ORIGINALS

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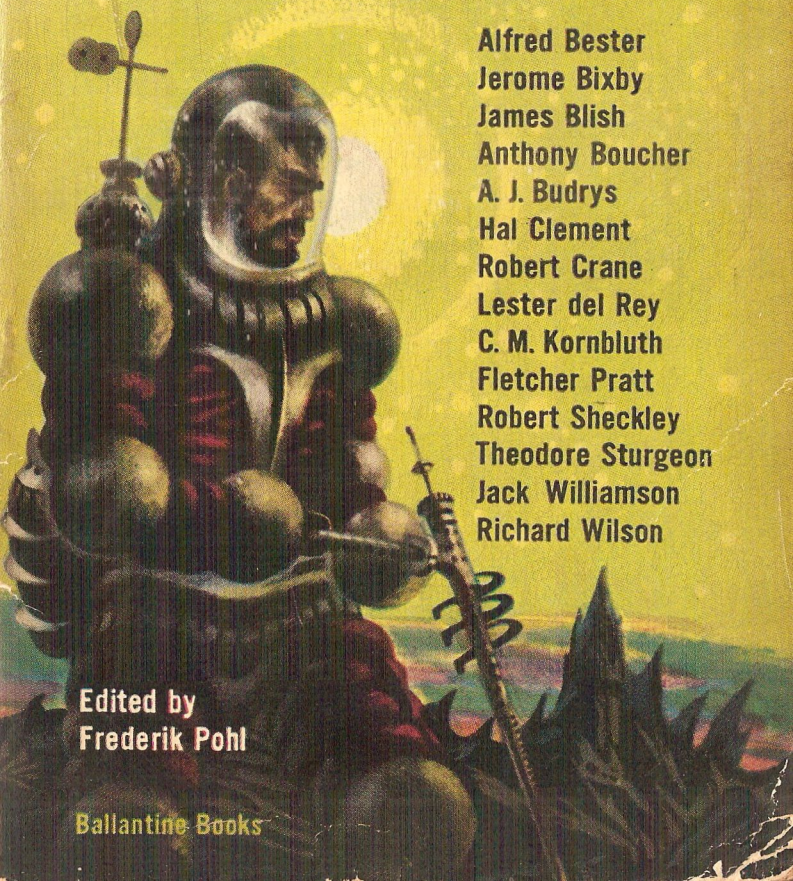
14 Stories Never Before Published-Anywhere

STAR science fiction stories no. 2

Alfred Bester
Jerome Bixby
James Blish
Anthony Boucher
A. J. Budrys
Hal Clement
Robert Crane
Lester del Rey
C. M. Kornbluth
Fletcher Pratt
Robert Sheckley
Theodore Sturgeon
Jack Williamson
Richard Wilson



Edited by
Frederik Pohl

Ballantine Books

ALFRED BESTER

tells a fiery and funny time-travel story of a future America

THEODORE STURGEON

draws a moving portrait of a lost visitor from afar

LESTER DEL REY

recounts the odd and haunting affair of a robot's effect on a marriage

ANTHONY BOUCHER

depicts explorers' adventures on a planet where the man-animal relationship is reversed

. . . and there are ten other first-rate stories of worlds near and far, now and in the future—told not only with imagination and excitement but with fine writing and characterization.

The first volume of STAR SCIENCE FICTION STORIES was called a "prime-quality collection" by *The New York Times* and was a tremendous success. We are confident that the second volume will win still more friends for the fastest-growing field of modern writing —science fiction.

None of these stories has ever appeared in print before.

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Editor's Note

One of the pleasures (there are many) of making a living out of science fiction is this: You get to read so many good stories. This, it is true, was not always so. There was a time when science fiction wore many of the trappings of a cult, and a small one at that; its readers were a devoted but tiny handful; its writers were mostly young and almost invariably amateur, and about as soon as they had begun to acquire skill enough to tell a story really well, they abandoned science fiction in favor of "serious" work. Some, like Nathan Schachner (whose brilliant biographies belong in every library), seem lost to us forever; others, happily, have come back. (Witness such repatriates as Kuttner and Kornbluth, who effectively gave up science fiction in order to produce pace-setting mysteries and detective stories; or Fletcher Pratt, who took a prolonged recess to create some of the finest short histories around; or Murray Leinster and John Wyndham, who spent their sabbaticals in the "slick" magazines.)

It was a hard time for science-fiction editors. After reading enormous quantities of what can only be called drivel they might be fortunate enough to find one flickering gleam of talent; by the time it was fanned into flame, they could rely on the conviction that it would be illuminating some other field of writing.

But now—praise be to Klono, brazen god of spacemen!—things are different. Editors still find talent flickering in the mass of unsolicited material, and the writers who show it still develop their powers from weak beginnings to a solid capacity for serious work. But now they don't have to go afield to do it; when they are ready for serious work, they do it right in the science-fiction field.

And they do it very well—as I hope you will agree when you have read the fourteen new stories that follow. Most of the top-ranking writers in science fiction permitted your editor to read their newest and best work to make this selection,

not one story of which has ever appeared in print before, and my deepest regret is that we hadn't space to include twice as many stories as are here presented.

To the fourteen writers represented, and to the many others who could not be fitted in, sincere thanks are due from——

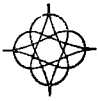
Frederik Pohl.

Contents

ALFRED BESTER

When the science-fiction readers assembled in convention last year in Philadelphia, a ballot was held to select the best science-fiction magazine, best short story and best novel in the field for the year 1953. Some of the voting was close; in one case, at least, so close that duplicate prizes were awarded. But in the "Best Novel" category only one book counted: The Demolished Man, *a brilliant trail-blazing job by Alfred Bester, which won the award in a walk. Playwright and radio-scripter as well as novelist, the energetic Mr. Bester demonstrates to any doubters that he is master of the short-story form as well with——*

Disappearing Act



This one wasn't the last war or a war to end war. They called it the War for the American Dream. General Carpenter struck that note and sounded it constantly.

There are fighting generals (vital to an army), political generals (vital to an administration), and public relations generals (vital to a war). General Carpenter was a master of public relations. Forthright and Four-Square, he had ideals as high and as understandable as the mottoes on money. In the mind of America he *was* the army, the administration, the nation's shield and sword and stout right arm. His ideal was the American Dream.

"We are not fighting for money, for power, or for world domination," General Carpenter announced at the Press Association dinner.

"We are fighting solely for the American Dream," he said to the 137th Congress.

"Our aim is not aggression or the reduction of nations to slavery," he said at the West Point Annual Officer's Dinner.

"We are fighting for the meaning of civilization," he told the San Francisco Pioneers' Club.

"We are struggling for the ideal of civilization; for culture, for poetry, for the Only Things Worth Preserving," he said at the Chicago Wheat Pit Festival.

"This is a war for survival," he said. "We are not fighting for ourselves, but for our dreams; for the Better Things in Life which must not disappear from the face of the earth."

America fought. General Carpenter asked for one hundred million men. The army was given one hundred million men. General Carpenter asked for ten thousand H-Bombs. Ten thousand H-Bombs were delivered and dropped. The enemy also dropped ten thousand H-Bombs and destroyed most of America's cities.

"We must dig in against the hordes of barbarism," General Carpenter said. "Give me a thousand engineers."

One thousand engineers were forthcoming, and a hundred cities were dug and hollowed out beneath the rubble.

"Give me five hundred sanitation experts, three hundred traffic managers, two hundred air-conditioning experts, one hundred city managers, one thousand communication chiefs, seven hundred personnel experts . . ."

The list of General Carpenter's demand for technical experts was endless. America did not know how to supply them.

"We must become a nation of experts," General Carpenter informed the National Association of American Universities. "Every man and woman must be a specific tool for a specific job, hardened and sharpened by your training and education to win the fight for the American Dream."

"Our Dream," General Carpenter said at the Wall Street Bond Drive Breakfast, "is at one with the gentle Greeks of Athens, with the noble Romans of . . . er . . . Rome. It is a dream of the Better Things in Life. Of music and art and poetry and culture. Money is only a weapon to be used in the fight for this dream. Ambition is only a ladder to climb to this dream. Ability is only a tool to shape this dream."

Wall Street applauded. General Carpenter asked for one hundred and fifty billion dollars, fifteen hundred ambitious dollar-a-year men, three thousand able experts in mineralogy, petrology, mass production, chemical warfare and air-traffic time study. They were delivered. The country was in high gear. General Carpenter had only to press a button and an expert would be delivered.

In March of A.D. 2112 the war came to a climax and the American Dream was resolved, not on any one of the seven fronts where millions of men were locked in bitter combat, not in any of the staff headquarters or any of the capitals of the warring nations, not in any of the production centers spewing forth arms and supplies, but in Ward T of the United States Army Hospital buried three hundred feet below what had once been St. Albans, New York.

Ward T was something of a mystery at St. Albans. Like any army hospital, St. Albans was organized with specific wards reserved for specific injuries. All right arm amputees were gathered in one ward, all left arm amputees in another. Radiation burns, head injuries, eviscerations, secondary gamma poisonings and so on were each assigned their specific location in the hospital organization. The Army Medical Corps had designated nineteen classes of combat injury which included every possible kind of damage to brain and tissue. These used up letters A to S. What, then, was in Ward T?

No one knew. The doors were double locked. No visitors were permitted to enter. No patients were permitted to leave. Physicians were seen to arrive and depart. Their perplexed expressions stimulated the wildest speculations but revealed nothing. The nurses who ministered to Ward T were questioned eagerly but they were close-mouthed.

There were dribs and drabs of information, unsatisfying and self-contradictory. A charwoman asserted that she had been in to clean up and there had been no one in the ward. Absolutely no one. Just two dozen beds and nothing else. Had the beds been slept in? Yes. They were rumpled, some of them. Were there signs of the ward being in use? Oh yes. Personal things on the tables and so on. But dusty, kind of. Like they hadn't been used in a long time.

Public opinion decided it was a ghost ward. For spooks only.

But a night orderly reported passing the locked ward and hearing singing from within. What kind of singing? Foreign language, like. What language? The orderly couldn't say. Some of the words sounded like . . . well, like: Cow dee on us eager tour . . .

Public opinion started to run a fever and decided it was an alien ward. For spies only.

St. Albans enlisted the help of the kitchen staff and checked the food trays. Twenty-four trays went in to Ward T three times a day. Twenty-four came out. Sometimes the returning trays were emptied. Most times they were untouched.

Public opinion built up pressure and decided that Ward T was a racket. It was an informal club for goldbricks and staff grafters who caroused within. Cow dee on us eager tour indeed!

For gossip, a hospital can put a small town sewing circle to shame with ease, but sick people are easily goaded into passion by trivia. It took just three months for idle speculation to turn into downright fury. In January, 2112, St. Albans was a sound, well-run hopsital. By March, 2112, St. Albans was in a ferment, and the psychological unrest found its way into the official records. The percentage of recoveries fell off. Malingering set in. Petty infractions increased. Mutinies flared. There was a staff shake-up. It did no good. Ward T was inciting the patients to riot. There was another shake-up, and another, and still the unrest fumed.

The news finally reached General Carpenter's desk through official channels.

"In our fight for the American Dream," he said, "we must not ignore those who have already given of themselves. Send me a Hospital Administration expert."

The expert was delivered. He could do nothing to heal St. Albans. General Carpenter read the reports and broke him.

"Pity," said General Carpenter, "is the first ingredient of civilization. Send me a Surgeon General."

A Surgeon General was delivered. He could not break the fury of St. Albans and General Carpenter broke him. But by this time Ward T was being mentioned in the dispatches.

"Send me," General Carpenter said, "the expert in charge of Ward T."

St. Albans sent a doctor, Captain Edsel Dimmock. He was a stout young man, already bald, only three years out of medical school but with a fine record as an expert in psychotherapy. General Carpenter liked experts. He liked Dimmock. Dimmock adored the general as the spokesman for a culture which he had been too specially trained to seek up to now, but which he hoped to enjoy after the war was won.

"Now look here, Dimmock," General Carpenter began. "We're all of us tools, today—sharpened and hardened to do a specific job. You know our motto: A job for everyone and everyone on the job. Somebody's not on the job at Ward T and we've got to kick him out. Now, in the first place what the hell is Ward T?"

Dimmock stuttered and fumbled. Finally he explained that it was a special ward set up for special combat cases. Shock cases.

"Then you do have patients in the ward?"

"Yes, sir. Ten women and fourteen men."

Carpenter brandished a sheaf of reports. "Says here the St. Albans patients claim nobody's in Ward T."

Dimmock was shocked. That was untrue, he assured the general.

"All right, Dimmock. So you've got your twenty-four crocks in there. Their job's to get well. Your job's to cure them. What the hell's upsetting the hospital about that?"

"W-Well, sir. Perhaps it's because we keep them locked up."

"You keep Ward T locked?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"To keep the patients in, General Carpenter."

