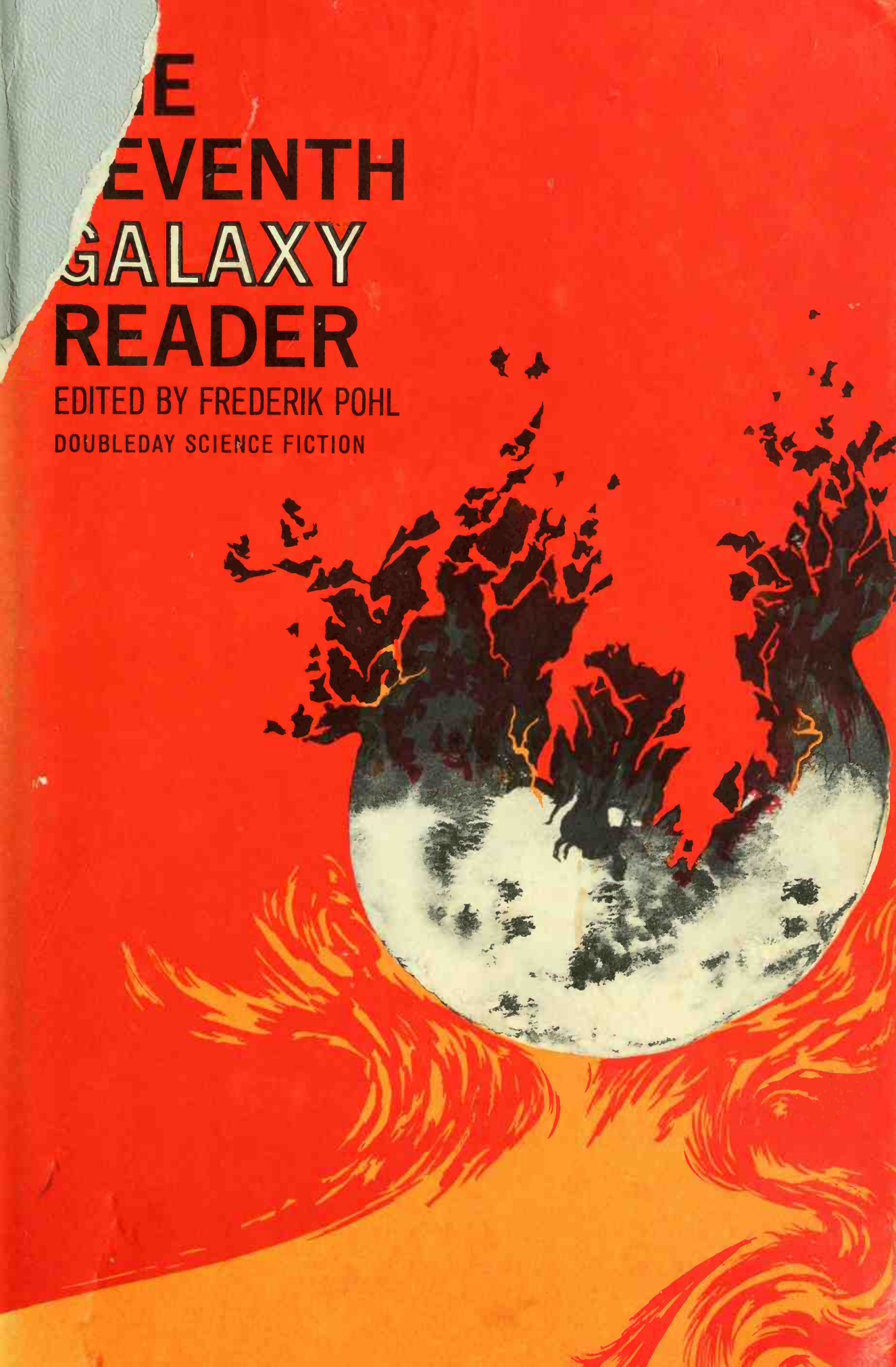
E EVENTH GALAXY READER

EDITED BY FREDERIK POHL

DOUBLEDAY SCIENCE FICTION



Ray Bradbury: COME INTO MY CELLAR. *Boys! You can raise Giant Mushrooms in your cellar . . . and that's by no means all!*

Lester Del Rey: RETURN ENGAGEMENT. *Something had been lost . . . He couldn't find it anywhere on Earth—for it was elsewhere!*

Fritz Leiber: THE BEAT CLUSTER. *They lived in spaceborne bubbles and feared the Earth—but not as much as old Earth feared them!*

THE SEVENTH GALAXY READER

EDITED BY FREDERIK POHL

Blasting off from a wide variety of plots and themes, these fifteen superb short stories—gleaned from the pages of *Galaxy*, the world's most widely read science fiction magazine—offer in turn witty and robust humor, pungent satire on modern civilization, tales of the future in which occurrences are less far-fetched than they might at first seem . . . and the view that people were, are, and always will be—people.

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A space ship pilot attempts to isolate a few lovely ladies for his own purposes, on what he thinks is an uninhabited planet (Eve Times Four) . . .

A scout team from Earth discovers that the natives of Joril are more intelligent than human beings (Turning Point) . . .

A future—and fragmented—America fights for its spiritual, as well as its physical integrity (No Truce With Kings).

Printed in the U.S.A.

THE SEVENTH GALAXY READER

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Edited by FREDERIK POHL

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All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Published in the United States of America

"Rainbird" by R. A. Lafferty, "An Old Fashioned Bird Christmas" by Margaret St. Clair, "For Love" by Algis Budrys, "Three Portraits and a Prayer" by Frederik Pohl, reprinted by courtesy of the authors.

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"Something Bright" by Zenna Henderson, reprinted by courtesy of Willis Kingsley Wing and the author.

To Bob Guinn

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INTRODUCTION

It is a convention of life in the publishing world—it is called "editorial courtesy"—that the editor of one magazine not speak harshly of other editors in the same field.

This convention I have no objection at all to obeying, because indeed I have little to say of other editors that is harsh. For all I have, if nothing else, sympathy. And for the best—Horace Gold and John Campbell are two of the giants in the field—I have had great respect and admiration always, in spite of an occasional reservation about specific editorial decisions.

Still, with all respect to the John Campbell who changed the whole shape of science fiction for the better twenty-odd years ago and the Horace Gold who did the same a decade or so later, I am not either of these gentlemen, and the stories that I think most worth your attention here are undoubtedly not the stories either of them would pick. I hope you will think as I do that this is a Good Thing. Any magazine and any anthology must reflect some of the personality of its editor. When it is an anthology compiled from the very stories which he helped bring to birth in his magazine in the first place, still more of himself must show through. This is that sort of an anthology.

These stories, then, represent as fully as any book I have ever turned over to a printer just what, in my opinion, modern science fiction is all about.

What I hope you will notice first about them is that they do not speak with a single voice. There is not much in com-

mon between Damon Knight's "The Big Pat Boom" and Cordwainer Smith's "On the Gem Planet." What Knight is writing about is our foibles, and with short, acid strokes he shows them to us in a parable about visitors from the planets of other stars. Smith, however, is not writing about us at all; evocatively and, if you will, poetically, he is telling us about our successors—human beings, yes, but so changed by their customs, their science, and their conquests that there's not much left in them of the boy next door. While in "The Tail-Tied Kings," Avram Davidson leaves the human race out of it entirely: his story is about rats.

I maintain that all of these stories, and all the others herein, are science fiction, and that no one of them is a "purer" form than any other. For science fiction is a variegated bloom; it can offer many kinds of experience to the reader—emotion, ideation, wry humor, or a thrill of pride—and what this book proposes to do is to show you a sampling of its colors in their most attractive forms.

But I warn you . . .

This blossom is habit-forming!

Frederik Pohl

THE SEVENTH GALAXY READER

FOR LOVE

By Algis Budrys

Malachi Runner didn't like to look at General Compton. Compton the lean, keen, slash-gesturing semi-demagogue of a few years ago had been much easier to live with than Compton as he was now, and Runner had never had much stomach for him even then. So Runner kept his eyes firmly fixed on the device he was showing.

Keeping his eyes where they were was not as easy as it might have been. The speckled, bulbous distortion in front of him was what Headquarters, several hundred miles away under The Great Salt Lake, was pleased to refer to as an Invisible Weapons Carrier. It was hard to see—because it was designed to be hard to see.

But Malachi Runner was going to have to take this thing up across several hundred miles of terrain, and he was standing too close to it not to see it. The Invisible Weapons Carrier was, in fact, a half-tone of reality. It was large enough inside to contain a man and a fusion bomb, together with the power supply for its engine and its light amplifiers. It bristled with a stiff mat of flexible-plastic light-conducting rods, whose stub ends, clustered together in a tight mosaic pointing outward in every conceivable direction, contrived to bend light around its bulk. It was presently conducting, toward Runner, a picture of the carved rock directly behind it.

The rock, here in this chamber cut under the eastern face of the Medicine Bow Mountains, was reasonably featureless; and the light-amplifiers carefully controlled the intensity of

the picture. So the illusion was marred by only two things: the improbable angle of the pictured floor it was also showing him, and the fact that for every rod conducting light from the wall, another rod was conducting light from Runner's direction, so that to his eyes the ends of half the rods were dead black.

"Invisibility," Compton said scornfully from behind and to one side of Runner. Or, rather, he whispered and an amplifier took up the strain in raising his voice to a normal level. "But it's not bad camouflage. You might make it, Colonel."

"I have orders to try." Runner would not give Compton the satisfaction of knowing that his impatience was with the means provided, not with the opportunity. The war could not possibly be permitted to continue the thirty years more given to it by Compton's schedule. Compton himself was proof of that.

Not that proof required Compton. He was only one. There were many.

Runner glanced aside at the cadet officer who had guided him from the tramway stop to this chamber here, in one of the side passages of the siege bore that was being driven under the Medicine Bows in the direction of the alien spaceship that had dominated the world for fifty years. The boy—none of these underofficers were older than seventeen—had a face that looked as if it had been made from wet paper and then baked dry. His eyesockets were black pits from which his red eyes stared, and his hands were like chicken's feet. His bloated stomach pushed against the wide white plastic of his sidearm belt.

He looked, in short, like most of the other people Runner had seen here since getting off the tram. As he was only seventeen, he had probably been born underground, somewhere along the advancing bore, and had never so much as seen sunlight, much less eaten anything grown under it. He had been bred and educated—or mis-educated; show him something

not printed in Military Alphabet and you showed him the Mayan Codex—trained and assigned to duty in a tunnel in the rock; and never in his life had he been away from the sound of the biting drills.

"You're not eager to go, Colonel?" Compton's amplified whisper said. "You're Special Division, so of course this isn't quite your line of work. I know your ideals, you Special Division men. Find some way to keep the race from dehumanizing itself." And now he chose to make a laugh, remembering to whisper it. "One way to do that would be to end the war before another generation goes by."

Runner wondered, not for the first time, if Compton would find some way to stop him without actually disobeying the Headquarters directive ordering him to cooperate. Runner wondered, too, what Compton would say if he knew just how eager he was for the mission—and why. Runner could answer the questions for himself by getting to know Compton better, of course. There was the rub.

Runner did not think he could ever have felt particularly civilized toward anyone who had married his fiancee. That was understandable. It was even welcome. Runner perversely cherished his failings. Not too perversely, at that—Runner consciously cherished every human thing remaining to the race.

Runner could understand why a woman would choose to marry the famous Corps of Engineers general who had already chivvied and bullied the Army—the organizing force of the world—into devoting its major resources to this project he had fostered. There was no difficulty in seeing why Norma Brand might turn away from Malachi Runner in favor of a man who was not only the picture of efficiency and successful intellect but was thought likely to be the savior of Humanity.

But Compton several years later was—

Runner turned and looked; he couldn't spend the rest of the day avoiding it. Compton, several years later, was precisely what a man of his time could become if he was engaged in

pushing a three hundred mile tunnel through the rock of a mountain chain, never knowing how much his enemy might know about it, and if he proposed to continue that excavation to its end, thirty years from now, whether the flesh was willing to meet his schedules or not.

Compton's leonine head protruded from what was very like a steam cabinet on wheels. In that cabinet were devices to assist his silicotic lungs, his sclerotic blood vessels, and a nervous system so badly deranged that even several years ago Runner had detected the great man in fits of spastic trembling. And God knew what else might be going wrong with Compton's body that Compton's will would not admit.

Compton grinned at him. Almost simultaneously, a bell chimed softly in the control panel on the back of the cabinet. The cadet aide sprang forward, read the warning in some dial or other and made an adjustment in the settings of the control knobs. Compton craned his neck in its collar of loose gray plastic sheeting and extended his grin to the boy. "Thank you, Cadet. I thought I was starting to feel a little dizzy."

"Yes, sir." The aide went back to his rest position.

"All right, Colonel," Compton said to Runner as though nothing had happened. "I've been curious to see this gimmick of yours in operation ever since it was delivered here. Thank you. You can turn it off now. And after that, I'll show *you* something you've never seen."

Runner frowned for a moment. Then he nodded to himself. He crawled under the weapons carrier. From that close it was no longer "invisible," only vaguely dizzying to the eye. He opened the hatch and turned off the main switch.

Compton could only have meant he was going to show him the ship.

Of course, he had seen films of it often enough. Who had not? The Army had managed to keep spy-drones flying above the Mississippi plain. The ship ignored them unless they took on aggressive trajectories.

Presumably there was some limit to the power the ship felt able to expend. Or perhaps the ship simply did not care what Earthmen might learn from watching it; perhaps it underestimated them.

This latest in the long chain of Compton's command bunkers, creeping mole-like toward the ship, was lighted a sickly orange-yellow. Runner seemed to recall a minor scandal in the Quartermaster Corps. Something about a contractor who had bribed or cozened a Corps officer into believing that yellow light duplicated natural sunlight. Contractor and misled officer were no doubt long dead in one of the labor battalions at the bore face, but some use for the useless lights had had to be found. And so here they were, casting their pall, just as if two lives and two careers had not already gone toward settling the account.

But, of course, nothing settles an account as derelict as Earth's was.

In that light, Compton's cabinet rolled forward to the bank of hooded television screens jury-rigged against a somewhat water-proofed wall. A row of technicians perched on stools watched what the drones were showing them.

"Lights," Compton said, and the aide made the room dark. "Here, Colonel—try this one." He pointed his chin toward a particular screen, and Runner stepped closer. For the first time in his life, he saw something only a few hundred people of his time had seen in an undelayed picture; he saw the ship. It was two hundred miles away from his present location, and two hundred fifty miles high.

II

Fifty years ago, the alien ship landed butt-down in the northwest quadrant of the central plain of the United States. Stern-first, she had put one of her four landing jacks straight down to bedrock through the town of Scott's Bluff, Nebraska,

and the diagonally opposite leg seventy-five miles away near Julesburg, Colorado. Her shadow swept fifty thousand square miles.

A tower of pitted dull green and brown-gold metal, her forepeak narrowing in perspective into a needle raking unseen through the thinnest last margins of the atmosphere, she had neither parleyed nor even communicated with anything on or of Earth. No one had ever seen anything of what her crew might look like. To this day, she still neither spoke to Earth nor listened to whatever Terrestrials might want to say to her. She was neither an embassy nor an invader.

For fifty years she had been broadcasting the same code group into space, hour after hour, but she had neither made nor received any beam transmissions along any portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. The presumption was she had a distress beacon out on general principles, but had no hope of communicating with a particular source of rescue.

She had come down a little erratically; there was some suggestion of jury-rigging in the plates over an apparently buckled section of the hull shrouding her stern tubes; there seemed to be some abnormal erosion at one segment of the lip around the main jet. Over the years, Headquarters Intelligence had reached the decision that she was down on Earth for a self-refit.

Landing, she had immediately put out surface parties and air patrols—there were turret-mounted weapons all along her flanks; she was clearly a warship of some kind—in a display of resources that badly upset the Terrestrial military forces observing her. The surface parties were squat-profiled, tracked, armored amphibious machines with sixteen-foot bogeys and a track-to-turtledeck height of seventy-five feet. They had fanned out over the surrounding states and, without regard to road, river, fence or farmhouse, had foraged for minerals. It had finally been concluded that the vehicles, equipped with power shovels, claws, drills, ore buckets and whatever other mining tools were necessary, were remote-controlled from the ship on

the basis of local topography but not with any reference to the works of Man. Or to the presence of Man. The undeviating tracks made as much of a hayrick as they did of a company of anti-tank infantry or a battalion of what the Army in those days was pleased to call "armor."

Whatever had hurt her, there was no point in Earthmen speculating on it. No missile could reach her. She had anti-missile missiles and barrage patterns that, in operation, had made the Mississippi plain uninhabitable. An attempt was made to strike her foraging parties, with some immediate success. She then extended her air cover to the entire civilized world, and began methodically smashing down every military installation and every industrial complex capable of supporting one.

It was a tribute to the energy and perseverance of Twentieth Century Man. And it was the cause of Twenty-First Century man's finding himself broken into isolated enclaves, almost all of them either underground or so geographically remote as to be valueless, and each also nearly incapable of physical communication with any other.

It did not take a great deal of Terrestrial surface activity to attract one of the ship's nearly invulnerable aircraft. Runner's journey between Salt Lake and the tunnel pit head had been long, complicated by the need to establish no beaten path, and anxious. Only the broken terrain, full of hiding places, had made it possible at all.

But the balance between birth and death rates was once more favorable, and things were no longer going all the ship's way—whether the ship knew it or not. Still, it would be another thirty years before this siege bore Compton was driving could reach, undermine and finally topple the ship.

Thirty years from now, Runner and the other members of Special Division knew, the biped, spindling, red-eyed creatures emerging from the ground to loot that broken ship and repay themselves for this nightmare campaign would be only

externally human—some of them. Some would be far less. Special Division's hope—its prospects were not good enough to call it a task—was to attempt to shorten that time while Humanity was still human.

And if the human race did not topple the ship, or if the ship completed its refit and left before they could reach it, then all this fifty years of incalculable material and psychic expenditure was irretrievably lost. Humanity would be bankrupt. They were all living now on the physical and emotional credit embodied in that tower of alien resources. From it, they could strip a technology to make the world new again—nothing less could accomplish that; in its conquest, there was a triumph to renew the most exhausted heart. Or almost any such heart. Runner could only speculate on how many of the victors would, like Compton, be unable to dance upon the broken corpse.

If anyone on Earth doubted, no one dared to dwell aloud on the enfeebling thought.

They had to have the ship.

"She's got some kind of force-field running over her structure," Compton remarked, looking at the image on the screen. "We know that much. Something that keeps the crystals in her metal from deforming and sliding. She'd collapse. If we had something like that field, we could build to her size, too."

"Is there that much metal in the world?"

Compton looked sideward at Runner. "A damned sight more. But if we had her, we wouldn't need it."

Yes, Runner thought, keeping himself from looking at the screen now as faithfully as he had prevented himself from looking at Compton earlier. Yes, if we had the ship we wouldn't need this, and we wouldn't need that, or the other thing. We could even engineer such wonderful cabinets like the one in which Compton dwelt that none of us would have to fear a stop to our ambitions, and we could roll along on the wonderfully smooth corridor floors we could carve away from the places where storms and lightning strike.

For how could you live, Compton, out there where I have to go tomorrow?

Compton, looking up at him, shrewdly said: "Do you know I approve of the Special Division? I think you people serve a very necessary function. I need the pressure of rivals."

Runner thought: You are ugly.

"I have to go to sleep," he had said and left Compton to his screens and schedules. But he did not take the lift down to the Bachelor Officers' Quarters where he had been given an accommodation—a two-man cubicle for himself alone; the aide, never having experienced solitude, as Runner had, had been envious. Instead, he puzzled his way through another of the branching temporary passageways that were crudely chopped out for living space near the advancing bore.

He searched until he found the proper door. The letter Norma had sent him did not contain the most exact directions. It had spoken in local terms: "Follow the first parallel until you reach the fourth gallery," and so forth.

He knocked, and the gas-tight door opened.

"I heard you would be here today," Norma said in a choked voice, and there was much for him to read in the waxiness of her skin and the deep wrinkles that ran from the corners of her nose to the corners of her bloodless mouth.

He took the hands she offered, and stepped inside.

There was one large room; that is, a room large enough for a free-standing single cot, rather than a bunk, and a cleared area, faintly marked by black rubber wheelmarks, large enough for a cabinet to turn around in. A Compton-sized cabinet.

"How are you, Norma?" he said as if he could not guess, and she did not trouble to answer him. She shut the door and leaned against it as if they had both just fled in here.

"Are you going out in the morning?"

Runner nodded. It seemed to him he had time at least to say a few conventional things to the girl who had been his

fiancee, and then Compton's wife. But she apparently thought otherwise.

"Are you going to make it?"

"I don't know. It's a gamble."

"Do you think you'll make it?"

"No."

It had never seemed reasonable that he would. In the Technical Section of the Special Division there were men—fully his equals—who were convinced he could succeed. They said they had calculated the ship's weaknesses, and he believed they had figures and evaluations, right enough. He in his own turn believed there were things a man had to be willing to do whether they seemed reasonable or not, simply because they seemed necessary. So neither fact nor opinion could modify his taking the weapons carrier out against the ship tomorrow. "But I *hope* I'll make it," he said.

"You hope you'll make it," Norma said tonelessly. She reached out quickly and took his hands again. "What a forlorn thing to tell me! You know I won't be able to stand it down here much longer. How do we know the ship doesn't have seismic detectors? How do we know it isn't just letting us concentrate ourselves here so it can smash us before we become dangerous?"

"Well, we don't know, but it seems unlikely. They have geological probes, of course. The gamble is that they're only probes and not detectors."

"If they don't smash us, there's only one reason—they know they'll be finished and gone before we can reach them!"

This was all wrong; he could not talk to her about anything important before he had calmed her. He said, searching for some way to reach her: "But we have to go on as if they won't. Nothing else we've tried has worked. At least Compton's project hasn't failed."

"Now you're on his side! You!"

She was nothing like the way she had been with him.

She would never have been like this. The way she was now, she and Malachi Runner could not meet. He understood, now, that in the years since she had left Headquarters with Compton she had come to think back on Malachi Runner not as a man but as an embodiment of that safe life. It was not him she was shouting out to. It was to all those days gone forever.

And so I must be those days of life in a place where shafts lead to the wine-rich air of the surface, and there is no sound of metal twisting in the rock. I am not Malachi Runner now. I hoped I could be. I should have read that letter as it was, not as I hoped it was. Good-by, Runner, you aren't needed here.

"No, I'm not on his side. But I wouldn't dare stop him if I could. I wouldn't dare shut off any hope that things will end and the world can go back to living."

"End? Where can they end? He goes on; he can't move an arm or a finger, but he goes on. He doesn't need anything but that box that keeps him alive and this tunnel and that ship. Where can I touch him?"

They stood separated by their outstretched hands, and Runner watched her as intently as though he had been ordered to make a report on her.

"I thought I could help him, but now he's in that box!"

Yes, Runner thought, now he's in that box. He will not let death rob him of seeing the end of his plans. And you love him, but he's gone where you can't follow. Can you?

He considered what he saw in her now, and he knew she was lost. But he thought that if the war would only end, there would be ways to reach her. He could not reach her now; nothing could reach her. He knew insanity was incurable, but he thought that perhaps she was not yet insane; if he could at least keep her within this world's bounds, there might be time, and ways, to bring her back. If not to him, then at least to the remembered days of Headquarters.

"Norma!" he said, driven by what he foresaw and feared. He pulled her close and caught her eyes in his own. "Norma, you have got to promise me that no matter what happens, you won't get into another one of those boxes so you can be with him."

The thought was entirely new to her. Her voice was much lower. She frowned as if to see him better and said: "Get into one of those boxes? Oh, no—no, I'm not sick, yet. I only have to have shots for my nerves. A corpsman comes and gives them to me. He'll be here soon. It's only if you can't not-care; I mean, if you have to stay involved, like he does, that you need the interrupter circuits instead of the tranquilizer shots. You don't get into one of those boxes just for fear," she said.

He had forgotten that; he had more than forgotten it—there were apparently things in the world that had made him be sure, for a moment, that it really was fear.

He did not like hallucinating. He did not have any way of depending on himself if he had lapses like that.

"Norma, how do I look to you?" he said rapidly.

She was still frowning at him in that way. "You look about the same as always," she said.

He left her quickly—he had never thought, in conniving for this assignment with the letter crackling in his pocket, that he would leave her so quickly. And he went to his accommodation, crossing the raw, still untracked and unsheathed echoing shaft of the tunnel this near the face, with the labor battalion squads filing back and forth and the rubble carts rumbling. And in the morning he set out. He crawled into the weapons carrier, and was lifted up to a hidden opening that had been made for it during the night. He started the engine and, lying flat on his stomach in the tiny cockpit, peering through the cat's-eye viewports, he slid out onto the surface of the mountain and so became the first of his generation to advance into this territory that did not any more belong to Man.

III

The interior of the weapons carrier was padded to protect him from the inevitable jounces and collisions. So it was hot. And the controls were crude; the carrier moved from one foot to another, like a turtle, and there were levers for each of his hands and feet to control. He sweated and panted for breath.

No other machine could possibly have climbed down the face of that mountain and then begun its heaving, staggering progress toward the spaceship's nearest leg. It could not afford to leave tracks. And it would, when it had covered the long miles of open country that separated it from its first destination, have to begin another inching, creeping journey of fifty-five miles, diagonally up the broadening, extensible pillar of the leg.

It stumbled forward on pseudopods—enormous hollow pads of tough, transparent plastic, molded full of stress-channels that curled them to fit the terrain, when they were stiffened in turn by compressed colorless fluid. Shifting its weight from one of these to another, the carrier duck-walked from one shadow to another as Runner, writhing with muscle cramps, guided it at approximately the pace of a drunken man.

But it moved forward.

After the first day Runner was ready to believe that the ship's radar systems were not designed to track something that moved so close to the ground and so slowly. The optical detection system—which Intelligence respected far more than it did radar; there were dozens of countered radar-proof missiles to confirm them—also did not seem to have picked him up.

He began to feel he might see Norma again. Thinking of that babbling stranger in Compton's accommodation, he began to feel he might someday see *Norma* again.

When he was three days out, he passed within a hundred yards of a cluster of mining-machines. They paid him no attention, and he laughed, cackling inside his egg. He knew that if he had safely come so close to an extension of the ship—an extension that could have stepped over and crushed him with almost no extra expenditure—then his chances were very good. He knew he cackled. But he knew the Army's drones were watching, unobtrusively, for signs of his extinction or breakdown. Not finding them, they were therefore giving Compton and Headquarters the negative good news that he had not yet failed. At Headquarters, other Special Division personnel would be beginning to hope. They had been the minority party in the conflicts there for as long as they had been in existence at all.

But it did not matter, he thought as he lay up that night and sipped warm water from the carrier's tank. It didn't matter what party was winning. Surely even Compton would not be infuriated by a premature end to the war. And there were plenty of people at Headquarters who had fought for Compton not because they were convinced his was the only way, but only because his was a way that seemed sure. If slow. Or as sure as any way could be.

It came to Runner, for the first time in his life, that any race, in whatever straits, willing to expend so much of its resources on what was really not a surety at all, must be desperate beyond all reason.

He cackled again. He knew he cackled. He smiled at himself for it.

The ship's leg was sunken through the ground down to its anchorage among the deep rock layers sloping away from the mountains. It was, at ground level, so far across that he could not see past it. It was a wall of streaked and overgrown metal curving away from him, and only by shifting to one of the side viewports could he make out its apparent limits from where he now was.

Looking overhead, he saw it rise away from him, an inverted pylon thrust into the ground at an angle, and far, far above him, in the air toward which that angle pointed, something large and vague rested on that pylon. Obscured by mist and cloud, distorted by the curvature of the tiny lens through which he was forced to look at it, it was nothing meaningful. He reasoned the pylon led up to the ship. He could not see the ship; he concentrated on the pylon.

Gingerly, he extended a pseudopod. It touched the metal of the ship, through which the stabilizing field ran. There was an unknown danger here, but it hadn't seemed likely to Intelligence that the field would affect non-metallic substances.

It didn't. The pseudopod touched the metal of the ship, and nothing uptoward happened. He drew it back, and cycled an entirely new fluid through the pseudopods. Hairline excretory channels opened on their soles, blown clean by the pressure. The pads flattened and increased in area. He moved forward toward the pylon again, and this time he began to climb it, held by air pressure on the pads and the surface tension on their wet soles. He began, then, at the end of a week's journey, to climb upon the ship no other aggression of Man's had ever reached. By the time he was a thousand feet up, he dared look only through the fore ports.

Now he moved in a universe of sound. The leg thrummed and quivered, so gently that he doubted anyone in the ship could feel it. But he was not in the ship; he was where the thrumming was. It invaded his gritted teeth and put an intolerable itching deep into his ears. This fifty-five miles had to be made without stop for rest; he could not, in fact, take his hands from the controls. He was not sure but what he shouldn't be grateful—he would have gouged his ears with his nails, surely, if he had been free to work at them.

He was past laughter of any kind now—but exultation sustained him even when, near the very peak of his climb, he came to the rat guard.

He had studied this problem with a model. No one had tried to tell him what it might be like to solve it at this altitude, with the wind and mist upon him.

The rat guard was a collar of metal, cone-shaped and inverted downward, circling the leg. The leg here was several miles in diameter; the rat guard was a canopy several yards thick and several hundred feet wide from its joining at the leg to its lip. It was designed to prevent exactly what was happening—the attempted entry of a pest.

Runner extended the carrier's pseudopods as far and wide as they would go. He pumped more coagulant into the fluid that leaked almost imperceptibly out of their soles, and began to make his way, head-downward, along the descending slope of the rat guard's outer face. The carrier swayed and stretched at the plastic membranes. He neutralized the coagulant in each foot in turn, slid it forward, fastened it again, and proceeded. After three hours he was at the lip, and dangling by the carrier's forelegs until he had succeeded in billowing one of the rear pads onto the lip as well.

And when he had, by this patient trial and error, scrambled successfully onto the rat guard's welcome upward face, he found that he was not past laughing after all. He shouted it; the carrier's interior frothed with it, and even the itching in his ears was lost. Then he began to move upward again.

Not too far away, the leg entered the ship's hull. There was an opening at least as large as the carrier needed. It was only a well; up here, the gleaming pistons that controlled the extension of the leg hung burnished in the gloom, but there was no entry to the ship itself. Nor did he need or want it.

He had reasoned long ago that whatever inhabited this ship must be as tired, as anxious, as beset as any human being. He needed no new miseries to borrow. He wanted only to find a good place to attach his bomb, set the fuse and go. Before the leg, its muscles cut, collapsed upon the aliens' hope of ever returning to whatever peace they dreamed of.

When he climbed out of the carrier, as he had to, to attach

the bomb, he heard one noise that was not wind-thrum or the throb of internal machinery. It was a persistent, nerve-torn ululation, faint but clear, deep inside the ship and with a chilling quality of endurance.

He hurried back down the leg; he had only four days to get clear—that is, to have a hope of getting clear—and he hurried too much. At the rat guard's lip, he had to hang by his heels and cast the fore pads under. He thought he had a grip, but he had only half a one. The carrier slipped, jerked and hung dangling by one pad. It began to slide back down the short distance to the lip of the guard, rippling and twisting as parts of its sole lost contact and other parts had to take up the sudden drag.

He poured coagulant into the pad, and stopped the awful series of sticks and slips. He slapped the other pads up into place and levered forward, forgetting how firmly that one pad had been set in his panic. He felt resistance, and then remembered, but by then the pull of the other three pads had torn the carrier forward and there was a long rip through which stress fluid and coagulant dripped in a turgid stream.

He came down the last ten miles of the leg like a runaway toboggan on a poorly surfaced slide, the almost flaccid pads turning brown and burnt, their plastic soft as jelly. He left behind him a long, slowly evaporating smear of fluid and, since no one had thought to put individual shut-offs in the cross-valving system between the pads, he came down with no hope of ever using the carrier to get back to the mountains.

It was worse than that. In the end, he crashed into the indented ground at the base of the leg and, for all the interior padding, the drive levers bludgeoned him and broke bones for him. He lay in the wreck with only a faint awareness of anything but his pain. He could not even know whether the carrier, with its silent power supply, still as much as half hid him or whether that had broken, too.

It hadn't broken, but he was still there when the bomb ex-

ploded; it was only a few hours afterward that he came out of his latest delirium and found that the ground had been stirred and the carrier was lying in a new position.

He pried open the hatch—not easily or painlessly—and looked out.

The ship hadn't fallen. The leg had twitched in the ground—it was displaced by several hundred yards, and raw earth clung to it far overhead. It had changed its angle several degrees toward vertical and was much less deeply sunken into the ground. But the ship had not fallen.

He fell back into the carrier and cried because the ship hadn't come down and crushed him.

IV

The carrier had to be abandoned. Even if the pads had been usable, it was three-quarters buried in the upheaval the leg had made when it stirred. The machine, Runner thought contemptuously, had failed, while a man could be holed and broken and heal himself nevertheless.

He had very good proof of that, creeping back toward the mountains. Broken badly enough, a man might not heal himself into what he had been. But he would heal into something.

For a time he had to be very wary of the mining machines, for there had been a frenzied increase in their activity. And there was the problem of food and water. But he was in well-watered country. The comings and goings of the machines had churned the banks of the Platte River into a series of sinks and swamps without making it impossible for a thirsty, crawling man to drink. And he had his rations from the carrier while the worst of the healing took place. After that, when he could already scuttle on his hands and one knee, he was able to range about. In crawling, he had discovered the great variety of burrowing animals that live beneath the eye of or-

dinary man; once he had learned which ones made bolt-holes and which could be scooped out of the traps of their own burrows he began to supply himself with a fair amount of protein.

The ship, and its extensions, did him no harm. Some of this was luck, when he was in the zones traversed by the machines as they went to and from the ship. But after he had taken up a systematic trek back along the North Platte, and presumably ought to have stopped being registered in the ship's detectors as an aimless animal, he was apparently protected by his coloration, which was that of the ground, and again by his slow speed and ability to hug the terrain. Even without pseudopods and a fusion bomb to carry, his speed was no better than that.

When several months had passed he was able to move in a half-upright walk that was an unrelenting parody of a skip and a jump, and he was making fair time. But by then he was well up into the beginnings of the Medicine Bows.

He thought that even though the ship still stood, if he could reach Norma soon enough she might still not be too lost.

Not only the ship but the Army drones had missed him, until he was almost back to the now refilled exit from which he and the carrier had launched themselves. The passages were hurriedly unblocked—every cubic yard of rubble that did not have to be dispersed and camouflaged at the pithead represented an enormous saving of expenditure—and he was hauled back into the company of his fellow creatures.

His rescue was nearly unendurable. He lay on a bed in the Aid Station and listened to Compton's delight.

"They went wild when I told them at Headquarters, Colonel. You'd already been given a posthumous Medal of Honor. I don't know what they'll do now you're available for parades. And you certainly deserve them. I had never had such a moment in my life as when I saw what you'd done to the ship."

And while Compton talked, Norma—Norma with no attention to spare for Runner; a Norma bent forward, peering at the dials of Compton's cabinet, one hand continually twitching toward the controls—that Norma reached with her free hand, took a photograph out of a file folder clipped to the side of the cabinet and held the picture, unseeing, for Runner to look at while she continued her stewardship of Compton's dials. The cadet had been replaced. The wife was homemaking in the only way she could.

The ship no longer pointed directly away from the ground, nor was she equally balanced on the quadruped of her landing jacks. The bombed leg dangled useless, its end trailing in the ground, and the ship leaned away from it.

"When the bomb went off," Compton was explaining, "she did the only thing she could to save herself for the time being. She partially retracted the opposite leg to balance herself."

Norma reached out and adjusted one of the controls. The flush paled out of Compton's face, and his voice sank toward the toneless whisper Runner remembered.

"I was always afraid she would do that. But the way she is now, I know—I *know* that when I undermine another leg, she'll fall! And she can't get away from me. She'll never take off with that leg dragging. I never had a moment in my life like the moment I had when I saw her tilt. Now I know there's an end in sight. All of us here know there's an end in sight, don't you, Norma? The ship'll puzzle out how you did it, Runner, and she'll defend against another such attempt, but she can't defend against the ground opening up under her. We'll run the tunnel right through the rock layers she rests on, get underneath, mine out a pit for the leg to stumble into and blow the rock—she'll go down like a tree in the wind, Runner. Thirty years—well, possibly forty, now that we've got to reach a farther leg—and we'll have her! We'll swallow her up, Runner!"

Runner was watching Norma. Her eyes darted over the

dials and not once, though most of the gestures were abortive, did her hands stop their twitching toward the controls. When she did touch them, her hands were sure; she seemed quite practiced; Runner could calculate that she had probably displaced the cadet very soon after he had bombed the ship.

"You were right, General," he said. "I never got the proper perspective to see all that. It was acute of you to bring me that drone's photograph. I never knew what an effect I'd produced until I got back here."

"Yes!" Compton laughed into Runner's eyes, and Norma tenderly adjusted the controls to keep the laugh from killing him forty years too soon. "It's all a matter of perspective!"

Runner comforted himself with the thought that the aliens in the ship had also gone mad. And he thought it was a very human thing to do—he thought, with some pride, that it was perhaps the last human thing—for him to refuse the doctors who offered to give him artificial replacements for the hopelessly twisted legs he had come back with.

"You will *not!*" he snapped, while up in the bunker, all unimaginable to him, Norma kissed Compton's face and said: "You *will* get her—you *will!*"

COME INTO MY CELLAR

By Ray Bradbury

Hugh Fortnum woke to Saturday's commotions, and lay eyes shut, savoring each in its turn.

Below, bacon in a skillet; Cynthia waking him with fine cookings instead of cries.

Across the hall, Tom *actually* taking a shower.

Far off in the bumble-bee dragon-fly light, whose voice was already damning the weather, the time, and the tides? Mrs. Goodbody? Yes. That Christian giantess, six foot tall with her shoes off, the gardener extraordinary, the octogenarian-dietitian and town philosopher.

He rose, unhooked the screen and leaned out to hear her cry:

"There! Take *that! This'll* fix you! Hah!"

"Happy Saturday, Mrs. Goodbody!"

The old woman froze in clouds of bug-spray pumped from an immense gun.

"Nonsense!" she shouted. "With these fiends and pests to watch for?"

"What kind *this* time?" called Fortnum.

"I don't want to shout it to the jaybirds, but—" she glanced suspiciously around—"what would you say if I told you I was the first line of defense concerning Flying Saucers?"

"Fine," replied Fortnum. "There'll be rockets between the worlds any year now."

"There already *are!*" She pumped, aiming the spray under the hedge. "There! Take that!"

He pulled his head back in from the fresh day, somehow not as high-spirited as his first response had indicated. Poor soul, Mrs. Goodbody. Always the very essence of reason. And now what? Old age?

The doorbell rang.

He grabbed his robe and was half down the stairs when he heard a voice say, "Special Delivery. Fortnum?" and saw Cynthia turn from the front door, a small packet in her hand.

He put his hand out, but she shook her head.

"Special Delivery airmail for your son."

Tom was downstairs like a centipede.

"Wow! That must be from the Great Bayou Novelty Greenhouse!"

"I wish I were as excited about ordinary mail," observed Fortnum.

"Ordinary?!" Tom ripped the cord and paper wildly. "Don't you read the back pages of *Popular Mechanics?* Well, here *they* are!"

Everyone peered into the small open box.

"Here," said Fortnum, "*what* are?"

"The Sylvan Glade Jumbo-Giant Guaranteed Growth Raise-Them-in-Your-Cellar-for-Big-Profit Mushrooms!"

"Oh, of course," said Fortnum. "How silly of me."

Cynthia squinted. "Those little teeny bits—?"

" 'Fabulous growth in 24 hours,' " Tom quoted from memory. " 'Plant them in your own cellar—' "

Fortnum and wife exchanged glances.

"Well," she admitted, "it's better than frogs and greensnakes."

"Sure is!" Tom ran.

"Oh, Tom," said Fortnum, lightly.

Tom paused at the cellar door.

"Tom," said his father. "Next time, fourth class mail would do fine."

"Heck," said Tom. "They must've made a mistake, thought

I was some rich company. Airmail special, who can afford *that?*"

The cellar door slammed.

Fortnum, bemused, scanned the wrapper a moment, then dropped it into the wastebasket. On his way to the kitchen, he opened the cellar door.

Tom was already on his knees, digging with a handrake in the dirt of the back part of the cellar.

He felt his wife beside him, breathing softly, looking down into the cool dimness.

"Those *are* mushrooms, I hope. Not . . . toadstools?"

Fortnum laughed. "Happy harvest, farmer!"

Tom glanced up and waved.

Fortnum shut the door, took his wife's arm, and walked her out to the kitchen, feeling fine.

Toward noon, Fortnum was driving toward the nearest market when he saw Roger Willis, a fellow Rotarian, and teacher of biology at the town high school, waving urgently from the sidewalk.

Fortnum pulled his car up and opened the door.

"Hi, Roger, give you a lift?"

Willis responded all too eagerly, jumping in and slamming the door.

"Just the man I want to see. I've put off calling for days. Could you play psychiatrist for five minutes, God help you?"

Fortnum examined his friend for a moment as he drove quietly on.

"God help you, yes. Shoot."

Willis sat back and studied his fingernails. "Let's just drive a moment. There. Okay. Here's what I want to say: something's wrong with the world."

Fortnum laughed easily. "Hasn't there always been?"

"No, no, I mean . . . something strange—something unseen—is happening."

"Mrs. Goodbody," said Fortnum, half to himself, and stopped.

"Mrs. Goodbody?"

"This morning. Gave me a talk on flying saucers."

"No." Willis bit the knuckle of his forefinger nervously. "Nothing like saucers. At least I don't think. Tell me, what is intuition?"

"The conscious recognition of something that's been subconscious for a long time. But don't quote this amateur psychologist!" He laughed again.

"Good, good!" Willis turned, his face lighting. He readjusted himself in the seat. "That's it! Over a long period, things gather, right? All of a sudden, you have to spit, but you don't remember saliva collecting. Your hands are dirty, but you don't know how they got that way. Dust falls on you every day and you don't feel it. But when you get enough dust collected up, there it is, you see and name it. That's intuition, as far as I'm concerned. Well, what kind of dust has been falling on *me?* A few meteors in the sky at night? Funny weather just before dawn? I don't know. Certain colors, smells, the way the house creaks at three in the morning? Hair prickling on my arms? All I know is, the damn dust *has* collected. Quite suddenly I *know.*"

"Yes," said Fortnum, disquieted. "But what *is* it you know?"

Willis looked at his hands in his lap.

"I'm afraid. I'm not afraid. Then I'm afraid again, in the middle of the day. Doctor's checked me. I'm A-1. No family problems. Joe's a fine boy, a good son. Dorothy? She's remarkable. With her, I'm not afraid of growing old or dying."

"Lucky man."

"But beyond my luck now. Scared stiff, really, for myself, my family; even, right now, for *you.*"

"Me?" said Fortnum.

They had stopped now by an empty lot near the market. There was a moment of great stillness, in which Fortnum turned to survey his friend. Willis' voice had suddenly made him cold.

"I'm afraid for everybody," said Willis. "Your friends, mine, and their friends, on out of sight. Pretty silly, eh?"

Willis opened the door, got out and peered in at Fortnum. Fortnum felt he had to speak.

"Well—what do we *do* about it?"

Willis looked up at the sun burning blind in the great, remote sky.

"Be aware," he said, slowly. "Watch everything for a few days."

"Everything?"

"We don't use half what God gave us, ten per cent of the time. We ought to hear more, feel more, smell more, taste more. Maybe there's something wrong with the way the wind blows these weeds there in the lot. Maybe it's the sun up on those telephone wires or the cicadas singing in the elm trees. If only we could stop, look, listen, a few days, a few nights, and compare notes. Tell me to shut up then, and I will."

"Good enough," said Fortnum, playing it lighter than he felt. "I'll look around. But how do I know the thing I'm looking for when I *see* it?"

Willis peered in at him sincerely. "You'll know. You've got to know. Or we're done for, all of us," he said quietly.

Fortnum shut the door, and didn't know what to say. He felt a flush of embarrassment creeping up his face. Willis sensed this.

"Hugh, do you think I'm—off my rocker?"

"Nonsense!" said Fortnum, too quickly. "You're just nervous, is all. You should take a couple of weeks off."

Willis nodded. "See you Monday night?"

"Any time. Drop around."

"I hope I will, Hugh. I really hope I will."

Then Willis was gone, hurrying across the dry weed-grown lot, toward the side entrance of the market.

Watching him go, Fortnum suddenly did not want to move. He discovered that very slowly he was taking deep breaths, weighing the silence. He licked his lips, tasting the salt. He

looked at his arm on the door-sill, the sunlight burning the golden hairs. In the empty lot the wind moved all alone to itself. He leaned out to look at the sun which stared back with one massive stunning blow of intense power that made him jerk his head in.

He exhaled. Then he laughed out loud. Then he drove away.

The lemonade glass was cool and deliciously sweaty. The ice made music inside the glass, and the lemonade was just sour enough, just sweet enough on his tongue. He sipped, he savored, he tilted back in the wicker rocking chair on the twilight front porch, his eyes closed. The crickets were chirping out on the lawn. Cynthia, knitting across from him on the porch, eyed him curiously. He could feel the pressure of her attention.

"What are you up to?" she said at last.

"Cynthia," he said, "is your intuition in running order? Is this earthquake weather? Is the land going to sink? Will war be declared? Or is it only that our delphinium will die of the blight?"

"Hold on. Let me feel my bones."

He opened his eyes and watched Cynthia in turn closing hers and sitting absolutely statue-still, her hands on her knees. Finally she shook her head and smiled.

