is about foreigners, especially when they're a mite addled. Bram has blue eyes and blond hair—or did before it turned white—and he talks just like everybody else. From a distance he seems just like an ordinary American. But up close, you feel it. He's foreign, all right. But we never did know where he came from."

"How long's he lived here in Elsby?"

"Beats me, Jimmy. You remember old Aunt Tress, used to know all about ancestors and such as that? She couldn't remember about Mr. Bram. She was kind of senile, I guess. She used to say he'd lived in that same old place out on the Concord road when she was a girl. Well, she died five years ago . . . in her seventies. He still walks in town every Wednesday . . . or he did up till yesterday anyway."

"Oh?" Tremaine stubbed out his cigarette, lit another. "What happened then?"

"You remember Soup Gaskin? He's got a boy, name of Hull. He's Soup all over again."

"I remember Soup," Tremaine said. "He and his bunch used to come in the drug store where I worked and perch on the stools and kid around with me, and Mr. Hempleman would watch them from

over back of the prescription counter and look nervous. They used to raise cain in the other drug store . . ."

"Soup's been in the pen since then. His boy Hull's the same kind. Him and a bunch of his pals went out to Bram's place one night and set it one fire."

"What was the idea of that?"

"Dunno. Just meanness, I reckon. Not much damage done. A car was passing by and called it in. I had the whole caboodle locked up here for six hours. Then the sob sisters went to work: poor little tyke routine, high spirits, you know the line. All of 'em but Hull are back in the streets playing with matches by now. I'm waiting for the day they'll make jail age."

"Why Bram?" Tremaine persisted. "As far as I know, he never had any dealings to speak of with anybody here in town."

"Oh hoh, you're a little young, Jimmy," Jess chuckled. "You never knew about Mr. Bram — the young Mr. Bram — and Linda Carroll."

Tremaine shook his head.

"Old Miss Carroll. School teacher here for years; guess she was retired by the time you were playing hookey. But her dad had money, and in her day she was a beauty. Too good for the fellers in these parts. I remember her ridin' by in a high-wheeled shay, when I was just a nipper. Sitting up proud and tall, with that red hair piled up high. I used to think she was some kind of princess . . ."

"What about her and Bram? A romance?"

Jess rocked his chair back on two legs, looked at the ceiling, frowning. "This would ha' been about nineteen-oh-one. I was no more'n eight years old. Miss Linda was maybe in her twenties — and that made her an old maid, in those times. The word got out she was setting her cap for Bram. He was a good-looking young feller then, over six foot, of course, broad backed, curly yellow hair — and a stranger to boot. Like I said, Linda Carroll wanted nothin' to do with the local bucks. There was a big shindy planned. Now, you know Bram was funny about any kind of socializing; never would go any place at night. But this was a Sunday afternoon and someways or other they got Bram down there; and Miss Linda made her play, right there in front of the town, practically. Just before sundown they went off together in that fancy shay. And the next day, she was home again — alone. That finished her reputation, as far as the biddies in Elsby was concerned. It was ten years 'fore she even landed the

teaching job. By that time, she was already old. And nobody was ever fool enough to mention the name Bram in front of her."

Tremaine got to his feet. "I'd appreciate it if you'd keep your ears and eyes open for anything that might build into a lead on this, Jess. Meantime, I'm just a tourist, seeing the sights."

"What about that gears of yours? Didn't you say you had some kind of detector you were going to set up?"

"I've got an oversized suitcase," Tremaine said. "I'll be setting it up in my room over at the hotel."

"When's this bootleg station supposed to broadcast again?"

"After dark. I'm working on a few ideas. It might be an infinitely repeating logarithmic sequence, based on —"

"Hold it, Jimmy. You're over my head." Jess got to his feet. "Let me know if you want anything. And by the way —" he winked broadly — "I always did know who busted Soup Gaskin's nose and took out his front teeth."

II

Back in the street, Tremaine headed south toward the Elsby Town Hall, a squat structure of brownish-red brick, crouched under yellow autumn trees at the end of Sheridan Street. Tremaine went up the steps and past heavy double doors. Ten yards along the dim corridor, a hand-lettered cardboard sign over a black-varnished door said "MUNICIPAL OFFICE OF RECORD". Tremaine opened the door and went in.

A thin man with garters above the elbow looked over his shoulder at Tremaine.

"We're closed," he said.

"I won't be a minute," Tremaine said. "Just want to check on when the Bram property changed hands last."

The man turned to Tremaine, pushing a drawer shut with his hip. "Bram? He dead?"

"Nothing like that, I just want to know when he bought the place."

The man came over to the counter, eyeing Tremaine. "He ain't going to sell, mister, if that's what you want to know."

"I want to know when he bought."

The man hesitated, closed his jaw hard. "Come back tomorrow," he said.

Tremaine put a hand on the counter, looked thoughtful. "I was

hoping to save a trip." He lifted his hand and scratched the side of his jaw. A folded bill opened on the counter. The thin man's eyes darted toward it. His hand eased out, covered the bill. He grinned quickly.

"See what I can do," he said.

It was ten minutes before he beckoned Tremaine over to the table where a two-foot-square book lay open. An untrimmed fingernail indicated a line written in faded ink:

"May 19. Acreage sold, One Dollar and other G&V consid. NW Quarter Section 24, Township Elsby. Bram. (see Vol. 9 & cet.)"

"Translated, what does that mean?" said Tremaine.

"That's the ledger for 1901; means Bram bought a quarter section on the nineteenth of May. You want me to look up the deed?"

"No, thanks," Tremaine said. "That's all I needed." He turned back to the door.

"What's up, mister?" the clerk called after him. "Bram in some kind of trouble?"

"No. No trouble."

The man was looking at the book with pursed lips. "Nineteen-oh-one," he said. "I never thought of it before, but you know, old Bram must be dern near to ninety years old. Spry for that age."

"I guess you're right."

The clerk looked sideways at Tremaine. "Lots of funny stories about old Bram. Useta say his place was haunted. You know; funny noises and lights. And they used to say there was money buried out at his place."

"I've heard those stories. Just superstition, wouldn't you say?"

"Maybe so." The clerk leaned on the counter, assumed a knowing look. "There's one story that's not superstition . . ."

Tremaine waited.

"You — uh — paying anything for information?"

"Now why would I do that?" Tremaine reached for the door knob.

The clerk shrugged. "Thought I'd ask. Anyway — I can swear to this. Nobody in this town's ever seen Bram between sundown and sunup."

Untrimmed sumacs threw late-afternoon shadows on the discolored stucco facade of the Elsby Public Library. Inside, Tremaine followed a paper-dry woman of indeterminate age to a rack of yellowed newsprint.

"You'll find back to nineteen-forty here," the librarian said. "The older are there in the shelves."

"I want nineteen-oh-one, if they go back that far."

The woman darted a suspicious look at Tremaine. "You have to handle these old papers carefully."

"I'll be extremely careful." The woman sniffed, opened a drawer, leafed through it, muttering.

"What date was it you wanted?"

"Nineteen-oh-one; the week of May nineteenth."

The librarian pulled out a folded paper, placed it on the table, adjusted her glasses, squinted at the front page. "That's it," she said. "These papers keep pretty well, provided they're stored in the dark. But they're still flimsy, mind you."

"I'll remember." The woman stood by as Tremaine looked over the front page. The lead article concerned the opening of the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo. Vice-President Roosevelt had made a speech. Tremaine leafed over, reading slowly.

On page four, under a column headed *County Notes* he saw.

> Mr. Bram has purchased a quarter section of fine grazing land, north of town, together with a sturdy house, from J. P. Spivey of Elsby. Mr. Bram will occupy the home and will continue to graze a few head of stock.

"May I see some earlier issues; from about the first of the year?"

The librarian produced the papers. Tremaine turned the pages, read the heads, skimmed an article here and there. The librarian went back to her desk. An hour later, in the issue for July 7, 1900, an item caught his eye.

> Severe Thunderstorm. Citizens of Elsby and the county were much alarmed by a violent cloudburst and thunder, during the night of the fifth. A fire set in the pine woods north of Spivey's farm destroyed a considerable amount of timber.

The librarian was at Tremaine's side. "I have to close the library now. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

Outside, the sky was sallow in the west; lights were coming on in windows along the side streets. Tremaine turned up his collar against a cold wind that had risen, started along the street toward the hotel.

A block away a black late-model sedan rounded a corner with a faint squeal of tires and gunned past him, a heavy antenna mounted forward on the left rear tail fin whipping in the slipstream. Tremaine stopped short, stared after the car.

"Damn!" he said aloud. An elderly man veered, eyeing him sharply. Tremaine set off at a run, covered the two blocks to the hotel, yanked open the door to his car, slid into the seat, made a U-turn, and headed north after the police car.

Two miles into the dark hills north of the Elsby city limits, Tremaine rounded a curve. The police car was parked on the shoulder beside the highway just ahead. He pulled off the road ahead of it and walked back. The door opened. A tall figure stepped out of the car.

"What's your problem, mister?" a harsh voice drawled.

"What's the matter? Run out of signal?"

"What's it to you, mister?"

"Are you boys in touch with Grammond on the car set?"

"We could be."

"Mind if I have a word with him? My name's Tremaine."

"Oh," said the cop, "you're the big shot from Washington." He shifted chewing tobacco to the other side of his jaw. "Sure, you can talk to him." He turned and spoke to the other cop, who muttered into the mike before handing it to Tremaine.

The heavy voice of the State Police chief crackled. "What's your beef, Tremaine?"

"I thought you were going to keep your men away from Elsby until I gave the word, Grammond."

"That was before I knew our Washington stuffed shirts were holding out on me."

"It's nothing we can go to court with, Grammond. And the job you were doing might have been influenced if I'd told you about the Elsby angle."

Grammond cursed. "I could have put my men in the town and taken it apart brick by brick in the time —"

"That's just what I don't want. If our bird sees cops cruising, he'll go underground."

"You've got it all figured, I see. I'm just the dumb hick you boys use for the spade work, that it?"

"Pull your lip back in. You've given me the confirmation I needed."

"Confirmation, hell! All I know is that somebody somewhere is punching out a signal. For all I know, it's forty midgets on bicycles, pedalling all over the damned state. I've got fixes in every county—"

"The smallest hyperwave transmitter Uncle Sam knows how to build weighs three tons," said Tremaine. "Bicycles are out."

Grammond snorted. "Okay Tremaine," he said. "You're the boy with all the answers. But if you get in trouble, don't call me: call Washington."

Back in his room, Tremaine put through a call.

"It looks like Grammond's not willing to be left out in the cold, Fred. Tell him if he queers this —"

"I don't know but what he might have something," the voice came back over the filtered hum. "Suppose he smokes them out —"

"Don't go dumb on me, Fred. We're not dealing with West Virginia moonshiners."

"Don't tell me my job, Tremaine!" the voice snapped. "And don't try out your famous temper on me. I'm still in charge of this investigation."

"Sure. Just don't get stuck in some senator's hip pocket." Tremaine hung up the telephone, went to the dresser and poured two fingers of Scotch into a water glass. He tossed it down, then pulled on his coat and left the hotel.

He walked south two blocks, turned left down a twilit side street. He walked slowly, looking at the weathered frame houses. Number 89 was a once-stately three-storied mansion overgrown with untrimmed vines, its windows squares of sad yellow light. He pushed through the gate in the ancient picket fence, mounted the porch steps and pushed the button beside the door, a dark panel of cracked varnish. It was a long minute before the door opened. A tall woman with white hair and a fine-boned face looked at him coolly.

"Miss Carroll," Tremaine said. "You won't remember me, but I—"

"There is nothing whatever wrong with my faculties, James," Miss Carroll said calmly. Her voice was still resonant, a deep contralto. Only a faint quaver reflected her age — close to eighty, Tremaine thought, startled.

"I'm flattered you remember me, Miss Carroll," he said.

"Come in." She led the way to a pleasant parlor set out with the furnishings of another era. She motioned Tremaine to a seat and took a straight chair across the room from him.

"You look very well, James," she said, nodding. "I'm pleased to see that you've amounted to something."

"Just another bureaucrat, I'm afraid."

"You were wise to leave Elsby. There is no future here for a young man."

"I often wondered why you didn't leave, Miss Carroll. I thought, even as a boy, that you were a woman of great ability."

"Why did you come today, James?" asked Miss Carroll.

"I . . ." Tremaine started. He looked at the old lady. "I want some information. This is an important matter. May I rely on your discretion?"

"Of course."

"How long has Mr. Bram lived in Elsby?"

Miss Carroll looked at him for a long moment. "Will what I tell you be used against him?"

"There'll be nothing done against him Miss Carroll . . . unless it needs to be in the national interest."

"I'm not at all sure I know what the term 'national interest' means, James. I distrust these glib phrases."

"I always liked Mr. Bram," said Tremaine. "I'm not out to hurt him."

"Mr. Bram came here when I was a young woman. I'm not certain of the year."

"What does he do for a living?"

"I have no idea."

"Why did a healthy young fellow like Bram settle out in that isolated bit of country? What's his story?"

"I'm . . . not sure that anyone truly knows Bram's story."

"You called him 'Bram', Miss Carroll. Is that his first name . . . or his last?"

"That is his only name. Just . . . Bram."

"You knew him well once, Miss Carroll. Is there anything—"

A tear rolled down Miss Carroll's faded cheek. She wiped it away impatiently.

"I'm an unfulfilled old maid, James," she said. "You must forgive me."

Tremaine stood up. "I'm sorry. Really sorry. I didn't mean to grill you, Miss Carroll. You've been very kind. I had no right . . ."

Miss Carroll shook her head. "I knew you as a boy, James. I have

complete confidence in you. If anything I can tell you about Bram will be helpful to you, it is my duty to oblige you; and it may help him." She paused. Tremaine waited.

"Many years ago I was courted by Bram. One day he asked me to go with him to his house. On the way he told me a terrible and pathetic tale. He said that each night he fought a battle with evil beings, alone, in a cave beneath his house."

Miss Carroll drew a deep breath and went on. "I was torn between pity and horror. I begged him to take me back. He refused." Miss Carroll twisted her fingers together, her eyes fixed on the long past. "When we reached the house, he ran to the kitchen. He lit a lamp and threw open a concealed panel. There were stairs. He went down . . . and left me there alone.

"I waited all that night in the carriage. At dawn he emerged. He tried to speak to me but I would not listen.

"He took a locket from his neck and put it into my hand. He told me to keep it and, if ever I should need him, to press it between my fingers in a secret way . . . and he would come. I told him that until he would consent to see a doctor, I did not wish him to call. He drove me home. He never called again."

"This locket," said Tremaine, "do you still have it?"

Miss Carroll hesitated, then put her hand to her throat, lifted a silver disc on a fine golden chain. "You see what a foolish old woman I am, James."

"May I see it?"

She handed the locket to him. It was heavy, smooth. "I'd like to examine this more closely," he said. "May I take it with me?"

Miss Carroll nodded.

"There is one other thing," she said, "perhaps meaningless."

"I'd be grateful for any lead."

"Bram fears the thunder."

III

As Tremaine walked slowly toward the lighted main street of Elsby a car pulled to a stop beside him. Jess leaned out, peered at Tremaine and asked:

"Any luck, Jimmy?"

Tremaine shook his head. "I'm getting nowhere fast. The Bram idea's a dud, I'm afraid."

"Funny thing about Bram. You know, he hasn't showed up yet. I'm getting a little worried. Want to run out there with me and take a look around?"

As they pulled away from the curb Jess said, "Jimmy, what's this about State Police nosing around here? I thought you were playing a lone hand from what you were saying to me."

"I thought so too, Jess. But it looks like Grammond's a jump ahead of me. He smells headlines in this; he doesn't want to be left out."

"Well, the State cops could be mighty handy to have around I'm wondering why you don't want 'em in. If there's some kind of spy ring working —"

"We're up against an unknown quantity. I don't know what's behind this and neither does anybody else. Maybe it's a ring of Bolsheviks . . . and maybe it's something bigger. I have the feeling we've made enough mistakes in the last few years; I don't want to see this botched."

The last pink light of sunset was fading from the clouds to the west as Jess swung the car through the open gate, pulled up under the old trees before the square-built house. The windows were dark. The two men got out, circled the house once, then mounted the steps and rapped on the door. There was a black patch of charred flooring under the window, and the paint on the wall above it was bubbled. Somewhere a cricket set up a strident chirrup, suddenly cut off. Jess leaned down, picked up an empty shotgun shell. He looked at Tremaine. "This don't look good," he said. "You suppose those fool boys . . .?"

He tried the door. It opened. A broken hasp dangled. He turned to Tremaine. "Maybe this is more than kid stuff," he said. "You carry a gun?"

"In the car."

"Better get it."

Tremaine went to the car, dropped the pistol in his coat pocket, rejoined Jess inside the house. It was silent, deserted. In the kitchen Jess flicked the beam of his flashlight around the room. An empty plate lay on the oilcloth-covered table.

"This place is empty," he said. "Anybody'd think he'd been gone a week."

"Not a very cozy —" Tremaine broke off. A thin yelp sounded in the distance.

"I'm getting jumpy," said Jess. "Dern hounddog, I guess."

A low growl seemed to rumble distantly. "What the devil's that?" Tremaine said.

Jess shone the light on the floor. "Look here," he said. The ring of light showed a spatter of dark droplets across the plank floor.

"That's blood, Jess . . ." Tremaine scanned the floor. It was of broad slabs, closely laid, scrubbed clean but for dark stains.

"Maybe he cleaned a chicken. This is the kitchen."

"It's a trail." Tremaine followed the line of drops across the floor. It ended suddenly near the wall.

"What do you make of it Jimmy?"

A wail sounded, a thin forlorn cry, trailing off into silence. Jess stared at Tremaine. "I'm too damned old to start believing in spooks," he said. "You suppose those damn-fool boys are hiding here, playing tricks?"

"I think," Tremain said, "that we'd better go ask Hull Gaskin a few questions."

At the station Jess led Tremaine to a cell where a lanky teen-age boy lounged on a steel-framed cot, blinking up at the visitor under a mop of greased hair.

"Hull, this is Mr. Tremaine," said Jess. He took out a heavy key, swung the cell door open. "He wants to talk to you."

"I ain't done nothin," Hull said sullenly. "There ain't nothin wrong with burnin out a Commie, is there?"

"Bram's a Commie, is he?" Tremaine said softly. "How'd you find that out, Hull?"

"He's a foreigner, ain't he?" the youth shot back. "Besides, we heard . . ."

"What did you hear?"

"They're looking for the spies."

"Who's looking for spies?"

"Cops."

"Who says so?"

The boy looked directly at Tremaine for an instant, flicked his eyes to the corner of the cell. "Cops was talkin about 'em." he said.

"Spill it, Hull," the policeman said. "Mr. Tremaine hasn't got all night."

"They parked out east of town, on 302, back of the woodlot. They called me over and asked me a bunch of questions. Said I could help 'em get them spies. Wanted to know all about any funny-actin people.

"And you mentioned Bram?"

The boy darted another look at Tremaine. "They said they figured the spies was out north of town. Well, Bram's a foreigner, and he's out that way, ain't he?"

"Anything else?"

The boy looked at his feet.

"What did you shoot at, Hull?" Tremaine said. The boy looked at him sullenly.

"You know anything about the blood on the kitchen floor?"

"I don't know what you're talkin about," Hull said. "We was out squirrel-huntin."

"Hull, is Mr. Bram dead?"

"What you mean?" Hull blurted. "He was —"

"He was what?"

"Nothin."

"The Chief won't like it if you hold out on him, Hull," Tremaine said. "He's bound to find out."

Jess looked at the boy. "Hull's a pretty dumb boy," he said. "But he's not that dumb. Let's have it, Hull."

The boy licked his lips. "I had Pa's 30-30, and Bovey Lay had a twelve-gauge . . ."

"What time was this?"

"Just after sunset."

"About seven-thirty, that'd be," said Jess. "That was half an hour before the fire was spotted."

"I didn't do no shootin'. It was Bovey. Old Bram jumped out at him, and he just fired off the hip. But he didn't kill him. He seen him run off . . ."

"You were on the porch when this happened. Which way did Bram go?"

"He . . . run inside."

"So then you set fire to the place. Whose bright idea was that?"

Hull sat silent. After a moment Tremaine and Jess left the cell.

"He must have gotten clear, Jimmy," said Jess. "Maybe he got scared and left town."

"Bram doesn't strike me as the kind to panic." Tremaine looked at his watch. "I've got to get on my way, Jess. I'll check with you in the morning."

Tremaine crossed the street to the Paradise Bar and Grill, pushed

into the jukebox-lit interior, took a stool and ordered a Scotch and water. He sipped the drink, then sat staring into the dark reflection in the glass. The idea of a careful reconnoitre of the Elsby area was gone, now, with police swarming everywhere. It was too bad about Bram. It would be interesting to know where the old man was . . .and if he was still alive. He'd always seemed normal enough in the old days: a big solid-looking man, middle-aged, always pleasant enough, though he didn't say much. He'd tried hard, that time, to interest Tremaine in learning whatever it was . . .

Tremaine put a hand in his jacket pocket, took out Miss Carroll's locket. It was smooth, the size and shape of a wrist-watch chasis. He was fingering it meditatively when a rough hand slammed against his shoulder, half knocking him from the stool. Tremaine caught his balance, turned, looked into the scarred face of a heavy-shouldered man in a leather jacket.

"I heard you was back in town, Tremaine," the man said.

The bartender moved up. "Looky here, Gaskin. I don't want —"

"Shove it!" Gaskin squinted at Tremaine, his upper lip curled back to expose the gap in his teeth. "You tryin to make more trouble for my boy, I hear. Been over to the jail, stickin your nose in."

Tremaine dropped the locket in his pocket and stood up. Gaskin hitched up his pants, glanced around the room. Half a dozen early drinkers stared, wide-eyed. Gaskin squinted at Tremaine. He smelled of unwashed flannel.

"Sicked the cops onto him. The boy was out with his friends, havin a little fun. Now there he sets in jail."

Tremaine moved aside from the stool, started past the man. Soup Gaskin grabbed his arm.

"Not so fast! I figger you owe me damages. I —"

"Damage is what you'll get," said Tremaine. He slammed a stiff left to Gaskin's ribs, drove a hard right to the jaw. Gaskin jackknifed backwards, tripped over a bar stool, fell on his back. He rolled over, got to hands and knees, shook his head.

"Git up, Soup!" someone called. "Hot dog!" offered another.

"I'm calling the police!" the bartender yelled.

"Never mind," a voice said from the door. A blue-jacketed State Trooper strolled into the room, fingers hooked into his pistol belt, the steel caps on his boot heels clicking with each step. He faced Tremaine, feet apart.

"Looks like you're disturbing the peace, Mr. Tremaine," he said, staring at him.

"You wouldn't know who put him up to it, would you?" Tremaine said.

"That's a dirty allegation," the cop grinned. "I'll have to get off a hot letter to my congressman."

Gaskin got to his feet, wiped a smear of blood across his cheek, then lunged past the cop and swung a wild right. Tremaine stepped aside, landed a solid punch on Gaskin's ear. The cop stepped back against the bar. Soup whirled, slammed out with lefts and rights. Tremaine lashed back with a straight left; Gaskin slammed against the bar, rebounded, threw a knockout right . . . and Tremaine ducked, landed a right uppercut that sent Gaskin reeling back, bowled over a table, sent glasses flying. Tremaine stood over him, his arms tense, his breath fast.

"On your feet, jailbird," he said. "A workout is exactly what I needed."

"Okay, you've had your fun," the State cop said. "I'm taking you in, Tremaine."

Tremaine looked at him. "Sorry, copper," he said. "I don't have time right now."

The cop looked startled, reached for his revolver.

"What's going on here, Jimmy?" Jess stood in the door, a huge .44 in his hand. He turned his eyes on the trooper.

"You're a little out of your jurisdiction," he said. "I think you better move on 'fore somebody steals your bicycle."

The cop eyed Jess for a long moment, then holstered his pistol and stalked out of the bar. Jess tucked his revolver into his belt, looked at Gaskin sitting on the floor, dabbing at his bleeding mouth. "What got into you, Soup?"

"I think the State boys put him up to it," Tremaine said. "They're looking for an excuse to take me out of the picture."

Jess motioned to Gaskin. "Get up, Soup. I'm locking you up alongside that boy of yours."

Outside, Jess said, "You got some bad enemies there, Jimmy. That's a tough break. You ought to hold onto your temper with those boys. I think maybe you ought to think about getting over the state line. I can run you to the bus station, and send your car along after you."

"I can't leave now, Jess. I haven't even started."

IV

In his room, Tremaine doctored the cut on his jaw, then opened his trunk, checked over the detector gear. The telephone rang.

"Tremaine? I've been on the telephone with Grammond. Are you out of your mind? I'm —"

"Fred," Tremaine cut in, "I though you were going to get those State cops off my neck."

"Listen to me, Tremaine. You're called off this job as of now. Don't touch anything! You'd better stay right there in that room. In fact, that's an order!"

"Don't pick now to come apart at the seams, Fred," Tremaine snapped.

"I've ordered you off! That's all!" The phone clicked and the dial tone sounded. Tremaine dropped the receiver in its cradle, then walked to the window absently, his hand in his pocket.

He felt broken pieces and pulled out Miss Carroll's locket. It was smashed, split down the center. It must have gotten it in the tussle with Soup, Tremaine thought. It looked —

He squinted at the shattered ornament. A maze of fine wires was exposed, tiny condensers, bits of glass.

In the street below, tires screeched. Tremaine looked down. A black car was at the curb, doors sprung. Four uniformed men jumped out, headed for the door. Tremaine whirled to the phone. The desk clerk came on.

"Get me Jess — fast!"

The police chief answered.

"Jess, the word's out I'm poison. A carful of State law is at the front door. I'm going out the back. Get in their way all you can." Tremaine dropped the phone, grabbed up the suitcase and let himself out into the hall. The back stairs were dark. He stumbled, cursed, made it to the service entry.

Outside, the alley was deserted.

He went to the corner, crossed the street, thrust the suitcase into the back seat of his car and slid up and eased away from the curb. He glanced in the mirror. There was no alarm.

It was a four-block drive to Miss Carroll's house. The housekeeper let Tremaine in.

"Oh, yes, Miss Carroll is still up," she said. "She never retires until nine. I'll tell her you're here, Mr. Tremaine."

Tremaine paced the room. On his third circuit Miss Carroll came in.

"I wouldn't have bothered you if it wasn't important," Tremaine said. "I can't explain it all now. You said once you had confidence in me. Will you come with me now? It concerns Bram . . . and maybe a lot more than just Bram."

Miss Carroll looked at him steadily. "I'll get my wrap."

On the highway Tremaine said, "Miss Carroll, we're headed for Bram's house. I take it you've heard of what happened out there?"

"No, James. I haven't stirred out of the house. What is it?"

"A gang of teen-age toughs went out last night. They had guns. One of them took a shot at Bram. And Bram's disappeared. But I don't think he's dead."

Miss Carroll gasped. "Why? Why did they do it?"

"I don't think they know themselves."

"You say . . . you believe he still lives . . ."

"He must be alive. It dawned on me a little while ago . . . a little late, I'll admit. The locket he gave you. Did you ever try it?"

"Try it? Why . . . no. I don't believe in magic, James."

"Not magic. Electronics. Years ago Bram talked to me about radio. He wanted to teach me. Now I'm here looking for a transmitter. That transmitter was busy last night. I think Bram was operating it."

There was a long silence.

"James," Miss Carroll said at last, "I don't understand."

"Neither do I, Miss Carroll. I'm still working on finding the pieces. But let me ask you: that night that Bram brought you out to his place. You say he ran to the kitchen and opened a trapdoor in the floor —"

"Did I say floor? That was an error; the panel was in the wall."

"I guess I jumped to the conclusion. Which wall?"

"He crossed the room. There was a table, with a candlestick. He went around it and pressed his hand against the wall, beside the woodbox. The panel slid aside. It was very dark within. He ducked his head, because the opening was not large, and stepped inside . . ."

"That would be the east wall . . . to the left of the back door?"

"Yes."

"Now, Miss Carroll, can you remember exactly what Bram said to you that night? Something about fighting something, wasn't it?"

"I've tried for sixty years to put it out of my mind, James. But I remember every word, I think." She was silent for a moment.

"I was beside him on the buggy seat. It was a warm evening, late in spring. I had told him that I loved him, and . . . he had responded. He said that he would have spoken long before, but that he had not dared. Now there was that which I must know.

"His life was not his own, he said. He was not . . . native to this world. He was an agent of a mighty power, and he had trailed a band of criminals . . ." She broke off. "I could not truly understand that part, James. I fear it was too incoherent. He raved of evil beings who lurked in the shadows of a cave. It was his duty to wage each night an unceasing battle with occult forces."

"What kind of battle? Were these ghosts, or demons, or what?"

"I don't know. Evil powers which would be unloosed on the world, unless he met them at the portal as the darkness fell and opposed them."

"Why didn't he get help?"

"Only he could stand against them. I knew little of abnormal psychology, but I understood the classic evidence of paranoia. I shrank from him. He sat, leaning forward, his eyes intent. I wept and begged him to take me back. He turned his face to me, and I saw the pain and anguish in his eyes. I loved him . . . and feared him. And he would not turn back. Night was falling, and the enemy awaited him."

"Then, when you got to the house . . .?"

"He had whipped up the horses, and I remember how I clung to the top braces, weeping. Then we were at the house. Without a word he jumped down and ran to the door. I followed. He lit a lamp and turned to me. From somewhere there was a wailing call, like an injured animal. He shouted something — and unintelligible cry — and ran toward the back of the house. I took up the lamp and followed. In the kitchen he went to the wall, pressed against it. The panel opened. He looked at me. His face was white.

"'In the name of the High God, Linda Carroll, I entreat you . . .'"

"I screamed. And he hardened his face, and went down . . . and I screamed and screamed again . . ." Miss Carroll closed her eyes, drew a shuddering breath.

"I'm sorry to have to put you through this, Miss Carroll," Tremaine said. "But I had to know."

Faintly in the distance a siren sounded. In the mirror, headlights twinkled half a mile behind. Tremaine stepped on the gas. The powerful car leaped ahead.

"Are you expecting trouble on the road, James?"

The State Police are unhappy with me, Miss Carroll. And I imagine they're not too pleased with Jess. Now they're out for blood. But I think I can outrun them."

"James," Miss Carrol said, sitting up and looking behind. "If those are police officers, shouldn't you stop?"

"I can't Miss Carroll. I don't have time for them now. If my idea mean sanything, we've got to get there fast . . ."

Bram's house loomed gaunt and dark as the car whirled through the gate, ground to a stop before the porch. Tremaine jumped out, went around the car and helped Miss Carroll out. He was surprised at the firmness of her step. For a moment, in the fading light of dusk, he glimpsed her profile. *How beautiful she must have been . . .*

He reached into the glove compartment for a flashlight.

"We haven't got a second to waste," he said. "That other car's not more than a minute behind us." He reached into the back of the car, hauled out the heavy suitcase. "I hope you remember how Bram worked that panel."

On the porch Tremaine's flashlight illuminated the broken hasp. Inside, he led the way along a dark hall, pushed into the kitchen.

"It was there," Miss Carroll said, pointing. Outside, an engine sounded on the highway, slowing, turning in. Headlights pushed a square of cold light across the kitchen wall. Tremaine jumped to the spot Miss Carroll had indicated, put the suitcase down, felt over the wall.

"Give me the light, James," Miss Carroll said calmly. "Press there." She put the spot on the wall. Tremaine leaned against it. Nothing happened. Outside, there was the thump of car doors; a muffled voice barked orders.

"Are you sure . . .?"

"Yes. Try again, James."

Tremaine threw himself against the wall, slapped at it, searching for a hidden latch.

"A bit higher; Bram was a tall man. The panel opened below . . ."

Tremaine reached higher, pounded, pushed up, sideways —

With a click a three by four foot section of wall rolled silently aside. Tremaine saw greased metal slides and, beyond, steps leading down.

"They are on the porch now, James," said Miss Carroll.

"The light!" Tremaine reached for it, threw a leg over the sill. He

reached back, pulled the suitcase after him. "Tell them I kidnapped you, Miss Carroll. And thanks."

Miss Carroll held out her hand. "Help me, James. I hung back once before. I'll not repeat my folly."

Tremaine hesitated for an instant, then reached out, handed Miss Carroll in. Footsteps sounded in the hall. The flashlight showed Tremaine a black pushbutton bolted to a two by four stud. He pressed it. The panel slid back in place.

Tremaine flashed the light on the stairs.

"Okay, Miss Carroll," he said softly. "Let's go down."

There were fifteen steps, and at the bottom, a corridor, with curved walls of black glass, and a floor of rough boards. It went straight for twenty feet and ended at an old-fashioned five-panel wooden door. Tremaine tried the brass knob. The door opened on a room shaped from a natural cave, with water-worn walls of yellow stone, a low uneven ceiling, and a packed-earth floor. On a squat tripod in the center of the chamber rested an apparatus of black metal and glass, vaguely gunlike, aimed at the blank wall. Beside it, in an ancient wooden rocker, a man lay slumped, his shirt blood-caked, a black puddle on the floor beneath him.

"Bram!" Miss Carroll gasped. She went to him, took his hand, staring into his face.

"Is he dead?" Tremaine said tightly.

"His hands are cold . . . but there is a pulse."

A kerosene lantern stood by the door. Tremaine lit it, brought it to the chair. He took out a pocket knife, cut the coat and shirt back from Bram's wound. A shotgun blast had struck him in the side; there was a lacerated area as big as Tremaine's hand.

"It's stopped bleeding," he said. "It was just a graze at close range. I'd say." He explored further. "It got his arm too, but not as deep. And I think there are a couple of ribs broken . . ." Tremaine pulled off his coat, spread it on the floor.

"Let's lay him out here and try to bring him around."

Lying on his back on the floor, Bram looked bigger than his six-foot-four, younger than his near-century, Tremaine thought. Miss Carroll knelt at the old man's side, chafing his hands, murmuring to him.