"Keep 'em in? What d'you mean? Are they trying to get out? They violent, or something?"

"No, sir. Not violent."

"Dimmock, I don't like your attitude. You're acting damned sneaky and evasive. And I'll tell you something else I don't like. That T classification. I checked with a Filing Expert from the Medical Corps and there is no T classification. What the hell are you up to at St. Albans?"

"W-Well, sir . . . We invented the T classification. It . . . They . . . They're rather special cases, sir. We don't know what to do about them or how to handle them. W-We've been trying to keep it quiet until we've worked out a modus operandi, but it's brand new, General Carpenter. Brand new!" Here the expert in Dimmock triumphed over discipline. "It's sensational. It'll make medical history, by God! It's the biggest damned thing ever."

"What is it, Dimmock? Be specific."

"Well, sir, they're shock cases. Blanked out. Almost catatonic. Very little respiration. Slow pulse. No response."

"I've seen thousands of shock cases like that," Carpenter grunted. "What's so unusual?"

"Yes, sir. So far it sounds like the standard Q or R classification. But here's something unusual. They don't eat and they don't sleep."

"Never?"

"Some of them never."

"Then why don't they die?"

"We don't know. The metabolism cycle's broken, but only on the anabolism side. Catabolism continues. In other words, sir, they're eliminating waste products but they're not taking anything in. They're eliminating fatigue poisons and rebuilding worn tissue, but without sleep. God knows how. It's fantastic."

"That why you've got them locked up? Mean to say . . . D'you suspect them of stealing food and cat naps somewhere else?"

"N-No, sir." Dimmock looked shamefaced. "I don't know how to tell you this, General Carpenter. I . . . We lock them up because of the real mystery. They . . . Well, they disappear."

"They what?"

"They disappear, sir. Vanish. Right before your eyes."

"The hell you say."

"I do say, sir. They'll be sitting on a bed or standing around. One minute you see them, the next minute you don't. Sometimes there's two dozen in Ward T. Other times none. They disappear and reappear without rhyme or reason. That's why we've got the ward locked, General Carpenter. In the entire history of combat and combat injury there's never been a case like this before. We don't know how to handle it."

"Bring me three of those cases," General Carpenter said.

* * *

Nathan Riley ate french toast, eggs benedict; consumed two quarts of brown ale, smoked a John Drew, belched delicately and arose from the breakfast table. He nodded quietly to Gentleman Jim Corbett, who broke off his conversation with Diamond Jim Brady to intercept him on the way to the cashier's desk.

"Who do you like for the pennant this year, Nat?" Gentleman Jim inquired.

"The Dodgers," Nathan Riley answered.

"They've got no pitching."

"They've got Snider and Furillo and Campanella. They'll take the pennant this year, Jim. I'll bet they take it earlier than any team ever did. By September 13th. Make a note. See if I'm right."

"You're always right, Nat," Corbett said.

Riley smiled, paid his check, sauntered out into the street and caught a horsecar bound for Madison Square Garden. He got off at the corner of 50th and Eighth Avenue and walked upstairs to a handbook office over a radio repair shop. The bookie glanced at him, produced an envelope and counted out fifteen thousand dollars.

"Rocky Marciano by a TKO over Roland La Starza in the eleventh," he said. "How the hell do you call them so accurate, Nat?"

"That's the way I make a living," Riley smiled. "Are you making book on the elections?"

"Eisenhower twelve to five. Stevenson——"

"Never mind Adlai." Riley placed twenty thousand dollars on the counter. "I'm backing Ike. Get this down for me."

He left the handbook office and went to his suite in the Waldorf where a tall, thin young man was waiting for him anxiously.

"Oh yes," Nathan Riley said. "You're Ford, aren't you? Harold Ford?"

"Henry Ford, Mr. Riley."

And you need financing for that machine in your bicycle shop. What's it called?"

"I call it an Ipsimobile, Mr. Riley."

"Hmmm. Can't say I like that name. Why not call it an automobile?"

"That's a wonderful suggestion, Mr. Riley. I'll certainly take it."

"I like you, Henry. You're young, eager, adaptable. I believe in your future and I believe in your automobile. I'll invest two hundred thousand dollars in your company."

Riley wrote a check and ushered Henry Ford out. He glanced at his watch and suddenly felt impelled to go back and look around for a moment. He entered his bedroom, undressed, put on a gray shirt and gray slacks. Across the pocket of the shirt were large blue leters: U.S.A.H.

He locked the bedroom door and disappeared.

He reappeared in Ward T of the United States Army Hospital in St. Albans, standing alongside his bed which was one of twenty-four lining the walls of a long, light steel barracks. Before he could draw another breath, he was seized by three pairs of hands. Before he could struggle, he was shot by a pneumatic syringe and poleaxed by 1½ cc of sodium thiomorphate.

"We've got one," someone said.

"Hang around," someone else answered. "General Carpenter said he wanted three."

* * *

After Marcus Junius Brutus left her bed, Lela Machan clapped her hands. Her slave women entered the chamber

and prepared her bath. She bathed, dressed, scented herself and breakfasted on Smyrna figs, Rose oranges and a flagon of Lachryma Christi. Then she smoked a cigarette and ordered her litter.

The gates of her house were crowded as usual by adoring hordes from the Twentieth Legion. Two centurions removed her chair-bearers from the poles of the litter and bore her on their stout shoulders. Lela Machan smiled. A young man in a sapphire-blue cloak thrust through the mob and ran toward her. A knife flashed in his hand. Lela braced herself to meet death bravely.

"Lady!" he cried. "Lady Lela!"

He slashed his left arm with the knife and let the crimson blood stain her robe.

"This blood of mine is the least I have to give you," he cried.

Lela touched his forehead gently.

"Silly boy," she murmured. "Why?"

"For love of you, my lady."

"You will be admitted tonight at nine," Lela whispered. He stared at her until she laughed. "I promise you. What is your name, pretty boy?"

"Ben Hur."

"Tonight at nine, Ben Hur."

The litter moved on. Outside the forum, Julius Caesar passed in hot argument with Marcus Antonius Antony. When he saw the litter he motioned sharply to the centurions, who stopped at once. Caesar swept back the curtains and stared at Lela, who regarded him languidly. Caesar's face twitched.

"Why?" he asked hoarsely. "I have begged, pleaded, bribed, wept, and all without forgiveness. Why, Lela? Why?"

"Do you remember Boadicea?" Lela murmured.

"Boadicea? Queen of the Britons? Good God, Lela, what can she mean to our love? I did not love Boadicea. I merely defeated her in battle."

"And killed her, Caesar."

"She poisoned herself, Lela."

"She was my mother, Caesar!" Suddenly Lela pointed

her finger at Caesar. "Murderer. You will be punished. Beware the Ides of March, Caesar!"

Caesar recoiled in horror. The mob of admirers that had gathered around Lela uttered a shout of approval. Amidst a rain of rose petals and violets she continued on her way across the Forum to the Temple of the Vestal Virgins where she abandoned her adoring suitors and entered the sacred temple.

Before the altar she genuflected, intoned a prayer, dropped a pinch of incense on the altar flame and disrobed. She examined her beautiful body reflected in a silver mirror, then experienced a momentary twinge of homesickness. She put on a gray blouse and a gray pair of slacks. Across the pocket of the blouse was lettered U.S.A.H.

She smiled once at the altar and disappeared.

She reappeared in Ward T of the United States Army Hospital where she was instantly felled by 1½ cc of sodium thiomorphate injected subcutaneously by a pneumatic syringe.

"That's two," somebody said.

"One more to go."

* * *

George Hanmer paused dramatically and stared around . . . at the opposition benches, at the Speaker on the woolsack, at the silver mace on a crimson cushion before the Speaker's chair. The entire House of Parliament, hypnotized by Hanmer's fiery oratory, waited breathlessly for him to continue.

"I can say no more," Hanmer said at last. His voice was choked with emotion. His face was blanched and grim. "I will fight for this bill at the beachheads. I will fight in the cities, the towns, the fields and the hamlets. I will fight for this bill to the death and, God willing, I will fight for it after death. Whether this be a challenge or a prayer, let the consciences of the right honorable gentlemen determine; but of one thing I am sure and determined: England must own the Suez Canal."

Hanmer sat down. The house exploded. Through the cheering and applause he made his way out into the division lobby where Gladstone, Canning and Peel stopped him to shake his hand. Lord Palmerston eyed him coldly, but Pam was shouldered aside by Disraeli who limped up, all enthusiasm, all admiration.

"We'll have a bite at Tattersall's," Dizzy said. "My car's waiting."

Lady Beaconfield was in the Rolls Royce outside the Houses of Parliament. She pinned a primrose on Dizzy's lapel and patted Hanmer's cheek affectionately.

"You've come a long way from the schoolboy who used to bully Dizzy, Georgie," she said.

Hanmer laughed. Dizzy sang: *"Gaudeamus igitur . . ."* and Hanmer chanted the ancient scholastic song until they reached Tattersall's. There Dizzy ordered Guinness and grilled bones while Hanmer went upstairs in the club to change.

For no reason at all he had the impulse to go back for a last look. Perhaps he hated to break with his past completely. He divested himself of his surtout, nankeen waistcoat, pepper and salt trousers, polished Hessians and undergarments. He put on a gray shirt and gray trousers and disappeared.

He reappeared in Ward T of the St. Albans hospital where he was rendered unconscious by 1½ cc of sodium thiomorphate.

"That's three," somebody said.

"Take 'em to Carpenter."

* * *

So there they sat in General Carpenter's office, PFC Nathan Riley, M/Sgt Lela Machan, and Corp/2 George Hanmer. They were in their hospital grays. They were torpid with sodium thiomorphate.

The office had been cleared and it blazed with blinding light. Present were experts from Espionage, Counter-Espionage, Security and Central Intelligence. When Captain Edsel Dimmock saw the steel-faced ruthless squad

awaiting the patients and himself, he started. General Carpenter smiled grimly.

"Didn't occur to you that we mightn't buy your disappearance story, eh Dimmock?"

"S-Sir?"

"I'm an expert too, Dimmock. I'll spell it out for you. The war's going badly. Very badly. There've been intelligence leaks. The St. Albans mess might point to you."

"B-But they do disappear, sir. I——"

"My experts want to talk to you and your patients about this disappearance act, Dimmock. They'll start with you."

The experts worked over Dimmock with preconscious softeners, id releases and superego blocks. They tried every truth serum in the books and every form of physical and mental pressure. They brought Dimmock, squealing, to the breaking point three times, but there was nothing to break.

"Let him stew for now," Carpenter said. "Get on to the patients."

The experts appeared reluctant to apply pressure to the sick men and the woman.

"For God's sake, don't be squeamish," Carpenter raged. "We're fighting a war for civilization. We've got to protect our ideals no matter what the price. Get to it!"

The experts from Espionage, Counter-Espionage, Security and Central Intelligence got to it. Like three candles, PFC Nathan Riley, M/Sgt Lela Machan and Corp/2 George Hanmer snuffed out and disappeared. One moment they were seated in chairs surrounded by violence. The next moment they were not.

The experts gasped. General Carpenter did the handsome thing. He stalked to Dimmock. "Captain Dimmock, I apologize. Colonel Dimmock, you've been promoted for making an important discovery . . . only what the hell does it mean? We've got to check ourselves first."

Carpenter snapped up the intercom. "Get me a combat-shock expert and an alienist."

The two experts entered and were briefed. They examined the witnesses. They considered.

"You're all suffering from a mild case of shock," the combat-shock expert said. "War jitters."

"You mean we didn't see them disappear?"

The shock expert shook his head and glanced at the alienist who also shook his head.

"Mass illusion," the alienist said.

At that moment PFC Riley, M/Sgt Machan and Corp/2 Hanmer reappeared. One moment they were a mass illusion; the next, they were back sitting in their chairs surrounded by confusion.

"Dope 'em again, Dimmock," Carpenter cried. "Give 'em a gallon." He snapped up his intercom. "I want every expert we've got. Emergency meeting in my office at once."

Thirty-seven experts, hardened and sharpened tools all, inspected the unconscious shock cases and discussed them for three hours. Certain facts were obvious: This must be a new fantastic syndrome brought on by the new and fantastic horrors of the war. As combat technique develops, the response of victims of this technique must also take new roads. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Agreed.

This new syndrome must involve some aspects of teleportation . . . the power of mind over space. Evidently combat shock, while destroying certain known powers of the mind must develop other latent powers hitherto unknown. Agreed.

Obviously, the patients must only be able to return to the point of departure, otherwise they would not continue to return to Ward T nor would they have returned to General Carpenter's office. Agreed.

Obviously, the patients must be able to procure food and sleep wherever they go, since neither was required in Ward T. Agreed.

"One small point," Colonel Dimmock said. "They seem to be returning to Ward T less frequently. In the beginning they would come and go every day or so. Now most of them stay away for weeks and hardly ever return."