"No. No war declared. No land sinking. Not even a blight. Why?"

"I've met a lot of Doom Talkers today. Well, two, anyway, and—"

The screen door burst wide. Fortnum's body jerked as if he had been struck. "What!"

Tom, a gardener's wooden flat in his arms, stepped out on the porch.

"Sorry," he said. "What's wrong, Dad?"

"Nothing." Fortnum stood up, glad to be moving. "Is that the crop?"

Tom moved forward, eagerly. "Part of it. Boy, they're do-

ing great. In just seven hours, with lots of water, look how big the darn things are!" He set the flat on the table between his parents.

The crop was indeed plentiful. Hundreds of small grayish brown mushrooms were sprouting up in the damp soil.

"I'll be damned," said Fortnum, impressed.

Cynthia put out her hand to touch the flat, then took it away uneasily.

"I hate to be a spoilsport, but . . . there's no way for these to be anything else but mushrooms, is there?"

Tom looked as if he had been insulted. "What do you think I'm going to feed you? Poison fungoids?"

"That's just it," said Cynthia quickly. "How do you tell them apart?"

"Eat 'em," said Tom. "If you live, they're mushrooms. If you drop dead—*well!*"

He gave a great guffaw, which amused Fortnum, but only made his mother wince. She sat back in her chair.

"I—I don't like them," she said.

"Boy, oh, boy." Tom seized the flat angrily. "When are we going to have the next Wet Blanket Sale in *this* house!?"

He shuffled morosely away.

"Tom—" said Fortnum.

"Never mind," said Tom. "Everyone figures they'll be ruined by the boy entrepeneur. To heck with it!"

Fortnum got inside just as Tom heaved the mushrooms, flat and all, down the cellar stairs. He slammed the cellar door and ran angrily out the back door.

Fortnum turned back to his wife, who, stricken, glanced away.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know why. I just *had* to say that to Tom."

The phone rang. Fortnum brought the phone outside on its extension cord.

"Hugh?" It was Dorothy Willis' voice. She sounded sud-

denly very old and very frightened. "Hugh . . . Roger isn't there, is he?"

"Dorothy? No."

"He's gone!" said Dorothy. "All his clothes were taken from the closet." She began to cry softly.

"Dorothy, hold on, I'll be there in a minute."

"You must help, oh, you must. Something's happened to him, I know it," she wailed. "Unless you do something, we'll never see him alive again."

Very slowly, he put the receiver back on its hook, her voice weeping inside it. The night crickets, quite suddenly, were very loud. He felt the hairs, one by one, go up on the back of his neck.

Hair can't do that, he thought. Silly, silly. It can't do that, not in *real* life, it can't!

But, one by slow prickling one, his hair did.

The wire hangers were indeed empty. With a clatter, Fortnum shoved them aside and down along the rod, then turned and looked out of the closet at Dorothy Willis and her son Joe.

"I was just walking by," said Joe, "and saw the closet empty, all Dad's clothes gone!"

"Everything was fine," said Dorothy. "We've had a wonderful life. I don't understand it, I don't, I don't!" She began to cry again, putting her hands to her face.

Fortnum stepped out of the closet.

"You didn't hear him leave the house?"

"We were playing catch out front," said Joe. "Dad said he had to go in for a minute. I went around back. Then—he was gone!"

"He must have packed quickly and walked wherever he was going, so we wouldn't hear a cab pull up in front of the house."

They were moving out through the hall now.

"I'll check the train depot and the airport." Fortnum hesitated. "Dorothy, is there anything in Roger's background—"

"It wasn't insanity took him." She hesitated. "I feel—somehow—he was kidnaped."

Fortnum shook his head. "It doesn't seem reasonable he would arrange to pack, walk out of the house and go meet his abductors."

Dorothy opened the door as if to let the night or the night wind move down the hall as she turned to stare back through the rooms, her voice wandering.

"No. Somehow they came into the house. Right in front of us, they stole him away."

And then:

". . . a terrible thing has happened."

Fortnum stepped out into the night of crickets and rustling trees. The Doom Talkers, he thought, talking their Dooms. Mrs. Goodbody. Roger. And now Roger's wife. Something terrible *has* happened. But *what*, in God's name? And *how*?

He looked from Dorothy to her son. Joe, blinking the wetness from his eyes, took a long time to turn, walk along the hall and stop, fingering the knob of the cellar door.

Fortnum felt his eyelids twitch, his iris flex, as if he were snapping a picture of something he wanted to remember.

Joe pulled the cellar door wide, stepped down out of sight, gone. The door tapped shut.

Fortnum opened his mouth to speak, but Dorothy's hand was taking his now, he had to look at her.

"Please," she said. "Find him for me."

He kissed her cheek. "If it's humanly possible . . ."

If it's humanly possible. Good Lord, why had he picked those words?

He walked off into the summer night.

A gasp, an exhalation, a gasp, an exhalation, an asthmatic insuck, a vaporing sneeze. Someone dying in the dark? No.

Just Mrs. Goodbody, unseen beyond the hedge, working late, her hand-pump aimed, her bony elbow thrusting. The

sick-sweet smell of bug-spray enveloped Fortnum heavily as he reached his house.

"Mrs. Goodbody? Still at it?!"

From the black hedge, her voice leapt:

"Damn it, yes! Aphids, waterbugs, woodworms and now the *marasmius oreades*. Lord, it grows fast!"

"What does?"

"The *marasmius oreades*, of course! It's me against them, and I intend to win. There! There! There!"

He left the hedge, the gasping pump, the wheezing voice, and found his wife waiting for him on the porch almost as if she were going to take up where Dorothy had left off at her door a few minutes ago.

Fortnum was about to speak, when a shadow moved inside. There was a creaking noise. A knob rattled.

Tom vanished into the basement.

Fortnum felt as if someone had set off an explosion in his face. He reeled. Everything had the numbed familiarity of those waking dreams where all motions are remembered before they occur, all dialogue known before it fell from the lips.

He found himself staring at the shut basement door. Cynthia took him inside, amused.

"What? Tom? Oh, I relented. The darn mushrooms meant so much to him. Besides, when he threw them into the cellar, they did nicely, just lying in the dirt."

"Did they?" Fortnum heard himself say.

Cynthia took his arm. "What about Roger?"

"He's gone, yes."

"Men, men, men," she said.

"No, you're wrong," he said. "I saw Roger every day for the last ten years. When you know a man that well, you can tell how things are at home, whether things are in the oven or the mixmaster. Death hadn't breathed down his neck yet. He wasn't running scared after his immortal youth, picking peaches in someone else's orchards. No, no, I swear, I'd bet my last dollar on it, Roger—"

The doorbell rang behind him. The delivery boy had come up quietly onto the porch and was standing there with a telegram in his hand.

"Fortnum?"

Cynthia snapped on the hall light as he ripped the envelope open and smoothed it out for reading.

> "TRAVELING NEW ORLEANS. THIS TELEGRAM POSSIBLE OFF-GUARD MOMENT. YOU MUST REFUSE, REPEAT REFUSE, ALL SPECIAL DELIVERY PACKAGES! ROGER."

Cynthia glanced up from the paper.

"I don't understand. What does he mean?"

But Fortnum was already at the telephone, dialing swiftly, once. "Operator? The police, and hurry!"

At ten-fifteen that night, the phone rang for the sixth time during the evening. Fortnum got it, and immediately gasped. "Roger! Where are you?!"

"Where am I, hell," said Roger lightly, almost amused. "You know very well where I am. You're responsible for this. I should be angry!"

Cynthia, at his nod, had hurried to take the extension phone in the kitchen. When he heard the soft click, he went on.

"Roger, I swear I don't know. I got that telegram from you—"

"What telegram?" said Roger, jovially. "I sent no telegram. Now, of a sudden, the police come pouring onto the southbound train, pull me off in some jerkwater, and I'm calling you to get them off my neck. Hugh, if this is some joke—"

"But, Roger, you just vanished!"

"On a business trip. If you can call that vanishing. I told Dorothy about this, and Joe."

"This is all very confusing, Roger. You're in no danger? Nobody's blackmailing you, forcing you into this speech?"

"I'm fine, healthy, free and unafraid."

"But, Roger, your premonitions . . . ?"

"Poppycock! Now, look, I'm being very good about this, aren't I?"

"Sure, Roger."

"Then play the good father and give me permission to go. Call Dorothy and tell her I'll be back in five days. How *could* she have forgotten?"

"She did, Roger. See you in five days, then?"

"Five days, I swear."

The voice was indeed winning and warm, the old Roger again. Fortnum shook his head, more bewildered than before.

"Roger," he said, "this is the craziest day I've ever spent. You're not running off from Dorothy? Good Lord, you can tell *me*."

"I love her with all my heart. Now, here's Lieutenant Parker of the Ridgetown police. Good-by, Hugh."

"Good—"

But the lieutenant was on the line, talking angrily. What had Fortnum meant putting them to this trouble? What was going on? Who did he think he was? Did or didn't he want this so-called friend held or released?

"Released," Fortnum managed to say somewhere along the way, and hung up the phone and imagined he heard a voice call all aboard and the massive thunder of the train leaving the station two hundred miles south in the somehow increasingly dark night.

Cynthia walked very slowly into the parlor.

"I feel so foolish," she said.

"How do you think I feel?"

"Who could have sent that telegram? And why?"

He poured himself some scotch and stood in the middle of the room looking at it.

"I'm glad Roger is all right," his wife said, at last.

"He isn't," said Fortnum.

"But you just said—"

"I said nothing. After all, we couldn't very well drag him

off that train and truss him up and send him home, could we, if he insisted he was okay? No. He sent that telegram, but he changed his mind after sending it. Why, why, why?" Fortnum paced the room, sipping the drink. "Why warn us against special delivery packages? The only package we've got this *year* which fits that description is the one Tom got this morning—" His voice trailed off.

Before he could move, Cynthia was at the wastepaper basket taking out the crumpled wrapping paper with the special-delivery stamps on it.

The postmark read: NEW ORLEANS, LA.

Cynthia looked up from it. "New Orleans. Isn't that where Roger is heading right *now?*"

A doorknob rattled, a door opened and closed in Fortnum's mind. Another doorknob rattled, another door swung wide and then shut. There was a smell of damp earth.

He found his hand dialing the phone. After a long while, Dorothy Willis answered at the other end. He could imagine her sitting alone in a house with too many lights on. He talked quietly with her awhile, then cleared his throat and said, "Dorothy, look. I know it sounds silly. Did any special delivery airmail packages arrive at your house the last few days?"

Her voice was faint. "No." Then: "No, wait. Three days ago. But I thought you *knew!* All the boys on the block are going in for it."

Fortnum measured his words carefully.

"Going in for what?"

"But why ask?" she said. "There's nothing wrong with raising mushrooms, is there?"

Fortnum closed his eyes.

"Hugh? Are you still there?" asked Dorothy. "I said: there's nothing wrong with—"

"—raising mushrooms?" said Fortnum, at last. "No. Nothing wrong. Nothing wrong."

And slowly he put down the phone.

The curtains blew like veils of moonlight. The clock ticked. The after-midnight world flowed into and filled the bedroom. He heard Mrs. Goodbody's clear voice on this morning's air, a million years gone now. He heard Roger putting a cloud over the sun at noon. He heard the police damning him by phone from downstate. Then Roger's voice again, with the locomotive thunder hurrying him away and away, fading. And finally, Mrs. Goodbody's voice behind the hedge:

"Lord, it grows fast!"

"What does?"

"*Marasmium oreades!*"

He snapped his eyes open. He sat up.

Downstairs, a moment later, he flicked through the unabridged dictionary.

His forefinger underlined the words:

"*Marasmius oreades*: a mushroom commonly found on lawns in summer and early autumn."

He let the book fall shut.

Outside, in the deep summer night, he lit a cigarette and smoked quietly.

A meteor fell across space, burning itself out quickly. The trees rustled softly.

The front door tapped shut.

Cynthia moved toward him in her robe.

"Can't sleep?"

"Too warm, I guess."

"It's not warm."

"No," he said, feeling his arms. "In fact, it's cold." He sucked on the cigarette twice, then, not looking at her, said, "Cynthia . . . What if . . . ?" He snorted and had to stop. "Well, what if Roger was right this morning? Mrs. Goodbody, what if she's right, too? Something terrible *is* happening. Like—well—" he nodded at the sky and the million stars—"Earth being invaded by things from other worlds, maybe."

"Hugh!"

"No, let me run wild."

"It's quite obvious we're not being invaded or we'd notice."

"Let's say we've only half-noticed, become uneasy about something. What? How could we be invaded? By what means would creatures invade?"

Cynthia looked at the sky and was about to try something when he interrupted.

"No, not meteors or flying saucers. Not things we can *see*. What about bacteria? That comes from outer space, too, doesn't it?"

"I read once, yes—"

"Spores, seeds, pollens, viruses probably bombard our atmosphere by the billions every second and have done so for millions of years. Right now we're sitting out under an invisible rain. It falls all over the country, the cities, the towns, and right now . . . our lawn."

"*Our* lawn?"

"*And* Mrs. Goodbody's. But people like her are always pulling weeds, spraying poison, kicking toadstools off their grass. It would be hard for any strange life form to survive in cities. Weather's a problem, too. Best climate might be South: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana. Back in the damp bayous, they could grow to a fine size."

But Cynthia was beginning to laugh now.

"Oh, really, you don't believe, do you, that this Great Bayou or Whatever Greenhouse Novelty Company that sent Tom his package is owned and operated by six foot tall mushrooms from another planet?"

"If you put it that way, it sounds funny," he admitted.

"Funny! It's hilarious!" She threw her head back deliciously.

"Good grief!" he cried, suddenly irritated. "*Something's* going on! Mrs. Goodbody is rooting out and killing *marasmium oreades*. What is *marasmium oreades*? A certain kind of mushroom. Simultaneously, and I suppose you'll call it

coincidence, by special delivery, what arrives the same day? Mushrooms for Tom! What else happens? Roger fears he may soon cease to be! Within hours, he vanishes, then telegraphs us, warning us not to accept what? The special-delivery mushrooms for Tom! Has Roger's son got a similar package in the last few days? He has! Where do the packages come from? New Orleans! And where is Roger going when he vanishes? New Orleans! Do you see, Cynthia, do you see? I wouldn't be upset if all these separate things didn't lock together! Roger, Tom, Joe, mushrooms, Mrs. Goodbody, packages, destinations, everything in one pattern!"

She was watching his face now, quieter, but still amused. "Don't get angry."

"I'm not!" Fortnum almost shouted. And then he simply could not go on. He was afraid that if he did, he would find himself shouting with laughter, too, and somehow he did not want that. He stared at the surrounding houses up and down the block and thought of the dark cellars and the neighbor boys who read *Popular Mechanics* and sent their money in by the millions to raise the mushrooms hidden away. Just as he, when a boy, had mailed off for chemicals, seeds, turtles, numberless salves and sickish ointments. In how many million American homes tonight were billions of mushrooms rousing up under the ministrations of the innocent?

"Hugh?" His wife was touching his arm now. "Mushrooms, even big ones, can't think. They can't move. They don't have arms and legs. How could they run a mail-order service and 'take over' the world? Come on, now. Let's look at your terrible fiends and monsters!"

She pulled him toward the door. Inside, she headed for the cellar, but he stopped, shaking his head, a foolish smile shaping itself somehow to his mouth. "No, no, I know what we'll find. You win. The whole thing's silly. Roger will be back next week and we'll all get drunk together. Go on up to bed now and I'll drink a glass of warm milk and be with you in a minute . . . well, a couple of minutes . . ."

"That's better!" She kissed him on both cheeks, squeezed him and went away up the stairs.

In the kitchen, he took out a glass, opened the refrigerator and was pouring the milk when he stopped suddenly.

Near the front of the top shelf was a small yellow dish. It was not the dish that held his attention, however. It was what lay in the dish.

The fresh-cut mushrooms.

He must have stood there for half a minute, his breath frosting the refrigerated air, before he reached out, took hold of the dish, sniffed it, felt the mushrooms, then at last, carrying the dish, went out into the hall. He looked up the stairs, hearing Cynthia moving about in the bedroom, and was about to call up to her, "Cynthia, did you put *these* in the refrigerator!?"

Then he stopped. He knew her answer. She had not.

He put the dish of mushrooms on the newel-upright at the bottom of the stairs and stood looking at them. He imagined himself, in bed later, looking at the walls, the open windows, watching the moonlight sift patterns on the ceiling. He heard himself saying, Cynthia? And her answering, yes? And him saying, there *is* a way for mushrooms to grow arms and legs . . . What? she would say, silly, silly man, what? And he would gather courage against her hilarious reaction and go on, what if a man wandered through the swamp, picked the mushrooms, and *ate* them . . . ?

No response from Cynthia.

Once inside the man, would the mushrooms spread through his blood, take over every cell, and change the man from a man to a—Martian? Given this theory, would the mushroom *need* its own arms and legs? No, not when it could borrow people, live inside and become them. Roger ate mushrooms given him by his son. Roger became "something else." He kidnaped himself. And in one last flash of sanity, of being "himself" he telegraphed us, warning us not to accept the spe-

cial-delivery mushrooms. The "Roger" that telephoned later was no longer Roger but a captive of what he had eaten! Doesn't that figure, Cynthia? Doesn't it, doesn't it?

No, said the imagined Cynthia, no, it doesn't figure, no, no, no . . .

There was the faintest whisper, rustle, stir from the cellar. Taking his eyes from the bowl, Fortnum walked to the cellar door and put his ear to it.

"Tom?"

No answer.

"Tom, are you down there?"

No answer.

"Tom?"

After a long while, Tom's voice came up from below.

"Yes, Dad?"

"It's after midnight," said Fortnum, fighting to keep his voice from going high. "What are you doing down there?"

No answer.

"I said—"

"Tending to my crop," said the boy at last, his voice cold and faint.

"Well, get the hell out of there! You hear me!?"

Silence.

"Tom? Listen! Did you put some mushrooms in the refrigerator tonight? If so, why?"

Ten seconds must have ticked by before the boy replied from below. "For you and Mom to eat, of course."

Fortnum heard his heart moving swiftly, and had to take three deep breaths before he could go on.

"Tom? You didn't . . . that is . . . you haven't by any chance eaten some of the mushroom yourself, have you?"

"Funny you ask that," said Tom. "Yes. Tonight. On a sandwich after supper. Why?"

Fortnum held to the doorknob. Now it was his turn not to answer. He felt his knees beginning to melt and he fought

the whole silly senseless fool thing. No reason, he tried to say, but his lips wouldn't move.

"Dad?" called Tom softly from the cellar. "Come on down." Another pause. "I want you to see the harvest."

Fortnum felt the knob slip in his sweaty hand. The knob rattled. He gasped.

"Dad?" called Tom softly.

Fortnum opened the door.

The cellar was completely black below.

He stretched his hand in toward the light switch. As if sensing this intrusion, from somewhere Tom said:

"Don't. Light's bad for the mushrooms."

Fortnum took his hand off the switch.

He swallowed. He looked back at the stair leading up to his wife. I suppose, he thought, I should go say good-by to Cynthia. But why should I think that! Why should I think that at *all?* No reason, is there?

None.

"Tom?" he said, affecting a jaunty air. "Ready or not, here I come!"

And stepping down in darkness, he shut the door.

THE TAIL-TIED KINGS

By Avram Davidson

He brought Them water, one by one.

"The water is sweet, One-Eye," said a Mother. "Very sweet."

"Many bring Us water," a second Mother said, "but the water you bring is sweet."

"Because his breath is sweet," said a third Mother.

The One-Eye paused, about to leave. "I would tell you of a good thing," a Father said, "which none others know, only We. I may tell him, softly, in his ear, may I not?"

In his corner, Keeper stirred. A Mother and a Father raised their voices. "It is colder now," They said. "Outside: frost. A white thing on the ground, and burns. We have heard. Frost." Keeper grunted, did not move. "Colder, less food, less water, We have heard, but for Us always food, always water, water, food, food . . ." They went on. Keeper did not move.

"Come closer," said the Father, softly. "I will tell you of a good thing, while Keeper sleeps." The Father's voice was deep and rich. "Come to my mouth. A secret thing. One-Eye."

"I may not come, Father," said the One-Eye, uncertainly. "Only to bring water."

"You may come," said a Mother. Her voice was like milk, her voice was good. "Your breath is sweet. Come, listen. Come."

Another Father said, "You will be cold, alone. Come among Us and be warm." The One-Eye moved his head from side to side, and he muttered.

"There is food here and you will eat," the other Father said. The One-Eye moved a few steps, then hesitated.

"Come and mate with me," said the milk-voiced Mother. "It is my time. Come."

The One-Eye perceived that it was indeed her time and he darted forward, but the Keeper blocked his way.

"Go, bring water for Them to drink," said Keeper. He was huge.

"He has water for Us now," a Mother said, plaintively. "Stupid Keeper. We are thirsty. Why do you stop him?"

A Father said, "He has water in his mouth which he has brought for Us. Step aside and let him pass. Oh, it is an ugly, stupid Keeper!"

"I have water in my mouth which I have brought for Them," the One-Eye said. "Step aside and—" He stopped, as they burst into jeers and titters.

The Keeper was not even angry. "There was nothing in your mouth but a lie. Now, go."

Too late, the One-Eye perceived his mistake. "I may sleep," he muttered.

"Sleep, then. But go." Keeper bared his teeth. The One-Eye shrank back, and turned and slunk away. Behind him he heard the Mother in her milk-voice say, "It was a stupid One-Eye, Father."

"And now," the Father said. The One-Eye heard their mating as he went.

Sometimes he had tried to run away, but everywhere there were others who stopped him. "It is a One-Eye, and too far away. Go to your place, One-Eye. Go to your duty, bring water for the Mothers and Fathers, take Their food to the Keeper, go back, go back, One-Eye, go back," they cried, surrounding him, driving him from the way he would go.

"I will not be a One-Eye any longer," he protested.

They jeered and mocked. "Will you grow another eye, then?

Back, back: it is The Race which orders you!" And they had nipped him and forced him back.

Once, he had said, "I will see the goldshining!"

There was an old one who said, "Return, then, One-Eye and I will show you the goldshining on the way." And the old one lifted a round thing and it glittered gold. He cried out with surprise and pleasure.

Then, "I thought it would be bigger," he said.

"Return, One-Eye, or you will be killed," the old one said. "Outside is not for you. Return . . . Not that way! That way is a death thing. Mark it well. *This* way. Go. And be quick —there may be dogs."

There was some times a new one to instruct, blood wet in the socket, at the place of water, to drink his fill and then fill his mouth and go to the Fathers and Mothers, not to swallow a drop, to learn the long way and the turnings, down and down in the darkness, past the Keeper, mouth to mouth to the Fathers and Mothers. Again and again.

"Why are *They* bound?" a new one asked.

"Why are *we* half-blinded? It is The Race which orders. It is The Race which collects the food that other One-Eyes bring to Keeper, and he stores it and feeds Them."

"Why?"

They paused, water dripping from above into the pool. *Why?* To eat and drink must be or else death. But why does The Race order Fathers and Mothers to be bound so that they cannot find their own food and water? "I am only a stupid One-Eye. But I think the Fathers and Mothers would tell me . . . There was mention of a secret thing . . . The Keeper would not let me listen after that . . ."

"That is a big Keeper, and his teeth are sharp!"

Water fell in gouts from overhead and splashed into the pool. They filled their mouths and started down. When he had emptied the last drop in his mouth he whispered, "Mother, I would hear the secret thing."

She stiffened. Then she clutched at him. The other Fathers

and Mothers ceased speaking and moving. At the entrance the Keeper sat up. "What is it?" he called. There was alarm in his voice, and it quavered.

"A strange sound," said a Father. "Keeper, listen!" Then—"Slaves?" he whispered.

The Keeper moved his head from side to side. The Fathers and Mothers were all quite still. "I hear nothing," Keeper said, uncertainly.

"Keeper, you are old, your senses are dulled," the deep-voiced Father said. "We say there is a strange noise! There is danger! Go and see—go now!"

The Keeper became agitated. "I may not leave," he protested. "It is The Race which orders me to stay here—"

Fathers and Mothers together cried out at him. "The Race! The Race! We are The Race! Go and find out the danger to Us!"

"The One-Eye—where is the One-Eye? I will send him!" But they cried that the One-Eye had left (as, indeed, one of them had), and so, finally, gibbering and muttering, he lumbered up the passageway.

As soon as he had left, the milk-voiced Mother began to caress and stroke the One-Eye, saying that he was clever and good, that his breath was sweet, that—

"There is no time for that, Mother," she was interrupted. "Tell him the secret. Quick! Quick!"

"Before you were made a One-Eye and were set apart to serve Us, with whom did you first mate?" she asked.

"With the sisters in my own litter, of course."

"Of course . . . for they were nearest. And after that, with the mother of your own litter. Your sire was perhaps an older brother. After that you would have mated with daughters, with aunts . . ."

"Of course."

The Mother asked if he did not know that this incessant inbreeding could eventually weaken The Race.

"I did not know."

She lifted her head, listened. "The stupid Keeper is not returning yet. Good . . . It is so, One-Eye. Blindness, deafness, deformation, aborting, madness, still-births. All these occur from time to time in every litter. And when flaw mates with flaw and no new blood enters the line, The Race weakens. Is it not so, Fathers and Mothers?"

They answered, "Mother, it is so."

The One-Eye asked, "Is this, then, the secret? A Father told me that the secret was a good thing, and this is a bad thing."

Be silent, They told him, and listen.

In her milk-rich voice the Mother went on, "But *We* are not born of the same litter, *We* are not sib, not even near kin. From time to time there is a choosing made of the strongest and cleverest of many litters. And out of these further selections. And then a final choosing—eight, perhaps, or ten, or twelve. With two, or at most, three males to be Fathers, and the rest females. And these, the chosen of the best of the young, are taken to a place very far from the outside, very safe from danger, and a Keeper set to guard them, and One-Eyes set apart to bring them food and water . . ."

A Father continued the story. "It is of Ourselves that We are talking. They bound Us together, tied Us tightly with many knots, tail to tail together, so that it was impossible to run away. We had no need to face danger above, no need to forage. We had only to eat, to drink, to grow strong—and you see that we are far larger than you—and to mate. All this as The Race has ordered."

"I see . . . I did not know. This is a good thing, yes. It is wise."

The Mothers and Fathers cried out at this. "It is not good!" They declared. "It is not wise! It is not right! To bind Us together when We were young and unknowing was well, yes. But to keep Us bound now is not well. We, too, would walk freely about! We would see the goldshining and the slaves, not to stay bound in the dimness here!"

"One-Eye!" They cried. "You were set apart to serve Us—"

"Yes," he muttered. "I will bring water."

But this was not what They wanted of him. "One-Eye," They whispered, "good, handsome, clever, young, sweet-breathed One-Eye. Set Us free! Unloose the knots! We cannot reach them, you can reach them—"

He protested. "I dare not!"

Their voices rose angrily. "You must! It is The Race which orders! We would rule and We will rule and you will rule with Us!"

". . . . mate with Us!" In his ear, a Mother's voice. He shivered.

Again, they spoke in whispers, hissing. "See, One-Eye, you must know where there are death places and food set out which must not be eaten. Bring such food here, set it down. We will know. We will see that Keeper eats it, when he returns. Then, One-Eye, then—"

Suddenly, silence.

All heads were raised.

A Father's deep voice was shrill with fear. "That is smoke!"

But another Father said, "The Race will see that no harm comes to Us." And the others all repeated his assurance. They moved to and fro, in Their odd, circumscribed way, a few paces to each side, and around, and over each other, and back. They were waiting.

It seemed to the One-Eye that the smoke grew thicker. And a Mother said, "While We wait, let Us listen for Keeper and for the steps of those The Race will send to rescue Us. Meanwhile, you, One-Eye, try the knots. Test the knots, see if you can set Us free."

"What is this talk of 'try' and 'test' and 'see'?" a Father then demanded. "He has only to act and it is done! Have We not discussed this amongst Ourselves, always, always? Are We not agreed?"

A second Mother said, "It is so. The One-Eye has freedom, full freedom of movement, while We have not; he can reach the knots and We can not. Come, One-Eye. Act. And while

you set Us free, We will listen, and when We are free, We will not need to wait longer for Keeper and the others. Why do they not come?" she concluded, querulous and uncertain.

And they cried to him to untie Them, set Them free, and great things would be his with Them; and, "If not," They shrilled, "We will kill you!"

They pushed him off and ordered him to begin. The smell of the smoke was strong.

Presently he said, "I can do nothing. The knots are too tight."

"We will kill you!" they clamored. "It is not so! We are agreed it is not!" And again and again he tried, but could do nothing.

"Listen, Mothers and Fathers," the milk-voiced one said. "There is not time. No one comes. The Race has abandoned Us. There must be danger to them; rather than risk, they will let Us die and then they will make another choosing for new Mothers and Fathers."

Silence. They listened, strained, snuffed the heavy air.

Then, screaming, terrified, the others leaped up, fell back, tumbling over each other. A Mother's voice—soft, warm, rich, sweet—spoke. "There is one thing alone. Since the knots will not loose, they must be severed. One-Eye! Your teeth. Quickly! Now!"

The others crouched and cringed, panting. The One-Eye sank his teeth into the living knot, and, instantly a Father screamed and lunged forward, cried stop.

"That is pain!" he whimpered. "I have not felt pain before, I cannot bear it. Keeper will come, the others will save Us, The Race—"

And none would listen to the Mother.

"Mother, I am afraid," the One-Eye said. "The smoke is thicker."

"Go, then, save yourself," she said.

"I will not leave without you."

"I? I am part of the whole. Go. Save yourself."

But still he would not, and again he crept up to her.

They came at last to the end of the passage. They could not count the full number of the dead. The smoke was gone now. The Mother clung to him with her fore limbs. Her hind limbs dragged. She was weak, weak from the unaccustomed labor of walking, weak from the trail of thick, red blood she left behind from the wound which set her free.

"Is this outside?" she asked.

"I think so. Yes, it must be. See! Overhead—the goldshining! The rest I do not know," the One-Eye answered.

"So that is the goldshining. I have heard—Yes, and the rest, I have heard, too. Those are the houses of the slaves and there are the fields the slaves tend, and from which they make the food which they store up for Us. Come, help me, for I must go slowly; and we will find a place for Us. We will mate, for We are now The Race." Her voice was like milk. "And our numbers will not end."

He said, "Yes, Mother. Our numbers will not end."

With his single eye he scanned Outside—the Upper World of the slaves who thought themselves masters, who, with trap and terrier and ferret and poison and smoke, warred incessantly against The Race. Did they think that even this great slaughter was victory? If so, they were deceived. It had only been a skirmish.

The slaves were slaves still; the tail-tied ones were kings.

"Come, Mother," he said. And, slowly and painfully, and with absolute certainty, he and his new mate set out to take possession of the world.

CRIME MACHINE

By Robert Bloch

"Let him alone," said Stephen's father. "It's a phase they all go through. He'll snap out of it."

Stephen didn't really believe he was ever going to snap out of it, but he was grateful that his folks let him alone. He wasn't worried what they thought, just as long as they allowed him to watch the viddies.

Because his father was rich and connected with the university labs, Stephen had his own viddie set. While his parents indulged their normal tastes and watched the adult mush on the wall downstairs, Stephen stayed in his room and his own world.

It was a wonderful world for any thirteen-year-old—the world called the Good Old Days. There were all kinds of viddie shows about the golden pioneer era of seventy-five years ago, the marvelous time when heroes like Dion O'Bannion and Hymie Weiss walked the Earth.

Stephen watched a show called *Big Jim*—about Big Jim Colosimo and his lovable friends. He watched *The Enforcer;* that was the one about Frank Nitti. He was a man of action, like the heroes of *Johnny Torrio* and *Legs Diamond.* The *Legs Diamond* show was very exciting, because Legs was the one who always danced his way around the bullets in a gang war. That was how he got his name.

Stephen learned a lot about the people who had lived in the romantic past. He knew about flashy gambling men like fancy Arnold Rothstein, who was so suave, and wild rascals like

Bugs Moran. There was a new show out called *The Great Dillinger*, and that was pretty good. But the best of all was Stephen's favorite—*Scarface Al*. No wonder it was right up there on top with all the kids; its hero was Scarface Al Capone, the Robin Hood of Chicago, who took from the rich and gave to the poor.

Lots of times Stephen found himself humming the theme song, which went:

Al Capone, Al Capone,
A mighty man who walked alone—
Wherever daring deeds are known,
Men sing the praise of Al Capone.

Stephen liked the way the machine guns came in on the end of the last line.

But then he liked everything about Al Capone; the way he got his scar—defending his sister from the crooked prohibition agents; the way he disguised himself as "Mr. Brown" when he was fighting the wicked cops and the thieving politicians of Chicago. Stephen knew all about Al Capone, riding in from his hideout in Cicero to bring justice to Chicago and save pretty girls from the evil Vice Squad men.

Stephen joined the "Scarface Al Club" and ate enough cereal to get himself the complete prize outfit—the artificial scar to wear, the bulletproof vest and everything.

He might have been a very happy boy if he hadn't found his uncle's subjectivity reactor.

It was a big machine, resembling nothing quite so much as the genetic control, which his uncle had also invented. The genetic control was a large box in which a woman could sit and be bombarded by radiations which would eradicate recessive and undesirable traits in her ova, thus leading to the reproduction of healthy offspring. This apparatus, marketed under the popular name of "Heir Conditioner," was an immediate success because it was a failure. Nothing really hap-

pened, but the woman who used it felt better; in that respect it resembled a face cream and had the additional advantage of being much more expensive.

The machine which Stephen found—the subjectivity reactor—was a failure because it was a success. Not an immediate failure, for it was never manufactured or marketed, but a gradual failure. His uncle had devised it while still a young man, many years ago, and it too was a large box which contained a variety of mechanisms. Under their stimulus, the subject became capable of materializing, in tangible three-dimensional form, his immediate thought patterns.

The gradual failure came about because his uncle had experimented upon himself, and pretty soon his home was overflowing with tangible three-dimensional forms to which his wife objected; most particularly to the redheads.

Consequently the subjectivity reactor was carted off to the storage building behind the university labs where Stephen's uncle and father both worked, and no one ever mentioned that it was also capable, by virtue of the same principle of materializing thought, of acting as a time machine.

Stephen himself found it out by accident one day when he was playing around, exploring the deserted warehouse premises. He noticed the boxlike apparatus and crawled inside, pretending for the moment that he was a hero like Pretty-Boy Floyd, hiding out from the dirty old Feds. He didn't pay much attention to the blinking lights and whirling mirrors which became self-activating the moment he stepped inside and closed the door; he was wishing he had a gat to protect himself in case that arch-fiend J. Edgar Hoover showed up. He'd show him!

"All right, copper—you asked for it." And he'd reach in his pocket and pull out his gat, like this, and—

Stephen felt the weight before he saw it. And then he *did* pull his hand out of his pocket and he *was* holding a gat. A real roscoe, a genuine equalizer. Stephen stared at it, his thoughts whirling faster than the mirrors.

The gun—where did it come from? He'd just thought about it and it was here; how could that be? Actually, he hadn't even thought, just *wished*. The way he wished he had been around back in the Good Old Days, the way he was wishing now. He'd give anything to see real live American History in the making, like that morning of St. Valentine's Day in the garage on Clark Street . . .

The mirrors revved faster and suddenly they disappeared. Everything disappeared. It was like a viddie dissolve, so Stephen wasn't frightened. He knew the next scene would come up right after the commercial. Only this wasn't viddie and there was no commercial. The next scene came up when the blurring stopped and he found himself sitting in the same box, the mirrors still whirring and he heard the noise outside. Stephen blinked, tugged at the door of the compartment, opened it, and saw the machine guns spit.

He knew where he was now. He'd seen it a dozen times on viddie, imagined it a thousand more. The garage, at eleven o'clock in the morning; the two executioners disguised in the uniforms of the hated police were mowing down the seven finks.

Stephen, in the subjectivity reactor, had materialized at the very instant the firing started. For thirty seconds Stephen stared at the finks as they writhed and fell. And during those thirty seconds the finks became men. Men who wriggled and flopped after the bullets struck, until the two swarthy hoods in uniform stepped up and completed their work with revolvers. There was blood on the wall and floor, and a terrible, acrid odor. The two men noticed it, too, and commented harshly in Italian. One of them laughed and spat on the floor.

Stephen wasn't laughing and he felt that unless he got out of here right away he'd do more than spit. He started to close the door and it was then that the executioners looked up and saw him.

"What the hell—" said the short one, and raised his revolver. His taller companion slapped it out of his hand.

"Wait," he said. He stooped, picked up the machine gun, and faced Stephen in the doorway of the compartment. "Awright, kid, how you get in here? Where you come from?" He raised the muzzle of his weapon. "C'mon, talk!"

Stephen talked. It was hard to, with the choking in his throat as he watched the machine-gun muzzle that was like a cruel mouth—almost as cruel as the mouth of the man who held it. It was hard to explain, too, and he wasn't sure he understood the situation himself. Certainly the shorter assassin didn't understand, because he nudged his companion and said, "He's nuts! Hurry up and give it to him—we gotta get outa here!"

The big man with the machine gun shook his head. "Shaddup and listen. Dincha hear? This thing goes through time. It's a time machine. Aincha never heard?"

"*Porko Dio!* No such thing—"

"No such thing now." The big man nodded. "But maybe they invent it later on. That's where this kid comes from. How else you figure he got here if not like that?"

"So?"

"So you wanna get outa here, right?"

"Sure, to St. Louis. That's where Al said we'd get the payoff—"

"You know what kinda payoff we end up with." The big man made a nasty noise in his throat. "But suppose we *really* get out. Suppose we go back with the kid here."

He took a step forward. "Awright, kid, whaddya say?" He stared at Stephen.

Stephen stared back, into his face and the face of his companion. Here was his chance to take two real live gangsters back into his own world, his own time. It was something he'd always dreamed of. Only he had never dreamed they really looked and talked like this. And he had never dreamed

the reality he glimpsed over their shoulders; the torn, huddled, oozing reality on the garage floor. Now he knew all there was to know about the Good Old Days.

The big man raised his weapon. "Hurry up! We ain't got all day. Whaddya say?"

Stephen knew he himself didn't have all day, or even another minute. Fortunately, thanks to the viddies, he knew what to say and how to say it. His hand squeezed the trigger inside his coat pocket. First the small man went down and then the big man.

As the big man fell there was a short, staccato burst from the machine gun. Several bullets punctured the shell of the compartment. But by this time Stephen had slammed the door of the subjectivity reactor and hurled himself to the floor in quivering panic, wishing with all his being that he was back where he belonged . . .

He might have had a hard time explaining the presence of the gat if he hadn't wished so strongly that it would disappear. As it was, he emerged from the subjectivity reactor completely unscathed. To all intents and appearances, Stephen was unchanged by his experience.

The thing of it was that from then on he never watched *Scarface Al* any more.

"He's growing up," his mother said proudly.

"What did I tell you?" his father said. "I knew he'd get over it. All it takes is time."

When he said, "All it takes is time," he suddenly remembered Stephen's visit to the old storage building. That night he made a trip there himself to confirm his suspicions.

And there, as he expected, he found the subjectivity reactor —and the telltale impressions left by the machine-gun bullets.

Funny thing, they didn't penetrate with half the force of the old Colt .45s. Stephen's father stopped until he found the holes near the bottom of the machine. Stephen's father remembered the day *those* shots had been fired.

Sometime he'd have to tell Stephen. Tell him how it was when *he* was a boy, when the machine had first been invented. Like father, like son.

Stephen's father gazed at the Colt bullet holes and smiled reminiscently. He too had had his viddie heroes in his youth. Only *his* personal favorite happened to be the *real* 1870 Wyatt Earp.

RETURN ENGAGEMENT

By Lester Del Rey

It was later than Daniel Shawn had thought when they finally came out of the little farm house and headed for the big car of Tommy Rogers. It was almost sundown. And there had been a light rain.

He took a slow breath, almost tasting the vigor of the air.

Strange that it should be late, though. Time had seemed to go so slowly. The whole visit of Professor Rogers had been a mistake that was hard on both of them. Now it was ending clumsily, as it had begun and continued in awkwardness. Once Tommy had been his friend. But that was before Tommy went into Administration and Shawn had given it all up to come back here to the little Minnesota farm where he had been born.

"A rainbow!" Tommy exclaimed suddenly. "I haven't seen one in years."

"Nor missed it, I'll warrant," Shawn guessed, raising his eyes to see it. It lay in the gap between the locust trees, adding a jeweled light to their dark greenness.

Tommy laughed his administrator's unoffended laugh and glanced back over the little farmyard before climbing into the car. "What do you find here, Dan? Kerosene lamps, outdoor plumbing, not even a radio. I still say it's no place for you—when you could take over the Chair of History if you'd be sensible."

"I was born here," Shawn replied, evading the part of the question he didn't want to answer.

"But that was forty-five years ago!"

Shawn nodded. "Yes. And sometimes, I think, so was the reality of myself. Let it be, Tommy, and I'll ride into Utica with you."

Tommy couldn't let it go, of course. There was that in the man which hated any way of life he could not understand. Maybe that was why he'd once studied sociology, only to find that the science could never supply enough answers. He repeated his question as the motor started.

"I don't know," Shawn answered slowly, fumbling for his pipe as he tried again to answer it to himself. "Something I almost saw as a child and then lost. Maybe all of us lost it once. That's why I turned to history, to find where it went. But I never found it. You used to do a lot of reading once, Tommy. You tell me. What was in Spencer, in Coleridge a little, in *Orlando*—only like an echo, but now it's gone from all our writing."

"I never thought there was anything like that," Tommy said flatly.

Shawn sighed. He should have known the answer that was a part of the man. Then they reached the little village, no more than a mile from the farm. He got out, putting out a hand.

But Tommy wasn't ready to end it yet. "If you're going to eat here, I'll join you," he suggested.

Shawn shrugged, then nodded. He was sorry that he had given in to the man's importunings over the phone and let him make the useless drive from Chicago. There should have been an end to it now. Yet Shawn had intended to dine here, since his own cooking was no better than it should be.

He picked up tobacco and the paper at a little store before leading the other to the restaurant beside the gas station. They ordered and waited for the food, with nothing to say between them.

The paper, Shawn saw from the headlines, had been an-

other mistake, but he glanced at it while consuming the tasteless food. There was a dark ugliness to the news. As there always was. The lilt of life was lacking in every part of it. It was heavy and ponderous, even when it tried to be witty. And around him, the few diners were filled with a heaviness that made their laughter a deliberate effort and gave them no pleasure in the stories they told endlessly to each other.

"Why?" Shawn asked abruptly, pointing to the headlines. "You're still a sociologist, Tommy. Tell me, why all the dark ugliness?"

For a moment, it seemed that there was a measure of understanding in the man. He sighed. "Sociologists don't know much more about the present cultural matrix than anyone else, Dan. Too much technology, maybe, before the culture can absorb it. Or maybe this is just one of the plateaus in an evolution toward a sense of group maturity."

"Maturity?" Shawn questioned bitterly.

"It could be." And now the administrator's optimism was creeping back into the face. "Oh, I know, there's still hate and ugly conflict. But think of the earlier ages, Dan. Look at the superstitious panics, the persecutions, the witch-burnings. There was a time when anything different from what was considered human was to be killed on sight. Children ostracize or fight with anyone who differs from the group norm. Seems to me we've improved a lot in that respect—at least in this country. We're trying to understand other peoples. Why right now, Dan, if little green men got out of a saucer, most people would be delighted to meet them. Lots of men are hoping to find alien races—look at Project Ozma. Or look at the case of that priest who is writing about the question of redemption for non-human beings. If there were werewolves today, I'll bet that there'd be a lot more scientific interest in them than fear or hatred. There wouldn't even be any persecution of witches, unless they went in for criminal activity. That could be considered a form of maturity."

Or maybe the human race was so unconsciously sick of its

own sordidness that it would welcome even alien relief, Shawn thought.

But he let the conversation die. There was as little answer to the problem in sociology as in history—as he had known all along.

He went out with Tommy at last, putting out his hand awkwardly in silence as the other reached his car.

"You sure you won't come back, Dan?" Tommy asked for the last time. "You're definitely turning President Schuyler down?"

"I won't come back, Tommy."

He stepped back from the car and stood watching it drive away. Then he sighed and dismissed the whole unfortunate business from his mind.

It was already so far into dusk that the stars were shining as he turned to walk homeward. The Moon was full and startlingly white in the dark sky. Wisps of clouds fleeced its path. The night was going to be one of loveliness. For a moment he was glad he had ridden in, since it gave him an excuse to travel back through the beauty of it.

The road went across the railroad tracks that led to all the earth, and yet the rails seemed to lead nowhere in the moonlight. It carried him on, past the school where once a teacher had touched his mind, then past the old cemetery, shaded with hollows of darkness. For a moment, there was a touch of the spiritual hush he had felt long before as he moved by the quiet place. Then it was shattered by a coarse laugh, and a burst of smut-tinged words of a juke song on a transistor radio.

Superstition was dying, as Tommy had said. At least, the older superstitious fear of things in the night. But the darkness of it was being replaced by an even darker veil of sordid ugliness.

Even the dead had no peace. A couple had found the retreat for their own use, but without even the respect of silence.

And maybe these dead could never feel the lack, if they could know. Yet he felt his soul rubbed in dirt as he guessed the ages of the couple. They were using the time for what should have been an opening outward in them for things better reserved for later years.

The houses thinned out and were behind him, except for a single light back from the road half a mile ahead. Here the land dipped down, carrying the road with it. It had been a graveled road once. Shawn missed the sound of the pebbles. But the Moon was the same he had known long ago, its light like a kiss across the fields. Even crops cultivated by great machines instead of horses could take on a difference in the silvering from above.