Abruptly a thin cry cut the air.

Tremaine whirled, startled. Miss Carroll stared, eyes wide. A low

rumble sounded, swelled louder, broke into a screech, cut off.

"Those are the sounds I heard that night," Miss Carroll breathed. "I thought afterwards I had imagined them, but I remember . . . James, what does it mean?"

"Maybe it means Bram wasn't as crazy as you thought," Tremaine said.

Miss Carroll gasped sharply. "James! Look at the wall—"

Tremaine turned. Vague shadows moved across the stone, flickering, wavering.

"What the devil . . .!"

Bram moaned, stirred. Tremaine went to him. "Bram!" he said. "Wake up!"

Bram's eyes opened. For a moment he looked dazedly at Tremaine, then at Miss Carroll. Awkardly he pushed himself to a sitting position.

"Bram . . . you must lie down," Miss Carroll said.

"Linda Carroll," Bram said. His voice was deep, husky.

"Bram, you're hurt . . ."

A mewling wail started up. Bram went rigid. "What hour is this?" he grated.

"The sun has just gone down; it's after seven—"

Bram tried to get to his feet. "Help me up," he ordered. "Curse the weakness . . ."

Tremaine got a hand under the old man's arm. "Careful, Bram," he said. "Don't start your wound bleeding again."

"To the Repellor," Bram muttered. Tremaine guided him to the rocking chair, eased him down. Bram seized the two black pistol-grips, squeezed them.

"You, young man," Bram said. "Take the circlet there; place it about my neck."

The flat-metal ring hung from a wire loop. Tremaine fitted it over Bram's head. It settled snugly over his shoulders, a flange at the back against his neck.

"Bram," Tremaine said. "What's this all about?"

"Watch the wall there. My sight grows dim. Tell me what you see."

"It looks like shadows; but what's casting them?"

"Can you discern details?"

"No. It's like somebody waggling their fingers in front of a slide projector."

"The radiation from the star is yet too harsh," Bram muttered. "But now the node draws close. May the High Gods guide my hand!"

A howl rang out, a raw blast of sound. Bram tensed. "What do you see?" he demanded.

"The outlines are sharper. There seem to be other shapes behind the moving ones. It's like looking through a steamy window . . ." Beyond the misty surface Tremaine seemed to see a high narrow chamber, bathed in white light. In the foreground creatures like shadowy caricatures of men paced to and fro. "They're like something stamped out of alligator hide," Tremaine whispered. "When they turn and I see them edge-on, they're thin . . ."

"An effect of dimensional attenuation. They strive now to match matrices with this plane. If they succeed, this earth you know will lie at their feet."

"What are they? Where are they? That's solid rock —"

"What you see is the Niss Command Center. It lies in another world than this, but here is the multihedron of intersection. They bring their harmonic generators to bear here in the hope of establishing an aperture of focus."

"I don't understand half of what you're saying, Bram. And the rest I don't believe. But with this staring me in the face, I'll have to act as though I did."

Suddenly the wall cleared. Like a surface of moulded glass the stone threw back ghostly highlights. Beyond it, the Niss technicians, seen now in sharp detail, worked busily, silently, their faces like masks of ridged red-brown leather. Directly opposite Bram's Repellor, an apparatus like an immense camera with a foot-wide silvered lens stood aimed, a black-clad Niss perched in a saddle atop it. The white light flooded the cave, threw black shadows across the Repellor, face tensed in strain. A glow built in the air around the Niss machine. The alien technicians stood now, staring with tiny bright-red eyes. Long seconds passed. The black-clad Niss gestured suddenly. Another turned to a red-marked knife-switch, pulled. As suddenly as it had cleared, the wall went milky, then dulled to opacity. Bram slumped back, eyes shut, breathing hoarsely.

"Near were they then," he muttered, "I grow weak . . ."

"Let me take over," Tremaine said. "Tell me how."

"How can I tell you? You will not understand."

"Maybe I'll understand enough to get us through the night."

Bram seemed to gather himself. "Very well. This must you know . . .

"I am an agent in the service of the Great World. For centuries we have waged war against the Niss, evil beings who loot the continua. They established an Aperture here, on your Earth. We detected it, and found that a Portal could be set up here briefly. I was dispatched with a crew to counter their move —"

"You're talking gibberish," Tremaine said. "I'll pass the Great World and the continua . . . but what's an Aperture?"

"A point of material contact between the Niss world and this plane of space-time. Through it they can pump this rich planet dry of oxygen, killing it — then emerge to feed on the corpse."

"What's a Portal?"

"The Great World lies in a different harmonic series than do Earth and the Niss World. Only at vast intervals can we set up a Portal of temporary identity as the cycles mesh. We monitor the Niss emanations, and forestall them when we can, now in this plane, now in that."

"I see: denial to the enemy."

"But we were late. Already the multihedron was far advanced. A blinding squall lashed outside the river cave where the Niss had focused the Aperture, and the thunder rolled as the ionization effect was propagated in the atmosphere. I threw my force against the Niss Aperture, but could not destroy it . . . but neither could they force their entry."

"And this was sixty years ago? And they're still at it?"

"You must throw off the illusion of time! To the Niss only a few days have passed. But here — where I spend only minutes from each night in the engagement, as the patterns coincide — it has been long years."

"Why don't you bring in help? Why do you have to work alone?"

"The power required to hold the Portal in focus against the stresses of space-time is tremendous. Even then the cycle is brief. It gave us first a fleeting contact of a few seconds; it was through that that we detected the Niss activity here. The next contact was four days later, and lasted twenty-four minutes — long enough to set up the Repellor. I fought them then . . . and saw that victory was in doubt. Still, it was a fair world; I could not let it go without a struggle. A third identity was possible twenty days later; I elected to remain here until

then, attempt to repel the Niss, then return home at the next contact. The Portal closed, and my crew and I settled down to the engagement.

"The next night showed us in full the hopelessness of the contest. By day, we emerged from where the Niss had focused the Aperture, and explored this land, and came to love its small warm sun, its strange blue sky, its mantle of green . . . and the small humble grass-blades. To us of an ancient world it seemed a paradise of young life. And then I ventured into the town . . . and there I saw such a maiden as the Cosmos has forgotten, such was her beauty . . .

"The twenty days passed. The Niss held their foothold — yet I had kept them back.

"The Portal reopened. I ordered my crew back. It closed. Since then, I have been alone . . ."

"Bram," Miss Carroll said. "Bram . . . you stayed when you could have escaped — and I —"

"I would that I could give you back those lost years, Linda Carroll," Bram said. "I would that we could have been together under a brighter sun than this."

"You gave up your world, to give this one a little time," Tremaine said. "And we rewarded you with a shotgun blast."

"Bram . . . when will the portal open again?"

"Not in my life, Linda Carroll. Not for ten thousand years."

"Why didn't you recruit help?" Tremaine said. "You could have trained someone . . ."

"I tried, at first. But what can one do with frightened rustics? They spoke of witchcraft, and fled."

"But you can't hold out forever. Tell me how this thing works. It's time somebody gave you a break!"

VI

Bram talked for half an hour, while Tremaine listened. "If I should fail," he concluded, "take my place at the Repellor. Place the circlet on your neck. When the wall clears, grip the handles and pit your mind against the Niss. Will that they do not come through. When the thunder rolls, you will know that you have failed."

"All right, I'll be ready. But let me get one thing straight, this Repellor of yours responds to thoughts, is that right? It amplifies them —"

"It serves to focus the power of the mind. But now let us make haste. Soon, I fear, will they renew the attack."

"It will be twenty minutes or so, I think," said Tremaine. "Stay where you are and get some rest."

Bram looked at him, his blue eyes grim under white brows. "What do you know of this matter, young man?"

"I think I've doped out the pattern; I've been monitoring these transmissions for weeks. My ideas seemed to prove out okay the last few nights."

"No one but I in all this world knew of the Niss attack. How could you have analyzed that which you knew not of?"

"Maybe you don't know it, Bram, but this Repellor of yours has been playing hell with our communications. Recently we developed what we thought was a Top Secret project — and you're blasting us off the air."

"This is only a small portable unit, poorly screened," Bram said. "The resonance effects are unpredictable. When one seeks to channel the power of thought —"

"Wait a minute!" Tremaine burst out.

"What is it?" Miss Carroll said, alarmed.

"Hyperwave," Tremaine said. "Instantaneous transmission. And thought. No wonder people had headaches — and nightmares! We've been broadcasting on the same band as the human mind!"

"This 'hyperwave'," Bram said. "You say it is instantaneous?"

"That's supposed to be classified information."

"Such a device is new in the cosmos," Bram said. "Only a protoplasmic brain is known to produce a null-lag excitation state."

Tremaine frowned. "Bram, this Repellor focuses what I'll call thought waves for want of a better term. It uses an interference effect to damp out the Niss harmonic generator. What if we poured more power to the Repellor?"

"No. The power of the mind cannot be amplified —"

"I don't mean amplification; I mean an additional source. I have a hyperwave receiver here. With a little rewiring, it'll act as a transmitter. Can we tie it in?"

Bram shook his head. "Would that I were a technician," he said. "I know only what is required to operate the device."

"Let me take a look," Tremaine said. "Maybe I can figure it out."

"Take care. Without it, we fall before the Niss."

"I'll be careful." Tremaine went to the machine, examined it,

tracing leads, identifying components.

"This seems clear enough," he said. "These would be powerful magnets here; they give a sort of pinch effect. And these are refracting-field coils. Simple, and brilliant. With this idea, we could beam hyperwave —"

"First let us deal with the Niss!"

"Sure." Tremaine looked at Bram. "I think I can link my apparatus to this," he said. "Okay if I try?"

"How long?"

"It shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes."

"That leaves little time."

"The cycle is tightening," Tremaine said. "I figure the next transmissions . . . or attacks . . . will come at intervals of under five minutes for several hours now; this may be the last chance."

"Then try," said Bram.

Tremaine nodded, went to the suitcase, took out tools and a heavy black box, set to work. Linda Carroll sat by Bram's side, speaking softly to him. The minutes passed.

"Okay," Tremaine said. "This unit is ready." He went to the Repellor, hesitated a moment, then turned two nuts and removed a cover.

"We're off the air," he said. "I hope my formula holds."

Bram and Miss Carroll watched silently as Tremaine worked. He strung wires, taped junctions, then flipped a switch on the hyperwave set and tuned it, his eyes on the dials of a smaller unit.

"Nineteen minutes have passed since the last attack," Bram said. "Make haste."

"I'm almost done," Tremaine said.

A sharp cry came from the wall. Tremaine jumped. "What the hell makes those sounds?"

"They are nothing — mere static. But they warn that the harmonic generators are warming." Bram struggled to his feet. "Now comes the assault."

"The shadows!" Miss Carroll cried.

Bram sank into the chair, leaned back, his face pale as wax in the faint glow from the wall. The glow grew brighter; the shadows swam into focus.

"Hurry, James," Miss Carrol said. "It comes quickly."

Bram watched through half-closed eyes. "I must man the Repel-

lor. I . . ." He fell back in the chair, his head lolling.

"Bram!" Miss Carroll cried. Tremaine snapped the cover in place, whirled to the chair, dragged it and its occupant away from the machine, then turned, seized the grips. On the wall the Niss moved in silence, readying the attack. The black-clad figure was visible, climbing to his place. The wall cleared. Tremaine stared across at the narrow room, the gray-clad Niss. They stood now, eyes on him. One pointed. Others erected leathery crests.

Stay out, you ugly devils, Tremaine thought. *Go back, retreat, give up . . .*

Now the blue glow built in a flickering arc across the Niss machine. The technicians stood, staring across the narrow gap, tiny red eyes glittering in the narrow alien faces. Tremaine squinted against the brilliant white light from the high-vaulted Niss Command Center. The last suggestion of the sloping surface of the limestone wall was gone. Tremaine felt a draft stir; dust whirled up, clouded the air. There was an odor of iodine.

Back, Tremaine thought. *Stay back.*

There was a restless stir among the waiting rank of Niss. Tremaine heard the dry shuffle of horny feet against the floor, the whine of the harmonic generator. His eyes burned. As a hot gust swept around him he choked and coughed.

NO! he thought, hurling negation like a weightless bomb. *FAIL! RETREAT!*

Now the Niss moved, readying a wheeled machine, rolling it into place. Tremaine coughed rackingly, fought to draw a breath, blinking back blindness. A deep thrumming started up, grit particles stung his cheek, the backs of his hands. The Niss worked rapidly, their throat gills visibly dilated now in the unaccustomed flood of oxygen . . .

Our oxygen, Tremaine thought. *The looting has started already, and I've failed, and the people of Earth will choke and die . . .*

From what seemed an immense distance, a roll of thunder trembled at the brink of audibility, swelling.

The black-clad Niss on the alien machine half rose, erecting a black-scaled crest, exulting. Then, shockingly, his eyes fixed on Tremaine's, his trap-like mouth gaped, exposing a tongue like a scarlet snake, a cavernous pink throat set with a row of needle-like snow-white teeth. The tongue flicked out, a gesture of utter contempt.

And suddenly Tremaine was cold with deadly rage. *We have a treatment for snakes in this world,* he thought with savage intensity. *We crush 'em under our heels* . . . He pictured a writhing rattler, broken-backed, a club descending; a darting red coral snake, its venom ready, slashed in the blades of a power mower; a cottonmouth, smashed into red ruin by a shotgun blast . . .

BACK SNAKE he thought. *DIE! DIE!*

The thunder faded.

And atop the Niss Generator, the black-clad Niss snapped his mouth shut, crouched.

"DIE!" Tremaine shouted. "Die!"

The Niss seemed to shrink in on himself, shivering. His crest went flaccid, twitched twice. The red eyes winked out and the Niss toppled from the machine. Tremaine coughed, gripped the handles, turned his eyes to a gray-uniformed Niss who scrambled up to replace the operator.

I SAID DIE, SNAKE!

The Niss faltered, tumbled back among his fellows, who darted about now like ants in a broached anthill. One turned red eyes on Tremaine, then scrambled for the red cut-out switch.

NO, YOU DON'T, Tremaine thought. *IT'S NOT THAT EASY, SNAKE, DIE!*

The Niss collapsed. Tremaine drew a rasping breath, blinked back tears of pain, took in a group of Niss in a glance.

Die!

They fell. The others turned to flee then, but like a scythe Tremaine's mind cut them down, left them in windrows. Hate walked naked among the Niss and left none living.

Now the machines. Tremaine thought. He fixed his eyes on the harmonic generator. It melted into slag. Behind it, the high panels set with jewel-like lights blackened, crumpled into wreckage. Suddenly the air was clean again. Tremaine breathed deep. Before him the surface of the rock swam into view.

NO! Tremaine thought thunderously. *HOLD THAT APERTURE OPEN!*

The rock-face shimmered, faded. Tremaine looked into the white-lit room, at the blackened walls, the huddled dead. *No pity,* he thought. *You would have sunk those white teeth into soft human throats, sleeping in the dark . . . as you've done on a hundred worlds.*

You're a cancer in the cosmos. And I have the cure.

WALLS, he thought, *COLLAPSE!*

The roof before him sagged, fell in. Debris rained down from above, the walls tottered, went down. A cloud of roiled dust swirled, cleared to show a sky blazing with stars.

Dust, stay clear, Tremaine thought. *I want good air to breathe for the work ahead.* He looked out across a landscape of rock, ghostly white in the starlight.

LET THE ROCKS MELT AND FLOW LIKE WATER!

An upreared slab glowed, slumped, ran off in yellow rivulets that were lost in the radiance of the crust as it bubbled, belching released gasses. A wave of heat struck Tremaine. *Let it be cool here,* he thought. *Now, Niss world . . .*

"No!" Bram's voice shouted. "Stop, stop!"

Tremaine hesitated. He stared at the vista of volcanic fury before him.

I could destroy it all, he thought. *And the stars in the Niss sky . . .*

"Great is the power of your hate, man of Earth," Bram cried. "But curb it now, before you destroy us all!"

"Why?" Tremaine shouted. "I can wipe out the Niss and their whole diseased universe with them, with a thought!"

"Master yourself," Bram said hoarsely. "Your rage destroys you! One of the suns you see in the Niss sky is your Sol!"

"Sol?" Tremaine said. "Then it's the Sol of a thousand years ago. Light takes time to cross a galaxy. And the earth is still here . . . so it wasn't destroyed!"

"Wise are you," Bram said. "Your race is a wonder in the Cosmos, and deadly is your hate. But you know nothing of the forces you unloose now. Past time is as mutable as the steel and rock you melted but now."

"Listen to him, James," Miss Carroll pleaded. "Please listen."

Tremaine twisted to look at her, still holding the twin grips. She looked back steadily, her head held high. Beside her, Bram's eyes were sunken deep in his lined face.

"Jess said you looked like a princess once, Miss Carroll," Tremaine said, "when you drove past with your red hair piled up high. And Bram: you were young, and you loved her. The Niss took your youth from you. You've spent your life here, fighting them, alone. And Linda Carroll waited through the years, because she loved you . . .

and feared you. The Niss did that. And you want me to spare them?"

"You have mastered them," said Bram. "And you are drunk with the power in you. But the power of love is greater than the power of hate. Our love sustained us; your hate can only destroy."

Tremaine locked eyes with the old man. He drew a deep breath at last, let it out shudderingly. "All right," he said. "I guess the God complex got me." He looked back once more at the devastated landscape. "The Niss will remember this encounter, I think. Thy won't try Earth again."

"You've fought valiantly, James, and won," Miss Carroll said. "Now let the power go."

Tremaine turned again to look at her. "You deserve better than this, Miss Carroll," he said. "Bram, You said time is mutable. Suppose —"

"Let well enough alone," Bram said. "Let it go!"

"Once, long ago, you tried to explain this to Linda Carroll. But there was too much against it; she couldn't understand. She was afraid. And you've suffered for sixty years. Suppose those years had never been. Suppose I had come that night . . . instead of now —"

"It could never be!"

"It can if I will it!" Tremaine gripped the handles tighter. *Let this be THAT night,* he thought fiercely. *The night in* 1901, *when Bram's last contact failed. Let it be that night, five minutes before the portal closed. Only this machine and I remain as we are now; outside there are gas lights in the farm houses along the dirt road to Elsby, and in the town horses stand in the stables along the cinder alleys behind the houses; and President McKinley is having dinner in the White House . . .*

There was a sound behind Tremaine. He whirled. The ravaged was gone. A great disc mirror stood across the cave, intersecting the limestone wall. A man stepped through it, froze at the sight of Tremaine. He was tall, with curly blond hair, fine-chiseled features, broad shoulders.

"Fdazh ha?" he said. Then his eyes slid pat Tremaine, opened still wider in astonishment. Tremaine followed the stranger's glance. A young woman, dressed in a negligee of pale silk, stood in the door, a hairbrush in her hand, her red hair flowing free to her waist. She stood rigid in shock.

Then. . .

"Mr. Bram . . .!" she gasped. "What —"

Tremaine found his voice. "Miss Carroll, don't be afraid," he said. "I'm your friend, you must believe me."

Linda Carroll turned wide eyes to him. "Who are you?" she breathed. "I was in my bedroom —"

"I can't explain. A miracle has been worked here tonight . . . on your behalf." Tremaine turned to Bram. "Look —" he started.

"What man are you?" Bram cut in in heavily accented English. "How do you come to this place?"

"Listen to me, Bram!" Tremaine snapped. "Time is mutable. You stayed here, to protect Linda Carroll — and Linda Carroll's world. You've just made that decision, right?" Tremaine went on, not waiting for a reply. "You were stuck here . . . for sixty years. Earth technology developed fast. One day a man stumbled in here, tracing down the signal from your Repellor; that was me. You showed me how to use the device . . . and with it I wiped out the Niss. And then I set the clock back for you and Linda Carroll. The Portal closes in two minutes. Don't waste time . . ."

"Mutable time?" Bram said. He went past Tremaine to Linda. "Fair lady of Earth," he said. "Do not fear . . ."

"Sir, I hardly know you," Miss Carroll said. "How did I come here, hardly clothed —"

"Take her, Bram!" Tremaine shouted. "Take her and get back through that Portal — fast." He looked at Linda Carroll. "Don't be afraid," he said. "You know you love him; go with him now, or regret it all your days."

"Will you come?" asked Bram. He held out his hand to her. Linda hesitated, then put her hand in his. Bram went with her to the mirror surface, handed her through. He looked back at Tremaine.

"I do not understand, man of Earth," he said. "But I thank you." Then he was gone.

Alone in the dim-lit grotto Tremaine let his hands fall from the grips, staggered to the rocker and sank down. He felt weak, drained of strength. His hands ached from the strain of the ordeal. How long had it lasted? Five minutes? An hour? Or had it happened at all . . .?

But Bram and Linda Carroll were gone. He hadn't imagined that. And the Niss were defeated.

But there was still his own world to contend with. The police would

be waiting, combing through the house. They would want to know what he had done with Miss Carroll. Maybe there would be a murder charge. There'd be no support from Fred and the Bureau. As for Jess, he was probably in a cell now, looking a stiff sentence in the face for obstructing justice . . .

Tremaine got to his feet, cast a last glimpse at the empty room, the outlandish shape of the Repellor, the mirrored portal. It was a temptation to step through it. But this was his world, with all its faults. Perhaps later, when his strength returned, he could try the machine again . . .

The thought appalled him. *The ashes of hate are worse than the ashes of love,* he thought. He went to the stairs, clumbed them, pressed the button. Nothing happened. He pushed the panel aside by hand and stepped into the kitchen. He circled the heavy table with the candlestick, went along the hall and out onto the porch. It was almost the dawn of a fresh spring day. There was no sign of the police. He looked at the grassy lawn, the row of new-set saplings.

Strange, he thought. *I don't remember any saplings. I thought I drove in under a row of trees* . . . He squinted into the misty early morning gloom. His car was gone. That wasn't too surprising; the cops had impounded it, no doubt. He stepped down, glanced at the ground ahead. It was smooth, with a faint footpath cut through the grass. There was no mud, no sign of tire tracks —

The horizon seemed to spin suddenly. *My God!* Tremaine thought. *I've left myself in the year* 1901 . . .!

He whirled, leaped up on the porch, slammed through the door and along the hall, scrambled through the still-open panel, bounded down the stairs and into the cave —

The Repellor was gone. Tremaine leaped forward with a cry — and under his eyes, the great mirror twinkled, winked out. The black box of the hyperwave receiver lay alone on the floor, beside the empty rocker. The light of the kerosene lamp reflected from the featureless wall.

Tremaine turned, stumbled up the steps, out into the air. The sun showed a crimson edge just peeping above distant hills.

1901, Tremaine thought. *The century has just turned. Somewhere a young fellow named Ford is getting ready to put the nation on wheels, and two boys named Wright are about to give it wings. No one ever heard of a World War, or the roaring Twenties, or Prohibi-*

tion, or FDR, or the Dust Bowl, or Pearl Harbor. And Hiroshima and Nagasaki are just two cities in distant floral Japan.

He walked down the path, stood by the rutted dirt road. Placid cows nuzzled damp grass in the meadow beyond it. In the distance a train hooted.

There are railroads, Tremaine thought. *But no jet planes, no radio, no movies, no automatic dish-washers. But then there's no TV either. That makes up for a lot. And there are no police waiting to grill me, and no neurotic nest of bureaucrats waiting to welcome me back . . .*

He drew a deep breath. The air was sweet. *I'm here,* he thought. *I feel the breeze on my face and the firm sod underfoot. It's real, and it's all there is now, so I might as well take it calmly. After all, a man with my education ought to be able to do well in this day and age!*

Whistling, Tremaine started the ten-mile walk into town. END

FRITZ LEIBER

X Marks the Pedwalk

Based in material in Ch. 7 — "First Clashes of the Wheeled and Footed Sects" — of Vol. 3 of Burger's monumental *History of Traffic,* published by the Foundation for Twenty-Second Century Studies.

The raggedy little old lady with the big shopping bag was in the exact center of the crosswalk when she became aware of the big black car bearing down on her.

Behind the thick bullet-proof glass its seven occupants had a misty look, like men in a diving bell.

She saw there was no longer time to beat the car to either curb. Veering remorselessly, it would catch her in the gutter.

Useless to attempt a feint and double-back, such as any venturesome child executed a dozen time a day. Her reflexes were too slow.

Polite vacuous laughter came from the car's loudspeaker over the engine's mounting roar.

From her fellow pedestrians lining the curbs came a sigh of horror.

The little old lady dipped into her shopping bag and came up with a big blue-black automatic. She held it in both fists, riding the recoils like a rodeo cowboy on a bucking bronco.

Aiming at the base of the windshield, just as a big-game hunter aims at the vulnerable spine of a charging water buffalo over the horny armor of its lowered head, the little old lady squeezed off three shots before the car chewed her down.

From the right-hand curb a young woman in a wheelchair shrieked an obscenity at the car's occupants.

Smythe-de Winter, the driver, wasn't happy. The little old lady's last shot had taken two members of his car pool. Bursting through the laminated glass, the steel-jacketed slug had traversed the neck of Phipps-McHeath and buried itself in the skull of Horvendile-Harker.

Braking vi[illegible]usly, Smythe-de Winter rammed the car over the

ight-hand curb. Pedestrians scattered into entries and narrow ar-:ades, among them a youth bounding high on crutches.

But Smythe-de Winter got the girl in the wheelchair.

Then he drove rapidly out of the Slum Ring into the Suburbs, a shred of rattan swinging from the flange of his right fore mudguard for a trophy. Despite the two-for-two casualty list, he felt angry and depressed. The secure, predictable world around him seemed to be crumbling.

While his companions softly keened a dirge to Horvy and Phipps and quietly mopped up their blood, he frowned and shook his head.

"They oughtn't to let old ladies carry magnums," he murmured.

Witherspoon-Hobbs nodded agreement across the front-seat corpse. "They oughtn't let 'em carry anything. God, how I hate Feet," he muttered, looking down at his shrunken legs. "Wheels forever!" he softly cheered.

The incident had immediate repercussions throughout the city. At the combined wake of the little old lady and the girl in the wheelchair, a fiery-tongued speaker inveighed against the White-Walled Fascists of Suburbia, telling to his hearers, the fabled wonders of old Los Angeles, where pedestrians were sacroscant, even outside crosswalks. He called for a hobnail march across the nearest lawn-bowling alleys and perambulator-traversed golf courses of the motorists.

At the Sunnyside Crematorium, to which the bodies of Phipps and Horvy had been conveyed, an equally impassioned and rather more grammatical orator reminded his listeners of the legendary justice of old Chicago, where pedestrians were forbidden to carry small arms and anyone with one foot off the sidewalk was fair prey. He broadly hinted that a holocaust, primed if necessary with a few tankfuls of gasoline, was the only cure for the Slums.

Bands of skinny youths came loping at dusk out of the Slum Ring into the innermost sections of the larger doughnut of the Suburbs slashing defenseless tires, shooting expensive watchdogs and scrawling filthy words on the pristine panels of matrons' runabouts which never ventured more than six blocks from home.

Simultaneously squadrons of young suburban motorcycles and scooterites roared through the outermost precincts of the Slum Ring, harrying children off sidewalks, tossing stink-bombs through second-story tenement windows and defacing hovel-fronts with paint.

Incident — a thrown brick, a cut corner, monster tacks in the portico of the Auto Club — were even reported from the center of the city, traditionally neutral territory.

The Government hurriedly acted, suspending all traffic between the Center and the Suburbs and establishing a 24-hour curfew in the Slum Ring. Government agents moved only by centipede-car and pogo-hopper to underline the point that they favored neither contending side.

The day of enforced non-movement for Feet and Wheels was spent in furtive vengeful preparations. Behind locked garage doors, machine-guns that fired through the nose ormnament were mounted under hoods, illegal scythe blades were welded to oversize hubcaps and the stainless steel edges of flange fenders were honed to razor sharpness.

While nervous National Guardsmen hopped about the deserted sidewalks of the Slum Ring, grim-faced men and women wearing black arm-bands moved through the webwork of secret tunnels and hidden doors, distributing heavy-caliber small arms and spike-studded paving blocks, piling cobblestones on strategic rooftops and sapping upward from the secret tunnels to create car-traps. Children got ready to soap intersections after dark. The Committee of Pedestrian Safety, sometimes known as Robespierre's Rats, prepared to release its two carefully hoarded anti-tank guns.

At nightfall, under the tireless urging of the Government, representatives of the Pedestrians and the Motorists met on a huge safety island at the boundary of the Slum Ring and the Suburbs.

Underlings began a noisy dispute as to whether Smythe-de Winter had failed to give a courtesy honk before charging, whether the little old lady had opened fire before the car had come within honking distance, how many wheels of Smythe-de's car had been on the sidewalk when he hit the girl in the wheelchair and so on. After a little while the High Pedestrian and the Chief Motorist exchanged cautious winks and drew aside.

The red writhing of a hundred kerosene flares and the mystic yellow pulsing of a thousand firefly lamps mounted on yellow sawhorses ranged around the safety island illumined two tragic, strained faces.

"A word before we get down to business," the Chief Motorist whispered. "What's the current S.Q. of your adults?"

"Forty-one and dropping," the High Pedestrian replied, his eyes fearfully searching from side to side for eavesdroppers. "I can hardly get aides who are halfway *compos mentis*."

"Our own Sanity Quotient is thirty-seven," the Chief Motorist revealed. He shrugged helplessly. "The wheels inside my people's heads are slowing down. I do not think they will be speeded up in my lifetime."

"They say Government's only fifty-two," the other said with a matching shrug.

"Well, I suppose we must scrape out one more compromise," the one suggested hollowly, "though I must confess there are times when I think we're all the figments of a paranoid's dream."

Two hours of concentrated deliberations produced the new Wheel-Foot Articles of Agreement. Among other points, pedestrian handguns were limited to a slightly lower muzzle velocity and to .38 caliber and under, while motorists were required to give three honks at one block distance before charging a pedestrian in a crosswalk. Two wheels over the curb changed a traffic kill from third-degree manslaughter to petty homicide. Blind pedestrians were permitted to carry hand grenades.

Immediately the Government went to work. The new Wheel-Foot Articles were loudspeakered and posted. Detachments of police and psychiatric social hoppers centipedaled and pogoed through the Slum Ring, seizing outsize weapons and giving tranquilizing jet-injections to the unruly. Teams of hypnotherapists and mechanics scuttled from home to home in the Suburbs and from garage to garage, in-chanting a conformist serenity and stripping illegal armament from cars. On the advice of a rogue psychiatrist, who said it would channel off aggressions, a display of bull-fighting was announced, but this had to be cancelled when a strong protest was lodged by the Decency League, which had a large mixed Wheel-Foot membership.

At dawn, curfew was lifted in the Slum Ring and traffic reopened between the Suburbs and the Center.

After a few uneasy moments it became apparent that the *status quo* had been restored.

Smythe-de Winter tooled his gleaming black machine along the Ring. A thick steel bolt with a large steel washer on either side neatly filled the hole the little old lady's slug had made in the windshield.

A brick bounced off the roof. Bullets pattered against the side windows.

Smythe-de Winter ran a handkerchief around his neck under his collar and smiled.

A block ahead children were darting into the street, cat-calling and thumbing their noses. Behind one of them limped a fat dog with a spiked collar.

Smythe-de suddenly gunned his motor. He didn't hit any of the children, but he got the dog.

A flashing light on the dash showed him the right front tire was losing pressure. Must have hit the collar as well. He thumbed the matching emergency-air button and the flashing stopped.

He turned toward Witherspoon-Hobbs and said with thoughtful satisfaction, "I like a normal orderly world, where you always have a little success, but not champagne-heady; a little failure, but just enough to brace you."

Witherspoon-Hobbs was squinting at the next crosswalk. Its center was discolored by a brownish stain ribbon-tracked by tires.

"That's where you bagged the little old lady, Smythe-de," he remarked. "I'll say this for her now: she had spirit."

"Yes, that's where I bagged her," Smythe-de agreed flatly. He remembered wistfully the witchlike face growing rapidly larger, the jerking shoulders in black bombazine, the wild white-circled eyes. He suddenly found himself feeling that this was a very dull day.

END

BRIAN W. ALDISS

The Impossible Star

I

When conditions veer away from normal, human reason tends to slip into madness.

Eddy Sharn looked at the sentence in his notebook and found it clutched tight to his chest, so that Malravin could not see what he wrote. "Tends to slip into madness," he particularly liked; the "tends" had a note of scientific detachment about it, the "madness" suggested something altogether more wild than "insanity". Which was appropriate, since they were a scientific detachment out in the wilds.

He was still savoring his little joke when the noises began in the hatch.

Malravin and Sharn exchanged glances. Malravin jerked his head towards the hatch.

"You hear that fool Dominguey? He makes all that noise on purpose, so that we'll know he's coming. What a big-headed joker to choose for a captain!"

"You can't help making a noise in that hatch," Sharn said. "It was badly designed. They missed out on the soundproofing and the noise carries round in the air circuits. Besides, they're both in there making a noise. Jim Baron's with him."

He spoke pleasantly enough, but of course Malravin's had been a loaded remark. The great Siberian oaf knew that among the four antagonisms that had sprang up between the four men on the ship, some sort of an alliance had grown between Sharn and Dominguey.

The hatch opened, and the other members of the crew of the *Wilson* entered and began to remove their bulky suits. Neither Malravin nor Sharn moved to help them. Dominguey and Baron helped each other.

Bill Dominguey was a striking young man, dark and sinewy, with a wonderfully gloomy cavern of a face that could break into laughter when anyone responded to his peculiar sense of fun. Jim Baron was another doleful-looking type, a little compact man with a crew-cut and solid cheeks that had turned red from his exertions outside.

He eyed Sharn and Malravin and said, "Well, you'd better get your sacks on and go out and have a look at it. You won't grasp its full impact until you do."

"It's a real little education, Jim, isn't it?" Dominguey agreed. "A higher education — I just wish they hadn't "highered" to me to get it."