"Never mind that," Carpenter said. "Where do they go?"

"Do they teleport behind the enemy lines?" someone asked. "There's those intelligence leaks."

"I want Intelligence to check," Carpenter snapped. "Is the enemy having similar difficulties with, say, prisoners of

war who appear and disappear from their POW camps? They might be some of ours from Ward T."

"They might simply be going home," Colonel Dimmock suggested.

"I want Security to check," Carpenter ordered. "Cover the home life and associations of every one of those twenty-four disappearers. Now . . . about our operations in Ward T. Colonel Dimmock has a plan."

"We'll set up six extra beds in Ward T," Edsel Dimmock explained. "We'll send in six experts to live there and observe. Information must be picked up indirectly from the patients. They're catatonic and nonresponsive when conscious, and incapable of answering questions when drugged."

"Gentlemen," Carpenter summed it up. "This is the greatest potential weapon in the history of warfare. I don't have to tell you what it can mean to us to be able to teleport an entire army behind enemy lines. We can win the war for the American Dream in one day if we can win this secret hidden in those shattered minds. We must win!"

* * *

The experts hustled, Security checked, Intelligence probed. Six hardened and sharpened tools moved into Ward T in St. Albans Hospital and slowly got acquainted with the disappearing patients who appeared and departed less and less frequently. The tension increased.

Security was able to report that not one case of strange appearance had taken place in America in the past year. Intelligence reported that the enemy did not seem to be having similar difficulties with their own shock cases or with POWs.

Carpenter fretted. "This is all brand new. We've got no specialists to handle it. We've got to develop new tools." He snapped up his intercom. "Get me a college," he said.

They got him Yale.

"I want some experts in mind over matter. Develop them," Carpenter ordered. Yale at once introduced three

graduate courses in Thaumaturgy, Extra Sensory Perception and Telekinesis.

The first break came when one of the Ward T experts requested the assistance of another expert. He wanted a Lapidary.

"What the hell for?" Carpenter wanted to know.

"He picked up a reference to a gem stone," Colonel Dimmock explained. "He can't relate it to anything in his experience. He's a personnel specialist."

"And he's not supposed to," Carpenter said approvingly. "A job for every man and every man on the job." He flipped up the intercom. "Get me a Lapidary."

An expert Lapidary was given leave of absence from the army arsenal and asked to identify a type of diamond called Jim Brady. He could not.

"We'll try it from another angle," Carpenter said. He snapped up his intercom. "Get me a Semanticist."

The Semanticist left his desk in the War Propaganda Department but could make nothing of the words Jim Brady. They were names to him. No more. He suggested a Genealogist.

A Genealogist was given one day's leave from his post with the Un-American Ancestors Committee but could make nothing of the name Brady beyond the fact that it had been a common name in America for five hundred years. He suggested an Archaeologist.

An Archaeologist was released from the Cartography Division of Invasion Command and instantly identified the name Diamond Jim Brady. It was a historic personage who had been famous in the city of Little Old New York some time between Governor Peter Stuyvesant and Governor Fiorello La Guardia.

"Christ!" Carpenter marveled. "That's centuries ago. Where the hell did Nathan Riley get that? You'd better join the experts in Ward T and follow this up."

The Archaeologist followed it up, checked his references and sent in his report. Carpenter read it and was stunned. He called an emergency meeting of his staff of experts.

"Gentlemen," he announced, "Ward T is something bigger than teleportation. Those shock patients are doing

something far more incredible . . . far more meaningful. Gentlemen, they're traveling through time."

The staff rustled uncertainly. Carpenter nodded emphatically.

"Yes, gentlemen. Time travel is here. It has not arrived the way we expected it . . . as a result of expert research by qualified specialists; it has come as a plague . . . an infection . . . a disease of the war . . . a result of combat injury to ordinary men. Before I continue, look through these reports for documentation."

The staff read the stenciled sheets. PFC Nathan Riley . . . disappearing into the early twentieth century in New York; M/Sgt Lela Machan . . . visiting the first century in Rome; Corp/2 George Hanmer . . . journeying into the nineteenth century in England. And all the rest of the twenty-four patients, escaping the turmoil and horrors of modern war in the twenty-second century by fleeing to Venice and the Doges, to Jamaica and the buccaneers, to China and the Han Dynasty, to Norway and Eric the Red, to any place and any time in the world.

"I needn't point out the colossal significance of this discovery," General Carpenter pointed out. "Think what it would mean to the war if we could send an army back in time a week or a month or a year. We could win the war before it started. We could protect our Dream . . . poetry and beauty and the fine culture of America . . . from barbarism without ever endangering it."

The staff tried to grapple with the problem of winning battles before they started.

"The situation is complicated by the fact that these men and women of Ward T are *non compos*. They may or may not know how they do what they do, but in any case they're incapable of communicating with the experts who could reduce this miracle to method. It's for us to find the key. They can't help us."

The hardened and sharpened specialists looked around uncertainly.

"We'll need experts," General Carpenter said.

The staff relaxed. They were on familiar ground again.

"We'll need a Cerebral Mechanist, a Cyberneticist, a

Psychiatrist, an Anatomist, an Archaeologist and a first-rate Historian. They'll go into that ward and they won't come out until their job is done. They must get the technique of time travel."

* * *

The first five experts were easy to draft from other war departments. All America was a tool chest of hardened and sharpened specialists. But there was trouble locating a first-class Historian until the Federal Penitentiary operated with the army and released Dr. Bradley Scrim from his twenty years at hard labor. Dr. Scrim was acid and jagged. He had held the chair of Philosophic History at a Western university until he spoke his mind about the war for the American Dream. That got him the twenty years hard.

Scrim was still intransigent, but induced to play ball by the intriguing problem of Ward T.

"But I'm not an expert," he snapped. "In this benighted nation of experts, I'm the last singing grasshopper in the ant heap."

Carpenter snapped up the intercom. "Get me an Entomologist," he said.

"Don't bother," Scrim said. "I'll translate. You're a nest of ants . . . all working and toiling and specializing. For what?"

"To preserve the American Dream," Carpenter answered hotly. "We're fighting for poetry and culture and education and the Finer Things in Life."

"You're fighting to preserve me," Scrim said. "That's what I've devoted my life to. And what do you do with me? Put me in jail."

"You were convicted of enemy sympathizing and fellow-traveling," Carpenter said.

"I was convicted of believing in the American Dream," Scrim said. "Which is another way of saying I had a mind of my own."

Scrim was also intransigent in Ward T. He stayed one

night, enjoyed three good meals, read the reports, threw them down and began hollering to be let out.

"There's a job for everyone and everyone must be on the job," Colonel Dimmock told him. "You don't come out until you've got the secret of time travel."

"There's no secret I can get," Scrim said.

"Do they travel in time?"

"Yes and no."

"The answer has to be one or the other. Not both. You're evading the——"

"Look," Scrim interrupted wearily. "What are you an expert in?"

"Psychotherapy."

"Then how the hell can you understand what I'm talking about? This is a philosophic concept. I tell you there's no secret here that the army can use. There's no secret any group can use. It's a secret for individuals only."

"I don't understand you."

"I didn't think you would. Take me to Carpenter."

They took Scrim to Carpenter's office where he grinned at the general malignantly, looking for all the world like a red-headed, underfed devil.

"I'll need ten minutes," Scrim said. "Can you spare them out of your tool box?"

Carpenter nodded.

"Now listen carefully. I'm going to give you all the clues to something vast, so strange, so new, that it will need all your fine edge to cut into it."

Carpenter looked expectant.

"Nathan Riley goes back in time to the early twentieth century. There he lives the life of his fondest dreams. He's a big-time gambler, the friend of Diamond Jim Brady and others. He wins money betting on events because he always knows the outcome in advance. He won money betting on Eisenhower to win an election. He won money betting on a prize fighter named Marciano to beat another prize fighter named La Starza. He made money investing in an automobile company owned by Henry Ford. There are the clues. They mean anything to you?"

"Not without a Sociological Analyst," Carpenter answered. He reached for the intercom.

"Don't bother. I'll explain. Let's try some more clues. Lela Machan, for example. She escapes into the Roman empire where she lives the life of her dreams as a *femme fatale*. Every man loves her. Julius Caesar, Brutus, the entire Twentieth Legion, a man named Ben Hur. Do you see the fallacy?"

"No."

"She also smokes cigarettes."

"Well?" Carpenter asked after a pause.

"I continue," Scrim said. "George escapes into England of the nineteenth century where he's a member of parliament and the friend of Gladstone, Canning and Disraeli, who takes him riding in his Rolls Royce. Do you know what a Rolls Royce is?"

"No."

"It was the name of an automobile."

"So?"

"You don't understand yet?"

"No."

Scrim paced the floor in exaltation. "Carpenter, this is a bigger discovery than teleportation or time travel. This can be the salvation of man. I don't think I'm exaggerating. Those two dozen shock victims in Ward T have been H-Bombed into something so gigantic that it's no wonder your specialists and experts can't understand it."

"What the hell's bigger than time travel, Scrim?"

"Listen to this, Carpenter. Eisenhower did not run for office until the middle of the twentieth century. Nathan Riley could not have been a friend of Diamond Jim Brady's and bet on Eisenhower to win an election . . . not simultaneously. Brady was dead a quarter of a century before Ike was President. Marciano defeated La Starza fifty years after Henry Ford started his automobile company. Nathan Riley's time traveling is full of similar anchronisms."

Carpenter looked puzzled.

"Lela Machan could not have had Ben Hur for a lover. Ben Hur never existed in Rome. He never existed at all. He was a character in a novel. She couldn't have smoked.

They didn't have tobacco then. You see? More anachronisms. Disraeli could never have taken George Hanmer for a ride in a Rolls Royce because automobiles weren't invented until long after Disraeli's death."

"The hell you say," Carpenter exclaimed. "You mean they're all lying?"

"No. Don't forget, they don't need sleep. They don't need food. They're not lying. They're going back in time all right. They're eating and sleeping back there."

"But you just said their stories don't stand up. They're full of anachronisms."

"Because they travel back into a time of their own imagination. Nathan Riley has his own picture of what America was like in the early twentieth century. It's faulty and anachronistic because he's no scholar; but it's real for him. He can live there. The same is true for the others."

Carpenter goggled.

"The concept is almost beyond understanding. These people have discovered how to turn dreams into reality. They know how to enter their dream realities. They can stay there, live there, perhaps forever. My God, Carpenter, *this* is your American dream. It's miracle-working, immortality, Godlike creation, mind over matter . . . It must be explored. It must be studied. It must be given to the world."

"Can you do it, Scrim?"

"No, I cannot. I'm a historian. I'm noncreative, so it's beyond me. You need a poet . . . a man who understands the creation of dreams. From creating dreams on paper or canvas it oughtn't to be too difficult to take the step to creating dreams in actuality."

"A poet? Are you serious?"

"Certainly I'm serious. Don't you know what a poet is? You've been telling us for five years that this war is being fought to save the poets."

"Don't be facetious, Scrim, I——"

"Send a poet into Ward T. He'll learn how they do it. He's the only man who can. A poet is half doing it anyway. Once he learns, he can teach your psychologists and anatomists. Then they can teach us; but the poet is the only

man who can interpret between those shock cases and your experts."

"I believe you're right, Scrim."

"Then don't delay, Carpenter. Those patients are returning to this world less and less frequently. We've got to get at that secret before they disappear forever. Send a poet to Ward T."

Carpenter snapped up his intercom. "Send me a poet," he said.

He waited, and waited . . . and waited . . . while America sorted feverishly through its two hundred and ninety millions of hardened and sharpened experts, its specialized tools to defend the American Dream of beauty and poetry and the Better Things in Life. He waited for them to find a poet, not understanding the endless delay, the fruitless search; not understanding why Bradley Scrim laughed and laughed and laughed at this final, fatal disappearance.

THEODORE STURGEON

There is nothing that needs to be said about the man who wrote It, Microcosmic God *and* Maturity—*to name only three prime-quality Sturgeons out of a crop that numbers well into the hundreds, and includes not only short stories like the foregoing but such exciting books as* More Than Human, Without Sorcery *and* The Dreaming Jewels. *Your editor has had more than a passing interest in Sturgeon's career, for, like your editor, Sturgeon has devoted a large part of his time to selling other writers' stories as a literary agent, and a number of years to peddling the printed word as a direct-mail advertising man. But the parallel stops too short; for Sturgeon actually* did *write, and your editor only* wishes *he had written, the sensitive and memorable story called——*

The Clinic

The police men and the doctors men and most of the people outside, they all helped me, they were very nice but nobody helped me as many-much as Elena.