Where had men lost whatever they had lost? History had taught him nothing, though he had searched. And the keys in literature were too elaborately carved to fit the lock. Books were written to bury the feelings of a past generation, not to reveal what might be happening in the present.

There had been a magic in men once. Oh, to be sure, it had been rare enough, and whole areas had missed it. Rome had been mighty in valor without it. Much of Greece had lost it, though it lay somewhere in the soft hint of legends older than Olympus. But there had been Persia. There had been Queen Maev and the Isle of Avalon, the sea warriors of Ys and the dreams that misted across man's rise from a beast. No time had ever been without it before.

Yet this time was lacking whatever it was. Save for a few bits borrowed from the past in Yeats, there was no song or dream in the poetry now; and nobody even read poetry to look for such things. The art was as ugly and machine-symboled as the thoughts of the little minds that made it.

The music was noise and the only legend was the legend of power.

A car filled with teen-agers passed him. The top was down, but none of them were seeing the moonlight.

Shawn passed the sandstone ridge at the edge of his farm, lifted a wire gate and left the road. The woods still stretched along the road. They were his woods, as they had been once when he was a boy. There, along the little rutted trail through them, was the hazel bush, or one like the one he remembered. The wild grapes were ripe and sweet, beaded with the rain or dew. He tasted them and went meditatively on.

There *had* been a lilting in a few men's thoughts once—enough to lighten the others, and to echo still, faintly, out of the filter of older literature and legendry. It had gone. Maybe the industrial revolution? But that was a poor answer, since the revolution had touched only lightly on much of the world, yet the wonder had vanished just as quickly. Maybe the drive toward power? And yet, there had been power before without the death of the glamor he could sense without defining.

Something had gone out of men. In its place was only the body of man's work—the machines, the dark forces that drove him on to bombs and destiny, the rockets that could lift him toward outer space but hide the dancing of the stars. Hundreds of years before, the lilt—and there was no other word—had vanished.

History had failed to show a reason why.

Shawn had come back here, looking for the threads he had lost in childhood. He was still seeking them. He walked on through the stubble left from the harvested barley . . . and something seemed to whisper in his veins.

There was the feeling in him that he should go on. He went, past the sagging barn and down the lane toward the orchard. The pump at the old well creaked and gave forth water that was reddened with rust, but cold and tingling on his palate. He stopped to pluck an apple from an unpruned tree and munched on it.

And now the tingling was stronger, and there was a faint singing of the blood in his ears, as if a horn were being blown

somewhere. It became louder as he crossed a stile into the meadow.

The grass was faintly damp. There was the smell of clover in the air, over the faint, rich musk of the earth itself. He moved across it, listening to the bending of the grass and the soft scuttling sounds of the little creatures that lived in it. From a pond beyond the orchard lane, the croaking of frogs reached him, the eerie call of a screech owl, the chirping of crickets.

The bugling of the strange excitement in his mind was stronger now.

He headed for the little dip near the center of the meadow. As a boy, he had lain there in the sunlight out of the wind and read *Princess of Mars* and Haggard and Dunsany, or crouched in the moonlight at times when he was too restless to sleep and too filled with unremembered plans. It was too damp now for a man of forty-five to return to the earth, but the spot drew him.

And then he saw the thing, centered in the spot toward which he was headed, and his heart seemed to leap with shock and then with expectancy.

He moved to it slowly.

He tried to tell himself it was something left behind by some wooing couple or as a practical joke by his neighbors. But he knew better.

It looked like a shell made of something milky-white. Half was almost buried in the grass. The other half of the opened shell was resting backwards against a rock. It seemed to be lined with a softness like the packed down of a milkweed pod. And it was perhaps eight feet long.

But it was the sweep of the lines and the rightness of the form that held his eyes. There was a fluting of the milky substance that lifted something in him as he had felt it lift before at an ancient jade screen or a phrase of Mozart.

There was no mark to show how it had come there. It

must have been after the rain, since the lining was dry and soft to his touch.

Inevitably, he thought of flying saucers. But he threw the idea out of his mind, like a man brushing dirt from himself. The ugliness of the times was reflected in the pitiful situation where men's dreaming of better things led only to the banality of the cults. And of all the cults, the flying saucer ones were the least alive with a spark of the—lilt.

Yet he knew without questioning that this thing had never been shaped on Earth.

And as if to confirm his idea, his eyes caught sight of a design that was revealed softly in the moonlight against the lid of the shell. He bent to see it, but it was still too dim.

Finally, as he had known he was going to do, he kicked off his wet shoes and stepped into the hollow of the padding, letting himself down gently until his eyes were near the carving.

Moonlight shone gently through the lid, making it hard to be sure of details. But somehow, his eyes filled with the figure. It was a woman—or rather, not a woman, since the features were planed as no human face could be. A strange woman, thinner than any human and more supple, from the dance in which she was frozen. The final proof of lack of humanity lay in the hair that rippled from her head and grew into a double crest on her back, spreading outwards across each of her shoulders, but standing well above her skin.

And suddenly, her hand seemed to move!

Shawn blinked. But it had been no illusion. The carved fingers opened and the arm moved toward him, just as the lid began to move inward to close the shell. There was a dancing cloud of motes that sprang from her hand and sped toward him. He lifted his arms, but it was too late. The gleaming motes struck his eyes, and they closed.

Gentle waves of sleep washed across his brain. He had only

time to feel the shell lift somehow and ride upwards into the moonlight before the sleep claimed him completely . . .

There was a sense of the passage of time, eventually. His eyes would not open, but he lay somewhere that was not on Earth, and he could sense that hours had passed. Hours, he thought. Not days or weeks, but only hours.

Around him, there was a stirring. He could sense that the shell was gone, and there was an alien but earthy odor in his nostrils. Now sounds came—voices—but no voices he had ever heard. There was a silvery quality to them, like the voices of children mysteriously robbed of the harsh overtones of childish screams. These were almost liquid. Yet he could sense a frenzy and worry in them. In the background, there was a chanting, and the heart inside him seemed to be crying as it ended.

He tried to sit up and open his eyes, but his mind was still not in control of his body. Some sign must have shown, however. There was a gentle touch on his forehead, and a few words obviously meant to be soothing. The words held a hint of familiarity, but he could understand none of them.

"Where am I?" he asked.

There was a sigh near him, and another voice answered. It was a strong, masculine voice with a power of command and responsibility behind it, even though there were no really deep tones. "You would call it Mars," the words came in oddly accented English.

"Mars? In a few hours?" Yet as Shawn protested, he sensed the rightness of the answer. The weight of him was little more than a third that which he had always known.

The voice was sober and somehow withdrawn. "Our ways are not your ways, man. Our science means as little to you as yours to us. We accept the way of the universe where you bend the laws of nature against themselves. Who shall say which is better? Yet for this one thing of moving beyond the distances you know, we have ways you have not."

"Yet you speak English."

"There have been others before you. Not many." The voice was falling, like the ending of an organ note. "So few. And now . . ." It died away, and then resumed more normally. "But enough. We go to confer. Use the time until we return as you will."

There were rustlings again, and then light shone weakly through Shawn's lids. Something touched his face, and he found his eyes opening. This time when he tried to sit up, his body obeyed, though the motion was awkward in the unfamiliar pull of the planet.

A dream, he told himself. A fantasy. He'd wake in the morning wet and soaked in the meadow, sneezing with a cold from exposure.

But he knew better. A dream like this could be none of his making. There were elements in it, as he stared about, that could never have come from his mind.

There wasn't much to see. He was in a room that must have been carved from colored rock, and there was a sense of a great many feet of similar rock above him. The light seemed to be in the air itself, diffused and softly silver over everything. He lay on what must be a couch, but a couch with soft curves and ornaments no man could have planned. And beyond him was a fountain.

It was a tiny fountain, carved out of the wall of rock, with a thin spray of water falling over into a basin, making a soft tinkling sound. In front of the basin was the carving of a kneeling girl. This time there was only a hint of the shoulder crests of hair, but the green of the stone made the other features easier to see. No human artist could have fashioned that, and no human model could have posed for it. The girl was beautiful, but it was as if she came from a race that had descended from something related to the lighter monkeys, as man claimed descent from a great anthropoid ancestor of himself and the gorilla.

Then, without warning, a curtain seemed to fall across the

room. It cut off most of it, leaving him with only a little space before the couch. But if the blackness was of cloth, it fell without a rustle. And behind it was the stirring of others moving into the room and finding places.

Behind the screen, the voice he took to be that of a leader began again. "What are you called, man? I am Porreos, a prince of my people."

"Danny," Shawn answered. His own response surprised him. He'd not called himself that since his childhood. But he let it stand.

"Then, Danny, we have conferred. And we feel you are better for not seeing us, since you cannot remain with us. We are sorry to have brought you here, though it is too late to alter that. But you will be returned."

Shawn puzzled over it, finding no logic to the decision. Why couldn't he remain? Why pick him up and bring him over all the distance for nothing but this? And why had the shell been on Earth in the first place?

He did not think he had spoken aloud, but Porreos sighed and began to answer. "We had hoped for a child of your race, Danny. One who could learn to live with us, as you could never do here. And the call of the shell was set for the yearning of one of your children. Strange that you should have answered. As strange as the shells that have returned to us empty. It has been so long . . ."

Again it was the fading of an organ note. And behind it came the hint of a wailing song in many voices, a snatch of group response that cut into Shawn's nerves and brought tears to his eyes, though he could understand none of it. There was a delicacy here, a lack of strength and force, that hardly matched a race able to span space at the breathtaking speed of the shells.

The air around him was almost as thick as that of Earth, and there had been a fountain of water. It fitted no picture of Mars, as these voices fitted no people he had expected to find

on the harshness of the little world. Suspicion grew in his mind suddenly.

"You never came from this planet, Porreos!"

This time, the wailing chant began before the prince could answer. It was a thing of beauty and tradition, but the ache in it was like the ache of a man who would reach for the stars to melt them against the palm of his hand, and then look to find them gone. There was a laughter to it like the laughter that there would be because of the aching he felt too strong inside his breast for anything else.

Shawn learned more from the song behind the words than from the answer that Porreos made. No, they had never developed on Mars, but far away. They had been an old race ten million years before. But on their world there had been another race, stronger, younger, with all that they lacked. And for a time, the two had touched falteringly, to the benefit of both. But then had come a great change over the younger race.

Something that the old ones could not understand had taken over the whole emotions of the new ones. It had built a sudden hatred.

The race that had sometimes feared and sometimes loved the race of Porreos was deliberately filled with superstition and belief that all other creatures were things of ultimate evil, to be shunned, hated and mistreated. And the old race had been unable to withstand it. They had never been strong. They had dwelt on only a part of the home planet at any time. But now, finally, they were forced to flee.

Mars was the best they could find.

They had carved dwellings out under the surface and trapped what little air and water there was. It was a poor home to them, but all they had.

And now they were dying, slowly and gently. They each lived for a long time, but they bred infrequently to make up for it. And there was no longer the heart in them to keep up

their numbers. All of the race that was left were here, behind the curtain.

"All," Porreos repeated as the song came to its end like the sound of the last leaf falling in the forest of winter. "It is a respect we owe you, at least, for disturbing you."

"But you'll disturb children, Porreos? You don't mind stealing them and bringing them here?"

"Don't condemn us without understanding," the voice said, and there was dignity and hurt in it. "We're a lonely people. We need others, and even a single child whom we can adopt and make into one of us helps. And besides, there's another need which doesn't concern you."

And there, Shawn realized, must lie the real crux of the matter. There was some need. There had to be, to send the shells across space looking for someone from Earth. "Maybe it does," he decided slowly. "You've brought me here. The reason should concern me as much as it would concern a child."

"No!"

Shawn waited patiently, as an adult might put pressure on a balky child. He heard the same pressure mount behind the screen, with a rising tempo of rustlings and subdued whispers in the tantalizingly familiar alien tongue.

"Don't ask us that, Danny!" It was almost a roar of pain from the prince. "A child we can adopt and make one of us and be bound to. But it is not for you to ask! We're an old, proud people, and our traditions are stronger than the laws of nature you Earthlings fight. We cannot ask favors outside our own. We cannot beg—not even for a part of the world that was our own. And we shall not beg of you!"

It was a nightmare experience. Logic was in abeyance, as if some part of him had already recognized that normal logic could not be used. But it was no more a nightmare than his own culture had become to him in the last few years. Beside that ugliness, this unreason was almost childishly simple.

"You're not begging," he told the group behind the curtain.

"I'm giving. Tell me what you want of me and take it."

There was a shock of silence, and a whisper that was not in the voice of the prince. "You trust us that much?"

To his own surprise, he did. Somewhere his mind was making a pattern out of all this, and he was not afraid of them.

"As a free gift, then," Porreos said at last, and some of the fatigue seemed to lift from the voice. "We have one who is dying. And there is something in your blood which can save her—a resistance that our bodies lack. We need a few drops of your blood, Danny."

Shawn got up quietly from the couch and approached the curtain. He thrust out his bared arm experimentally, surprised when it penetrated with almost no resistance. He grinned at himself as he waited.

There was the tiniest of prickings on his finger, and a brief itch. When he withdrew his hand, something like a fine mesh of cobweb lay over the end of the finger. He was sure there would be no infection.

There were stirrings but no voices behind the screen, and he waited, staring again around the limited section of the room he could see. It was beautiful. There was a shaping of beauty no man could have rendered. But there was a weakness, a lack of the very brutal force he sensed in even the ugliness that was overtaking Earth . . . And there was no lilt here either.

"Danny," Porreos called at last. "Danny, there is life among us in one who was dying. Your blood is our debt. Before we return you to Earth, there is another tradition which we must keep. Make one request of us, as is your right now. And if we can fulfill it, the boon is yours."

It was what Shawn had expected. It could be no other. And there was still a surprise.

No, he thought, there could be no lilt here and none among his people. The dark force there and the fair lack of force here were neither complete. And the lilt he had named and sought

could only come from a true completion. No wonder the shell had come to him in answer to his yearning. No wonder that these people sought a child of Earth while his people lost their superstitious xenophobia and even wanted alien contact from the stars.

"Porreos," he asked, "can you follow my thoughts?"

"A little, Danny Shawn." The voice was reluctant, as if the admission carried unknown dangers. Then it was suddenly filled with intensity. "Yes, oh yes, we can follow!"

The curtain vanished, leaving the room visible to Shawn, and he could see all of the ancient race that was left before him. There were less than a hundred there, green-clad and brown-garbed men, and women with delicate winglike mantles of hair. Their faces were inhuman and their tiny bodies were strange. But they were familiar as no alien being could ever be.

"Ask your boon," the prince of the fairy folk cried. But they already knew, and there was laughter rising and smiles spreading across the elfin faces that looked up toward the human.

"Come home," Shawn asked them. "Come back to Earth. We need you!"

EARTHMEN BEARING GIFTS

By Fredric Brown

Dhar Ry sat alone in his room, meditating. From outside the door he caught a thought wave equivalent to a knock, and, glancing at the door, he willed it to slide open.

It opened. "Enter, my friend," he said. He could have projected the idea telepathically; but with only two persons present, speech was more polite.

Ejon Khee entered. "You are up late tonight, my leader," he said.

"Yes, Khee. Within an hour the Earth rocket is due to land, and I wish to see it. Yes, I know, it will land a thousand miles away, if their calculations are correct. Beyond the horizon. But if it lands even twice that far the flash of the atomic explosion should be visible. And I have waited long for first contact. For even though no Earthman will be on that rocket, it will still be first contact—for them. Of course our telepath teams have been reading their thoughts for many centuries, but—this will be the first *physical* contact between Mars and Earth."

Khee made himself comfortable on one of the low chairs. "True," he said. "I have not followed recent reports too closely, though. Why are they using an atomic warhead? I know they suppose our planet is uninhabited, but still—"

"They will watch the flash through their lunar telescopes and get a—what do they call it?—a spectroscopic analysis. That will tell them more than they know now (or think they know; much of it is erroneous) about the atmosphere of our

planet and the composition of its surface. It is—call it a sighting shot, Khee. They'll be here in person within a few oppositions. And then—"

Mars was holding out, waiting for Earth to come. What was left of Mars, that is; this one small city of about nine hundred beings. The civilization of Mars was older than that of Earth, but it was a dying one. This was what remained of it: one city, nine hundred people. They were waiting for Earth to make contact, for a selfish reason and for an unselfish one.

Martian civilization had developed in a quite different direction from that of Earth. It had developed no important knowledge of the physical sciences, no technology. But it had developed social sciences to the point where there had not been a single crime, let alone a war, on Mars for fifty thousand years. And it had developed fully the parapsychological sciences of the mind, which Earth was just beginning to discover.

Mars could teach Earth much. How to avoid crime and war to begin with. Beyond those simple things lay telepathy, telekinesis, empathy . . .

And Earth would, Mars hoped, teach them something even more valuable to Mars: how, by science and technology—which it was too late for Mars to develop now, even if they had the type of minds which would enable them to develop these things—to restore and rehabilitate a dying planet, so that an otherwise dying race might live and multiply again.

Each planet would gain greatly, and neither would lose.

And tonight was the night when Earth would make its first sighting shot. Its next shot, a rocket containing Earthmen, or at least an Earthman, would be at the next opposition, two Earth years, or roughly four Martian years, hence. The Martians knew this, because their teams of telepaths were able to catch at least some of the thoughts of Earthmen, enough to know their plans. Unfortunately, at that distance, the connection was one-way. Mars could not ask Earth to hurry its

program. Or tell Earth scientists the facts about Mars' composition and atmosphere which would have made this preliminary shot unnecessary.

Tonight Ry, the leader (as nearly as the Martian word can be translated), and Khee, his administrative assistant and closest friend, sat and meditated together until the time was near. Then they drank a toast to the future—in a beverage based on menthol, which had the same effect on Martians as alcohol on Earthmen—and climbed to the roof of the building in which they had been sitting. They watched toward the north, where the rocket should land. The stars shone brilliantly and unwinkingly through the atmosphere.

In Observatory No. 1 on Earth's moon, Rog Everett, his eye at the eyepiece of the spotter scope, said triumphantly, "Thar she blew, Willie. And now, as soon as the films are developed, we'll know the score on that old planet Mars." He straightened up—there'd be no more to see now—and he and Willie Sanger shook hands solemnly. It was an historical occasion.

"Hope it didn't kill anybody. Any Martians, that is. Rog, did it hit dead center in Syrtis Major?"

"Near as matters. I'd say it was maybe a thousand miles off, to the south. And that's damn close on a fifty-million-mile shot. Willie, do you really think there are any Martians?"

Willie thought a second and then said, "No."

He was right.

RAINBIRD

By R. A. Lafferty

Were scientific firsts truly tabulated the name of the Yankee inventor, Higgston Rainbird, would surely be without peer. Yet today he is known (and only to a few specialists, at that) for an improved blacksmith's bellows in the year 1785, for a certain modification (not fundamental) in the moldboard plow about 1805, for a better (but not good) method of reefing the lateen sail, for a chestnut roaster, for the Devil's Claw Wedge for splitting logs, and for a nutmeg grater embodying a new safety feature; this last was either in the year 1816 or 1817. He is known for such, and for no more.

Were this all that he had achieved his name would still be secure. And it *is* secure, in a limited way, and to those who hobby in technological history.

But the glory of which history has cheated him, or of which he cheated himself, is otherwise. In a different sense, it is without parallel, absolutely unique.

For he pioneered the dynamo, the steam automobile, the steel industry, ferro-concrete construction, the internal combustion engine, electric illumination and power, the wireless, the televox, the petroleum and petro-chemical industries, monorail transportation, air travel, world-wide monitoring, fissionable power, space travel, group telepathy, political and economic balance; he built a retrogressor; and he made great advances towards corporeal immortality and the apotheosis of mankind. It would seem unfair that all this is unknown of him.

Even the once-solid facts—that he wired Philadelphia for light and power in 1799, Boston the following year and New York two years later—are no longer solid. In a sense they are no longer facts.

For all this there must be an explanation; and if not that, then an account at least; and if not that, well—something anyhow.

Higgston Rainbird made a certain decision on a June afternoon in 1779 when he was quite a young man, and by this decision he confirmed his inventive bent.

He was hawking from the top of Devil's Head Mountain. He flew his falcon (actually a tercel hawk) down through the white clouds, and to him it was the highest sport in the world. The bird came back, climbing the blue air, and brought a passenger pigeon from below the clouds. And Higgston was almost perfectly happy as he hooded the hawk.

He could stay there all day and hawk from above the clouds. Or he could go down the mountain and work on his sparker in his shed. He sighed as he made the decision, for no man can have everything. There was a fascination about hawking. But there was also a fascination about the copper-strip sparker. And he went down the mountain to work on it.

Thereafter he hawked less. After several years he was forced to give it up altogether. He had chosen his life, the dedicated career of an inventor, and he stayed with it for sixty-five years.

His sparker was not a success. It would be expensive, its spark was uncertain and it had almost no advantage over flint. People could always start a fire. If not, they could borrow a brand from a neighbor. There was no market for the sparker. But it was a nice machine, hammered copper strips wrapped around iron teased with lodestone, and the thing turned with a hand crank. He never gave it up entirely. He based other things upon it; and the retrogressor of his last years could not have been built without it.

But the main thing was steam, iron, and tools. He made the

finest lathes. He revolutionized smelting and mining. He brought new things to power, and started the smoke to rolling. He made mistakes, he ran into dead ends, he wasted whole decades. But one man can only do so much.

He married a shrew, Audrey, knowing that a man cannot achieve without a goad as well as a goal. But he was without issue or disciple, and this worried him.

He built steamboat and steamtrain. His was the first steam thresher. He cleared the forests with wood-burning giants, and designed towns. He destroyed southern slavery with a steam-powered cotton picker, and power and wealth followed him.

For better or worse he brought the country up a long road, so there was hardly a custom of his boyhood that still continued. Probably no one man had ever changed a country so much in his lifetime.

He fathered a true machine-tool industry, and brought rubber from the tropics and plastic from the laboratory. He pumped petroleum, and used natural gas for illumination and steam power. He was honored and enriched; and, looking back, he had no reason to regard his life as wasted.

"Yet I've missed so much. I tar-heeled and wasted a lot of time. If only I could have avoided the blind alleys, I could have done many times as much. I brought machine-tooling to its apex. But I neglected the finest tool of all, the mind. I used it as it is, but I had no time to study it, much less modify it. Others after me will do it all. But I rather wanted to do it all myself. Now it is too late."

He went back and worked with his old sparker and its descendants, now that he was old. He built toys along the line of it that need not always have remained toys. He made a televox, but the only practical application was that now Audrey could rail at him over a greater distance. He fired up a little steam dynamo in his house, ran wires and made it burn lights in his barn.

And he built a retrogressor.

"I would do much more along this line had I the time. But I'm pepper-bellied pretty near the end of the road. It is like finally coming to a gate and seeing a whole greater world beyond it, and being too old and too feeble to enter."

He kicked a chair and broke it.

"I never even made a better chair. Never got around to it. There are so clod-hopping many things I meant to do. I have maybe pushed the country ahead a couple of decades faster than it would otherwise have gone. But what couldn't I have done if it weren't for the blind alleys! Ten years lost in one of them, twelve in one. If only there had been a way to tell the true from the false, and to leave to others what they could do, and to do myself only what nobody else could do. To see a link (however unlikely) and go out and get it and set it in its place. O the waste, the wilderness that a talent can wander in! If I had only had a mentor! If I had had a map, a clue, a hatful of clues. I was born shrewd, and I shrewdly cut a path and went a grand ways. But always there was a clearer path and a faster way that I did not see till later. As my name is Rainbird, if I had it to do over, I'd do it infinitely better."

He began to write a list of the things that he'd have done better. Then he stopped and threw away his pen in disgust.

"Never did even invent a decent ink-pen. Never got around to it. Dog-eared damnation, there's so much I didn't do!"

He poured himself a jolt, but he made a face as he drank it.

"Never got around to distilling a really better whisky. Had some good ideas along that line too. So many things I never did do. Well, I can't improve things by talking to myself here about it."

Then he sat and thought.

"But I burr-tailed *can* improve things by talking to myself *there* about it."

He turned on his retrogressor, and went back sixty-five years and up two thousand feet.

Higgston Rainbird was hawking from the top of Devil's Head Mountain one June afternoon in 1779. He flew his bird down through the white-fleece clouds, and to him it was sport indeed. Then it came back, climbing the shimmering air, and brought a pigeon to him.

"It's fun," said the old man, "but the bird is tough, and you have a lot to do. Sit down and listen, Higgston."

"How do you know the bird is tough? Who are you, and how did an old man like you climb up here without my seeing you. And how in hellpepper did you know that my name was Higgston?"

"I ate the bird and I remember that it was tough. I am just an old man who would tell you a few things to avoid in your life, and I came up here by means of an invention of my own. And I know your name is Higgston, as it is also my name; you being named after me, or I after you, I forget which. Which one of us is the oldest anyhow?"

"I had thought that you were, old man. I am a little interested in inventions myself. How does the one that carried you up here work?"

"It begins, well it begins with something like your sparker, Higgston. And as the years go by you adapt and add. But it is all tinkering with a force field till you are able to warp it a little. Now then, you are an ewereared galoot and not as handsome as I remembered you; but I happen to know that you have the makings of a fine man. Listen now as hard as ever you listened in your life. I doubt that I will be able to repeat. I will save you years and decades; I will tell you the best road to take over a journey which it was once said that a man could travel but once. Man, I'll pave a path for you over the hard places and strew palms before your feet."

"Talk, you addle-pated old gaff. No man ever listened so hard before."

The old man talked to the young one for five hours. Not a word was wasted: they were neither of them given to wasting

words. He told him that steam wasn't everything—this before he knew that it was anything. It was a giant power, but it was limited. Other powers, perhaps, were not. He instructed him to explore the possibilities of amplification and feedback, and to use always the lightest medium of transmission of power: wire rather than mule-drawn coal cart, air rather than wire, ether rather than air. He warned against time wasted in shoring up the obsolete, and of the bottomless quicksand of cliché, both of word and of thought.

He admonished him not to waste precious months in trying to devise the perfect apple-corer; there will never be a perfect apple-corer. He begged him not to build a better bob-sled. There would be things far swifter than the bob-sled.

Let others make the new hide-scrapers and tanning salts. Let others aid the carter and the candle-molder and the cooper in their arts. There was need for a better halm, a better horse-block, a better stile, a better whetstone. Well, let others fill those needs. If our button-hooks, our fire-dogs, our whiffle-trees, our boot-jacks, our cheese-presses are all badly designed and a disgrace, then let someone else remove that disgrace. Let others aid the cordwainer and the cobbler. Let Higgston do only the high work that nobody else would be able to do.

There would come a time when the farrier himself would disappear, as the fletcher had all but disappeared. But new trades would open for a man with an open mind.

Then the old man got specific. He showed young Higgston a design for a lathe-dog that would save time. He told him how to draw, rather than hammer wire; and advised him of the virtues of mica as insulator until better materials should come to hand.

"And here there are some things that you will have to take on faith," said the old man, "things of which we learn the 'what' before we fathom the 'why.'"

He explained to him the shuttle armature and the self-exciting field and commutation; and the possibilities that alternation carried to its ultimate might open up. He told him a

bejammed lot of things about a confounded huge variety of subjects.

"And a little mathematics never hurt a practical man," said the old gaffer. "I was self-taught, and it slowed me down."

They hunkered down there, and the old man cyphered it all out in the dust on the top of Devil's Head Mountain. He showed him natural logarithms and rotating vectors and the calculi and such; but he didn't push it too far, as even a smart boy can learn only so much in a few minutes. He then gave him a little advice on the treatment of Audrey, knowing it would be useless, for the art of living with a shrew is a thing that cannot be explained to another.

"Now hood your hawk and go down the mountain and go to work," the old man said. And that is what young Higgston Rainbird did.

The career of the Yankee inventor, Higgston Rainbird, was meteoric. The wise men of Greece were little boys to him, the Renaissance giants had only knocked at the door but had not tried the knob. And it was unlocked all the time.

The milestones that Higgston left are breathtaking. He built a short high dam on the flank of Devil's Head Mountain, and had hydroelectric power for his own shop in the same year (1779). He had an arc light burning in Horse-Head Lighthouse in 1781. He read by true incandescent light in 1783, and lighted his native village, Knobknocker, three years later. He drove a charcoal-fueled automobile in 1787, switched to a distillate of whale oil in 1789, and used true rock-oil in 1790. His gasoline powered combination reaper-thresher was in commercial production in 1793, the same year that he wired Centerville for light and power. His first diesel locomotive made its trial run in 1796, in which year he also converted one of his earlier coal-burning steam ships to liquid fuel.

In 1799 he had wired Philadelphia for light and power, a major breakthrough, for the big cities had manfully resisted

the innovations. On the night of the turn of the century he unhooded a whole clutch of new things, wireless telegraphy, the televox, radio transmission and reception, motile and audible theatrical reproductions, a machine to transmit the human voice into print, and a method of sterilizing and wrapping meat to permit its indefinite preservation at any temperature.

And in the spring of that new year he first flew a heavier-than-air vehicle.

"He has made all the basic inventions," said the many-tongued people. "Now there remains only their refinement and proper utilization."

"Horse hockey," said Higgston Rainbird. He made a rocket that could carry freight to England in thirteen minutes at seven cents a hundredweight. This was in 1805. He had fissionable power in 1813, and within four years had the price down where it could be used for desalting seawater to the eventual irrigation of five million square miles of remarkably dry land.

He built a Think Machine to work out the problems that he was too busy to solve, and a Prediction Machine to pose him new problems and new areas of breakthrough.

In 1821, on his birthday, he hit the moon with a marker. He bet a crony that he would be able to go up personally one year later and retrieve it. And he won the bet.

In 1830 he first put on the market his Red Ball Pipe Tobacco, an aromatic and expensive crimp cut made of Martian lichen.

In 1836 he founded the Institute for the Atmospheric Rehabilitation of Venus, for he found that place to be worse than a smoke-house. It was there that he developed that hacking cough that stayed with him till the end of his days.

He synthesized a man of his own age and disreputude who would sit drinking with him in the after-midnight hours and say, "You're so right, Higgston, so incontestably right."

His plan for the Simplification and Eventual Elimination

of Government was adopted (in modified form) in 1840, a fruit of his Political and Economic Balance Institute.

Yet, for all his seemingly successful penetration of the field, he realized that man was the one truly cantankerous animal, and that Human Engineering would remain one of the never-completely-resolved fields.

He made a partial breakthrough in telepathy, starting with the personal knowledge that shrews are always able to read the minds of their spouses. He knew that the secret was not in sympathetic reception, but in arrogant break-in. With the polite it is forever impossible, but he disguised this discovery as politely as he could.

And he worked toward corporeal immortality and the apotheosis of mankind, that cantankerous animal.

He designed a fabric that would embulk itself on a temperature drop, and thin to an airy sheen in summery weather. The weather itself he disdained to modify, but he did evolve infallible prediction of exact daily rainfall and temperature for decades in advance.

And he built a retrogressor.

One day he looked in the mirror and frowned.

"I never did get around to making a better mirror. This one is hideous. However (to consider every possibility) let us weigh the thesis that it is the image and not the mirror that is hideous."

He called up an acquaintance.

"Say, Ulois, what year is this anyhow?"

"1844."

"Are you sure?"

"Reasonably sure."

"How old am I?"

"Eighty-five, I think, Higgston."

"How long have I been an old man?"

"Quite a while, Higgston, quite a while."

Higgston Rainbird hung up rudely.

"I wonder how I ever let a thing like that slip up on me?" he said to himself. "I should have gone on corporeal immortality a little earlier. I've bungled the whole business now."

He fiddled with his Prediction Machine and saw that he was to die that very year. He did not seek a finer reading.

"What a saddle-galled splayfooted situation to find myself in! I never got around to a tenth of the things I really wanted to do. O, I was smart enough; I just ran up too many blind alleys. Never found the answers to half the old riddles. Should have built the Prediction Machine at the beginning instead of the end. But I didn't know how to build it at the beginning. There ought to be a way to get more done. Never got any advice in my life worth taking except from that nutty old man on the mountain when I was a young man. There's a lot of things I've only started on. Well, every man doesn't hang, but every man does come to the end of his rope. I never did get around to making that rope extensible. And I can't improve things by talking to myself here about it."

He filled his pipe with Red Ball crimp cut and thought a while.

"But I hill-hopping *can* improve things talking to myself *there* about it."

Then he turned on his retrogressor and went back and up.

Young Higgston Rainbird was hawking from the top of Devil's Head Mountain on a June afternoon in 1779. He flew his hawk down through the white clouds, and decided that he was the finest fellow in the world and master of the finest sport. If there was earth below the clouds it was far away and unimportant.

The hunting bird came back, climbing the tall air, with a pigeon from the lower regions.

"Forget the bird," said the old man, "and give a listen with those outsized ears of yours. I have a lot to tell you in a very little while, and then you must devote yourself to a concentrated life of work. Hood the bird and clip him to the stake. Is

that bridle-clip of your own invention? Ah yes, I remember now that it is."

"I'll just fly him down once more, old man, and then I'll have a look at what you're selling."

"No, no. Hood him at once. This is your moment of decision. That is a boyishness that you must give up. Listen to me, Higgston, and I will orient your life for you."

"I rather intended to orient it myself. How did you get up here, old man, without me seeing you? How, in fact, did you get up here at all? It's a hard climb."

"Yes, I remember that it is. I came up here on the wings of an invention of my own. Now pay attention for a few hours. It will take all your considerable wit."

"A few hours and a perfect hawking afternoon will be gone. This may be the finest day ever made."

"I also once felt that it was, but I manfully gave it up. So must you."

"Let me fly the hawk down again and I will listen to you while it is gone."

"But you will only be listening with half a mind, and the rest will be with the hawk."

But young Higgston flew the bird down through the shining white clouds, and the old man began his rigmarole sadly. Yet it was a rang-dang-do of a spiel, a mummywhammy of admonition and exposition, and young Higgston listened entranced and almost forgot his hawk. The old man told him that he must stride half a dozen roads at once, and yet never take a wrong one; that he must do some things earlier that on the alternative had been done quite late; that he must point his technique at the Think Machine and the Prediction Machine, and at the unsolved problem of corporeal immortality.

"In no other way can you really acquire elbow-room, ample working time. Time runs out and life is too short if you let it take its natural course. Are you listening to me, Higgston?"

But the hawk came back, climbing the steep air, and it had

a gray dove. The old man sighed at the interruption, for he knew that his project was in peril.

"Hood the hawk. It's a sport for boys. Now listen to me, you spraddling jack. I am telling you things that nobody else would ever be able to tell you! I will show you how to fly falcons to the stars, not just down to the meadows and birch groves at the foot of this mountain."

"There is no prey up there," said young Higgston.

"There *is*. Gamier prey than you ever dreamed of. Hood the bird and snaffle him."

"I'll just fly him down one more time and listen to you till he comes back."

The hawk went down through the clouds like a golden bolt of summer lightning.

Then the old man, taking the cosmos, peeled it open layer by layer like an onion, and told young Higgston how it worked. Afterwards he returned to the technological beginning and he lined out the workings of steam and petro and electro-magnetism, and explained that these simple powers must be used for a short interval in the invention of greater power. He told him of waves and resonance and airy transmission, and fission and flight and over-flight. And that none of the doors required keys, only a resolute man to turn the knob and push them open. Young Higgston was impressed.

Then the hawk came back, climbing the towering air, and it had a mainbird.

The old man had lively eyes, but now they took on a new light.

"Nobody ever gives up pleasure willingly," he said, "and there is always the sneaking feeling that the bargain may not have been perfect. This is one of the things I have missed. I haven't hawked for sixty-five years. Let me fly him this time, Higgston."

"You know how?"

"I am an adept. And I once intended to make a better

gauntlet for hawkers. This hasn't been improved since Nimrod's time."

"I have an idea for a better gauntlet myself, old man."

"Yes. I know what your idea is. Go ahead with it. It's practical."

"Fly him if you want to, old man."

And old Higgston flew the tercel hawk down through the gleaming clouds, and he and young Higgston watched from the top of the world. And then young Higgston Rainbird was standing alone on the top of Devil's Head Mountain, and the old man was gone.

"I wonder where he went? And where in apple-knockers' heaven did he come from? Or was he ever here at all? That's a danged funny machine he came in, if he did come in it. All the wheels are on the inside. But I can use the gears from it, and the clock, and the copper wire. It must have taken weeks to hammer that much wire out that fine. I wish I'd paid more attention to what he was saying, but he poured it on a little thick. I'd have gone along with him on it if only he'd have found a good stopping place a little sooner, and hadn't been so insistent on giving up hawking. Well, I'll just hawk here till dark, and if it dawns clear I'll be up again in the morning. And Sunday, if I have a little time, I may work on my sparker or my chestnut roaster."

Higgston Rainbird lived a long and successful life. Locally he was known best as a hawker and horse racer. But as an inventor he was recognized as far as Boston.

He is still known, in a limited way, to specialists in the field and the period: known as contributor to the development of the moldboard plow, as the designer of the Nonpareil Nutmeg Grater with the safety feature, for a bellows, for a sparker for starting fires (little used) and for the Devil's Claw Wedge for splitting logs.

He is known for such, and for no more.

THREE PORTRAITS AND A PRAYER

By Frederik Pohl

Howard Chandler Christy: The Lovely Young Girl

When Dr. Rhine Cooperstock was put under my care I was enlarged with pride. Dr. Cooperstock was a hero to me. I don't mean a George Washington, all virtue and no fire, I mean he was a dragon killer. He had carried human knowledge far into the tiny spaces of an atomic nucleus. He was a very great man. And I was his doctor and he was dying.

Dr. Cooperstock was dying in the finest suite in the Morgan Pavilion and with all the best doctors. (I am not modest.) We couldn't keep him alive for more than a matter of months, and we couldn't cure him at all. But we could make him comfortable. If round-the-clock nurses and color television constitute comfort.

I don't ask you to understand technical medical terms. He was an old man, his blood vessels deteriorating, and clots formed, impeding the circulation. One day a clot would form in heart, brain or lungs and he would die. If it was in the lung it would be painful and slow. In the heart, painful and fast. In the brain most painful of all, but so fast that it would be a mercy.

Meanwhile we fed him heparin and sometimes coumarol and attempted by massages and heat and diet to stave off the end. Although, in fact, he was all but dead anyway, so little freedom of movement we allowed him.

"Martin, the leg hurts. You'd better leave a pill," he would

say to me once or twice a week, and I would hesitate. "I don't know if I can make it to the bathroom tonight, Martin," he would say, his tone cheerfully resigned. Then he would call for the bedpan while I was there, or mention casually that some invisible wrinkle in the sheet caused him pain and stand by bravely while the bed was remade, and say at last, self-deprecating, "I think I will need that pill, Martin." So I would allow myself to be persuaded and let him have a red-and-white capsule and in the morning it would be gone. I never told him that they contained only aspirin and he never admitted to me that he did not take the pills at all but was laboriously building up a hoard against the day when the pain would be really serious and he would take them all at once.

Dr. Cooperstock knew the lethal dose as well as I did. As he knew the names of all his veins and arteries and the chemistry of his disease. A man like Rhine Cooperstock, even at seventy, can learn enough medicine for that in a week.

He acquired eleven of the little capsules in one month at the Pavilion; I know, because I counted them after he left. That would have been enough for suicide, if they had not been aspirin. I suppose he would have stopped there, perhaps beginning to take a few, now and then, both to keep me from getting suspicious and for the relief of the real pain he must have felt. But he did leave. Nan Halloran came and got him.

She invaded the Pavilion like a queen. Expensive, celebrated hospital, we were used to the famous; but this was Nan Halloran, blue-eyed, black-haired, a face like a lovely child and a voice like the sway of hips. She was a most remarkable woman. I called her a queen, but she was not that, she was a goddess, virgin and fertile. I speak subjectively, of course, for in medical fact she was surely not one and may not have been either. She breezed into the room, wrinkling her nose. "Coopie," she said, "what is that awful smell? Will you do me a favor, dear? I need it very much."

You would not think that a man like Dr. Cooperstock would have much to do with a television star; but he knew

her; years before, when he was still teaching sometimes, she had somehow wandered into his class. "Hello, Nan," he said, looking quite astonished and pleased. "I'll do anything I can for you, of course. That smell," he apologized, touching the leg with its bright spots of color and degenerated tissues, "is me."

"Poor Coopie." She looked around at me and smiled. Although I am fat and not attractive and know in my heart that, whatever long-term wonders I may work with the brilliance of my mind and the cleverness of my speech, no woman will ever lust for me on sight, I tingled. I looked away. She said sweetly, "It's about that fusion power thing, Coopie. You know Wayne Donner, of course? He and I are good friends. He has these utility company interests, and he wants to convert them to fusion power, and I told him you were the only man who could help him."

Dr. Cooperstock began to laugh, and laughed until he was choking and gagging. I laughed too, although I think that in all the world Dr. Cooperstock and I must be two of the very few men who would laugh at the name of Wayne Donner. "Nan," he said when he could, "you're amazing. It's utterly impossible, I'm afraid."

She sat on the edge of his bed with a rustle of petticoats. She had lovely legs. "Oh, did that hurt you? But I didn't even touch your leg, dear. Would you please get up and come now, because the driver's waiting?"

"Nan!" he cried. "Security regulations. Death. Lack of proper engineering! Did you ever think of any of those things? And they're only a beginning."

"If you're going to make objections we'll be here all day, darling. As far as security is concerned," she said, "this is for the peaceful use of atomic power, isn't it? I promise you that Wayne has enough friends in the Senate that there will be no problem. And the engineering's all right, because Wayne has

all those people already, of course. This isn't any little Manhattan Project, honey. Wayne spends *money*."

Dr. Cooperstock shook his head and, although he was smiling, he was interested, too. "What about death, Nan?" he said gently.

"Oh, I know, Coopie. It's terrible. But you can't lick this thing. So won't you do it for me? Wayne only needs you for a few weeks and he already talked to some doctors. They said it would be all right."

"Miss Halloran," I said. I admit I was furious. "Dr. Cooperstock is my patient. As long as that is so, I will decide what is or is not all right."

She looked at me again, sweetly and attentively.

I have now and had then no doubt at all; I was absolutely right in my position. Yet I felt as though I had committed the act of a clumsy fool. She was clean and lovely, her neck so slim that the dress she wore seemed too large for her, like an adorable child's. She was no child; I knew that she had had a hundred lovers because everyone knows that, even doctors who are fat and a little ugly and take it all out in intelligence. Yet she possessed an innocence I could not withstand. I wanted to take her sweetly by the hand and shelter her, and walk with her beside a brook and then that night crush her and caress her again and again with such violence and snorting passion that she would Awaken and then, with growing abandon, Respond. I did know it was all foolishness. I did. But when she mentioned the names of five or six doctors on Donner's payroll who would care for Dr. Cooperstock and suggested like a child that with them in charge it would really be all right, I agreed. I even apologized. Truth to tell, they were excellent men, those doctors. But if she had named six chiropractors and an unfrocked abortionist I still would have shrugged and shuffled and stammered, "Oh, well, I suppose, Miss Halloran, yes, it will be all right."

So we called the nurses in and very carefully dressed the old man and wheeled him out into the hall. I said something

else that was foolish in the elevator. I said, because I had assumed that it was so, that she probably had a cab waiting and a cab would not do to transport a man as sick as Dr. Cooperstock. But she had been more sure of herself than that. The driver who was waiting was at the wheel of a private ambulance.

A TIME cover,
attributed to Artzybasheff,
with mosaic of dollar signs.

I did not again hear of Dr. Cooperstock for five weeks. Then I was telephoned to come and get him, for he was ready to return to the Pavilion to die. It was Wayne Donner himself who called me.

I agreed to come to one of Donner's New York offices to meet him, for in truth I was curious. I knew all about him, of course—rather, I knew as much as he wished anyone to know. I have seen enough of the world's household names in the Pavilion to know what their public relations men can do. The facts that were on record about Wayne Donner were that he was very rich. He had gone from a lucky strike in oil and the twenty-seven and a half per cent depletion allowance to aluminum. And thence to electric power. He was almost the wealthiest man in the world, and I know his secret.

He could afford anything, anything at all, because he had schooled himself to purchase only bargains. For example, I knew that he was Nan Halloran's lover and, although I do not know her price, I know that it was what he was willing to pay. Otherwise he would have given her that thin, bright smile that meant the parley was over, there would be no contract signed that day, and gone on to another incredible beauty more modest in her bargaining. Donner allowed himself to want only what he could get. I think he was the only terrible man I have ever seen. And he had nearly been President of the United States! Except that Governor Hewlett of Ohio spoke so honestly and so truthfully about him in the primaries that

not all of Donner's newspapers could get him the vote; what was terrible was not that he then destroyed Hewlett, but that Hewlett was not destroyed for revenge. Donner hated too deeply to be satisfied with revenge, I think; he was too contemptuous of his enemies to trouble to crush them. He would not give them that satisfaction. Hewlett was blotted out only incidentally. Because Donner's papers had built the campaign against him to such a pitch that it was actually selling papers, and thus it was profitable to go on to ruin the man. When I saw Donner he had Hewlett's picture framed in gilt in his waiting room. I wondered how many of his visitors understood the message. For that matter I wondered how many needed it.

When I was admitted, Dr. Cooperstock was on a relaxing couch. "Hello, Martin," he said over the little drone of its motor. "This is Wayne Donner. Dr. Finneman. Dr. Grace."

I shook hands with the doctors first, pettishly enough but I felt obliged to show where I stood, and then with Donner. He was very courteous. He had discovered what bargains could be bought with that coin too. He said, "Dr. Finneman here has a good deal of respect for you, Doctor. I'm sure you're well placed at the Pavilion. But if you ever consider leaving I'd like to talk to you."