Baron put his arms out with his fingers extended and touched the plastic of the bulkheads. He closed his eyes.

"I didn't think I'd ever make it back into here, Billy. I'm sorry if I went a bit —"

Quickly Dominguey said, "Yes, it's good to be back in the ship. With the artificial half-Gee being maintained in here, and the shutters down, this dump seems less like a cast-off version of hell, doesn't it?" He took Bishop's arm and led him to a chair. Sharn watched curiously; he had not seen the stolid and unimaginative Baron so wild-eyed before.

"But the weight business," Baron was saying, "I thought — well, I don't know what I thought. There's no rational way of putting it. I thought my body was disintegrating. I —"

"Jim, you're over-excited," Dominguey said harshly. "Keep quiet or give yourself a sedative." He turned to the other two men. "I want you two to get outside right away. There's nothing there that can harm you. We're down on a minor planet, by the looks of things. But before we can evaluate the situation, I want you to check what that situation is — as soon as possible."

"Did you establish the spectroscopes? Did you get any readings?" Sharn asked. He was not keen to go outside.

"They're still out there. Get your suit on, Eddy. You too, Ike; go and look at them. Jim and I will get a bit to eat. We set the instruments up and we left 'em out there on the rock, pointing at Big Bertha. But they don't give any readings. Not any readings that make sense."

"For God's sake, you must have got something. We checked out all the gear before you carted it outside."

"If you don't believe us, you get out there and have a goddamned good look for yourself, Sharn," Baron said.

"Don't shout at me, Baron!"

"Well, take that sick look off your face. Billy and me have done our stint — now you two get outside as Billy says. Take a walk around as we did. Take your time. We've got plenty of that till the drive is mended."

Malravin said, "I'd prefer to get on straightening out the coil. No point in me going out there. My job is in the ship."

"I'm not going out there alone, Ike, so don't try to worm out of it," Sharn said. "We agreed that we should go out there when these two came back."

"*If* we came back — conquering heroes that we are," Dominguey corrected. "You might have had a meal ready to celebrate our return, Eddy."

"We're on half rations, if you remember."

"I try never to remember a nasty fact like that," Dominguey said good-humoredly.

A preoccupation with food signifies a childish nature, Eddy thought. He must write that down later.

After more quarreling, Sharn and Malravin climbed into their suits and headed for the hatch.

They knew roughly what they would see outside. They had seen enough from the ship's port before they had agreed to close down all the shutters. But to view it from outside was psychologically a very different matter.

"One thing," Baron called to them. "Watch out for the atmosphere. It has an annoying way of wandering."

"There can't be an atmosphere on a planetoid this size!" Sharn protested.

Baron came up to him and peered through the helmet at him. His cheeks were still hectically flushed, his eyes wild.

"Look, clever dick, get this into your head! We've arrived in some ghastly hole in the universe where the ordinary physical laws don't apply. This place can't exist, and Big Bertha can't exist. Yet they do! You're very fond of paradoxes — well, now one has gobbled you up. Just get out there quickly, and you won't come back in as cocky as you are now."

"You love to blow your mouth off, Baron. It didn't do you much

good out there. I thought you were going to die of fright."

Dominguey said urgently, "Hey, you sweet fellows! Stop it. I warn you, Eddy, Jim is right. You'll see when you get outside. In this bit of heaven, the universe is horribly out of joint."

"So will someone's nose be," Sharn promised.

He tramped into the hatch with Malravin. The burly Siberian thumbed the sunken toggle switches on the panel, and the airlock sank down to ground level, its atmosphere exhausting as it went.

They unsealed the door and stepped out onto the rough surface of the planetoid Captain Dominguey had sardonically christened Erewon.

They stood with the doughnut shape of the *Wilson* on stilts behind them and tried to adjust to the prospect. If anything, they seemed to weigh slightly more than they had in the ship's artificially maintained half-Gee field, although the bulk of their suits made this hard to tell.

At first it was difficult to see anything.

It always remained difficult to see anything well.

They stood on a tiny plain. The distance of the horizon was impossible to judge in the weird light. It seemed never more than a hundred yards away in any direction. It was distorted; this seemed to be because the plain was irregular. High banks, broken hollows, jagged lips of rock formed the landscape, the features running higgledy-piggledy in a way that baffled sense. There was no sign of the atmosphere Baron had mentioned. The stars came down to the skyline and were sharply occulted by it.

With the claw hands of their suits touching, the two men began to walk forward. They could see Baron's instruments standing deserted a short way off, and instinctively moved towards them. There was no need for light; the entire bowl of the sky was awash with a thick sprinkle of stars.

II

The *Wilson* was a deep-penetration cartographic ship. With two sister ships, it was the first such vessel to venture into the heart of the Crab Nebula. There, weaving its way among the endless abysses of interstellar dust, it lost contact with the *Brinkdale* and the *Grandon*. The curtains of uncreated matter closed in on them, baffling even the subradio.

They went on. As they went, the concepts of space they had once held were erased. This was a domain of light and matter, not of emptiness and dark. All about them were coils of smoke — smoke set with sequins! — and cliffs of shimmering dust, the surface of which they could not have explored in two lifetimes. At the beginning the four men were elated at the sheer magnificence of the new environment. Later, the magnificence seemed not beauty but of annihilation.

It was too big. They were too insignificant. The four men retreated into silence.

But the ship continued on its course, for they had their orders, and their honor, and their pay. According to plan, the *Wilson* sank into the heart of the nebula. The instrumentation had developed an increasing fault, until it became folly to go further, but fortunately they had then come to a region less tightly packed with stars and star matter. Beyond that was space, light-years across, entirely free of physical bodies — except one.

They found soon enough that it was no stroke of fortune to be here. Swilling in the middle of the gigantic hole in space was the phenomenon they christened Big Bertha.

It was too big. It was impossible. But the instruments ceased to be reliable; without instruments, human senses were useless there. Already bemused by travel, they were ill-equipped to deal with Big Bertha. To add to their troubles, the directional cyboscope that governed the jets in the ship's equator broke down and became unreliable.

They took the only course open to them. They landed on the nearest possible body, to rest there while they did a repair job and re-establish contact with their sister ships.

The nearest possible body happened to be Erewon.

Touchdown on Erewon had been a little miracle, accomplished with few other instruments than human eyes, human hands and a string of human blasphemies. The hammer of static radiated by Big Bertha rendered radio, radar and radix all ineffective.

Now the sky was a wonder painful to view. Everywhere were the glittering points of stars, everywhere the immense plumes and shawls of inchoate matter illuminated by starshine. Yet it was all far away, glittering beyond the gravitational pull of Bertha. In her domain, only the wretched planetoid the *Wilson* rested on seemed to exist.

"Gravitation can be felt not only in the muscles but in the thalamus. It is a power of darkness, perhaps the ultimate power."

"What's that?" Malravin asked, startled.

"I was thinking aloud." Embarrassed, Sharn added, "Bertha will rise in a minute, Ike. Are you ready for it?"

They stopped by the pathetic cluster of instruments. They just stood there, rooted to the spot with a tension that could not be denied. Bertha had already begun to rise.

Their eyes were bad judges of what happened next, even with the infra-red screens pulled down over their faceplates. But they partly saw — and partly they felt, for a tidal sensation crawled across their bodies.

Above the eastern horizon, a section of the star field began to melt and sag. Star after star, cluster after cluster, uncountably stratified and then wavered and ran towards the horizon like ill-applied paint trickling down a wall. As if in sympathy, distortion also seized the bodies of Sharn and Malravin.

"An illusion! An optical illusion," Malravin said, raising a hand to the melting line of stars. "Gravity bending light. But I've — Eddy, I've got something in my suit with me. Let's get back to the ship."

Sharn could not reply. He fought silently with something inside his own suit, something closer to him than his muscles.

Where the stars flowed, something was lumbering up over the horizon, a great body sure of its strength, rising powerfully from its grave, thrusting up now a shoulder, now a torso into the visible.

That was Bertha. The two men sank clumsily to their knees.

Whatever it was, it was gigantic. It occupied about twenty degrees of arc. It climbed above the horizon — but more and more of it kept coming, and it seemed to expand as it came. It rose tall, swallowing the sky as it rose.

Its outline indicated that it was spherical, though the outline was not distinct. The wavering bands of starlight rendered it impossible to see properly.

The sensation in Sharn's body had changed. He felt lighter now, and more comfortable. The feeling that he was wearing someone else's body had disappeared. In its place had come an odd lopsidedness. Drained, he could only peer up at the disturbance.

Whatever it was, it ate the sky. It did not radiate light. Yet

what could be seen of it was clearly not seen by reflected light. It darkled in the sky.

"It — emits black light," Sharn said. "Is it alive, Ike?"

"It's going to crush us," Ike said. He turned to crawl back to the ship, but at that instant the atmosphere hit them.

Sharn had drawn his gaze away from that awesome monster in space to see what Malravin was doing, so that he saw the atmosphere arrive. He put a claw up to shield his face as it hit.

The atmosphere came up over the horizon after Bertha. It came in long strands, traveling fast. With it came sound, a whisper that grew to a shriek that shrilled inside their faceplates. At first the vapor was no more than a confusion in the gloom, but as it thickened it became visible as drab gray cloud. There were electrical side-effects, too. Corposants glowed along the ridges of rock about them. The cloud rose rapidly, engulfing them like an intangible sea.

Sharn found he was on his knees beside Malravin. They both had their headlights on now, and headed for the ship in a rapid shuffle. It was hard going. That lopsided effect spoiled the instinctive placing of their limbs.

Once they were touching the metal of the *Wilson*'s airlock, some of the panic left them. Both men stood up, breathing heavily. The level of the grayish gas had risen above their heads. Sharn moved out from under the bulk of the *Wilson* and looked into the sky. Bertha was still visible through haze.

It was evident that Erewon had a rapid rotation speed. The monstrous black disk was already almost at zenith. Surrounded by a halo of distorted starglow, it lowered over the little ship like a millstone about to fall. Hesitantly, Sharn put up his hand to see if he could touch it.

Malravin tugged at his arm.

"There's nothing there," he said. "It's impossible. It's the sort of thing you see in a dream. And how do you feel now? Very light now, as in a dream! It's just a nightmare, and you'll —"

"You're talking bloody nonsense, Malravin. You're trying to escape into madness if you pretend it isn't there. You wait till it falls down and crushes us all flat into the rock — then you'll see whether it's a dream or not!"

Malravin broke from him and ran to the airlock. He opened the door and climbed in, beckoning to Sharn.

Sharn stood where he was, laughing. The other's absurd notion, so obviously a product of fear, had set Sharn into a high good humor. He did — Malravin was right there — feel much lighter than he had. It made him light-headed.

"Challenge," he said. "Challenge and response. The whole history of life can be related in those terms. That must go into the book. Those that do not respond go to the wall."

"It's some sort of a nightmare, Eddy! What is that thing up there? It's no sun! Come in here, for God's sake!" Malravin called from the safety of the airlock.

"You fool! This is no dream or I'd be a figment of it — and you know that's nonsense. You're losing your head, that's all."

In his contempt for Malravin, he turned his back on the man and began to stride over the plain. Each stride took him a long, floating way. He switched off his intercom, and at once the fellow's voice was cut out of existence. In the helmet fell a perfect peace.

He found he was not afraid to look up at the lumbering beast in the sky.

"Put anything into words, and it loses that touch of tabu to which fear attaches. That object is a thing overhead. It may be some sort of a physical body. It may be some sort of a whirlpool operating in space in a way we do not yet understand. It may be an effect in space itself, caused by the stresses in the heart of a nebula: there must be all sorts of unexpected pressures here. So I put the thing into words, and it ceases to worry me."

He had got only to chapter four in the autobiography he was writing. But he saw that it would be necessary at some point of the book — perhaps at the focal point of the book — to explain what prompted a man to go into deep space, and what sustained him when he got there. This experience on Erewon was valuable, an intellectual experience as much as anything. It would be something to recall in the years to come — if that beast did not fall and squash him. It was leaping at him, directly overhead.

Again he was down full length, yelling into the dead microphone. He was too light to nuzzle properly, heavily, deeply into the ground; and he cried his dismay till the helmet rang with sound.

He stopped the noise abruptly.

"Got dizzy," he told himself. He shut his eyes, squeezing up his face to do so. "Don't relax your control over yourself, Ed. Think of those fools in the ship, how they'd laugh. Remember nothing can

hurt a man who has enough resilience."

He opened his eyes. The next thing would be to get up.

The ground was moving beneath him. For a while he stared fascinated at it. A light dust of grit and sand crawled over the solid rock at an unhurried but steady pace. He put his metal claw into it, and it piled against the barrier like water against a dam. Must be quite a wind blowing, Sharn told himself. Looking along the ground, he saw the particles trundled slowly towards the west. The western horizon was veiled in the cloud-like atmosphere. Into it the great grinding shape of Big Bertha was sinking at a noticeable rate.

Now other fears overcame him. He saw Erewon for what it was, a fragment of rock twirling over and over. He — the ship — the others — they clung to this bit of rock like flies, and — and —

No, that was something he couldn't face, not alone out here.

Something else occurred to him. Planetoids as small as Erewon did not possess atmospheres. So this atmosphere had been something else fairly recently. He saw it as an ice casing, embalming the rock.

Suddenly, more than irrational fear made him want to run. There was a logical reason as well. He switched on his mike and began to shout as he stumbled back towards the ship: "I'm coming back, fellers, open up. Open up, I'm coming!"

III

Some of the drive casing was off. Malravin's feet protruded from the cluttered cavity. He was in there with an arc lamp, still patiently working on the directional cyboscope.

The other three sat round in bucket seats, talking. Sharn had changed his clothes, toweled himself down and had a hot cup of Stimulous. Baron and the captain smoked mescahales.

"We've established that Erewon's period of rotation is two hours, five minutes odd," Dominguey told Sharn. "That gives us about an hour of night when the ship is shielded from Big Bertha by the bulk of the planetoid. Sunset of the night after next will fall just before twenty hours, Galactic Mean. At twenty hours, all governmental ships keep open listen for distress signals. Shielded from Bertha's noise, we stand our best chance of contacting the *Grandon* and the *Brinkdale* then. There's hope for us yet!"

Sharn nodded. Baron said, "You're too much the optimist, Billy. Nobody can ever get to rescue us." He spoke in an amused, confident tone.

"How's that again?"

"I said nobody can ever reach us, man. Consider it like this. We left ordinary space behind when we started burrowing into the nebula to get here. We agree that there's nowhere else like this place in the universe —"

"No, we don't," Dominguey said. "We agree that in less than eleven hundred years of galactic exploration we have covered only a small section of one arm of one galaxy. We don't know enough as yet to be capable of labeling an unusual situation unique . . . though I'll agree it's a poor spot for a picnic. Now, you were saying?"

"Don't try and be funny, Billy. This is no place for humor — not even graveyard humor." Baron smiled as if the remark had a significance only he knew. He gestured with one hand, gracefully. "We are in a place that cannot possibly exist. That monstrous thing up in space cannot be a sun or any known body, or we would have got a spectroscopic reading from it. It cannot be a totally dead sun, or we would not see it as we do. This planetoid cannot be a planetoid for in reality it would be so near Bertha it would be swept into it by irrestistible gravitational forces. You were right to call it Erewon. That's what it is — Nowhere."

Sharn spoke. "You're playing with Malravin's silly theory, Baron. You're pretending we are in a nightmare. Let me assure you such assumptions are based entirely on withdrawal —".

"I don't want to hear!" Baron said. The smile on his lips became gentler. "You wouldn't understand, Sharn. You are so clever you prefer to tell me what I think, rather than hear what I think. But I'm going to tell you what I think. I don't think we are undergoing a nightmare . . . I think we are dead."

Sharn rose, and began pacing behind his seat.

"Dominguey, you don't think this?"

"I don't feel dead."

"Good. Keep feeling that way — or we're going to be in trouble. You know what the matter is with Baron: he's a weak character. He has always supported himself with the methods of science. We've had nothing but a diet of facts from him for the last thousand light-years. Now he thinks science has failed him. There's nothing

else left. He can no longer face the physical world. So, he comes to this emotional conclusion that he is dead. Classic withdrawal symptoms."

Dominguey said, "Someone ought to kick your tail, Eddy Sharn. Of all the glib and conceited idiots I ever met! At least Jim has come out with an idea. It's not so far fetched at that, when you consider we know nothing about what happens after death. Try to visualize the period after heart action has ceased, when the body, and particularly the brain inside its skull case, still retains its warmth. What goes on then? Suppose in that period of time everything in the brain drains away into nothing like a bucket of water leaking into sand. Don't you think some pretty vivid and hallucinatory things would happen inside that head? And, after all, the sort of events happening to us now are typical of the sort that might occur to us in that dying period. Maybe we ran smack into a big chunk of dead matter on our way into the Crab. Okay, we're all dead. The strong feeling of helplessness we all have is a token of the fact that we are really strewn over the control cabin with the walls caved in."

Lazily clapping his hands, Baron said, "You put it even better than I could have put it myself, Billy."

"Don't think I believe what I am saying though," Dominguey said grimly. "You know me, laddy. Ever the funny man, even to death."

He stood up and confronted Sharn.

"What I am trying to say, Eddy, is that you are too fond of your own opinions. I know the way your mind works. You're much happier in any situation if you can make yourself believe that the other people involved are inferior to you. Now then, if you have a theory that helps us tackle this particular section of hell, Jim and I would be pleased to hear it."

"Give me a mescahale," Sharn said. He had heard such outbursts from the captain before, and attributed them to Dominguey's being less stable than he liked to pretend he was. Dominguey would be dangerous in a crisis.

Not that this was less than a crisis.

Sharn accepted the yellow cylinder, activated it, stuck it into his mouth and sat down. Dominguey sat down beside him, regarding him with interest. They both smoked in silence.

"Begin then, Eddy. It's time we took a quick sleep, the lot of

us. We're all exhausted. It's beginning to show."

"On you maybe, Dominguey." He turned to Baron, languidly sunk in his chair.

"Are you listening, Baron?"

Baron nodded his head without looking up.

"Go ahead. Don't mind me."

Things would be so much simpler if one were a robot, Sharn thought. Personalities would not be involved.

Any difficulty has to be situation plus character. It's bad enough to be burdened with one's own character; one that has to put up with other people's as well. He pulled out his little notebook to write the thought down, saw Dominguey was eyeing him and began to speak abruptly.

"What's your silly fuss about? We're here to do a job of observation — why not do it? Before Ike and I went outside, you told us to watch for the atmosphere. I did just that; but from the nonsense you talk about being dead I'd say you were the ones who should have watched it. And this peculiar bodily sensation. You let it rattle you. So did Ike — so did I — but it doesn't take much knowledge to realize that the horrible sensation as if something was climbing about inside the suit with you has a rational and obvious explanation."

Baron got up and walked away.

"Come back when I'm talking, Baron!" Sharn said, angrily.

"I'm going to see how Malravin is getting on. Then I'm going to bunk down. If you have anything interesting to say, Billy can give it to me in a nutshell later. Your doubletalk holds nothing for me. I'm tired of your speeches."

"Tired? When you're dead? Needing to bunk down? When you're dead?"

"Leave him, for God's sake, and get on with what you are saying," Dominguey said with a yawn. "Look, Eddy, we're in a nasty spot here. I don't just mean stuck on Erewon, though that's bad enough. But much more getting on each other's nerves and there will be murder done. I'd say you were turning into a very good candidate for the axe."

"You toying with the idea of murder, Dominguey? I suppose that could be another refuge from the realities of the position."

"Knock off that line of talk, Sharn! That's an order. You were

talking about this strange bodily sensation we felt out on the rock. Don't be so coy about it. It's caused by the fact that most of our weight out there comes by courtesy of Big Bertha, not Erewon. Your mass orients itself partly according to where Bertha is, and not according to the body you are standing on. Of course it causes some odd sensations, particularly with respect to your proprioceptors and the balances in your inner ear. When the sun first rises, your intellect has to fight your body out of its tendency to regard the east as down. When the sun's overhead, the situation's not so bad; but your mass will always act as a compass, as it were, tending towards the sun — if Bertha is a sun. Have I taken the words out of your mouth?"

Sharn nodded.

"Since you're so smart, Billy, you've probably worked out that Bertha is a star. A big star. A star, that is, with an abnormally large mass. And I do mean abnormally — it's got a unique chance to grow here. It has gorging on bulk from the nebula. Its mass must be something above twenty-five million times the mass of Sol."

Dominguey whistled. "A pretty tall order! Though I see it is well placed for stellar growth processes. So you think it is just a gigantic accumulation of dead matter?"

"Not at all. There's no such thing as dead matter in that sense. Baron's the scientist — he'd tell you, if he wasn't heading for catatonia. You get such a mass of material together and terrific pressures are set up. No, I'm saying Bertha is a tremendous live sun built from dead nebular matter."

"That's all nonsense, though, Eddy. We don't even see it properly except as a shimmering blackness. If your theory were correct, Bertha would be a white giant. We'd all be scorched out of existence, sitting here so close to it."

"No, you're forgetting your elementary relativity. I've worked this out. This is no fool hypothesis. I said Bertha had twenty-five million times Sol's mass for a good reason: because if you have a sun that big, the force of gravity at its surface is so colossal that even light cannot escape off into space."

Dominguey put his mescahale down and stared at the nearest bulkhead with his mouth open.

"By the saints . . . Eddy, could that be so? What follows from that? I mean, is there any proof?"

"There's the visible distortion of distant starlight by Bertha's bulk that gives you some idea of the gravitational forces involved. And the inteferometer offers some guide. It's still working; I used it out on the surface before I came back aboard. Why didn't you try it? I suppose you and Baron panicked out there, as Malravin did? Bertha has an angular diameter of twenty-two degrees of arc. If the mass is as I say, then you can reckon on its diameter in miles. Should be 346 times the sun's, or about some 300 million miles. That's presuming a lot, I know, but it gives us a rough guide. And from there a spot of trig will tell you how far we are from Bertha. I make it something less than one billion six hundred million miles. You know what that means? We're as far from Bertha as Uranus is from Sol, which with a body of Bertha's size means we're very nearly on top of it!"

"Now you're beginning to frighten me," Dominguey said. He looked frightened, dark skin stretched over his cheekbones as he pressed his temples with his fingertips. Behind them, Baron and Malravin were quarreling. Baron had tripped over the other's foot as he lay with his head in the drive box, and they were having a swearing match. Neither Dominguey nor Sharn paid them any attention.

"No, there's one hole in your theory," Dominguey finally said.

"Such as?"

"Such as if Erewon was as close as that to its primary, it could never hold its orbit. It would be drawn into Bertha.

Sharn stared at the captain, mulling over his answer. Life was a misery, but there was always some pleasure to be wrung from the misery.

"I got the answer to that when I was outside rolling on the sterile stinking rockface," he said. "The vapor came pouring over the ground at me. I knew Erewon was to small to retain any atmosphere for any length of time. In fact, it was diffusing into space fast. Therefore, not so long ago, that atmosphere was lying in hollows on the surface, liquid. Follow me?"

Dominguey swallowed and said, "Go on."

"*You* made the assumption that Erewon bore a planetary relationship to Bertha, Dominguey. You were wrong. Erewon is spinning in from a colder region. The rocks are heating up. We haven't settled on a planetoid — we're squatting on a hunk of rock spiraling rapidly into the sun."

IV

There came the sound of a blow, and Malravin grunted. He jumped at Baron and the two men clinched, pummeling each other's backs rather foolishly. Dominguey and Sharn ran up and pulled them apart. Dead or not, Baron was giving a fair account of himself.

"All right," Dominguey said angrily. "So we've run ourselves ragged. We need sleep. You three bunk down, give yourselves sedatives. I'll get on fixing the cybo, Malravin. Set the alarm signal for nineteen hours fifty, G.M., so that we don't miss calling *Grandon* and *Brinkdale,* and bunk down. We want to get out of here — and we *all* want to get out of here. Go on, move! You too, Eddy. Your theory has me convinced. We're leaving as soon as possible, so I'm having peace while I work."

In turn they all protested, but Dominguey was not to be overruled. He stood with his hands on his hips, his dark face unmoving as they climbed into their bunks. Then he shrugged, set the alarm on the communication panel and crawled into the drive compartment.

He picked up the tools and started working.

It was not a matter of simple replacement. Fortunately they had spares for the little sinecells which studded the main spiral of the cyboscope that steered the ship. But the spiral itself had become warped by the extra strains placed on it during their penetration of the nebula. Malravin had drained its oil bath and removed its casing, but the business of setting it back into true was a slow precision job, not made easier by the awkard angle at which it had to be tackled.

Time passed . . .

Dominguey was listening to the sound of his own heavy breathing when the alarm bell shrilled.

He crawled out into the cabin. Sharn and Malravin were already rousing and stretching.

"That's four hours hard grind I just put in," he said, pushing his words through a yawn. "Eddy, see if you can raise the other ships, will you? I must have a drink and get some shuteye. We're nearly set to blast off."

Then he saw Baron, his ashen face, the crimson stain over his chest.

In two steps Dominguey was over to his bunk. Baron lay contorted on his left side, gripping a handful of blanket. He was dead, with a knife in his ribs.

Dominguey let out a cry that brought the other two down onto their feet.

"He's been murdered. Jim's been murdered! One of you two . . ." He turned to Sharn. "Sharn, you did this! You've killed him with his own explorer's knife. Why? Why?"

Sharn had gone as pale as Dominguey.

"You're lying! I never did it. I was in my bunk asleep. I had no quarrel with Baron. What about Malravin? He'd just had a fight with Jim. He did it, didn't you, Malravin?"

The alarm was still shrilling away. They were all shouting. Malravin said, "Don't you call me a murder. I was fast asleep in my bunk, under sedation as ordered. One of you two did it. It was nothing to do with me."

"You've got a black eye coming on, Malravin." Dominguey said. "Jim Baron gave you that before you hit the sack. Did you stab him to even up the score?"

"For God's sake man, let's try and raise the other ships while we've the chance. You know I'd not do anything like that. You did it yourself, most likely. You were awake, we weren't."

"I was stuck with my head in the drive all the time."

"Were you? How do we know?"

"Yes, he has a point, Dominguey," Sharn said. "How do we know what you were up to? Didn't you arrange for us all to get a bit of sleep on purpose, so that you could bring this off?"

"So he did, the filthy murderer!" Malravin shouted. "I wonder you didn't finish us all while you were about it!" Putting his hands up, he charged at Dominguey.

Dominguey ducked. He jumped to one side and hit Malravin as he lumbered past. The blow was a light one. It served merely to make Malravin bellow and come on again. On the table lay a wrench they had used earlier on the cybo casing. Dominguey hit Malravin with it at the base of the neck. The big fellow collided with a chair and sprawled with it to the floor, catching his head sharply against the bulkhead as he went.

"You want any?" Dominguey asked, facing Sharn with the wrench ready.

Shaking, Sharn formulated the word "No."

"See to Ike then, while I try to raise a signal." Nodding curtly, he went over to the communications panel and cut off the alarm. The sudden silence was as chilling as the racket had been a moment before. He opened up the subradio and began to call.

Sharn slipped to his knees and pulled Malravin's head up as gently as he could.

The man did not stir. Groaning, Sharn tried to adjust to what had happened. He tried to concentrate his thoughts. He muttered. "Humans instigate events; events affect humans. Once a man has started a chain of events, he may find himself the victim of the events. When I entered star service, this was a decisive action; but readers may think that since then I have been at the mercy — the mercy —"

He began to weep. Malravin was also dead. His neck was broken. Inside his head, still warm, thoughts pouring out into oblivion . . .

After some indefinite period of time Sharn realized that Dominguey had stopped speaking. Only a meaningless gibber and squeak of static came from the subradio.

He looked up. The captain was pointing an iongun at him.

"I know you killed Jim Baron, Sharn," he said. His face was distorted by tension.

"I know you killed Malravin. I saw you do it, and there is the murder weapon on the floor."

The iongun wavered.

"Ike's dead?"

"Dead, just as you killed Baron. You're clever, Dominguey, the real silent superman type, always in command of his environment. Now I suppose you will kill me. With three bodies out of the hatch, the *Wilson* will lift a lot more easily, won't it? You'll need all that lift, Dominguey, because we are getting nearer to Bertha every minute."

"I'm not going to kill you, Sharn, just as I didn't kill Baron. Just as killing Malravin was an accident. There's a signal."

He swiveled his chair and turned up the volume of the set. Below the crackle of static, a faint voice called them. It said, "Can you hear me, *Wilson?* Can you hear me, *Wilson?* Grant of the *Brinkdale* here. Come in, please."

Hello, Grant! Hello, Grant!" As he spoke, the captain moved the mike so that he could continue to cover Sharn with his iongun.

"Dominguey of *Wilson* here. We're down on an asteroid for repairs. If I send a carrier, will you get a fix on us? Situation very urgent. Dawn is less than an hour away, and static will cancel reception then."

Far away, down a great well of time and space, a tiny voice asked for the carrier wave. Dominguey switched to *send* and turned to face Sharn.

Sharn still crouched over Malravin. He had brought himself under control now.

"Going to finish me at once, Dominguey?" he asked. "Don't want any witnesses, do you?"

"Get up, Sharn. Back over to the wall. I want to see if Malravin is really dead, or if you are up to some stupid deception."

"Oh, he's dead all right. I'd say you did a very good job. And with Baron too, although there it was easier because the poor fellow was not only asleep but believed himself already dead."

"You're sick, Sharn. Get over against that wall when you're ordered to."

They moved into their new positions, Sharn by the wall near the shuttered ports, Dominguey by the ugly body on the floor. Both of them moved slowly, watching each other, their faces blank.

"He's dead all right," Sharn said.

"He's dead. Sharn, get into your spacesuit."

"What are you planning, a burial service? You're crazy, Dominguey! It's only a few hours before our mass cremation."

"Don't you call me crazy, you little snake! Get into your spacesuit. I can't have you in here while I'm working. I don't trust you. I know you killed Baron; you're mad and had less patience with your talk and theories than any of us. You can't tolerate anyone who won't enlist as your audience, can you? But you're not going to kill me. So you wait outside until we are ready to go, or until the *Brinkdale* comes to pick us up, whichever is soonest. Move fast now, man! Into your suit!"

"You're going to leave me out here, compiling an anthology of ways to murder in galactic space? Beyond the solar system, the word of man becomes the word of God."

Moving fast, Dominguey slapped him across the cheek.

"— And the hand of God," Sharn muttered. He moved toward his suit. Reluctantly, he climbed into it, menaced continually by the

iongun. Dominguey propelled him towards the lock.

"Don't send me out there again, Dominguey, please. I can't stand it. You know what Big Bertha's like. Please! Tie me to my bunk —"

"Move, man! I have to get back to the set. I won't leave you."

"Please, Dominguey, Captain, I swear I'm innocent. You know I never touched Baron. I'd die out there on the rock! Forgive me!"

"You can stay if you'll sign a confession that you murdered Baron."

"You know I never did it! You did it while we were all asleep. You saw how his idea about our all being dead was a menace to the general sanity, and so you killed him. Or Malravin killed him. Yes, Malravin killed Jim, Dominguey, it's obvious! You know we were talking together while they were quarreling! We're not to blame. Let's not be at each other's throat now, we're the only two left. We've got to get out of here quickly — you need help. We always got on well together, we've covered the galaxy together —"

"Confess or get out, Sharn! I know you did it. I can't have you in here or you'll kill me."

Sharn stopped protesting. He ran a hand through his damp hair and leaned back against the bulkhead.

"All right, I'll sign. Anything rather than go out there again. I can always say I signed under duress."

Dominguey dragged him to the table, seized a scratch pad from the radio bench and forced Sharn to write out a brief confession to the murder of Jim Baron. He pocketed it and leveled the iongun again.

"Now get outside," he said.

"Dominguey, no! No, you lied to me — please —"

"You've got to get out, Sharn. With this paper in my pocket, you'd not hesitate to kill me now, given half a chance."

"You're mad, Dominguey! Cunning mad. You're going to get rid of me and then blame it all onto me —"

"I'll count five, Sharn. If you're not on your way to that lock by then, I swear I'll fry your boots off."

The look on his face was unmistakable.

Sharn backed into the lock, weeping. The door closed on him. He heard Dominguey begin to exhaust the air from the room panel. Hurriedly, he screwed down his face plate. The air whispered away and the lock descended to ground level.

When it stopped, he opened the door, unscrewed one of the levers from the control panel and wedged it in the doorway so that the door could not close. It could not retract until it was closed, so his way to the ship was not withdrawn.

Then he stepped out onto the surface of Erewon for a second time.

Conditions were changing. Bertha came ripping up into the sky, surrounded by a shock wave of star-blur. The further stars lent it a halo of confused light.

It was riding ahead of the time-table the humans had worked out; so communication with *Brinkdale* would now be effectively cut off. Also, the perceptible disk of the body was larger. They were indeed falling towards it.

Sharn wondered why he was not already fried to smears of carbohydrate on the rock, despite the refrigeration unit in his suit. But if Bertha was so gigantic, then she would not even be able to release her own heat. What a terrible towering thing it was! He looked up at it, in a sort of ecstasy transcending fear, feeling in his lack of weight that he was drifting out towards it. The black globe seemed to thunder overhead, a symbol — a symbol of what? Of life, of fertility, of death, of destruction? It seemed to combine aspects of all things as it rode omnipotently overhead.

"The core of experience — to be at the core of experience transcends the need for lesser pleasures," Sharn told himself.

He could feel his black notebook in his hip pocket, inaccessible inside the spacesuit. For all his inability to get at it, it might as well have been left back on Earth. That was a terrible loss — not just to him, but to others who might have read and been stimulated by his work. Words were coming to him now, thick and rich as blood, coming first singly, like birds alighting on his shoulder, then in swarms.

Finally he fell silent, impaled under that black gaze. The isolation was so acute, it was as if he alone of all creation had been singled out to stand there — there under something that was physically impossible.