De la Torre liked me very nice I think, but number one because what I am is his work. The Sergeant liked me very nice too but inside I think he say not real, not real. He say in all his years he know two for-real amnesiacs but only in police book. Unless me. Some day, he say, some day he find out I not-real amnesiac trying to fool him. De la Torre say I real. Classic case, he say. He say plenty men forget talk forget name forget way to do life-work but *por Dios* not forget buttons forget eating forget every damn thing like me. The Sergeant say yes Doc you would rather find a medical monstrosity than turn up a faker. De la Torre say yes you would rather find out he is a fugitive than a phenomenon, well this just shows you what expert

opinion is worth when you get two experts together. He say, one of us has to be wrong.

Is half right. Is both wrong.

If I am a fugitive I must be very intelligent. If I am an amnesiac I could be even intelligenter as a fugitive. Anyway I be intelligent better than any man in the world, as how could conversation as articulo-fluent like this after only six days five hours fifty three minutes?

Is both wrong. I be Nemo.

But now comes Elena again, de la Torre is look happy-face, the Sergeant is look watch-face, Elena smile so warm, and we go.

* * *

"How are you tonight, Nemo?"

"I am very intelligent."

She laughs. "You can say that again," and then she puts hand on my mouth and more laughs. "No, don't say it again. Another figure of speech. . . . Remember any yet?"

"What state what school what name, all that? No."

"All right." Now de la Torre, he ask me like that and when I no him, he try and try ask some other how. The Sergeant, he ask me like that and when I no him, he try and try ask me the same asking, again again. Elena ask and when I no her, she talk something else. Now she say, "What would you like to do tonight?"

I say, "Go with you whatever."

She say, "Well we'll start with a short beer," so we do.

The short beer is in a room with long twisty blue lights and red lights and a noise-machine looks like two sunsets with bubbles and sounds unhappy out loud. The short beer is wet, high as a hand, color like Elena's eyes, shampoo on top, little bubbles inside. Elena drank then I drink all. Little bubbles make big bubble inside me, big bubble come right back up so roaring that all people look to see, so it is bigger as the noise-machine. I look at people and Elena laugh again. She say, "I guess I shouldn't laugh. Most people don't do that in public, Nemo."

"Was largely recalcitrant bubble and decontrolled," I say. "So what do—keep for intestinals?"

She laugh again and say, "Well, no. Just try to keep it quiet." And now come a man from high long table where so many stand, he has hair on face, low lip flaccid, teeth brown black and gold, he smell as waste-food, first taste of mouth-thermometer, and skin moisture after drying in heavy weavings. He say, "You sound like a pig, Mac, where you think you are, home?"

I look at Elena and I look at he, I say, "Good evening." That what de la Torre say in first speak to peoples after begin night. Elena quick touch arm of mine, say, "Don't pay any attention to him, Nemo." Man bend over, put hand forward and touches it to ear of me with velocity, to make a large percussive effect. Same time bald man run around end of long high table exhibiting wooden device, speaking the prognosis: "Don't start nothing in my place, Purky, or I'll feed you this bung-starter."

I rub at ear and look at man who smells. He say, "Yeah, but, you hear this little pig here? Where he think he's at?"

The man with bung-starter device say, "Tell you where you'll be at, you don't behave yourself, you'll be out on the payment with a knot on your head," and he walk at Purky until Purky move and walk again until Purky is back to old place. I rub on ear and look at Elena and Elena has lip-paint of much bigger red now. No it is not bigger red, it is face skin of more white. Elena say, "Are you all right, Nemo? Did he hurt you?"

I say, "He is destroyed no part. He is create algesia of the middle ear. This is usual?"

"The dirty rat. No, Nemo, it isn't usual. I'm sorry, I'm *so* sorry. I shouldn't've brought you in here. . . . Some day someone'll do the world a favor and knock his block off."

"I have behavior?"

She say, "You what? Oh—did you act right." She gives me diagnostic regard from sides of eyes. "I guess so, Nemo. But . . . you can't let people push you around like that. Come on, let's get out of here."

"But then this is no more short beer, yes?"

"You like it? You want another?"

I touch my larynx. "It localizes a euphoria."

"Does it now. Well, whatever that means, I guess you can have another." She high display two fingers and big bald man gives dispensing of short beer more. I take all and large bubble forms and with concentration I exude it through nostrils quietly and gain Elena's approval and laughter. I say my thinks about the kindlies, about de la Torre and the Sergeant but it is Elena who helps with the large manymuchness.

"Forget it," she say.

"Is figure of speech? Is command?"

She say low-intensity to shampoo on short beer, "I don't know, Nemo. No, I guess I wouldn't want you to forget me." She look up at me and I know she will say again, "You'll never forget your promise, Nemo?" and she say it. And I say, "I not go away before I say, Elena, I going away."

She say, "What's the matter, Nemo? What is it?"

I say, "You think I go away, so I think about I go away too. I like you think about I here. And that not all of it."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I—well, it's important to me, that's all. I couldn't bear it if you just disappeared some day. . . . What else, Nemo?"

I say, "Two more short beer."

We drink the new short beer with no talk and with thinks. Then she say she go powder she nose. She nose have powder but she also have behavior so I no say why. When she go in door-place at back angle, I stand and walk.

I walk to high long table where stand the smelly man Purky, I push on him, he turn around.

He say, "Well look what crawled up! What you want, piggy?"

I say, "Where you block?"

He say, "Where's *what?*" He speak down to me from very tall, but he speak more noise than optimum.

I say, "You block. Block. You know, knock off block. Where you block? I knock off."

Big man who bring short beer, he roar. Purky, he roar. Mens jump back, looking, looking. Purky lift high big

bottle, approach it at me swiftly. I move very close swiftlier, impact the neck of Purky by shoulder, squeeze flesh of Purky in and down behind pelvis, sink right thumb in left abdomen of Purky—one-two-three and go away again. Purky still swing down bottle but I not there for desired encounter now. Bottle go down to floor, Purky go down to floor, I walk back to chair, Purky lie twitching, men look at he, men look at me, Purky say "Uh-uh-uh," I sit down.

Elena come out of door running, say "What happened? Nemo . . ." and she look at Purky and all men looking.

I say, "Sorry. Sorry."

"Did you do that, Nemo?"

I make the head-nod, yes.

"Well what are you sorry about?" she say, all pretty with surprise and fierce.

I say, "I think you happy if I knock block off, but not know block. Where is block? I knock off now."

"No you don't!" she say. "You come right along out of here! Nemo, you're dynamite!"

I puzzle. "Is good?"

"Just now, is good."

We go out and big man call, "Hey, how about one on the house, Bomber?"

I puzzle again. Elena say, "He means he wants to give you a drink."

"Short beer?"

Big man put out short beer, I drink all. Purky sit up on floor. I feel big bubble come, I make it roar. I look at Purky. Purky not talk. Elena pull me, we go.

We walk by lakeshore long time. People foot-slide slowly to pulse from mens with air-vibrators, air-column wood, air-column metal, vibrating strings single and sets. "Dancing," Elena say and I say "Nice. Is goodly nice." We have a happy, watching. Pulse fast, pulse slow, mens cry with pulse and vibrations, womens, two at once, cry together. "Singing," Elena say, and the lights move on the dancing, red and yellow-red and big and little blue; clouds shift and change, pulse shift and change, stars come, stars go and the wind, warm. Elena say, "Nemo, honey, do you know what love is?"

I say no.

She look the lake, she look the lights, she wave the arm of her to show all, with the wind and stars; she make her voice like whisper and like singing too and she say, "It's something like this, Nemo. I hope you find out some day."

I say yes, and I have sleepy too. So she take me back to the hospital.

* * *

It is the day and de la Torre is tired with me. He fall into chair, wipe the face of he with a small white weaving.

He say, *"Por Dios,* Nemo, I don't figure you at all. Can I be frank with you?"

I say, "Yes," but I know all he be is de la Torre.

He say, "I don't think you're trying. But you must be trying; you couldn't get along so fast without trying. You don't seem to be interested; I have to tell you some things fifty times before you finally get them. Yet you ask questions as if you *were* interested. What are you? What do you want?"

I lift up the shoulders once, quickly, just like de la Torre when he not know.

He say, "You grasp all the complicated things at sight, and ignore the simple ones. You use terms out of *Materia Medica* and use them right, and all the time you refuse to talk anything but a highly individualized pidgin-English. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

I say, "Yes."

He say, *"Do* you? Tell me: what is *Materia Medica?* What is 'Individualized'? What is 'Pidgin-English'?"

I do the shoulders thing.

"So don't tell me you know what I'm talking about."

I turn the head little, raise the one finger like he do sometime, I say, "I do. I do."

"Tell me then. Tell it in your own words. Tell me why you won't learn to talk the way I do."

"No use," I say. Then I say, "No use for me." Then I say, "Not interest me." And still he sit and puzzle at me.

So I try. I say, "De la Torre, I see peoples dancing in the night."

"When? With Elena?"

"Elena, yes. And I see mens make pulse and cries for dancing."

"An orchestra?" I puzzle. He say, "Men with instruments, making noises together?" I make a yes. He say, "Music. That's called music."

I say, "What this?" and I move the arms.

He say, "Violin?"

I say, "Yes. Make one noise, a new noise, a new noise—one and one and one. Now," I say, "what this?" and I move again.

"Banjo," he say. "Guitar, maybe."

"Make many noise, in set. Make a new set. And a new set. Yes?"

"Yes," he say. "It's played in chords, mostly. What are you getting at?"

I bump on side of head. "You have think word and word and word and you make set. I have think set and set and set."

"You mean I think like a violin, one note at a time, and you think like a guitar, a lot of related notes at a time?" He quiet, he puzzle. "Why do you want to think like that?"

"Is my thinks."

"You mean, that's the way you think? Well, for Pete's sake, Nemo, you'll make it a lot easier to convey your thinks—uh—thoughts if you'll learn to come out with them like other people."

I make the no with the head. "No use for me."

"Look," he say. He blow hard through he nostrils, bang-bang on table, eyes close. He say, "You've got to understand this. I'll give you an example. You know how an automobile engine works?"

I say no.

He grab white card and markstick and start to mark, start to conversation swift, say all fast about they call this a four-cycle engine because its acts in four different phases, the piston goes down, this valve opens, that valve closes, the piston goes up, this makes a fire . . . and a lot, all so

swift. "This the intake cycle," and many words. "This is the crankshaft, sparkplug, fuel line, compression stroke . . ." Much and much.

And stops, whump. Points markstick. "Now, you and your thinking in concepts. That's how it works, basically. Don't tell me you got any of that, with any real understanding."

"Don't tell?"

"No, no," he say. He tired, he smile. He say, "Name the four cycles of this engine."

I say, "Suck. Squeeze. Pop. Phooey."

He drop he markstick. A long quiet. He say, "I can't teach you anything."

I say, "I not intelligent?"

He say, "*I* not intelligent."

* * *

Is many peoples in eatplace but I by my own with my plate and my thinks, I am alone. Is big roughness impacting on arm, big noise say, "What's your *name?*"

I bend to look up and there is the Sergeant. I say "Nemo."

He sit down. He look. He make me have think: he like me, he not believe me. He not believe anybody. He say: "Nemo, Nemo. That's not your name."

I do the thing with the shoulders.

He say, "You weren't surprised when I jolted you then. Don't you ever get surprised? Don't you ever get sore?"

I say, "Surprise, no. Sore?"

He say, "Sore, mad, angry."

I have a think. I say, "No."

He say, "Ought to be something that'll shake you up. Hm. . . . They pamper you too much around here, you walking around like Little Eva or Billy Budd or somebody. Sweetness and light. Dr. de la Torre says you're real bright."

"De la Torre real bright."

"Maybe. Maybe." He eyes have like coldness, like so

cold nothing move. He say, "That Elena. How you like Elena, Nemo?"

I say, "I like." And I say, "High music, big color-gentle."

He say, "Thought so." He poke sharp into my chest. "Now I'm gonna tell you the truth about your Elena. She's crazy as a coot. She went bad young. She was a mainliner, understand me? She was an addict. She did a lot of things to get money for the stuff. She had to do more'n most of 'em, with a face like that, and it didn't get any prettier. De la Torre pulled her through a cure. He's a good man. Three different times he cured her.

"So one time she falls off again and what do you know, she picks up with a looney just like you. A guy they called George. I figured from the start he was a faker. Showed up wandering, just like you. And she goes for him. She goes for him bigger'n she ever went for anything else, even hash. And he went over the hill one fine day and was never seen again.

"So she's off the stuff, sure. And you know what? The only thing she has any use for is amnesiacs. Yeah, I mean it. You're the sixth in a row. They come in, she sticks with 'em until they get cured or fade. Between times she just waits for the next one.

"And that's your Elena. De la Torre strings along with her because she does 'em good. So that's your light o' love, Nemo boy. A real twitch. If it isn't dope it's dopes. You get cured up, she'll want no part of you. Wise up, fella."

He look at me. He has a quiet time. He say, "God awmighty, you don't give a damn for her after all . . . or maybe you just don't know how to get mad . . . or you didn't understand a word of what I said."