I thanked him and refused. I was flattered, though. I thought of how his fusion-power nonsense might have killed Dr. Cooperstock before he was ready to die, and I thought of him with Nan Halloran, sweat on that perfect face. And I am not impressed by money.

Yet I was flattered that he would take the trouble and time, and God knows how much an hour of his time was worth, to himself offer me a job. I was flattered even though I knew that the courtesy was for his benefit, not mine. He wanted the best he chose to afford—in the way of a doctor, in my case, but the best of anything else too. If he hired a gardener he would want the man to be a very good gardener. Aware as he was of the dignities assumed by a professional man, he had budgeted

the time to give me a personal invitation instead of letting his housekeeper or general manager attend to it. It was only another installment of expense he chose to afford and yet I was glad to get out of there. I was almost afraid I would reconsider and say yes, and I hated that man very much.

When we got Dr. Cooperstock back and bedded and checked over I examined the records Dr. Finneman had sent. He had furnished complete tests and a politely guarded prognosis, and of course he was right; Cooperstock was sinking, but not fast; he was good for another month or two with luck. I told him as much, snappishly. "Don't be angry with me, Martin," he said, "you'd have done the same thing for Nan if she asked you."

"Probably, but I'm not dying."

"Don't be vulgar, Martin."

"I'm not a nuclear physicist, either."

"It's only to make a few dollars for the man, Martin. Heavens. What difference can another billion or two make to Donner? Besides," he said strongly, "you know I've always opposed this fetish of security. Think of Oppenheimer, not allowed to read his own papers! Think of the waste, the same work done in a dozen different places, because in Irkutsk they aren't allowed to know what's going on in Denver and in Omaha somebody forgot to tell them."

"Think of Wayne Donner with all the power in the world," I said.

He said, "I guess Nan hit you harder than I thought, to make you so mad."

Although I watched the papers I did not see anything about converting Donner's power stations to fusion energy. In fact, I didn't see much of Donner's name at all, which caused me to wonder. Normally he would have been spotted in the Stork or cruising off Bimini or in some other way photographed and written about a couple of times a week. His publicity men must have been laboring extra hard.

Nan Halloran came to see Dr. Cooperstock but I did not join them. I spent my time with him when there was no one else, after my evening rounds. Sometimes we played cards but more often I listened to him talk. The physics of the atomic nucleus was poetry when he talked of it. He told me about Gamow's primordial atom from which all the stars and dust clouds had exploded. He explained Fred Hoyle to me, and Heisenberg. But he was tiring early now.

Behind the drawer of his night table, in a used cigarette package thumbtacked to the wood, his store of red-and-white capsules was growing again. They were still aspirin. But I think I would not have denied him the real thing if he had known the deception and asked. We took off two toes in March and it was only a miracle that we saved the leg.

By Gilbert Stuart.
His late period.
Size 9′ x 5′; heroic.

In the beginning of May newspaper stories again began to appear about Donner, but I could not understand them. The stories were datelined Washington. Donner was reported in top-level conferences, deeply classified. There were no leaks, no one knew what the talks were about. But the presidential press secretary was irritable with the reporters who asked questions, and the cabinet members were either visibly worried or visibly under orders to keep their mouths shut. *And* worried. I showed one or two of the stories to Dr. Cooperstock, but he was too tired to guess at implications.

He was hanging on, but it would not be for long. Any night I expected the call from his nurses, and we would not be able to save him again.

Then I was called to my office. I was lecturing to fourth-year men when the annunciator spoke my name; and when I got to my office Governor Hewlett was there.

"I need to see Dr. Cooperstock," he said. "I'm afraid it may excite him. The resident thought you should be present."

I said, "I suppose you know that any shock may kill him. I hope it's important."

"It is important. Yes." The Governor limped ahead of me to the elevator, his bald head gleaming, smiling at the nurses with his bad teeth and his wonderful eyes. Dr. Cooperstock was a hero to me. Governor Hewlett was something less, perhaps a saint or a martyr. He was what St. George would have been if in the battle he had been killed as well as the dragon; Hewlett had spent himself against Donner in the campaign and now he lingered on to serve out his punishment for his daring, the weasels always chipping away at him, a constant witness before commissions and committees with slanders thick in the air, a subject for jokes and political cartoons. A few senators and others of his own party still listened to him, but they could not save him from the committees.

The Governor did not waste words. "Dr. Cooperstock, what have you done? What is Wayne Donner up to?"

Cooperstock had been dozing. Elaborately he sat up. "I don't see, sir, that it is—"

"Will you answer me, please? I'm afraid this is quite serious. The Secretary of Defense, who was with me in the House fifteen years ago, told me something I did not suspect. Do you know that he may be asked to resign and that Wayne Donner may get his job?"

Dr. Cooperstock said angrily, "That's nonsense. Donner's just a businessman now. Anyway, what conceivable difference can—"

"It makes a difference, Dr. Cooperstock, because the rest of the cabinet is to be changed around at the same time. Every post of importance is to go to a man of Donner's. You recall that he wanted to be President. Perhaps this time he does not want to bother with a vote. What weapon have you given him to make him so strong, Dr. Cooperstock?"

"Weapon? Weapon?" Cooperstock stopped and began to gasp, lying back on his pillow, but he thrust me away when I came to him. "I didn't give him any weapon," he said thought-

fully, after staring at the Governor's face for a moment, forcing his lungs to work more easily. "At least, I don't think I did. It was only a commercial matter. You see, Governor, I have never believed in over-classification. Knowledge should be free. The basic theory—"

"Donner doesn't intend to make it free, Dr. Cooperstock, he plans to keep it for himself. Please tell me what you know."

"Well, it's fusion power," Cooperstock said.

"The hydrogen bomb?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Governor! It is fusion of hydrogen, yes, but not in any sense a bomb. The self-supporting reaction takes place in a magnetic bottle. It will not explode, even if the bottle fails; you would have to coax it to make it blow up. Only heat comes out, with which Donner is going to drive steam generators, perfectly normal. I assure you there is no danger of accident."

"I was not thinking of an accident," said the Governor after a moment.

"Well—in that event—I mean, it is true," said Cooperstock with some difficulty, "that, yes, as the reactor is set up, it would be possible to remove the safeguards. This is only the pilot model. The thing *could* be done."

"By remote control, as I understand," said Hewlett wearily. "And in that event each of Donner's power stations would become a hydrogen bomb. Did you know that he has twenty-four of them under construction, all over the nation?"

Cooperstock said indignantly, "He could not possibly have twenty-four installations completed in this time. I can hardly believe he has even one! In the New York plant on the river we designed only the fusion chamber itself. The hardware involved in generating power will take months."

"But I don't think he bothered with the hardware for generating power, you see," said the Governor.

Dr. Cooperstock began to gasp again. The Governor sat watching him for a moment, his face sagging with a painful

fatigue, and then he roused himself and said at last, "Well, you shouldn't have done this, Dr. Cooperstock, but God bless you, you're a great man. We all owe you a debt. Only we'll have to do something about this now."

In my office the Governor took me aside. "I am sorry to have disturbed your patient. But it was important, as you see."

"Donner is a terrible man."

"Yes, I think that describes him. Well. It's all up to us now," said the Governor, looking very gray. "I confess I don't know what we can do."

"Surely the government can handle—"

"Doctor," he said, "I apologize for troubling you with my reflections, I've not much chance to talk them out with anyone, but I assure you I have thought of everything the government can do. Donner has eight oil senators in his pocket, you know. They would be delighted to filibuster any legislation. For more direct action, I'm afraid we can't get what we need without a greater risk than I can lightly contemplate. Donner has threatened to blow up every city of over eight hundred thousand, you see. I now find that this threat is not empty. Thank you, Doctor," he said, getting up. "I hope I haven't distressed your patient as much as he has distressed me."

He limped to the door, shook hands and was gone.

Half an hour later it was time for my rounds. I had spent the time sitting, doing nothing, almost not even thinking.

But I managed to go around, and then Dr. Cooperstock's nurse signaled me. He had asked her to phone Nan Halloran for him, and should she do it? There was a message: "I have something else for Wayne."

I found that puzzling but, as you will understand, I was in an emotionally numb state; it was difficult to guess at what it meant. I told the nurse she could transmit the message. But when Nan Halloran arrived, an hour or two later, I waited in

the hall outside Dr. Cooperstock's room until she came out.

"Why, Doctor," she said, looking very lovely.

I took her by the arm. It was the first time I had touched that flesh, we had not even shaken hands before; I took her to my office. She seemed eager to go along with me. She asked no questions.

In the office, the door closed, I was extremely conscious of being alone in a room with her. She knew that, of course. She took a cigarette out of her purse, sat down and crossed her legs. Gallant, I stumbed to my desk and found a match to light her cigarette.

"You've been worrying Coopie," she said reproachfully. "You and that Hewlett. Can't he stay out of a simple business matter?"

She surprised me; it was such a foolish thing to say and she was not foolish. I told her very briefly what Hewlett had said. No one had told me to be silent. She touched my hand, laughing. "Would it make so very much difference . . . Martin? (May I?) Donner's not a monster."

"I don't know that."

She said impishly, "I do. He's a man like other men, Martin. And really he's not so young, even with all the treatments. What would you give him, with all his treatments? Twenty more years, tops?"

"A dictatorship even for twenty minutes is an evil thing, Miss Halloran," I said, wondering if I had always sounded so completely pompous.

"Oh, but bad words don't make bad things. Sakes! Think what they could call *me*, dear! Donner's only throwing his weight around, and doesn't everyone? As much weight as he has?"

"Treason—" I began, but she hardly let me get even the one word out.

"No bad words, Martin. You'd be astonished if you knew what wonderful things Wayne wants to do. It takes a man

like him to take care of some problems. He'll get rid of slums, juvenile delinquents, gangsters . . ."

"Some problems are better not solved. Hitler solved the Jewish question in Europe."

She said sweetly, "I respect you, Martin. So does Wayne. You have no idea how much he and Dr. Cooperstock think of you, and so do I, so please don't do anything impulsive."

She walked out the room and left it very empty.

I felt turgid, drained and a little bit stupid. I had never wanted anything as much as I had wanted her.

It was several minutes before I began to wonder why she had taken the trouble to entice me in a pointless conversation. I knew that Nan Halloran was her own bank account, spent as thriftily as Donner's billions. I wondered what it was that I had had that she was willing to purchase with the small change of a few words and a glimpse of her knees and the scent of her perfume.

Before I had quite come to puzzle the question through, while I was still regretting I had had no higher-priced commodity for her, my phone rang. It was Dr. Cooperstock's nurse, hysterical.

Nan Halloran's conversation had not been pointless. While we were talking two ambulance attendants had come to assist Dr. Cooperstock into a wheelchair, and he was gone.

To Whom
all things concern

On the fourth of May Dr. Cooperstock defected and in the morning of the fifth Governor Hewlett telephoned me. "He's not back?" he said, and I said he wasn't, and Hewlett, pausing only a second, said, "Well. We can't wait any longer. The Army is moving in."

I went from my office to the operating room and I was shaking as I scrubbed in.

It was a splenectomy, but the woman was grossly fat, with a mild myocarditis that required external circulation. It took all

of my attention, for which I was grateful. We were five hours in the room, but it was successful and it was not until I was smoking a cigarette in the little O.R. lounge that I began to shake.

Twenty-four nuclear bombs in twenty-four cities. And of course one of them, the one that we knew was ready to go off, was in the city I was in. I remembered the power plant, off in the Hudson River under the bridge, yellow brick and green glass. It was not more than a mile away.

And yet I was alive. The city was not destroyed. There had been no awful blast of heat and concussion.

I walked into the recovery room to look at the splenectomy. She was all right, but the nurse stared at me, so I went back to my office, realizing that I was crying.

And Nan Halloran was there waiting for me, looking like a drunken doll.

She pulled herself together as I came in. Her lipstick was smeared, and she shook. "You win, Martin," she said, with a little laugh. "Who would have thought old Coopie was such a lion? He gave me something for you."

I poured her a drink. "What happened?"

"Oh," said she. She drank the whiskey, politely enough, but showing she needed it. "Coopie came to Wayne and made a deal. Politics, he said, is out of my line, but you owe me something, I've helped you, I'll help you more, only you must promise that research will be free and well endowed. He had it very carefully worked out, the man is a genius." She giggled and held out her glass. "Funny. Of course he's a genius. So Wayne took the hook and said it was a deal, what was Coopie going to do for him next? And Coopie offered to show him how to convert the power plant to a different kind of bomb. Neutrons, he said." So Dr. Cooperstock had taken the billionaire down into the guarded room and, explaining how it was possible to change the type of nuclear reaction from a simple hot explosion to a cold, killing flood of rays that would leave the city unharmed, if dead, he had diverted the hydrogen fuel

supply, starved the reaction and shut off the magnetic field that contained it.

And then he had told Donner all deals were off.

There was nothing hard about rebuilding the field and restarting the reaction, of course. It only took a few days; but Donner no longer had days. "I told Wayne," said Nan Halloran gravely, draining her glass, "I told him he should wait until he had all the bombs ready, but he's—he was—he's still, but I think not for long, hard-headed. I have to go now, my plump friend, and I do thank you for the drink. I believe they're going to arrest me." She got up and picked up her white gloves, and at the door she paused and said, "Did I tell you? I've got so many things on my mind. Coopie's dead. He wouldn't let Wayne's doctors touch him."

They did arrest her, of course. But by and by, everything calming down, they let her go again. She's even starring in the movies again, you can see her whenever you like. I've never gone.

The letter in the envelope was from Dr. Cooperstock and it said:

> I've pulled their fuses, Martin, for you and the Governor, and if it kills me, as you should know it must, please don't think that I mind dying. Or that I am afraid to live, either. This is not suicide. Though I confess that I cannot choose between the fear of living in this world and the fear of what may lie beyond it.
>
> The leg is very bad. You would not even let me wear elastic socks, and for the past hour I have been crawling around the inside of Donner's stainless-steel plumbing. It was really a job for a younger man, but I couldn't find one in time.
>
> So I suppose these are my last words, and I wish I could make them meaningful. I expect there is a meaning to this. Science, as one of my predecessors once said—Teller,

was it?—has become simpler and more beautiful. And surely it has become more wonderful and strange. If gravity itself grows old and thin, so that the straggling galaxies themselves weaken as they clutch each other, it seems somehow a much lesser thing that we too should grow feeble. Yet I do hate it. I am able to bear it at all, indeed, only through a Hope which I never dared confess even to you, Martin, before this.

When I was young I went to church and dreaded dying for the fear of hellfire. When I was older I dreaded nothing; and when I was older still I began to dread again. The hours, my friends, in which I held imaginary conversations with the God I denied—proving to Him, Martin, that He did not exist—were endless. And then, past Jehovah and prophets, I found another God, harsher, more awful and more remote. I could not pray to Him, Creator of the Big Bang, He Who Came Before the Monobloc. But I could fear Him.

Now I am not afraid of Him. A galaxy twenty billion years old has given me courage. If there was no monobloc there can have been no God Who made it. I live in the hope of the glorious steady state!

It was weak and wicked of me to give Donner a gun to point at the world, therefore, and I expect it is fair if I die taking it back; but it is not to save the world that I do it but to save my own soul in the galaxies yet to be born. For if the steady state is true there is no end to time. And infinity is not bounded, in any way. Everything must happen in infinity. Everything must happen . . . an infinity of times.

So Martin, in those times to come, when these atoms that compose us come together again, under what cis-Andromedan star I cannot imagine, we will meet—if there is infinity it is sure—and I can hope. In that day may we be put together more cleanly, Martin. And may we meet again, all of us, in shapes of pleasing strength

and health, members of a race that is, I pray, a little wiser and more kind.

That was the letter from Dr. Rhine Cooperstock. I folded it away. I called my secretary on the intercom to tell her that his suite would now be free for another patient; and I went out into the spring day, to the great black headlines with Donner's name over all the papers and to the life that Cooperstock had given back to us all.

SOMETHING BRIGHT

By Zenna Henderson

Do you remember the Depression? That black shadow across time? That hurting place in the consciousness of the world? Maybe not. Maybe it's like asking do you remember the Dark Ages. Except what would I know about the price of eggs in the Dark Ages? I knew plenty about prices in the Depression.

If you had a quarter—*first find your quarter*—and five hungry kids, you could supper them on two cans of soup and a loaf of day-old bread, or two quarts of milk and a loaf of day-old bread. It was filling and—in an after-thoughty kind of way—nourishing. But if you were one of the hungry five, you eventually began to feel erosion set in, and your teeth ached for substance.

But to go back to eggs. Those were a precious commodity. You savored them slowly or gulped them eagerly—unmistakably as eggs—boiled or fried. That's one reason why I remember Mrs. Klevity. She had eggs for *breakfast!* And *every day!* That's *one* reason why I remember Mrs. Klevity.

I didn't know about the eggs the time she came over to see Mom, who had just got home from a twelve-hour day, cleaning up after other people at thirty cents an hour. Mrs. Klevity lived in the same court as we did. Courtesy called it a court because we were all dependent on the same shower house and two toilets that occupied the shack square in the middle of the court.

All of us except the Big House, of course. It had a bathroom of its own and even a radio blaring *Nobody's Business*

and *Should I Reveal* and had ceiling lights that didn't dangle nakedly at the end of a cord. But then it really wasn't a part of the court. Only its back door shared our area, and even that was different. It had *two* back doors in the same frame—a screen one and a wooden one!

Our own two-room place had a distinction, too. It had an upstairs. One room the size of our two. The Man Upstairs lived up there. He was mostly only the sound of footsteps overhead and an occasional cookie for Danna.

Anyway, Mrs. Klevity came over before Mom had time to put her shopping bag of work clothes down or even to unpleat the folds of fatigue that dragged her face down ten years or more of time to come. I didn't much like Mrs. Klevity. She made me uncomfortable. She was so solid and slow-moving and so nearly blind that she peered frighteningly wherever she went. She stood in the doorway as though she had been stacked there like bricks and a dress drawn hastily down over the stack and a face sketched on beneath a fuzz of hair. Us kids all gathered around to watch, except Danna who snuffled wearily into my neck. Day nursery or not, it was a long, hard day for a four-year-old.

"I wondered if one of your girls could sleep at my house this week." Her voice was as slow as her steps.

"At your house?" Mom massaged her hand where the shopping-bag handles had crisscrossed it. "Come in. Sit down." We had two chairs and a bench and two apple boxes. The boxes scratched bare legs, but surely they couldn't scratch a stack of bricks.

"No, thanks." Maybe she couldn't bend! "My husband will be away several days and I don't like to be in the house alone at night."

"Of course," said Mom. "You must feel awfully alone."

The only aloneness *she* knew, what with five kids and two rooms, was the taut secretness of her inward thoughts as she mopped and swept and ironed in other houses. "Sure, one of

the girls would be glad to keep you company." There was a darting squirm and LaNell was safely hidden behind the swaying of our clothes in the diagonally curtained corner of the Other room, and Kathy knelt swiftly just beyond the dresser, out of sight.

"Anna is eleven." I had no place to hide, burdened as I was with Danna. "She's old enough. What time do you want her to come over?"

"Oh, bedtime will do." Mrs. Klevity peered out the door at the darkening sky. "Nine o'clock. Only it gets dark before then—" Bricks can look anxious, I guess.

"As soon as she has supper, she can come," said Mom, handling my hours as though they had no value to me. "Of course she has to go to school tomorrow."

"Only when it's dark," said Mrs. Klevity. "Day is all right. How much should I pay you?"

"Pay?" Mom gestured with one hand. "She has to sleep anyway. It doesn't matter to her where, once she's asleep. A favor for a friend."

I wanted to cry out: whose favor for what friend? We hardly passed the time of day with Mrs. Klevity. I couldn't even remember Mr. Klevity except that he was straight and old and wrinkled. Uproot me and make me lie in a strange house, a strange dark, listening to a strange breathing, feeling a strange warmth making itself part of me for all night long, seeping into me . . .

"Mom—" I said.

"I'll give her breakfast," said Mrs. Klevity. "And lunch money for each night she comes."

I resigned myself without a struggle. Lunch money each day—a whole dime! Mom couldn't afford to pass up such a blessing, such a gift from God, who unerringly could be trusted to ease the pinch just before it became intolerable.

"Thank you, God," I whispered as I went to get the can opener to open supper. For a night or two I could stand it.

I felt all naked and unprotected as I stood in my flimsy crinkle cotton pajamas, one bare foot atop the other, waiting for Mrs. Klevity to turn the bed down.

"We have to check the house first," she said thickly. "We can't go to bed until we check the house."

"Check the house?" I forgot my starchy stiff shyness enough to question, "What for?"

Mrs. Klevity peered at me in the dim light of the bedroom. They had *three* rooms for only the two of them! Even if there was no door to shut between the bedroom and the kitchen.

"I couldn't sleep," she said, "unless I looked first. I have to."

So we looked. Behind the closet curtain, under the table—Mrs. Klevity even looked in the portable oven that sat near the two-burner stove in the kitchen.

When we came to the bed, I was moved to words again. "But we've been in here with the doors locked ever since I got here. What could possibly—"

"A prowler?" said Mrs. Klevity nervously, after a brief pause for thought. "A criminal?"

Mrs. Klevity pointed her face at me. I doubt if she could see me from that distance. "Doors make no difference," she said. "It might be when you least expect, so you have to expect all the time."

"I'll look," I said humbly. She was older than Mom. She was nearly blind. She was one of God's *Also Unto Me's.*

"No," she said. "I have to. I couldn't be sure, else."

So I waited until she grunted and groaned to her knees, then bent stiffly to lift the limp spread. Her fingers hesitated briefly, then flicked the spread up. Her breath came out flat and finished. Almost disappointed, it seemed to me.

She turned the bed down and I crept across the gray, wrinkled sheets and, turning my back to the room, I huddled one ear on the flat tobacco-smelling pillow and lay tense and uncomfortable in the dark, as her weight shaped and reshaped

the bed around me. There was a brief silence before I heard the soundless breathy shape of her words, "How long, O God, how long?"

I wondered through my automatic *Bless Papa and Mama* —and the automatic back-up because Papa had abdicated from my specific prayers—*bless Mama and my brother and sisters*— what it was that Mrs. Klevity was finding too long to bear.

After a restless waking, dozing sort of night that strange sleeping places held for me, I awoke to a thin, chilly morning and the sound of Mrs. Klevity moving around. She had set the table for breakfast, a formality we never had time for at home. I scrambled out of bed and into my clothes with only my skinny, goosefleshed back between Mrs. Klevity and me for modesty. I felt uncomfortable and unfinished because I hadn't brought our comb over with me.

I would have preferred to run home to our usual breakfast of canned milk and shredded wheat, but instead I watched, fascinated, as Mrs. Klevity struggled with lighting the kerosene stove. She bent so close, peering at the burners with the match flaring in her hand that I was sure the frousy brush of her hair would catch fire, but finally the burner caught instead and she turned her face toward me.

"One egg or two?" she asked.

"Eggs! Two!" Surprise wrung the exclamation from me. Her hand hesitated over the crumpled brown bag on the table. "No, no!" I corrected her thought hastily. "One. One is plenty." And sat on the edge of a chair watching as she broke an egg into the sizzling frying pan.

"Hard or soft?" she asked.

"Hard," I said casually, feeling very woman-of-the-world-ish, dining out—well, practically—and for breakfast, too! I watched Mrs. Klevity spoon the fat over the egg, her hair swinging stiffly forward when she peered. Once it even dabbled briefly in the fat, but she didn't notice and, as it swung back, it made a little shiny curve on her cheek.

"Aren't you afraid of the fire?" I asked as she turned away from the stove with the frying pan. "What if you caught on fire?"

"I did once." She slid the egg out onto my plate. "See?" She brushed her hair back on the left side and I could see the mottled pucker of a large old scar. "It was before I got used to Here," she said, making Here more than the house, it seemed to me.

"That's awful," I said, hesitating with my fork.

"Go ahead and eat," she said. "Your egg will get cold." She turned back to the stove and I hesitated a minute more. Meals at a table you were supposed to ask a blessing, but . . . I ducked my head quickly and had a mouthful of egg before my soundless amen was finished.

After breakfast I hurried back to our house, my lunch-money dime clutched securely, my stomach not quite sure it liked fried eggs so early in the morning. Mom was ready to leave, her shopping bag in one hand, Danna swinging from the other, singing one of her baby songs. She *liked* the day nursery.

"I won't be back until late tonight," Mom said. "There's a quarter in the corner of the dresser drawer. You get supper for the kids and try to clean up this messy place. We don't have to be pigs just because we live in a place like this."

"Okay, Mom." I struggled with a snarl in my hair, the pulling making my eyes water. "Where you working today?" I spoke over the clatter in the other room where the kids were getting ready for school.

She sighed, weary before the day began. "I have three places today, but the last is Mrs. Paddington." Her face lightened. Mrs. Paddington sometimes paid a little extra or gave Mom discarded clothes or left-over food she didn't want. She was nice.

"You get along all right with Mrs. Klevity?" asked Mom as she checked her shopping bag for her work shoes.

"Yeah," I said. "But she's funny. She looks under the bed before she goes to bed."

Mom smiled. "I've heard of people like that, but it's usually old maids they're talking about."

"But, Mom, nothing coulda got in. She locked the door after I got there."

"People who look under beds don't always think straight," she said. "Besides, maybe she'd *like* to find something under there."

"But she's *got* a husband," I cried after her as she herded Danna across the court.

"There are other things to look for besides husbands," she called back.

"Anna wants a husband! Anna wants a husband!" Deet and LaNell were dancing around me, teasing me sing-song. Kathy smiled slowly behind them.

"Shut up," I said. "You don't even know what you're talking about. Go on to school."

"It's too early," said Deet, digging his bare toes in the dust of the front yard. "Teacher says we get there too early."

"Then stay here and start cleaning house," I said.

They left in a hurry. After they were gone, Deet's feet reminded me I'd better wash my own feet before I went to school. So I got a washpan of water from the tap in the middle of the court and, sitting on the side of the bed, I eased my feet into the icy water. I scrubbed with the hard, gray, abrasive soap we used and wiped quickly on the tattered towel. I threw the water out the door and watched it run like dust-covered snakes across the hard-packed front yard.

I went back to put my shoes on and get my sweater. I looked at the bed. I got down on my stomach and peered under. *Other things to look for.* There was the familiar huddle of cardboard cartons we kept things in and the familiar dust fluffs and one green sock LaNell had lost last week, but nothing else.

I dusted my front off. I tied my lunch-money dime in the

corner of a handkerchief and, putting my sweater on, left for school.

I peered out into the windy wet semi-twilight. "Do I have to?"

"You said you would," said Mom. "Keep your promises. You should have gone before this. She's probably been waiting for you."

"I wanted to see what you brought from Mrs. Paddington's." LaNell and Kathy were playing in the corner with a lavender hug-me-tight and a hat with green grapes on it. Deet was rolling an orange on the floor, softening it preliminary to poking a hole in it to suck the juice out.

"She cleaned a trunk out today," said Mom. "Mostly old things that belonged to her mother, but these two coats are nice and heavy. They'll be good covers tonight. It's going to be cold. Someday when I get time, I'll cut them up and make quilts." She sighed. Time was what she never had enough of. "Better take a newspaper to hold over your head."

"Oh, Mom!" I huddled into my sweater. "It isn't raining now. I'd feel silly!"

"Well, then, scoot!" she said, her hand pressing my shoulder warmly, briefly.

I scooted, skimming quickly the flood of light from our doorway, and splishing through the shallow run-off stream that swept across the court. There was a sudden wild swirl of wind and a vindictive splatter of heavy, cold raindrops that swept me, exhilarated, the rest of the way to Mrs. Klevity's house and under the shallow little roof that was just big enough to cover the back step. I knocked quickly, brushing my disordered hair back from my eyes. The door swung open and I was in the shadowy, warm kitchen, almost in Mrs. Klevity's arms.

"Oh!" I backed up, laughing breathlessly. "The wind blew—"

"I was afraid you weren't coming." She turned away to the stove. "I fixed some hot cocoa."

I sat cuddling the warm cup in my hands, savoring the chocolate sip by sip. She had made it with milk instead of water, and it tasted rich and wonderful. But Mrs. Klevity was sharing my thoughts with the cocoa. In that brief moment when I had been so close to her, I had looked deep into her dim eyes and was feeling a vast astonishment. The dimness was only on top. Underneath—underneath—

I took another sip of cocoa. Her eyes—almost I could have walked into them, it seemed like. Slip past the gray film, run down the shiny bright corridor, into the live young sparkle at the far end.

I looked deep into my cup of cocoa. Were all grownups like that? If you could get behind their eyes, were they different, too? Behind Mom's eyes, was there a corridor leading back to youth and sparkle?

I finished the cocoa drowsily. It was still early, but the rain was drumming on the roof and it was the kind of night you curl up to if you're warm and fed. Sometimes you feel thin and cold on such nights, but I was feeling curl-uppy. So I groped under the bed for the paper bag that had my jammas in it. I couldn't find it.

"I swept today," said Mrs. Klevity, coming back from some far country of her thoughts. "I musta pushed it farther under the bed."

I got down on my hands and knees and peered under the bed. "Ooo!" I said. "What's shiny?"

Something snatched me away from the bed and flung me to one side. By the time I had gathered myself up off the floor and was rubbing a banged elbow, Mrs. Klevity's bulk was pressed against the bed, her head under it.

"Hey!" I cried indignantly, and then remembered I wasn't at home. I heard an odd whimpering sob and then Mrs. Klevity backed slowly away, still kneeling on the floor.

"Only the lock on the suitcase," she said. "Here's your jam-

mas." She handed me the bag and ponderously pulled herself upright again.

We went silently to bed after she had limped around and checked the house, even under the bed again. I heard that odd breathy whisper of a prayer and lay awake, trying to add up something shiny and the odd eyes and the whispering sob. Finally I shrugged in the dark and wondered what I'd pick for funny when I grew up. All grownups had some kind of funny.

The next night Mrs. Klevity couldn't get down on her knees to look under the bed. She'd hurt herself when she plumped down on the floor after yanking me away from the bed.

"You'll have to look for me tonight," she said slowly, nursing her knees. "Look good. Oh, Anna, look good!"

I looked as good as I could, not knowing what I was looking for.

"It should be under the bed," she said, her palms tight on her knees as she rocked back and forth. "But you can't be sure. It might miss completely."

"What might?" I asked, hunkering down by the bed.

She turned her face blindly toward me. "The way out," she said. "The way back again—"

"Back again?" I pressed my cheek to the floor again. "Well, I don't see anything. Only dark and suitcases."

"Nothing bright? Nothing? Nothing—" She tried to lay her face on her knees, but she was too unbendy to manage it, so she put her hands over her face instead. Grownups aren't supposed to cry. She didn't quite, but her hands looked wet when she reached for the clock to wind it.

I lay in the dark, one strand of her hair tickling my hand where it lay on the pillow. Maybe she was crazy. I felt a thrill of terror fan out on my spine. I carefully moved my hand from under the lock of hair. How can you find a way *out* under a *bed?* I'd be glad when Mr. Klevity got home, eggs or no eggs, dime or no dime.

Somewhere in the darkness of the night, I was suddenly swimming to wakefulness, not knowing what was waking me but feeling that Mrs. Klevity was awake too.

"Anna." Her voice was small and light and silver. "Anna—"

"Hummm?" I murmured, my voice still drowsy.

"Anna, have you ever been away from home?" I turned toward her, trying in the dark to make sure it was Mrs. Klevity. She sounded so different.

"Yes," I said. "Once I visited Aunt Katie at Rocky Butte for a week."

"Anna." I don't know whether she was even hearing my answers; her voice was almost a chant. "Anna, have you ever been in prison?"

"No! Of course not!" I recoiled indignantly. "You have to be awfully bad to be in prison."

"Oh, no. Oh, no!" she sighed. "Not jail, Anna. Prison, prison. The weight of the flesh—bound about—"

"Oh," I said, smoothing my hands across my eyes. She was talking to a something deep in me that never got talked to, that hardly even had words. "Like when the wind blows the clouds across the moon and the grass whispers along the road and all the trees pull like balloons at their trunks and one star comes out and says 'Come' and the ground says 'Stay' and part of you tries to go and it hurts—" I could feel the slender roundness of my ribs under my pressing hands. "And it hurts—"

"Oh, Anna, Anna!" The soft, light voice broke. "You feel that way and you *belong* Here. You won't ever—"

The voice stopped and Mrs. Klevity rolled over. Her next words came thickly, as though a gray film were over them as over her eyes. "Are you awake, Anna? Go to sleep, child. Morning isn't yet."

I heard the heavy sigh of her breathing as she slept. And finally I slept too, trying to visualize what Mrs. Klevity would look like if she looked like the silvery voice-in-the-dark.

I sat savoring my egg the next morning, letting thoughts slip in and out of my mind to the rhythm of my jaws. What a funny dream to have, to talk with a silver-voiced someone. To talk about the way blowing clouds and windy moonlight felt. But it wasn't a dream! I paused with my fork raised. At least not my dream. But how can you tell? If you're part of someone else's dream, can it still be real for you?

"Is something wrong with the egg?" Mrs. Klevity peered at me.

"No—no—" I said, hastily snatching the bite on my fork. "Mrs. Klevity—"

"Yes." Her voice was thick and heavy-footed.

"Why did you ask me about being in prison?"

"Prison?" Mrs. Klevity blinked blindly. "Did I ask you about prison?"

"Someone did—I thought—" I faltered, shyness shutting down on me again.

"Dreams." Mrs. Klevity stacked her knife and fork on her plate. "Dreams."

I wasn't quite sure I was to be at Klevity's the next evening. Mr. Klevity was supposed to get back sometime during the evening. But Mrs. Klevity welcomed me.

"Don't know when he'll get home," she said. "Maybe not until morning. If he comes early, you can go home to sleep and I'll give you your dime anyway."

"Oh, no," I said, Mom's teachings solidly behind me. "I couldn't take it if I didn't stay."

"A gift," said Mrs. Klevity.

We sat opposite one another until the silence stretched too thin for me to bear.

"In olden times," I said, snatching at the magic that drew stories from Mom, "when you were a little girl—"

"When I was a girl—" Mrs. Klevity rubbed her knees with reflective hands. "The other Where. The other When."

"In olden times," I persisted, "things were different then."

"Yes." I settled down comfortably, recognizing the reminis-

cent tone of voice. "You do crazy things when you are young." Mrs. Klevity leaned heavily on the table. "Things you have no business doing. You volunteer when you're young." I jerked as she lunged across the table and grabbed both my arms. "But I *am* young! Three years isn't an eternity. I *am* young!"

I twisted one arm free and pried at her steely fingers that clamped my other one.

"Oh." She let go. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

She pushed back the tousled brush of her hair.

"Look," she said, her voice was almost silver again. "Under all this—this grossness, I'm still me. I thought I could adjust to anything, but I had no idea that they'd put me in such—" She tugged at her sagging dress. "Not the clothes!" she cried. "Clothes you can take off. But this—" Her fingers dug into her heavy shoulder and I could see the bulge of flesh between them.

"If I knew *anything* about the setup maybe I could locate it. Maybe I could call. Maybe—"

Her shoulders sagged and her eyelids dropped down over her dull eyes.

"It doesn't make any sense to you," she said, her voice heavy and thick again. "To you I'd be old even There. At the time it seemed like a perfect way to have an odd holiday and help out with research, too. But we got caught."

She began to count her fingers mumbling to herself. "Three years There, but Here that's—eight threes are—" She traced on the table with a blunt forefinger, her eyes close to the old, wornout cloth.

"Mrs. Klevity." My voice scared me in the silence, but I was feeling the same sort of upsurge that catches you sometimes when you're playing-like and it gets so real. "Mrs. Klevity, if you've lost something, maybe I could look for it for you."

"You didn't find it last night," she said.

"Find what?"

She lumbered to her feet. "Let's look again. Everywhere. They'd surely be able to locate the house."

"What are we looking for?" I asked, searching the portable oven.

"You'll know it when we see it," she said.

And we searched the whole house. Oh, such nice things! Blankets, not tattered and worn, and even an extra one they didn't need. And towels with wash rags that matched—and weren't rags. And uncracked dishes that matched! And glasses that weren't jars. And books. And money. Crisp new-looking bills in the little box in the bottom drawer—pushed back under some *extra* pillow cases. And clothes—lots and lots of clothes. All too big for any of us, of course, but my practiced eye had already visualized this, that and the other cut down to dress us all like rich people.

I sighed as we sat wearily looking at one another. Imagine having so much and still looking for something else! It was bedtime and all we had for our pains were dirty hands and tired backs.

I scooted out to the bath house before I undressed. I gingerly washed the dirt off my hands under the cold of the shower and shook them dry on the way back to the house. Well, we had moved everything in the place, but nothing was what Mrs. Klevity looked for.

Back in the bedroom, I groped under the bed for my jammas and again had to lie flat and burrow under the bed for the tattered bag. Our moving around had wedged it back between two cardboard cartons. I squirmed under farther and tried to ease it out after shoving the two cartons a little farther apart. The bag tore, spilling out my jammas, so I grasped them in the bend of my elbow and started to back out.

Then the whole world seemed to explode into brightness that pulsated and dazzled, that splashed brilliance into my astonished eyes until I winced them shut to rest their seeing and saw the dark inversions of the radiance behind my eyelids.

I forced my eyes open again and looked sideways so the edge of my seeing was all I used until I got more accustomed to the glory.

Between the two cartons was an opening like a window would be, but little, little, into a wonderland of things I could never tell. Colors that had no names. Feelings that made windy moonlight a puddle of dust. I felt tears burn out of my eyes and start down my cheeks, whether from brightness or wonder, I don't know. I blinked them away and looked again.

Someone was in the brightness, several someones. They were leaning out of the squareness, beckoning and calling—silver signals and silver sounds.

"Mrs. Klevity," I thought. "Something bright."

I took another good look at the shining people and the tree things that were like music bordering a road, and grass that was the song my evening grass hummed in the wind—a last, last look, and began to back out.

I scrambled to my feet, clutching my jammas. "Mrs. Klevity." She was still sitting at the table, as solid as a pile of bricks, the sketched face under the wild hair a sad, sad one.

"Yes, child." She hardly heard herself.

"Something bright . . ." I said.

Her heavy head lifted slowly, her blind face turned to me. "What, child?"

I felt my fingers bite into my jammas and the cords in my neck getting tight and my stomach clenching itself. "Something bright!" I thought I screamed. She didn't move. I grabbed her arm and dragged her off-balance in her chair. "Something bright!"

"Anna." She righted herself on the chair. "Don't be mean."

I grabbed the bedspread and yanked it up. The light sprayed out like a sprinkler on a lawn.

Then *she* screamed. She put both hands up to her heavy face and screamed, "Leolienn! It's here! Hurry, hurry!"

"Mr. Klevity isn't here," I said. "He hasn't got back."

"I can't go without him! Leolienn!"

"Leave a note!" I cried. "If you're there, you can make them come back again and I can show him the right place!" The upsurge had passed make-believe and everything was realer than real.

Then, quicker than I ever thought she could move, she got paper and a pencil. She was scribbling away at the table as I stood there holding the spread. So I dropped to my knees and then to my stomach and crawled under the bed again. I filled my eyes with the brightness and beauty and saw, beyond it, serenity and orderliness and—and uncluttered cleanness. The miniature landscape was like a stage setting for a fairy tale—so small, so small—so lovely.

And then Mrs. Klevity tugged at my ankle and I slid out, reluctantly, stretching my sight of the bright square until the falling of the spread broke it. Mrs. Klevity worked her way under the bed, her breath coming pantingly, her big, ungainly body inching along awkwardly.

She crawled and crawled and crawled until she should have come up short against the wall, and I knew she must be funneling down into the brightness, her face, head and shoulders, so small, so lovely, like her silvery voice. But the rest of her, still gross and ugly, like a butterfly trying to skin out of its cocoon.

Finally only her feet were sticking out from under the bed and they thrashed and waved and didn't go anywhere, so I got down on the floor and put my feet against hers and braced myself against the dresser and pushed. And pushed and pushed. Suddenly there was a going, a finishing, and my feet dropped to the floor.

There, almost under the bed, lay Mrs. Klevity's shabby old-lady black shoes, toes pointing away from each other. I picked them up in my hands, wanting, somehow, to cry. Her saggy lisle stockings were still in the shoes.

Slowly I pulled all of the clothes of Mrs. Klevity out from under the bed. They were held together by a thin skin, a

sloughed-off leftover of Mrs. Klevity that only showed, gray and lifeless, where her bare hands and face would have been, and her dull gray filmed eyes.

I let it crumple to the floor and sat there, holding one of her old shoes in my hand.

The door rattled and it was gray, old, wrinkled Mr. Klevity.

"Hello, child," he said. "Where's my wife?"

"She's gone," I said, not looking at him. "She left you a note there on the table."

"Gone—?" He left the word stranded in mid-air as he read Mrs. Klevity's note.

The paper fluttered down. He yanked a dresser drawer open and snatched out spool-looking things, both hands full. Then he practically dived under the bed, his elbows thudding on the floor, to-hurt hard. And there was only a wiggle or two and *his* shoes slumped away from each other.

I pulled his cast-aside from under the bed and crawled under it myself. I saw the tiny picture frame—bright, bright, but so small.

I crept close to it, knowing I couldn't go in. I saw the tiny perfection of the road, the landscape, the people—the laughing people who crowded around the two new rejoicing figures—the two silvery, lovely young creatures who cried out in tiny voices as they danced. The girl-one threw a kiss outward before they all turned away and ran up the winding white road together.

The frame began to shrink, faster, faster, until it squeezed to a single bright bead and then blinked out.

All at once the house was empty and cold. The upsurge was gone. Nothing was real any more. All at once the faint ghost of the smell of eggs was frightening. All at once I whimpered, "My lunch money!"

I scrambled to my feet, tumbling Mrs. Klevity's clothes into a disconnected pile. I gathered up my jammas and leaned

across the table to get my sweater. I saw my name on a piece of paper. I picked it up and read it.

> *Everything that is ours in this house now belongs to Anna-across-the-court, the little girl that's been staying with me at night.*
>
> *Ahvlaree Klevity*

I looked from the paper around the room. All for me? All for us? All this richness and wonder of good things? All this and the box in the bottom drawer, too? And a paper that said so, so that nobody could take them away from us.

A fluttering wonder filled my chest and I walked stiffly around the three rooms, visualizing everything without opening a drawer or door. I stood by the stove and looked at the frying pan hanging above it. I opened the cupboard door. The paper bag of eggs was on the shelf. I reached for it, looking back over my shoulder almost guiltily.

The wonder drained out of me with a gulp. I ran back over to the bed and yanked up the spread. I knelt and hammered on the edge of the bed with my clenched fists. Then I leaned my forehead on my tight hands and felt my knuckles bruise me. My hands went limply to my lap, my head drooping.

I got up slowly and took the paper from the table, bundled my jammas under my arm and got the eggs from the cupboard. I turned the lights out and left.

I felt tears wash down from my eyes as I stumbled across the familiar yard in the dark. I don't know why I was crying—unless it was because I was homesick for something bright that I knew I would never have, and because I knew I could never tell Mom what really happened.

Then the pale trail of light from our door caught me and I swept in on an astonished Mom, calling softly, because of the sleeping kids, "Mom! Mom! Guess what!"

Yes, I remember Mrs. Klevity because she had eggs for *breakfast! Every day!* That's *one* of the reasons I remember her.

ON THE GEM PLANET

By Cordwainer Smith

Consider the horse. He climbed up through the crevasses of a cliff of gems; the force which drove him was the love of man.

Consider Mizzer, the resort planet, where the dictator Colonel Wedder reformed the culture so violently that whatever had been slovenly now became atrocious.

Consider Genevieve, so rich that she was the prisoner of her own wealth, so beautiful that she was the victim of her own beauty, so intelligent that she knew there was nothing, nothing to be done about her fate.

Consider Casher O'Neill, a wanderer among the planets, thirsting for justice and yet hoping in his innermost thoughts that "justice" was not just another word for revenge.

Consider Pontoppidan, that literal gem of a planet, where the people were too rich and busy to have good food, open air or much fun. All they had was diamonds, rubies, tourmalines and emeralds.

Add these together and you have one of the strangest stories ever told from world to world.

I

When Casher O'Neill came to Pontoppidan, he found that the capital city was appropriately called Andersen.

This was the second century of the Rediscovery of Man. People everywhere had taken up old names, old languages, old

customs, as fast as the robots and the underpeople could retrieve the data from the rubbish of forgotten starlanes or the subsurface ruins of Manhome itself.

Casher knew this very well, to his bitter cost. Re-acculturation had brought him revolution and exile. He came from the dry, beautiful planet of Mizzer. He was himself the nephew of the ruined ex-ruler, Kuraf, whose collection of objectionable books had at one time been unmatched in the settled galaxy; he had stood aside, half-assenting, when the colonels Gibna and Wedder took over the planet in the name of reform; he had implored the Instrumentality, vainly, for help when Wedder became a tyrant; and now he traveled among the stars, looking for men or weapons who might destroy Wedder and make Kaheer again the luxurious, happy city which it once had been.

He felt that his cause was hopeless when he landed on Pontoppidan. The people were warmhearted, friendly, intelligent, but they had no motives to fight for, no weapons to fight with, no enemies to fight against. They had little public spirit, such as Casher O'Neill had seen back on his native planet of Mizzer. They were concerned about little things.

Indeed, at the time of his arrival, the Pontoppidans were wildly excited about a horse.

A horse! Who worries about one horse?

Casher O'Neill himself said so. "Why bother about a horse? We have lots of them on Mizzer. They are four-handed beings, eighty times the weight of a man, with only one finger on each of the four hands. The fingernail is very heavy and permits them to run fast. That's why our people have them, for running."