"I want to come back aboard. I need to make some calculations. I'm beginning to understand Bertha. Her properties represent physical impossibilities. You understand that, don't you, Dominguey? So how can she exist? The answer must be that beneath her sur-

face, under unimaginable conditions, she is creating anti-matter. We've made a tremendous discovery, Dominguey! Perhaps they'll name the process after me: the Sharn Effect. Let me come back, Dominguey . . ."

But he spoke to himself, and the words were lost in his helmet.

He stood mute, bowing to the black thing.

Already Bertha was setting. The foggy blanket of atmosphere was whipped off the bed of rock, following the sun round like a tide. The vapor was thinner now, little more than shoulder high as its component molecules drained off into space.

The weight-shift took place. Sharn's body told him that *down* was the monstrous thing on the horizon, and that he walked like a fly on the wall across Erewon. Though he fought the sensation, when he turned back towards the *Wilson,* he moved uphill, and the vapors poured across him in a dying waterfall.

Taking no notice of the vapors, Sharn lumbered back to the airlock. He had remembered the thick pad of miostrene that hung clipped to one wall of the lock, a stylo beside it. It was placed there for emergencies, and surely this was one.

As he reached for it, Dominguey's voice came harshly through his headphones.

"Stay away from that lock, Sharn. I've got the casing back on the cyboscope and am preparing to blast off. I shall have to take a chance on maneuvering. Get away from the ship!"

"Don't leave without me, Dominguey! Please! You know I'm an innocent man."

"I've got your confession! Stand clear for blastoff!"

"But I've made an important discovery."

"Stand clear!"

The connection went dead. Sharn cried into his suit. Only the universe answered.

Clutching the miostrene pad, he ran from the lock. He ran after the last disappearing strand of vapor, sucked along the ground like a worm withdrawing. He lumbered down a cliff that began to seesaw back towards horizontal. The big sun had disappeared below the group of rocks that did rough duty for a horizon.

A tower of distorted strata rose before him. He stooped behind it and looked back.

A golden glow turned white; a plump pillow of smoke turned into

flat sheets of vapor that flapped towards him; the ship rose.

Almost at once, it was hidden behind the northern horizon. The movement was so sudden and unpredictable that Sharn though it had crashed, until he realized how fast ship and planetoid were moving in relation to each other. He never caught another glimpse of it.

Calmer now, he stood up and looked round. In the rock lay a great crater. The last of the smoke was sucked into it. He hobbled over to it and looked down. A great eye looked back at him.

Sharn staggered away in alarm, running through the passages of his mind to see if delusion had entered there. Then he realized what he had seen. Erewon was a thin slab of rock, holed right through the middle. He had seen Bertha lowering on the other side. In a minute, it would rise again.

Now the illusion of day and night, with its complimentary implication that one was on a planetoid, was shattered. That great eye held truth in its gaze. He clung to an infinitesimal chunk of rock falling ever faster towards its doom.

As he squatted down with his pad, the sun came up again. It rushed across the arch of space and disappeared almost at once.

Erewon bore no trace of any vapor to follow it now. And another illusion was gone: now plainly it was the chunk of rock that turned, not the mighty ball that moved. *That* was stationary, and all space was full of it. It hung there like a dull shield, inviting all.

He began to write on the pad in big letters. "As this rock is stripped of all that made it seem like a world, so I become a human stripped of all my characteristics. I am as bare as a symbol myself. There are no questions relevant to me; you cannot ask me if I murdered a man on a ship; I do not know; I do not remember. I have no need for memory. I only know what it is to have the universe's grandest grandstand view of death. I —"

But the rock was spinning so fast that he had to abandon the writing. A spiral of black light filled space, widening as he drew nearer to Bertha. He lay back on the rock to watch, to stretch his nerves to the business of watching, holding on as his weight pulsed about him in rhythm with the black spiral.

As he flung the pad aside, the last word on it caught his eye, and he flicked an eyebrow in recognition of its appositeness:

"I —"

END

MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

The Apprentice God

I can tell it to you, sir, only the way it happened:
I had no slightest intent to cause such devastation.
Believe me, I was only unquestioning and obedient.

(He paused here, scripter alert. His under-brain grew dim.
He shuddered, overwhelmed by justified resentment.
The atomic clock marked the slow inexorable minutes;
Outside the dome the two moons met and passed.
He sighed, and forced himself to the necessary abasement.)

You must recall you uttered no cautious word of warning,
Merely gave me the globe and issued your curt command:
"Surface analysis, pupil. Report it to me tomorrow."

I scanned the tiny sphere—gray streaks on a bluish green,
Specks scattered here and there that might be natural features
Or only surface dirt. I pondered the likeliest methods.
First wipe it clean. A film came off where I flicked it lightly.
Too delicate, it seemed, for any vigorous scrubbing.
Perhaps if I warmed it, then? I held it to the heat:
It melted off in patches. I let it cool again,
Gingerly probed and poked it, brushed it over with magnets.
Fine dust appeared. I turned the little globe over and shook it.
Moisture dripped down from it that I gathered into a vessel—
A cupful only. I wiped the minuscule sphericle dry,
Glanced at my wiping cloth and found a greenish stain . . .
I had scarred and scabbed it enough; I shook the dust onto a plate.

(Anger seized him again. His brain felt fogged. He paced
The prison cubicle, remembering the master's fury,
Impervious to excuse, remembering his own chilly horror

At the callous revelation—a horror that went unshared.
Why had he not been cautioned? Let it go: there was one road only
To exculpation, to freedom, to a future worth the living.
With steely resolution he set to his vindication.)

A globe the size of a pebble—the little dust I had gathered
Almost too small to study under the strongest lenses.
I did my unmost, master. I analyzed as you had taught me.
It was hardly worth the endeavor; the components were ordinary,
The liquid: hydrogen, oxygen; the solids: nitrogen, carbon;
Microscopic traces of iron; a few other metals;
Almost invisible compounds resembling clay and limestone . . .
I noted all, and reported. How else could I have obeyed you?
Moreover, sir,—

(He paused, with searching tentacle-tip
Touched the aching cut beneath his lowest eye-stalk
Where a fragment, at scalpel's prick,
had leapt from the globe and struck him.)

I suffered bodily damage, barely escaped being blinded
For distant vision forever, here in my lowest eye.
Indeed, sir, your implication I played some silly prank,
Or worse, that I harmed the specimen out of deliberate malice—
Forgive me; I know you are just, I know you must surely have spoken
From under-brain emotion. You called me "knave or fool"—
I do not deem myself either; but if one, more fool than knave!

("Humble yourself," he muttered. "No need to incense him further:
He holds the final power over your aspirations.
How could you live at all, cast out from the world of workers?")
Sir, I am deeply repentant and eager to make amends.
Since by my fault I ruined this rare and valuable object
Beyond all remedy, tell me where I may find,
At any cost whatever, another such for your use.
Could I search for one, beg one, buy one? It was surely not unique.
This specimen came from somewhere, somewhere there must be others.
Only give me my chance, admit me again to your favor.

("No, no!" his shocked heart murmured, and generous anger shook him.
But cold necessity conquered. He must. He wrote on.)

If you will, subject me besides to open and public confession,

Display the gouges, the scratches, the spoiled and ugly remnant:
I will acknowledge all came from my dull-witted blundering.

(The clock moved on, the night sky paled, amethystine,
The hard blue sun rose high over the sheltering dome.
Brooding, he sought for words to screen his ultimate nausea—
The thing he had tried to forget, the thing that would not stay forgotten.
The just, the wise, the all-knowing—but the merciful too, the all-feeling—
Where was he now, that master, god of his young devotion?
Not that he'd raged and scolded—to be anger's slave is but human;
Not that against himself that unfair wrath was directed:
No—he knew it and wept—the source of his deep revulsion,
Making a mock of forgiveness, hypocrisy of his pleading,
Lay in one question only: *why* was the master angry?
The words he had shrunken to hear echoed again in his memory:
"I trusted you, my best pupil, not to spoil the equipment.
This specimen cost me dear, and now it is useless rubbish."
. . . And merely as added grievance, coolly, to point the damage,
Voicing those awful words: "I suppose you realize
This was no man-made object, no artificial model:
This tiny globe was a world, as genuine as our own,
To us, infinitesimal, to its natives as real as ours!"

"To its natives!" . . . Shuddering, frightened—the pupil, not the master:
The master infuriated, the pupil appalled and remorseful:
To the one, an extraneous trifle, to the other a blinding disclosure—
Value supreme to the one, brotherhood to the other:
Niggard and mean the master, only the pupil's compassion
Knowing life, all life, to be one, even the life of a dust-speck!
No, he could not go on, sacrifice once again
His microscopic brothers to the hazards of cold research,
Offer them up for murder by those to whom they were merely
Objects of alien interest. Despairing, he seized his scripter.)

Sir, it was dreadful to learn what I had done by my error—
Scraped mountains from their bases, scoured whole continents clean,
Poured oceans in a cup, scorched atmospheres away,
Learn that the shard that cut me was the world's mountain-peak.
So much, perhaps, I could bear, could even expiate,
Could find another globe for your experiments . . .
But if on that tortured sphere were living beings, too small
For sight, but not for death—even—O gods of space!—
Beings sentient and aware, beings like our great selves,

Lords of their puny earth as we of our mighty one—
Oh, sir, you may forgive me; I shall not forgive myself.
And *you* I do not forgive: you have made me a murderer.
Do what you will with me; I shall not again be your agent
To find another world for you to slaughter coldly.

(Long he gazed at the writing . . . And slowly sober expedience
Cast its web of self-interest around his selfless rage.
Hating himself, he expunged the futile cry of revulsion.
Trembling, he signed his name to the abject earlier plea . . .
And pressed the signal-key to send it forth to his master.) END

C. C. MacAPP

A Guest of Ganymede

I

His employer had paid enormously to have the small ship camouflaged as a chunk of asteroid-belt rock, and Gil Murdoch had successfully maneuvered it past the quarantine. Now it lay snugly melted into the ice; and if above them enough water had boiled into space to leave a scar, that was nothing unique on Ganymede's battered surface. In any case, the Terran patrols weren't likely to come in close.

Murdoch applied heat forward and moved the ship gingerly ahead.

"What are you doing now?" Waverill demanded.

Murdoch glanced at the blind man. "Trying to find a clear spot, sir, so I can see into the place."

"What for? Why don't you just contact them?"

"Just being careful, sir. After all, we don't know much about them." Murdoch kept the annoyance out of his voice. He had his own reason for wanting a preliminary look at the place, though the aliens had undoubtedly picked them up thousands of miles out and knew exactly where they were now.

Something solid, possibly a rock imbedded in the ice, bumped along the hull. Murdoch stopped the ship, then moved on more slowly.

The viewscreen brightened. He stopped the drive, then turned off the heat forward. Water, milky with vapor bubbles, swirled around them, gradually clearing. In a few minutes it froze solid again and he could see.

They were not more than ten feet from the clear area carved out of the ice. Murdoch had the viewpoint of a fish in murky water, looking into an immersed glass jar. The place was apparently a per-

fect cylinder, walled by a force-field or whatever held back the ice. He could see the dark translucency of the opposite wall, about fifty yards away and extending down eighty or ninety feet from the surface. He'd only lowered the ship a third that far, so that from here he looked down upon the plain one-story building and the neat lawns and hedges around it.

The building and greenery occupied only one-half of the area, the half near Murdoch being paved entirely with gravel and unplanted. That, he presumed, was where they'd land. The building was fitted to the shape of its half-circle, and occupied most of it, like a half cake set in a round box with a little space around it. A gravel walkway, bordered by grass, ran along the straight front of the building and around the back curve of it. The hedges surrounded the half-circle at the outside.

There was an inconspicuous closed door in the middle of the building. There were no windows in the flat gray wall.

The plants looked Terran, and apparently were rooted in soil, though there must be miles of ice beneath. Artificial sunlight poured on the whole area from the top. Murdoch had heard, and now was sure, that something held an atmosphere in the place.

"What are we waiting for?" Waverill wanted to know.

Murdoch reached for a switch and said, simply, "Hello."

The voice that answered was precise and uninflected. "Who are you?"

"My employer is Frederick Waverill, He has an appointment."

"And you?"

"Gilbert Murdoch."

There was a pause, then, "Gilbert Andrew Murdoch. Age thirty-four. Born in the state called Illinois."

Murdoch, startled, hesitated, then realized he'd probably been asked a question. "Er — that's right."

"There is a price on your head Murdoch."

Murdoch hesitated again, then said, "There'd be a price on your own if Earth dared to put it there."

Waverill gripped the arms of his seat and stood up, too vigorously for the light gravity. "Never mind all that. I hired this man because he could make the contact and get me here. Can you give me back my eyes?"

"We can but first of all I must warn both of you against trying to

steal anything from us or prying into our methods. Several Terrans have tried but none have escaped alive."

Waverill made an impatient gesture. "I've already got more money than I can count. I've spent a lot of it, a very great lot, on the metal you wanted, and I have it here in the ship."

"We have already perceived it and we do not care what it has cost you. We are not altruists."

That, thought Murdoch, could be believed. He felt clammy. If they knew so much about him, they might also be aware of the years he'd spent sifting and assessing the rumors about them that circulated around the tenuous outlaw community of space. Still, he'd been as discreet as was humanly possible.

He wondered if Waverill knew more than he pretended. He thought not; Murdoch's own knowledge was largely meticulous deduction. This much Murdoch knew with enough certainty to gamble his life on it: the treatments here involved a strange virus-like thing which multiplied in one's veins and, for presumably selfish or instinctive reasons, helped the body to repair and maintain itself. He knew for dead certain that the aliens always carefully destroyed the virus in a patient's veins before letting him go.

He thought he knew why.

The problem was to smuggle out any viable amout of the virus. Even a few cells, he thought, would be enough if he could get away from here and get them into his own blood. For it would multiply; and what would be the going price for a drop of one's blood — for a thousandth of a drop — if it carried virtual immortality?

A man could very nearly buy Earth.

The voice was speaking again. "Move straight ahead. The field will be opened for you."

Murdoch got the ship moving. He was blanked out again by the melting ice until they popped free into air, with an odd hesitation and then a rush. The ship was borne clear on some sort of a beam. He could hear water cascading outside the hull for a second, then it was quiet. He glanced at the aft viewer and could see the tunnel where they'd come out, with a little water still in the bottom, confined by the force-field again. The water that had escaped was running off along a ditch that circled the clearing.

They were lowered slowly to the graveled area. "Leave the ship," the voice directed, "and walk to the doorway you see."

Murdoch helped Waverill through the inner and outer hatches and led him toward the building. His information was that a force barrier sliced off this half of the circle from the other, and he could see that the hedges along the diameter pressed against some invisible plane surface. He hesitated as they came to it, and the voice said, "Walk straight ahead to the door. The field will be opened for you."

He guided Waverill in the right direction. As they passed the midpoint he felt an odd reluctance, a tingle and a slight resistance. Waverill grunted at it, but said nothing.

The door slid open and they were in a plain room with doors at the left and right. The outer door closed behind them. The door on the right opened and Murdoch took Waverill through it. They were in a second room of the same size, bare except for a bench along one wall.

The voice said, "Remove your clothing and pile it on the floor."

Waverill complied without protest, and after a second Murdoch did too. "Step back," the voice said. They did.

The clothing dropped through the floor, sluggishly in the light gravity. Murdoch grunted. There were weapons built into his clothes, and he felt uneasy without them.

At the end of the room away from the middle of the building was another door like the one they'd come through. It opened and a robot walked in.

It was humanoid in shape, flesh-colored but without animal details. The head had several features other than the eyes, but none of them was nose, mouth or ears. It stood looking at them for a minute, then said in the familiar voice, "Do not be alarmed if you feel something now."

There was a tingling, then a warmth, then a vibration, and some other sensations not easy to classify. Murdoch couldn't tell whether they came from the robot or not. It was obvious, though, that the robot was scanning them. He resisted an urge to move his hands more behind him. He'd been well satisfied with the delicate surgery, but now he imagined it awkward and obvious.

The robot didn't seem to notice anything.

After a minute the robot said, "Through the door where I entered you will find a bedroom and a bath and a place to cook. It is best you retire now and rest."

Murdoch offered his arm to Waverill, who grumbled a little but came along.

The voice went on, seeming now to come from the ceiling, "Treatment will begin tomorrow. During convalescence Murdoch will care for Waverill. Sight will be restored within four days and you will be here one day after that then you may return to your ship. You will be protected from each other while you are here. If you keep your bargain you will be of no concern to us after you leave."

Murdoch watched Waverill's face but it showed nothing. He was sure the billionaire already had arrangements to shut him up permanently as soon as he was no longer needed, and he didn't intend, of course, to let those arrangements work out.

II

It developed that when the robot spoke of days, it meant a twenty-four-hour cycle of light and dark, with temperatures to suit. Under other circumstances, the place would have been comfortable.

The pantry was stocked with Earthside food that didn't help Murdoch's confidence any, since it was further evidence of the aliens' contacts with men. He cooked eggs and bacon, helped Waverill eat, then washed the dishes.

He felt uneasy without his clothes; the more because the weapons in them, through years of habit, were almost part of himself. He thought, I'm getting too jumpy too soon. My nerves have to last a long time yet.

While he was putting the dishes to drain, the robot walked into the room and watched him for a moment. Then it said to Waverill, "Keep your hand on my shoulder and walk behind me." It reached for Waverill's right hand and placed it on its own right shoulder, revealing in the process that its arm was double-jointed. Then it simply walked through the wall. The blind man, without flinching and perhaps without being aware, passed through the substance.

When they were gone, Murdoch went quickly to the wall and passed his hands over it. Solid.

The voice came from the ceiling, "You can not pentrate the walls grounds is open to you. The half where your ship is will remain cut except when told to. Any place you can reach in this half of the off. You may amuse yourself as you wish so long as you do not willfully damage anything. We have gone to great effort to make this place comfortable for Terrans. Do not impair it for those who may come later."

Murdoch smiled inwardly. He'd known the walls would be solid; he'd only wanted to check the alien's watchfulness. Now he knew that there was more to it than just the robot, and that the voice was standard wherever it came from.

Not that the information helped any.

He went back to the middle of the building and went through the door across the lobby. In that half of the building were a library, a gymnasium and what was evidently a Solar System museum. There was nothing new to him in the museum. Though there were useful tables and data in the library, he was too tense to study. The gymnasium he'd use later.

He went outside, walking gingerly on the gravel. The rear of the building was a featureless semi-circle, the lawns and hedges unvaried. He took deep breaths of the air perfumed by flowers.

He jumped at a sudden buzz near his elbow. A bee circled up from a blossom and headed for the top of the building to disappear over the edge. Murdoch considered jumping for a hold and hauling himself up to the top of the building to see if there were hives there, but decided not to risk the aliens' displeasure. He realized now that he'd been hearing the bees all the time without recognizing it, and was annoyed at himself for not being more alert. He paid more attention now, and saw there were other insects too; ants and a variety of beetles. There were no birds, mammals, or reptiles that he could see.

He parted the hedge and leaned close to the clear wall, shading the surface with his hands to see into the ice. There were a few rocks in sight. He found one neatly sliced in two by the force-field, or whatever it was, showing a trail of striations in the ice above it where it had slowly settled. On Ganymede, the rate of sink of a cool rock would be very slow in the ice.

Far back in the dimness he could see a few vague objects that might have been large rocks or ships. There were some other things with vaguely suggestive shapes, like long-eroded artifacts. Nothing that couldn't have been the normal fall-in from space.

He went to the front of the building again and stood for a while, looking at the graveled other half of the place. He couldn't see any insects there, and not a blade of grass. He approached the barrier and leaned against it, to see how it felt. It was rigid, but didn't feel glass-hard. Rather it had a very slight surface softness, so he could press a fingernail in a fraction of a millimeter.

He remembered that on Earth bees would blunder into a glass pane, and looked around to see if they hit the barrier. They didn't. An inch or so from it, they turned in the air and avoided it. Neither could he see any insects crawling on the invisible surface. He pressed his face closer, and noticed again the odd reluctance he'd felt when crossing on the way in.

At ground level, a dark line not more than a quarter of an inch thick marked where the barrier split the soil. Gravel heaped up against it on both sides.

He looked again toward the ship. If things went according to plan, the ship's proximity alarm would go off some time within the next two days. He didn't think the aliens would let him go to the ship, but he expected the diversion to help him check out something he'd heard about the barrier.

He flexed his thumbs, feeling the small lumps implanted in the web of flesh between thumb and finger on each hand. He'd practiced getting the tiny instruments in and out until he could do it without thinking. But now the whole project seemed ridiculously optimistic.

He felt annoyed at himself again. It's the aliens, he thought, that are getting my nerves. I've pulled plenty of jobs as intricate as this without fretting this way.

He began another circuit around the building, and was at the rear when the voice said, almost at his shoulder, "Murdoch, Waverill wants you."

His employer lay on his cot, looking drowsy. He scowled at Murdoch's footsteps. "Where you been? I want a drink."

Murdoch involuntarily glanced around. "Will they let you have it, sir?"

The voice came from the ceiling this time. "One ounce of hundred-proof liquor every four hours."

"Is there any here?" Murdoch asked.

"Tell us where to find it and we will get it from your ship."

Murdoch told them where the ship's supply of beverages was stowed, and headed for the front of the building. The robot was already in the lobby. It allowed him to follow outside, but said, "Stand back from the barrier."

Murdoch leaned against the building, trying not to show his eagerness. This was an unexpected break. He watched the ground level as the robot passed through the barrier. The dark line in the ground

didn't change. The gravel stayed in place on both sides. Neither did the plants to the sides move. Evidently the barrier only opened at one spot to let things through.

The robot had no trouble with the hatches, and came out quickly with a bottle in one hand. Murdoch worried again whether it had discovered that the ship's alarm was set. If so, it didn't say anything as it drew near. It handed Murdoch the bottle and disappeared into the building.

After a few moments Murdoch followed. He found Waverill asleep, but at his footsteps the older man stirred. "Murdoch? Where's that drink?"

"Right away, sir." Murdoch got ice from the alien's pantry, put it in a glass with a little water and poured in about a jigger of rye. He handed it to Waverill, then poured himself a straight shot. Rye wasn't his favorite, but it might ease his nerves a little.

"Mm," said Waverill, "'S better."

Murdoch couldn't see any marks on him. "Did they stick any needles into you, sir?"

"I'm not paying you to be nosey."

"Of course not, sir. I only wanted to know so I wouldn't touch you in a sore spot."

"There are no sore spots," Waverill said. "I want to sleep a couple of hours, so go away. Then I'll want a steak and a baked potato."

"Surely, sir."

Murdoch went outside again and toured the grounds without seeing anything new. He went to the barrier and stared at the ship for a while. Then, to work off tension, he went into the gymnasium and took a workout. He had a shower, looked in on Waverill and found him still asleep, then went back to the library. The books and tapes were all Terran, with no clues about the aliens. The museum was no more helpful. It was a relief when he heard Waverill calling.

There were steaks in the larder, and potatoes. Waverill grumbled at the wait while Murdoch cooked. The older man still acted a little drowsy, but had a good appetite. After eating he wanted to rest again.

Murdoch wandered some more, then forced himself to sit down in the library and pretend to study. He went over his plans again and again.

They were tenuous enough. He had to get a drop of Waverill's blood sometime within the next day or two, and get it past the barrier. Then he had to get it into the ship and, once away from

Ganymede, inoculate himself. The proble of Waverill didn't worry him. The drowsiness would have to be coped with, but based on the timetable Waverill's symptoms would give him, he should be able to set up a flight plan which would allow him to nap.

The time dragged agonizingly. He had two more drinks during the "afternoon", took another workout and a couple of turns around the building, and finally saw the sunlamps dimming. After that there was a time of lying on his bunk trying to force himself to relax. Finally he did sleep.

III

He was awake again with the first light; got up and wandered restlessly into the pantry. In a few minutes he heard Waverill stirring. "Murdoch!" came the older man's voice.

Murdoch went to him. "Yes, sir. I was just going to get breakfast."

"I can see the light!"

"You — that's wonderful, sir!"

"I can see the light! Dammit, where are you? Take me outside!"

"It's no brighter out there, sir." Murdoch was dismayed. He'd counted on another day before Waverill's sight began to return; with a chance to arrange a broken drinking glass, a knife in Waverill's way, something to bring blood in an apparent accident. Now . . .

"Take me outside!"

"Yes, sir." Murdoch, his mind spinning, guided the older man.

The door slid open for them and Waverill crowded through. As he stepped on the gravel with his bare feet, he said, "Ouch! Damn it!"

"Step lightly, sir, and it won't hurt. Murdoch had a sudden wild hope that Waverill would cut his feet on a sharp pebble. But there were no sharp pebbles; they were all rounded; and the light gravity made it even more unlikely.

Waverill raised his head and swung it to the side. "I can see spots of light up there."

"The sunlamps, sir. They're getting brighter."

"I can see where they are." The older man's voice was shaky. He looked toward Murdoch. "I can't see you, though."

"It'll come back gradually, sir. Why don't you have breakfast now?"

Waverill told him what to do with breakfast. "I want to stay out here. How bright is it now? Is it like full daylight yet?"

"No, sir. It'll be a while yet. You'll be able to feel it on your skin." Murdoch was clammy with the fear that the other's sight would improve too fast. He looked around for some sharp corner, some twig he could maneuver the man into. He didn't see anything.

"What's that sweet smell?" Waverill wanted to know.

"Flowers, sir. There's a blossoming hedge around the walkways."

"I'll be able to see flowers again. I'll . . ." The older man caught himself as if ashamed. "Tell me what this place looks like."

Murdoch described the grounds, meanwhile guiding Waverill slowly around the curved path. Somewhere, he thought, there'll be something sharp I can bump him into. He had a wild thought of running the man into a wall; but a bloody nose would be too obvious.

"I can feel the warmth now," Waverill said, "and I can tell that they're brighter." He was swiveling his head and squinting, experimenting with his new traces of vision.

Murdoch carried on a conversation with half his attention, while his mind churned. He thought, I'll have to resist the feeling that it's safer here in back of the building. They'll be watching everywhere. He wished he could get the man inside; under the cover of serving breakfast he could improvise something. I'm sweating, he thought. I can just begin to feel the lamps, but I'm wet all over. I've got to —

He drew in his breath sharply. From somewhere he heard the buzz of a bee. His mind leaped upon the sound. He stopped walking, and Waverill said, "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I — stepped on a big pebble."

"They all feel big to me. Damned outrage; taking away a man's . . ." Waverill's voice trailed off as he started experimenting with his eyes again.

There were more bees now, and presently Murdoch saw one loop over the edge of the building and search along the hedge. The first of them, he thought. There'll be more. He looked along the hedge. Most of the blossoms hadn't really closed for the night, though the petals were drawn together. He walked as slowly as he dared. The buzzing moved tantalizingly closer, then away.

A second buzz added itself. He heard the insect move past them, then caught it in the corner of his eye.

Waverill stopped. "Is that a *bee?* Here?"

"I guess they keep them to fertilize the plants, sir."

"They bother me. I can't tell where they are."

"I'll watch out for them, sir."

He could see the insect plainly now, and thought, I have an excuse to watch it. The buzz changed pitch as the bee started to settle, then changed again as it moved on a few feet. Murdoch clamped his teeth in frustration. He tried to wipe his free hand where trousers should have been, and discovered that his thigh was sweaty too. He thought, surely Waverill must feel how sweaty my arm is.

The bee flirted with another flower, then settled on a petal. Tense, Murdoch subtly moved Waverill toward the spot. He could see every move of the insect's legs as it crawled into the bell of the flower.

"You can smell the blossoms more now, sir," he said. His throat felt dry, and he thought his voice sounded odd. "It's warming up and bringing out the smell, I guess." He halted, and tried not to let his arm tense or tremble. "This is a light blue blossom. Can you see it?"

"I — I'm not sure. I can see a bright spot a little above my head and right in front of me."

"That's a reflection off the ice, sir. The flower's down here." Holding his breath, he took Waverill's hand and moved it toward the flower. He found himself gritting his teeth and wincing as Waverill's fingers explored delicately around the flower.

The bee crawled out, apparently not aware of anything unusual, and moved away a few inches. It settled on a leaf and began working it legs together.

Murdoch felt like screaming.

Waverill's fingers stopped their exploration, then, as the bee was silent, began again. Waverill bent over to bring his eyes closer to his hand.

Shaking with anxiety now, Murdoch executed the small movements of his right hand that forced the tiny instrument out from between his thumb and forefinger. He felt a panicky desire to hurry, and forced himself to move slowly. He transferred the tiny syringe to his left hand, which was nearer Waverill. Waverill was about to pluck the blossom. Murdoch moved his right hand forward, trying — in case the aliens could see, though he had his body in the way — to make the move casual. He flicked a finger near the bee.

The bee leaped into the air, it buzz high-pitched and loud. Waverill tensed.

Murdoch cried, "Look out, sir!" and grabbed Waverill's hand. He jabbed the miniature syringe into the fleshy part of the hand, at the outside, just below the wrist.

"Damn you!" Waverill bellowed, slapping at his right hand with his left. He jerked away from Murdoch.

"Here, sir! Let me help you!"

"Get away from me, you clumsy fool!"

"Please, sir. Let me get the stinger out. You'll squeeze more poison into your skin."

Waverill faced him, a hand raised as if to strike. Then he lowered it. "All right, damn you; and be careful about it."

Shakily, Murdoch took Waverill's hand. The syringe, dangling from the skin, held a trace of red in its minute plastic bulb. Murdoch gasped for breath and fought to make his fingers behave. He got hold of the syringe and drew it out. Pretending to drop it, he hid it in the junction of the third and fourth fingers of his left hand. He kept his body between them and the building, and tried to make his actions convincing. "There. It's out, sir."

Waverill was still cursing in a low voice. Presently he stopped, but his face was still hard with anger. "Take me inside."

"Yes, sir." Murdoch was weak with reaction. He drew a painful breath, gave the older man his left arm and led him back.

The tiny thing between his fingers felt as large and as conspicuous as a handgun.

IV

Murdoch felt as if the entire place was lined with eyes, all focused on his left hand. The act of theft clearly begun, his life in the balance, he felt now the icy nausea of fear; a feeling familiar enough, and which he knew how to control, but which he still didn't like. Fear. It's a strange thing, he thought. A peculiar thing. If you analyzed it, you could resolve it into the physical sick feeling and the wish in your mind, a very fervent wish, that you were somewhere else. Sometimes, if it caught you tightly enough, it was almost paralyzing so that your limbs and even your lungs seemed to be on strike. When fear gripped him he always remembered back to that act that had made him an outlaw and an exile from Earth.

He'd been a pilot in the Space Force, young, just out of the Academy, and the bribe had seemed very large and the treason very small. It seemed incredibly naive, now, that he should not have understood that a double-cross was necessarily a part of the arrangement.

It was in escaping at all, against odds beyond calculating, that he had learned that he thought faster and deeper than other men, and that he had guts. Having guts turned out to be a different thing than he had imagined. It didn't mean that you stood grinning and calm while others went mad with fear. It meant you suffered all the panic, all the actual physical agony they did, but that you somehow stuck to the gun, took the buffeting and still had in a corner of your being enough wit to throw the counterpunch or think through to the way out.

And that's what he had to do now. Endure the fear and keep his wits.

The robot had responded to Waverill's loud demand. It barely glanced at Waverill's hand, said, "It will heal quickly" and left. So far as Murdoch could tell, it didn't look at him.

As soon as he dared, he went and took a shower. In the process of lathering he inserted the syringe into the slit between thumb and forefinger of his left hand. In that hiding-place was a small plastic sphere holding a substance which ought to be nutrient to the virus. It was delicate work, but he'd practiced well and his fingers were under control now; and he got the point of the syringe into the sphere and squeezed. He relaxed the squeeze, felt the bulb return slowly to shape as it drew out some of the gummy stuff. He squeezed it back in, let the shower rinse the syringe and got that back into the pouch in his right hand.

He didn't dare discard it. There was always the possibility of failure and a second try, though the timing made it very remote. If the surgery was right, the pouches in his hand were lined with something impervious, so that none of the virus would get into his blood too soon. He lathered very thoroughly and rinsed off, then let a blast of warm air dry him. He felt neither fear nor elation now. Rather there was a let-down, and a weary apprehension at the trials ahead. The next big step was to get the small sphere past the barrier ahead of the time of leaving. He was pretty sure that he couldn't smuggle it out on his person. The alien's final examination and sterilization would prevent that.

Now there came the agony of waiting for the next step. He hadn't been able to rig things tightly enough to predict within several hours when it would come. It might be in one hour or in ten. A derelict was drifting in. He'd arranged that, but it might be late or it might be intercepted. He prepared a meal for Waverill and himself; sweated out the interval and cooked another. He wandered from library to gymnasium to out-of-doors, and fought endlessly the desire to stand at the barrier and stare at the ship.

The robot examined Waverill and revealed only that things were going well. Waverill spent his time bringing objects before his eyes, squinting and twisting his face, swallowed up in the ecstasy of his slowly returning vision. When darkness came the older man slept. Murdoch lay twisting on his own couch or dozed fitfully, beset with twisted dreams.

When the ship's alarm went off he didn't know at first whether it was real or another of the dreams.

His mind was sluggish in clearing, and when he sat up he could hear sounds at the front of the building. Suddenly in a fright that he would be too late, he jumped up and ran that way. The robot was already out of the building. It turned toward him with a suggestion of haste. "What is this."

Murdoch tried to act startled. "The ship's alarm! There's something headed in! Maybe Earth Patrol!"

"Why did you leave the alarm on."

"We — I guess I forgot in the excitement."

"That was dangerous stupidity. How is the alarm powered?"

"It's self-powered. Rechargeable batteries."

"You are fortunate that it is only a dead hull drifting by, otherwise we would have to dispose of you at once. Stay here. I will shut it off."