I say, "Every people hurt Elena. Some day Elena be happy, always. Sergeant hurt every people. Sergeant not be happy. Never."

He look at me. Something move in the cold, like lobster on ice; too cold to move much. I say, "Poor Sergeant."

He jump up, he make a noise, not word, he raise a big hand. I look up at him, I say, "Poor Sergeant." He go away. He bump de la Torre who is quiet behind us.

De la Torre say, "I heard that speech of yours, you

skunk. I'd clobber you myself if I didn't think Nemo'd done it better already. You'd better keep your big flat feet the hell out of this hospital."

Sergeant run away. De la Torre stand a time, go away. I eat.

* * *

It is night by the lake, the moon is burst and leaking yellow to me over the black alive water and Elena by me. I say, "I go soonly."

She breathe, I hear.

I say, "Tree finish, tree die. Sickness finish, sickness gone. House finish, workmens leave. Is right."

"Don't go. Don't go yet, Nemo."

"Seed sprout, child grow, bird fly. Something finish, something change. I finish."

She say, "Not so soon."

"Bury plant? Tie boy to cradle? Nail wings to nest?"

She say, "All right." We sit.

I say, "I promised."

She say, "You kept your promise, Nemo. Thank you." She cry. I watch leaking moon float free, lost light flattening and flattening at the black lake. Light tried, light tried, water would not mix.

Elena say, "What world do you live in, Nemo?"

I say, "My world."

She say, "Yes . . . yes, that's the right answer. You live in your world, I live in my world, a hundred people, a hundred worlds. Nobody lives with me, nobody. Nemo, you can travel from one world to another."

I do the head, yes.

"But just one at a time. I'm talking crazy, but you don't mind. I had a world I don't remember, soft and safe, and then a world that hurt me because I was too stupid to duck when I saw hurt coming. And a world that was better than real where I couldn't stay, but I had to go there . . . and I couldn't stay . . . and I had to go . . . and then I had a world where I thought, just for a little while—*such* a little while—I thought it was a world for me and . . ."

I say, "—and George."

She say, *"You can read my mind!"*

"No!" I say, big; loud. Hurt. I say, "Truly no, not do that, I can't do that."

She touch on my face, say, "It doesn't matter. But George, then, about George . . . I was going to be lost again, and this time forever, and I saw George and spoke right up like a—a—" She shake. "You wouldn't know what I was like. And instead, George was gentle and sweet and he made me feel as if I was . . . well and whole. In all my life nobody ever treated me gently, Nemo, except Dr. de la Torre, and he did it because I was sick. George treated me as if I was healthy and fine, and he . . . admired me for it. Me. And he came to love me like those lights, those lights I showed you, all the colors, slipping among the dancers under the sky. He came to love me so much he wanted to stay with me for ever and ever, and then he went away sometime between a morning and a snowstorm."

The moon is gone up, finished and full, the light left on the water frightened and yearning to it, thinning, breaking and fusing, pointing at the moon, the moon not caring, it finished now.

She say, "I was dead for a long time."

She passes through a think and lets her face be dead until she say, "Dr. de la Torre was so kind, he used to tell me I was a special princess, and I could go anywhere. I went in all the places in the hospital, and I found out a thing I had not known; that I had these hands, these legs, eyes, this body, voice, brains. It isn't much and nobody wants it . . . now . . . but I had it all. And some of those people in there, without all of it, they were happier than I was, brave and good. There's a place with people who have their voices taken out of their throats, Nemo, you know that? And they learn to speak there. You know how they do it? I tell some people this, they laugh, but you won't laugh. You won't laugh, Nemo?"

I am not laugh.

She say, "You know that noise you made when you drank the beer so fast? That's what they do. On purpose.

They do it and they practice and practice and work hard, work together. And bit by bit they make a voice that sounds like a voice. It's rough and it's all on one note, but it's a real voice. They talk together and laugh, and have a debating society . . .

"There's a place in there where a man goes in without legs, and come out dancing, yes twirling and swirling a girl around, her ball-gown a butterfly and he smiling and swift and sure. There's a place for the deaf people, and they must make voices out of nothing too, and ears. They do it, Nemo! And together they understand each other. Outside, people don't understand the deaf. People don't mean to be unkind, but they are. But the deaf understand the deaf, and they understand the hearing as well, better than the hearing understand themselves.

"So one day I met a soldier there, with the deaf. He was very sad at first. Many of the people there are born deaf, but he had a world of hearing behind him. And there was a girl there and they fell in love. Everyone was happy, and one day he went away.

"She cried, she cried so, and when she stopped, it was even worse.

"And Dr. de la Torre went and found the soldier, and very gently and carefully he dug out why he had run away. It was because he was handicapped. It was because he had lost a precious thing. And he wouldn't marry the girl, though he loved her, because she was as she had been born and he felt she was perfect. She was perfect and he was damaged. She was perfect and he was unfit. And that is why he ran away.

"Dr. de la Torre brought him back and they were married right there in the hospital with such fine banquet and dance; and they got jobs there and went to school and now they are helping the others, together. . . .

"So then I went into another world, and this is my world; and if I should *know* that it is not a real world I would die.

"My world is here, and somewhere else there are people like us but different. One of the ways they are different is that they need not speak; not words anyway. And something happens to them sometimes, just as it does to us:

through sickness through accident, they lose forever their way of communicating, like our total deaf. But they can learn to speak, just as you and I can learn Braille, or make a voice without a larynx, and then at least they may talk among themselves. And if you are to learn Braille, you should go among the blind. If you are to learn lip-reading you do it best among the deaf. If you have something better than speech and lose it, you must go among a speaking people.

"And that is what I believe, because I must or die. I think George was such a one, who came here to learn to speak so he could rejoin others who also had to learn. And I think that anyone who has no memory of this earth or anything on it, and who must be taught to speak, might be another. They pretend to be amnesiacs so that they will be taught *all* of a language. I think that when they have learned, they understand themselves and those like them, and also the normal ones of their sort, better than anyone, just as the deaf can understand the hearing ones better.

"I think George was such a one, and that he left me because he thought of himself as crippled and of me as whole. He left me for love. He was humble with it.

"This is what I believe and I can't . . ."

She whisper.

" . . . I can't believe it . . . very much . . . longer . . ."

She listen to grief altogether until it tired, and when she can listen to me I say, "You want me to be George, and stay."

She sit close, she put she wet face on my face and say, "Nemo, Nemo, I wish you could, I do *so* wish you could. But you can't be my George, because I love him, don't you see? You can be my de la Torre, though, who went out and found a man and explained why and brought him back. All he has to know is that when love is too humble it can kill the lovers. . . . Just tell him that, Nemo. When you . . . when you go back."

She look past me at the moon, cold now, and down and out to the water and sky, and she here altogether out of

memory and hope-thinks. She say with strong daytime voice, "I talk crazy sometimes, thanks, Nemo, you didn't laugh. Let's have a beer some time."

* * *

I wish almost the Sergeant knows where I keep anger. It would please him I have so much. Here in the bare rocks, here in the night, I twist on anger, curl and bite me like eel on spear.

It is night and with anger, I alone in cold hills, town and hospital a far fog of light behind. I stand to watch it the ship and around it, those silents who watch me, eight of them, nine, all silent.

This is my anger: that they are silent. They share all thinks in one thinking instant, each with one other, each with all others. All I do now is talk. But the silents, there stand by ship, share and share all thinks, none talks. They wait, I come. They have pity.

They have manymuch pity, so I angry.

Then I see my angry is envy, and envy never teach to dance a one-legged man. Envy never teach the lip-reading.

I see that and laugh at me, laugh but it sting my eyes.

"Hello!"

One comes to me, not silent, but have conversation! Surprise. I say, "Good evening."

He shake hand of me, say, "We thought you were not going to come." His speak slow, very strong, steadily.

I say, "I ready. I surprise you have talk."

He say, "Oh, I spent some time here. I studied very carefully. I have come back to live here."

I say, "You conversation goodly. I have learn talk idea, good enough. You have word and word and word, like Earth peoples. Good. Why you come returning?"

He look my face, very near, say, "I did not like it at home. When you go back there, everyone will be kind. But they will have their own lives to live, and there is not much they can share with you any more. You will be blind among the seeing, deaf among those who hear. But they will be kind, oh yes: very kind."

Then he look back at the silents, who stand watching. He say, "But here, I speak among the speaking, and it is a better sharing than even a home planet gone all silent." He point at watchers. He laugh. He say, "We speak together in a way they have never learned to speak, like two Earth mutes gesticulating together in a crowd. It is as if we were the telepaths and not they—see them stare and wonder!"

I laugh too. "Not need to telepath here!"

He say, "Yes, on Earth we can be blind with the blind, and we will never miss our vision. While I was here I was happy to share myself by speaking. When I went home I could share only with other . . . damaged . . . people. I had to go home to find out that I did not feel damaged when I was here, so I came back."

I look to ship, to wondering silents. I say, "What name you have here?"

He say, "They called me George."

"I think, I have message for you: Elena dying for you. I say, "Elena waiting for you."

He make large shout and hug on me and run. I cry, "Wait! wait!" He wait, but not wanting. I say, "I learn talk like you, word and word, and one day find Elena for me too."

He hit on me gladly, say, "All right. I'll help you."

We go down hill togetherly, most muchly homelike. Behind, ship wait, ship wait, silents watch and wonder. Then ship load up with all pity I need no more, scream away up to stars.

I have a happy now that I get sick lose telepathy come here learn talk find home, *por Dios.*

A. J. BUDRYS

Science-fiction writers are coming along younger and younger every year; for example, take twenty-two-year-old Algis Budrys, possibly the only holder of a captain's commission in the Lithuanian Army ever to appear in the pages of a science-fiction magazine. Of Budrys's first dozen published stories, four were at once snapped up for anthologies of the best science fiction in the field, and his first novel was signed by a publisher before he even had it written. It's quite a record for a young fellow; and to show that his early brilliance was no flash in the pan, you need only examine his latest story, entitled——

The Congruent People

"The tie," Dexter Bergenholm's wife said dryly just as he put his hand on the doorknob. "It doesn't match your socks."

Bergenholm turned the knob and pulled the door open. "It's all right, dear. Nobody'll notice. Besides, I haven't got time to change it."

"Change it."

Bergenholm shut the door and went back to change his tie.

Nevertheless, the first chisel-mark had yet to be put on the shape of the day. Anything that he did or had done to him before he left the apartment was only so much routine —in a class with waking up, and similar invariables. It was only the world outside his apartment door that each day brought him something special, something that happened on that day, and on that day alone, and thus established its individuality.

All days begin like other days. Colored by half-remembered dreams and half-visualized anticipations though it may be, a day is a day are days like the rest of them, until the first thing happens to mark this off as (a) the Day

the Shoelace Finally Broke, or, (b) the Day the Rent is Due, or, (c) etcetera.

Therefore, for Dexter Bergenholm, the Day did not really begin until he had left his apartment, whistling *Gloria,* ridden down in the elevator, crossed Fourteenth Street into Avenue A, reached the newsstand at A and Thirteenth, and seen the well-dressed man with the graying burnsides collect a nickel from the newsdealer and drop a paper on the counter.

Note, please, that this is not superficially different from dropping a nickel and collecting a paper. Dexter Bergenholm, however, chanced to notice this inverted form of barter.

That is to say, his subconscious noted it, and clamored to impress this fact on his conscious, which, by now, was so used to the accepted rituals of Buying the Paper that it didn't even blink, but when Bergenholm laid his nickel down, and, naturally, got the paper the well-dressed man had just dropped, his subconscious came striking home with a heavy hand. The headline read:

"STAGE ONE'S STILL SQUABBLING AT U.N."

Bergenholm's breath whistled out, "Hoo*ooh!*" and he craned his neck to look at the next *Times* on the stack. *That* headline read:

"U.N. DISARMAMENT TALKS CONTINUE"

Odd, he thought. He looked more closely at the paper in his hand. A gag, maybe?

If so, it was a thoroughly worked-out one. In the familiar modified Old English type, the paper announced itself as *The New York Times,* and the date, as it should have been, was May 6, 1954. But the weather report predicted: "Rain from 6:30 to 11:54 A.M., followed by cloudy to 2:17 P.M., followed by scattered showers falling between 2:1701 and 3:0350, 4:56 and 6:3906, and from 10:0248 continuing into tomorrow, with interspersed cloudiness."

Ah? thought Bergenholm, followed by *uh!* Even for the *Times,* this was meterology on an unexpected scale.

He didn't have time for a closer examination just then. Instead he bought a copy of the "DISARMAMENT TALKS CONTINUE" *Times* with another nickel, pushed

both papers under his arm, and ran for the bus. He was, to a large extent preoccupied. But not preoccupied enough not to notice that the well-dressed man was flagging down a moving van at the other corner.