"Why run?" said the Hereditary Dictator of Pontoppidan. "Why run, when you can fly? Don't you have ornithopters?"

"We don't run with them," said Casher indignantly. "We make them run against each other and then we pay prizes to the one which runs fastest."

"But then," said Philip Vincent, the Hereditary Dicta-

tor, "you get a very illogical situation. When you have tried out these four-fingered beings, you know how fast each one goes. So what? Why bother?"

His niece interrupted. She was a fragile little thing, smaller than Casher O'Neill liked women to be. She had clear gray eyes, well-marked eyebrows, a very artificial coiffeur of silver-blonde hair and the most sensitive little mouth he had ever seen. She conformed to the local fashion by wearing some kind of powder or face cream which was flesh-pink in color but which had overtones of lilac. On a woman as old as twenty-two, such a coloration would have made the wearer look like an old hag, but on Genevieve it was pleasant, if rather startling. It gave the effect of a happy child playing grown-up and doing the job joyfully and well. Casher knew that it was hard to tell ages in these off-trail planets. Genevieve might be a grand dame in her third or fourth rejuvenation.

He doubted it, on second glance. What she said was sensible, young, and pert:

"But uncle, they're *animals!*"

"I know that," he rumbled.

"But uncle, don't you see it?"

"Stop saying 'but uncle' and tell me what you mean," growled the Dictator, very fondly.

"Animals are always *uncertain.*"

"Of course," said the uncle.

"That makes it a game, uncle," said Genevieve. "They're never sure that any one of them would do the same thing twice. Imagine the excitement—the beautiful big beings from earth running around and around on their four middle fingers, the big fingernails making the gems jump loose from the ground!"

"I'm not at all sure it's that way. Besides, Mizzer may be covered with something valuable, such as earth or sand, instead of gemstones like the ones we have here on Pontoppi-

dan. You know your flower-pots with their rich, warm, wet, soft earth?"

"Of course I do, uncle. And I know what you paid for them. You were very generous. And still are," she added diplomatically, glancing quickly at Casher O'Neill to see how the familial piety went across with the visitor.

"We're not that rich on Mizzer. It's mostly sand, with farmland along the Twelve Niles, our big rivers."

"I've seen pictures of rivers," said Genevieve. "Imagine living on a whole world full of flowerpot stuff!"

"You're getting off the subject, darling. We were wondering why anyone would bring one horse, just one horse, to Pontoppidan. I suppose you could race a horse against himself, if you had a stop-watch. But would it be fun? Would you do that, young man?"

Casher O'Neill tried to be respectful. "In my home we used to have a lot of horses. I've seen my uncle time them one by one."

"Your uncle?" said the Dictator interestedly. "Who was your uncle that he had all these four-fingered 'horses' running around? They're all Earth animals and very expensive."

Casher felt the coming of the low, slow blow he had met so many times before, right from the whole outside world into the pit of his stomach. "My uncle—" he stammered—"my uncle—I thought you knew—was the old Dictator of Mizzer, Kuraf."

Philip Vincent jumped to his feet, very lightly for so well-fleshed a man. The young mistress, Genevieve, clutched at the throat of her dress.

"Kuraf!" cried the old Dictator. "Kuraf! We know about him, even here. But you were supposed to be a Mizzer patriot, not one of Kuraf's people."

"He doesn't have any children—" Casher began to explain.

"I should think not, not with those habits!" snapped the old man.

"—so I'm his nephew and his heir. But I'm not trying to put the Dictatorship back, even though I should be dictator. I just want to get rid of Colonel Wedder. He has ruined my people, and I am looking for money or weapons or help to make my home-world free." This was the point, Casher O'Neill knew, at which people either started believing him or did not. If they did not, there was not much he could do about it. If they did, he was sure to get some sympathy. So far, no help. Just sympathy.

But the Instrumentality, while refusing to take action against Colonel Wedder, had given young Casher O'Neill an all-world travel pass—something which a hundred lifetimes of savings could not have purchased for the ordinary man. (His obscene old uncle had gone off to Sunvale, on Ttiollé, the resort planet, to live out his years between the casino and the beach.) Casher O'Neill held the conscience of Mizzer in his hand. Only he, among the star travelers, cared enough to fight for the freedom of the Twelve Niles. Here, now, in this room, there was a turning point.

"I won't give you anything," said the Hereditary Dictator, but he said it in a friendly voice. His niece started tugging at his sleeve.

The older man went on. "Stop it, girl. I won't give you anything, not if you're part of that rotten lot of Kuraf's, not unless—"

"Anything, sir, anything, just so that I get help or weapons to go home to the Twelve Niles!"

"All right, then. Unless you open your mind to me. I'm a good telepath myself."

"Open my mind! Whatever for?" The incongruous indecency of it shocked Casher O'Neill. He'd had men and women and governments ask a lot of strange things from him, but no one before had had the cold impudence to ask him to open his mind. "And why you?" he went on. "What would you get out of it? There's nothing much in my mind."

"To make sure," said the Hereditary Dictator, "that you

are not too honest and sharp in your beliefs. If you're positive that you know what to do, you might be another Colonel Wedder, putting your people through a dozen torments for a Utopia which never quite comes true. If you don't care at all, you might be like your uncle. He did no real harm. He just stole his planet blind and he had some extraordinary habits which got him talked about between the stars. He never killed a man in his life, did he?"

"No, sir," said Casher O'Neill, "he never did." It relieved him to tell the one little good thing about his uncle; there was so very, very little which could be said in Kuraf's favor.

"I don't like slobbering old libertines like your uncle," said Philip Vincent, "but I don't hate them either. They don't hurt other people much. As a matter of actual fact, they don't hurt anyone but themselves. They waste property, though. Like these horses you have on Mizzer. We'd never bring living beings to this world of Pontoppidan, just to play games with. And you know we're not poor. We're no Old North Australia, but we have a good income here."

That, thought Casher O'Neill, is the understatement of the year, but he was a careful young man with a great deal at stake, so he said nothing.

The Dictator looked at him shrewdly. He appreciated the value of Casher's tactful silence. Genevieve tugged at his sleeve, but he frowned her interruption away.

"If," said the Hereditary Dictator, "*if*," he repeated, "you pass two tests, I will give you a green ruby as big as my head. If my Committee will allow me to do so. But I think I can talk them around. One test is that you let me peep all over your mind, to make sure that I am not dealing with one more honest fool. If you're too honest, you're a fool and a danger to mankind. I'll give you a dinner and ship you off-planet as fast as I can. And the other test is—solve the puzzle of this horse. The one horse on Pontoppidan. Why is the animal here? What should we do with it? If it's good to eat, how

should we cook it? Or can we trade to some other world, like your planet Mizzer, which seems to set a value on horses?"

"Thank you, sir—" said Casher O'Neill.

"But, uncle—" said Genevieve.

"Keep quiet, my darling, and let the young man speak," said the Dictator.

"—all I was going to ask, is," said Casher O'Neill, "what's a green ruby good for? I didn't even know they came green."

"That, young man, is a Pontoppidan specialty. We have a geology based on ultra-heavy chemistry. This planet was once a fragment from a giant planet which imploded. The use is simple. With a green ruby you can make a laser beam which will boil away your city of Kaheer in a single sweep. We don't have weapons here and we don't believe in them, so I won't give you a weapon. You'll have to travel further to find a ship and to get the apparatus for mounting your green ruby. If I give it to you. But you will be one more step along in your fight with Colonel Wedder."

"Thank you, thank you, most honorable sir!" cried Casher O'Neill.

"But uncle," said Genevieve, "you shouldn't have picked those two things because I know the answers."

"You know all about *him*," said the Hereditary Dictator, "by some means of your own?"

Genevieve flushed under her lilac-hued foundation cream. "I know enough for us to know."

"How do you know it, my darling?"

"I just know," said Genevieve.

Her uncle made no comment, but he smiled widely and indulgently as if he had heard that particular phrase before.

She stamped her foot. "And I know about the horse, too. *All* about it."

"Have you seen it?"

"No."

"Have you talked to it?"

"Horses don't talk, uncle."

"Most underpeople do," he said.

"This isn't an underperson, uncle. It's a plain unmodified old Earth animal. It never did talk."

"Then what do you know, my honey?" The uncle was affectionate, but there was the crackle of impatience under his voice.

"I taped it. The whole thing. The story of the horse of Pontoppidan. And I've edited it, too. I was going to show it to you this morning, but your staff sent that young man in."

Casher O'Neill looked his apologies at Genevieve.

She did not notice him. Her eyes were on her uncle.

"Since you've done this much, we might as well see it." He turned to the attendants. "Bring chairs. And drinks. You know mine. The young lady will take tea with lemon. Real tea. Will you have coffee, young man?"

"You have coffee!" cried Casher O'Neill. As soon as he said it, he felt like a fool. Pontoppidan was a *rich* planet. On most worlds' exchanges, coffee came out to about two man-years per kilo. Here halftracks crunched their way through gems as they went to load up the frequent trading vessels.

The chairs were put in place. The drinks arrived. The Hereditary Dictator had been momentarily lost in a brown study, as though he were wondering about his promise to Casher O'Neill. He had even murmured to the young man, "Our bargain stands? Never mind what my niece says." Casher had nodded vigorously. The old man had gone back to frowning at the servants and did not relax until a tiger-man bounded into the room, carrying a tray with acrobatic precision. The chairs were already in place.

The uncle held his niece's chair for her as a command that she sit down. He nodded Casher O'Neill into a chair on the other side of himself.

He commanded, "Dim the lights . . ."

The room plunged into semidarkness.

Without being told, the people took their places immediately behind the three main seats and the underpeople perched

or sat on benches and tables behind them. Very little was spoken. Casher O'Neill could sense that Pontoppidan was a well-run place. He began to wonder if the Hereditary Dictator had much real work left to do, if he could fuss that much over a single horse. Perhaps all he did was boss his niece and watch the robots load truckloads of gems into sacks while the underpeople weighed them, listed them and wrote out the bills for the customers.

II

There was no screen; this was a good machine.

The planet Pontoppidan came into view, its airless brightness giving strong hints of the mineral riches which might be found.

Here and there enormous domes, such as the one in which this palace was located, came into view.

Genevieve's own voice, girlish, impulsive and yet didactic, rang out with the story of her planet. It was as though she had prepared the picture not only for her own uncle, but for off-world visitors as well. (By Joan, that's it! thought Casher O'Neill. If they don't raise much food here, outside of the hydroponics, and don't have any real People Places, they *have* to trade: that does mean visitors, and many, many of them.)

The story was interesting but the girl herself was more interesting. Her face shone in the shifting light which the images—a meter, perhaps a little more, from the floor—reflected across the room. Casher O'Neill thought that he had never before seen a woman who so peculiarly combined intelligence and charm. She was girl, girl, girl, all the way through; but she was also very smart and pleased with being smart. It betokened a happy life. He found himself glancing covertly at her. Once he caught her glancing, equally covertly, at him. The darkness of the scene enabled them both to pass it off as an accident without embarrassment.

Her viewtape had come to the story of the *dipsies*, enormous canyons which lay like deep gashes on the surface of the planet. Some of the color views were spectacular beyond belief. Casher O'Neill, as the "appointed one" of Mizzer, had had plenty of time to wander through the nonsalacious parts of his uncle's collections, and he had seen pictures of the most notable worlds.

Never had he seen anything like this. One view showed a sunset against a six-kilometer cliff of a material which looked like solid emerald. The peculiar bright sunshine of Pontoppidan's small, penetrating, lilac-hued sun ran like living water over the precipice of gems. Even the reduced image, one meter by one meter, was enough to make him catch his breath.

The bottom of the dipsy had vapor emerging in curious cylindrical columns which seemed to erode as they reached two or three times the height of a man. The recorded voice of Genevieve was explaining that the very thin atmosphere of Pontoppidan would not be breathable for another 2,520 years, since the settlers did not wish to squander their resources on a luxury like breathing when the whole planet only had 60,000 inhabitants; they would rather go on with masks and use their wealth in other ways. After all, it was not as though they did not have their domed cities, some of them many kilometers in radius. Besides the usual hydroponics, they had even imported 7.2 hectares of garden soil, 5.5 centimeters deep, together with enough water to make the gardens rich and fruitful. They had bought worms, too, at the price of eight carats of diamond per living worm, in order to keep the soil of the gardens loose and living.

Genevieve's transcribed voice rang out with pride as she listed these accomplishments of her people, but a note of sadness came in when she returned to the subject of the dipsies. ". . . and though we would like to live in them and develop their atmospheres, we dare not. There is too much escape of radioactivity. The geysers themselves may or may not be contaminated from one hour to the next. So we just

look at them. Not one of them has ever been settled, except for the Hippy Dipsy, where the horse came from. Watch this next picture."

The camera sheered up, up, up from the surface of the planet. Where it had wandered among mountains of diamonds and valleys of tourmalines, it now took to the blue-black of near, inner space. One of the canyons showed (from high altitude) the grotesque pattern of a human woman's hips and legs, though what might have been the upper body was lost in a confusion of broken hills which ended in a bright almost-iridescent plain to the North.

"That," said the real Genevieve, overriding her own voice on the screen, "is the Hippy Dipsy. There, see the blue? That's the only lake on all of Pontoppidan. And here we drop to the hermit's house."

Casher O'Neill almost felt vertigo as the camera plummeted from off-planet into the depths of that immense canyon. The edges of the canyon almost seemed to move like lips with the plunge, opening and folding inward to swallow him up.

Suddenly they were beside a beautiful little lake.

A small hut stood beside the shore.

In the doorway there sat a man, dead.

His body had been there a long time; it was already mummified.

Genevieve's recorded voice explained the matter: ". . . in Norstrilian law and custom, they told him that his time had come. They told him to go to the Dying House, since he was no longer fit to live. In Old North Australia, they are so rich that they let everyone live as long as he wants, unless the old person can't take rejuvenation any more, even with stroon, and unless he or she gets to be a real pest to the living. If that happens, they are invited to go to the Dying House, where they shriek and pant with delirious joy for weeks or days until they finally die of an overload of sheer happiness and excite-

ment . . ." There was a hesitation, even in the recording. "We never knew why this man refused. He stood off-planet and said that he had seen views of the Hippy Dipsy. He said it was the most beautiful place on all the worlds, and that he wanted to build a cabin there, to live alone, except for his nonhuman friend. We thought it was some small pet. When we told him that the Hippy Dipsy was very dangerous, he said that this did not matter in the least to him, since he was old and dying anyhow. Then he offered to pay us twelve times our planetary income if we would lease him twelve hectares on the condition of absolute privacy. No pictures, no scanners, no help, no visitors. Just solitude and scenery. His name was Perinö. My great-grandfather asked for nothing more, except the written transfer of credit. When he paid it, Perinö even asked that he be left alone after he was dead. Not even a vault rocket so that he could either orbit Pontoppidan forever or start a very slow journey to nowhere, the way so many people like it. So this is our first picture of him. We took it when the light went off in the People Room and one of the tiger-men told us that he was sure a human consciousness had come to an end in the Hippy Dipsy.

"And we never even thought of the pet. After all, we had never made a picture of him. This is the way he arrived from Perinö's shack."

A robot was shown in a control room, calling excitedly in the old Common Tongue.

"People, people! Judgment needed! Moving object coming out of the Hippy Dipsy. Object has improper shape. Not a correct object. Should not rise. Does so anyhow. People, tell me, people, tell me! Destroy or not destroy? This is an improper object. It should fall, not rise. Coming out of the Hippy Dipsy."

A firm click shut off the robot's chatter. A well-shaped woman took over. From the nature of her work and the lithe, smooth tread with which she walked, Casher O'Neill sus-

pected that she was of cat origin, but there was nothing in her dress or in her manner to show that she was underpeople.

The woman in the picture lighted a screen.

She moved her hands in the air in front of her, like a blind person feeling his way through open day.

The picture on the inner screen came to resolution.

A face showed in it.

What a face! thought Casher O'Neill, and he heard the other people around him in the viewing room.

The horse!

Imagine a face like that of a newborn cat, thought Casher. Mizzer is full of cats. But imagine the face with a huge mouth, with big yellow teeth—a nose long beyond imagination. Imagine eyes which look friendly. In the picture they were rolling back and forth with exertion, but even there—when they did not feel observed—there was nothing hostile about the set of the eyes. They were tame, companionable eyes. Two ridiculous ears stood high, and a little tuft of golden hair showed on the crest of the head between the ears.

The viewed scene was comical, too. The cat-woman was as astonished as the viewers. It was lucky that she had touched the emergency switch, so that she not only saw the horse, but had recorded herself and her own actions while bringing him into view.

Genevieve whispered across the chest of the Hereditary Dictator: "Later we found he was a palomino pony. That's a very special kind of horse. And Perinö had made him immortal, or almost immortal."

"Sh-h!" said her uncle.

The screen-within-the-screen showed the cat-woman waving her hands in the air some more. The view broadened.

The horse had four hands and no legs, or four legs and no hands, whichever way you want to count them.

The horse was fighting his way up a narrow cleft of rubies which led out of the Hippy Dipsy. He panted heavily. The oxygen bottles on his sides swung wildly as he clambered. He

must have seen something, perhaps the image of the cat-woman, because he said a word:

Whay-yay-yay-yay-whay-yay!

The cat-woman in the nearer picture spoke very distinctly:

"Give your name, age, species and authority for being on this planet." She spoke clearly and with the utmost possible authority.

The horse obviously heard her. His ears tipped forward. But his reply was the same as before:

Whay-yay-yay!

Casher O'Neill realized that he had followed the mood of the picture and had seen the horse the way that the people on Pontoppidan would have seen him. On second thought, the horse was nothing special, by the standards of the Twelve Niles or the Little Horse Market in the city of Kaheer. It was an old pony stallion, no longer fit for breeding and probably not for riding either. The hair had whitened among the gold; the teeth were worn. The animal showed many injuries and burns. Its only use was to be killed, cut up and fed to the racing dogs. But he said nothing to the people around him. They were still spellbound by the picture.

The cat-woman repeated:

"Your name isn't Whayayay. Identify yourself properly; name first."

The horse answered her with the same word in a higher key.

Apparently forgetting that she had recorded herself as well as the emergency screen, the cat-woman said, "I'll call real people if you don't answer! They'll be annoyed at being bothered."

The horse rolled his eyes at her and said nothing.

The cat-woman pressed an emergency button on the side of the room. One could not see the other communication screen which lighted up, but her end of the conversation was plain.

"I want an ornithopter. Big one. Emergency."

A mumble from the side screen.

"To go to the Hippy Dipsy. There's an underperson there, and he's in so much trouble that he won't talk." From the screen beside her, the horse seemed to have understood the sense of the message, if not the words, because he repeated:

Whay-yay-whay-yay-yay!

"See," said the cat-woman to the person in the other screen, "that's what he's doing. It's obviously an emergency."

The voice from the other screen came through, tinny and remote by double recording:

"Fool, yourself, cat-woman! Nobody can fly an ornithopter into a dipsy. Tell your silly friend to go back to the floor of the dipsy and we'll pick him up by space rocket."

Whay-yay-yay! said the horse impatiently.

"He's not my *friend*," said the cat-woman with brisk annoyance. "I just discovered him a couple of minutes ago. He's asking for help. Any idiot can see that, even if we don't know his language."

The picture snapped off.

The next scene showed tiny human figures working with searchlights at the top of an immeasurably high cliff. Here and there, the beam of the searchlight caught the cliff face; the translucent faceted material of the cliff looked almost like rows of eerie windows, their lights snapping on and off, as the searchlight moved.

Far down there was a red glow. Fire came from inside the mountain.

Even with telescopic lenses the cameraman could not get the close-up of the glow. On one side there was the figure of the horse, his four arms stretched at impossible angles as he held himself firm in the crevasse; on the other side of the fire there were the even tinier figures of men, laboring to fit some sort of sling to reach the horse.

For some odd reason having to do with the techniques of recording, the voices came through very plainly, even the

heavy, tired breathing of the old horse. Now and then he uttered one of the special horse-words which seemed to be the limit of his vocabulary. He was obviously watching the men, and was firmly persuaded of their friendliness to him. His large, tame, yellow eyes rolled wildly in the light of the searchlight and every time the horse looked down, he seemed to shudder.

Casher O'Neill found this entirely understandable. The bottom of the Hippy Dipsy was nowhere in sight; the horse, even with nothing more than the enlarged fingernails of his middle fingers to help him climb, had managed to get about four of the six kilometers' height of the cliff face behind him.

The voice of a tiger-man sounded clearly from among the shift of men, underpeople and robots who were struggling on the face of the cliff.

"It's a gamble, but not much of a gamble. I weigh six hundred kilos myself, and, do you know, I don't think I've ever had to use my full strength since I was a kitten. I *know* that I can jump across the fire and help that thing be more comfortable. I can even tie a rope around him so that he won't slip and fall after all the work we've done. And the work he's done, too," added the tiger-man grimly. "*Perhaps* I can just take him in my arms and jump back with him. It will be perfectly safe if you have a safety rope around each of us. After all, I never saw a less prehensile creature in my life. You can't call those fingers of his 'fingers.' They look like little boxes of bone, designed for running around and not much good for anything else."

There was a murmur of other voices and then the command of the supervisor. "Go ahead."

No one was prepared for what happened next.

The cameraman got the tiger-man right in the middle of his frame, showing the attachment of one rope around the tiger-man's broad waist. The tiger-man was a modified type whom the authorities had not bothered to put into human cosmetic form. He still had his ears on top of his head, yellow

and black fur over his face, huge incisors overlapping his lower jaw and enormous antenna-like whiskers sticking out from his moustache. He must have been thoroughly modified inside, however, because his temperament was calm, friendly and even a little humorous; he must have had a carefully re-done mouth, because the utterance of human speech came to him clearly and without distortion.

He jumped—a mighty jump, right through the top edges of the flame.

The horse saw him.

The horse jumped too, almost in the same moment, also through the top of the flame, going the other way.

The horse had feared the tiger-man more than he did the cliff.

The horse landed right in the group of workers. He tried not to hurt them with his flailing limbs, but he did knock one man—a true man, at that—off the cliff. The man's scream faded as he crashed into the impenetrable darkness below.

The robots were quick. Having no emotions except *on*, *off*, and *high*, they did not get excited. They had the horse trussed and, before the true men and underpeople had ensured their footing, they had signaled the crane operator at the top of the cliff. The horse, his four arms swinging limply, disappeared upward.

The tiger-man jumped back through the flames to the nearer ledge. The picture went off.

In the viewing room, the Hereditary Dictator Philip Vincent stood up. He stretched, looking around.

Genevieve looked at Casher O'Neill expectantly.

"That's the story," said the Dictator mildly. "Now you solve it."

"Where is the horse now?" said Casher O'Neill.

"In the hospital, of course. My niece can take you to see him."

III

After a short, painful and very thorough peeping of his own mind by the Hereditary Dictator, Casher O'Neill and Genevieve set off for the hospital in which the horse was being kept in bed. The people of Pontoppidan had not known what else to do with him, so they had placed him under strong sedation and were trying to feed him with sugar-water compounds going directly into his veins. Genevieve told Casher that the horse was wasting away.

They walked to the hospital over amethyst pebbles.

Instead of wearing his spacesuit, Casher wore a surface helmet which enriched his oxygen. His hosts had not counted on his getting spells of uncontrollable itching from the sharply reduced atmospheric pressure. He did not dare mention the matter, because he was still hoping to get the green ruby as a weapon in his private war for the liberation of the Twelve Niles from the rule of Colonel Wedder. Whenever the itching became less than excruciating, he enjoyed the walk and the company of the slight, beautiful girl who accompanied him across the fields of jewels to the hospital. (In later years, he sometimes wondered what might have happened. Was the itching a part of his destiny, which saved him for the freedom of the city of Kaheer and the planet Mizzer? Might not the innocent brilliant loveliness of the girl have otherwise tempted him to forswear his duty and stay forever on Pontoppidan?)

The girl wore a new kind of cosmetic for outdoor walking—a warm peachhued powder which let the natural pink of her cheeks show through. Her eyes, he saw, were a living, deep gray; her eyelashes, long; her smile, innocently provocative beyond all ordinary belief. It was a wonder that the Hereditary Dictator had not had to stop duels and murders between young men vying for her favor.

They finally reached the hospital, just as Casher O'Neill thought he could stand it no longer and would have to ask Genevieve for some kind of help or carriage to get indoors and away from the frightful itching.

The building was underground.

The entrance was sumptuous. Diamonds and rubies, the size of building-bricks on Mizzer, had been set to frame the doorway, which was apparently enameled steel. Kuraf at his most lavish had never wasted money on anything like this door-frame. Genevieve saw his glance.

"It did cost a lot of credits. We had to bring a blind artist all the way from Olympia to paint that enamel-work. The poor man. He spent most of his time trying to steal extra gemstones when he should have known that we pay justly and never allow anyone to get away with stealing."

"What do you do?" asked Casher O'Neill.

"We cut thieves up in space, just at the edge of the atmosphere. We have more manned boats in orbit than any other planet I know of. Maybe Old North Australia has more, but, then, nobody ever gets close enough to Old North Australia to come back alive and tell."

They went on into the hospital.

A respectful chief surgeon insisted on keeping them in the office and entertaining them with tea and confectionery, when they both wanted to go see the horse; common politeness prohibited their pushing through. Finally they got past the ceremony and into the room in which the horse was kept.

Close up, they could see how much he had suffered. There were cuts and abrasures over almost all of his body. One of his *hooves*—the doctor told them that was the correct name, *hoof*, for the big middle fingernail on which he walked—was split; the doctor had put a cadmium-silver bar through it. The horse lifted his head when they entered, but he saw that they were just more people, not horsey people, so he put his head down, very patiently.

"What's the prospect, doctor?" asked Casher O'Neill, turning away from the animal.

"Could I ask you, sir, a foolish question first?"

Surprised, Casher could only say yes.

"You're an O'Neill. Your uncle is Kuraf. How do you happen to be called 'Casher'?"

"That's simple," laughed Casher. "This is my young-man-name. On Mizzer, everybody gets a baby name, which nobody uses. Then he gets a nickname. Then he gets a young-man-name, based on some characteristic or some friendly joke, until he picks out his career. When he enters his profession, he picks out his own career name. If I liberate Mizzer and overthrow Colonel Wedder, I'll have to think up a suitable career name for myself."

"But why 'Casher,' sir?" persisted the doctor.

"When I was a little boy and people asked me what I wanted, I always asked for cash. I guess that contrasted with my uncle's wastefulness, so they called me Casher."

"But what is cash? One of your crops?"

It was Casher's time to look amazed. "Cash is money. Paper credits. People pass them back and forth when they buy things."

"Here on Pontoppidan, all the money belongs to me. All of it," said Genevieve. "My uncle is trustee for me. But I have never been allowed to touch it or to spend it. It's all just planet business."

The doctor blinked respectfully. "Now this horse, sir, if you will pardon my asking about your name, is a very strange case. Physiologically he is a pure earth type. He is suited only for a vegetable diet, but otherwise he is a very close relative of man. He has a single stomach and a very large cone-shaped heart. That's where the trouble is. The heart is in bad condition. He is dying."

"Dying?" cried Genevieve.

"That's the sad, horrible part," said the doctor. "He is dying but he cannot die. He could go on like this for many years.

Perinö wasted enough stroon on this animal to make a planet immortal. Now the animal is worn out but cannot die."

Casher O'Neill let out a long, low, ululating whistle. Everybody in the room jumped. He disregarded them. It was the whistle he had used near the stables, back among the Twelve Niles, when he wanted to call a horse.

The horse knew it. The large head lifted. The eyes rolled at him so imploringly that he expected tears to fall from them, even though he was pretty sure that horses could not lachrymate.

He squatted on the floor, close to the horse's head, with a hand on its mane.

"Quick," he murmured to the surgeon. "Get me a piece of sugar and an underperson-telepath. The underperson-telepath must not be of carnivorous origin."

The doctor looked stupid. He snapped "Sugar" at an assistant but he squatted down next to Casher O'Neill and said, "You will have to repeat that about an underperson. This is not an underperson hospital at all. We have very few of them here. The horse is here only by command of His Excellency Philip Vincent, who said that the horse of Perinö should be given the best of all possible care. He even told me," said the doctor, "that if anything wrong happened to this horse, I would ride patrol for it for the next eighty years. So I'll do what I can. Do you find me too talkative? Some people do. What kind of an underperson do you want?"

"I need," said Casher, very calmly, "a telepathic underperson, both to find out what this horse wants and to tell the horse that I am here to help him. Horses are vegetarians and they do not like meat-eaters. Do you have a vegetarian underperson around the hospital?"

"We used to have some squirrel-men," said the chief surgeon, "but when we changed the air circulating system the squirrel-men went away with the old equipment. I think

they went to a mine. We have tiger-men, cat-men, and my secretary is a wolf."

"Oh, no!" said Casher O'Neill. "Can you imagine a sick horse confiding in a wolf?"

"It's no more than you are doing," said the surgeon, very softly, glancing up to see if Genevieve were in hearing range, and apparently judging that she was not. "The Hereditary Dictators here sometimes cut suspicious guests to pieces on their way off the planet. That is, unless the guests are licensed, regular traders. You are not. You might be a spy, planning to rob us. How do I know? I wouldn't give a diamond chip for your chances of being alive next week. What do you want to do about the horse? That might please the Dictator. And *you* might live."

Casher O'Neill was so staggered by the confidence of the surgeon that he squatted there thinking about himself, not about the patient. The horse licked him, seemingly sensing that he needed solace.

The surgeon had an idea. "Horses and dogs used to go together, didn't they, back in the old days of Manhome, when all the people lived on planet Earth?"

"Of course," said Casher. "We still run them together in hunts on Mizzer, but under these new laws of the Instrumentality we've run out of underpeople-criminals to hunt."

"I have a good dog," said the chief surgeon. "She talks pretty well, but she is so sympathetic that she upsets the patients by loving them too much. I have her down in the second underbasement tending the dish-sterilizing machinery."

"Bring her up," said Casher in a whisper.

He remembered that he did not need to whisper about this, so he stood up and spoke to Genevieve:

"They have found a good dog-telepath who may reach through to the mind of the horse. It may give us the answer."

She put her hand on his forearm gently, with the approbatory gesture of a princess. Her fingers dug into his flesh. Was

she wishing him well against her uncle's habitual treachery, or was this merely the impulse of a kind young girl who knew nothing of the way the world was run?

IV

The interview went extremely well.

The dog-woman was almost perfectly humaniform. She looked like a tired, cheerful, worn-out old woman, not valuable enough to be given the life-prolonging santaclara drug called *stroon*. Work had been her life and she had had plenty of it. Casher O'Neill felt a twinge of envy when he realized that happiness goes by the petty chances of life and not by the large destiny. This dog-woman, with her haggard face and her stringy gray hair, had more love, happiness and sympathy than Kuraf had found with his pleasures, Colonel Wedder with his powers, or himself with his crusade. Why did life do that? Was there no justice, ever? Why should a worn-out worthless old underwoman be happy when he was not?

"Never mind," she said, "you'll get over it and then you will be happy."

"Over what?" he said. "I didn't say anything."

"I'm not going to say it," she retorted, meaning that she was telepathic. "You're a prisoner of yourself. Some day you will escape to unimportance and happiness. You're a good man. You're trying to save yourself, but you really *like* this horse."

"Of course I do," said Casher O'Neill. "He's a brave old horse, climbing out of that hell to get back to people."

When he said the word *hell* her eyes widened, but she said nothing. In his mind, he saw the sign of a fish scrawled on a dark wall and he felt her think at him, *So you too know something of the "dark wonderful knowledge" which is not yet to be revealed to all mankind?*

He thought *a cross* back at her and then turned his thinking

to the horse, lest their telepathy be monitored and strange punishments await them both.

She spoke in words, "Shall we link?"

"Link," he said.

Genevieve stepped up. Her clear-cut, pretty, sensitive face was alight with excitement. "Could I—could I be cut in?"

"Why not?" said the dog-woman, glancing at him. He nodded. The three of them linked hands and then the dog-woman put her left hand on the forehead of the old horse.

The sand splashed beneath their feet as they ran toward Kaheer. The delicious pressure of a man's body was on their backs. The red sky of Mizzer gleamed over them. There came the shout:

"I'm a horse, I'm a horse, I'm a horse!"

"You're from Mizzer," thought Casher O'Neill, "from Kaheer itself!"

"I don't know names," thought the horse, "but you're from my land. The land, the good land."

"What are you doing here?"

"Dying," thought the horse. "Dying for hundreds and thousands of sundowns. The old one brought me. No riding, no running, no people. Just the old one and the small ground. I have been dying since I came here."

Casher O'Neill got a glimpse of Perinö sitting and watching the horse, unconscious of the cruelty and loneliness which he had inflicted on his large pet by making it immortal and then giving it no work to do.

"Do you know what dying is?"

Thought the horse promptly: "Certainly. No-horse."

"Do you know what life is?"

"Yes. Being a horse."

"I'm not a horse," thought Casher O'Neill, "but I am alive."

"Don't complicate things," thought the horse at him,

though Casher realized it was his own mind and not the horse's which supplied the words.

"Do you want to die?"

"To no-horse? Yes, if this room, forever, is the end of things."

"What would you like better?" thought Genevieve, and her thoughts were like a cascade of newly-minted silver coins falling into all their minds: brilliant, clean, bright, innocent.

The answer was quick: "Dirt beneath my hooves, and wet air again, and a man on my back."

The dog-woman interrupted: "Dear horse, you know me?"

"You're a dog," thought the horse. "Goo-oo-oo-ood dog!"

"Right," thought the happy old slattern, "and I can tell these people how to take care of you. Sleep now, and when you waken you will be on the way to happiness."

She thought the command *sleep* so powerfully at the old horse that Casher O'Neill and Genevieve both started to fall unconscious and had to be caught by the hospital attendants.

As they re-gathered their wits, she was finishing her commands to the surgeon. "—and put about 40% supplementary oxygen into the air. He'll have to have a real person to ride him, but some of your orbiting sentries would rather ride a horse up there than do nothing. You can't repair the heart. Don't try it. Hypnosis will take care of the sand of Mizzer. Just load his mind with one or two of the drama-cubes packed full of desert adventure. Now, don't you worry about me. I'm not going to claim any credit, and I'm not going to give you any more suggestions. People-man, you!" she laughed. "You can forgive us dogs anything, except for being right. It makes you feel inferior for a few minutes. Never mind. I'm going back downstairs to my dishes. I love them, I really do. Good-by, you pretty thing," she said to Genevieve. "And good-by, wanderer! Good luck to you," she said to Casher O'Neill. "You will remain miserable as long as you seek justice, but when you give up, righteousness will come to you and you

will be happy. Don't worry. You're young and it won't hurt you to suffer a few more years. Youth is an extremely curable disease, isn't it?"

She gave them a full curtsey, like one Lady of the Instrumentality saying good-by to another. Her wrinkled old face was lit up with smiles, in which happiness was mixed with a tiniest bit of playful mockery.

"Don't mind me, boss," she said to the surgeon. "Dishes, here I come." She swept out of the room.

"See what I mean?" said the surgeon. "She's so horribly *happy!* How can anyone run a hospital if a dishwasher gets all over the place, making people happy? We'd be out of jobs. Her ideas were good, though."

They were. They worked. Down to the last letter of the dog-woman's instructions.

There was argument from the council. Casher O'Neill went along to see them in session.

One councillor, Bashnack, was particularly vociferous in objecting to any action concerning the horse. "Sire," he cried, "sire! We don't even know the name of the animal! I must protest this action, when we don't know—"

"That we don't," assented Philip Vincent. "But what does a name have to do with it?"

"The horse has no identity, not even the identity of an animal. It is just a pile of meat left over from the estate of Perinö. We should kill the horse and eat the meat ourselves. Or, if we do not want to eat the meat, then we should sell it off-planet. There are plenty of peoples around here who would pay a pretty price for genuine earth meat. Pay no attention to me, sire! You are the Hereditary Dictator and I am nothing. I have no power, no property, nothing. I am at your mercy. All I can tell you is to follow your own best interests. I have only a voice. You cannot reproach me for using my voice when I am trying to help you, sire, can you? That's all I am doing, helping you. If you spend any credits

at all on this animal you will be doing wrong, wrong, wrong. We are not a rich planet. We have to pay for expensive defenses just in order to stay alive. We cannot even afford to pay for air that our children can go out and play. And you want to spend money on a horse which cannot even talk! I tell you, sire, this council is going to vote against you, just to protect your own interests and the interests of the Honorable Genevieve as Eventual Title-holder of all Pontoppidan. You are not going to get away with this, sire! We are helpless before your power, but we will insist on advising you—"

"Hear! Hear!" cried several of the councillors, not the least dismayed by the slight frown of the Hereditary Dictator.

"I will take the word," said Philip Vincent himself.

Several had had their hands raised, asking for the floor. One obstinate man kept his hand up even when the Dictator announced his intention to speak. Philip Vincent took note of him, too:

"You can talk when I am through, if you want to."

He looked calmly around the room, smiled imperceptibly at his niece, gave Casher O'Neill the briefest of nods, and then announced:

"Gentlemen, it's not the horse which is on trial. It's Pontoppidan. It's we who are trying ourselves. And before whom are we trying ourselves, gentlemen? Each of us is before that most awful of courts, his own conscience.

"If we kill that horse, gentlemen, we will not be doing the horse a great wrong. He is an old animal, and I do not think that he will mind dying very much, now that he is away from the ordeal of loneliness which he feared more than death. After all, he has already had his great triumph—the climb up the cliff of gems, the jump across the volcanic vent, the rescue by people whom he wanted to find. The horse has done so well that he is really beyond us. We can help him, a little, or we can hurt him, a little; beside the immensity of his accomplishment, we cannot really do very much either way.

"No, gentlemen, we are not judging the case of the horse. We are judging space. What happens to man when he moves out into the Big Nothing? Do we leave Old Earth behind? Why did civilization fall? Will it fall again? Is civilization a gun or a blaster or a laser or a rocket? Is it even a planoforming ship or a pinlighter at his work? You know as well as I do, gentlemen, that civilization is not what we can do. If it had been, there would have been no fall of Ancient Man. Even in the Dark Ages they had a few fusion bombs, they could make some small guided missiles and they even had weapons like the Kaskaskia Effect, which we have never been able to rediscover. The Dark Ages weren't dark because people lost techniques or science. They were dark *because people lost people*. It's a lot of work to be human and it's work which must be kept up, or it begins to fade. Gentlemen, the horse judges us.

"Take the word, gentlemen. 'Civilization' is itself a lady's word. There were female writers in a country called France who made that word popular in the third century before space travel. To be 'civilized' meant for people to be tame, to be kind, to be polished. If we kill this horse, we are wild. If we treat the horse gently, we are tame. Gentlemen, I have only one witness and that witness will utter only one word. Then you shall vote and vote freely."

There was a murmur around the table at this announcement. Philip Vincent obviously enjoyed the excitement he had created. He let them murmur on for a full minute or two before he slapped the table gently and said, "Gentlemen, the witness. Are you ready?"

There was a murmur of assent. Bashnack tried to say, "It's still a question of public funds!" but his neighbors shushed him. The table became quiet. All faces turned toward the Hereditary Dictator.

"Gentlemen, the testimony. Genevieve, is this what you yourself told me to say? Is civilization always a woman's choice first, and only later a man's?"

"Yes," said Genevieve, with a happy, open smile.

The meeting broke up amid laughter and applause.

V

A month later Casher O'Neill sat in a room in a medium-size planoforming liner. They were out of reach of Pontoppidan. The Hereditary Dictator had not changed his mind and cut him down with green beams. Casher had strange memories, not bad ones for a young man.

He remembered Genevieve weeping in the garden.

"I'm romantic," she cried, and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of his cape. "Legally I'm the owner of this planet, rich, powerful, free. But I can't leave here. I'm too important. I can't marry whom I want to marry. I'm too important. My uncle can't do what *he* wants to do—he's Hereditary Dictator and he always must do what the Council decides after weeks of chatter. I can't love you. You're a prince and a wanderer, with travels and battles and justice and strange things ahead of you. I can't go. I'm too important. I'm too sweet! I'm too nice; I hate, hate, hate myself sometimes. Please, Casher, could you take a flier and run away with me into space?"

"Your uncle's lasers could cut us to pieces before we got out."

He held her hands and looked gently down into her face. At this moment he did not feel the fierce, aggressive, happy glow which an able young man feels in the presence of a beautiful and tender young woman. He felt something much stranger, softer, quieter—an emotion very sweet to the mind and restful to the nerves. It was the simple, clear compassion of one person for another. He took a chance for her sake, because the "dark knowledge" was wonderful but very dangerous in the wrong hands.

He took both her beautiful little hands in his, so that she looked up at him and realized that he was not going to kiss

her. Something about his stance made her realize that she was being offered a more precious gift than a sky-lit romantic kiss in a garden. Besides, it was just touching helmets.

He said to her, with passion and kindness in his voice:

"You remember that dog-woman, the one who works with the dishes in the hospital?"

"Of course. She was good and bright and happy, and helped us all."

"Go work with her, now and then. Ask her nothing. Tell her nothing. Just work with her at her machines. Tell her I said so. Happiness is catching. You might catch it. I think I did myself, a little."

"I think I understand you," said Genevieve softly. "Casher, good-by and good, good luck to you. My uncle expects us."

Together they went back into the palace.

Another memory was the farewell to Philip Vincent, the Hereditary Dictator of Pontoppidan. The calm, clean-shaven, ruddy, well-fleshed face looked at him with benign regard. Casher O'Neill felt more respect for this man when he realized that ruthlessness is often the price of peace, and vigilance the price of wealth.

"You're a clever young man. A very clever young man. You may win back the power of your uncle Kuraf."

"I don't want *that* power!" cried Casher O'Neill.

"I have advice for you," said the Hereditary Dictator, "and it is good advice or I would not be here to give it. I have learned the political arts well: otherwise I would not be alive. Do not refuse power. Just take it and use it wisely. Do not hide from your wicked uncle's name. Obliterate it. Take the name yourself and rule so well that, in a few decades, no one will remember your uncle. Just you. You are young. You can't win now. But it is in your fate to grow and to triumph. I know it. I am good at these things. I have given you your weapon. I am not tricking you. It is packed safely and you may leave with it."

Casher O'Neill was breathing softly, believing it all, and trying to think of words to thank the stout, powerful older man when the dictator added, with a little laugh in his voice:

"Thank you, too, for saving me money. You've lived up to your name, Casher."

"Saved you money?"

"The alfalfa. The horse wanted alfalfa."

"Oh, that idea!" said Casher O'Neill. "It was obvious. I don't deserve much credit for that."

"*I* didn't think of it," said the Hereditary Dictator, "and my staff didn't either. We're not stupid. That shows you are bright. You realized that Perinö must have had a food converter to keep the horse alive in the Hippy Dipsy. All we did was set it to alfalfa and we saved ourselves the cost of a shipload of horse food twice a year. We're glad to save that credit. We're well off here, but we don't like to waste things. You may bow to me now, and leave."

Casher O'Neill had done so, with one last glance at the lovely Genevieve, standing fragile and beautiful beside her uncle's chair.

His last memory was very recent.

He had paid two hundred thousand credits for it, right on this liner. He had found the Stop-Captain, bored now that the ship was in flight and the Go-Captain had taken over.

"Can you get me a telepathic fix on a horse?"

"What's a horse?" said the Go-Captain. "Where is it? Do you want to pay for it?"

"A horse," said Casher O'Neill patiently, "is an unmodified earth animal. Not underpeople. A big one, but quite intelligent. This one is in orbit right around Pontoppidan. And I will pay the usual price."

"A million Earth credits," said the Stop-Captain.

"Ridiculous!" cried Casher O'Neill.

They settled on two hundred thousand credits for a good fix and ten thousand for the use of the ship's equipment even

if there were failure. It was not a failure. The technician was a snake-man: he was deft, cool, and superb at his job. In only a few minutes he passed the headset to Casher O'Neill, saying politely, "This is it, I think."

It was. He had reached right into the horse's mind.

The endless sands of Mizzer swam before Casher O'Neill. The long lines of the Twelve Niles converged in the distance. He galloped steadily and powerfully. There were other horses nearby, other riders, other things, but he himself was conscious only of the beat of the hooves against the strong moist sand, the firmness of the appreciative rider upon his back. Dimly, as in a hallucination, Casher O'Neill could also see the little orbital ship in which the old horse cantered in mid-air, with an amused cadet sitting on his back. Up there, with no weight, the old worn-out heart would be good for many, many years. Then he saw the horse's paradise again. The flash of hooves threatened to overtake him, but he outran them all. There was the expectation of a stable at the end, a rubdown, good succulent green food, and the glimpse of a filly in the morning.

The horse of Pontoppidan felt extremely wise. He had trusted *people*—people, the source of all kindness, all cruelty, all power among the stars. And the people had been good. The horse felt very much horse again. Casher felt the old body course along the river's edge like a dream of power, like a completion of service, like an ultimate fulfilment of companionship.

THE DEEP DOWN DRAGON

By Judith Merril

The girl's one duty was to look—and understand:

White flatness of the wide wall dissolved into mist as the room dimmed. Then whiteness itself broke apart, from all-color to each component.

Pinpoints of brightness swirled and coalesced into new patterns of color and shape. Pinks and yellows here. Silver, blue, black there. Brown, gray, green. Rainbow stripes.

First flat, like a painted scene, then deepening to its own kind of reality, the scene glowed in the center of nothingness where the wall had been before.

The scene had been exactly the same before, she remembered. There was the strangely clear-air atmosphere, thin and sharp. The sketched-in effect of the background—hills, oddly shaped? A domed structure closer?—was simply a matter of her focused attention, not distance haze. Through this transparent air detailed vision would be possible at a far distance. And the background hills were far; for the moment, however, they were only background.