Murdoch pretended to protest mildly, then stood watching the robot go. His hands were moving in what he hoped looked like a gesture of futility. He got the plastic sphere out of its hiding-place and thumbed it like a marble. He held his breath. The robot crossed the barrier. Murdoch flipped the sphere after it. He saw it arc across the line and bound once, then he lost it in the gravel. In the dim light from Jupiter, low on the horizon, he could not find it again. Desperately, he memorized the place in relation to the hedge. When he and Waverill left, there would be scant time to look for it.

The robot didn't take long to solve the ship's hatches, go in through the lock, and locate the alarm. The siren chopped off in mid-scream. The robot came back out and started toward him. Involuntarily, he backed up against the building, wondering what the robot (or its masters) might deduce with alien senses, and whether swift punishment might strike him the next instant. But the robot passed him silently and disappeared indoors.

After a while he followed it inside, lay down on his couch, and resumed the fitful wait.

The next morning Waverill's eyes followed him as he fixed breakfast. There was life in them now, and purpose. The man looked younger, more vigorous, too.

Murdoch, trying not to sound nervous, asked, "Can you see more now, sir?"

"A little. Sit me so the light falls on my plate."

Murdoch watched the other's attempt to eat by sight rather than feel, adding mentally to his own time-table of the older man's recovery. Apparently Waverill could see his plate, but no details of the food on it. There was no more drowsiness, though. The movements were deft except that they didn't yet correlate with the eyes. The eye seemed to have a little trouble matching up too, sometimes. No doubt it would take a while to restore the reflexes lost over the years.

Waverill walked the grounds alone in mid-morning. Murdoch, following far enough behind not to draw a rebuff, took the opportunity to spot his small treasure in the gravel beyond the barrier. Once found it was dismayingly visible. But there was nothing he could do now. He was sweating again, and hoped with a sort of half-prayer to Fortune that his nerves wouldn't start to shatter once more.

He made lunch, then set himself the job of waiting out the afternoon. Ages later he cooked dinner. He managed to eat most of his steak, envying Waverill the wolfish appetite that made quick work of the meal.

The long night somehow wore through and he embraced eagerly the small respite of breakfast.

He felt unreal when the alien voice said, "Do not bother to wash the dishes. Lie down on your bunks for your final examination. When you awake you may leave."

The fear spread through him again as he moved slowly to his couch. He thought, if they've caught me, this is when they'll kill me. He was afraid, no doubt of that; all the old symptoms were there. But, oddly, there was a trace of perverse comfort in the thought: Maybe I've lost. Maybe I'll just never wake up. Then dizziness hit him. He was aware of a brief, feeble effort to resist it, then he slid into darkness.

He came awake still dizzy, and with a drugged feeling. His mouth was dry. Breath came hard at first. He tried to open his eyes, but his lids were too stiff. He spent a few minutes just getting his breath to working, then he was able to open his eyes a little. When he sat up there was a wash of nausea. He sat on the edge of the bunk, head hung, until it lessened. Gradually he felt stronger.

Waverill was sitting up too, looking no better than Murdoch felt. He seemed to recover faster, though, Murdoch thought. He's actually healthier than I am now. I hope he hasn't become a superman.

The voice from the ceiling said, "Your clothes are in the next room. Dress and leave at once. The barrier will be opened for you."

Murdoch got to his feet and headed for the other room. He paused to let Waverill go ahead, and noticed that Waverill had no trouble finding the door. The older man wasn't talking this morning, and the jubilation he must feel at seeing again was confined, outwardly, to a tight grin.

They dressed quickly, Murdoch noting in the process that his clothes had been gone over and all weapons removed. It didn't matter. But it did matter that he had to collect his prize on the way to the ship, and the sweaty anxiety was with him.

As they went out the door, Waverill stopped and let his eyes sweep about the grounds. What a cool character he is, Murdoch thought. Not a word. Not a sign of emotion.

Waverill turned and started toward the ship. Murdoch let him get a step ahead. His own eyes were searching the gravel. For a moment he had the panicky notion that it was gone; then he spotted it. He wouldn't have to alter his course to reach it. He saw Waverill flinch a little as they crossed the barrier, then he too felt the odd sensation. He kept going, trying to bring his left foot down on the capsule. He managed to do it.

Taut with anxiety, he paused and half-turned as if for a last look

back at the place. He could feel the sphere give a little; or maybe it was a pebble sinking into the ground. He twisted his foot. He thought he could feel something crush. He hesitated, in the agony of trying to decide whether to go on or to make sure by dropping something and pretending to pick it up. He didn't have anything to drop. He thought, I've got to go on or they'll suspect. He turned. Waverill had stopped and was looking back at him keenly. Murdoch gripped himself, kept his face straight, and went on.

Waverill had to grope a little getting into the ship, as though his hands still didn't correlate with his eyes, but it was clear that he could see all right, even in the ship's dim interior. Murdoch said, "Your eyes seem to be completely well, sir."

Waverill was playing it cool too. "They don't match up very well yet, and I have to experiment to focus. It'll come back, though." He went casually to his seat and lowered himself into it.

Murdoch got into the pilot's seat. "Better strap in, sir."

He didn't have long to wonder how they'd be sent off; the ship lifted and simply passed through whatever served as a ceiling.

There was no restraint when Murdoch turned on the gravs and took over. He moved off toward Ganymede's north pole, gaining altitude slowly, watching his screens, listening to the various hums and whines as the ship came alive. The radar would have to stay off until they were away from Ganymede, but the optical system showed nothing threatening. He moved farther from the satellite, keeping it between him and Jupiter.

"Hold it here," Waverill said.

Letting the ship move ahead on automatic, Murdoch turned in pretended surprise. "What . . ."

Waveril had a heat gun trained on him. "I'll give you the course."

Murdoch casually reached down beside the pilot's chair. A compartment opened under his fingers, and he lifted a gun of his own.

Waverill's mouth went tight as he squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. Waverill glanced at the weapon. Rage moved across his face. He hoisted the gun as if to throw it, then stopped as Murdoch lifted his own gun a little higher.

"You got to them," Waverill said flatly.

"The ones that did the remodeling job on this crate and hid that gun for you? Of course. Did you think you were playing with an

"I could have sworn they were beyond reach."

"I reached them." Murdoch got unstrapped and stood up. He had the ship's acceleration just as he wanted it. "And naturally I went over the ship while you were blind. Get into your suit now, Waverill."

"Why?"

"I'm giving you a better break than you were going to give me. I'm putting you where the Patrol will pick you up."

"You won't make it, you son of a bitch. I've got some cards left."

"I know where you planned to rendezvous. By the time you buy your way out of jail, I'll be out of your reach."

"You *never* will."

"Talk hard enough and I may decide to kill you right now."

Waverill studied his face for a moment, then slowly got to his feet. He went to the suit locker, got out his suit, and squirmed into it. Murdoch grinned as he saw he disappointment on the other's face. The weapons were gone from the suit, too.

He said, "Zip up and get the helmet on, and get into the lock."

Waverill, face contorted with hate, complied slowly. Murdoch secured the inner hatch behind the man, then got on the ship's intercom. "Now, Waverill, you'll notice it's too far for a jump back to Ganymede. I'm going to spend about forty minutes getting into an orbit that'll give you a good chance. When I say shove off, you can either do it or stay where you are. If you stay, we'll be headed a different direction and I'll have to kill you for my own safety." He left the circuit open, and activated a spy cell so he could see into the lock. Waverill was leaning against the inner hatch, conserving what heat he could.

V

Murdoch set up a quick flight program, waited a minute to get farther from Ganymede and the aliens, then turned on a radar search and set the alarm. He unzipped his left shoe, got it off and stood staring at it for a moment, almost afraid to turn it over.

Then he turned it slowly. There was a sticky spot on the sole.

The muscles around his middle got so taut they ached. He hurried to the ship's med cabinet, chose a certain package of bandages and tore it open with unsteady fingers. There was a small vial hidden there. He unstoppered it and poured the contents onto the shoe sole.

He let it soak while he checked the pilot panel, then hurried back. With a probe, he mulled the liquid around on the shoe sole and waited a minute longer. Then he scraped all he could back into the vial and looked at it. There were a few bits of shoe sole in it, but none big enough to worry him. He got out a hypodermic and drew some of the fluid into it. The needle plugged. He swore, ejected a little to clear it and drew in some more.

When he had his left sleeve pushed up, he looked at the vein in the bend of his elbow for a little while, then took a deep breath and plunged the needle in. He hit it the first time. He was very careful not to get any air into the vein.

He sighed, put the rest of the fluid back in the vial and stoppered it, and cleaned out the needle. Then he put a small bandage on his arm and went back to the pilot's seat. He felt tired now that it was done.

The scan showed nothing dangerous. Waverill hadn't moved. Murdoch opened his mouth to speak to him, then decided not to. He flexed his arm and found it barely sore, then went over his flight program again. He made a small adjustment. The acceleration was just over one G, and it made him a little dizzy. He wondered if he could risk a drink. It hadn't hurt Waverill. He went to the small sink and cabinet that served as a galley, poured out a stiff shot into a glass, and mixed it with condensed milk. He took it back to the pilot's seat, not bothering with the free-fall cap, and drank it slowly.

It was nearly time to unload Waverill.

He checked course again, then thumbed the mike. "All right, Waverill. Get going. You should be picked up within nine or ten hours."

Waverill didn't answer, but the panel lights showed the outer hatch activated. Through the spy cell Murdoch could see the stars as the hatch slowly opened. Waverill jumped off without hesitating. Murdoch liked the tough old man's guts, and hoped he'd make it all right.

He closed the hatch and fed new data into the autopilot. He sagged into the seat as the ship strained into a new course, then it eased off to a steady forward acceleration. He was ready to loop around another of Jupiter's moons, then around the giant planet itself, on a course that should defy pursuit unless it were previously known.

He flexed his arm. It was a little sorer now. He wondered when the drowsiness would hit him. He didn't want to trust the autopilot until he was safely past Jupiter; if a meteor or a derelict got in the way, it might take human wits to set up a new course safely.

He had all the radar units on now. The conic sweep forward showed the great bulge of Jupiter at one side; no blips in space. The three Plan Position screens, revolving through cross-sections of the sphere of space around him, winked and faded with blips but none near the center. He thought, I've made it. I've gotten away with it, and I ought to feel excited. Instead, he was only tired. He thought, I'll get up and fill a thermos with coffee, then I can sit here.

He unstrapped and began to rise. Then his eyes returned to one of the scopes.

This particular one was seldom used in space; it was for planet landings. It scanned ahead in a narrow horizontal band, like a sea vessel's surface sweep. He'd planned only to use it as he transited Jupiter, to cut his course in near to the atmosphere, and it was only habit that had made him glance at it. The bright green line showed no peaks, but at the middle, and for a little way to each side, it was very slightly uneven.

He thought, it's just something in the system, out of adjustment. He looked at the forward sweep. There were no blips dead ahead. He moved the adjustments of the horizontal sweep, blurred the line, brought it back to sharpness. Except in the middle. The blurriness there remained.

He opened a panel and punched automatic cross-checks, got a report that the instrument was in perfect order. He looked at the scope again. The blurred length had grown to either side. Clammy sweat began to form on his skin. He punched at the computers, set up a program that would curve the ship off its path, punched for safety verification, and activated the autopilot. He heard the drive's whine move higher, but felt no answering lateral acceleration. He punched for three G deceleration, working frantically to get strapped in. The drive shrieked but there was no tug at his body.

The blurred part of the green line was spreading.

He realized he was pressing against the side of his seat. That meant the ship was finally swerving. But he'd erased that program. And now, abruptly, deceleration hit him. He sagged forward against his straps, gasping for air. He heard a new whine as his seat

automatically began to turn, pulling in the straps on one side, as it maneuvered to face him away from the deceleration. He was crushed sideways for a while, then the seat locked and he pressed hard against the back of it. This he could take, though he judged it was five or six G's. He labored for breath.

The deceleration cut off and he was in free fall. His screens and scopes were dark. The drive no longer whined. He thought, something's got me. Something that can hide from radar, and control a ship from a distance like a fish on the end of a spear.

He tore at the straps, got free and leaped for the suit locker. He dressed in frantic haste, cycled the air lock . . . and found himself on the surface of a planet.

Panicked, he fled; then abruptly, where nothing had been, there was something solid in his path. He turned his face to avoid the impact and tried to get his arms in front of him. He crashed into something that did not yield. His arms slid around something, and without opening his eyes he knew the robot had him. He tried to fight, but his strength was pitiful. He relaxed and tried to think.

In his suit helmet radio the voice of the robot said, "We will put you to sleep now."

He fought frantically to break loose. His mind screamed. No! If you go to sleep now you'll never . . .

He was wrong.

His first waking sensation was delicious comfort. He felt good all over. He came a little more awake and his spaceman's mind began to reason: There's light gravity, and I'm supported by the armpits. No acceleration. I'm breathing something heavier than air, but it feels good in my lungs, and tastes good.

His eyelids unlocked themselves, and the shock of seeing was like a knife in his middle.

He was buried in the ice, looking out at the place where he and Waverill had stayed. He was far into the ice and could only see distortedly. Between him and the open were various things; rocks, eroded artifacts. At the edge of his vision on the right was a vaguely animal shape.

Terror made him struggle to turn his head. He couldn't; he was encased in something just tight enough to hold him. His nose and mouth were free, and a draft of the cloying atmosphere moved past them so that he could breathe. There was enough space before his

eyes for him to see the stuff swirling like a heavy fog. He thought, I'm being fed by what I breathe. I don't feel hungry. In horror, he forced the stuff out of his lungs. It was hard to exhale. He resisted taking any back in, but eventually he had to give up and then he fought to get it in. He tried to cry out, but the sound was a muffled nothing.

He yielded to panic and struggled for a while without accomplishing anything, except that he found that his casing did yield, very slowly, if he applied pressure long enough. That brought a little sanity, and he relaxed again until the exhaustion wore off.

There was movement in the vague shape at his right, and he felt a compulsion to see it more plainly. Even after it was in his vision, horrified fascination kept him straining until his head was turned toward it.

It was alive; obscenely alive, a caricature of parts of a man. There was no proper skin, but an ugly translucent membrane covered it. The whole was encased as Murdoch himself must be, and from the casing several pipes stretched back into the dark ice. The legs were entirely gone, and only stubs of arms remained, sufficient for the thing to hang from in its casing. Bloated lungs pulsed slowly, breathing in and out a misty something like what Murdoch breathed. The stomach was shrunken to a small repugnant sack, hanging at the bottom of what might be things evolved from liver and kidneys. Blood moved from the lungs through the loathsome mess, pumped by an overgrown heart that protruded from between the lungs. A little blood circulated up to what had once been the head. The skull was gone. The nose and mouth were one round hole where the nutrient vapor puffed in and out. The brain showed horrible and shrunk through the membrane. A pair of lidless idiot eyes stared unmovingly in Murdoch's direction. The whole jawless head was the size of Murdoch's two fists doubled up, if he could judge the size through the distortion of the ice.

Sick but unable to vomit, Murdoch forced his eyes away from the thing. Now the aliens spoke to him, from somewhere. "Pretty isn't he, Murdoch. He makes a good bank for the virus. You were right you know it does offer great longevity but it has its own ideas of what a host should be."

Murdoch produced a garbled sound and the aliens spoke again. "Your words are indistinct but perhaps you are asking how long it

took him to become this way. He was one of our first visitors who tried to steal from us. His plan was not as clever as your own which we found diverting though of course you had no chance against our science which is beyond your understanding." And, in answer to his moan, they said, "Do not be unphilosophical Murdoch you will find many thoughts to occupy your time."

I'll go mad, he thought. That's the way out!

But he doubted that even the escape of madness would be allowed. END

JACK WILLIAMSON

The Masked World

The planet wore a mask.

At ten million miles, it was a sullen yellow eye. At one million, a scarred and evil leer. Outside the smoking circle our landing-jets had sterilized, it was a hideous veil of hairy black tentacles and huge sallow blooms, hiding the riddle of its sinister genes.

On most worlds that we astronauts have found, the life is vaguely like our own. Similar nucleotides are linked along similar helical chain of DNA, carrying similar genetic messages. A similar process replicates the chain when the cells divide, to carry the complex blueprints for a particular root or eye or wing accurately down across ten thousand generations.

But even the genes were different here — enormously complicated. Here the simplest-seeming weed had more and longer chains of DNA than anything we had seen before. What was their message?

We had come to read it, with our new genetic micro-probe. A hundred precious tons of microscopic electronic gear, it was designed to observe and manipulate the smallest units of life. It could reach even those strange genes.

That was our mission.

Ours was the seventh survey ship to approach the planet. Six before us had been lost without trace. We were to find out why.

Our pilot was Lance Llandark. A lean hard man, silent and cold as the gray-cased micro-probe. We hated him — until someone learned why he had volunteered to come.

His wife had been pilot of the ship before us. When we knew that, we began to hear hidden tension in his tired voice, monotonously calling on every band: "Come in, Six . . . Come in Six . . ."

Six never came in.

For two days, we watched the planet. The shallow ditch our jets had dug. The charred stumps. The jungle beyond — the visible mask of those monstrous genes — rank, dark, utterly alien.

At the third dawn, Lance Llandark took two of us out in a 'copter. Flying a grid over the landing area, we mapped six shallow pock-marks on that scowling wilderness, where our ships must have landed.

We dropped into the newest crater, where black stumps jutted like broken teeth out of queerly bare red muck. A yellow-scummed stream oozed across it. By the stream we found a fine-boned human skeleton.

A nightmare plant stood guard beside the bones. Its thick leaves were strangely streaked, twisted with vegetable agony, half poison spine and half-blighted bloom. Shapeless blobs of rotting fruit were falling from it over those slender bones.

Lance Llandark stood up.

"Her turquoise thunderbird." He showed us the bit of blackened silver and blue-veined stone. "Back on Terra . . . Back when we were student pilots . . . We bought it from an Indian in an old, old town called Santa Fe."

He bent again.

"Lilith?" he whispered. "Lilith, what killed you?"

We found no other bones, nothing even to tell us what force or poison kept the creeping jungle back from that solitary plant. We left at dusk. Tenderly, Lance Llandark brought the gathered bones. Carefully we carried a few leaves and dried pods from that crazy sentinel plant. We found no other clue.

Patiently, day by forty-hour day, we searched the other sites. We found jet marks and stumps and teeming weeds, but nothing like that tormented nightmare over Lilith Llandark's skeleton. We found no wreckage. Nothing to show how the planet had murdered the lost expeditions.

Day by eternal day, the unknown leered from the secret places of its genes. It was all vegetable. We saw no animal movement, heard no cry or insect hum. The silence became suffocating.

Day after desperate day, we returned to the micro-probe.

"The answer's in the genes," Lance Llandark whispered grimly. "We've no other chance."

He kept the probe running on the strangest genes of all; those from the plant nightmare that had grown beside his wife. They were

like nothing else on the planet. The double-stranded chains of DNA were monstrously long; many of the nucleotide links held copper or arsenic atoms.

"Queer!" Lance kept muttering. "No copper or arsenic in other plants here. I'd like to know why."

He was running when we heard the woman scream. In that stifling quiet, her cry unnerved us all. We crowded down to the lock.

Tattered, stained with blood-colored juices, she slipped through those coiled, constricting creepers. She splashed out into the open ditch, waving a filthy rag. Halfway to the ship, she fell to the mud.

Lance Llandark led three of us to bring her in. She whimpered and looked up. Tears streaked the grime on her wasted face.

"Lance!" she gasped. "My dear."

"Lilith —" But he shrank back suddenly. "I found Lilith dead!"

"I am nearly dead." She tried weakly to get up. "You see, we're all marooned out there in the bush. Emergency landing, when we tried to get off. Wrecked our astrogation gear. Need your spare astro-pilot —"

"Back." He swung on us. "Back aboard!"

"What's wrong?" We were stunned. "She's your wife —"

"Aboard! Instanter!"

We obeyed his deadly voice.

"Help —" she whispered faintly behind us in the mud. "Survivors — need astro-pilot — to plot our way home —"

The clanging lock cut off her voice.

Angrily we turned on Lance Llandark.

"Hold it!" he snapped. "I'm not crazy — the planet is. Come along to the micro-probe. I'm probing a seed from the plant we found by Lilith's bones. It puzzled me. So much of it was —"

In spite of the tension, he had to grope for a word to express meaning.

"Arbitrary! Those shapeless leaves, twisted stalk, that sterile seed. The copper and arsenic in those needless links. Too many genes had no function. No use at all!

"I'd just got the key, when that thing screamed. The copper and arsenic atoms are not genetic instructions to the plant. They're a message to us — words replicated a trillion times, and concealed in every cell of the plant!"

"Words?" someone whispered blankly. "Words in the atoms?"

"Written in binary code." His scowl was bleakly triumphant. "That weed's a mutant, you see. The real Lilith formed the first cell with her micro-probe. She left it — I suppose in her own body — as a message that no pseudo-Lilith could intercept."

Outside that something screamed again.

"Call each copper atom a dot," he whispered. "Call each arsenic a dash. Taken in order along the chains of DNA, they do encode a message. The computer's decoding it now."

He punched a button, and the printer whirred.

TO WHOEVER COMES . . . GIVE NO AID TO ANYONE . . . GET OFF THIS PLANET . . . ITS LIFE IS PSEUDOMORPHIC . . . DON'T LET IT LEAVE . . . JUST TAKE MY LOVE TO LANCE LLANDARK . . . FROM LILITH, HIS WIFE . . . AND GET OFF THIS PLANET, FAST . . .

Outside, it uttered a frantic, bubbling screech.

We did get off the planet, and we expect to stay away. END

JULIAN F. GROW

The Trouble With Truth

I

"The WPA stinks," Sara said.

Now, I've known Sara four years. We've been engaged four times and married once — only marriage, not matrimony — so I pretty much know what to expect from her. I didn't speak.

She rummaged in her belt pouch and waved something from it under my nose. It was a plastic tube, pointed and dark at one end. "Do you know what this is?" She said it loud enough to make people at other tables look away from the program on the Rutlan Community Room cubeo.

As it happened, I did know what it was. "Sure," I said. "It's a pencil."

"A pencil!" she hissed back. "A pencil such as they've been making for, I don't know, maybe three hundred years. Plastic and a black core, that's all. An atavistic, human writing instrument. But there is more real, solid news in this one pencil than in all the gadgets and wires and whirling wheels of the whole stinking WPA, your World Press Association! And in one edition of my poor little *Argus,* that funny little country monthly . . ."

Fortunately, at this point, the familiar Thomas Edison Pageant broadcast ended and the announcer on the cubeo rang his Town Crier bell. Copies of the Northeast Region edition of the *Sun* began pouring out of the Fotofax slot. As a matter of habit I rose and got a *Sun* for each of us, Sara taking hers with a snort, and sat down again as the announcer gave the World Press Association opening format:

"An informed people is a free people," he droned. "Read your *Sun* and know the truth. Stand by now for an official synopsis of the day's happenings prepared by the World Press Association."

We both got up to go, leaving our *Suns* behind as most in the room later would too. "Oh, I almost forgot," Sara said, the way she does when she's been thinking about something all day. "That reminds me. I'm pregnant."

"Ah?" I said. "Okay. Good." Not just marriage this time: matrimony it was. We walked out, and she held my hand, a thing she doesn't normally do.

On the belt-way to Milbry and Sara's house, some 48 kiloms north of Rutlan, we talked about getting wed. I lay back in the seat of my car and through the roof watched the December snow fall — making plans with only half a mind for moving from my Nork apartment, deciding whether to keep both cars, arguing whether the commute to Nork took 40 or 45 minutes, choosing a sex for the baby. Mostly I was thinking about what Sara had said about the *Sun*. I'm a reporter, after all.

When the car locked onto the exit tramway and started deceleration, I suggested that we go to the *Argus* office first. Her apartment was just upstairs anyway. "We had better," I said, "have a little talk."

The demand sensor of the radiant heater in front of the *Argus* building was, as usual, out of order, so we didn't linger. Sara pressed her ID bracelet against the night lock and the door swung open with a squawk that lifted my hair.

Once when I asked her why she didn't get it fixed, she said it saved the price of a cowbell on a spring. I told her then that Vermont had no business in the 21st century, and she said the 21st century had no business in Vermont, the 19th had been more fun. Fun! She said if I didn't like Vermont I could go back to Nork, and she gave it the old fashioned pronunciation, Newark, I suppose just to irritate me. As I recall, I did go back to Nork, that time, but that was a long time ago.

This time, anyway, I pushed her gently down into her chair, the worn old oak swivel chair in front of the disreputable rolltop desk, with that battered old electric typewriter of her father's and her grandfather's. For all I know, her five-great-grandfather Elias Witherill started the *Argus* with it in 1847, two centuries ago.

"You say the WPA is bad," I said. I tapped the typewriter. "There's your real villain. And there —" pointing at the ancient offset press she printed the *Argus* on and waving at the framed, yel-

lowed copy of Vol. 1, No. 1 of the *Argus* hanging on the wall — and "there!"

It began with the typewriter, I informed her. The printing press came first, but typewriters really did the job.

Maybe the actual beginning was the manuscript of the ancient monks: impersonal and uniform. But handwriting was hardly widespread in the Dark Ages, so let's take it from the typewriter.

Handwriting was an individual thing. Transcribed speech; and speech is an individual's articulated thought. Printing is based on handwriting, but it's stylized and made uniform for mass production.

That leaves a big gap between script and print — the difference between personal mental process and a merely mechanical process of duplication.

Look at it this way. In the days when handwriting was general, a man believed a personal message if it came from someone he trusted. And he'd know it came from that person because he recognized the handwriting, just as he'd recognize the person's voice, or his face. The writing was, in effect, an extension of the reader's own senses or experience, into a distant situation.

Then with better communications came more handwritings, and more distant situations. Then the typewriter, and then the dictatyper. Everybody's writing was just like everybody else's, and there was a lot of it.

Everything was in type, even the identifying name at the end of a personal letter, the autograph ("Signature," Sara snigged) . . . signature, then. For a long time businessmen's letters had been signed by their stenographers anyway. ("Secretaries, blockhead," Sara muttered, and she sighed.)

The point is, I continued, that except for a few cases of eccentricity — I glanced at her belt pouch with the pencil in it — handwriting had disappeared. The written word — the reader's distant experience — was in type: dictatype, teletype, phototype, printer's type . . . newspapers, books, advertising, business letters, memoranda, personal letters, everything.

Before, people had tended to believe most of what was handwritten, and almost nothing that was in type. With everything in type, they got tired of deciding which to believe and began to believe either every word, or none. It wasn't good.

It led to the Edict, and of course to the World Press Association

and its relentless search for truth.

"Gah," said Sara. "Truth is an overrated commodity. Let's go upstairs and get ourselves something to eat."

Her voice was muffled coming from the jon. But I knew she was reading from a document she kept framed there, and I knew well what it said.

The Edict

Be it enacted by the unanimous voice of these United Nations of America, Europe, Africa and Free Asia, in congress this 14th day of April, 1997 that, henceforth:

No person, group of persons, organization, or governing body of any town, city, state or nation existing under the articles of this federation, shall print, or cause to be printed, or knowingly permit to be printed, or disseminate or knowingly permit to be disseminated any word, phrase or work, excepting only certain scientific treaties of explicit speculative nature as hereinafter defined by statute, that is not both wholly and in part demonstrably true.

"Great Judah," I heard Sara say. "What a disaster!"

"Stop muttering and come out here," I shouted. "You said food."

"I'll be with you in a minute. I'm almost finished undressing." Since we weren't expecting company I had already hung up my coverall — a new though serviceable one of diaphragm-weave thermoplast, bought especially for Vermont and warranted for 30 degrees below.

With or without the chiton and hose she favored over coveralls, Sara was a handsome woman. Strong, straight and, I knew, a fit mother for our children. But right at the moment, she was angry at me all over again.

She strode to the foodbar. "You!" she said, chucking a handful of steakpaks into the infra, twisting the dial. "You and your Edict!" she said, hurling potatopaks into a pan of hot water and yelping when the water splashed on her thigh. "You and your stupid, buzzing, clicking, inhuman WPA!" she said, filling milkpaks with water, cramming them into holders and slapping them sloshing down on the table.

"You talk about type and belief and truth. Truth! You have the gall to keep on parroting those same old defenses about that electronic scrap heap you have the effrontery to call a — a Greeley! Elias Witherill thought Horace Greeley was a rotten newspaperman, but rotten or not, he was still too good to have that whining junkpile named after him.

"What does a tangle of wires know about newspapering. What does WPA know about writing a story? What do *you* know about news?"

"Now, Sara," I said.

"Don't now-sara me, dammit. You still fail utterly to realize that news is more than just what happened, when, where, to whom, how and why. It's what might still happen, even what might have happened otherwise or never did happen, if that's part of the story.

"The Edict forbids every bit of it!

"But most important, news is expressed — and this you simply cannot see — expressed in basic human terms, designed to arouse the basic human curiosity or sympathy that makes an abstract description palatable *to people*. If you like, it *tricks* people into informing themselves. The *Sun,* your wonderful *Sun,* sticks to facts and statistics, and make a *hurricane* dull. It doesn't tell about people, it lists numbers!

"Real news has, by God, Heart! Without it, a newspaper is just a list, a long list that . . . nobody . . will . . . READ!"

"Okay," I said. "Okay! This is better?" I tramped over to a framed *Argus* front page down the wall from Vol. 1, No. 1, that was dated April 17, 1904. She started to protest, but I overrode her. "Listen to this," I said. And read from a story given prominent play on the page:

NEAR-DEATH . . . AND TRAGEDY

"WHERE'S TINKLE?" HER FIRST QUESTION

Death's clammy hand brushed a golden-haired moppet Tuesday afternoon.

Gentlewomen swooned in the crowd that quickly gathered at the corner of South Main and Elm Streets, so

near had tragedy come to that little girl, Irma Littlefield, aged four, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Adoniram Littlefield of 324 Elm Street, that afternoon. Men wept unashamedly when little Irma, lying crumpled in the dust, stirred her tiny limbs and opened eyes of deepest blue, even as her shrieking mother flew to the side of her baby.

Death had passed by Irma, yes. Yet the uncaring runaway freight wagon that had so nearly snuffed out her brief existence had dealt the child a blow even as cruel, more savage; perhaps as grievous a hurt as would have been the sweet baby's death to her stricken parent, sobbing now with the child's golden head in her lap.

For from Irma's ashen lips, cold still with the awful nearness of the Grim Reaper, the first faltering words were,

"Where's Tinkle, my little doggie?"

Tinkle, a curly-haired mongrel to the unseeing world, nothing to the insensible, crushing wheels of the now-distant freight wagon. Tinkle, more than a dog, more than a pet, more than it is given us in our wisdom to know, to that little child. A friend, confidante, companion in all her infant games and journey of the imagination.

"Where's Tinkle?" Alas, Irma.

"That's plenty of that," I told Sara. "Is that what you mean by Heart? Is that what you mean by 'news'?

"It wouldn't even rate two lines in your own *Argus* today.

"But don't try to tell me that the major newspapers changed from that mawkish, overblown sentimentality about unimportant or nonexistent things. They just printed the same sort of drivel using governments and countries instead of people. They cluttered themselves up with portentous speculation and conflicting interpretation until the actual relation of real events was crowded off the page -- because plain facts weren't exciting enough to sell newspapers!

"Granted, country people are curious about their neighbors, and have activities too small and numerous to make the *Sun*. That's why semi-controlled monthlies like the *Argus* exist. But for the important stuff, only the exact truth will do."

I thought a minute before going on. Why can't a civilization that will some day land on the moon, calm an angry woman? I

started by pulling Sara, struggling, onto my lap.

"You think — hold still! — a Reporter doesn't have to know much," I told her. She nodded violent assent. "You think all he has to do, all day long, is sit by the Scoop and keep Flacks and psychos away. You think I just sit there while news goes in the Scoop and comes out the Fotofax slot.

"To some extent, you're right. WPA doesn't encourage heavy thought on the job — just that I be big enough and quick enough to keep some fool from hollering fake advertising plugs or obscenities or nonsense into the mouthpiece, or maybe smashing the Scoop the way some try to do.

"But I *think*. I take pleasure in thinking, in figuring things out. Sure, I keep it quiet, permanent Civil Service status or not. If I didn't keep my mouth shut I'd never have been promoted from Inaplis to WPA Center Nork.

"Sara, I am in charge of the No. One Scoop in the Northeast Region for the Greeley — all right, the Groves-Rudermann Eidetic Integrator. Top spot in the Guild, Sara! Because I keep my eyes open and my mouth shut, and I tend my Scoop."

"But all the while you're faithfully guarding that hole-in-the-wall, you're thinking big fat thoughts," she snarled. But she had nestled into a comfortable position in my lap.

"Faith and fat, your favorite shock words," I said. "Yes, I do think. I think the Edict was a good thing. I think the WPA is a good and necessary organization. And I think that Cybernetic Democracy is the best form of government that men have figured out yet."

"Speak for yourself," Sara muttered. "I don't like being told how to live by a pinball machine."

Don't hurl antiquities at me, I told her. Cybernetic Democracy and WPA are root and branch of the same tree. The Edict set up WPA, and WPA worked, and Congris came as a logical development, and it works. The voice came before the brain (Sara mumbled something about a Cheshire Cat, whatever that is) but the point is, now we have both.

Look, it surely wasn't good the way government was before. Stands to reason as long as men are making the laws, a lot of those laws are bound to be stupid, or unfair, or just plain corrupt — like the men that made them.

But electrons don't lie, and they can't be bought, and they don't make mistakes.

So in every community room throughout the UN, there are Senators. Microphones linked direct by microwave to Congris, the biggest cybernetic machine in the world, buried deep in rock somewhere in the Midwest. All you or any other citizen has to do is clear your ID with the Page, there protecting his Senator just like I do my Scoop, and speak your mind.

That complaint, or suggestion or whatever it is, goes straight to Congris, and Congris tallies it. If enough people have said the same thing, maybe that call of yours is the one that tips the balance: a new general law may be made, an old one changed.

Why, don't you realize that if enough people asked Congris to abolish itself and bring back representative human government, it would? That directive was the first one programmed, even before the civil codes of a hundred thousand big and little governments were fed in, compiled and codified. But it'll never happen.