The van stopped, slid open a panel in its side, and then admitted him. Bergenholm caught a glimpse of seats and passengers inside the van, and a strap-festooned horizontal rail with customers clinging to the straps and reading their newspapers with the same dogged apathy as the riders in Bergenholm's own bus. As a matter of fact, he could almost have sworn he saw the conductor hand the well-dressed man a dime as he got on.

At lunchtime, he compared the two papers with exhaustive thoroughness. He discovered that both versions carried approximately the same news items, but that while one newspaper dealt rather seriously with the troubles of the world, the other reported the facts with a touch of tongue-in-cheek amusement at the way the Stage One's were bumbling along.

Never was there any overt explanations of what "Stage One" meant, but the sense was there, as though a superior culture were describing the activities of something just one or two steps above the savage. There were other disquieting points, as well.

Granting that the strange newspaper was not a hoax, then the culture which had produced it was technologically superior to the one in which Dexter Bergenholm lived. The weather report, for instance, and the advertising. Macys' was selling radar-piloted motorized perambulators, it seemed, and Gimbels' was selling a similar model for $1.98 less. Macys' audiovisual Plug-it-Yourself telephone extensions, however, figured at 6% less for cash, came out cheaper than Gimbels'.

Bergenholm considered the possibility of time travel. Tomorrow's newspaper was not exactly a new idea. But the dates on both papers were the same. He turned to the masthead. Exactly the same people filled the same positions. The baseball results were identical.

Was it a hoax? Then what about the moving van that was a bus?

His glance crossed over the front page of the newspaper again. And this time he saw that it was not *The New York Times* at all. His eye, accustomed to seeing the same thing in the group of modified Old English characters every day, had betrayed him. It was *A New York Times.*

And, of course, as you noticed, it wasn't Macy's and Gimbel's.

By eight o'clock the following morning, Dexter Bergenholm was completely ready to accept the idea of parallel worlds. His wife ran off him like water off a duck's back, and the evening news broadcast seemed much less ominous when considered in the light of what *A New York Times* would have said about the same disasters.

As a matter of fact, perhaps, if he got down to the newsstand five minutes late again, he would again be able to get the copy the well-dressed man left. With that thought in mind, he dawdled over his breakfast until his wife almost pushed him out the door, and then stopped the elevator at every floor. He reached the newsstand at exactly the same time as he had the day before.

The well-dressed man was there again. This time, Dexter noticed that his elegantly-cut suit lapped from right to left as it buttoned in front. When the white-cuffed wrist slid out of the sleeve as the man dropped his paper, Dexter saw that he wore his watch on his right wrist.

But most of Dexter's faculties were concentrated on getting that newspaper. He realized with a leap of his heart that a fat, pipe-puffing man in a Homburg was going to reach it first. Or would have. The chubby fingers had just touched *A New York Times* when the well-dressed man suddenly took a step back, and collided with the Homburged man. During that second's delay, Dexter got the newspaper with an eel-like insinuation of his arm past the two men.

Once away from the stand, he opened the paper avidly. This time the headline read:

"THEY'RE STILL AT IT."

He ignored everything else on the page and searched out the weather report. The prediction for today was for "Generally sunny and mild, except between 11:0543 and

11:1026 A.M., when an artificially seeded cloud will be moved in under Authorization 56, Sec. D (Met. Admin. R&R)."

So, an artificially seeded cloud would be moved in, eh? This put a different light on things. Up to now, his impression had been that of a parallel world standing slightly apart from his own, regarding the childish goings-on with an air of faint amusement. But now it seemed that these people were actually meddling with things in the Stage One world.

He looked around for the well-dressed man, and saw him standing on the opposite corner, looking up the street. Dexter followed the line of his sight, and saw the moving van that was a bus coming toward the corner.

He stood irresolute for about a moment, then made up his mind. Tucking the paper under his arm, he sprinted across the street and reached the corner just as the moving van pulled up. Propelled by his curiosity, he followed the well-dressed man aboard, and held out his hand for his dime with well-feigned detachment on his face, as he kept his eyes on the well-dressed man. Walking up the aisle, he dropped into a seat behind him.

From the inside, the van looked just like any other bus. Or, rather, like what a bus should look like in about ten years. The seats were more comfortable, and local air conditioners made smoking possible. There was nothing spectacularly special about the windows except that they were clean, and invisible from the outside.

The well-dressed man turned around and held out his hand across the back of his seat. "How do you do, Mr. Bergenholm. Glad to have you aboard."

Dexter gaped, and then cursed himself for a fool at the same time. Here he'd been proceeding blithely on the assumption that his discovery of the parallel world was entirely accidental, when actually, considered in retrospect, it was fairly obvious that the entire chain of events had been part of an adroit maneuver. The paper had been left for him to see, and his glimpse of the van-bus interior had been equally contrived.

And here he was on the bus, presumably surrounded by

people who were not quite human. He looked up nervously, and saw that the well-dressed man was actually smiling. He also saw the outstretched hand, and realized that he was being welcomed. And that was more disquieting than anything else would have been.

He reached out numbly and took the offered hand, shaking with some hesitation. "How do you do," he murmured.

The well-dressed man widened his smile. "It's rather disconcerting, I imagine. But, don't worry, it'll all be explained to you. My name is Hubert De La Meter. I've been assigned to your indoctrination."

Indoctrination? The word sounded almost ominous, even though it actually wasn't. But any kind of explanation would be better than the guesses which were all he had to go on at the present.

"Thank you," he managed to say.

"Oh, don't thank me, Mr. Bergenholm," De La Meter said with a deprecating gesture of his hand. "You've certainly earned the privilege."

Ah? How?

"I'm afraid I don't quite——" he began.

"Understand?" De La Meter's voice was smooth with charm. "I wouldn't feel any apprehension, if I were you, Mr. Bergenholm. You'll soon see that you're among friends —perhaps the best friends you've ever had.

"But we're getting close to your stop. Could you come to my apartment after supper tonight? Or perhaps you'd care to join me at a restaurant for dinner? We'd have time for a thorough explanation."

"Well—uh—couldn't you drop over to my place?"

De La Meter's expression became slightly uncomfortable. "I'm afraid not," he said, picking his words carefully. "I'm afraid—well, we've found cases like this work out much more smoothly if the wife or husband of the selectee isn't burdened with tiresome details."

Bergenholm cocked his brow. His mind made a prodigious leap. "You mean—I'm in, whatever that means, but my wife isn't?"

De La Meter touched his finger tips to the knuckles of his

other hand. His face reflected mingled embarrassment and relief. "That is substantially the case, yes."

Hmm. Dexter, seeing his stop approach, got up bemusedly. "That's very interesting."

"You'll find that the devotion of some thought to the problem will generally provide you with experimental data which will make your ultimate decision easier," De La Meter said.

Meaning that he would remember what a dog she was, Dexter deciphered. "Yes, no doubt," he said. He moved over to the door, breaking the photocell circuit that automatically brought the bus into its stop, which, as before, was the corner opposite the Stage One stop.

"Wait!" De La Meter said hastily. "My address."

He held out a card with a few lines penned on it. Dexter took it and put it in his pocket. "Thank you," he said absently, and stepped off the bus as the door opened. "No doubt," he added to himself.

During his lunch hour, he called his wife from a drugstore phone. As he reached for a dime, he remembered the one the conductor had given him. He looked at it closely. It appeared to be a perfectly ordinary dime, except for the motto, which now read "E Omnibus Pluri."

Dropping it into the slot, he spun out the number, but no one answered the phone. Well, his wife might have met a friend for lunch. He hung up and went back to work without devoting any inordinate thought to it.

He wasn't sure, yet, what he was going to do. Despite the fact that he'd had overwhelming proof to the contrary, there was still the faint possibility that the whole thing was just an elaborate practical joke, and, though no logic could support that supposition, it nevertheless hung on to one edge of his mind.

He stepped into a puddle left by the seeded rain that had fallen just before lunch and cursed himself again.

He realized that the parallel world could maintain itself indefinitely within the confines of Stage One, its inhabitants and their facilities concealed by the gestalt-conscious workings of the human mind.

The business with the papers, for instance. He had seen a transaction involving a nickel and a newspaper. All his experience told him that there was only one logical result possible from the interaction of these two factors. So, he hadn't even noticed that the usual process had been reversed—and he would have continued not to notice, if he hadn't bought *that* particular paper and sent his conscious rummaging frantically through his subconscious data files in an attempt to find an explanation.

A New York Times. A configuration of symbols which had never once varied in his lifetime. His eye saw the configuration—or something that resembled it closely—and read it as it always had been, not as it actually was. Macys' instead of Macy's. A man walked down the street, wearing a perfectly ordinary suit. Who would notice which side it buttoned on?

But why had they invaded—was that the word?—this world, and why did they claim to want him as one of themselves?

Did they really mean it, or was this some elaborate means of getting rid of him, now that he knew of their existence?

He did something he would not have done under ordinary circumstances, or in an ordinary state of mind. As soon as he got back to the office, he used a company phone to try to get his wife again. When nobody answered, he sat looking out of the window, his confused eyes on the generally sunny and mild day.

He tried calling his wife several times during the remainder of the afternoon, but apparently she hadn't come back. That, added to the accumulating strain of what had happened in the past two days, was beginning to get on his nerves.

Should he go to see De La Meter? Or should he simply go home and try to ignore the parallel world? He couldn't hope to escape it, he knew, but perhaps, if he gave them his word he wouldn't betray them, they'd agree to leave him alone.

His jerky-paced trips to the water cooler became more and more frequent, until, finally, he had worked himself

into a frantic lather. By five o'clock, he had no intention of getting in touch with De La Meter, or anyone else except his wife. She still hadn't answered the phone. The only thing to do was to go home and wait for her there.

He tried one last phone call before he left. It was as fruitless as the others, and he almost ran out of the elevator on the main floor and out into the street. He didn't have time to wait for buses. Moreover, there was an empty cab just pulling in to the curb in front of the building.

He pulled the door open and got in hastily, never noticing that the door was trimmed in green-and-white diamonds instead of checkers. "Fourteenth and Avenue A, please," he said in a nervous voice.

"Certainly, sir," the cabby answered. He pushed his flag down—to the left, instead of the right—and pulled away from the curb.

Dexter Bergenholm's mind raced on. For the first time, he was actively bothered by the thought that something might have happened to his wife. Her habits were usually ironclad, and being home to listen to a string of soap operas was one of them.

What was happening? He had already discovered that his previous conception of the world was a fiction, that he had lived his entire life according to a set of arbitrary and preconceived notions. He couldn't believe what had been proved to be false, he couldn't believe what the last two days seemed to prove, and he couldn't believe De La Meter's friendly intentions. And now he didn't know what had happened to his wife.

He ached for one touch of reason, something as incontrovertible and unchanging as the buildings they were passing.

He looked again. The buildings were incontrovertible, right enough, but they weren't Stuyvesant Town. They were the similar structures of Peter Cooper Village. He shot forward and seized the cabby's shoulder. "Hey, where do you think you're taking me?"

The cabby twitched his shoulder out of the way as

politely as possible. "To see Mr. De La Meter, sir. I'm sorry, but it's for your own good, you know."

Bergenholm shrank back into his seat, his face blank. He knew better than to argue or try to jump from a moving vehicle. He was trapped, he knew it, and he lapsed into hopelessness.

He hadn't tried to escape when the cab stopped. The driver had come around and opened his door, his eyes mildly watchful. Moreover, Dexter didn't even care what happened any more. He rode the elevator to De La Meter's apartment—or, rather to the floor the cabby indicated—and waited while the man went over to the incinerator.

The cabby reached up and pushed the plastic plate which bore a legend prohibiting the tenents from throwing explosives down the shaft, and slid it upwards, despite the seemingly solid rivets in each corner. The door opened, and De La Meter looked out.

"Ah, Mr. Bergenholm! Come in!" He turned to the cabby. "All right, Boskone, you can go now. I won't need you any more today."

Dexter went into De La Meter's apartment with approximately the same feelings he would have had if the door had really opened on the incinerator. He stared glumly while De La Meter mixed him a drink and handed it to him, and sat down as if the man's hospitable gesture had been a physical shove.

De La Meter frowned. "You look nervous," he said. Then he smiled. "Oh, I understand." He chuckled lightly. "Don't worry, Mr. Bergenholm. We certainly won't hold anything against you. What you experienced was merely a phenomenon we've come to call Remission of Sincerity. It's quite common. That's why Boskone was waiting for you."

Bergenholm remained unconvinced, but some of the tension began to leave him as the drink did its work.

"I'm sorry," he said, not knowing whether he was or not.

De La Meter's hands moved in their practiced deprecatory gesture. "A nothing. But you're curious, and I should explain.

"It's really quite simple," he went on. "You'll grant me that most people live by looking at things as they ought to be, rather than by what they are. A tree is a tree, a house is a house, a fireplug is a fireplug.

"They live even more firmly on the basis of gestalts—that is, by learning that a certain invariable group of definite components makes up any one thing, or any act. A car is a metal body with windows, on wheels. An emphasis on any one of these components produces variations; i.e., a larger body means a truck, or, more windows"— he chuckled— "a bus.