What counted was front-center, bright-colored . . . as real as when she had seen it the first time, for herself.

The three footprints. The shoe. The square of cloth. The three bushes. In color, focus and meaning they were identical. Her own shoe, with the silly spike heel and lacy strap unfastened, was lying where it dropped on the pink-hued sand, alongside the alien prints. The first time she had not known why, exactly, the prints were "alien." Now she saw it was the

shoe that accomplished the effect. Plenty of three-toed things left prints in sand, but nothing exactly the length of her own foot was tripartite.

Nothing on Earth.

It was the same thing with the brown-gray-green thorn bushes . . . planted, she suddenly realized, by some insane gardener, to landscape that circular blockhouse thing in the background! Or maybe not so insane. Nowhere else in sight was there a growing or green thing at all. Poor green was better than none. Spikes, spines and thorns did grow. They were alive, if still—alien? Why? Of course, the same thing. The patterned robe. A square of cloth, from the same bolt from which she had made the robe, only last week, hung impaled on the farthest bush.

Farthest? Nearest! Nearest to the door of the house, from which the strange footprints curved down and off-scene.

Half the wall was filled now. Inch by slow fraction of inch the scene widened. She sat forward, breathing almost not at all, tensed with knowing the next print, or the one beyond it, would contain the print-maker, the—alien.

Alien? What an odd thought! That was the second—the third?—time she'd thought it. She did not remember the thought from the first seeing of the same scene. "Strange," maybe. "Unknown." Not "alien."

Odd . . . Odder still, as her eyes went unwillingly from the forming print at the far edge of the scene, she saw her own sandal alongside the trail, silly spike heel and lacy strap, still fastened as it had been on her foot . . .

That wasn't just odd. It was wrong! And the torn strip of fabric ripped from her robe by the thornbush—

"That's not how it was! That's not the way it went," she thought, and the scene faded out.

The light brightened in the room as the wall came back to normality, and she realized that she had not just thought it, but spoken aloud.

"This is *his*, remember?" Gordon was smiling. "Only the very first frame is identical. It starts branching off right away. The colors, for instance?"

Ruth thought back and of course he was right. *Hers* had been much yellower. Pink sand was absurd.

She laughed out loud, at the absurdity of thinking anything in the projection absurd. Then she explained. "Pink sand. I was thinking how silly that was, and then I remembered that *mine* had little pink clouds floating over my pure yellow desert! Why on Earth do you think he'd have pink sand, though?"

Gordon smiled again as she realized how her own question had answered itself. ". . . on Earth . . ." she had said. Of course. Why should it be Earth at all?

With the questioning thought came concern. Why had *hers* been on Earth? Did that mean . . . ? Were they showing her Charles's sequence just to explain, in the kindest way, why she failed?

She wouldn't finish the thoughts, even in her own head. But Gordon was chuckling quietly as he watched her. Of course he knew what had been crossing her—face, she decided, as well as her mind! Other people had been through this whole thing before. Half of them must have gone through the same thoughts.

Half of them would have been worried . . . and how many of them had good cause to be?

"Relax, Ruth," he said warmly. "You haven't failed or passed yet. There's a lot more to it than the sequence. But I can tell you that it makes no difference where you make the setting, or when. At least—" he frowned faintly, and she knew it was impatience with his own imprecision in a vital communication. "At least, it makes no more difference—and no less—than your choice of colors or textures. A good bit less difference than clothing, for instance."

She looked at him gratefully.

"All right," she said. "I'll try to forget my own sequence."

"The best way is just to let yourself go, as completely as

you can. There's no harm in being aware of the difference, just so you aren't contrasting. It won't rationalize. But you don't have to stop being you to be *him* for a while, you know." He smiled again.

She nodded and grinned. Some things did not have to be verbalized.

She shivered and settled back, ready to watch—to feel, to know, be, exist—in *his* mind and body.

Gordon didn't say any more. The room dimmed again, and once more the misting wall focused the scene.

When it had covered the wall, Ruth had forgotten that there was a wall there at all. Or that she was herself.

More completely than ever before, or again (unless and until they fused to a new person, their child) she was one with the man who had made her his own.

The trail of prints led tantalizingly out of sight, curving away behind a low ridge of dunes. Unless the creature, whatever it was, moved much more swiftly than the prints promised, it had been more than a few minutes since it happened.

He looked again at her slipper dropped on its side in the sand. The first glimpse had been more incongruous than anything else. The alienness of the prints contrasted ridiculously with the spiced femininity of Ruth's shoe on the orange-pink sand. Now it seemed to him that the slipper was not dropped but thrown. Or kicked.

Kicked off her foot? For the first time, fear grabbed him, a clawed fist of ice in his belly that turned him to look again at the bright rainbow of stuff draped and torn on the edge of the bush near the door. It was part of the skirt of the new robe, the one she made herself last week, after he noticed the new fabric in the shop window. He had liked it; so she had bought it and fashioned into a garment to please him. Now it hung cruelly torn by spiked thorns. And she—

He tore himself loose from the immobility of anxiety, and ran for the house. Somewhere in back of his mind the ques-

tion was registered: What shop? Where? The nearest shop was forty million miles away. The question was registered, filed, and ticketed for later thought.

Right now he could not even stop to wonder why he had not noticed the door before. He had to have seen it, when he saw the bush. How do you not notice that the thick door of a pressure hut has been torn loose from its hinges? What kind of wild man speculates about his wife's robe when his home, in which he left her safe and protected, no more than five hours ago, has been violated?

That was a dangerous word. He unthought it, and the red haze cleared away. He could see again.

"Ruth!" he shouted. "*Ruth!*"

No answer. He had known there could not be one. "Ruth!" he kept shouting to thin-aired emptiness inside the dome that had been—five short hours ago—rich with Earth air and scents, sounds and solidity: Ruth.

His gun hung by the door. It had been a joke, he remembered. Pioneers ought to keep a gun by the front door. Damn right they should! He grabbed it as he ran, stride unbroken. He tore off down the trail of the monstrous prints, past the bushes and the sandal, fifty feet more. His lungs were on fire inside him. He would have cursed in his futility, but there was no strength or breath for self-anger; not even, just now, for anger better placed. It was not even possible now to run back to the copter. He had wasted too much strength. He had to drag himself full length along the sand, catching and holding the thin concentration of lichen's oxygen at the sand surface.

Inside the copter, lungs full again, he was coasting along fifteen feet above the prints of horned three-toed feet. He had time enough, and more than he wanted, to think and to question his idiocies. As if he had forgotten where he was. At the first hint of danger they faced he went into shock. As if he were back on Earth, wrapped in her warm air, strong-armed gravity.

Ancestral memories reacting for him in moment of panic?

He sneered back at himself for that kind of excuse. The only part that applied was the single word, "panic."

He'd panicked. Okay. Don't forget it, boy. But don't let it slow you down, either. File for future reference. Take it out and examine it—later. Meantime, what counts is down there. Right now, you're just a pair of eyes. Later you may get to be arms and legs, a back, if you're lucky a gun. Right now—just eyes. And a computer.

He studied the prints. Two-footed or four? He couldn't decide—and then he saw the pattern, and it was not two or four, but three. Three? Distribute *N* pounds of weight—divided at any time on two of three feet, in prints that each dug in deeper than his own foot would, with his full weight on it. The damn thing was big. *N* pounds was too many.

That didn't make sense. What kind of Thing made prints like that on Mars? On a planet whose largest life-form was adapted to breathing air no more than two feet above ground? And even those didn't cross desert dryness. They lived in the still thinly moist and green valley of old sea bottoms.

The error was obvious. What kind of creature could make a print like a man's, on Mars? Largest *native* life-form, he had meant. So this Thing, with three-toed, three-legged stride, hard-bottomed foot digging too deep in dry sand, had a stride barely more than a man's, one meter maybe from print to print along the trail. It was not long enough to be that heavy. Not man, not Martian. Something else.

Alien.

He tried to think more, but either there were no more clues or the block was too great. Alien, from where? No way to know. What for? Where to? Why? When?

For the moment, the "when" was what counted the most. Whatever and whyever, It had Ruth with It. Was she still alive? Did she have an oxytank?

He tried to remember, aside from the door, what signs of violence, struggle or damage he'd seen in the house. He re-

membered none. The door, the robe and the slipper. That was all.

Ten minutes after the copter lifted, he came to the first rock outcroppings. For a while after that he could still follow the trail without too much trouble. The creature tended to stay on the sand-drifted crevices between hills. There were still plenty of prints clear enough to be seen from the height he had to maintain to stay clear of the jagged-edged, sand-scoured shapes of bare hilltops. But as the ground level rose, there was less and less sand between rocks to catch imprints, and it was more difficult to peer down and navigate at the same time.

Hard to say if he would be better off on the ground. He could spend hours trying wrong passages, backing and trying again, to search out the scattered prints that made the only trail now. Circling above, he could save time—maybe. Certainly, if he could stay in the air, he kept an advantage he'd never have face to face. (Face to chest? belly? thigh? No way at all to judge relative height.) Not to mention armament, general equipment. Inside the copter, he had the distilled and neatly packaged essence of Earth technology to fight for him. On foot in the hills, with whatever he could carry on his own back—?

It was obvious he had no choice. He had just noticed the time. Twilight would fall fast and dark across him in a half hour or less. Moonless, or as good as moonless, dark would follow short minutes after. The kind of cross-eyed trail-following and peak-hopping he could barely manage in sunlight would then be impossible. Find a place where he could land, then. Now, quickly, while he still could.

The copter dropped, and he found a ledge just firm and wide enough. Charles went methodically through lockers, picking and choosing, till at last he had a pile he thought he could manage, with all the essentials, in one form or other.

Searchlight, rope, hand pickaxe, knife. Pistol-grip torch,

which he thought of as a flame thrower. Plain old pistol. Extra airtank. Extra mask. Light warm blanket. Bullets, and gas for the torch. Food concentrates. Two water flasks. He climbed into his heat suit, discarded the blanket, and took her suit instead. He had thought to make a knapsack of the blanket, carrying the rest of the stuff on his back, but that was silly. He had to be able to get at whatever he needed, but fast. He got out a package of clip-back hooks and studded his suit with them, hanging himself like a grim Christmas tree inside-out: bright flame-red suit underneath; dull gray, brown and black tanks, handles, tools and weapons dangling all around.

He practiced bending over, sitting, squatting, reaching. He could climb. Okay. The weight was going to be hard to handle, but not impossible.

He added one more airtank, and one more flask. If it all got too heavy, he could leave a trail of his own behind him. At least the stuff would be nearer than here in the copter. He was half out of the hatch when he remembered it: The first aid kit.

He started into the hills with his searchlight flooding the pass at his feet just as darkness collapsed from the sky. He wondered as he stumbled forward and up—following an edge of toe here, of heel there—what else he had not thought to take.

Then the glare of light glinted off redness on rockside. A smear, that's all. Red blood. Not alien. Ruth's!

His gloved hand reached out, and the red smudged. Still wet? Impossible. In this atmosphere, the seconds they'd need to get out of sight would have dried blood. He looked closely at his gauntlet and moved forward more swiftly, with an exultation of knowledge and purpose he had not dared let himself hold until then. It was not blood. It was spilled red powder. Rouge! She was alive, able to think, to act! She knew

he would have to come after, and she was helping by leaving a trail.

He no longer followed footprints. He followed the crimson trail blazes. And wondered how far back they'd started, how much time he might have gained had he abandoned the copter sooner.

No use wondering. No use thinking back. Now it was only the next moment and the next. Was he gaining or losing? This he had to know. He was traveling at his best speed. He went faster. If he lost ground now, he had no chance. The creature was making a path as straight as the hard rockside hills would permit; It knew where It was headed. The Thing could not climb, that was clear, so It would not have gone through the hills without cause. But wherever It was headed, presumably that spot offered It some protection. He had to find It and head It off first.

He found he could go faster still. And then, suddenly, he knew he'd better slow down. It was nothing he'd seen—surely nothing he'd heard. Inside the suit hood, even such sounds as carried through the thin air were stilled. Well, then.

He opened the mask, and he did hear. Maybe it was some vibration of the Thing's tread through the rock that had warned him first. Well, he would not give himself away by the same carelessness. He knew he was very close to It now.

He moved so carefully after that, it seemed agonizingly as if he were once more crawling belly-flat. But he knew he was gaining on them. The Thing was really slow!

He was close. Fool! he thought angrily, as he switched his light off. Creep up on the Thing with a searchlight to flood the scene in advance! The suit had an infrascope in the visor. He'd have had to close it soon anyhow. Five minutes was about maximum breathing without a tank; unless you cared to drag yourself flat as he'd done earlier.

The black-light scope came on. Charles paused with a new certainty under an overhang of rock at the next bend. And saw the Thing. And his wife.

He noticed, in a detached and extremely calm way, that what happened next all happened in seconds. Maybe a minute at most. No more, because with the sharp self-awareness exploding inside him, he could count his breaths while he did all the rest.

He inhaled exactly three times—deeply, evenly—while it occurred.

Before the first breath, there was again the ice-fingered grip of fear twisting his gut, squeezing the strength and air out of him.

He inhaled then. And let the retinal image go to his brain, instead of his belly.

It was twice the height of a man, weirdly elongated, the tripod base all ropy tendon, thin and hard. The trunk—thorax?—chest?—well, whatever, shelled or spacesuited or something, but shiny-hard—bulked enormous, four feet around surely at the center. At least four. And the Thing's head was turned just far enough to the side so that Charles could see clearly that his wife's face was in the gaping, reptilian maw of the Thing.

It held her under one arm. Her feet kicked at Its side. It seemed not to notice. Her arm, with the bright metal cosmetic case clutched in her hand, swung wide, reaching to hit the canyon wall whenever it could. Her head was half into the creature's mouth, firmly held, chin and forehead, by Its enormous stretched lips.

While he drew in the first breath, he saw all this clearly and knew he dared not act in such a way as to make It bite down—from fear or anger, made no difference. Charles could not see inside the great maw. What kind of teeth, what harm had been done, what could be done, he did not know . . . and knew he could not risk. He thought through and rejected five separate plans, while his hands found the items he'd need. He drew a new breath, and his legs moved beneath him.

He could not shoot first. And he could not simply follow and learn more about the Thing. Because another image came

through from somewhere—the same eyes that watched every move of the Thing? Unlikely, but it had to be—of the gleaming column of metal too close ahead. A Thing-ship. So: no time.

He leaped, knife in hand. Pricked the creature, and jumped back.

It worked, as he'd prayed; no; as he had known, not just hoped or prayed, that it must. The Thing jumped, turned to look—and released his wife's head.

He did not waste effort in looking, but saw anyhow that her face was unharmed. He jumped again, drawing the third breath, and pricked at the arm that held her. She squirmed and pushed, exactly on time, like a part of himself—which she was—and her body was clear of his as he emptied the pistol at Its head.

He reached for the torch.

By that time he could not stop himself. He would have avoided the torch if he could. As it was he thundered at Ruth, above the explosion: "*Down!* Keep down, babe!" And the blue flame of released oxygen missed her head by a foot . . .

He carried her back to the copter with strength he had not believed he could find. Nobody pursued.

She sat up, dazed, as the lights brightened slowly, and the white wall turned serenely opaque. She looked across at Gordon, and her face glowed with pleasure.

"No sillier than mine was," she said, laughing. "Was it?"

"Not at all," Gordon said.

She sat politely, waiting.

Gordon stood up, grinned down at her, and offered his hand. "I think they must be done in there," he told her, nodding in the direction of the screenwall. "I imagine you'd like . . ." He let it trail off.

"You're a smart old thing, aren't you?" She took the hand and came to her feet. Then, on impulse, astonished at herself, she stood on tiptoe and placed a quick kiss on his cheek.

"What's more, you're a doll." She turned and ran, glad but embarrassed.

The door closed behind her. A mirrored door on the opposite wall opened, and a young man entered. Gordon greeted him warmly. "Well—what did you think?" His own enthusiasm was unmistakable.

"Outside of it being a great racket? Do they all react that way?"

"Well, not all. Matter of fact, this pair is practically classical. You don't often get a mesh like this one—you saw hers, didn't you?"

"I don't think so," the other said. "Unless it was one of the bunch you ran for us last night?"

"Could be. She worked out a sort of a junior-size Tyrannosaur. Out of Professor Challenger maybe? Future-past uncertainty, here on Earth. Had it threaten the children, and just when she was about to sacrifice herself to save them, old Charlie showed up in the nick of time to do the slaying."

The other nodded. "It's a fascinating technique," he said. "Damn glad to have this chance to see it work. One thing I don't follow—why do you show them each other's? That's pretty much against basic theory on joint therapy, isn't it?"

Gordon was smiling again. "Well," he said slowly. "This pair didn't really take the runs for therapy." He had a surprise to spring, and he was enjoying it. "You've heard about the new screening technique for colonists? You know the last expedition had only one broken couple and two psychotic collapses, out of fifty-six?"

The younger man whistled. Then he understood. "This is how you're doing it? Let them fantasy their own reactions? Well, hell. Sure! What's surprising is, nobody thought of using it before!"

"Of course not. It was right under our noses," Gordon said.

They both laughed.

"In this case," he added, "we've got everything. His sequence stressed readiness, thoughtful preparation, careful ac-

tion. You saw that. Hers was strongest on instinct, physical wisdom, that whole set. He was moved to do things he couldn't possibly do—and knows he can't, by the way—in real life, because *she* was in danger. Her stimulus was a threat to home and children. And even then, she made sure *he* did the actual dragon-slaying job." He flicked a switch. Through the wall, now, they saw Ruth and Charles, standing, holding hands, smiling and squeezing a little. That was all.

The two doctors smiled as the paleskinned, ninety-five-pound, five-foot product of slum-crowded Earth threw a proud arm around his wife's narrow shoulder, and led her out.

"Doesn't look like much of a dragon-slayer," the younger one said.

"No. But as long as he *is* . . ." He paused, looked the visitor over with care, and said, "You asked about showing them to each other? Ever think how much more therapy there might be for him in knowing she *knows* he can handle a dragon? Or for her, knowing that he really *can*?"

THE KING OF THE CITY

By Keith Laumer

I stood in the shadows and looked across at the run-down lot with the wind-blown trash packed against the wire mesh barrier fence and the yellow glare panel that said HAUG ESCORT. There was a row of city-scarred hacks parked on the cracked ramp. They hadn't suffered the indignity of a wash-job for a long time. And the two-story frame building behind them—that had once been somebody's country house —now showed no paint except the foot-high yellow letters over the office door.

Inside the office a short broad man with small eyes and yesterday's beard gnawed a cigar and looked at me.

"Portal-to-portal escort cost you two thousand C's," he said. "Guaranteed."

"Guaranteed how?" I asked.

He waved the cigar. "Guaranteed you get into the city and back out again in one piece." He studied his cigar. "If somebody don't plug you first," he added.

"How about a one-way trip?"

"My boy got to come back out, ain't he?"

I had spent my last brass ten-dollar piece on a cup of coffee eight hours before, but I had to get into the city. This was the only idea I had left.

"You've got me wrong," I said. "I'm not a customer. I want a job."

"Yeah?" He looked at me again, with a different expression,

like a guy whose new-found girl friend has just mentioned a price.

"You know Gra'nyauk?"

"Sure," I said. "I grew up here."

He asked me a few more questions, then thumbed a button centered in a ring of grime on the wall behind him. A chair scraped beyond the door; it opened and a tall bony fellow with thick wrists and an adams apple set among heavy neck tendons came in.

The man behind the desk pointed at me with his chin. "Throw him out, Lefty."

Lefty gave me a resentful look, came around the desk and reached for my collar. I leaned to the right and threw a hard left jab to the chin. He rocked back and sat down.

"I get the idea," I said. "I can make it out under my own power." I turned to the door.

"Stick around, mister. Lefty's just kind of a like test for separating the men from the boys."

"You mean I'm hired?"

He sighed. "You come at a good time. I'm short of good boys."

I helped Lefty up, then dusted off a chair and listened to a half-hour briefing on conditions in the city. They weren't good. Then I went upstairs to the chart room to wait for a call.

It was almost ten o'clock when Lefty came into the room where I was looking over the maps of the city. He jerked his head.

"Hey, you."

A weasel-faced man who had been blowing smoke in my face slid off his stool, dropped his cigarette and smeared it under his shoe.

"You," Lefty said. "The new guy."

I belted my coat and followed him down the dark stairway, and out across the littered tarmac, glistening wet under the

polyarcs, to where Haug stood talking to another man I hadn't seen before.

Haug flicked a beady glance my way, then turned to the stranger. He was a short man of about fifty with a mild expressionless face and expensive clothes.

"Mr. Stenn, this is Smith. He's your escort. You do like he tells you and he'll get you into the city and see your party and back out again in one piece."

The customer looked at me. "Considering the fee I'm paying, I sincerely hope so," he murmured.

"Smith, you and Mr. Stenn take number 16 here." Haug patted a hinge-sprung hood, painted a bilious yellow and scabbed with license medallions issued by half a dozen competing city governments.

Haug must have noticed something in Stenn's expression.

"It ain't a fancy-looking hack, but she's got full armor, heavy-duty gyros, crash-shocks, two-way music and panic gear. I ain't got a better hack in the place."

Stenn nodded, popped the hatch and got in. I climbed in the front and adjusted the seat and controls to give me a little room. When I kicked over the turbos they sounded good.

"Better tie in, Mr. Stenn," I said. "We'll take the Canada turnpike in. You can brief me on the way."

I wheeled 16 around and out under the glare-sign that read HAUG ESCORT. In the eastbound linkway I boosted her up to 90. From the way the old bus stepped off, she had at least a megahorse under the hood. Maybe Haug wasn't lying, I thought. I pressed an elbow against the power pistol strapped to my side.

I liked the feel of it there. Maybe between it and old 16 I could get there and back after all.

"My destination," Stenn said, is the Manhattan section."

That suited me perfectly. In fact, it was the first luck I'd had since I burned the uniform. I looked in the rear viewer at Stenn's face. He still wore no expression. He seemed like a

mild little man to be wanting into the cage with the tigers.

"That's pretty rough territory, Mr. Stenn," I said. He didn't answer.

"Not many tourists go there," I went on. I wanted to pry a little information from him.

"I'm a businessman," Stenn said.

I let it go at that. Maybe he knew what he was doing. For me, there was no choice. I had one slim lead, and I had to play it out to the end. I swung through the banked curves of the intermix and onto the turnpike and opened up to full throttle.

It was fifteen minutes before I saw the warning red lights ahead. Haug had told me about this. I slowed.

"Here's our first roadblock, Mr. Stenn," I said. "This is an operator named Joe Naples. All he's after is his toll. I'll handle him; you sit tight in the hack. Don't say anything, don't do anything, no matter what happens. Understand?"

"I understand," Stenn said mildly.

I pulled up. My lights splashed on the spikes of a Mark IX tank trap. I set the parking jacks and got out.

"Remember what I told you," I said. "No matter what." I walked up into the beam of the lights.

A voice spoke from off to the side.

"Douse 'em, Rube."

I went back and cut the lights. Three men sauntered out onto the highway.

"Keep the hands away from the sides, Rube."

One of the men was a head taller than the others. I couldn't see his face in the faint red light from the beacon, but I knew who he was.

"Hello, Naples," I said.

He came up to me. "You know me, Rube?"

"Sure," I said. "The first thing Haug told me was pay my respects to Mr. Naples."

Naples laughed. "You hear that, boys? They know me pretty good on the outside, ha?"

He looked at me, not laughing any more. "I don't see you before."

"My first trip."

He jerked a thumb at the hack. "Who's your trick?"

"A businessman. Name is Stenn."

"Yeah? What kind business?"

I shook my head. "We don't quiz the cash customers, Joe."

"Let's take a look." Naples moved off toward the hack, the boys at his side. I followed. Naples looked in at Stenn. Stenn sat relaxed and looked straight ahead. Naples turned away, nodded to one of his helpers. The two moved off a few yards.

The other man, a short bullet-headed thug in a grease-spatted overcoat, stood by the hack, staring in at Stenn. He took a heavy old-style automatic from his coat pocket, pulled open the door. He aimed the gun at Stenn's head and carefully squeezed the trigger.

The hammer clicked emptily.

"Ping," he said. He thrust the gun back in his pocket, kicked the door shut and went over to join Naples.

"Okay, Rube," Naples called.

I went over to him.

"I guess maybe you on the level," he said. "Standard fee. Five hundred, Old Federal notes."

I had to be careful now. I held a bland expression, reached in—slowly—took out my wallet. I extracted two hundred-C notes and held them out.

Naples looked at them, unmoving. The thug in the dirty overcoat moved up close, and suddenly swung the edge of his palm at my wrist. I was ready; I flicked my hand aside and chopped him hard at the base of the neck. He dropped.

I was still holding out the money.

"That clown isn't worthy of a place in the Naples organization," I said.

Naples looked down at the man, stirred him with his foot.

"A clown," he said. He took the money and tucked it in his shirt pocket.

"Okay, Rube," he said. "My regards to Haug."

I got in the hack and moved up to the barrier. It started up, trundled aside. Naples was bending over the man I had downed. He took the pistol from the pocket of the overcoat, jacked the action and aimed. There was a sharp crack. The overcoat flopped once. Naples smiled over at me.

"He ain't worthy a place in the Naples organization," he said.

I waved a hand vaguely and gunned off down the road.

II

The speaker in my ear hummed.

I grunted an acknowledgement and a blurred voice said, "Smith, listen. When you cross the South Radial, pick up the Midwest Feed-off. Take it easy and watch for Number Nine Station. Pull off there. Got it?"

I recognized the voice. It was Lefty, Haug's Number One boy. I didn't answer.

"What was the call?" Stenn asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Nothing."

The lights of the South Radial Intermix were in sight ahead now.

I slowed to a hundred and thought about it. My personal motives told me to keep going, my job as a paid Escort was to get my man where he wanted to go. That was tough enough, without detours. I eased back up to one-fifty, took the Intermix with gyros screaming, and curved out onto the thruway.

The speaker hummed. "What are you trying to pull, wise guy?" He sounded mad. "That was the South Radial you just passed up—"

"Yeah," I said. "That's right. Smitty takes 'em there and he brings 'em back. Don't call us, we'll call you."

There was a long hum from the speaker. "Oh, a wiseacre," it said finally. "Listen, rookie, you got a lot to learn. This guy

is bankrolled. I seen the wad when he paid Haug off. So all right, we cut you in. Now, get this . . ."

He gave me detailed instructions. When he was finished, I said, "Don't wait up for me."

I took the speaker out of my ear and dropped it into the disposal slot. We drove along quietly for quite a while.

I was beginning to recognize my surroundings. This section of the turnpike had been opened the year before I left home. Except for the lack of traffic and the dark windows along the way it hadn't changed.

I was wondering just what Lefty's next move would be when a pair of powerful beams came on from the left, then pulled onto the highway, speeding up to pace me. I rocketed past before he had made full speed. I heard a loud spang, and glass chips scattered on my shoulder. I twisted and looked. A starred hole showed in the bubble, above the rear seat.

"Duck!" I yelled. Stenn leaned over, put his head down.

The beams were gaining on me. I twisted the rear viewer, hit the I/R switch. A three-ton combat car, stripped, but still mounting twin infinite repeaters. Against that, old 16 was a kiddie car. I held my speed and tried to generate an idea. What I came up with wasn't good, but it was all I had.

A half a mile ahead there should be a level-split, one of those awkward ones that caused more than one pile-up in the first few months the turnpike was open. Maybe my playmates didn't know about it.

They were about to overtake me now. I slowed just a little, and started fading to the right. They followed me, crowding my rear wheel. I heard the spang again, twice, but nothing hit me. I was on the paved shoulder now, and could barely see the faded yellow cross-hatching that warned of the abutment that divided the pavement ahead.

I held the hack in the yellow until the last instant, then veered right and cleared the concrete barrier by a foot, hit the

downcurve at a hundred and eighty in a howl of gyros and brakes—and the thunderous impact of the combat car.

Then I was off the pavement, fighting the wheel, slamming through underbrush, then miraculously back on the hard surface and coasting to a stop in the clear.

I took a deep breath and looked back. The burning remains of the car were scattered for a quarter of a mile along the turnpike. That would have been me if I had gauged it wrong.

I looked at the canopy of the hack. Three holes, not a foot apart, right where a passenger's head would be if he were sitting upright. Stenn was unconcernedly brushing glass dust from his jacket.

"Very neat, Mr. Smith," he said. "Now shall we resume our journey?"

"Maybe it's time you leveled with me, Stenn," I said.

He raised his eyebrows at me slightly.

"When Joe Naples' boy Friday pointed the gun at your head you didn't bat an eyelash," I said.

"I believe those were your instructions," Stenn said mildly.

"Pretty good for a simple businessman. I don't see you showing any signs of the shakes now, either, after what some might call a harrowing experience."

"I have every confidence in your handling—"

"Nuts, Stenn. Those three holes are pretty well grouped, wouldn't you say? The man that put them there was hitting where he was aiming. And he was aiming for you."

"Why me?" Stenn looked almost amused.

"I thought it was a little shakedown crew, out to teach me a lesson," I said. "Until I saw where the shots were going."

Stenn looked at me thoughtfully. He reached up and took a micro-speaker from his ear.

"The twin to the one you rashly disposed of," he said. "Mr. Haug was kind enough to supply it—for a fee. I must tell you that I had a gun in my hand as we approached the South Radial Intermix. Had you accepted the invitation to turn off, I would have halted the car, shot you and gone on alone.

Happily, you chose to resist the temptation, for reasons of your own . . ." He looked at me inquiringly.

"Maybe I'm sap enough to take the job seriously," I said.

"That may possibly be true," Stenn said.

"What's your real errand here, Stenn? Frankly, I don't have time to get involved."

"Really? One wonders if you have irons in the fire, Smith. But never mind. I shan't pry. Are we going on?"

I gave him my stern penetrating look.

"Yeah," I said. "We're going on."

In twenty minutes, we were on the Inner Concourse and the polyarcs were close together, lighting the empty sweep of banked pavement. The lights of the city sparkled across the sky ahead, and gave me a ghostly touch of the old thrill of coming home.

I doused that feeling fast. After eight years there was nothing left there for me to come home to. The city had a lethal welcome for intruders; it wouldn't be smart to forget that.

I didn't see the T-Bird until his spot hit my eyes and he was beside me, crowding.

I veered and hit the brakes, with a half-baked idea of dropping back and cutting behind him, but he stayed with me. I had a fast impression of squealing metal and rubber, and then I was skidding to a stop up against the deflector rails with the T-Bird slanted across my prow. Its lid popped almost before the screech died away, and I was looking down the muzzles of two power pistols. I kept both hands on the wheel, where they could see them, and sat tight.

I wondered whose friends we had met this time.

Two men climbed out, the pistols in sight, and came up to the hack. The first one was a heavy-set Slavic type zipped into a tight G. I. weather suit. He motioned. I opened up and got out, not making any sudden movements. Stenn followed. A cold wind was whipping along the concourse, blowing a fine

misty rain hard against my cheek. The polyarcs cast black shadows on gray faces.

The smaller man moved over to Stenn and crowded him back against the hack. The Slav motioned again, and I moved over by the T-Bird. He fished my wallet out and put it in his pocket without looking at it. I heard the other man say something to Stenn, and then the sound of a blow. I turned my head slowly, so as not to excite my watchdog. Stenn was picking himself up. He started going through his pockets, showing everything to the man with the gun, then dropping it on the ground. The wind blew cards and papers along until they soaked up enough water to stick. Stenn carried a lot of paper.

The gunny said something and Stenn started pulling off his coat. He turned it inside out, and held it out. The gunny shook his head, and motioned to my Slav. He looked at me, and I tried to read his mind. I moved across toward the hack. I must have guessed right because he didn't shoot me. The Slav pocketed his gun and took the coat. Methodically, he tore the lining out, found nothing, dropped the ripped garment and kicked it aside. I shifted position, and the Slav turned and backhanded me up against the hack.

"Lay off him, Heavy," the other hood said. "Maxy didn't say nothing about this mug. He's just a Escort."

Heavy started to get his gun out again. I had an idea he was thinking about using it. Maybe that's why I did what I did. As his hand dipped into his pocket, I lunged, wrapped an arm around him and yanked out my own artillery. I held onto a handful of the weather suit and dug the pistol in hard. He stood frozen. Heavy wasn't as dumb as he looked.

His partner had backed a step, the pistol in his hand covering all of us.

"Drop it, Slim," I said. "No hard feelings, and we'll be on our way."

Stenn stood absolutely motionless. He was still wearing his mild expression.

"Not a chance, mug," the gunny said softly. No one moved.

"Even if you're ready to gun your way through your pal, I can't miss. Better settle for a draw."

"Maxy don't like draws, mister."

"Stenn," I said. "Get in the T-Bird. Head back the way we came, and don't slow down to read any billboards."

Stenn didn't move.

"Get going," I said. "Slim won't shoot."

"I employed you," Stenn said, "to take care of the heroics."

"If you've got any better ideas it's time to speak up, Stenn. This is your only out, the way I see it."

Stenn looked at the man with the gun.

"You referred to someone named 'Maxy.' Would that by any chance be Mr. Max Arena?"

Slim looked at him and thought about it.

"Could be," he said.

Stenn came slowly over to the Slav. Standing well out of the line of fire, he carefully put a hand in the loose pocket of the weather suit and brought out the pistol. I saw Slim's eyes tighten. He was having to make some tough decisions in a hurry.

Stenn moved offside, pistol in hand.

"Move away from him, Smith," he said.

I didn't know what he had in mind, but it didn't seem like the time to argue. I moved back.

"Drop your gun," he said.

I risked a glance at his mild expression.

"Are you nuts?"

"I came here to see Mr. Arena," he said. "This seems an excellent opportunity."

"Does it? I—"

"Drop it now, Smith. I won't warn you again."

I dropped it.

Slim swiveled on Stenn. He was still in an awkward spot.

"I want you to take me to Mr. Arena," Stenn said. "I have a

proposition to put before him." He lowered the gun and handed it to Heavy.

It seemed like a long time until Slim lowered his gun.

"Heavy, put him in the back seat." He motioned me ahead, watched me as he climbed in the T-Bird.

"Nice friends you got, mug," he said. The T-Bird started up, backed, and roared off toward the city. I stood under the polyarcs and watched the tail glare out of sight.

Max Arena was the man I had come to the city to find.

III

Old number 16 was canted against the deflector rail, one side shredded into curled strips of crumpled metal. I looked closer. Under the flimsy fairings, gray armor showed. Maybe there was more to Haug's best hack than met the eye. I climbed in and kicked over the starter. The turbos sounded as good as ever. I eased the gyros in; she backed off the rail with a screech of ripped metal.

I had lost my customer, but I still had wheels.

The smart thing to do now would be to head back out the turnpike to Haug's lot, turn in my badge and keep moving, south. I could give up while I was still alive. All I had to do was accept the situation.

I had a wide choice. I could sign on with the New Confeds, or the Free Texans, or any one of the other splinter republics trying to set up shop in the power vacuum. I might try to get in to one of the Enclaves and convince its Baron he needed another trained bodyguard. Or I could take a post with one of the kingpins in the city.

As a last resort I could go back and find a spot in the Naples organization. I happened to know they had a vacancy.

I was just running through mental exercises to hear myself think. I couldn't settle for the kind of world I had found when I touched planet three months back, after eight years in deep

space with Hayle's squadron. When the Interim Administration shot him for treason, I burned my uniform and disappeared. My years in the Service had given me a tough hide and a knack for staying alive; my worldly assets consisted of the clothes I stood in, my service pistol and a few souvenirs of my travels. For two months I had been scraping along on the cash I had in my pocket, buying drinks for drifters in cheap bars, looking for a hint, any lead at all, that would give me a chance to do what had to be done. Max Arena was the lead. Maybe a dud lead—but I had to find out.

The city lights loomed just a few miles away. I was wasting time sitting here; I steered the hack out into the highway and headed for them.

Apparently Lefty's influence didn't extend far beyond the South Radial. The two roadblocks I passed in the next five miles took my money, accepted my story that I was on my way to pick up a fare, said to say hello to Haug and passed me on my way.

Haug's sour yellow color scheme seemed to carry some weight with the town Organizations, too. I was well into the city, cruising along the third level Crossover, before I had any trouble. I was doing about fifty, watching where I was going and looking for the Manhattan Intermix, when a battered Gyrob fourseater trundled out across the fairway and stopped. I swerved and jumped lanes; the Gyrob backed, blocking me. I kicked my safety frame down and floorboarded the hack, steering straight for him. At the last instant he tried to pull out of the way.

He was too late.

I clipped him across his aft quarter, and caught a glimpse of the underside of the car as it stood on its nose, slammed through the deflector and over the side. Old 16 bucked and I got a good crack across the jaw from the ill-fitting frame, and then I was screeching through the Intermix and out onto the Manhattan Third level.

Up ahead, the glare panels at the top of the Blue Tower reared up half a mile into the wet night sky. It wasn't a hard address to find. Getting inside would be another matter.

I pulled up a hundred yards from the dark cave they used to call the limousine entrance and looked the situation over. The level was deserted—like the whole city seemed, from the street. But there were lights in the windows, level after level of them stretching up and away as far as you could see. There were plenty of people in the city—about ten million, even after the riots and the Food Scare and the collapse of legal government. The automated city supply system had gone on working, and the Kingpins, the big time criminals, had stepped in and set things up to suit their tastes. Life went on—but not out in the open. Not after dark.

I knew almost nothing about Arena. Judging from his employees, he was Kingpin of a prosperous outfit. The T-Bird was an expensive late model, and the two thugs handled themselves like high-priced talent. I couldn't expect to walk into his HQ without jumping a few hurdles. Maybe I should have invited myself along with Stenn and his new friends. On the other hand, there were advantages to arriving unannounced.

It was a temptation to drive in, with the hack's armor between me and any little surprises that might be waiting, but I liked the idea of staging a surprise of my own. I eased into drive and moved along to a parking ramp, swung around and down and stopped in the shadow of the retaining wall.

I set the brake and took a good look around. There was nothing in sight. Arena might have a power cannon trained on me from his bedroom window, for all I knew, but I had to get a toe into the water sometime. I shut down the turbo, and in the silence popped the lid and stepped out. The rain had stopped, and the moon showed as a bright spot on the high mist. I felt hungry and a little bit unreal, as though this were happening to somebody else.

I moved over to the side of the parking slab, clambered over the deflector rail and studied the shadows under the third level roadway. I could barely make out the catwalks and service ways. I was wondering whether to pull off my hard-soled shoes for the climb when I heard footsteps, close. I gauged the distance to the hack, and saw I couldn't make it. I got back over the rail and waited.

He came into sight, rangy, shock-haired and preternaturally thin in tight traditional dress.

When he got close I saw that he was young, in his early twenties at most. He would be carrying a knife.

"Hey, Mister," he whined. "Got a cigarette?"

"Sure, young fellow," I said, sounding a little nervous. I threw in a shaky laugh to help build the picture. I took a cigarette from a pack, put the pack back in my pocket, held the weed out. He strutted up to me, reached out and flipped the cigarette from my fingers. I edged back and used the laugh again.

"Hey, he liked that," the punk whined. "He thinks that's funny. He got a sense of humor."

"Heh, heh," I said. "Just out getting a little air."

"Gimme another cigarette, funny man."

I took the pack out, watching. I got out a cigarette and held it gingerly, arm bent. As he reached for it, I drew back. He snatched for it. That put him in position.

I dropped the pack, clenched my two hands together, ducked down and brought them up hard under his chin. He backflipped, rolled over and started crawling.

I let him go.

I went over the rail without stopping to think it over and crossed the girder to the catwalk that ran under the boulevard above. I groped my way along to where the service way branched off for the Blue Tower, then stopped and looked up. A strip of luminous sky showed between the third level and the facade of the building. Anybody watching from the right spot would see me cross, walking on the narrow footway. It

was a chance I'd have to take. I started to move out, and heard running feet. I froze.

The feet slid to a stop on the level above, a few yards away.

"What's up, Crackers?" somebody growled.

"The mark sapped me down."

That was interesting. I had been spotted and the punk had been sent to welcome me. Now I knew where I stood. The opposition had made their first mistake.

"He was starting to cross under when I spot him," Crackers went on, breathing heavily. "He saps me and I see I can't handle him and I go for help."

Someone answered in a guttural whisper. Crackers lowered his voice. It wouldn't take long now for reinforcements to arrive and flush me out. I edged farther and chanced a look. I saw two heads outlined above. They didn't seem to be looking my way, so I started across, walking silently toward a narrow loading platform with a wide door opening from it.

Below me, a lone light reflected from the wet pavement of the second level, fifty feet down; the blank wall of the Blue Tower dropped past it sheer to the glistening gutters at ground level. Then I was on the platform and trying the door.

It didn't open.

It was what I should have expected. Standing in the full light from the glare panel above the entry, I felt as exposed as a fandancer's navel. There was no time to consider alternatives. I grabbed my power pistol, flipped it to beam fire and stood aside with an arm across my face. I gave the latch a blast, then kicked the door hard. It was solid as a rock. Behind and above me, I heard Crackers yell.

I beamed the lock again, tiny droplets of molten metal spattering like needles against my face and hand. The door held.

"Drop it and lift 'em, mug," a deep voice yelled. I twisted to look up at the silhouettes against the deflector rail. I rec-

ognized the Slavic face of the man called Heavy. So he could talk after all.

"You're under my iron, mug," he called. "Freeze or I'll burn you."

I believed him, but I had set something in motion that couldn't stop now. There was nothing to go back to; the only direction for me was on the way I was headed—deeper into trouble. I was tired of being the mouse in a cat's game. I had taken the initiative and I was keeping it.

I turned, set the power pistol at full aperture, and poured it to the armored door. Searing heat reflected from the barrier, smoke boiled, metal melted and ran. Through the stink of burning steel, I smelled scorched hair—and felt heat rake the back of my neck and hands. Heavy was beaming me at wide aperture, but the range was just too far for a fast kill. The door sagged and fell in. I jumped through the glowing opening, hit the floor and rolled to damp out my smouldering coat.

I got to my feet. There was no time now to stop and feel the pain of my burns. They would expect me to go up—so I would go down. The Blue Tower covered four city blocks and was four hundred stories high. There was plenty of room in it for a man to lose himself.

I ran along the corridor, found a continuous service belt and hopped on, lay flat, rode it through the slot. I came out into the light of the service corridor below, my gun ready, then down and around again. I saw no one.

It took ten minutes to cover the eighteen floors down to the sub-basement. I rolled off the belt and looked around.

The whole space was packed with automatics; the Blue Tower was a self-sufficient city in itself. I recognized generators, heat pumps, air plants. None of them were operating. The city services were all still functioning, apparently. What it would be like in another ten or twenty years of anarchy was anybody's guess. But when the city systems failed the Blue Tower could go on on its own.

Glare panels lit the aisles dimly. I prowled along looking for an elevator bank. The first one I found indicated the car at the hundred-eightieth floor. I went on, found another indicating the twentieth. While I watched, the indicator moved, started down. I was getting ready to duck when it stopped at the fifth. I waited; it didn't move.

I went around to the side of the bank, found the master switch. I went back, punched for the car. When the door whooshed open, I threw the switch.

I had to work fast now. I stepped into the dark car, reached up and slid open the access panel in the top, then jumped, caught the edge and pulled myself up. The glare panels inside the shaft showed me the pony power pack on top of the car, used by repairmen and inspectors when the main power was off. I lit a permatch to read the fine print on the panel. I was in luck. It was a through car to the four-hundredth. I pushed a couple of buttons, and the car started up. I lay flat behind the machinery.

As the car passed the third floor feet came into view; two men stood beyond the transparent door, guns in their hands, watching the car come up. They didn't see me. One of them thumbed the button frantically. The car kept going.

There were men at almost every floor now. I went on up, passed the hundredth floor, the one-fiftieth, and kept going. I began to feel almost safe—for the moment.

I was gambling now on what little I knew of the Blue Tower from the old days when all the biggest names congregated there. The top floor was a lavish apartment that had been occupied by a retired fleet admiral, a Vice-President and a uranium millionaire, in turn. If I knew anything about Kingpins, that's where Max Arena would hang his hat.

The elevator was slow. Lying there I had time to start thinking about my burned hide. My scalp was hit worst, and then my hands; and my shoulders were sticking to the charred

coat. I had been travelling on adrenalin since Heavy had beamed me, and now the reaction was starting to hit.

It would have to wait; I had work to do.

Just below the three hundred and ninety-eighth floor I punched the button and the car stopped. I stood up, feeling dizzy. I grabbed for the rungs on the wall, hung on. The wall of the shaft seemed to sway . . . back . . .

Sure, I told myself. The top of the building sways fifteen feet in a high wind. Why shouldn't I feel it? I dismissed the thought that it was dead calm outside now, and started up the ladder.

It was a hard climb. I hung on tight, and concentrated on moving one hand at a time. The collar of my coat rasped my raw neck. I passed up the 398th and 9th—and rammed my head smack against a dead end. No service entry to the penthouse. I backed down to the 399th.

I found the lever and eased the door open, then waited, gun in hand. Nothing happened. I couldn't wait any longer. I pushed the door wide, stepped off into the hall. Still nobody in sight, but I could hear voices. To my left a discreet stair carpeted in violet velvet eased up in a gentle curve. I didn't hesitate; I went up.

The door at the top was an austere slab of bleached teak. I tried the polished brass lever; the door swung open silently, and I stepped across the threshold and was looking across a plain of honey-colored down at a man sitting relaxed in a soft chair of pale leather.

He waved a hand cheerfully. "Come on in," he said.