And if Congris sees it's got just a local matter, it passes your call down to the district level, and the same computer that settles everything from tax bills to traffic violations to murder may publish an ordinance — and that's that.

It's incorruptible, not like man-made law. It's impartial, it's just and impersonal. It's the greatest good for the greatest number, and as sure as 51 beats 49, there never was democracy purer than we've got now.

Sara! Wake up!

She sat up yawning, and stretched. "I, and my father before me, have been writing editorials against Congris for forty-two years. Since 2005," Sara informed me drowsily. "Why don't you tell me all about it?"

Then she sat up, eyes wide with interest. "You are blushing with anger clear down to your navel," she exclaimed. "I never knew you did that!"

"And you are flat clear down to yours," I snapped. The words I regretted immediately. They were atavistic, impulsive, and even untrue; a violation of ethics and my Reporter's code.

"I am not," she said with composure. "But I won't be petty again, so go on, I guess."

"Well," I mumbled, "all I was going to say is that if it works for

government it works for news too."

She sat up very straight in my lap and sing-songed like a schoolgirl: "Where the objective of cybernetic Democracy is justice impartially rendered, the objective of cybernetic journalism and of the World Press Association is truth impartially told. 'For you will be told the truth, and the truth will keep you secure.' Foof."

"Well, it's — it's true, dammit," I said. "You aren't, you of all people aren't, going to tell me that news isn't just as important as government!

"Without that Fotofax printer in every home and public cubeo set, how are people going to know what's going on, and what laws have been passed? And how well those laws are obeyed? Why, without the *Sun* we wouldn't have an informed public. We wouldn't have democracy at all!"

"You," she said crisply, "are confusing news with the *Sun*. News is a description of events, presented with human intelligence in a manner to interest and stimulate other human intelligence. The *Sun* is whatever that monstrous washing-machine decides is proper to have happened, presented in a manner to interest no one except other washing-machines."

"Very glib," I replied. "But at least you will admit that news is important. Then doesn't it seem sensible to give it the same protection that government has? Protection from error and stupidity and corruption?"

"Protection?" she wailed. "It's so protected nobody sees it — nobody sees it — nobody cares!

"That hairy old item you read off the wall. You're right, I wouldn't use it today any more than the *Sun* would. But suppose Little Irma there had been killed by the runaway. We'd both print it . . . I'd tell the story, a story that might make just one more parent careful that day and save one more child. The *Sun* would put it in a list, something like:

DEATHS, Accidental
MILBRY — Littlefield
Irma: 4 dau/M&M
Adoniram L-, 324 Elm,
struck by wagon Elm at S. Main.

". . . and that would be that for a little blonde-haired, blue-eyed, four-year-old statistic! Why, suppose . . ."

"Supposition!" I interrupted. "You can't waste time with supposition! People are entitled to facts. They get facts in the *Sun*. They know that every item in that sheet is written, checked and checked again by the special media circuits of Congris we call WPA. Those same cybernetic banks that make the laws, trace the lawbreakers, do the thousands of things that make our civilization possible, they filter, sift and sort the news as it comes in from the Scoops.

"A Fireman reports on a fire, a Policeman reports on a crime, a Doctor a death or a citizen any important event. Every bit goes to the Greeley and if it's important enough, comes out in the next regional, national or world *Sun*. All the Fireman or citizen or whatever has to do, is press his ID tag to the sensor, for identity, veracity and authority audit, and have a Second there for corroboration.

"It's the news, straight news, all the news that's important enough to print, and written so it can be understood . . ."

"By a washing-machine," Sara broke in. "Sterilized, deodorized, dehumanized news — and still it stinks."

"Dehumanized! Certainly it's dehumanized! There's none," I said emphatically, "of that so-called human element about it! Why, the whole point is to eliminate human error, human prejudice, human partiality, human ignorance!"

Sara sat up suddenly, driving her rump right into the pit of my stomach. "Oh," she said, "I almost completely forgot. What do you want for Christmas?"

Torn between pain and exasperation, I believe I kept myself in check admirably. From clenched teeth I informed her I was intelligent enough not to exchange unwanted gifts of equal value, moral enough to abhor Crimmus. All I could ever want, I said was not to be bludgeoned in the belly with a butt.

I asked her to please get up, and she did, cheerfully.

III

Driving down to Nork the next morning, I dropped off the feeder tramway onto the fast belt south. Hanging from the feeder hook, waiting for an open space in the line of cars, it occurred to me a lot of people were on the road, both Nork-bound and northbound to Montral.

"Crimmus shopping," I said aloud, remembering, and swore mildly at the slip. While the day — tomorrow, it was — still meant something to some, it's not the kind of rational deformity you generally talk about.

Sara would, of course.

But I long ago faced the fact that Sara's a romantic. As neuroses go, that's a mild one, and didn't even call automatically for correction. All that it meant was that she was restricted to the C Population Zones that she wouldn't leave anyway, and a little outside special tutoring in the Realities for our children.

It wouldn't even affect my job or Civil Service rating. Still, if Vermont were ever zoned Population B, there might be trouble. She wouldn't leave Milbry.

Oho, I thought to myself, locking onto the Nork belt and double-checking the destination coordinates, I am lapsing into speculation — risky ground for a Reporter. The code expressly forbids speculation, and with reason.

Speculation uses an inadequate number of arbitrarily chosen half-truths to shape conflicting possibilities, all but one of which time must prove to be false. Truth is only what has already happened. Conjecture is a laboratory matter for trained scientists to dabble in under laboratory controls. Judging from the scarcity of scientific news these days, conjecture wasn't working there either.

Having neatly boxed myself into an uninformed generality, I grimaced, took a dozer and slept all the way to Nork.

Back in my stag cubicle at the dorm, I fingered my chin in what must have been pure atavism; it wasn't even close to time for a depilatory booster. Sara — Sara, Sara, Sara — once urged me to skip the pill some month and grow a beard, a mustache or something, like her Four-Great-Grandfather Isaac, Elias Witherill's son. The one that was a war major, in 1861.

I told her it was an aberration for her to have our sort of relationship with a grandfather image, and besides a beard did mean body hair in general and that itched. She said, well, I could instead get a false beard, like Santa Claus, and then we had a really big argument about what sorts of vulgarity were amusing and which were not.

That broke off our second engagement, I think it was. Yes, the second. Now she was pregnant, on purpose, we were going to get wed, and I had just seven minutes to get to work.

My Scoop is in the usual sound-proofed, glass-walled, isol-booth you'll see anywhere in Nork. The fact that it is in a plaza at the 75th level and thus under the open sky, a thing that bothers a lot of Nork people, is to me more than mitigated by the view from the vestibule. You can see, beyond the Liberty Statue International Memorial floating in New York Bay over the former site of Times Square, to the Long Island shore at Mineola and up into Conicut.

Today there wasn't time to look around. I formally relieved Vern, the late-nightside Reporter, and had barely punched my ID against the time clock when the District Reporter's face came on the viewer for visual check.

"Reporter One-C Ben Marli, US-6044-230 988 368GN 0800/24 Deck 2047," I said. The face nodded, faded.

Vern was still there when the viewer went blank. Most of us punch in exactly on time and punch out exactly four hours later, to the minute. Vern always comes on early and leaves late because, I think, his father was convicted of advertising under the Edict, and Vern is still trying to clear the family number.

"Quiet night, Ben. Just one accident," he said. I was leafing through the little pile of dupes — simultypes of the stories that had gone into the Scoop, with the ibems of the Source and his or her Second — and was seeing this for myself, so I just grunted.

Then one, the accident he'd spoken of, brought me up sharp.

On the face it was a straight item: the Source, Retailer Mark Neman, US2109-590-412 663CC, a visitor to Nork, had told of an accident involving one Housewife Ela Brand in a store on the 24th level, unnamed, of course. She fell on an antique glass bowl, which broke and cut her neck severely. The store's security guard substantiated the story, adding that the woman had nearly bled to death from a severed carotid artery before arrival of the store doctor. He had been delayed by the nearly unheard-of circumstance of the birth of twins in the store's infirmary.

First aid by an unidentified passerby saved the accident victim's life, according to both Source and Second.

The doctor was unable to perform as Second because, while the victim was physically able to go on her way after normal treatment, she had had to be clinicked for "irrational grief reaction" over loss of the bowl she had fallen on. Even so, the novel injury, rare these days, would have made it a play story in *Sun* editions across the nation, at a quiet time like the end of the year.

"Vern, Vern," I said. "Don't you know a Plant when you hear one? Surely you should recognize a Flack's work, if anybody could," I told him. Maybe it was unkind to talk about Flacks, when his father had been one; but any time the truth hurts, it's the pain of healing.

"It's a pretty elaborate plant, but phony as faith," I said more gently. "That bowl fairly screams 'Gift.' Are you forgetting tomorrow's Crimmus, and that all over the country Flacks are pulling tricks like this?"

Vern, pale, said defensively, "Ben, look. The Source's ID checked without a hitch. He's a retailer in Dals, Tex. The guard's cleared too. The doctor verified by phone, from the clinic. You going to tell me that a doctor would lie or be mistaken about an accident like that, or that it could be faked in a crowded store, or that any woman'd risk bleeding to death for Flack money?

"I know the Flacks are out in droves. But this has got to be a legitimate story."

"It's a phony," I said. "The gift is just too integral. Don't be slow to punch the button on a deal like this."

IV

It *was* a phony, of course. Despite Vern's failure to signal for a double-check, the WPA had delayed publication and run the circuits. Similar but not identical stories had gone into Scoops in 14 major cities, all at the same time today; each involved a near death or disaster, with a reference to a recognizable gift that couldn't be edited out. In each case the Source was a retailer visiting that city — and yet the stores and 14 retailers matched up perfectly.

In our particular "accident," the woman turned out to be a clandestine actress — they had all virtually disappeared after the Edict, needless to say — hired for her ability to fall and fake injury convincingly. She hadn't cut herself on the glass, only burst a hidden capsule of her own blood drawn off weeks before. The actual gash was made with a shard of glass by the "unidentified passerby" — really the Flack himself — when he saw the store doctor coming. The artificially-stimulated birth of twins that had delayed the doctor, had also been part of the Plant.

The doctor was found innocent. The guard, only true victim of the plot, was cited as unobservant but not held for correction. The Flack, the actress, the mother of the twins and the visiting retailer

were, before my shift was half over, sentenced for conspiracy to deceive and falsely advertise in violation of the Edict, as were the culprits in the 13 other Plants. Their conviction was the play story, all editions in the 10:00 hours *Sun*.

All that, to remind people about gifts, and Crimmus. The WPA had exposed the plot, and printed the truth about it as no human newsreporting agency could have.

Even so, I wondered, if, despite the Edict and WPA, the Flacks hadn't gotten their Crimmus reminder before the public, after all. I stared in at the Scoop.

Physically, the Scoop is just a short, thick tube projecting from a blank wall; it ends in a round orifice covered by a grille, and is adjustable to the height of the speaker. Below it is an ID sensor plate, and above it, the viewer and the preamble to the Edict.

The Scoop isn't large. But it gives man a voice no man ever had before: it could bring his words almost instantly to men throughout the world. It is the ultimate in the communication that mankind has sought from the dawning of intelligence. Only one condition must be met, and only one thing those words must, according to the Edict, be:

". . . Wholly and in part demonstrably true."

Think about it a minute. In the earliest days, communication was between two men only. If the first lied, only two people, the liar and the victim, were affected. Later, as civilization developed through improved communication — more abstract lingual concepts, systems of writing, methods of transportation — a word could travel faster and farther, and affect more and more people. The numbers hearing a man's speech and being touched by his words grew at the same time larger and closer to him, as his methods of addressing them went farther and farther out.

Great truths were produced by closer collaboration, as communications improved. But with imperfect regulation, great lies went out too, magnified by the same communications. One man's lies could poison an entire nation, and afflict the entire world.

It had to stop and, after the Third War, the Edict stopped it.

Just as cybernetic democracy brought true justice to government, the incorruptible and infallible machines brought just truth to communication, through control of mass media.

Of course it meant the end of written and portrayed fiction; for

who could tell when a fiction, faultily understood would be believed, and a lie derived?

Of course it meant the end of competitive advertising and, to a large extent, competing products. One depilatory is not truly, demonstrably better than another. No car is superior to another in appreciable degree. And no institution requiring false images of such superiority can contribute to a civilization facing reality. If a product can't be sold on the basis of true fact, it has no place on the market.

Of course it meant other necessary changes in the economy; for without predictions of mythical profits or hypothetical success, banned by the Edict, who would invest? What human could surely forecast profits or success? Congris now decides such matters, and the result has been a stable economy.

Of course it meant alteration of personal relationships. All too often the so-called "love" of one another was founded on deliberate deception, or self-delusion fostered by fiction. "Love" letters, and with them the extravagant posturings of romance, ceased almost to exist, through postal censorship under the Edict. All but known truth was eliminated from schoolbooks, to the detriment only of the romanticized, and thus probably false, past. Surrounded by fact, human relationships have become factual. Hypocrisy, deceit, exaggeration are against the law.

Granted, the per capita ratio of marriages, and weddings once a desired child is to be born, have decreased. But so have the divorces, both overt and covert, that once resulted from disillusion.

In the same way, parents and children assess their true feelings toward each other and, sometimes, rearrange themselves — or on application are rearranged. It makes for a far more practical allotment, often, than the hit-or-miss distribution of children previously.

Life, freed from the phantoms and fairies inspired by spurious children's tales, by adult daydreams, deception and delusion, is less complex, more direct than it was 50 years ago. It permits a far greater attention to the details of present existence; for once you realize how little good it does to dwell on an unknowable future, the immediate and provable present becomes important indeed.

If sometimes this present seems to lack a luster that older people say they remember, at least no flaws have been concealed by that luster. At last mankind can see exactly what he is, and where he stands.

Myth, prediction, speculation, promise, aspiration, hope: these fog the mind with illusion and paralyze the hand with doubt. The present suffices for itself.

V

All the wrong things were in the face of the man I saw approaching now, through the tube from the elevator. You know how you can spot the dreamers? I could see it on this one 50 yards away, and I swore, because it was almost time for my shift to end.

He came on, hurrying with that expression in his eyes, a little girl trotting after him. They were father and daughter. Both had the look, though he seemed a little old to have a young child.

He passed the outer gate well enough, fumbling his ID against the lockplate and fidgeting during the seconds it took for preliminary verification to come. The lock clicked and he burst in, pulling the girl after him.

"We wish to report . . ." he began. I waved at him to shut up. "Name, number and duty," I said. "That's the routine." Of course the information had typed out from the banks before he got in.

"Oh. I'm sorry." I think he really was. "My name is Karl Onlon, professor of elementary biology, downstairs." That meant he tended a teaching machine at the center midtown branch of the university. "Number . . . my number is —" and he peered at his ID "— ah, US1006929 113 274CE."

The point of asking for name, number and duty is to let the Source cool down a bit. He had, a little, so I said, "Okay, what's your story?"

"We wish to report signs of the presence of a herd of small ruminant animals in Central Park Memorial Plaza," he said. He waved toward the patch of white-mottled brown about a kilometer away, where dirt and rocks and a whole lake had been raised to rooftop level for an open-air park. Naturally, that was done when pointless things were still being done.

"What you tell me doesn't matter as far as appearing in the *Sun* is concerned," I told him. "But I have to know details before I can pass you in to the Scoop. The World Press Association decides on the stories." He nodded. "You are the Source?"

"Ah . . . actually, no," Onlon said. "I'm the Second. My daughter Gini —" he'd been standing with his arm around the little girl, and

squeezed her shoulder "— is the, uh, Source. But she is a very sensible person, and I will vouch for — Second — anything she tells you."

Truly, I was already getting a little uncomfortable with this pair. The girl hadn't said anything, but she stood looking grave and important, and something else, too, up at her father. Open pride, it looked like. Yet sometimes she almost smiled. He was earnest enough, except when he looked down at her.

I was weighing all this while I listened with half an ear to the story. This wasn't a Flack, or a Flack's trick. That I was certain of. You can tell. Deviates don't come in father-daughter pairs, so it wasn't an obscenity kick. And this wasn't a Scoop-smash.

I didn't think it was a news story, either. But Onlon seemed quite convinced that this pack of animals that left the tracks were rare, not only in Nork but anywhere. The tracks were distinctive, he said. And the girl, whose voice matched her face, grave yet with a kind of . . . happiness in it, did seem sensible. So I passed them in, to the Scoop.

Odd, I thought of Sara as I did it.

"I don't think this will make the paper," I warned them. "Children don't make good Sources. And your being her father weakens the Second. This herd, or whatever it was, could have been a dog or rat pack . . . there are still some in Central Park. But the Greeley'll decide. Go on in."

As the glass door swung shut behind them, he held it and said, "They're early, you see." And I swear the little girl giggled.

I watched her reach up to the sensor plate with her ID.

They weren't in the Scoop cubicle long, for Ron Orbin, my relief, reached the top of the elevator just as the girl started to talk into the Scoop, and he was opening the vestibule door when the pair came out. Ron, was, of course, on the dot of noon.

The father was talking to the girl as Ron checked in at the time clock. "There, Gini, I promised you, and we tried," I heard him say. She thanked me, still grave and almost smiling, and he thanked me, and they left. I was glad to see them go.

"Quiet morning, Ron," I said. That reminded me of Vern, and Vern's blunder, and suddenly that made me edgy. I went in to the Scoop and tore off the dupe of the Onlon report.

The first warning I had was the slug, "CHURCH," stamped at

the end of their transmission on signal from the Greeley. It meant the Greeley had evaluated the transmission and referred it to the editorial level.

And that was wrong, way wrong.

Every trade has its vulgar and, some would say, irreverent catchwords. Actual churches had become pretty rare as Congris took over more and more direction of public life. You can depend on advice you get from a cybernetic system that doesn't stop eating if you stop asking. So as religion dwindled in the WPA we came to call the Greeley's editorials "sermons," and the ratiocinating levels of the Greeley, "Church." It's rather juvenile, I suppose.

Still the Onlon transmission was slugged "CHURCH." I looked at the father's Second report, and saw why.

"THE STORY I TOLD TO GAIN ENTRANCE HERE WAS A JOKE," he had said. "THERE WERE NO TRACKS OF TINY REINDEER IN CENTRAL PARK MEMORIAL PLAZA . . . AT LEAST NONE WHOSE TRACKS I SAW . . .

PLEASE . . . WHOMEVER IT MAY CONCERN . . . DO NOT BLAME THE REPORTER WHO LET US IN . . . HE IS TRAINED ONLY TO RECOGNIZE COLD TRUTH AND COLD LIES . . . AND HAS NO EXPERIENCE WITH JOKES . . . WHICH ARE NEITHER . . . I FULLY UNDERSTAND THAT . . . IN OUR SOCIETY . . . A JOKE IS A LIE AND A CRIME . . . I THINK THAT IS A TRUE CRIME . . . THANK YOU . . .

AND I'M SORRY . . .

Bad, bad, bad for me. Beyond a possible editorial about these "jokes," the Church would ignore the matter. But the fact I had passed a lie would show on my performance audit, and it wouldn't look good; even so, the treatment I got from the Civil Service would be a lot gentler than the things I was thinking about myself. I doubted that Onlon would even get more than a reprimand — he apparently meant no harm. He would be separated from the child, of course.

As for the girl's transmission, it was shocking and stupid. I jammed the dupe in my belt-pouch, and went out without a word to Ron, to start the trip to Sara and Vermont.

I was poor company when I got there. Sara tried every trick she knew to find out what the trouble was, for naturally I told her there was trouble. But I couldn't yet make myself tell her how

I'd been duped, by a professor and a child.

Finally she dragged me off to the Milbry Community Room to, as she said, "dissolve my unwept tears in humanity's soothing sea." Knowing full well it was Crimmuseve didn't help me a bit.

As I feared, the gaiety of Crimmus was rank in the room: a lot of excited talk, snatches of humming. And even, when the Fotofax bell sounded, somebody said, "Ring out, wild bells," and a few people laughed out loud Though most looked around guiltily.

I got up automatically to get our copies of the *Sun* as the cubeo announcer went into the WPA opening format:

"An informed people is a free people. Read your *Sun* and know the truth. Stand by now for an official synopsis of the day's happenings prepared by the World Press Association." That was the standard formula. But then he departed from the standard, and it rattled him. I sat next to Sara and watched, interested.

"I have been directed," he said, "to call your full attention to the editorial on the front page of your *Sun*." Good grief, I thought: Church! Surely not the Onlon thing! The announcer looked around at him rather wildly, then blurted: "I now turn you over to the Orator, for a direct-voice proclamation of this editorial."

The vocal unit of Church, highest level of the WPA and the actual voice of Congris! The last time it spoke, 2 years ago, it was the Panasian War — this couldn't be the Onlon thing. The announcer's image faded from the cubeo prism and was replaced by a soft light, and an organ note as the local station engineers patched to the nationwide WPA circuit. Everyone in the room stared into the light, even Sara, waiting for the voice.

When it came, deep and resonant, I could feel it in my own chest. I could feel too the tension go out of Sara, and feel the sigh she and everyone else sighed, at the end of waiting.

The voice said:

"I speak to you about the question asked by a little girl. I answer her, but my answer is for all children, and women and men, and for all time . . ."

I almost shouted aloud, in sheer disbelief. It wasn't war, it wasn't even Onlon's joke — it was that silly thing from Onlon's daughter!

I grabbed the dupe up out of my belt-pouch, and read along with that deep, throbbing voice:

"I am eight years old. Some of my little friends say there is no

Santa Claus. Papa says, if you see it in the *Sun,* it's so. Please tell me the truth: is there a Santa Claus?"

And the voice read off the name the way the girl, with her grave little voice, would have formally given it: Virginia O'Hanlon. But what could the Church in all dignity say, to nonsense like that?

"Virginia," said the voice, "your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see . . ."

I was stunned. The broadcast is a hoax, I thought; a Flack's trick or an incredible act of sabotage on an entire social system. Barely conscious of Sara sitting raptly beside me, I tried to make sense out of that deep organ note sounding through the roaring in my ears.

"Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus," it was saying. "He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist . . . How dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! There would be no child-like faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished . . ."

I turned to Sara, tried to speak. She turned to me, eyes shining, and raised her fingertips to my mouth, then went back to the light, and the voice. Over the buzz I heard:

". . . there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance can push aside the curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond.

"Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

"No Santa Claus? Thank God, he lives! and lives forever! A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood."

The echoes of the voice seemed to ring even after the light had faded and left a roomful of people staring at the place where it had been; then looking up, with widening eyes, into the faces of others.

"I'll be damned," Sara whispered. "I will be damned! or just maybe . . . maybe not, after all . . ."

As I said, I don't know where it will end. Nobody does. END

CORDWAINER SMITH

The Good Friends

Fever had given him a boyish look.

The nurse, standing behind the doctor, watched him attentively. Her half-smile blended tenderness with an appreciation of his manly attraction.

"When can I go, doc?"

"In a few weeks, perhaps. You have to get well first."

"I don't mean home, doc. When can I go back into space? I'm captain, doc. I'm a good one. You know that, don't you?"

The doctor nodded gravely.

"I want to go back, doc. I want to go back right away. I want to be well, doc. I want to get back in my ship and take off again. I don't even know why I'm here. What are you doing with me, doc?"

"We're trying to make you well," said the doctor, friendly, serious, authoritative.

"I'm not sick, doc. You've got the wrong man. We brought the ship in, didn't we? Everything was all right, wasn't it? Then we started to get out and everything went black. Now I'm here in a hospital. Something's pretty fishy, doc. Did I get hurt in the port?"

"No," said the doctor, "you weren't hurt at the port."

"Then why'd I faint? Why am I sick in a bed? Something must have happened to me, doc. It stands to reason. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. Some stupid awful thing must have happened, doc. After such a nice trip. Where did it happen?" A wild light came into the patient's eyes. "Did somebody do something to me, doc? I'm not hurt, am I? I'm not ruined, am I? I'll be able to go back into space, won't I?"

"Perhaps," said the doctor.

The nurse drew in her breath as though she were going to say

something. The doctor looked around and gave her an authorative frown, meaning *keep quiet.*

The patient saw it.

Desperation came into his voice, almost a whine? "What's the matter, doc? Why won't you talk to me? What's wrong? Something has happened to me. Where's Ralph? Where's Pete? Where's Jock? The last time I saw him he was having a beer. Where's Larry? Where's my gang, doc? They're not killed, are they? I'm not the only one, am I? Talk to me, doc. Tell me the truth. I'm a space captain, doc. I've faced queer hells in my time, doc. You can tell me anything, doc. I'm not *that* sick. I can take it. Where's my gang, doc — my pals from the ship? What a cruise that was! Won't you talk, doc?"

"I'll talk," said the doctor, gravely.

"Okay," said the patient. "Tell me."

"What in particular?"

"Don't be a fool, doc! Tell me the straight stuff. Tell me about my friends first, and then tell me what has happened to me."

"Concerning your friends," said the doctor, measuring his words carefully, "I am in a position to tell you there has been no adverse change in the status of any of the persons you mentioned."

"All right, then, doc, if it wasn't them, it's me. Tell me. What's *happened* to me, doc? Something stinking awful must have happened or you wouldn't be standing there with a face like a constipated horse!"

The doctor smiled wryly, bleakly, briefly at the weird compliment. "I won't try to explain my own face, young fellow. I was born with it. But you are in a serious condition and we are trying to get you well. I will tell you the whole truth."

"Then do it, doc! Right away. Did somebody jump me at the port? Was I hurt badly? Was it an accident? Start talking, man!"

The nurse stirred behind the doctor. He looked around at her. She looked in the direction of the hypodermic on the tray. The doctor gave her a brief negative shake of his head. The patient saw the whole interplay and understood it correctly.

"That's right, doc. Don't let her dope me. I don't need sleep. I need the truth. If my gang's all right, why aren't they here? Is Milly out in the corridor? Milly, that was her name, the little curlyhead. Where's Jock? Why isn't Ralph here?"

"I'm going to tell you everything, young man. It may be tough but I'm counting on you to take it like a man. But it would help if you told me first."

"Told you what? Don't you know who I am? Didn't you read about my gang and me? Didn't you hear about Larry? What a navigator! We wouldn't be here except for Larry."

The late-morning light poured in through the open window; a soft spring breeze touched the young ravaged face of the patient. There was mercy and more in the doctor's voice.

"I'm just a medical doctor. I don't keep up with the news. I know your name, age and medical history. But I don't know the details of your cruise. Tell me about it."

"Doc, you're kidding. It'd take a book. We're famous. I bet Went's out there right now, making a fortune out of the pictures he took."

"Don't tell me the whole thing, young man. Suppose you just tell me about the last couple of days before you landed, and how you got into port."

The young man smiled guiltily; there was pleasure and fond memory in his face. "I guess I can tell you, because you're a doctor and keep things confidential."

The doctor nodded, very earnest and still kind. "Do you want," said he softly, "the nurse to leave?"

"Oh, no," cried the patient. "She's a good scout. It's not as though you were going to turn it loose on the tapes."

The doctor nodded. The nurse nodded and smiled, too. She was afraid that there were tears forming at the corner of her eyes, but she dared not wipe them away. This was an extraordinarily observant patient. He might notice it. It would ruin his story.

The patient almost babbled in his eagerness to tell the story. "You know the ship, doc. It's a big one: Twelve cabins, a common room, simulated gravity, lockers, plenty of room."

The doctor's eyes flickered at this but he did nothing, except to watch the patient in an attentive sympathetic way.

"When we knew we just had two days to earth, doc, and we knew everything was all right, we had a ball. Jock found the beer in one of the lockers. Ralph helped him get it out. Betty was an old pal of mine, but I started trying to make time with Milly. Boy, did I make it! Yum." He looked at the nurse and blushed all the way down to his neck. "I'll skip the details. We had a party, doc. We

were high. Drunk. Happy. Boy, did we ever have fun! I don't think anybody ever had more fun than we did, me and that old gang of mine. We docked all right. That Larry, he's a navigator. He was drunk as an owl and he had Betty on his lap but he put that ship in like the old lady putting a coin in the collection plate. Everything came out exactly right. I guess I should have been ashamed of landing a ship with the whole crew drunk and happy, but it was the best trip and the best gang and the best fun that anybody ever had. And we had succeeded in our mission, doc. We wouldn't have cut loose at the end of the mission if we hadn't known everything was hunky-dory. So we came in and landed, doc. And then everything went black, and here I am. Now you tell me your side of it, but be sure to tell me when Larry and Jock and Went are going to come in and see me. They're characters, doc. That little nurse of yours, she's going to have to watch them. They might bring me a bottle that I shouldn't have. Okay, doc. Shoot."

"Do you trust me?" said the doctor.

"Sure. I guess so. Why not?"

"Do you think I would tell you the truth?"

"It's something mean, doc. Real mean. Okay, shoot anyhow."

"I want you to have the shot first," said the doctor, straining to keep kindness and authority in his voice.

The patient looked bewildered. He glanced at the nurse, the tray, the hypodermic. Then he smiled at the doctor, but it was a smile in which fright lurked.

"All right, doctor. You're the boss."

The nurse helped him roll back his sleeve. She started to reach for the needle.

The doctor stopped her. He looked her straight in the face, his eyes focused right on hers. "No, intravenous. I'll do it. Do you understand?"

She was a quick girl.

From the tray she took a short length of rubber tubing, twisted it quickly around the upper arm, just below the elbow.

The doctor watched, very quiet.

He took the arm, ran his thumb up and down the skin as he felt the vein.

"Now," said he.

She handed him the needle.

Patient, nurse and doctor all watched as the hypodermic emptied

itself directly into the little ridge of the vein on the inside of the elbow.

The doctor took out the needle. He himself seemed relieved. Said he: "Feel anything?"

"Not yet, doc. Can you tell me now, doc? I can't make trouble with this stuff in me. Where's Larry? Where's Jock?"

"You weren't on a ship, young man. You were alone in a one-man craft. You didn't have a party for two days. You had it for twenty years. Larry didn't bring your ship in. The Earth authorities brought it in with telemetry. You were starved, dehydrated and nine-tenths dead. The boat had a freeze unit and you were fed by the emergency kit. You had the narrowest escape in the whole history of space travel. The boat had one of the new hypo kits. You must have had a second or two to slap it to your face before the boat took over. You didn't have any friends with you. They came out of your own mind."

"That's all right, doc. I'll be all right. Don't worry about me."

"There wasn't any Jock or Larry or Ralph or Milly. That was just the hypo kit."

"I get you, doc. It's all right. This dope you gave me, it's good stuff. I feel happy and dreamy. You can go away now and let me sleep. You can explain it to me in the morning. But be sure to let Ralph and Jock in, when visiting hours open up." He turned on his side away from them.

The nurse pulled the cover up over his shoulders.

Then she and the doctor started to leave the room. At the last moment, she ran past the doctor and out of the room ahead of him. She did not want him to see her cry. END

T. K. BROWN III

When The Stars Answer

This is an account of events some of which have already taken place and the rest of which are going to take place. They may not happen *exactly* as they are set down here. But in essence they will — you can take our word for that. It's the only way things can possibly work out.

First comes the factual part:

And it goes way back to 1931, when a certain Dr. Karl Jansky got the crazy idea of using a large radio antenna to find out if any radio signals were reaching New Jersey from outer space. Right on the face of it you can see what a ridiculous notion *that* was. You'd think the Bell Telephone Co. would know better than to hire a screwball like that.

So, anyway, after Dr. Jansky detected in this fashion what he called "cosmic static," people began to wonder what it could be, where it came from and so on. To find out, they built radiotelescopes — huge rotatable metal dishes that catch and focus radio waves. They liked to build them at places with "bank" in their names. The University of Manchester built one at Jodrell Bank, England, and we built one at Green Bank, W. Va. With these giant listening devices the astronomers heard broadcasts of static from our sun, from planets and from points very far away, far beyond our solar system, far beyond our galaxy.

By now we are up to 1951, when two Harvard professors made an interesting discovery. The universe has its own wave length — 1420 megacycles, the characteristic radio emission line of neutral hydrogen. Beneath all the sputtering and beeping and yowling of the incidental static, neutral hydrogen maintains its steady drone through the length and breadth of space.

This fact gave scientists an exciting idea. If there were intelligent beings on other planets, and if they were trying to establish contact

with other worlds, they would do so by broadcasting a radio message of some sort on the 1420 mc frequency — asking, in effect, "Are you there?" Obviously the thing to do was to listen for such messages. Nothing might come from such listening; on the other hand, the rewards could be inconceivably high. For, as one prominent astrophysicist pointed out:

"Since we have only in the last few years attained the capability of listening for broadcasts from space, it is evident that no one of less technological development can be sending them. The chances are overwhelming that the exosociety will be found to be made up of beings vastly superior to ourselves." And Dr. Harold Urey added approval: "Contact with *them* would be the most magnificent thing one can imagine!"

Animated by the same enthusiasm, Dr. Frank B. Drake, on Dr. Otto Struve's staff at Green Bank, instituted in 1960 Project Ozma, devoted to the monitoring of nearby stars. Astronomers at Swarthmore College had already catalogued and analyzed the fifty-six stars within sixteen light years of the sun. Of them, thirty-one are single bodies (not twinned or tripleted) and seven are very sunlike in size, brilliance, and composition. Dr. Drake turned his listening devices on two of these, Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani.

That brings us more or less up to date. What follows is merely the most self-evident sort of extrapolation.

The monitoring of Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani continued to yield negative results. So did that of Alpha Centauri, Epsilon Indi, and 70 Ophiuchi. Eventually the obvious idea occurred to one of the staff: "Perhaps our neighbors are so far ahead of us, and have been broadcasting for so many thousands of years, that they have given up and are merely listening, counting on the new member of the family — us — to make its presence known. It is up to us to do the broadcasting."