"Similarly, a man walking up to a newsstand is going to buy a paper. What else would he be doing? Particularly when the other two physical components—a newspaper and a nickel—are combined with the other two action components. Two arms reach out. One is holding a paper, and the other a nickel. Obviously, a newspaper is being purchased."

Bergenholm nodded. "I figured that out." But why was it being done—why were De La Meter and others like him taking advantage of this fact?

"Precisely. You figured it out. On the day after you'd been given your first hint, you had learned enough to duplicate my actions in boarding the bus. Actually, of course, our conductors do not give the passengers money—but you had been led to believe they did, and you fell into a new gestalt which enabled you, so you thought, to live outside Stage One gestalts. For our purpose, it proved you were capable of assuming the protective mimicry which enables us to live as we do. You bore out our earlier decision to approach you."

"Why *did* you approach me?" Bergenholm asked. He was watching De La Meter closely, looking for the sign of a lie.

"You've been—'suffering' is the wrong word—from gestalt lapses," De La Meter replied. "Do you remember the time you got off on the wrong floor of your building? Actually, you didn't. You got off on the tenth floor, which is where you live. But, this time, you'd been counting floors as you went up, rather than simply waiting for the proper

number to appear on the door. So, when the elevator accidentally stopped on the tenth floor—the true tenth floor—you got off."

"I remember that," Dexter agreed. "I ducked right back into the elevator when I saw the number on the elevator door. It said 'Nine.'"

De La Meter smiled. "Precisely. There are two ninth floors in the building."

Bergenholm was past the stage of being impressed by such revelations. "Why?" he asked. "What are you people up to? Isn't your own world better than ours?"

"But, my dear fellow, this *is* our world. We're completely and totally human. We simply take advantage of a human trait. We've established a serene and untroubled society beside the Stage One society, that's all. After all, it's a human privilege to live on one's nerve ends and be pushed and shoved around, but it's also a human privilege to try and do something about it. We did, quite a few generations ago. If the Stage Ones want to have their annoyances, let them. We don't have to deal with them."

Bergenholm—who could be called Dexter Bergenholm, or Dexter, or simply "he" without once implying that each label signified a different person—had finished his drink, which wasn't really his, but De La Meter's, since De La Meter had paid for it. He thought of that and the myriad gestalts which make up the sum and substance of experience and life, and communication, and for that one instant life was not a smoothly progressive, largely invariable whole, but an accretion of fragments which usually—*but not always*—fell into the same patterns. Even the society within a society—De La Meter's society, *his* society—was a gestalt composed of subsidiary gestalts.

"So, why be tied down to a pretty nerve-wracking and thankless existence?" De La Meter said. "We have our own technology, now, our own traditions and habits. You'll find our life serene, and infinitely less troubled." He smiled again. "We don't need your answer right away. Think it over for a few days. And now, I imagine your wife is getting anxious to have you home."

So De La Meter didn't have anything to do with his

wife's not being home. Then she was probably out shopping or something.

Bergenholm felt the load of anxiety fall off his shoulders, and realized that most of what had been the matter with him had been simple worry about her. After all, she *was* his wife.

"All right, I will," he said. "And thanks—thanks very much. I'll come around the day after tomorrow. I imagine we can work out an arrangement about my wife?"

"Oh, certainly. It's a simple matter. Many families have only one Stage Two member."

Ah. The ideal answer. He shook De La Meter's hand warmly, and bid him a friendly goodbye.

All the way downstairs, he whistled happily. For amusement, he counted the floors. There was an extra one, all right—and a button set off to one side of the regular board which, because of its red color, no Stage One would ever push.

Surprisingly, Boskone was waiting downstairs with his cab. Dexter climbed in, still whistling lightheartedly. He settled back on the cushions and crossed his legs, giving his home address.

"I thought you were trying to camouflage something when you dawdled over breakfast this morning," Boskone said in a peppery voice. "Your socks are dirty. Oh, I swear to goodness, I don't know what you'd do if I wasn't always busy looking out for you!"

Dexter bounced forward and stared at Boskone's face in the rearview mirror. "Miriam!" he gasped.

"Yes, Miriam," she mimicked. "Who did you think it was—some flibbertygibberty Stage Two? Oh, you make me sick sometimes."

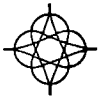
"B—But!"

"Oh, shut up and read the paper!" She reached into the meter and pulled out the Late City Edition of *The Newer York Times.*

HAL CLEMENT

Air Force bomber pilot, science teacher and scoutmaster, Hal Clement possesses a tremendous competitive advantage over the majority of his colleagues in the ranks of top-notch science-fiction writers: He understands what the scientists are talking about. This is tough on his competitors but works beautifully for the rest of us; for by ruthlessly capitalizing on his advantage he is enabled to write such horrifyingly plausible fantasies of science as——

Critical Fatocr



Pentong, excited for the first time in his life, raced northward. There was no need to grope or feel his way; this close to the great earthquake zone there were always minor tremors, and their echoes from the dense basalt below and the emptiness above reached him almost constantly. The treacherous sandstone strata, which beguiled the lazy traveler with the ease of penetration they offered and then led him up to the zones of death, were easy to spot; Pentong actually used them now, for seeing was so good that he could leave them with plenty of time to seek the safer levels below whenever they started to slope.

The worst of his journey was behind. The narrow bridge of livable rock which led to the strange land he had found had been recrossed in safety, in spite of the terrifying and deceptive manner in which temblors from the earthquake zone far to the north were trapped, magnified, and echoed from its sides. Now he could see for many days' travel all about him, and as far as he could see the land was good.

Not as good as that he had visited, of course. This was the land he had known all his life, where food was just hard enough to find to make life interesting; where for ages past counting other, less fortunate, races from the far, far north had sought to break in and kill that they might in-

herit its plenty; where pools of magma shifted just rapidly enough to trap the unwary between impenetrable basalt and glowing death; where, if Pentong was right in what he believed of his discovery, regions now too close to the zones of death might be made accessible and provide food and living space for unguessable generations to come.

He dreamt of this possibility constantly as he moved. No trace of his passage marked the rock behind him, for none of it was edible; but he hardly thought of food for himself. Speed was his prime concern, and to achieve it he traveled as close as he dared to the upper zones.

The nearest settlement was more than five thousand miles north, he knew; his memory held a sharp picture of the tortuous path he had followed from it, and he retraced that path now. It led him far to the east, where the earth tremors were faint and travel slowed by the poor vision; then back, at a much lower level, to the northwest, where the principal delay was the denser rock. Five hundred miles short of his goal he had to stop, to examine carefully the region of magma pools through which he had passed on his way south. The precise path he had followed could not now be used; it was blocked in several places by molten rock which had forced its way between strata and heated the otherwise habitable stone above and below to an unbearable degree. But other paths existed; and slowly and carefully Pentong wormed his way between the pools, sometimes retreating the way he had come, sometimes going almost straight away from his goal, but gradually working north and downward until the last of the dangerous pockets of fluid lay behind him. Then he could hasten once more; and at last he reached the bed of carbonate rock, a mile thick and more than thirty thousand square miles in area, which had been deposited on the floor of an ancient sea some hundreds of millions of years before and was now safely surrounded and capped by harder layers which shielded its inhabitants from filtering oxygen. This was the city—not the one where Pentong had been born, but the farthest south of all the dwelling centers of his people, and the one to which the more adventurous spirits of the race tended to gravitate. The cities

to the northwest and northeast, under the Bering and Icelandic bridges, held danger, of course; they bore the brunt of the endless defense against the savage tribes from beyond the bridges. Still, that danger was known and almost routine; it was the unknown parts of the world that spelled adventure. Pentong, he was sure, had proved himself the most adventurous so far; and he was also sure that he had done more.

"Halt!" The challenge came through the rock as Pentong's great, liquid body began to filter into the limestone. No city, even this far from the zones of war, dared be without sentries. "Name yourself!"

"I am Pentong, returning from the south, a trip that was commanded. My word is this." He emitted the coded series of temblors which the City Leaders had given him for identification, when and if he returned.

"Wait." The explorer knew that the sentry's body extended far back into the city, and that at his other end he was in communication with the Leaders. The wait was not long. "Enter. You may eat, if you hunger, but go to the Leaders as soon thereafter as may be."

"I am hungry, but I must go to them at once. I have found something of importance, and they must know." The sentry was plainly curious, but forbore to question further; obviously if this stranger felt his news too important to wait for food, he would hardly pause for conversation.

"Take the Stratum of Maganese; it will be cleared for you," was all the watcher said. Pentong acknowledged the courtesy—traffic was sometimes a problem in a city of sixty billion inhabitants, each of whom averaged ten cubic yards in volume and was apt to have that bulk spread through a most irregular outline. The Stratum of Maganese was a foot-thick layer stained with the oxide of that metal, and thereby marked plainly to Pentong's senses. It was cut off sharply by a fault which extended across the center of the city in a northeast-southwest direction; and at one point along that fault was a large volume where numerous boulders of quartz, probably washed to this spot by some ancient river, were imbedded in the limestone. Here the Leaders, or enough of them to transact business, could

always be found. Pentong greeted them, received the acknowledgment, and began his report without preamble.

"About five thousand miles to the south," he said, "the continental mass in which this city is located narrows apparently to a point. The earthquake zone extends to this point, and seeing is good; but echoes tend to be confusing in some regions, and I explored many of these by touch. In one such area I found a long tongue of sandstone extending yet farther south; and after debating whether I should return to report its existence before venturing out along it, I decided it would be better to have something more complete to report. It was almost like traveling through a stratum which has been cut off on opposite sides by parallel dikes; but the sides this time were simply emptiness. There was no zone of death, however, apparently the tongue of rock is surrounded by what Derrell the Thinker called *ocean,* which seems to protect the upper regions of portions of the continents. Below, of course, was basalt.

"The neck of rock went on, seemingly without end. Sometimes it widened, sometimes narrowed so that I thought it had come to an end; but it always went on. Those who claim the continents are drifting will have to explain how that narrow ridge of stone has stayed intact.

"At last, however, it really widened; and to make short a report whose data was long in compiling, there is a continent at the other end—and I could find no trace of other than lower animals in that continent. That, however, is not its most important feature; what is really striking is the fact that it appears to have no Zone of Death whatever. It is covered with a solid material, which seems to be crystalline from the way it carries sound, but which is impenetrable to living bodies. The continent is inhabitable from top to bottom."

"How about edible rock?"

"As good or better than our own land." The Leaders reacted audibly to this, and it was some time before speech was again directed at the explorer. Then, as he had expected, it was complimentary.

"Pentong, you deserve the thanks of every inhabitant

of this continent. If your report is as accurate as it seems to be objective, our food problem is solved for generations to come. We will transmit this news to the other cities, and plans for colonizing the new continent will be worked out as rapidly as may be. Your name will be known from here to the Northern Frontier."

For a moment the explorer basked in the praise that was the deepest need of his kind; then he spoke again, with a delicious thrill of anticipation.

"Leaders, there is yet more, if I may speak." Cracklings of surprise spread from the boulder-shot area, and the nearer citizens paused in their activities to learn what went on.

"Speak."

"I was curious as to the nature of this solid which seemed as impenetrable as basalt, and strove to learn more about it. For a long time I made no progress; but at last I came to an earthquake zone, in which magma had risen very near the upper levels. About this point the strange substance was thinner; and while investigating the neighborhood, a pocket of magma broke through the Outer Void. This I could tell, partly because of the good seeing, and partly because I could feel the heat working down from the thin layers above." He paused.

"This has occurred before," commented one of the Leaders. "What did it teach you?"

"Where the magma spread, the solid disappeared—*and became like the ocean!*" Pentong stopped again, for purely rhetorical reasons—he knew there would be no interruption this time.

"As you all remember, Derrell the Thinker showed that *ocean* was a substance, apparently liquid like magma, he studied its sound-transmitting properties, and described them well. I heard his lecture, and examined the substance myself on several occasions. This crystalline sheath of the Southern Continent is simply solid ocean; it melted just as rock does when the magma reached it." Again the pause, and this time the Leaders conferred briefly.

"Your point is of extreme scientific interest," their spokesman finally said, "but we admit we do not see prac-

tical importance for it as yet. We gather from your manner that you do; if you would go on——" he left the sentence unfinished.

"My point is simple. Ocean protects rock from the oxygen, which filters down from the Void and kills those exposed to it—sometimes even renders rock poisonous. Much of our continent is protected by ocean, but much is not, and its upper layers are therefore unattainable. This solid ocean melts very easily, as I could see on the Southern Continent; and the continent seems to be covered with it to a depth of more than a mile, on the average. It may seem an ambitious project, but if that continent were to be heated enough to melt its ocean covering, would not it add to the ocean over the rest of the world and thus *cover more of our continent?"*

For long moments no answer came; Pentong could not tell whether the Leaders were actually considering the problem objectively or reacting emotionally to his admittedly audacious suggestion. The first response was in the form of a question.