IV

Max Arena was a broad-shouldered six-footer, with clean-shaven blue jaws, coarse gray-flecked black hair brushed back from a high forehead, a deeper tan than was natural for the city in November, and very white teeth. He was showing them

now in a smile. He waved a hand toward a chair, not even glancing at the gun in my hand. I admired the twinkle of light on the polished barrel of a Norge stunner at his elbow and decided to ignore it too.

"I been following your progress with considerable interest," Arena said genially. "The boys had orders not to shoot. I guess Luvitch sort of lost his head."

"It's nothing," I said, "that a little skin graft won't clear up in a year or so."

"Don't feel bad. You're the first guy ever made it in here under his own steam without an invitation."

"And with a gun in his hand," I said.

"We won't need guns," he said. "Not right away."

I went over to one of the big soft chairs and sat down, put the gun in my lap.

"Why didn't you shoot as I came in?"

Arena jiggled his foot. "I like your style," he said. "You handled Heavy real good. He's supposed to be my toughest boy."

"What about the combat car? More friends of yours?"

"Nah," he said, chuckling easily. "Some Jersey boys heard I had a caller. They figured to knock him off on general principles. A nifty." He stopped laughing. "The Gyrob was mine; a remoted job. Nice piece of equipment. You cost me real dough tonight."

"Gee," I said. "That's tough."

"And besides," he said, "I know who you are."

I waited. He leaned over and picked something off the table. It was my wallet.

"I used to be in the Navy myself. Academy man, believe it or not. Almost, anyway. Kicked out three weeks before graduation. A frame. Well, practically a frame; there was plenty of guys doing what I was doing."

"That where you learned to talk like a hood?"

For a second Arena almost didn't smile.

"I am perfectly capable of expressing myself like a little

gentleman, when I feel so inclined," he said, "but I say to hell with it."

"You must have been before my time," I said.

"A year or two. And I was using a different name then. But that wasn't my only hitch with the Service. When the Trouble started, I enlisted. I wanted some action. When the Navy found out they had a qualified Power Section man on their hands, I went up fast. Within fourteen months I was a J. G. How about that?"

"Very commendable."

"So that's how I knew about the trick I. D. under the emulsion on the snapshot. You should have ditched it, Maclamore. Or should I say Captain Maclamore?"

My mouth opened, but I couldn't think of a snappy answer to that one. I was in trouble. I had meant to play it by ear once I reached Arena to get the information I needed. That was out now. He knew me. He had topped my aces before I played them.

Suddenly Arena was serious. "You came to the right man, Maclamore. You heard I had one of your buddies here, right? I let the word leak; I thought it might bring more of you in. I was lucky to get Admiral Hayle's deputy."

"What do you want with me?"

Arena leaned forward. "There were eight of you. Hayle and his aide, Wolfgang, were shot when they wouldn't spill to the Provisional Government—or whatever that mob calls itself. Margan got himself killed in some kind of tangle near Denver. The other four boys pulled a fast one and ducked out with the scout you guys came back in. They were riding dry tanks—the scout had maybe thirty ton/hours fuel aboard—so they haven't left the planet. That leaves you stranded. With six sets of Federal law looking for you. Right?"

"I can't argue with what's in the newspapers," I said.

"Well, I don't know. I got a couple newspapers. But here's where I smell a deal, Maclamore. You want to know where

that scout boat is. Played right, you figure you got a good chance of a raid on an arsenal or a power plant to pick up a few slugs of the heavy stuff; then you hightail out, join up with the rest of the squadron and, with the ordnance you pack, you can sit off and dictate the next move." Arena leaned back and took a deep breath. His eyes didn't leave me.

"Okay. I got one of you here. I found out something from him. He gave me enough I know you boys got something up your sleeve. But he don't have the whole picture. I need more info. You can give it to me. If I like what I hear, I'm in a position to help—like, for example, with the fuel problem. And you cut me in for half. Fair enough?"

"Who is it you've got?"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"What did he tell you?"

"Not enough. What was Hayle holding out? You birds found something out there. What was it?"

"We found a few artifacts on Mars," I said. "Not Martian in origin; visitors. We surveyed—"

"Don't string me, Maclamore. I'm willing to give you a fair deal, but if you make it tough for me—"

"How do you know I haven't got a detonator buried under my left ear," I said. "You can't pry information out of me, Arena."

"I think you want to live, Maclamore. I think you got something you want to live for. I want a piece of it."

"I can make a deal with you, Arena," I said. "Return me and my shipmate to our scout boat. Fuel us up. You might throw in two qualified men to help handle the ship—minus their blackjacks, preferably—then clear out. We'll handle the rest. And I'll remember, with gratitude."

Arena was silent for a long moment.

"Yeah, I could do that, Maclamore," he said finally. "But I won't. Max Arena is not a guy to pick up the crumbs—or wait around for handouts. I want in. All the way in."

"This time you'll have to settle for what you can get, Arena." I put the gun away and stood up.

I had a feeling I would have to put it over now or not at all.

"The rest of the squadron is still out there. If we don't show, they'll carry on alone. They're supplied for a century's operation. They don't need us."

That was true up to a point. The squadron had everything —except fuel.

"You figure you got it made if you can get your hands on that scout boat," Arena said. "You figure to pick up fuel pretty easy by knocking off say the Lackawanna Pile."

"It shouldn't be too tough; a fleet boat of the Navy packs a wallop."

Arena tapped his teeth with a slim paper-cutter.

"You're worried your outfit will wind up Max Arena's private Navy, right? I'll tell you something. You think I'm sitting on top of the world, huh? I own this town, and everybody in it. All the luxury and fancy dinners and women I can use. And you know what? I'm bored."

"And you think running the Navy might be diverting?"

"Call it whatever you want to. There's something big going on out there, and I don't plan to be left out."

"Arena, when I clear atmosphere, we'll talk. Take it or leave it."

The smile was gone now. Arena looked at me, rubbing a finger along his blue cheek.

"Suppose I was to tell you I know where your other three boys are, Maclamore?"

"Do you?" I said.

"And the boat," Arena said. "The works."

"If you've got them here, I want to see them, Arena. If not, don't waste my time."

"I haven't exactly got 'em here, Maclamore. But I know a guy that knows where they are."

"Yeah," I said.

Arena looked mad. "Okay, I'll give it to you, Maclamore. I

got a partner in this deal. Between us we got plenty. But we need what you got, too."

"I've made my offer, Arena. It stands."

"Have I got your word on that, Maclamore?" He stood up and came over to stand before me. "The old Academy word. You wouldn't break that, would you, Maclamore?"

"I'll do what I said."

Arena walked to his desk, a massive boulder of Jadeite, cleaved and polished to a mirror surface. He thumbed a key.

"Send him in here," he said.

I waited. Arena sat down and looked across at me.

Thirty seconds passed and then the door opened and Stenn walked in.

Stenn glanced at me.

"Well," he said. "Mr. Smith."

"The Smith routine is just a gag," Arena said. "His name is—Maclamore."

For an instant, I thought I saw a flash of expression on Stenn's face. He crossed the room and sat down.

"Well," he said. "A very rational move, your coming here. I trust you struck a profitable bargain?" He looked hard at me, and this time there was expression. Hate, I would call it, offhand.

"Not much of a deal at that, Stenn," Arena said. "The captain is a tough nut to crack. He wants my help with no strings attached. I think I'm going to buy it."

"How much information has he given you?"

Arena laughed. "Nothing," he said. "Max Arena going for a deal like that. Funny, huh? But that's the way the fall-out fogs 'em."

"And what have you arranged?"

"I turn him loose, him and Williams. I figure you'll go along, Stenn, and let him have the three guys you got. Williams will tell him where the scout boat is, so there's no percentage in your holding out."

"What else?"

"What else is there?" Arena spread his hands. "They pick up the boat, fuel up—someplace—and they're off. And the captain here gives me the old Academy word he cuts me in, once he's clear."

There was a long silence. Arena smiled comfortably; Stenn sat calmly, looking at each of us in turn. I crossed my fingers and tried to look bored.

"Very well," Stenn said. "I seem to be presented with a *fait accompli* . . ."

I let a long breath out. I was going to make it . . .

". . . But I would suggest that before committing yourself, you take the precaution of searching Mr. Maclamore's person. One never knows."

I could feel the look on my face. So could Arena.

"So," he said. "Another nifty." He didn't seem to move, but the stunner was in his hand. He wasn't smiling now, and the stunner caught me easily.

V

The lights came on, and I blinked, looking around the room.

My mementos didn't look like much, resting in the center of Arena's polished half-acre of desk top. The information was stored in the five tiny rods, less than an inch long, and the projector was a flat polyhedron the size of a pillbox. But the information they contained was worth more than all the treasure sunk in all the seas.

"This is merely a small sample," Stenn said. "The star surveys are said to be unbelievably complete. They represent a mapping task which would require a thousand years."

"The angles," Arena said. "Just figuring the angles will take plenty time."

"And this is what you almost let him walk out with," Stenn said.

Arena gave me a slashing look.

"Don't let your indignation run away with you, Arena," Stenn said. "I don't think you remembered to mention the fuel situation to Mr. Maclamore, did you?"

Arena turned to Stenn, looming over the smaller man. "Maybe you better button your lip," he said quietly. "I don't like the way you use it."

"Afraid I'll lower you in the gentleman's esteem?" Stenn said. He looked Arena in the eye.

"Nuts to the gentleman's esteem," Arena said.

"You thought you'd squeeze me out, Arena," Stenn said. "You didn't need me any more. You intended to let Maclamore and Williams go and have them followed. There was no danger of an escape, since you knew they'd find no fuel."

He turned to me. "During your years in space, Mr. Maclamore, technology moved on. And politics as well. Power fuels could be used to construct bombs. Ergo, all stations were converted for short half-life secondaries, and the primary materials stored at Fort Knox. You would have found yourself fuelless and therefore helpless. Mr. Arena would have arrived soon thereafter to seize the scout boat."

"What would he want with the boat without fuel?" I asked.

"Mr. Arena was foresighted enough to stock up some years ago," Stenn said. "I understand he has enough metal hoarded to power your entire squadron for an indefinite time."

"Why tell this guy that?" Arena asked. "Kick him to hell out of here and let's get busy. You gab too much."

"I see that I'm tacitly reinstated as a partner," Stenn said. "Most gratifying."

"Max Arena is no welcher," Arena said. "You tipped me to the tapes, so you're in."

"Besides which you perhaps sense that I have other valuable contributions to make."

"I figure you to pull your weight."

"What are your plans for Mr. Maclamore?"

"I told you. Kick him out. He'll never wise up and cooperate with us."

"First, you'd better ask him a few more questions."

"Why? So he'll blow his head off and mess up my rug, like . . ." Arena stopped. "You won't get anything out of him."

"A man of his type has a strong aversion to suicide. He won't die to protect trivial information. And if he does—we'll know there's something important being held out."

"I don't like messy stuff," Arena said.

"I'll be most careful," Stenn said. "Get me some men in here to secure him to a chair, and we'll have a nice long chat with him."

"No messy stuff," Arena repeated. He crossed to his desk, thumbed a lever and spoke to someone outside.

Stenn was standing in front of me.

"Let him think he's pumping you," he hissed.

"Find out where his fuel is stored. I'm on your side." Then Arena was coming back, and Stenn was looking at me indifferently.

Arena had overcome his aversion to messy stuff sufficiently to hit me in the mouth now and then during the past few hours. It made talking painful, but I kept at it.

"How do I know you have Williams?" I said.

Arena crossed to his desk, took out a defaced snapshot.

"Here's his I. D." he said. "Take a look." He tossed it over. Stenn held it up.

"Let me talk to him."

"For what?"

"See how he feels about it," I mumbled. I was having trouble staying awake. I hadn't seen a bed for three days. It was hard to remember what information I was supposed to get from Arena.

"He'll join in if you do," Arena said. "Give up. Don't fight. Let it happen."

"You say you've got fuel. You're a liar. You've got no fuel."

"I got plenty fuel, wise guy," Arena yelled. He was tired too.

"Lousy crook," I said. "Can't even cheat a little without getting caught at it."

"Who's caught now, swabbie?" Arena was getting mad. That suited me.

"You're a lousy liar, Arena. You can't hide hot metal. Even Stenn ought to know that."

"What else was in the cache, Maclamore?" Stenn asked—for the hundredth time. He slapped me—also for the hundredth time. It jarred me and stung. It was the last straw. If Stenn was acting, I'd help him along. I lunged against the wires, swung a foot and caught him under the ribs. He oofed and fell off his chair.

"Don't push me any farther, you small-time chiselers," I yelled. "You've got nothing but a cast brass gall to offer. There's no hole deep enough to hide out power metal, even if a dumb slob like you thought of it."

"Dumb slob?" Arena barked. "You think a dumb slob could have built the organization I did, put this town in his hip pocket? I started stock-piling metal five years ago—a year before the ban. No hole deep enough, huh? It don't need to be so deep when it's got two feet of lead shielding over it."

"So you smuggled a few tons of lead into the Public Library and filed it under Little Bo Peep."

"The two feet was there ahead of me, wisenheimer. Remember the Polaris sub that used to be drydocked at Norfolk for the tourists to rubberneck?"

"Decommissioned and sold for scrap," I said. "Years ago."

"But not scrapped. Rusted in a scrapyard for five years. Then I bought her—beefed up her shielding—loaded her and sank her in ten fathoms of water in Cartwright Bay."

"That," Stenn said, "is the information we need."

Arena whirled. Stenn was still sitting on the floor. He had a

palm gun in his hand, and it was pointed at the monogram on Arena's silk shirt.

"A cross," Arena said. "A lousy cross . . ."

"Move back, Arena." Stenn got to his feet, eyes on Arena.

"Where'd you have the stinger stashed?"

"In my hand. Stop there."

Stenn moved over to me. Eyes on Arena, he reached for the twisted ends of wire, started loosening them.

"I don't want to be nosey," I said. "But just where the hell do you fit into this, Stenn?"

"Naval Intelligence," Stenn said.

Arena cursed. "I knew that name should have rung a bell. Vice Admiral Stenn. The papers said you got yours when the Navy was purged."

"A few of us eluded the net."

Arena heaved a sigh.

"Well, fellows," he said—and jumped.

Stenn's shot went wild, and Arena left-hooked him down behind the chair. As he followed, Stenn came up fast, landed a hard left, followed up, drove Arena back. I yanked at my wires. Almost—

Then Arena, a foot taller, hammered a brutal left-right, and Stenn sagged. Carefully Arena aimed a right cross to the jaw. Stenn dropped.

Arena wiped an arm across his face.

"The little man tried, Mister. Let's give him that."

He walked past my chair, stooped for Stenn's gun. I heaved, slammed against him, and the light chair collapsed as we went over. Arena landed a kick, then I was on my feet, shaking a slat loose from the dangling wire. Arena stepped in, threw a whistling right. I ducked it, landed a hard punch to the midriff, another on the jaw. Arena backed, bent over but still strong. I couldn't let him rest. I was after him, took two in the face, ducked a haymaker that left him wide open just long enough for me to put everything I had in an uppercut that

sent him back across his fancy desk. He sprawled, then slid onto the floor.

I went to him, kicked him lightly in the ribs.

"Where's Williams," I said. I kept kicking and asking. After five tries, Arena shook his head and tried to sit up. I put a foot in his face and he relaxed. I asked him again.

"You didn't learn this kind of tactics at the Academy," Arena whined.

"It's the times," I said. "They have a coarsening effect."

"Williams was a fancy-pants," Arena said. "No guts. He pulled the stopper."

"Talk plainer," I said, and kicked him again, hard—but I knew what he meant.

"Blew his lousy head off," Arena yelled. "I gassed him and tried scop on him. He blew. He was out cold, and he blew."

"Yeah," I said. "Hypnotics will trigger it."

"Fancy goddam wiring job," Arena muttered, wiping blood from his face.

I got the wire and trussed Arena up. I had to clip him twice before I finished. I went through his pockets, looked at things, recovered my souvenirs. I went over to Stenn. He was breathing.

Arena was watching. "He's okay, for crissake," he said. "What kind of punch you think I got?"

I hoisted Stenn onto my shoulder.

"So long, Arena," I said. "I don't know why I don't blow your brains out. Maybe it's that Navy Cross citation in your wallet."

"Listen," Arena said. "Take me with you."

"A swell idea," I said. "I'll pick up a couple of tarantulas, too."

"You're trying for the hack, right?"

"Sure. What else?"

"The roof," he said. "I got six, eight rotos on the roof. One high-speed job. You'll never make the hack."

"Why tell me?"

"I got eight hundred gun boys in this building alone. They know you're here. The hack is watched, the whole route. You can't get through."

"What do you care?"

"If the boys bust in here after a while and find me like this . . . They'll bury me with the wires still on, Maclamore."

"How do I get to the roof?"

He told me. I went to the right corner, pushed the right spot, and a panel slid aside. I looked back at Arena.

"I'll make a good sailor, Maclamore," he said.

"Don't crawl, Arena," I said. I went up the short stair, came out onto a block-square pad.

Arena was right about the rotos. Eight of them. I picked the four-place Cad, and got Stenn tied in. He was coming to, muttering. He was still fighting Arena, he thought.

". . . I'll hold . . . you . . . get out . . ."

"Take it easy, Stenn," I said. "Nothing can touch this bus. Where's the boat?" I shook him. "Where's the boat, Stenn?"

He came around long enough to tell me. It wasn't far—less than an hour's run.

"Stand by, Admiral," I said. "I'll be right back."

"Where . . . you . . ."

"We need every good man we can get," I said. "And I think I know a guy that wants to join the Navy."

EPILOGUE

Admiral Stenn turned away from the communicator screen.

"I think we'd be justified in announcing victory now, Commodore." As usual, he sounded like a professor of diction, but he was wearing a big grin.

"Whatever you say, chief," I said, with an even sappier smile.

I made the official announcement that a provisional Con-

gress had accepted the resignations of all claims by former office holders, and that new elections would be underway in a week.

I switched over to Power Section. The NCO in charge threw me a snappy highball. Damned if he wasn't grinning too.

"I guess we showed 'em who's got the muscle, Commodore," he said.

"Your firepower demonstration was potent, Max," I said. "You must have stayed up nights studying the tapes."

"We've hardly scratched the surface yet," he said.

"I'll be crossing back to *Alaska* now, Mac," Stenn said.

I watched him move across the half-mile void to the flagship. Five minutes later the patrol detail broke away to take up surveillance orbits. They would be getting all the shore leave for the next few years, but I was glad my squadron had been detailed to go with the flagship on the Deep Space patrol. I wanted to be there when we followed those star surveys back to where their makers came from. Stenn wasn't the man to waste time, either. He'd be getting under way any minute. It was time to give my orders. I flipped the communicator key to the squadron link-up.

"Escort Commander to Escort," I said. "Now hear this . . ."

THE BEAT CLUSTER

By Fritz Leiber

When the eviction order arrived, Fats Jordan was hanging in the center of the Big Glass Balloon, hugging his guitar to his massive black belly above his purple shorts.

The Big Igloo, as the large living-Globe was more often called, was not really made of glass. It was sealingsilk, a cheap flexible material almost as transparent as fused silica and ten thousand times tougher—quite tough enough to hold a breathable pressure of air in the hard vacuum of space.

Beyond the spherical wall loomed the other and somewhat smaller balloons of the Beat Cluster, connected to each other and to the Big Igloo by three-foot-diameter cylindrical tunnels of triple-strength tinted sealingsilk. In them floated or swam about an assemblage of persons of both sexes in informal dress and undress and engaged in activities suitable to freefall: sleeping, sunbathing, algae tending ("rocking" spongy cradles of water, fertilizer and the green scummy "guk"), yeast culture (a rather similar business), reading, studying, arguing, stargazing, meditation, space-squash (played inside the globular court of a stripped balloon), dancing, artistic creation in numerous media and the production of sweet sound (few musical instruments except the piano depend in any way on gravity).

Attached to the Beat Cluster by two somewhat larger sealingsilk tunnels and blocking off a good eighth of the inky, star-speckled sky, was the vast trim aluminum bulk of Re-

search Satellite One, dazzling now in the untempered sunlight.

It was mostly this sunlight reflected by the parent satellite, however, that now illuminated Fats Jordan and the other "floaters" of the Beat Cluster. A huge sun-quilt was untidily spread (staying approximately where it was put, like all objects in freefall) against most of the inside of the Big Igloo away from the satellite. The sun-quilt was a patchwork of colors and materials on the inward side, but silvered on the outward side, as turned-over edges and corners showed. Similar "Hollywood Blankets" protected the other igloos from the undesirable heating effects of too much sunlight and, of course, blocked off the sun's disk from view.

Fats, acting as Big Daddy of the Space Beats, received the eviction order with thoughtful sadness.

"So we all of us gotta go down *there*?"

He jerked a thumb at the Earth, which looked about as big as a basketball held at arms-length, poised midway between the different silvers of the sun-quilt margin and the satellite. Dirty old Terra was in half phase: wavery blues and browns toward the sun, black away from it except for the tiny nebulous glows of a few big cities.

"That is correct," the proctor of the new Resident Civilian Administrator replied through thin lips. The new proctor was a lean man in silvery gray blouse, Bermuda shorts and sock-assins. His hair was precision clipped—a quarter-inch blond lawn. He looked almost unbearably neat and hygienic contrasted with the sloppy long-haired floaters around him. He almost added, "and high time, too," but he remembered that the Administrator had enjoined him to be tactful—"firm, but tactful." He did not take this suggestion as including his nose, which had been wrinkled ever since he had entered the igloos. It was all he could do not to hold it shut with his fingers. Between the overcrowding and the loathsome Chinese gardening, the Beat Cluster *stank*.

And it was dirty. Even the satellite's precipitrons, working over the air withdrawn from the Beat Cluster via the exhaust tunnel, couldn't keep pace with the new dust. Here and there a film of dirt on the sealingsilk blurred the starfields. And once the proctor thought he saw the film *crawl.*

Furthermore, at the moment Fats Jordan was upside-down to the proctor, which added to the latter's sense of the unfitness of things. Really, he thought, these beat types were the curse of space. The sooner they were out of it the better.

"Man," Fats said mournfully, "I never thought they were going to enforce those old orders."

"The new Administrator has made it his first official act," the proctor said, smiling leanly. He went on, "The supply rocket was due to make the down-jump empty this morning, but the Administrator is holding it. There is room for fifty of your people. We will expect that first contingent at the boarding tube an hour before nightfall."

Fats shook his head mournfully and said, "Gonna be a pang, leavin' space."

His remark was taken up and echoed by various individuals spotted about in the Big Igloo.

"It's going to be a dark time," said Knave Grayson, merchant spaceman and sun-worshipper. Red beard and sheathknife at his belt made him look like a pirate. "Do you realize the nights average twelve hours down there instead of two? And there are days when you never see Sol?"

"Gravity yoga will be a trial after freefall yoga," Guru Ishpingham opined, shifting from padmasana to a position that put his knees behind his ears in a fashion that made the proctor look away. The tall, though presently much folded and intertwined, Briton was as thin as Fats Jordan was stout. (In space the number of thins and fats tends to increase sharply, as neither overweight nor under-musculature carries the penalties it does on the surface of a planet.)

"And mobiles will be trivial after space stabiles," Erica

Janes threw under her shoulder. The husky sculptress had just put the finishing touches to one of her three-dimensional free montages—an arrangement of gold, blue and red balls—and was snapping a stereophoto of it. "What really hurts," she added, "is that our kids will have to try to comprehend Newton's Three Laws of Motion in an environment limited by a gravity field. Elementary physics should never be taught anywhere except in freefall."

"No more space diving, no more water sculpture, no more vacuum chemistry," chanted the Brain, fourteen-year-old fugitive from a brilliant but much broken home down below.

"No more space pong, no more space pool," chimed in the Brainess, his sister. (Space pool, and likewise billiards, is played on the inner surface of a stripped balloon. The balls, when properly cued, follow it by reason of their slight centrifugal force.)

"Ah well, we all knew this bubble would someday burst," Gussy Friml summed up, pinwheeling lazily in her black leotards. (There is something particularly beautiful about girls in space, where gravity doesn't tug at their curves. Even fat folk don't sag in freefall. Luscious curves become truly remarkable.)

"*Yes!*" Knave Grayson agreed savagely. He'd seemed lost in brooding since his first remarks. Now as if he'd abruptly reached conclusions, he whipped out his knife and drove it through the taut sealingsilk at his elbow.

The proctor knew he shouldn't have winced so convulsively. There was only the briefest whistle of escaping air before the edge-tension in the sealingsilk closed the hole with an audible *snap*.

Knave smiled wickedly at the proctor. "Just testing," he explained. "I knew a roustabout who lost a foot stepping through sealingsilk. Edge-tension cut it off clean at the ankle. The foot's still orbiting around the satellite, in a brown boot

with needle-sharp hobnails. This is one spot where a boy's got to remember not to put his finger in the dike."

At that moment Fats Jordan, who'd seemed lost in brooding too, struck a chilling but authoritative chord on his guitar.

"Gonna be a *pang*
"Leavin' space," (he sang)
"Gonna be a *pang!*"

The proctor couldn't help wincing again. "That's all very well," he said sharply, "and I'm glad you're taking this realistically. But hadn't you better be getting a move on?"

Fats Jordan paused with his hand above the strings. "How do you mean, Mister Proctor?" he asked.

"I mean getting your first fifty ready for the down jump!"

"Oh, *that*," Fats said and paused reflectively. "Well, now, Mr. Proctor, *that's* going to take a little time."

The proctor snorted. "Two hours!" he said sharply and, grabbing at the nylon line he'd had the foresight to trail into the Beat Cluster behind him (rather like Theseus venturing into the Minotaur's probably equally smelly labyrinth), he swiftly made his way out of the Big Igloo, hand over hand, by way of the green tunnel.

The Brainess giggled. Fats frowned at her solemnly. The giggling was cut off. To cover her embarrassment the Brainess began to hum the tune to one of her semi-private songs:

"Eskimos of space are we
"In our igloos falling free.
"We are space's Esquimaux,
"Fearless vacuum-chewing hawks."

Fats tossed Gussy his guitar, which set him spinning very slowly. As he rotated, precessing a little, he ticked off points to his comrades on his stubby, ripe-banana-clustered fingers.

"Somebody gonna have to tell the research boys we're callin' off the art show an' the ballet an' terminatin' jazz Fridays. Likewise the Great Books course an' Saturday poker. Might as

well inform our friends of Edison and Convair at the same time that they're gonna have to hold the 3D chess and 3D go tournaments at their place, unless they can get the new Administrator to donate them our quarters when we leave—which I doubt. I imagine he'll tote the Cluster off a ways and use the igloos for target practice. With the self-sealin' they should hold shape a long time.

"But don't exactly tell the research boys when we're goin' or why. Play it mysterioso.

"Meanwhile the gals gotta start sewin' us some ground clothes. Warm *and* decent. And we all gotta get our papers ready for the customs men, though I'm afraid most of us ain't kept nothin' but Davis passports. Heck, some of you are probably here on Nansen passports.

"An' we better pool our credits to buy wheelchairs and dollies groundside for such of us as are gonna need 'em." Fats looked back and forth dolefully from Guru Ishpingham's interwoven emaciation to his own hyper-portliness.

Meanwhile a space-diver had approached the Big Igloo from the direction of the satellite, entered the folds of a limp blister, zipped it shut behind him and unzipped the slit leading inside. The blister filled with a dull *pop* and the diver pushed inside through the lips. With a sharp effort he zipped them shut behind him, then threw back his helmet.

"Condition Red!" he cried. "The new Administrator's planning to ship us all groundside! I got it straight from the Police Chief. The new A's taking those old deportation orders seriously and he's holding the—"

"We know all about that, Trace Davis," Fats interrupted him. "The new A's proctor's been here."

"Well, what are you going to *do* about it?" the other demanded.

"Nothin'," Fats serenely informed the flushed and shock-headed diver. "We're complyin'. You, Trace—" he pointed a finger—"get out of that suit. We're auctionin' it off 'long with

all the rest of our unworldly goods. The research boys'll be eager to bid on it. For fun-diving our spacesuits are the pinnacle."

A carrot-topped head thrust out of the blue tunnel. "Hey, Fats, we're broadcasting," its freckled owner called accusingly. "You're on in thirty seconds!"

"Baby, I clean forgot," Fats said. He sighed and shrugged. "Guess I gotta tell our downside fans the inglorious news. Remember all my special instructions, chillun. Share 'em out among you." He grabbed Gussy Friml's black ankle as it swung past him and shoved off on it, coasting toward the blue tunnel at about one fifth the velocity with which Gussy receded from him in the opposite direction.

"Hey, Fats," Gussy called to him as she bounced gently off the sun-quilt, "you got any general message for us?"

"Yeah," Fats replied, still rotating as he coasted and smiling as he rotated. "Make more guk, chillun. Yeah," he repeated as he disappeared into the blue tunnel, "take off the growth checks an' make mo' guk."

Seven seconds later he was floating beside the spherical mike of the Beat Cluster's short-wave station. The bright instruments and heads of the Small Jazz Ensemble were all clustered in, sounding a last chord, while their foreshortened feet waved around the periphery. The half dozen of them, counting Fats, were like friendly fish nosing up to the single black olive of the mike. Fats had his eyes on the Earth, a little more than half night now and about as big as the snare drum standing out from the percussion rack Jordy had his legs scissored around. It was good, Fats thought, to see who you were talking to.

"Greetings, groundsiders," he said softly when the last echo had come back from the sealingsilk and died in the sun-quilt. "This is that ever-hateful voice from outer space, the voice of your old tormentor Fats Jordan, advertising no pickle juice."

Fats actually said "advertising," not "advertisin' "—his diction always improved when he was on vacuum.

"And for a change, folks, I'm going to take this space to tell you something about us. No jokes this time, just tedious talk. I got a reason, a real serious reason, but I ain't saying what it is for a minute."

He continued, "You look mighty cozy down there, mighty cozy from where we're floating. Because we're way out here, you know. Out of this world, to quote the man. A good twenty thousand miles out, Captain Nemo.

"Or we're up here, if it sounds better to you that way. Way over your head. Up here with the stars and the flaming sun and the hot-cold vacuum, orbiting around Earth in our crazy balloons that look like a cluster of dingy glass grapes."

The band had begun to blow softly again, weaving a cool background to Fats' lazy phrases.

"Yes, the boys and girls are in space now, groundsiders. We've found the cheap way here, the back door. The wild ones who yesterday would have headed for the Village or the Quarter or Big Sur, the Left Bank or North Beach, or just packed up their Zen Buddhism and hit the road, are out here now, digging cool sounds as they fall round and round Dear Old Dirty. And folks, ain't you just a little glad we're gone?"

The band coasted into a phrase that was like the lazy swing of a hammock.

"Our cold-water flats have climbed. Our lofts have gone aloft. We've cut our pads loose from the cities and floated them above the stratosphere. It was a stiff drag for our motorcycles, Dad, but we made it. And ain't you a mite delighted to be rid of us? I know we're not all up here. But the worst of us are.

"You know, people once pictured the conquest of space entirely in terms of military outposts and machine precision." Here Burr's trumpet blew a crooked little battle cry. "They didn't leave any room in their pictures for the drifters and

dreamers, the rebels and no-goods (like me, folks!) who are up here right now, orbiting with a few pounds of oxygen and a couple of gobs of guk (and a few cockroaches, sure, and maybe even a few mice, though we keep a cat) inside a cluster of smelly old balloons.

"That's a laugh in itself: the antique vehicle that first took man off the ground also being the first to give him cheap living quarters outside the atmosphere. Primitive balloons floated free in the grip of the wind; we fall free in the clutch of gravity. A balloon's a symbol, you know, folks. A symbol of dreams and hopes and easily-punctured illusions. Because a balloon's a kind of bubble. But bubbles can be tough."

Led by Jordy's drums, the band worked into the Blue Ox theme from the Paul Bunyan Suite.

"Tough the same way the hemlock tents and sod huts of the American settlers were tough. We got out into space, a lot of us did, the same way the Irish and Finns got west. They built the long railroads. We built the big satellites."

Here the band shifted to the Axe theme.

"I was a welder myself. I came into space with a bunch of other galoots to help stitch together Research Satellite One. I didn't like the barracks they put us in, so I made myself a little private home of sealingsilk, a material which then was used only for storing liquids and gases—nobody'd even thought of it for human habitation. I started to meditate there in my bubble and I came to grips with a few half-ultimates and I got to like it real well in space. Same thing happened to a few of the other galoots. You know, folks, a guy who's wacky enough to wrestle sheet aluminum in vacuum in a spider suit may very well be wacky enough to get to really like stars and weightlessness and all the rest of it.

"When the construction job was done and the big research outfits moved in, we balloon men stayed on. It took some wangling but we managed. We weren't costing the Government much. And it was mighty convenient for them to have us around for odd jobs.

"That was the nucleus of our squatter cluster. The space roustabouts and roughnecks came first. The artists and oddballs, who have a different kind of toughness, followed. They got wind of what our life was like and they bought, bummed or conned their way up here. Some got space research jobs and shifted over to us at the ends of their stints. Others came up on awards trips and managed to get lost from their parties and accidentally find us. They brought their tapes and instruments with them, their sketchbooks and typers; some even smuggled up their own balloons. Most of them learned to do some sort of space work—it's good insurance on staying aloft. But don't get me wrong. We're none of us work-crazy. Actually we're the laziest cats in the cosmos: the ones who couldn't bear the thought of carrying their own weight around every day of their lives! We mostly only toil when we have to have money for extras or when there's a job that's just got to be done. We're the dreamers and funsters, the singers and studiers. We leave the 'to the stars by hard ways' business to our friends the space marines. When we use the 'ad astra per aspera' motto (was it your high school's too?) we change the last word to asparagus—maybe partly to honor the green guk we grow to get us oxygen (so we won't be chiseling too much gas from the Government) and to commemorate the food-yeasts and the other stuff we grow from our garbage.

"What sort of life do we have up here? How can we stand it cooped up in a lot of stinking balloons? Man, we're *free* out here, really free for the first time. We're floating, literally. Gravity can't bow our backs or break our arches or tame our ideas. You know, it's only out here that stupid people like us can really think. The weightlessness gets our thoughts and we can sort them. Ideas grow out here like nowhere else—it's the right environment for them.

"Anybody can get into space if he wants to hard enough. The ticket is a dream.

"That's our story, folks. We took the space road because it

was the only frontier left. We had to come out, just because space was here, like the man who climbed the mountain, like the first man who skin-dove into the green deeps. Like the first man who envied a bird or a shooting star."

The music had softly soared with Fats' words. Now it died with them and when he spoke again it was without accompaniment, just a flat lonely voice.

"But that isn't quite the end of the story, folks. I told you I had something serious to impart—serious to us anyway. It looks like we're not going to be able to stay in space, folks. We've been told to get out. Because we're the wrong sort of people. Because we don't have the legal right to stay here, only the right that's conveyed by a dream.

"Maybe there's real justice in it. Maybe we've sat too long in the starbird seat. Maybe the beat generation doesn't belong in space. Maybe space belongs to soldiers and the civil service, with a slice of it for the research boys. Maybe there's somebody who wants to be in space more than we do. Maybe we deserve our comedownance. I wouldn't know.

"So get ready for a jolt, folks. We're coming back! If you *don't* want to see us, or if you think we ought to be kept safely cooped up here for any reason, you just might let the President know.

"This is the Beat Cluster, folks, signing off."

As Fats and the band pushed away from each other, Fats saw that the little local audience in the sending balloon had grown and that not all new arrivals were fellow floaters.

"Fats, what's this nonsense about you people privatizing your activities and excluding research personnel?" a grizzle-haired stringbean demanded. "You can't cut off recreation that way. I depend on the Cluster to keep my electron bugs happily abnormal. We even mention it downside in recruiting personnel—though we don't put it in print."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Thoms," Fats said. "No offense meant to

you or to General Electric. But I got no time to explain. Ask somebody else."

"Whatdya mean, no offense?" the other demanded, grabbing at the purple shorts. "What are you trying to do, segregate the squares in space? What's wrong with research? Aren't we good enough for you?"

"Yes," put in Rumpleman of Convair, "and while you're doing that would you kindly throw some light on this directive we just received from the new A—that the Cluster's off-bounds to us and that all dating between research personnel and Cluster girls must stop? Did *you* put the new A up to that, Fats?"

"Not exactly," Fats said. "Look, boys, let up on me. I got work to do."

"Work!" Rumpleman snorted.

"Don't think you're going to get away with it," Thoms warned Fats. "We're going to protest. Why, the Old Man is frantic about the 3D chess tournament. He says the Brain's the only real competition he has up here." (The Old Man was Hubert Willis, guiding genius of the open bevatron on the other side of the satellite.)

"The other research outfits are kicking up a fuss too," Trace Davis put in. "We spread the news like you said, and they say we can't walk out on them this way."

"Allied Microbiotics," Gussy Friml said, "wants to know who's going to take over the experiments on unshielded guk societies in freefall that we've been running for them in the Cluster."

Two of the newcomers had slightly more confidential messages for Fats.

Allison of Convair said, "I wouldn't tell you, except I think you've guessed, that I've been using the Beat Cluster as a pilot study in the psychology of anarchic human societies in freefall. If you cut yourself off from us, I'm in a hole."

"It's mighty friendly of you to feel that way," Fats said, "but right now I got to rush."

Space Marines Sergeant Gombert, satellite police chief, drew Fats aside and said, "I don't know why you're giving research a false impression of what's happening, but they'll find out the truth soon enough and I suppose you have your own sweet insidious reasons. Meanwhile I'm here to tell you that I can't spare the men to police your exodus. As you know, you old corner-cutter, this place is run more like a national park than a military post, in spite of its theoretical high security status. I'm going to have to ask you to handle the show yourself, using your best judgment."

"We'll certainly work hard at it, Chief," Fats said. "Hey, everybody, get cracking!"

"Understand," Gombert continued, his expression very fierce, "I'm wholly on the side of officialdom. I'll be officially overjoyed to see the last of you floaters. It just so happens that at the moment I'm short-handed."

"I understand," Fats said softly, then bellowed, "On the jump, everybody!"

But at sunset the new A's proctor was again facing him, right-side-up this time, in the Big Igloo.

"Your first fifty were due at the boarding tube an hour ago," the proctor began ominously.

"That's right," Fats assured him. "It just turns out we're going to need a little more time."

"What's holding you up?"

"We're getting ready, Mr. Proctor," Fats said. "See how busy everybody is?"

A half dozen figures were rhythmically diving around the Big Igloo, folding the sun-quilt. The sun's disk had dipped behind the Earth and only its wild corona showed, pale hair streaming across the star-fields. The Earth had gone into its dark phase, except for the faint unbalanced halo of sunlight bent by the atmosphere and for the faint dot-dot-dot of glows that were the Los Angeles-Chicago-New York line. Soft yellow lights sprang up here and there in the Cluster as it prepared for its short night. The transparent balloons seemed

to vanish, leaving a band of people camped among the stars.

The proctor said, "We know you've been getting some unofficial sympathy from research and even the MPs. Don't depend on it. The new Administrator can create special deputies to enforce the deportation orders."

"He certainly can," Fats agreed earnestly, "but he don't need to. We're going ahead with it all, Mr. Proctor, as fast as we're able. F'rinstance, our groundclothes ain't sewed yet. You wouldn't want us arriving downside half naked an' givin' the sat' a bad reputation. So just let us work an' don't joggle our elbow."

The proctor snorted. He said, "Let's not waste each other's time. You know, if you force us to do it, we can cut off your oxygen."

There was a moment's silence. Then from the side Trace Davis said loudly, "Listen to that! Listen to a man who'd solve the groundside housing problem by cutting off the water to the slums."

But Fats frowned at Trace and said quietly only, "If Mr. Proctor shut down on our air, he'd only be doing the satellite a disservice. Right now our algae are producing a shade more oxy than we burn. We've upped the guk production. If you don't believe me, Mr. Proctor, you can ask the atmosphere boys to check."

"Even if you do have enough oxygen," the proctor retorted, "you need our forced ventilation to keep your air moving. Lacking gravity convection, you'd suffocate in your own exhaled breath."

"We got our fans ready, battery driven," Fats told him.

"You've got no place to mount them, no rigid framework," the proctor objected.

"They'll mount on harnesses near each tunnel mouth," Fats said imperturbably. "Without gravity they'll climb away from the tunnel mouths and ride the taut harness. Besides,

we're not above hand labor if it's necessary. We could use punkahs."

"Air's not the only problem," the proctor interjected. "We can cut off your food. You've been living on handouts."

"Right now," Fats said softly, "we're living half on yeasts grown from our own personal garbage. Living well, as you can see by a look at me. And if necessary we can do as much better than half as we have to. We're farmers, man."

"We can seal off the Cluster," the proctor snapped back, "and set you adrift. The orders allow it."

Fats replied, "Why not? It would make a very interesting day-to-day drama for the groundside public and for the food chemists—seeing just how long we can maintain a flourishing ecology."

The proctor grabbed at his nylon line. "I'm going to report your attitude to the new Administrator as hostile," he sputtered. "You'll hear from us again shortly."

"Give him our greetings when you do," Fats said. "We haven't had opportunity to offer them. And there's one other thing," he called after the proctor, "I notice you hold your nose mighty rigid in here. It's a waste of energy. If you'd just steel yourself and take three deep breaths you'd never notice our stink again."

The proctor bumped into the tunnel side in his haste to be gone. Nobody laughed, which doubled the embarrassment. If they'd have laughed he could have cursed. Now he had to bottle up his indignation until he could discharge it in his report to the new Administrator.

But even this outlet was denied him.

"Don't tell me a word," the new Administrator snapped at his proctor as the latter zipped into the aluminum office. "The deportation is canceled. I'll tell you about it, but if you tell anybody else I'll down-jump *you*. In the last twenty minutes I've had messages direct from the Space Marshal and the President. We must not disturb the Beat Cluster because of

public opinion and because, although they don't know it, they're a pilot experiment in the free migration of people into space." ("Where else, Joel," the President had said, "do you think we're going to get people to go willingly off the Earth and achieve a balanced existence, using their own waste products? Besides, they're a floating labor pool for the satellites. And Joel, do you realize Jordan's broadcast is getting as much attention as the Russian landings on Ganymede?") The new Administrator groaned softly and asked the Unseen, "Why don't they tell a new man these things before he makes a fool of himself?"

Back in the Beat Cluster, Fats struck the last chord of "Glow Little Glow Worm." Slowly the full moon rose over the satellite, dimming the soft yellow lights that seemed to float in free space. The immemorial white globe of Luna was a little bit bigger than when viewed from Earth and its surface markings were more sharply etched. The craters of Tycho and Copernicus stood out by reason of the bright ray systems shooting out from them and the little dark smudge of the Mare Crisium looked like a curled black kitten. Fats led those around him into a new song:

"Gonna be a *pang*
"Leavin' space,
"Gonna be a *pang!*
"Gonna be a *pang*
"Leavin' space,
"So we won't go!"

AN OLD FASHIONED BIRD CHRISTMAS

By Margaret St. Clair

The Reverend Clem Adelburg had come out to cut some mistletoe. He tucked the hatchet tightly in the band of his trousers and shinned up the knobby trunk of the apple tree. When he got high enough, he saw that two ravens were seated on the apple tree branches, eating the mistletoe berries. There were always ravens around the cabin nowadays; he chased them away indignantly, with many loud whooshes. Then he felt a twinge of remorse.

"O Lord," he prayed among the branches, his face upturned toward the dramatic cloudscape of an Arizona winter, "O Lord, bless this little experiment of thy servant. O Lord, grant that I wasn't wrong to chase away those darned ravens. Yes, Lord."

He sighted up at the branches. He chopped with the hatchet. Three branches of mistletoe fell down on the sheets of newspaper he had previously placed at the foot of the tree. He climbed down.

It was beginning to get dark. Mazda would have supper ready. There was a premonitory rumble and then the sound of *Silent Night*, played on an electric xylophone, filled the sky.

The Reverend Adelburg frowned. The noise must be coming from Parker; the municipal Christmas tree there would be thirty-five feet tall this year, and already he could see the red glow of Parker's municipal Christmas street-decoration project in the southern sky. Well. If the Lord continued to

bless him, and if his next few sermons had the effect he hoped they'd have, he might be able to change the character of Parker's Christmas celebration. The Forthright Temple, in Los Angeles, was a long way from Parker, but his broadcasts were receivable here, too.

He went in the kitchen. Mazda was cooking something on the oil stove, an oil lamp burning dimly on the table beside her. The kitchen smelled good.

"Hello, Clem," she said, turning to face him. She smiled at him. "Did you get the berries for the tea?"

"Yes, dear." He handed her the three branches of mistletoe. "Make it good and strong this time, dear. I just want to see if there's anything in my little idea."

"About mistletoe being the common element in all religions? Sure."

He watched her as she went to fill the teakettle at the sink. She was a tall woman, with masses of puffy ginger hair and a very fair skin. Her figure was excellent, though rangy, and he always enjoyed watching her.

Most of the time Mazda's being in the cabin seemed so ordinary, so fitting (she was remarkably domestic, when you got to know her), that he simply didn't think about it. But there were moments, like the present, when her physical immediacy seemed to catch him in the solar plexus. Then he could only stand and look at her and draw deep, surprised breaths.

It wasn't so much his living with her, in the technical sense, that troubled him. He hadn't even tried to feel guilty about that. It seemed at once so extraordinary and so perfectly natural, that it wasn't something his conscience could get a grip on. No, it was Mazda's being in the cabin at all that was the surprising thing.

Where had she come from, anyhow? He'd gone outside one morning early in September, meaning to walk up and down in the sand while he put the finishing touches on his sermon

for next week, and there she had been, sitting quietly under a Joshua tree.