Accordingly, in the year 1963, narrow cones of radio emission were beamed at the seven most likely nearby stars. The signal was a sequence of beeps unmistakably identifiable by the exosociety as the product of rational effort. Then, of course, began the long wait — nine years at least for the signal to reach the star; many times that if the star were farther away or the message was not immediately picked up.

It was, as it happened, in 1985, twenty-two years after the in-

ception of this program, and just as the Americans were preparing to send the first rocket with passengers to Mars, that the answer came — not as an electromagnetic impulse (which was the most anyone dreamed of) but in the form of a sphere, forty-two feet in diameter; a space ship that appeared spectacularly a hundred miles above the earth, broadcast (1050 kc.) in perfect English the statement that it intended to land in a field near Davenport, Iowa, and did so the next day at noon.

The ship was met by a deputation in which atomic cannon and heavy tanks mingled strangely with TV cameras and a party from the Department of State in frock coats. From the craft there emerged a creature who, to the astonishment of absolutely everyone, resembled *Homo sapiens* (if we may still use that term) to the last detail, except for a forehead that bulged enough to house about 200 cc. more forebrain, and who furthermore was dressed in the latest Western fashion, including button-down collar. The space ship closed behind him. He advanced to meet the delegation of generals and State Department men who had stepped forward, rather gingerly, when it appeared that he was unarmed.

"Congratulate me, gentlemen," the spaceman said, "on being the first person from our society to attempt interstellar flight, and on bringing the attempt to such a successful conclusion."

There was a lively suspicion among the Americans that the whole thing was a Russian hoax, designed to steal the spotlight from the Mars shot. Consequently, their formalities were rather perfunctory and they got right down to a number of questions regarding 1) his English, 2) his clothing, behind which lay the thinly veiled and sneering implication that he was a phony.

"I did not wish to make too bizarre a first impression," he said. "Therefore I cruised above your planet for a day, watching your television." He shuddered visibly. Indeed, now that he mentioned it, they noticed that his diction betrayed a familiarity with the fruity and slightly hysterical cadences of the hard sell. "From these observations it was no problem to get the hang of your language, and with the materials I had on board my robots were able to tailor a reasonable facsimile of your clothing." He laughed. "It was just as well. On our planet we go naked."

The scientists were overjoyed to learn that they had established contact with a being capable of learning perfect English in a

day. The next questions, needless to say, concerned his native whereabouts. It transpired that his planet circled 61 Cygni, in the constellation Swan, an inconspicuous star of 5.6 magnitude, 10.9 light years distant. The astrophysicist in the group, adding together the eleven years it had taken the earth signal to reach 61 Cygni and the eleven years it had taken the space ship to make its journey, was stupefied to realize that it must have traveled at the speed of light.

"Oh, yes," the visitor said, in answer to his question, "our ships travel at that speed. Right now we're tussling with a nasty technical problem — the light barrier, you know."

"Our physicists," the scientist said faintly, "believe that the speed of light is an absolute that cannot be exceeded."

"Well, of course we know better than that," the spaceman said. "It's just a matter of getting up the power, and then, to be sure, finding out what's on the other side. Matter of fact, when it was decided that I should take part in a 'first,' I was given the choice of that project or this one.

"I'm afraid I chose the easy one."

The astrophysicist had another question. "Why is it, with your tremendous resources, that you have not been sending out messages, as we have, to make the acquaintance of your neighbors?"

"Oh," he said, "that was not felt to be prudent. Oh, no indeed, not wise at all."

The State Department chief suggested that they get into the car and head back toward the center of things. The spaceman readily agreed. (Already, thanks to radio and television, the world knew him by nickname — Siggy, the man from 61 Cygni.) Showing the keenest interest in everything about him, he got into the back seat and they started off with motorcycles for and aft.

"Still using internal combustion, eh?" he said. "How quaint! And wheels! How perfectly charming! That reminds me — have you heard this one? What a silly question. Anyway, it seems that there were these two astronauts —"

And he went on to tell a joke of which the humor was so acute, so penetrating, so absolutely out of this world, that the very proper State Department man, laughing and screaming, got out of control and died, right there in the back seat.

"So sorry," said Siggy. "And I'd already seen on TV what you people will laugh at. I'll have to be more careful."

The U.S.S.R. made frantic efforts to have Siggy declared a ward of the United Nations, but this maneuver was foiled and he vanished into the entrails of the Pentagon where he received the V.I.P. treatment and where the most concerted labors were applied to picking his brains, while others were devoting all their ingenuity to getting inside his space ship — in vain. But Siggy was most cooperative in the Pentagon. He manifested an astounding intelligence, as far superior to yours and mine as ours is superior to a cat's. Nor was he a bit reluctant to divulge whatever information was solicited of him. This fact was reassuring; for surely, if his intent were inimical, he would not be so free with his insights.

"It doesn't matter in the least," he said genially. "Would you like to know how to live 1000 years, the way we do?" And he told.

Within a week, as he chattered on, the United States came into possession of the knowledge of how to amplify light, transport living creatures by radio, read minds at any distance, square the circle, intercept any missile, neutralize any explosion (so that all it did was go poof), and use the H-bomb to trigger a superbomb of such devastating power that one alone would be sufficient to reduce the continent of Asia to ashes. And much more. In short, the United States was without any question the master of the world. A note was dispatched to the U.S.S.R. to this effect, dwelling with perhaps unnecessary smugness on the fact, that since the United States had shown the initiative to bring the visitor from 61 Cygni, the United States should properly reap the benefits. The U.S.S.R. was instructed to do this, that and the other — or else.

The day was now approaching for the American trip to Mars. Though much of the zest had been taken from this enterprise by recent events, there was no question of not going through with it, particularly since some of the information received from Siggy, and applied to the project, made success a foregone conclusion.

It was only natural that the visitor should be the guest of honor at the launching. He was transported with much ceremony and much picture-taking of the site. There was a review of the guard of honor and several speeches were delivered, followed by a salute to the colors during the National Anthem. Then the party of dignitaries and technicians entered the control building for the countdown. It must be admitted that Siggy was very polite about the whole thing — rather like the grownup who is humoring the kids by watching the Erector derrick pick up the wooden block.

"Very ingenious," he said, as he surveyed the towering missile.

"It must seem extremely primitive to you," the operations chief said modestly, "but you must admit that it represents the product of much sophisticated thinking."

"Oh, very definitely," Siggy replied.

"The missile is completely automated," the scientist continued, "so we are not concerned actually, whether it will get there or not. We *know* it will get there and back."

"Why, of course it will," said Siggy. "No doubt of that whatsoever."

"What we are investigating really," the scientist went on, "is the reaction of the passengers during the flight. How they respond to many weeks of weightlessness, exposure to cosmic bombardment and extremes of temperature. How their reflexes are affected by the unfamiliar conditions."

"Well, I certainly know how important that is," Siggy said, chuckling politely.

"Our instruments will tell us all we want to know about respiration, heartbeat, metabolism, reaction time to stimuli, and so on."

"You certainly have been thorough," Siggy said. "I must say, you fellows have done a simply splendid job."

"Thank you," the scientist replied. He pushed a button and the monkeys were led out toward the space vehicle. Each wore a special suit and helmet. Each arched its tail behind its back.

"Now isn't that absolutely phenomenal!" Siggy exclaimed. "Surely," he said to the scientist and turning, to the others as well, "surely this allows us to make a valid generalization about the basic working mechanisms of intelligence, wherever it may occur in the universe at whatever level."

The scientist paused. "I'm not sure that I quite follow your meaning."

"Why," Siggy said, "this apparently innate instinct to send the inferior creature on ahead, to explore the way."

"Well, yes," the scientist said. "It was for us self-evident — and I am happy to see that our minds seem to work in the same way — self-evident that the first attempt —"

The President's deputy interrupted.

"Didn't you tell us when you landed," he asked carefully, "— surely my recollection deceives me — but didn't you say you were

the *first* to make an interstellar flight from your planet?"

"Yes, that's right," Siggy said. "That's just what I mean, don't you see? Sending the inferior creature on ahead."

There was a long silence.

"You mean," the deputy said, "that *you* are the inferior creature?"

"But of course," Siggy said. "Why should They take the risk? They have us."

The silence now was very long.

"They?" the scientist said.

"But I thought you understood," Siggy said courteously. "Didn't I make that clear? But it's so obvious! How could I have given you all that information if it made any difference? Goodness, I do hope I haven't upset you in some way."

Another silence, even longer.

"They?" the scientist repeated.

"We are Their — well, Their domesticated animals," Siggy said "Their minds are so much greater than ours that we haven't even been able to figure out Their language. They don't have to vocalize, of course. They function on a different level. They sent me out ahead, to explore — to run the risk." He made a gesture. "Like those monkeys. I've already sent back my report, of course. That's the job they gave me to do."

"And then?" the deputy whispered.

"Why, then They will move in," Siggy said. "They'll be here in twenty-two years. Maybe sooner," he added somberly, "if they've cracked the light barrier since I left."

In 1986, if you follow the sound of the dull thuds to the special little building in Central Park, pay your dollar and get in line, you will in time reach the inner chamber. There, bending over and presenting his behind, is a man in his late fifties. There, like the thousands of others, you will be privileged to kick him in it, just as hard as you can. His name is Ignatius Fitzhuggh Crespi, and he is the mental giant who dreamed up the idea of shouting "Are you there?" at our neighbors. END

ROBERT F. YOUNG

Little Dog Gone

The ground beneath his back was frost-cold. During the night the Coldness had climbed into his arms and shoulders and condensed in his chest, and now he was a part of the ground itself, an almost indistinguishable part that must soon break free or forever be lost.

Through will alone, he drove the last of the garish nightmares away, turned on his side and opened his eyes.

It had been a binge to beat all binges. It had begun in a little bar off Teletheatre Square in Old New York City and it had blasted off into space and taken root among the stars. Now, after strutting and fretting its hour upon the stage, it had come to an end.

Dawn had emerged from her gray dwelling in the east and was lighting pink candles to illumine the big back yard of the world. It was a world that Nicholas Hayes could not remember. He knew, though, that he had seen it before, seen it from the distorted deeps of drunkenness . . . through the mists of no-pain and non-remembrance . . . from the false heights of Never Come Tomorrow . . . seen it, and forgotten it.

He was lying in a field. Rows of dead stalks alternated with parallel swaths of frost-wilted weeds. On either side were similar fields, and in the distance, woods. Beyond the woods, hills showed.

He could see his breath. He could see something else, too — a small animal of some kind. It was crouched in the weeds a dozen yards away, and it was watching him.

He wondered whether it was inside or outside his head.

Painfully, he propped himself on one elbow, picked up a loose clod of earth and heaved it in the animal's direction.

The animal promptly disappeared.

He patted his pockets in the vain hope of finding a bottle. Raising his eyes, he saw the animal again. It had reappeared in the same spot, and had resumed watching him. "Go way!" he shouted hoarsely, and closed his eyes. When he re-opened them, the animal was still there.

It looked as though it might be a dog of some sort, but he could not be sure. Perhaps it was real after all. Working himself into a sitting position, Hayes went through his pockets. They contained his billfold, which was empty, his Teletheatre Guild membership card, which was void, his passport, a large handful of change and a concentrated chocolate bar. Unwrapping the bar, he broke it in two and tossed one half to the animal. Again the animal vanished; but this time, thanks to the growing light, he saw it reappear some fifty yards beyond its original position. As he sat there, staring, it vanished once more, rematerialized in the very same spot it had occupied before, and gobbled down the chocolate.

Hayes rubbed his eyes. Still the animal would not go away. Moreover, it was looking at him as though it momentarily expected him to toss it another piece of chocolate. He held out the remaining half of the bar. "If you want it, you'll have to come and get it," he said.

The dog — for a dog of some kind it seemed to be — flattened out on its belly and inched its way forward. Dawn had lighted the last of her pink candles, and now her son, the day was coming out to play. In the brighter light Hayes saw that the dog was about the size of a miniature poodle. Its hair was quite thick, though not in the least curly, and was the color of the rising morning mist. Its slightly oversize paws suggested that it had not completely grown out of puppyhood, and the sad, eager-to-be-loved look in its slightly slanted golden eyes more or less substantiated the suggestion. The rather long but blunt muzzle lent a comical pug-nose effect, and the tatterdemalion ears hung down on either side of the head like a pair of frayed bar-rags. By far the most remarkable feature about the animal was its tail — on the bushy side, terminating in a white tuft. But instead of wagging, it rotated, first clockwise and then counterclockwise, somewhat in the manner of a spring winding itself up and letting itself run down. A star shaped white mark blazed in the middle of the animal's forehead.

Obviously the dog had not been eating very well of late, or per-

haps, like any puppy, it was eternally hungry. It made short work of the second piece of chocolate, and gazed eagerly up into Hayes' eyes as though expecting a third. Tentatively, Hayes tweaked one of the rag-like ears. "Well, anyway, at least you're real," he said.

But if the dog was real, why had it disappeared?

Hayes let the question ride for the moment. Too many other questions had priority over it. For one example, where was he? For another, what was he doing here?

He could remember choosing a planet at random and booking passage for it at the Great Eastern Spaceport, and he could vaguely remember boarding a subspace liner and long hours in the starbar, talking with other passengers now and then, but mostly to himself. But that was all he could remember. Sometime during the voyage he had reached the point of no-pain and non-remembrance. Somewhere along the line he had scaled the heights of Never Come Tomorrow and thumbed his nose at the cosmos.

And now, tomorrow had come. And the heights were hopelessly behind him.

He forced himself to his feet. His head was one vast gnawing ache. his body, a lump of clay supported by unfeeling stilts that once had been a pair of legs. Hatless, coatless, begrimed of slacks and shirt, he turned and faced the way he must have come. There was a road of sorts not too far distant, and presently he was walking along it toward a misted huddle of buildings that spelled a town.

A soft whimpering sound came from behind him. He stopped and turned. The little dog stopped, too. It fixed him with a forlorn eye. "Well, what do you know?" Hayes said. And then, "Come on, Bar-rag. If you promise not to disappear on me again, I'll stake you to a meal."

"Rowp!" the little dog answered, and rotated its tail. Hayes waited till it caught up to him, then turned and continued on his way.

II

He was sweating when he came to the first house, and yet he was shivering, too. By the time he reached the business section, his chest was paining him so acutely that he could barely breathe.

The business section was still asleep, but it informed him by means of its unpretentious facades and crude wooden walkways that

the town was an out-planet settlement. However, there were thousands of out-planet settlements. This could be any one of them. The placename, when he finally spotted it on the facade of the only hotel, told him nothing:

THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

He headed for the hotel, Bar-rag trotting at his heels. The doors were open, but there was no one on the immediate premises. He looked around. If he had ever been there before, the memory eluded him. He stepped into the bar. That at least ought to be familiar, and familiar it turned out to be. However, the bell that the big raftered roof with its old-fashioned tables and chairs rang in his mind was faint indeed. While he knew that he had been there recently, he could not remember any detail of his visit.

He chose a table at random and sat down. Bar-rag, obviously discontented by its new surroundings, slipped beneath the table and curled up at his feet. The room was as devoid of decor as it was of people. Two high windows looked out into the street, a liana-like rope looped incongruously down from a centrally-located rafter to a small gallery on the wall opposite the bar, and there was a doorway in the rear that presumably led to the kitchen.

Hayes pounded on the tabletop. Someone ought to be up at least.

Someone was: a tall girl with shoulder-length blonde hair, rather wide hips, and nice legs. She advanced purposefully into the room through the doorway at the rear, her blue eyes bright with indignation. "Breakfast isn't served till eight-thirty!" she snapped. "Just who in hell do you think you are, mister?" Abruptly she stopped in her tracks, Then, slowly, she covered the remaining distance to the table, eyes no longer indignant. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hayes," she said. "I didn't recognize you."

She had a full oval face, but her rather high cheekbones and the way she wore her hair made her cheeks seem thin. Hayes judged her to be somewhere in her late twenties or early thirties, which put her pretty much in his own age-category. However, he did not know her from Eve. "When did we meet?" he asked.

"We didn't, but I know you from your teletheatre roles. Last night when you came into the bar I recognized you right away." Briefly, she lowered her eyes. She was wearing a knee-length floral dress that covered most of her shoulders, and her hair lay upon the false

flowers like morning sunshine. "You — you might say I'm one of your many admirers."

"Did anyone else recognize me?"

"I don't think so. I'm afraid even taped teletheatre hasn't got to Black Dirt yet."

Black Dirt, he thought. That would be Procyon 16. Now why in hell had he come here? Aloud, he said, "I'm a little foggy on a few points. By any chance did I happen to mention how I got here?"

"I heard you tell the bartender that you'd come in from Port-o'-Stars by airbus, and that you were recently arrived from Earth. Don't you remember, Mr. Hayes?"

"How long did I hang around?"

"Till nearly closing time. I — I wanted to talk to you, but I didn't have enough nerve. Then suddenly I looked around and you were gone. I checked your bag and your coat in the lobby. I thought perhaps you'd gone somewhere else to sleep."

Hayes grimaced. "I did. Though I imagine my original intention was confined to a walk beneath the stars."

At this point, Bar-rag poked its head from beneath the table. The girl jumped. "Where in the world did you get hold of a doggone, Mr. Hayes?" she said. "I thought all of them had been frightened back into the hills."

"A doggone?"

"That's the settlers' name for them. First you see them, then you don't. They're capable of teleportation."

"Well, no wonder!" Hayes said. "For a while there when I first woke up I thought I was seeing things. He followed me back to town for some reason or other — probably a free meal. Do you think you could fix him up with something?"

"Of course. He must like you, Mr. Hayes. Usually when a doggone sees a human being he teleports himself as far away as he can get. Or perhaps I should say 'it'. They're bisexual, you know, and reproduce by parthenogenesis." She looked at Hayes closely. "You're shivering, Mr. Hayes. Shall I turn the heat up?"

"No. Just bring me a triple shot."

He downed half of it a second after she set it before him. A shudder began deep within him and spread upward. The room very nearly turned him upside down, but he steadied it just in time by

gripping the edge of the table with both hands. Presently he became aware that the girl was leaning over him. "Are you all right, Mr. Hayes?" she asked.

He drank the rest of the whiskey. "I will be. By the way, what's your name?"

"Moira. Moira Blair."

"Bring me another triple shot, Moira."

There was concern in her blue eyes. "Do you think —"

"I do. Bring it."

After she brought it she went into the kitchen and returned a few minutes later bearing a plate of meat scraps. She set the plate on the floor, and the little doggone came out of hiding and dug in. "Does he have a name yet, Mr. Hayes?"

"Bar-rag." Hayes tossed off the second triple shot and removed the handful of change from his pocket. He piled it carefully on the table. "This cairn of coins you see before you, Moira, represents the last of the tangible assets of one Nicholas Hayes," he said. "You will keep bringing him drinks till it is gone, after which it is to be hoped that you will have the good sense to throw him out into the gutter where he belongs."

"Please let me help you, Mr. Hayes."

"Why?"

"Because it isn't fair for you to — to be like this. When I was still living in New North Dakota, Mars and had access to live TTV, I saw you in all your teletheatre roles, both Debuts and Encores. I saw you as Tambourlaine. I saw you as Cyrano. I saw you as Hamlet. I saw you as Edward II. I saw you as Willy Loman. And you were wonderful. You still are! You always will be."

"Aha! but you didn't see me as Milton Pomfret, did you? You didn't see me in the Debut of *The Two-Sided Triangle*. Even if you were still living in New North Dakota you wouldn't have seen me." Hayes crashed his fist on the table. "And do you know why you wouldn't have seen me, Moira? You wouldn't have seen me because on Debut night I showed up as drunk as a spaceman on three-weeks' leave and got myself thrown out of teletheatre. And it was just what I had coming, too. Because you see, Moira my dear, that was far from the first time I had shown up as drunk as a spaceman on three-weeks' leave — far from the first time Humpty Dumpty Hayes had had a great fall. Only this time, Christopher King's

men didn't bother to put Humpty Dumpty back together again with alco-antidotes and souped-up sugar pills. By this time they were as sick of him as he was of himself. So they told him that if he wanted to be put back together again he would have to do the job himself. So he burned his bridges behind him, invested in a super-binge, climbed aboard and blasted off for the stars on a mission he has since forgotten and no longer wants to remember. For God's sake. bring him a bottle and let him bow out in peace!"

"No."

It was the flattest, most uncompromising "no" that Hayes had ever heard in all his life. It brought him to his feet — and to his undoing. This time, when the room started to turn upside down, he could not stop it. Giddiness washed over him like gray surf, and beyond the surf, blackness roiled . . . And now, the blackness began swirling around his legs. Up, up, it swirled, and he called out "Leslie!" in a semi-strangled voice. However, it was not sophisticated dark-haired Leslie who leaped through the gathering night to his side, but a tall blonde girl with anxious eyes. He felt strong arms supporting him as he sank into nothingness, and just before nothingness became complete, he felt her warm fingers touch his face.

There were jumbled phases of warmth and cold, of darkness and light. Sometimes the bedroom in which he lay played host to a blond girl wearing a print dress — and once in a while to the same girl wearing a jaguar-skin sarong — and frequently to a coarse, bearded man with chest-prodding fingers — and always, it seemed, to a small, mist-gray animal with bar-rag ears, rotating tail, and worshipful golden eyes. Finally there were late mornings and long, sunny afternoons, and sometimes snow falling lazily beyond diamond-patterned windowpanes.

The bedroom was not a large one. Strictly speaking, it was not a bedroom at all, but a commandeered living room. There was a sofa and there were chairs and there was a small table on which stood a lamp, a clock and a copy of R. E. Hames' *Stellar Geography*. The only incongruous item was the bed. It was high and narrow and it had obviously been borrowed from the local frontier hospital. It stood out among the endemic furniture like a besheeted barge floating down a nonexistent river.

One night, the girl in the jaguar skin came out of the shadows

and gazed down upon his face. "Dr. Grimes says you're much better," she said. "I'm glad."

"You're Moira, aren't you?" Hayes said.

"Not when I wear my costume. When I wear my costume I'm Zonda of the Amazon, the Amazon in this case being the big river of the same name in the wilds of Alpha Centauri 9. Haven't you ever heard of Zonda of the Amazon, Mr. Hayes?"

"I can't say as I have."

"She was the main character of an earthside 3V show of the same title. They chose me for the role because they needed a big blonde and didn't in the least mind if she fell considerably short of being a second Sarah Bernhardt. I used to swing through trees on fake grapevines and win friends and influence animals and utter sparkling lines such as 'Zonda hungry' and 'Zonda save you — you no fear.' For a poor girl from New North Dakota who couldn't act her way out of a plastic bag, I did all right for myself for a while. And then the series was canceled and I found myself out in the cold, because big blondes who can't act are no more in demand in Videoville than they used to be in Hollywood. But I'd saved enough money to last me until the reruns began and checks started coming through again. And after the reruns came the repeat-reruns. And after that the series was sold successively to just about every earthside station on the network, and I began making personal appearances in local studios for the benefit of the kids who still remembered me. Then the series was sold successively to the Martian stations and I made more personal appearances, and eventually the tapes were shipped off to outplanets that didn't have 3V yet but that did have local theatres where the tapes could be run along with old, old movies, and well, I tagged along as usual for more personal appearances and finally I ended up here in The Last Of The Mohicans where the proprietor of the local hotel offered me a job for life if I'd play Zonda of the Amazon once a week for the benefit of his bar trade. By that time I was sick of being Zonda. But I was even sicker of traveling from one sad stand to another, so I took him up on his offer."

"What do you have to do?" Hayes asked.

"Three times each Saturday night I swing across the barroom on a make-believe grapevine, land on the bar, give the victory cry of a Centaurian jungle girl, and fight off the dirt farmers."

"Is this your living room?"

She nodded. "But don't feel that you're inconveniencing me, Mr. Hayes. I never use it."

"Why didn't you pack me off to the nearest charity ward and have done with me?"

"I thought you'd be better off here. Out-planet hospitals are understaffed and half of the time they don't even have the medical supplies they need." She glanced at the clock on the table. "I'll have to be going now, Mr. Hayes. It's almost time for Zonda's first aerial maneuver. Bar-rag will keep you company till you fall asleep. Won't you, Bar-rag?"

At the sound of its name, the little doggone materialized on the bed, joyously winding and unwinding its tail. "Rowp!" it said to Hayes, and licked his cheek. Hayes grinned. "I need a shave, don't I?" he said.

"I'll have a barber come in tomorrow. While he's at it, he can give you a haircut, too." Moira dimmed the light. "Good night, Mr. Hayes."

"Good night," Hayes said.

After she had gone, he let his head sink deep into the pillow. He was weary and he was weak, and he felt as though he could go on lying there forever. There was no sound save for the remote thumping of a stereo in the bar below, and the soft susurrus of Bar-rag's breathing. Beyond the diamond-patterned windowpanes, a streetlight caught glistening particles of gently falling snow . . . In Old York, it would be summer. It was always summer in Old York, with balmy winds blowing in from the rerouted Gulf Stream and breathing up the revamped avenues. The open-air little theatres around Teletheatre Square would be in full swing. NOW PLAYING: *The Two-Sided Triangle,* with Leslie Lake and Humpty Dumpty Hayes. No, not Humpty Dumpty Hayes. Humpty Dumpty Hayes had had a great fall — remember? And all the King's horses and all the King's men hadn't bothered to try to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Hayes closed his eyes against the sudden bleakness of the ceiling. Desperately, he reached out and touched Bar-rag's glossy back. The little animal curled up in the crook of his arm. It was all right then, and he knew that tonight at least he could sleep. NOW PLAYING, he thought drowsily: *The Last of the Mohicans Hotel,* with teleporting Bar-rag, Zonda of the Amazon, and Humpty Dumpty Hayes.

II

There were times after that when he wanted a drink, when he begged for a drink, when he cried out for a drink and raved when Moira would not bring him one and locked the door behind her. Once when she came upstairs after her Zonda routine he was waiting for her in the shadows, and when she came into the room he seized her throat and went tumbling with her to the floor, threatening to kill her unless she promised to go back down to the bar and get him a bottle.

He was still pitifully weak. It would have been no trick at all for her to have broken his grip and flung him aside but she didn't. Instead, she lay there immobile, and after a while, she said, "Go ahead, Nick — choke me. What are you waiting for?" His hands fell away then, and he sat there sick and ashamed on the floor till she got up and helped him back into bed.

When she brought him his breakfast the next morning she sat down beside the bed and talked to him as though nothing had happened. He couldn't stand it. "For God's sake, why don't you throw me out and have done with me!" he said.

Her eyes were soft upon his face. "Nights are the worst, aren't they?" she said.

"Nights I'm someone else. Or maybe it's the other way around. It doesn't matter — neither one of us is any good."

"I think you're someone in between. Like me. I'm someone in between Zonda of the Amazon and Moira Blair."

"It's not the same, and you know it," Hayes said. Then, "How long have I been cooped up in here?" he asked.

"Three weeks. But the doctor says you'll be on your feet in a few more days. I guess you know by now that you very nearly died."

Suddenly Bar-rag materialized between them on the edge of the bed. There were particles of ice clinging to its paws, and a little ridge of snow lay along the top of its nose. Hayes gave the little animal a piece of toast. "I wonder where he's been," he said.

"Home in the hills I imagine," Moira said. "They have an infallible sense of direction, and I've heard that they can teleport themselves millions of miles. I think they could even teleport themselves from one planet to another if they took it into their heads."

"If they did, they'd be dead. Teleportation may be instantaneous

in one sense, but it's still subject to the velocity of light — unless it employs subspace."

"It doesn't — which is probably why doggones never leave Black Dirt. They probably sense what would happen to them if they were to spend several minutes in an absolute-zero vacuum. The way an ordinary dog knows enough not to jump over a cliff."

"Rowp!" Bar-rag said.

Hayes laughed. "I almost believe he knows what we're talking about."

"It wouldn't surprise me. They're remarkably intelligent." She stood up. "I must go now, Nick."

"Between Moira of the Kitchen and Zonda of the Amazon, you put in a pretty long week."

"I don't mind. It's good to keep busy." She picked up the breakfast tray. Just as she did so, Bar-rag disappeared from the bed, and a split second later, scratching sounds came from the hall. She went over to the hall door and opened it, and there was Bar-rag standing proudly on the threshold. "Why I do believe you're showing off," she said. "Bar-rag, you're a born ham!"

"Rowp!" Bar-rag said, and teleported itself back to the bed.

Hayes stared at the roguish face. "Moira," he said excitedly. "I just remembered why I came to the stars! I was going to tour the out-planet towns and support myself by giving Shakespearean soliloquies. It was a corny idea and I thought of it when I was drunk, and it never would have paid off in a million years. But now I've got a better idea. Would you bring me a pad and pencil before you go back downstairs?"

"Sure, Nick."

He did not begin to write right away, but sat there thinking, his pillow propped behind his back, the pad resting on his knees. To accomplish what he had in mind, he would need first of all the right sort of skit.

Perhaps he could adapt it from a passage of a well-known play that was in the public domain. The idea appealed to him, and he began going over the plays he knew by heart. The process could very well have taken the rest of the morning if *The Two-Sided Triangle* hadn't come immediately to mind. When that happened, he knew he needed to go no further: the play was a good sixty years old, it was perennially popular and part of it at least should prove

ideally suited to his needs.

He knew it by heart. Now he began thinking it through, word for word, line by line, scene by scene. It concerned a young executive named Milton Pomfret whose wife Glenda was determined to find out whether he was a philanderer or a perfect husband. Enlisting the services of a phoneticst and a face-and-figure specialist, she made arrangements with each to have herself temporarily changed into another woman, after which she told her husband she was going to visit her mother for a few weeks, packed her things and rented a downtown apartment under the name of Mary Lou Johnson. She had her face and figure altered over the weekend, and with the phoneticist's help, practiced and perfected a subtly different mode of speech. Then, on Monday morning, she got a secretarial job in her husband's office and went on the make for him. On several occasions she almost became his "mistress", but each time, something happened to interrupt the proceedings, leaving her no wiser than she had been before.

Eventually the husband fell madly in love with her and asked her to marry him — a development she had failed to foresee — and in order to keep him she had to divorce him as her original and remarry him as her second self.

The scene which Hayes finally settled on was one of the most popular ones in the play. It opened with Milton Pomfret stopping off at Mary Lou's apartment after a date and sitting beside her on the big sofa in her living room. By this time, Milton's defenses had crumbled and he was ready to make love and as for Mary Lou she was more than ready. However, each time they were about to go into a clinch an interruption occurred. In the play, the interruptions were ironic in nature; in the version which Hayes presently set down, they were farcical and amounted in each case to the materializing of Bar-rag between the two lovers each time they were about to embrace. The first time the little animal appeared, Mary Lou put it outside and locked the door; the second time, she put it outside and locked the windows as well as the door; the third time she put it outside, locked the windows and the door and activated the anti-housebreak field; and the fourth time, with Milton's help, she got a suitcase and trunk out of the closet, put the little animal into the suitcase and secured the straps, put the suitcase into the trunk, closed and locked the lid, dragged the trunk outside, came back in, locked and barricaded the door and reactivated the anti-housebreak

field. Then, certain that they would not be interrupted again, the two frustrated lovers returned to the sofa, only to have Bar-rag pop into being for the fifth and final time. In addition to these changes, Hayes made the revisions that were necessary to make the skit an independent unit, but otherwise he kept the dialogue and the action intact.

He was just completing the polished version when Moira brought him his lunch. He was so enthusiastic that he could hardly eat.

"Read it," he said, handing her the script. "Picture yourself as Mary Lou, me as Milton Pomfret and Bar-rag as himself. See what you think."

Her blue eyes brought a summer sunrise to mind when she raised them from the final page. "You — you want *me* to act this with *you?*"

"You and Bar-rag. He'll be the star of course. The people on Black Dirt know about doggones but the people on the other out-planets have probably never even heard of such an animal, and with them, the act will be twice as effective. We'll be combining old-fashioned thaumaturgy with broad out-planet humor and, even if we fail to get laughs our audiences will at least be mystified. Sure I know that such a cornball setup would fall flat on its face in Old York but we should worry about Old York with all the out-planet places we've got at our disposal. I'll turn out a few more skits to round out the show to about an hour and a half, then we'll go on tour, the three of us, and —"

"You — you want *me* to act with *you?*"

"Come off it, Moira. I'm not bestowing any honors. I'm merely suggesting a way for us to make some money. *I've* got to make some someway, and acting, or at least some aspect of it, is the only means I have. If you're satisfied with your job here, I'll get someone else. But I'd much rather have you."

"Don't you *dare* get anybody else!"

He grinned. "All right, I won't," he said. "We can begin rehearsing right here in this room," he went on. "If you can scare up a trunk somewhere, we'll have all the props we'll need, and the room itself will serve as a stage. Our main problem is going to be Bar-rag. He's got to appear between us at exactly the right times or the whole thing won't work. You'll notice that in the skit the last word Milton speaks before each interruption is 'darling'. That'll be Bar-

rag's cue. Do you think we can get him to respond to it?"

Her eyes were shining, and there was a hint of tears in their corners. Hayes didn't believe he had ever seen anyone so happy in all his life. "I'm sure we can," she said. "Bar-rag, come here."

The doggone materialized in her arms, tail whirring like a small propellor. A tear tumbled down her cheek and dropped on the little animal's nose. NOW PLAYING, Hayes thought: Zonda of the Amazon, Bar-rag the Wonder Dog, and Nicholas Hayes in *Courtin' Mary Lou.*

IV

They began rehearsing the next evening, with Hayes playing Milton Pomfret and directing at the same time.

Moira and Bar-rag proved to be the two most co-operative players he had ever worked with. Within three days the skit was running smoothly, with the doggone appearing promptly on cue and Moira embracing the role of the beautiful but far from brilliant out-planet girl as though she had been preparing for it all her life. As for Hayes himself, he merely had to make a few minor changes in his portrayal of the old Milton Pomfret in order to become the new, after which he performed the part with his usual adroit mastery.