She couldn't have been there for more than ten minutes. Her skin, as he had come to know later, was extraordinarily sensitive to sunlight, and she was wearing the skimpiest Bikini imaginable. She'd have been sunburned all over if she'd been there for any length of time. And how had she got there? There'd been no sign of a car in any direction, and he hadn't even heard the noise of a plane or a copter in the sky. Had she walked over from Parker? In a Bikini? Five miles?

He knew so little about her—no more now, really, than he had known on that first day when she had said, "Hi," and gone in the house. It wasn't that she was close-mouthed or sullen. She just didn't talk about herself. Once only, when he had been elaborating his idea that the use of mistletoe might be the common element behind all religion, had she come out with anything that might be a personal remark. He'd spoken of the use of mistletoe in classical paganism, in druidism, in Christian festival, in the old Norse religion, in Zoroastrism—

Her lower lip had begun to protrude defiantly. "There's no mistletoe in Zoroastrism," she had cut in sharply. "I know."

Well? It wasn't much for the fruit of more than three months.

He couldn't help wondering about Mazda sometimes, though he didn't want to fail in Christian charity. But he knew he had his enemies. Could she possibly be a Retail Merchants Association spy?

The teakettle was beginning to hum. Mazda gave the pot of string beans on the stove a stir with a wooden spoon. "How did you come out with your sermon, Clem?" she asked.

"Eh? Oh, splendidly. The ending, I really think, will have an effect. There are some striking passages. The ravens were quite impressed." He smiled at his little joke.

"Ravens?" She turned to face him. "Were there ravens outside when you were rehearsing your speech?"

"Yes, indeed. We have ravens all the time here now. There were even ravens in the apple tree when I was cutting the mistletoe."

Her eyes widened. "Oh . . ." she said thoughtfully.

"I fear I chased them away a little too vehemently," he said, becoming serious. "Ravens, after all, are the Lord's creatures too."

"Not *those* ravens," Mazda said.

There was a very brief pause. Mazda fingered the wooden bracelet on her left wrist. Then she said, "Listen, Clem, I know you've talked about it, but I guess I'm just dumb. Why are you so down on modern Christmases, anyway?"

"My dear, if you'd ever attend the Temple services—" the Reverend Adelburg said in gentle reproof. "But I'll try to make my point of view, which I humbly trust is also the Lord's point of view, clear to you." He began to talk.

He was an excellent talker. Phrases like "star in the darkness," "the silent night of Bethlehem," "pagan glitter," "corruption," "perversion," "true values," "an old-time America," "myrrh," "frankincense" and "1776," seemed to shimmer in the air between them. Mazda listened, nodding from time to time or prodding the potatoes in the saucepan with a two-tined kitchen fork.

At last he appeared to have finished. Mazda nodded for the last time. "Um-hum," she said. "But you know what I think, Clem? I think you just don't like lights. When it's dark, you want it to *be* dark. It's reasonable enough—you're a different guy once the sun goes down."

"I don't like the false lights of modernity," the Reverend said with a touch of stiffness. "As I intend to make abundantly clear in my sermon tomorrow."

"Um-hum. You're a wonderful talker. I never thought I'd get fond of somebody who didn't like light."

"I like some kinds of light," said the Reverend Adelburg. "I like fires."

Mazda drew a deep breath. "You'd better wash up before supper, Clem," she said. "You've got rosin on you from the apple tree."

"All right, dear." He kissed her on the cheek and then—she had seductive shoulders, despite her ranginess—on the upper arm.

"Mmmmmmmm," Mazda said.

When he had gone into the pantry to wash, she looked after him slantingly. Her caramel-colored eyebrows drew together in a frown. She had already scalded out the teapot. Now she reached into the drawer of the kitchen table and drew out a handful of what looked like small mushrooms. They were, as a matter of fact, mescal buttons, and she had gathered them last week from the top of a plant of *Lophophora Williamsii* herself.

II

She cut them up neatly with a paring knife and dropped them into the teapot. She put the mistletoe berries in on top of the mescal buttons. Then she filled the teapot with boiling water. When the Reverend got back from his washing, the teapot was steaming domestically on the table beside the string beans.

He said grace and poured himself a cup of the tea. "Goodness, but it's bitter," he observed, sipping. "Not at all like it was the first time. What a difference putting in more mistletoe has made!"

Mazda looked down. She passed him the sugar bowl. He sweetened the tea lavishly. "You haven't set a cup for yourself, dear," he said, suddenly solicitous.

"There isn't much tea. You said to make it strong."

"Yes, honey, but if there's any good in the tea, I want you to share it. Get another cup."

He looked across the table at her, brightly and affectionately. There was a faint flush in Mazda's cheeks as she obeyed.

Supper was over and Mazda was washing the dishes when the Reverend Clem said suddenly, "How fast you're moving, Mazda! I never saw anything like the way you're getting through those dishes. I can hardly see your hands, they're moving so fast."

"Fast?" Mazda echoed. She sounded bewildered. She held up a spoon and polished its bowl languidly in the light of the oil lamp. "Why, I'm not moving fast. I've been standing here by the sink for hours and hours, washing one dish. I don't know what's the matter with me. I wish I *could* move fast."

There was a silence. Mazda had finished the dishes. She took off her apron and sat down on the floor, her feet out straight in front of her. Almost immediately the Reverend Adelburg slid off the chair where he had been sitting, and flopped down on the floor parallel to her. Both their legs were stretched out.

"What lovely hands you have, Mazda," he said. He picked up one of them from her lap, where it was languidly lying, and turned it about admiringly. "Your fingers remind me of the verse in the Canticles—'Fair are my love's palms as an eel that feedeth among lilies. And the coals thereof hath a most vehement flame.' They're even colored like eels, purple and gold and silver. Your nails are little dark rainbows. The Lord bless you, Mazda. I love you very much."

He put his arm around her. She let her head decline on his shoulder, and they both leaned back against the wall. "Are you happy, dear?" he asked her anxiously. "As happy as I am? Do you have a dim sweet bird sense of blessings hovering over you?"

"Um-hum," Mazda answered. It was obviously difficult for her to talk. "Never felt better." A grin zig-zagged across her face. "Mus' be the mistletoe."

The effects of peyote—mescal button—intoxication are predictable. They run a definite course. None the less, the response to a drug is always somewhat idiosyncratic. Thus it was that the Reverend Clem Adelburg, who had drunk enough peyote infusion to keep a cart horse seeing beatific visions for twenty-four hours, reached, about six o'clock in the morning, the state of intense wakefulness that succeeds to the drug trance. By the time the copter came from Los Angeles to take him to the Temple, a little after eight, he had bathed, shaved and dressed, and was reading over his sermon notes.

He went into the bedroom where Mazda was lying to bid her good-by. (Sometime during the night they had managed to get to bed.) He bent over and kissed her tenderly on her loosened mouth. "Good-by, dear. Our little experiment certainly had results, didn't it? But I feel no ill after-effect, and I trust that you will not, either. I'll be back about eleven tonight."

Once more he kissed her. Mazda made a desperate effort to rouse herself from the rose and opal-hued heaven she was currently floating in. She licked her lips. "Clem . . ." she said.

"Yes, dear?"

"*Be careful.*"

"Certainly, dear. I always am. Yes."

He patted her on the shoulder. He went out. Even in her paradise, which was at the moment blue and silver, she could hear the noise of the copter as it bore him away.

Mazda's drug dreams came to an end with a bump about twelve o'clock. She sprang out of bed and ran to the window. The Reverend Adelburg was gone, of course. And there wasn't a raven in sight.

Over in Los Angeles, the Reverend's sermon was going swimmingly. From his first words, which had been the arresting sentence, "The lights are going out again all over the world," he had riveted the attention of his listeners as if with

stainless steel rivets. Even the two troops of Archer Eagle Scouts in the front rows, who, with their scoutmaster Joe Buell, were today's Honor Guests, had been so fascinated that they had stopped twanging their bowstrings. The Reverend had swung thunderously from climax to climax; by now at least half his audience had resolved to disconnect its radio when it got home, and throw away the electric lights on its Christmas tree. Now the Reverend was approaching the climax of climaxes.

"In the sweet night of the spirit, bless us, O Lord! Yes, Lord, it's good to be dark—in the sweet silence of the stable let the little flame of—bless us, Lord!—let the little flame—My *Gosh!* Good Lord!"

Forthright Temple is ventilated, and partly lighted, by a clerestory in the middle part of the building. Through this clerestory eight large black birds flew rapidly.

Two of them headed straight for the Reverend Adelburg's eyes. Four of them attacked the Temple's not very bright electric lights. The other two made dive after dive on the helpless congregation's head.

Women were screaming. Handkerchiefs waved. Hymnbooks rocked and fluttered through the air. The organist burst into a Bach chorale. The bewildered choir began singing two different songs.

When the ravens had first swooped down upon him, the Reverend Adelburg had dived under the lectern. From thence —he was a man who was used to authority—he began shouting orders to the troops of Archer Eagle Scouts in a clarion, stentorian voice.

"Young men! Listen! Shoot at the birds! Shoot—at—the —birds!"

There was a very slight hiatus. Then bowstrings began to twang and arrows to thud.

Eight pagan ravens are no match at all for the legitimate weapons of two troops of Archer Eagle Scouts. The ravens dived valiantly, they cawed and shrieked. In vain. Inside five

minutes after the shooting started, there remained no trace of the birds' incursus except a black tail feather floating in an updraft, eight or ten hymnbooks with ruffled pages and some arrows on the floor.

For a few moments the scouts scurried about collecting arrows. Then the Reverend Adelburg summoned them up to the lectern, where he was standing. He finished his sermon with a troop of Archer Scouts drawn up on either side of him, like a body guard.

"That was a wonderful sermon, wasn't it," said the lady from Iowa as she and her husband walked toward their parked car. "I never heard anything like it before. He really spoke better after the birds came in than he did earlier . . . I think tomorrow I'll go down town and see if I can get some little oil lamps to burn in the patio."

"Wonder what sort of birds those were," her husband said idly. "They were mighty big for crows."

"Crows! Why, they were ravens; haven't you ever seen pictures of ravens? I wonder what made them go in the Temple. Ravens always seem such *old-fashioned birds.*"

III

"I betrayed my Company for you," Mazda said. She hiccoughed with emotion. "I'm a rat. As far as that goes, you're a rat too. We're *both* rats."

"What company is that?" the Reverend asked with innocent curiosity. He yawned. They had been sitting in the tiny living room, arguing, for hours, ever since he got back from the Temple, and by now it was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

"The PE&G. Why? Did you ever suspect?"

"I thought perhaps the Retail Merchants Association sent you. I never understood how you happened to be sitting under that Joshua tree."

Mazda laughed scornfully. "The Retail Merchants? Those

boffs? Why, I don't suppose they have more than three secret agents in the whole Los Angeles metropolitan area. They couldn't stop a baby from crossing a street on a kiddy car. Their idea of hot tactics is to hire a big newspaper ad.

"No, I'm a PE&G girl. I've been one of their top people for years. That's why I know what you're up against."

She took an earnest step toward him. "Clem, I don't think you have any idea of how serious this is," she said. "But they'll stop at nothing. They can't possibly let you get away with it. Why, last December after your old-fashioned Christmas sermons, power consumption was off 27% all along the whole Pacific slope, and it didn't get back to normal until late February. People just didn't use much electricity. The Company didn't pay any dividends at all on its common stock, and if the same thing happens this year, they'll have to skip payments on the preferred! That's why I was sent to stop you at all costs."

"How were you supposed to stop me?" the Reverend inquired. He put the tips of his outstretched fingers together thoughtfully.

"I was supposed to seduce you, and then call the broadcasters in. You know, moral turpitude. But I convinced them that it wouldn't work. Congregations aren't so touchy about things like that nowadays. It wouldn't have worked."

"Mazda, how *could* you?"

"I don't know how I could," Mazda replied with spirit. "I could have had a nice clean-cut electronics engineer . . . or one of those cute linemen up on a pole . . . and then I had to fall for a Reverend with his collar on backwards. Somebody ought to examine my head."

The Reverend Adelburg let this pass without comment. "What was the alternate plan?" he asked.

"I promised them I'd keep you from delivering any more old-fashioned Christmas sermons. That's what the peyote was for."

"Peyote? When?"

She told him.

"Oh. Then it wasn't the mistletoe," he said when she had finished. He sounded rather annoyed.

"No, it wasn't the mistletoe. But I guess I didn't give you enough peyote. You delivered the sermon anyway.

"Clem, you think that because the ravens made that silly attack on you in the Temple, that that's the sort of thing the Company has up its sleeve. It's not. The ravens were acting on their own responsibility, and they're not awfully bright birds. The Company can do lots better than that when they want to."

"What do you think they'll try next?" the Reverend inquired. His jaw had begun to jut out.

"Well, they might try to get you for moral turpitude after all, or stick an income tax evasion charge on you or accuse you of dope smuggling. I don't think they will. They don't want to give you any more publicity. I think they'll just quietly try to wipe you out."

For a moment Mazda's self command deserted her. She wrung her hands. "What'm I to *do?*" she whimpered. "I've got to save you, and you're as stubborn as a mule. I don't know any magic—or at least not nearly enough magic. The whole Company will be against me as soon as the ravens are sure I ratted on them. And there's just no place in the world today for anybody who's in conflict with the PE&G.

"I wish I hadn't been such a dope as to fall in love with you."

The Reverend Clem Adelburg got up from the chair where he had been sitting and put his arm around her. "Cheer up, my dear," he told her solemnly. "We will defeat the company. Right is on our side."

Mazda gave a heroic sniffle. She smiled at him mistily. "It's not just the PE&G, of course," she said. "Sometimes I think *they* have agents everywhere."

"Not the PE&G?" the Reverend cried. He let his arm fall from around her. He had a sudden nightmare vision of a whole world united against him—a world in which the clouds semaphored secrets about him to the dolphins in the Pacific waves. "What is it, then?"

"Why, it's Nous."

"I never heard of it."

"Very few people have. But *Nous, Infinite,* is the company from which the PE&G gets its power.

"Nous is a very strange outfit. It operates on the far side of 3,000 A.D., and selling power is only one of the things it does. When you're a top agent for the Company, like I was, you hear all sorts of stories about it—for instance, that it's responsible for maintaining the difference in potential between the earth and the ionosphere, or that the weather on Venus is a minor Nous project—stuff like that. I've even heard agents say that Nous is G—but I don't believe *that.* I know about Mithras, myself."

"I thought the PE&G made its own power," said the Reverend. He was still struggling with the first part of Mazda's remarks.

Mazda laughed. "I don't mean any disrespect to the Company, but what makes you think that? The Company's a bad opponent, but outside of that, witchcraft, or sorcery, or ravens, is all they're capable of.

"All the really hot developments in power, the electronic stuff, comes from after 3,000 A.D. Nobody in the present has brains enough to work out a germanium transistor, for example. Nous helps them. People nowadays are dopes. They can't work buttons on pants, or open a package of chewing gum unless there's a paper ribbon to help them.

"That's beside the point, really. The thing I'm trying to make clear, Clem, is that Nous is a bad outfit to come up against.

"I was supposed to go outside at one-thirty this morning

and have the ravens pick me up under the Joshua tree. They were going to take me back to headquarters by air raft. If it—"

"Is that how you got here in the first place?" the Reverend inquired. "By air raft?"

"Yes. As I was saying, if I'd done that, the Company would have accepted that my failure with the peyote was just a mistake. But I didn't do it. I couldn't bear to leave a chump like you all alone to face the Company, and by now they must be beginning to realize that I've ratted on them. It won't be very long before the real trouble begins.

"Now, listen. There are two things you can do. The best one would be for you to go outside and talk to the ravens. If you promise them on your word of honor as a Christian gentleman that you won't deliver any more anti-light sermons —I can't see why you don't like light, anyhow; light's wonderful—if you promise them that, they'll let you go." She paused hopefully.

The Reverend gave her a look.

"Well," said Mazda. "Then we'll have to make a break for it.

"While you were in the washroom, I called the Temple copter." She indicated the short-wave radio on the other side of the little stone fireplace. "It'll be here any minute. I think —well, we'll try to get through," she said without much hope.

The Reverend looked at her in silence for a moment. Fatigue had made shadows under her eyes, but they only made her look glamorous and desirable. She had never been more beautiful. She had betrayed her company for him; he loved her more than ever. He gave her a hug.

"Nix, my dear," he said. "Nix."

"N-n-n-n-?"

"Nix. Never." His voice rang out, booming and resonant. "Run away from those devils and their ravens? Flee from those pagan night-lighters? Never! I *will* not." He advanced toward the radio.

"What are you going to do?" Mazda squeaked.

"I'm going to contact the TVA," he said without turning. "You have to fight fire with fire."

"*Public power?*" Mazda breathed. Her face was white.

"Public power! Their line will be open all night."

He turned his face toward the rafters. "O Lord," he boomed reverently, "bless this radio message. Please, Lord, grant that in contacting a radical outfit like the TVA I'm doing aright."

IV

The noise of prayer died away in the ceiling. He pressed a key and turned a switch. For a moment the room was utterly quiet. Then there was a soft flurry and plop at the window.

The ravens, after all, were not deaf. They too had heard the Reverend's prayers.

Mazda spun round toward the sound. Before she could decide what to do, there was a series of tinkles from the chimney. It ended in a glassy crash. Something had broken on the stone hearth.

Mazda screamed.

"Keep back!" she yelled at the Reverend, who had turned from the radio and was leaning forward interestedly. "Keep back! Don't breathe! *Damn* those birds!" She was fumbling wildly with the wooden bracelet on her left wrist.

"What is it?" he asked. He advanced a step toward the shards of glass on the hearth.

"Get *back*. It's a germ culture bomb. Parrot fever. I'm going to purify it. Stand *back!*"

The Reverend Adelburg discounted most of this warning as due to feminine hysteria. He drew back a fraction of an inch, but still remained leaning forward, his eyes fixed on the glass.

Mazda gave a moan of desperation. "I've got to do it!" she

yelled. She slid her bracelet toward her elbow and gave it a violent twist.

A strictly vertical flash of lightning appeared between the ceiling and the hearth. It was very bright, and accompanied by a sizzling noise. A second later a sharp chlorine-like smell filled the air.

Mazda's artificial lightning died away. The room returned to its normal dim illumination. A faint curl of smoke floated above the pieces of broken glass on the hearth of the fireplace. There was no doubt that Mazda had purified the germ culture effectively. But the Reverend Clem Adelburg was stretched out on the floor flat on his back.

Mazda ran to him. She tore open his white shirt front and laid her head on his chest. His heart was still beating, and his hands and feet were warm. But he was completely out—outer than any of the neon lights he had been trying to put out.

Mazda got up, rubbing her hands. She couldn't move him, and she didn't know what she ought to do for him. She hoped he'd be all right. She knew he had a strong constitution. She went into the kitchen and got a towel.

She came back with it and tied it to the poker. Carrying this home-made flag of truce in front of her, she opened the door and went out into the night.

It was a dark night. From under the Joshua tree a darker shadow detached itself. "'Llo, Mazda," a harsh voice said.

"Hello," she replied. There was a glitter of beady eyes in the darkness around her. "Listen here, you birds," Mazda said slowly, "we've always been on good terms, haven't we? We've always got on together well. Are you really trying to do me and my boy friend in?"

A bird cleared its throat. There was a noise of talons being shifted uneasily. "Well . . . no, Mazda. We like you too," somebody said.

"Oh, yes? Is that why you dropped the parrot-fever bomb? Were you going to drop a dead parrot down the chimney and

make it look as if we'd died a natural death? I wouldn't call that bomb exactly a friendly thing."

"The bomb was just a warning," said the harsh voice that had spoken first. "We knew you'd purify it. We have confidence in you. We don't want to do you any harm personally. You can always get another boy friend."

"I want this one."

"You've had better ones."

"Yes, I know. But this is the one I want."

There was a silence. Then a bird said, "We're sorry, Mazda. We only do what we're sent out to do."

Mazda drew a sharp breath. "Hell's Canyon," she said deliberately. "Rural electrification cooperatives. *Public power.*"

There was a sound as of somebody's tail feathers being plucked distractedly. "Mazda, I *wish* you wouldn't," said the chief raven in a wincing voice.

"I will, though. I'll get in touch with the public power people. I don't care about the ethics of it. I'm in love."

"Haw!" the raven jeered harshly. It seemed to have regained its aplomb. "That lightning flash of yours burned out every tube in the radio. You couldn't send a message to Parker to ask for a stick of chewing gum. You're through.

"We'll give you half an hour. During any of that time you can come out unhurt. But after that you're in for it too. This time we're serious."

"What are you going to do?" Mazda cried.

"You'll find out."

Mazda went back to the house.

The clock on the mantlepiece read twenty minutes to three. The ravens would probably give her a few minutes' grace, so she had until ten or twelve minutes after the hour. Mazda knelt down by her consort and began to chafe his hands. When that didn't help, she ran to the kitchen, got a handful of red feathers from the chicken they had had for

lunch yesterday, and began burning them under the Reverend's nose.

At seven minutes to three the Reverend's eyelids fluttered and the noise of a copter was heard in the sky. Mazda listened with strained attention, her eyes fixed on her consort. She longed to run to the window, but she was afraid of alerting the ravens. She could only wait.

The copter appeared to be having difficulties. The whoosh of its helix changed pitch, the motor stuttered and coughed. Once the noise seemed to recede; Mazda was afraid the plane was going away entirely. She fingered her wooden blast bracelet nervously. But the copter returned. It landed with a thump that was almost a crash.

The copter door opened and somebody jumped out. There was a sound of squawks, caws and rapid fluttering. A vigorous male voice said, "Ouch! *Ouch!* Birds! What the bloody hell!" More fluttering. Then sandaled feet thudded rapidly along the path. Somebody pounded at the door.

Mazda ran to open it. The man who stumbled across the threshold was a dark, stocky Indian who wore white duck pants and red glasses, and carried a three-foot bow slung across his back. He was bleeding freely from half a dozen peck marks on his shoulders and breast. "Lord Mithras," Mazda said prayerfully, "it's Joe Buell! Joe!"

"Mazda! Why didn't you show a light? What are you doing here? What *is* all this?"

Mazda told him. Joe listened intently, frowning more and more. "My word, what a mess," he said when she had finished. He pushed his red glasses up on his nose. "Has the Reverend come to yet?"

They turned around. Clem's eyes were open, but he was still lying on the floor. As they watched, he slowly closed his eyes again. "I guess he's not ready yet," Mazda said.

She looked at the clock. It showed two minutes to three. "Let's get him up and walk him," she said harriedly. "It

might help him to get back to normal. Oh, Mithras, how late it is!"

The Reverend Adelburg was limp and slippery, but they managed to get him to his feet. As they guided his rubbery footsteps about the room, Mazda said, "I haven't seen you since you were in Canada, Joe. Those nights in Saskatchewan! I didn't know you were one of the Reverend's men."

"Since 1965," Joe answered briefly.

"How come? I thought you danced Shalako at the pueblo one year."

"I did. But you should see Halonawa now. There's a red and purple neon sign twenty feet high over the plaza. It reads, 'Welcome to Halonawa, Home of the Shalako.' After that I joined up with the Rev. A nice dark Christmas seems a wizard idea."

He plainly didn't want to pursue the subject further. Mazda said, "If the Reverend revives in time, what'll we do?"

"Can you pilot a copter?"

"I can drive a car."

"A copter's really easier." He gave her directions. "The motor's missing a little, but I don't think you'll have any trouble. Orient yourself by Parker and the dam. The dam's just north of us.

"If the Rev comes to in time, make a break for it with him in the plane. I'll create a diversion by climbing out the window and shooting at those bloody birds. I owe them some arrows, at that."

"I wish I knew what they had in mind," Mazda said.

V

At five minutes after three the Reverend's willow-withy body stiffened. His eyes opened. He raised his head and looked about him. "What a lovely day," he said in a pleasant, conversational voice.

Mazda's face puckered. For a moment she seemed about to burst into wild tears. Then she blinked her eyes and shook her head defiantly. "He hurt his head when he fell, that's all. He'll be all right later. He's got to be all right. And he may really be easier to handle this way than if he wasn't goofed. He's a stubborn man."

Joe had gone over to the table and was putting out the lamp. He handed his red glasses to Mazda. "Makes piloting easier," he said. Then he opened the window on the left and swung himself out of it. He gave a high, passionate battle cry. There was a rush of feathers and some frenzied squawking. Joe's bow began to twang.

Mazda grabbed the Reverend by the hand. "Nice Christmas," she hissed. "Come along." Bent forward, one arm raised to shield her eyes, she pulled him after her at a run toward the door.

The night had grown darker. The sky was heavily overcast. None the less, she could make out the improbable shape of the copter. "Hurry!" she said to Clem Adelburg. "Run!"

Wings buffeted around her. Claws struck at her face, her cheeks, her hair. The Reverend Adelburg gave a cry of pain; Mazda had to use her free arm to wipe her own blood from her eyes. Then they were in the copter and the door was slammed.

She turned the switch. The motor gave a cough and started. Mazda was trembling with excitement, but she followed Joe's instructions. Slowly the copter rose.

She had put on the red glasses before they left the house. As her eyes grew used to the darkness, she made out the glimmer of the river in front of her and the flat surface of Parker dam. She wanted to go west, toward Los Angeles. The copter climbed a little. She tried to turn.

Wings whizzed by her. Mazda grinned. She twisted the blast bracelet on her wrist. The tiny receptor within it vibrated. There was a flash of light, and the bird plummeted to the ground.

When it hit the sand there was a faint concussion. The floor of the copter shuddered. After a second the smell of almond extract tinged the air.

The bird had been carrying a cyanide bomb.

Mazda sent the copter a little higher. Her mind was a kaleidoscope of tumbling fears. The possibility of more bombs, of explosive bombs, of a kamekazi attack on the copter's propeller, played leap-frog in her brain. And what about Joe? Dear Joe, he'd been wonderful in Saskatchewan. Had they got him yet?

She looked back anxiously at the cabin. Joe had vaulted up on the roof and was standing with one foot planted on either side of the ridge pole, like a Zuñi Heracles. The thick clouds behind him had begun to be tinged with light from the rising moon; she could see that though his bow was ready and he had an arrow drawn nearly back to his ear he wasn't shooting. His eyes were fixed intently on the sky.

She followed the direction of his gaze. Very high up, so high that they looked no bigger than crows, seven of the big black birds were flapping rapidly northward in single file.

For the next five minutes or so nothing at all happened. The copter plodded steadily westward toward Los Angeles, down low, along the line of the aqueduct. This apparent quiescence on the part of her opponents unnerved Mazda more than a direct attack would have done. She couldn't believe that the PE&G would let her and Clem escape so easily.

Suddenly along the sky in front of her there passed a vast flash of light. For an instant the desert was as bright and white as day. Then the darkness closed down again and thunder crashed.

Mazda's hands shook on the controls. The storm that was coming up might, of course, be merely a storm. Or it might have been sent by the Company. But if Nous . . . but if Nous . . . but if Nous, that enormous and somehow enigmatic power that operated from the far side of 3,000 A.D.

. . . if *Nous* had decided to stretch out its arm against her and Clem, there wasn't a chance in the world that she and the Reverend would continue to live.

There was another prodigious lightning flash. The desert, the aqueduct, a line of power poles, a small square building, burned themselves on Mazda's eyes. When darkness came back the Reverend, who had been sitting quite calmly and quietly beside Mazda all this time, stirred. "Wonderful fireworks," he said approvingly.

Mazda's eyes rolled. "Clem, baby," she said despairingly, "what'll I *do?*" She looked around as if hunting an answer. Then the bottom of the heavens dropped out.

The heaviest precipitation recorded to date in a cloudburst is two and a half inches in three minutes. What fell on the copter now was heavier. Inside of two seconds after the avalanche of water had begun to pour from the sky the copter was down flat on the ground, as if it had been pushed into the sand by a giant hand.

The noise inside the cabin was deafening. It was like being a dried pea shaken within a drum. It beat along the body like hammers. Mazda, looking up openmouthed, saw that the copter ceiling was beginning to bulge.

The downpour—the cataract—stopped as suddenly as it had begun. There was a minute of dazed silence in the cabin. Then Mazda, pushing hard against the door in the warped copter body, got it open and scrambled out.

The copter was deep in the sand. One blade of the propeller had been broken off entirely. The other hung limply parallel to the shaft.

Mazda stood shivering. She took off her red glasses absently and dropped them on the sand. The sky had cleared. The moon was almost up. She reached inside the cabin and caught Clem Adelburg by the wrist. "C'mon," she said. She had seen a building, just before the cloudburst. They might be able to take cover in that.

She struggled over the sand with the Reverend following docilely at her heels. The building, once reached, turned out to be a Company substation, and Mazda felt a touch of hope. She could get in, despite the *Danger* and *No admittance* signs, and the ravens might be deterred, even if only slightly, by their respect for Company property.

The substation door would open to a verbal signal. Mazda twisted her blast bracelet twice on her arm, inhaled, and swallowed. "Alameda, Alpine, Amador, Butte," she said carefully.

Nothing happened. She cleared her throat and began again, a couple of notes lower. "Alameda, Alpine, Amador, Butte." There was a faint click. "Calaveras, Colusa, Contra Costa, Del Norte, Fresno—"

The door swung wide. Mazda's enumeration of the counties of California had worked. She took the Reverend by the hand and led him through the opening. "Stanislaus, Sutter, Tulare, Tuolomne, Ventura, Yuba, Yolo," she said. The door closed.

It was much darker inside the substation than it had been outside on the white desert, and the air was filled with a high humming that sounded, and actually was exceedingly dangerous. Mazda put her arm around Clem's shoulders. "Don't move, baby," she said pleadingly. "Don't touch anything. Stay close to Mazda and be quiet."

The Reverend coughed. "Certainly, my dear," he said in quite a normal voice, "but would you mind telling me where we are? And what has been happening?"

Mazda went as limp as if she had been coshed on the head. She clung to him and babbled with relief, while the Reverend stroked her soothingly on the hair and tried to make sense out of her babbling.

"Yes, my dear," he said when she had finally finished. "Do you hear a noise outside?"

"What sort of a noise?"

"A sort of whoosh."

Mazda drew in her breath. "Shin up to the window and look out," she ordered. "Look out especially for birds."

He was at the high, narrow window only an instant before he let himself down. "There was only one raven," he reported, "but there were a number of birds like hawks, with short wings. There seemed to be humps on their backs."

Even in the poor light of the substation Mazda visibly turned green. "Goshawks!" she gasped. Then she began taking off her clothes.

Dress, slip, panties went on the floor. She stood on one foot and removed her sandals alternately. She began going through her hair and pulling out bobby pins. She took off her blast bracelet and added it to the heap.

"What are you doing that for?" the Reverend inquired. It seemed to him a singularly ill-chosen time.

"I'm trying to set up a counter-charm, and I have to be naked to do it." Her voice was wobbling badly. "Those birds —those birds are goshawks. I've never known the Company to send them out but once before. Those lumps on their backs are portable nous projectors. They're trying to teleport us."

"Teleport us? Where to?"

"To—to the Company's cellars. Where—they attend to people who believe in public power. They—oh—I can't talk about it, Clem."

She crouched down at his feet and picked up a bobby pin. "Don't move," she said without looking up. "Try not to think."

She began to scratch a diagram around him on the floor with the pin. He coughed. "Don't cough," she cautioned him. "It might be better to hold your breath."

The Reverend's lungs were aching before she got the diagram done. She eyed it a moment and then spat carefully at four points within the hexagram. A faint bluish glow sprang up along the lines she had traced on the floor.

Mazda rose to her feet. "It'll hold them for a few minutes," she said. "After that . . ."

The Reverend raised his eyes to the rafters. "I'm going to pray," he announced. He filled his lungs.

"O Lord," he boomed powerfully, "we beg thy blessing to preserve me and Mazda from the power of the ravens. We beg thy blessing to help us stay here and not be transported to the PE&G's cellars. Bless us, O Lord. Preserve us. And help us to make thine old-fashioned Christmas a living reality. Amen, O Lord. Amen!"

Mazda, too, was praying. Hands clasped over her diaphragm, head bowed, lips moving silently, she besought her bright divinity. "Mithras, lord of the morning, slayer of the bull of darkness, preserve my love and me. Mithras, lord!"

Prayer is a force. So is magic. So is the energy from nous projectors. These varying forces met and collided in mid air.

The collision made a sort of vortex, a small but uncomfortable knot in the vast, conscious field potential that is the Infinite part of Nous. There was momently an intense, horrible sense of pressure and tension in the very air. The substation hummed ominously. Then, with a burst of energy that blew out every generator from Tacoma to San Diego, the roof came off.

(The PE&G crews worked overtime on the repairs, but there were too many wrecked generators. All along the Pacific slope, and as far inland as Provo, Utah, it was as dark a Christmas as even the Reverend would have wished.)

There was a pause. The noise of breaking timbers died away. The Reverend Adelburg and Mazda were looking upward frozenly, mouths open, necks outstretched. Then a gigantic hand reached in through the hole in the roof. A gigantic voice, even bigger than the hand, said in enormous and somehow Oxonian accents, "Very well. *Take* your old-fashioned Christmas, then."

It was just before sunrise on December 21st. The Christians, who would be strangled at dawn the next day and then burned in honor of the solstice, were gibbering away in their wicker cages. There were three cages full of them. Great progress was being made in stamping out the new heresy. The Christians would make a fine bright blaze.

The druid looked up at the cages, which were hanging from the boughs of three enormous oak trees, and nodded with satisfaction. His consort, Mahurzda, would find it a hard job strangling so many people. He'd have to help her. It would be a pleasant task.

Once more he nodded. He tested the edge of the sickle he was carrying. Then the druid who had been—would be—would will have been—the Reverend Clem Adelburg hoisted up his long white robe and clambered up in the nearest of the oak trees to cut the sacred mistletoe.

THE BIG PAT BOOM

By Damon Knight

The long, shiny car pulled up with a whirr of turbines and a puff of dust. The sign over the roadside stand read: BASKETS. CURIOS." Farther down, another sign over a glass-fronted rustic building announced: SQUIRE CRAWFORD'S COFFEE MILL. TRY OUR DOUGHNUTS." Beyond that was a pasture, with a barn and silo set back from the road.

The two aliens sat quietly and looked at the signs. They both had hard purplish skins and little yellow eyes. They were wearing gray tweed suits. Their bodies looked approximately human, but you could not see their chins, which were covered by orange scarves.

Martha Crawford came hustling out of the house and into the basket stand, drying her hands on her apron. After her came Llewellyn Crawford, her husband, still chewing his cornflakes.

"Yes, sir—ma'am?" Martha asked nervously. She glanced at Llewellyn for support, and he patted her shoulder. Neither of them had ever seen an alien real close to.

One of the aliens, seeing the Crawfords behind their counter, leisurely got out of the car. He, or it, was puffing a cigar stuck through a hole in the orange scarf.

"Good morning," Mrs. Crawford said nervously. "Baskets? Curios?"

The alien blinked its yellow eyes solemnly. The rest of its face did not change. The scarf hid its chin and mouth, if any. Some said that the aliens had no chins, others that they

had something instead of chins that was so squirmy and awful that no human could bear to look at it. People called them "Hurks" because they came from a place called Zeta Herculis.

The Hurk glanced at the baskets and gimcracks hung over the counter, and puffed its cigar. Then it said, in a blurred but comprehensible voice, "What is that?" It pointed downward with one horny, three-fingered hand.

"The little Indian papoose?" Martha Crawford said, in a voice that rose to a squeak. "Or the birchbark calendar?"

"No, that," said the Hurk, pointing down again. This time, craning over the counter, the Crawfords were able to see that it was looking at a large, disshaped gray something that lay on the ground.

"That?" Llewellyn asked doubtfully.

"That."

Llewellyn Crawford blushed. "Why—that's just a cowpat. One of them cows from the dairy got loose from the herd yesterday, and she must have dropped that there without me noticing."

"How much?"

The Crawfords stared at him, or it, without comprehension. "How much what?" Llewellyn asked finally.

"How much," the alien growled around its cigar, "for the cowpat?"

The Crawfords exchanged glances. "I never *heard*—" said Martha in an undertone, but her husband shushed her. He cleared his throat. "How about ten ce— well, I don't want to cheat you—how about a quarter?"

The alien produced a large change purse, laid a quarter on the counter and grunted something to its companion in the car.

The other alien got out, bringing a square porcelain box and a gold-handled shovel. With the shovel, she—or it—carefully picked up the cowpat and deposited it in the box.

Both aliens then got into the car and drove away, in a whine of turbines and a cloud of dust.

The Crawfords watched them go, then looked at the shiny quarter lying on the counter. Llewellyn picked it up and bounced it in his palm. "Well, say!" He began to smile.

All that week the roads were full of aliens in their long shiny cars. They went everywhere, saw everything, paid their way with bright new-minted coins and crisp paper bills.

There was some talk against the government for letting them in, but they were good for business and made no trouble. Some claimed to be tourists, others said they were sociology students on a field trip.

Llewellyn Crawford went into the adjoining pasture and picked out four cowpats to deposit near his basket stand. When the next Hurk came by, Llewellyn asked, and got, a dollar apiece.

"But why do they *want* them?" Martha wailed.

"What difference does that make?" her husband asked. "*They* want 'em—*we* got 'em! If Ed Lacey calls again about that mortgage payment, tell him not to worry!" He cleared off the counter and arranged the new merchandise on it. He jacked his price up to two dollars, then to five.

Next day he ordered a new sign: COWPATS.

One fall afternoon two years later, Llewellyn Crawford threw his hat in a corner, and sat down hard. He glared over his glasses at the large circular object, tastefully tinted in concentric rings of blue, orange and yellow, which was mounted over the mantelpiece. To the casual eye, this might have been a genuine "Trophy" class pat, a museum piece, painted on the Hurk planet; but in fact, like so many artistic ladies nowadays, Mrs. Crawford had painted and mounted it herself.

"What's the matter, Lew?" she asked apprehensively. She

had a new hairdo and was wearing a New York dress, but looked peaked and anxious.

"Matter!" Llewellyn grunted. "Old man Thomas is a damn fool, that's all. Four hundred dollars a head! Can't buy a cow at a decent price any more."

"Well, Lew, we do have seven herds already, don't we, and—"

"Got to have more to meet the demand, Martha!" said Llewellyn, sitting up. "My heaven, I'd think you could see that. With queen pats bringing up to fifteen dollars, and not enough to go 'round— And fifteen *hundred* for an emperor pat, if you're lucky enough—"

"Funny we never thought there was so many kinds of pats," Martha said dreamily. "The emperor—that's the one with the double whorl?"

Llewellyn grunted, picking up a magazine.

"Seems like a person could kind of—"

A kindly gleam came into Llewellyn's eyes. "Change one around?" he said. "Nope—been tried. I was reading about it in here just yesterday." He held up the current issue of *The American Pat Dealer*, then began to turn the glossy pages. "*Pat-O-Grams*," he read aloud. "*Preserving Your Pats. Dairying—a Profitable Sideline.* Nope. Oh, here it is. *Fake Pats a Flop.* See, it says here some fellow down in Amarillo got hold of an emperor and made a plaster mold. Then he used the mold on a couple of big cull pats—says here they was so perfect you couldn't tell the difference. But the Hurks wouldn't buy. *They* knew."

He threw the magazine down, then turned to stare out the back window toward the sheds. "There's that fool boy just sitting in the yard again. Why ain't he working?" Llewellyn rose, cranked down the louver, shouted through the opening, "You, Delbert! Delbert!" He waited. "Deaf, too," he muttered.

"I'll go tell him you want—" Martha began, struggling out of her apron.

"No, never mind—go myself. Have to keep after 'em every damn minute." Llewellyn marched out the kitchen door and across the yard to where a gangling youth sat on a trolley, slowly eating an apple.

"Delbert!" said Llewellyn, exasperated.

"Oh—hello, Mr. Crawford," said the youth, with a gap-toothed grin. He took a last bite from the apple, then dropped the core. Llewellyn's gaze followed it. Owing to his missing front teeth, Delbert's apple cores were like nothing in this world.

"Why ain't you trucking pats to the stand?" Llewellyn demanded. "I don't pay you to set on no empty trolley, Delbert."

"Took some out this morning," the boy said. "Frank, he told me to take 'em back."

"He what?"

Delbert nodded. "Said he hadn't sold but two. You ask him if I'm lying."

"Do that," Llewellyn grunted. He turned on his heel and strode back across the yard.

Out at the roadside, a long car was parked beside a battered pickup at the pat stand. It pulled out as Llewellyn started toward it, and another one drove up. As he approached the stand, the alien was just getting back in. The car drove off.

Only one customer was left at the stand, a whiskered farmer in a checked shirt. Frank, the attendant, was leaning comfortably on the counter. The display shelves behind him were well filled with pats.

"Morning, Roger," Llewellyn said with well-feigned pleasure. "How's the family? Sell you a nice pat this morning?"

"Well, I don't know," said the whiskered man, rubbing his chin. "My wife's had her eye on that one there—" he pointed to a large, symmetrical pat on the middle shelf— "But at them prices—"

"You can't do better, believe me, Roger. It's an invest-

ment," said Llewellyn earnestly. "Frank, what did that last Hurk buy?"

"Nothing," said Frank. A persistent buzz of music came from the radio in his breast pocket. "Just took a picture of the stand and drove off."

"Well, what did the one before—"

With a whirr of turbines, a long shiny car pulled up behind him. Llewellyn turned. The three aliens in the car were wearing red felt hats with comic buttons sewed all over them, and carried Yale pennants. Confetti was strewn on their gray tweed suits.

One of the Hurks got out and approached the stand, puffing a cigar through the hole in his—or its—orange scarf.

"Yes, sir?" said Llewellyn at once, hands clasped, bending forward slightly. "A nice pat this morning?"

The alien looked at the gray objects behind the counter. He, or it, blinked its yellow eyes and made a curious gurgling noise. After a moment Llewellyn decided that it was laughing.

"What's funny?" he demanded, his smile fading.

"Not funny," said the alien. "I laugh because I am happy. I go home tomorrow—our field trip is over. Okay to take a picture?" He raised a small lensed machine in one purple claw.

"Well, I suppose—" Llewellyn said uncertainly. "Well, you say you're going home? You mean all of you? When will you be coming back?"

"We are not coming back," the alien said. He, or it, pressed the camera, extracted the photograph and looked at it, then grunted and put it away. "We are grateful for an entertaining experience. Good-by." He turned and got into the car. The car drove off in a cloud of dust.

"Like that the whole morning," Frank said. "They don't buy nothing—just take pictures."

Llewellyn felt himself beginning to shake. "Think he means it—they're all going away?"

"Radio said so," Frank replied. "And Ed Coon was through

here this morning from Hortonville. Said *he* ain't sold a pat since day 'fore yesterday."

"Well, I don't understand it," Llewellyn said. "They can't just all quit." His hands were trembling badly, and he put them in his pockets. "Say, Roger," he said to the whiskered man, "now just how much would you want to pay for that pat?"

"Well—"

"It's a ten dollar pat, you know," Llewellyn said, moving closer. His voice had turned solemn. "Prime pat, Roger."

"I know that, but—"

"What would you say to seven FIFTY?"

"Well, I don't know. Might give—say, five."

"Sold," said Llewellyn. "Wrap that one up, Frank."

He watched the whiskered man carry his trophy off to the pickup. "Mark 'em all down, Frank," he said faintly. "Get whatever you can."

The long day's debacle was almost over. Arms around each other, Llewellyn and Martha Crawford watched the last of the crowd leaving the pat stand. Frank was cleaning up. Delbert, leaning against the side of the stand, was eating an apple.

"It's the end of the world, Martha," Llewellyn said huskily. Tears stood in his eyes. "Prime pats, going two for a nickel!"

Headlights blinding in the dusk, a long, low car came nosing up to the pat stand. In it were two green creatures in raincoats, with feathery antennae that stood up through holes in their blue pork-pie hats. One of them got out and approached the pat stand with a curious scuttling motion. Delbert gaped, dropping his apple core.

"Serps!" Frank hissed, leaning over the stand toward Llewellyn. "Heard about 'em on the radio. From Gamma Serpentis, radio said."

The green creature was inspecting the half-bare shelves. Horny lids flickered across its little bright eyes.

"Pat, sir—ma'am?" Llewellyn asked nervously. "Not many left right now, but—"

"What is *that?*" the Serp asked in a rustling voice, pointing downward with one claw.

The Llewellyns looked. The Serp was pointing to a misshapen, knobby something that lay beside Delbert's boot.

"That there?" Delbert asked, coming partially to life. "That's an apple core." He glanced across to Llewellyn, and a gleam of intelligence seemed to come into his eyes. "Mr. Crawford, I quit," he said clearly. Then he turned to the alien. "That's a *Delbert Smith* apple core," he said.

Frozen, Llewellyn watched the Serp pull out a billfold and scuttle forward. Money changed hands. Delbert produced another apple and began enthusiastically reducing it to a core.

"Say, Delbert," said Llewellyn, stepping away from Martha. His voice squeaked, and he cleared his throat. "Looks like we got a good little thing going here. Now, if you was smart, you'd rent this pat stand—"

"Nope, Mr. Crawford," said Delbert indistinctly, with his mouth full of apple. "Figure I'll go over to my uncle's place. He's got an orchard."

The Serp was hovering nearby, watching the apple core and uttering little squeals of appreciation.

"Got to be close to your source of *supply*, you know," said Delbert, wagging his head wisely.

Speechless, Llewellyn felt a tug at his sleeve. He looked down: it was Ed Lacey, the banker.

"Say, Lew, I tried to get you all afternoon, but your phone didn't answer. About your collateral on those loans . . ."

THE SEVENTH GALAXY READER

EDITED BY FREDERIK POHL