Between rehearsals, he dashed off three more skits, each embodying the sort of broad humor out-planet people went for, and he and Moira mastered these skits, too, with Bar-rag proving an enthusiastic if puzzled audience of one. Finally one evening they ran through the entire act, saving *Courtin' Mary Lou* till the last. The performance came off without a hitch. "Now," said Hayes, "we've got to have a sort of trial run right here in The Last of the Mohicans, just to make sure. For that we'll have to rent the local theatre, and to rent the local theatre we're going to need money." He went into the bedroom, opened the dresser drawer where Moira had put away his things, and returned with a platinum figurine of Maurice Evans. Inscribed on the base were the words: *The Evans Teletheatre Award, given to Nicholas Hayes in this years of Our Lord 2186 for his outstanding contribution to the telestage in his role as Edward II.* He handed the figurine to Moira. "Take it into Port-o'-Stars tomorrow. You ought to be able to get a couple of hundred credits for it, which should be enough to get us started."

She stood there looking down at the figurine as though it were a crucifix. "I have money, Nick. There's no need for you to make such a sacrifice."

He flushed. "That's a chunk of platinum you're holding in your hands. Nothing more. You'll do as I say."

"But it's not fair, Nick."

"All right, I'll go myself!"

He reached for the figurine, but she drew it back. "I'll go," she said, not looking at him. "You're not well enough yet."

"Good. While you're gone, I'll get some advertising copy into circulation and rig up an anti-housebreak field generator. When you get back, we'll run through the act on a real stage. And in a couple of days we'll open!"

On the first night, they played before a full house. On the second. And the third.

Hayes was amazed till he remembered that out-planet towns like The Last of the Mohicans were virtually devoid of live entertainment, and that the same state of affairs endured in the surrounding areas. Even with Bar-rag as a known quantity, the *Courtin' Mary Lou* skit went over big, and the three skits that preceded it got their share of laughs, too. No, not laughs: guffaws — guffaws that made the skylights rattle. It was a new experience for Hayes, who was accustomed to sophisticated audiences, but he took it in his stride without undue difficulty. Moira took it in hers, too, and as for Bar-rag, it turned out to be the truest trouper of them all, and fell sound asleep in Hayes' arms while they were returning to the hotel after their first performance.

They could have played in The Last of the Mohicans for a month running, but Hayes was anxious to get started on the itinerary which he had mapped out with the aid of Hames' *Stellar Geography,* and anxious also to sample an audience that had never seen a dog-gone. Hence he instructed Moira to give her employer a week's notice.

When the week was up they packed their things, set out by air-bus to Port-o'-Stars, cleared Bar-rag through customs, and booked passage for Goshen, the twelfth planet of the blue star Sirius. Moira had sold the figurine for three hundred credits. Their take after expenses from The Last of the Mohicans stand amounted to more than seven hundred more, giving them a combined working capital of some one thousand credits. Things were looking up.

"It's all right, Nick. And Nick?"

"Yes?"

"Port-o'-Sands isn't very far from New North Dakota. Maybe we can visit the farm. And — and my folks."

"We'll make it a point to. Good night, Moira."

"Good night."

V

The freighter they finally settled for was an old washtub of a job, but the ion drive was still in good working order and the space-subspace correlator, for all its passe design, functioned as efficiently as the newer, more compact units. In common with the more modern merchantmen, the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer*, as they named the vessel, could be operated by one man. Just as important, the deck of the lower level was but several feet above ground level, and in conjunction with the retractable dock would provide an excellent stage.

To obtain more width, Hayes had the original cargo locks removed, the aperture enlarged and wider ones installed. The power room occupied most of the rear section of the lower hold, but there was still a dressing room for Moira, one for Hayes and space for three compartments and a small storage room. Moira insisted that Bar-rag's name be painted on the storage-room door, saying that in view of the fact that the little doggone was the most essential member of the cast, it rated equal prestige at least. Grudgingly, Hayes gave in to her.

Half of the upper hold, Hayes set aside for the medicine kits, which had already been ordered from Earth, and for supplies. The other half he had converted into a large living room, a commodious kitchen and a small office. The pilot's quarters on the deck above made an excellent pair of upstairs bedrooms. As a finishing touch, he replaced the pilots' quarters and control room with a spiral steel stairway, after which he had the ship painted inside and out. Then he and Moira went shopping for furniture.

By this time, the capital of Hayes & Co. had dwindled to an alarming low. They had purchased the ship on time, putting the loan through the Port-o'-Sands Manufacturers' and Traders' Trust Company; for everything else, however, they had laid down hard cash.

In Old York, it would be summer. It was always summer in Old York. In Old York, there were many lights and much laughter, and never any need to be alone. In Old York, if you were good enough, you could step upon a magic stage and cameras would focus on you and multiply you by one hundred million . . . and on Earth and on Mars you would step into millions of living rooms, and people would know you were alive. Out, out, brief candle! Out, out, the brief career of Nicholas Hayes.

The street along which he was walking came to an end. It did not debouch into another street the way most streets do when they die. It simply stopped existing because there was no further reason for it to be. Trees grew boldly up to its very edge, and in the darkness a phosphorescent sign said, *Dead End.*

Wearily, Hayes turned and began retracing his steps. He became aware then that he was not alone. Something was walking beside him — a little animal with a pug nose and golden eyes.

"Bar-rag," he said, "what're you doing out so late at night? You should be in bed."

"Rowp!" the little animal said, and looked up at him the way people used to look up at him at curtain call when he and his supporting cast stepped out upon the proscenium, and took their bows. Then it disappeared. Lord! he thought, if I could teleport I'd be back on Earth as fast as the wings of light could carry me. And then he thought. Yes, and arrive there dead eight years from now. I'm as well off being dead, dumbly waltzing around up here among the stars.

Yes, but did he have to remain dead? Was he so stupid that he could devise no way to bring himself back to life? No, he was not stupid. Not he, Nicholas Hayes. It wasn't a matter of devising a means to gain his end.

It was merely a matter of selection!

When he got back to his room, Bar-rag was fast asleep again at the foot of the bed. The adjoining room was silent. Should he wait till morning? he wondered. He decided not to. Tapping on the door, he said, "Moira, may I talk with you for a while."

There was a silence, and then the clicking of a lamp. "Yes, Nick, come in."

In the radiance of the bed lamp her hair was the color of evening primroses and lay like spring upon the pillow. Her eyes were bell-

flowers-blue. "Are you all right, Nick?" she asked.

"Yes." He pulled a chair over to the side of the bed, and sat down. "I was walking tonight, and I got an idea. An idea for a theatre-ship."

"Yes, Nick?"

"Centuries ago on Earth, charlatans used to travel from frontier town to frontier town on enclosed wagons, giving what were called medicine shows. The shows themselves were free, designed to attract a crowd so that the charlatan could peddle his quack remedies. Thanks to too-rapid colonization brought on by the subspace drive, we have today a situation similar to that which existed in the old west. The settlers have spread out so rapidly and so widely that it's no longer possible to keep them supplied with everything they need, and this is particularly true with regard to medicine. So suppose, Moira, that you and I were to invest in a used space-freighter, remodel the interior so that we could live in it comfortably, stock it with all-purpose medicine kits, and install a stage. Then suppose that we were to limit our act to the *Courtin' Mary Lou* skit and were to peddle medicine kits instead of charging admission. We could sell them at a modest profit, and we'd never have to feel guilty about taking advantage of gullible people. Because far from taking advantage of them, we'd be helping them. Granted, we'd never get rich. But we'd make a reasonably good living, and, while we'd be traveling all the time, we'd never really be away from home because we'd have our home with us. What do you think, Moira?"

For a long while she was silent. Then, "Why do you want to do this, Nick?"

The time had come for the lie. He told it beautifully: "Because I've got to stop thinking of myself as an actor. Because somehow I've got to shed the past. I need a new identity, a totally different identity. Maybe being a 'medicine man' will bring me peace."

She looked away from his face; at the coverlet, at her hands. They were rather large hands, and hard work had broadened them; but they were full of grace. Presently she said, "I think it's a wonderful idea, Nick."

"Good. We'll do a one-week stand here, then we'll go to Mars. There's a big used-ship yard at Port-o'-Sands that ought to be able to supply us with the sort of ship we'll need." He stood up. "I'm sorry I had to wake you up, Moira."

"It's all right, Nick. And Nick?"

"Yes?"

"Port-o'-Sands isn't very far from New North Dakota. Maybe we can visit the farm. And — and my folks."

"We'll make it a point to. Good night, Moira."

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V

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Consequently, they had to settle for something less in the way of furniture than they originally had had in mind. In the end, though, this worked to their advantage, for Moira proved to have a knack for refurbishing chairs, tables, beds and even appliances, and eventually the cheapest and most decrepit items they bought yielded both dignity and grace. Nor did Moira stop with the furniture. The rooms themselves got a going over, too, and when she got done, the living quarters could have passed for a late-twentieth century duplex — which in effect was what they really were.

All this while she and Hayes had been attending night school and learning how to pilot a spacecraft. The near-complete automation of ships like the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer* had long since relegated spaceship navigation to pretty much the same category as driving a late-twentieth century automobile. In many ways it was simpler; certainly it was less perilous. Nevertheless, there were certain basic steps that all would-be pilots had to be familiar with, and in addition there were scores of rules to be memorized. Then Moira and Hayes had to take the training ship on a solo orbit apiece, after which each of them had to go on a trial correlation run to Alpha Centauri 4 and back. Neither ran into any trouble, and they received their licenses on the same day.

Meanwhile, the medicine kits they had ordered from Earth had arrived and had been loaded onto the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer,* bringing their business in Port-o'-Sands to a close. "If we're going to visit your folks, it's high time we were getting started," Hayes said after supper one night. "What did you say the name of your home town was?"

She placed the last of the supper dishes in the rinser and turned the unit on. "Red Spud. It's not a town, though. It's a hamlet, and not much of a one at that. But it's on one of the main airbus routes."

"Good. We can pack tonight and leave in the morning."

She did not look at him. "All right."

"You don't seem very enthusiastic."

"Nick," she said to the stove, "do you think we could pretend to be — to be —"

"To be what?"

"Man and wife. For the duration of the visit, I mean. I — I know you've never thought of me that way, and I know I've no right to

expect you to. But my mother and father are going to wonder. And probably they'll worry. So for their benefit could we make believe?"

Hayes looked out of the kitchen viewport into the cluttered darkness of the shipyard. Here and there, specks of wan light shone, and in the distance a night crew was dismantling an ancient SB-2. Marriage was an item that had not entered into his caluclations. But would it do him any harm to marry Moira? True, he did not love her. But then he had never loved anyone, for that matter — save Leslie perhaps. And anyway, marriage wasn't the final step it used to be. There was a clause in every contract that made it possible for either party to walk out on the other during the first year without showing just cause — provided no children had been conceived during that period of time. *The Two-Sided Triangle* would come up for Encore long before a year.

So he said to Moira, "I remembered everything didn't I? Except the most important thing of all. Will you marry me, Moira?"

Her eyes, when she raised them to his, brought Bar-rag's worshipful orbs to mind. "I didn't mean for you to ask me that."

"Nevertheless, I did it. So don't you think I rate an answer?"

"I'm the girl who used to swing on a grapevine in the Last Of The Mohicans Hotel — remember?"

"And I'm the drunk you rescued from the snakes."

He saw her then, as the years fell from her shoulders, the way she must have been when she set out from New North Dakota long ago, tall and slender, girlish and soft; Zonda of the Amazon standing in a treetop and looking out over the wide-wide world, blue eyes filled with wonder. But it was Moira, not Zonda, who answered. "I'm no Leslie," she said. "I could never be Leslie Lake."

He stood his ground. "I wouldn't want you to be." Stepping closer, he placed his hands upon her shoulders. "We'll find a justice of the peace tonight. We'll spend our honeymoon in New North Dakota." He paused. Terms of endearment had always been difficult for him to utter. He could never in real life give them the sincerity that was needed to put them across, the sincerity that came so natural to him on the stage. But it was imperative that he utter on now. "I'm sure we'll be happy, darling," he said.

Instantly, Bar-rag, who had been dozing on the couch in the living room, materialized between them. Moira laughed, and suddenly everything was the way it should be, and she was warm and wanted in his arms. Bar-rag, proud as a peacock for having remembered its

cue, leaped ecstatically about their feet, tail rotating like a toy windmill.

New North Dakota was warmth on cold nights and red plains rolling away under pale Martian skies; it was raftered rooms and open fireplaces and strong coffee percolating on primitive stoves, it was *maklus* roasts browning in ovens, and brown gravy and baked beans; it was 3-V beamed all the way from Earth and viewed on long evenings in big living rooms; it was hikes in ocher hills and dances in bright community halls, and allemaine left and allemaine right; it was star-crisp nights walking home from warmth and laughter, cameraderie and good cheer; it was waking under eaves in gray dawnlight beneath feather ticks ten inches thick; it was a quaint little church standing like a steepled matchbox beneath a vastness of lavender sky, and the peace of pleasant people on pleasant Sunday afternoons.

When the time came to leave, Hayes was almost as sad as Moira's parents were. Moira cried. Bar-rag did not cry, of course; but the sadness in the little animal's slanted golden eyes said that it could have if it would.

However, the sadness was shortlived on both man and doggone's part. It lasted no longer than the airbus journey back to Port-o'-Sands. After that, Hayes had piloting to occupy him, and Bar-rag, the exploration of the world of the ship.

The exploration had been begun before the trip to New North Dakota, and now it was resumed in earnest. Seemingly obsessed with a desire to be everywhere at once, the little animal kept teleporting itself from deck to deck, from hold to hold, from room to room, and for a while Hayes re-experienced the fear he had experienced during the Black Dirt-to-Goshen and Goshen-to-Mars run — that the doggone would miscalculate its distance and teleport itself beyond the life-and-death boundary of the hull. But it never did. Hayes came to the conclusion that, in common with its sense of direction, a doggone's sense of distance was infallible.

The first planet on the medicine-show itinerary was Golden Grain, the ninth satellite of green star Castor. After clearing the ship at Port-o'-Plains, he began the series of hops that he and Moira had decided upon, the first of which brought them to One Leg To Stand On. Coming down in an uncultivated field a few miles outside of town, he started beaming a carefully prepared sales pitch over

the local short-wave band: NOW PLAYING: Nicholas Hayes, Zonda of the Amazon, and Bar-rag the Wonder Dog in *Courtin' Mary Lou*. Come one, come all — ADMISSION FREE. The place: the Theatre-Ship, two miles south of town. The time: star-rise. See Bar-rag the Wonder Dog thwart the ardent lovers. See him appear out of Thin Air and spin his magic tail. See him, see him, see him! FREE! FREE! FREE!" If the "FREE" didn't get them, nothing would.

It got them all right — that, and the emptiness of their days. By the time the first star appeared, the section of the meadow in front of the ship was filled to capacity, and the beyond. The starlit faces were gaunt and unimaginative for the most part, but there was curiosity in every pair of eyes, and in the children's eagerness as well. Hayes turned on the footlights he had installed along the edge of the dock, and stepped from behind the maroon plastivelvet curtain Moira had made.

"Citizens of Golden Grain," he said, "we have not come here to defraud you of your hard-earned credits but to help and entertain you. Whether or not you buy one of the medicine kits which I'm about to show you, you will be equally welcome to attend the show which will go on immediately afterward." He faced the curtain. "Zonda?"

Clad in her jaguar skin, her long legs flashing in the footlights, Moira stepped out on the dock carrying a small table on which several dozen medicine kits were piled. Setting the table down, she picked up the topmost kit and handed it to Hayes; then she turned and smiled warmly at the audience.

Hayes held up the kit and described its contents.

"None of the items I've mentioned is a panacea," he concluded, "but each of them will live up to the claims I made for it, and all of them should be in every single household in One Leg To Stand On. The kits sell for two credits apiece. Surely your physical welfare and the welfare of your children are worth that much to you!"

The kits sold surprisingly well, and Moira had to go upstairs twice for more of them. She and Hayes were elated when they retired behind the curtain to round up Bar-rag and get ready for their act. "I think we'd better tone it down a little, don't you?" she said, slipping into her Mary Lou dress. "There's a lot of kids out there."

"Good idea," Hayes said. "I'll keep my hands above the waist

and leave out the leers, and you can eliminate the wiggles when you walk. Okay?"

"Okay."

Even toned down, *Courtin' Mary Lou* went over big. In fact, the audience begged for an encore. Hayes and Moira gave it to them in the form of one of their abandoned skits. "Why don't you do something for them out of your repertoire?" Moira asked Hayes, when the people continued to linger hopefully about the platform.

"That's one way of getting rid of them, I suppose."

"I didn't mean it that way. Don't you see, Nick? You're as much obligated to elevate them culturally as you are to elevate them physically. You've sold them penicillin. Now sell them another kind of pill. Force it down their throats if they don't want to take it. You owe it to them, Nick. You owe it to yourself!"

He regarded her thoughtfully. It was an angle that hadn't occurred to him, and it just might provide the added something that he needed to round out the image he was trying to create. "All right," he said, "I'll give it a try."

Stepping out on the dock, he explained what had gone before the soliloquy he was about to render and what would take place afterward. Then he raised his arms—

"What is a man, if his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unus'd . . ."

As he spoke, the stars stood out ever more vividly above his head, while their light rained down with ever greater intensity upon the upturned faces of his audience. The air was cool, bracing. One of Golden Grain's three moons had climbed into the sky and hung in the heavens like the eye of a camera.

He felt shackles slip from his wrists, fetters fall from his ankles. The "camera" captured his facsimile and started relaying it toward a hundred million living rooms, and he knew the fulfillment of distribution once again. His words climbed into the sky and spread out among the stars in rich and rounded syllables, hung there for all to hear even after he had finished speaking and there was no sound

save the susurrus of the meadow grass beneath the feet of his awed and departing audience . . . And he stood there all alone, Nicholas Hayes did, the wind from the forest fresh against the words he had uttered as they sped outward into the immensities.

No, not quite alone. Moira had come out on the deck and was standing beside him, and Bar-rag had crept forth from behind the curtain and had curled up at his feet. Hayes was barely aware of either of them. "You were wonderful, Nick," Moira said, "and they knew it, too. They'll never forget, and neither will I."

The spell was broken. "It's getting cold," Hayes said. "Let's go inside."

VI

From One Leg To Stand On they hopped to Dutchman's Breeches, and from Dutchman's Breeches they hopped to Devil Take The Hindmost, and from Devil Take The Hindmost, they hopped to A Pocket Full Of Rye. The turnout in each instance was excellent, and the same enthusiasm that had been accorded them in One Leg To Stand On was accorded them thrice more. At the close of each performance Hayes rendered his soliloquy, and each time received the same rapt attention and the same symbolic fulfillment.

But symbolic fulfillment was not enough. And he knew it.

From Golden Grain they proceeded to Acre In The Sky, the fifth planet of the blue star Achernar, where they made one-night stands in Potpourri, Sunrise, Venus Looking-Glass, Hereafter, Winding River and Jack Jump Over The Candlestick. Their stand in Jack Jump Over The Candlestick resulted in the accidental publicity which Hayes had gambled on gaining sooner or later. Mahatma McFadden, a leading correspondent for the IBS Special News Service, had come upon the scene to tape a peasant wedding, Acre In The Sky style, but when he heard about the medicine show and learned that none other than Nicholas Hayes was the medicine man, he taped the *Courtin' Mary Lou* performance, too. He also taped the spiel that preceded it and the soliloquy that followed it.

Hayes played his hand shrewdly. "I'm not sure I'd want that much publicity," he said when Mahatma came hurrying back stage, waving a waiver.

"Give me anything, but don't give me that, Mr. Hayes," Mahatma said. "Who ever heard of an actor who didn't want publicity!"

"I'm not an actor any more. I'm a medicine man."

Mahatma guffawed. He was a thin, wiry little man with a hungry face and bright brown eyes. "Medicine smedicine. Once an actor, always an actor, I say. The trouble with you, Mr. Hayes, is you're sore because you got kicked out of the Guild. Sign here, and when they see the tape they may even let you back in. You never can tell."

"Let me back in because I ran away and became a medicine man?" Hayes laughed a laugh with the precise amount of derision in it necessary to lend it a ring of truth. "Even if they would, I wouldn't consider it."

"All right, then. Look at the situation this way, Mr. Hayes. Eventually this tape will wind up in the out-planets and be played in two-bit theatres and barns — provided you sign the waiver, that is. Now, you want these people to know about you, don't you? You want them to look forward to your coming, don't you? Well, believe me, once they see you on tape they *will* look forward, and if they happen to have seen you live already, they'll be all the more eager to see you live again. Publicity never hurt anybody, you know."

"I think he's right, Nick," Moira said.

"I know I'm right," Mahatma said.

"H'm'm," Hayes said.

The battle won, Mahatma handed him the waiver and an uncapped jet pen. "Right there where it says 'signature of originator', Mr. Hayes."

Two months later when Hayes and Moira and Bar-rag were touring Green Thumb, the tenth planet of the white star Beta Aurigae, Nancy Oakes, girl reporter for the interstellar magazine Newstar caught up to them in the little town of Lily Of The Valley.

Miss Oakes was asparkle with excitement when she sought Hayes out in the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer* after the performance, and her portable tape-recorder was loaded and ready to go. "Mr. Hayes, you simply *must* let me write you up," she said. "'Our readers will simply *devour* your story. Here, let me show you some of the stereophotos I took during your act. They're simply *terrific!*"

Hayes looked them over with carefully disciplined curiosity. One of them showed him peddling medicine kits, with Moira standing beside him in her jaguar skin. Another showed him and Moira on the sofa, with Bar-rag between them. A third showed him standing

on the starlit dock in the midst of his soliloquy. It was one of the best pictures he had ever had taken.

He handed the stereophotos back. Abruptly Bar-rag materialized on the living-room floor and jumped up on his lap. Miss Oakes gasped. "How in the world did you ever manage to train him like that, Mr. Hayes?"

"It wasn't difficult. He's not an ordinary dog, you see. He's a doggone."

"Really?" Miss Hayes activated the recorder with an unobtrusive flick of her finger. "Tell me what a doggone is, Mr. Hayes. It ought to make simply fascinating copy."

Hayes complied. "And now," Miss Oakes rushed on, "you must fill me in on your past. And Zonda's too, of course. Naturally, I know that you're a guest actor, but I'd like some personal items — things that will tie in with your deciding to become medicine man."

Hayes looked at Moira with feigned helplessness. "Shall we let her do the article?" he asked.

"Of course, Nick."

He faced Miss Oakes again. "Well, I guess we can't fight destiny, can we, Miss Oakes? Start throwing your questions."

The issue with the article in it came out two months later, but two more months passed before the copy which the publisher sent Hayes caught up to him. The article began on page 14. He looked at the title: *Nicholas Hayes: the Dr. Schweitzer of the Spaceways.* He read the blurb: *How an exiled thespian has triumphed over alcoholism to bring the blessings of civilization to our neighbors in the sky.*

He threw the magazette into the wastebasket.

The next town they played in was Winter's Breath. At the close of the performance Hayes received a message that a certain party wished to see him in her room at the Winter's Breath Hotel. He walked through woods and over fields, beneath stars he no longer saw, then down a winding street and up dilapidated steps into a tired lobby. The room was number 204. He climbed stairs, turned down a dingy hall. Leslie met him at the door. "Nick, darling, you're looking wonderful."

He went in and sat down on the nearest chair. She took the chair facing it. "I guess you know I've come to take you back," she said.

He raised his eyes. Her eyes were the same. Pale brown, with

flecks of summer sunlight in them. Her hair was night-dark as always, sequined with latent stars that even unimaginative lamplight could elicit. Translucent of V-bodice she sat there, gold of abbreviated skirt. Strutting as always her little hour upon the stage.

Why didn't King come after me himself?"

"Because I asked him to send me. An appropriate gesture, don't you think? Imagine, Nick — we'll have cocktails in Laughter in the Afternoon just the way we used to. We'll go to those cute crummy places we used to eat in after shows. We'll —"

"I'm married," Hayes said.

She laughed. "So what? No one stays married any more. It's passe. In Old York, we've adopted the Muslim custom in such matters. You say 'I divorce you' three times and it's all over."

"Is it?"

She leaned forward. "Don't play noble with me, Nick. I can read between the lines when the lines concern you. I'm not Zonda of the Amazon. I'm Leslie of Laughter in the Afternoon. You didn't become a medicine man to help out-planet peoples. You became a medicine man to help yourself — to attract the favorable attention you needed to get yourself back into the good graces of the Teletheatre Guild and back into the good graces of Christopher King. Most of all, you became a medicine man so you could step before the teletheatre camera and be multiplied by one hundred million once again."

Hayes was looking at the floor. "I assume I'm already reinstated in Guild. Does King have a part for me?"

"I knew you'd see the light, darling. Of course he has a part. He has *the* part — the part of Milton Pomfret. *The Two-sided Triangle* is coming up for Encore next month, and your understudy's contract runs out before that time. So you're all set, Nicholas dear. I can't say the same for Zonda, of course, since I'm still Mary Lou, besides which I doubt very much if she'd measure up to Chris' standards." Suddenly she giggled. "Tell me, darling, did she *really* swing on a grapevine in the Last Of The Mohicans bar the way it says in the article?"

"Shut up!" Hayes said.

"And that ridiculous little dog with the windmill tail. Where in the world did you find *him?* Honestly, Nick, you're too precious for words!"

Hayes stood up. "You've reserved passage, I suppose."

"On the Great Eastern Express. We rendezvous out of Port-o'-Winds at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. So get a move on darling. We've very little time."

"I'll be back in an hour," Hayes said, and walked out of the room —

And down the hall and down the stairs and out into the street and down the winding street and through woods and across meadows, more field to where the dark pile of the ship showed against the stars . . .

Moira was waiting up for him, Bar-rag fast asleep on her lap. Her face told him that she already knew. "You've known all along, haven't you?" he said.

"Don't feel bad, Nick. I wanted you to be reinstated, too."

It was late in the day to ask it, but he asked it anyway. "Do *you* feel bad?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm going back to New North Dakota, Mars, where I belong."

"I'll hire a pilot to go with you. It's no good piloting a ship alone. The *Schweitzer* ought to bring more than we paid for it if you can find the right buyer."

"I think I'll hang on to it for a while. There's plenty of room for it at the farm. Will you be on teletheatre soon?"

"Next month. In the Encore of *The Two-Sided Triangle.*"

"I'm glad. Bar-rag and I will watch you."

He looked down at the small gray head and the absurd, tatter-demalion ears. He raised his eyes to Moira's slender throat. A faint pulse beat there. He raised his eyes still further and caught the telltale glint of the runaway tear.

He stood there, desperately trying to feel. He felt nothing at all except a desire to be gone. "Goodby, Moira," he said, and turned and ran down the spiral stairway and out into the night.

VII

In Old New York it was summer. It was always summer in Old New York. He went with Leslie and King to Laughter in the Afternoon and sipped drab coffee while they gaily chatted over cocktails and said Nick this and Nick that, and Oh Nick, how good it is to have you back! He went to *Triangle* to rehearsals and picked

up effortlessly where he had left off, and sometimes when he spoke his lines he thought of starry nights on Green Thumb and Acre In The Sky, and cool winds wafting out of virgin woods and breathing upon the little stage.

He was not surprised when he began to drink again. It had been inevitable all along. He drank for the same reason he had drunk before, only this time he knew what the reason was. But knowing did not help. What good did it do to know that you were incapable of loving anyone besides yourself if that same incapability was incurable?

On Encore night the Teletheatre Bowl overflowed into the square. Encores were traditional, and Old Yorkers treasured traditions, above the common sense that would have reminded them, had they listened, that they had already seen the play at least once, either on its teletheatre debut or in one of the various little theatres it had been playing in during the past year. But they did not listen, and came instead like lemmings to drown in a quasi-cultural sea.

"How does it feel to be in action again, medicine man?" Leslie said, as she and Hayes took their places for the first scene. "How does it feel to know that in a few seconds you'll be multiplied by one hundred million and will no longer be alone?"

He did not answer. Would Moira be watching? he wondered. Would Bar-rag? Abruptly he forgot both girl and doggone as the curtain rose and the cameras swung into place. Seated behind his desk, he said to his wife who had stopped off at the office on this sunny Friday afternoon to check up on him, "As you can see, Glenda, my dear, there are no secretaries sitting on my lap, none hidden in the filing cabinets, and none peering fearfully forth at you from behind the coffee-break bar," and the play was off to a smooth start with Leslie, as the suspicious Glenda, telling him that she had not come to count his amanuenses but to remind him that that night they were dining at the Croftons and to suggest that he skip his usual on-the-road cocktail and get home a little early so that for once they could avoid the last-minute confusion occasioned by his trying to shave, shower, and dress all at the same time.

At this point, a striking redhead minced into the office and told Hayes Pomfret that he was wanted in the layout room, whereupon he followed her offstage. Glenda stared after them for a moment, then picked up the phone and put in a call to the face-and-figure specialist and told him what she wanted done, and why. Next, she

put in a call to the phoneticist and told *him* what she wanted done.

The following scene showed her as ravishing Mary Lou Johnson, applying for and obtaining a secretarial job in her husband's office. The plot progressed. Hayes Promfret took his new secretary out to lunch. He took her out to dinner. At length he made a date with her and stopped off afterward at her apartment. They sat down side by side on the sofa in her living room. Mary Lou edged closer to him. "I'll bet your home was never like this." she said, pouting her lips for the "first" kiss.

"Darling," Hayes Pomfret said, "if home was like this, I'd never budge from the doorstep."

She moved even closer. "Prove it then."

"I will," Hayes Pomfret said, and put his arms around her.

The door bell rang. "Darn!" Mary Lou said, and got up and left the room.

Her voice could be heard offstage as she argued loudly with a salesman who was trying to sell her a book called *Why You Should Never Trust Your Husband.* To get rid of the man she had to take the stand that all husbands *were* trustworthy and that therefore the book was a big lie. The interruption lasted a little over five minutes, during which time Hayes Pomfret paced back and forth on the stage doing a humorous pantomime of a conscience-stricken husband trying vainly to free himself from the grip of an impatient lover. Upon Mary Lou's return, he resumed his seat on the sofa and she sat back down beside him.

"Darn old salesmen!" she said. "It's getting so people can't have *any* privacy any more!"

Hayes Pomfret started to put his arm around her.

Abruptly she screamed and leaped to her feet.

Hayes stared at the small object that had materialized beside him. He could not move.

The object had hair the hue of morning mists. Its tatterdemalion ears brought bar-rags to mind, and its glazed, protruding eyes lingered a hint of the gold that had once shone forth in love and adoration. Frozen blood flaked the once-roguish mouth, and the white-tufted tail was silent. The small star in the middle of the forehead shone no more.

He picked the little body up and cradled it in his arms. For a moment, he could not see.

"Shove it under the sofa quick!" Leslie, who had sat back down beside him whispered. "Get on with your lines!"

Hayes hardly heard her. "Why, Bar-rag?" he said. "Why did you do it? You knew it was a cliff — why did you jump over it? It was forty million miles high, Bar-rag. Forty million miles!"

"Nick, for God's sake!" Leslie said. "Get rid of that horrible thing and get on with your lines!"

Still cradling Bar-rag in his arms, Hayes stood up. The bowl was filled with a vast whispering; ten thousand faces shimmered in the mist before his eyes. He walked away from Leslie. He walked away from himself. He died one hundred million deaths.

In the dressing-room corridor, King caught up to him. "Nick, come back! We can still save the show. Some stagehand pulled a dirty trick — that's all."

Hayes did not pause.

"Nick, you walk out that door, you'll never walk back in it again! I swear."

Hayes kept on walking.

Outside, it wasn't so bad. Outside, he could see Mars. Almost at perigee, it hung like an orange streetlight in the sky. He saw the red plains through his tears. He saw the steepled matchbox of the little church. He saw the rambling ocher hills. His gaze came back and rested on the little body cradled in his arms. Forty million miles, he thought. *Forty million miles!*

The house was a gentle pile of wood and windows in the starlight. Moira met him at the door. "Nick, I hoped, I prayed you'd come!"

"Were you with him when — when he —"

She nodded. "He was sitting at my feet. A second after you said 'darling', he disappeared. At first I didn't understand what had happened. I never dreamed he'd recognize you on teletheatre. Then, several minutes later, he appeared on the screen, and—and I knew."

"I buried him in space," Hayes said. "Out among the stars. He belongs there, Bar-rag does. He was a star himself."

"Come into the living room, Nick. There's something I want to show you."

They walked down the hall. "The ship," Hayes said. "Did you sell it yet?"

"No — it's still at Port-o'-Sands. Mom and Dad just went to bed

— shall I wake them so you can say hello?"

"No. I'm going to be here for some time — if you'll put up with me."

In the living room, she knelt beside a small basket that stood by the fireplace. He knelt beside her. He saw the tiny tatterdemalion ears first, then the small mist-gray body and the little white-tufted tail. A pair of slanted golden eyes returned his astonished gaze, and above them on the forehead shone a little star. "Bar-rag!" he gasped.

"I told you they were parthenogenetic. He — she gave birth to him a week before she died."

Hayes tweaked one of the tatterdemalion ears, "Well, what do you know!" he said.

He straightened, and pulled Moira to her feet. Over her shoulder he saw the platinum figurine of Maurice Evans standing on the mantel. Yes, she had sold it all right. Sold it to herself. He looked into her eyes. He would have fallen in love with her long ago if love had not been beyond him. It was beyond him no longer. "We'll begin all over, Moira — if you'll do me the honor of being my leading lady again. We'll restock the ship and we'll go to all the places we didn't get to before. We'll go to Morning Glory and Far Reach and Lode —"

"And Meadow Flower and Forty-Niner and Frontier —"

"And when we complete our circuit, we'll go back to Black Dirt —"

"And go on from there to Golden Grain —"

"And Goshen —"

"And Acre In The Sky . . ."

She was in his arms now, and he was kissing her. In Old York, it was summer. It was always summer in Old York. But in New North Dakota, Mars, it was spring. END

THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION

From WORLDS OF TOMORROW

Edited by

FREDERIK POHL

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