"Just why should this material blanket the continents instead of remaining more or less where it is? You seem to be taking a good deal for granted."

"I realize that the behavior of liquids such as magma and ocean out in the Void is not generally known," responded Pentong. "However, there exists a good deal of observation which strongly suggests that magma, at least, tends to spread out over the surface of the Earth when released to the Void. I admit that further observation would be needed to prove that ocean does the same—but is it not already doing just that? It seems reasonable to suppose that the liquid ocean has spread as far as its quantity permits; if we add more, it should spread farther. Let us at least check this point; I can show the way, or for that matter describe it, to the Southern Continent, and the necessary experiments could be conducted by a small group."

* * *

The news of the Pentong project took some time to reach Derrell the Thinker. There were several reasons for

this; for one, he was located thousands of miles from the city under the Gulf of Mexico where Pentong had made his report, and for another he was in the midst of a battlefield. The latter fact was not at once evident; the only sights and sounds—the two were identical to Derrell, whose only long-range sense reacted to shock waves in the earth's crust—were those emitted from the earthquake belt to the south and west. He himself was focusing his entire attention on a matter unconnected with the battle; but at least half of his research crew had their fluid bodies extended and joined into a single net that surrounded the entire area of the experiment. It was hoped that none of the savages from the Asian mainland would get through the net without touching one of its strands and betraying their presence.

The thing that interested Derrell was a cave, something almost unheard of in the depths where his people dwelt. Virtually all the empty spaces, which his people regarded as extensions of the Outer Void, were very close to that void; and they were almost without exception filled with the oxygen which poisoned the rocks for the dwellers of the depths. Occasional bubbles occurred in the igneous rocks, of course, filled with gases which had come from the rocks themselves; but as a rule these were unapproachable —the material in which they occurred was nearly impenetrable to the members of Derrell's race, who traveled through rock rather as ink does through a blotter.

The present cave was one of the few exceptions to this rule. The rock itself was not porous enough for travel, but seismic strains had produced a network of miscroscopic cracks part way into the mass which permitted slow progress, if the traveler had persistence.

Derrell had seen caves before from a distance, but the thing he was watching now had never occurred within his memory or knowledge. The upper level of the bubble was just at the top of the igneous layer in which it had formed; the rock above was sedimentary. Between the two layers a thin sill was gradually making its way from a pool of magma a few miles distant—a pool that was being fed by energy from sources far below, and outside the bounds

even of Derrell's knowledge. It was more than likely that some day this sill might grow to the proportions of a laccolith, in view of the nature of the rock above; but this was not the scientist's concern at the moment. The advancing magma was approaching the bubble, and he wanted to see what effect the trapped, high-pressure gas in the "empty" space would have on the molten rock. It was fortunate that this was occurring just here; the endless, tiny seismic shocks from the southwest made things clearly visible throughout the region. It would have been extremely dangerous, with the Asian savages filtering through the neighboring strata, if the investigators had had to produce sounds of their own in order to further their research.

Derrell had a mental picture of what would occur when the molten rock reached the bubble, but like any good scientist he was not allowing it to influence his observing technique. He intended to see everything that happened; and his attention was so completely centered on that particular volume of rock that the arrival of one of his assistants, who had been on a short leave to the nearest of the frontier cities, failed to distract him in the slightest. The assistant himself forbore to interrupt, though he had news that he knew would be of interest; for the magma was very close now to the bubble. Like the chief scientist, the newcomer had a mental picture of the hot fluids simply reaching the cavity, flowing around its walls, and gradually filling it from edge to center. Like Derrell, his idea of the general nature of gases was too sketchy to permit him to realize that, at the very least, the vapor in the bubble must dissolve in the inflowing rock before his picture could be carried through; and like his chief, he had no conception whatever of another force that would also operate. No living member of their race had ever had a good look at a fluid that was not in a confined space; they had never seen a free liquid surface. Their experience was about to be enlarged.

There would be no point in guessing who was the most surprised by what actually happened, but there was no doubt about which of the observers adjusted himself first. Derrell was paralyzed for just an instant as the first drops

of fluid reached the opening of the cavity—*and shot straight across it to the other side!*— but he noted carefully and precisely how more of the magma followed. The drops became a stream, and gradually a pool of the stuff came into being against the side of the bubble opposite the opening. The sides of the pool not in contact with the walls of the cavity seemed to want to form a plane surface, but the stream that was adding to its volume gave rise to disturbances which spread from the point of impact in all directions *over the surface*—waves which none of the watchers had ever seen or imagined, and which held even the sentries' attention to a degree which might have proven disastrous. Not until the bubble had filled completely with molten rock did anyone move, speak, or even think of anything but what was happening a few hundred yards away; and even then most of the team waited for Derrell to express an opinion. He, regarding his assistants as students to be guided by suggestion rather than laymen who might be impressed by spot conclusions, opened his comments with a question.

"Could the ordinary pressure on that liquid account for its behavior?"

"Not completely." The answer came promptly from one of the team.

"Why not? Pressure can force liquid between rock layers, and even into rock pores; why could it not send a stream across a space where there is no resistance?"

"It could, I suppose; but I fail to see how ordinary rock pressure could keep one side of that growing pool flat when the rock was not actually touching it. That would seem to call for some invisible substance pressing on that particular surface—a substance not only invisible, but able to permit the stream of rock to pass toward the new pool but not away from it. I find such a substance hard to imagine."

"So do I. Your objection to rock pressure also seems valid—unless someone else can see a way?" He paused for a fair interval, but if any of the assistants had ideas they were not sufficiently formulated for expression. "It would seem, then, that some force with which we are unfamiliar

is involved. That means that all the data anyone may have is possibly relevant. Karpor, list the material you have observed which you think might help."

The student responded at once.

"The igneous rock is largely silicates of magnesium, the stratiform layer next to it mostly calcium carbonate. The bubble is about fifteen feet in diameter, one side almost exactly tangent to the stratiform boundary. The boundary itself is parallel to the Void boundary a mile and a half away. The front edge of the sill was advancing at about six inches an hour, and the sill itself had a thickness of about——"

"All right; good so far. Taless, what else?" Another student took up the list; and the recent arrival forgot his news temporarily in the intensity of the resulting discussion. By the time he remembered it, a hypothesis had been developed.

"It seems possible," Derrell summed the idea up, "that a force of unknown nature exists, which tends to drive liquids (at least) as far from the Void as they are free to travel. Our single observation is to that effect, anyway. It would seem desirable to find other, more accessible hollows in the deeper rocks, to determine how far from the Void boundary this force extends, and to learn if possible whether other things than liquids are affected."

"I wonder what the existence of such a force—if it does exist—will do to the Pentong Project," remarked the newcomer, recalling his news suddenly.

"What is that? Another defense plan?"

"Not exactly." The scientist described Pentong's discovery of the Antarctic Continent, and his account of its covering of solid ocean. "His plan to melt this substance, and thus protect more of the world's rock from the oxygen of the Void, has been favorably received by more than half the City Leaders of the continent, and parties are already under way to examine the Southern Continent more completely," he concluded. A student cut in instantly.

"But if this force exists, and ocean is subject to it as magma is, won't the freshly melted ocean simply spread

flat over what is already there, and perhaps hardly protect any more land at all?"

"That seems probable," replied Derrell. "Since such a project will involve a vast expenditure of effort, and very possibly interfere with defense on the frontiers, it now becomes imperative that we check the nature and existence of this force as quickly as possible."

"However, if the available ocean surface is not too large," put in another, "even spreading the new ocean over all of it might permit a considerable increase in the protected areas."

"It might; but unless and until we have some idea of the size of the World inside the Void, and how much of the World is covered by ocean, we cannot afford to take a chance on that possibility. We must search for more bubbles; and this carbonate stratum is in contact with igneous rock over many thousands of square miles, it would seem. Break up into parties of three and start exploring; if you encounter savages, call—there are military personnel not too far behind us. This is important." He turned back to the assistant who had brought the news. "I suppose they plan to do the melting by coaxing magma pools toward the Void boundary, and letting them flow out into contact with this solid ocean."

"That is the general idea. However, they plan to do it not only on the Southern Continent. It was felt that there might be much of this solid ocean on our own continent, which we had never discovered because we cannot venture near enough to the Void boundary; so every pool we can reach is to be brought into use. The places where light rocks project into the Void probably cannot be reached, but it seems to the planners who investigated the data that all the other regions—more than three quarters of the continent—can easily be coated with melted rock, if it clings to the surface reasonably well."

Derrell glanced back at the bubble. "It should do that, all right," he said, "if our force applies out in the Void as well as in the rock next to it. But that means an even more vast expenditure of effort than I had supposed; they'll be pulling the defenders away from the frontiers until the

savages from Asia are fighting the ones from Europe—around our dead bodies. Let's find those bubbles." He joined one of the search teams, worried more about the possible waste of work on an inefficient and probably unproductive effort than about the results of covering most of the American continents with lava. After all, he had never heard of the human race, and probably never would.

There was probably not another spot on the North American continent where his team could have found what they sought so quickly; if other regions existed where a lava flow had extended into a shallow sea, hardened, been buried with such speed under calcareous detritus, and then carried down rapidly enough and steadily enough to develop a thick limestone cap over the hardened lava, they had either been lifted back to the surface where they were unapproachable to Derrell's kind or carried so far down as to be altered completely beyond recognition. Here, however, there were cavities; many of them filled by the limy material that had settled into them and hardened into rock and many just too deep in impenetrable regions of the lava to be attained although they were easily visible, but a fair number both empty and attainable. The water that had once filled them had long since gone into hydrates in the overlying rock, and been replaced by gases from the lava—usually oxides of carbon and sometimes even sulfur. These did not bother the investigators, and it was not long before one of the search teams reported an ideal site for investigation. The group congregated at the spot as quickly as possible, and plans were rapidly made.

There was no magma pool near enough to be "tickled" into action this time; but that did not bother Derrell. He had already seen what molten rock would do in this situation. He rapidly gave orders, and the group of liquid bodies gathered in the limestone just above the bubble and began to—eat. The eating was done in a very careful manner; and gradually a large fragment of limestone was separated from the rest of the formation. It was located directly above the bubble, and when freed from its original matrix rested on the thin silicate layer that formed the roof of the cavity. That layer was seamed with cracks, microscopic in size,

but adequate in the needs of the scientists; their fluid bodies worked inside those cracks, loosening particle after particle, gradually weakening the flimsy roof. The actual force that any one of the beings could exert was minute, lifting a grain of sand would have been impossible for one of the big, but fluid, bodies; but bit by bit the lava moved, as it was dissolved along the tiny zones of weakness the brief exposure to the sea had left. Toward the end the workers very carefully stayed away from the thin layer, extending only narrow pseudopods to do the remainder of the job. Most of them, in fact, withdrew even farther in order to observe, and two of the assistants completed the final task. Derrell was ready when the lava roof suddenly collapsed, permitting the great block of limestone they had previously freed to drop into the cavern.

No one was very surprised. It behaved, within its limitations, as the magma had done, hurtling against the wall farthest from the Void and sending a few fragments of its mass flying off at angles. The fragments also returned to that part of the vast cavity farthest from the broken roof. The force evidently existed; and it appeared to work on solids as well as liquids. Bits of the lava roof had also obeyed the invisible urge; and as far as any one could tell, not a single fragment that was free to move away from the Void had failed to do so.

Without a word, Derell flowed through the limestone to a point just above the opening. Here he pulled himself into the smallest possible volume, and deliberately began to dissolve the rock about him. He had tried to get to the portion of the bubble where the rocks had come to rest, and found it impossible; the tiny cracks that would have furnished access extended only a foot or two from the surface of the lava. Now he was going to get there—and incidentally, see what effect the new force had on living matter. He learned!

The rock in which he lay broke free as its predecessor had done; and Derrell became the first member of his race to experience the acceleration of gravity. He also was the first to discover that the most noticeable thing about a fall is the sudden stop. The shock did not hurt him—after all,

he was accustomed to traveling in regions of seismic strain, and seeing by the resultant shock waves—but the whole thing was slightly surprising. For one thing, the rock had turned over as it fell, and no member of his race had *ever* had a sudden change of orientation with respect to his surroundings. It took several seconds for him to realize that it was he who had moved, not the surrounding universe.

Once convinced of that, he started to emerge from the rock which he had ridden; and in doing so he learned the most painful lesson of all about gravity.

Derrell's body was liquid. It was less dense than water, being composed mainly of hydrocarbons; it had no more rigidity than water. All its support was normally furnished by the rock in which it happened to be "soaked" at the moment; he moved by controlling the liquid's surface tension, as an amoeba moves—or, for that matter, as a man moves a muscle. Outside the supporting rock, however, he was just a puddle of oil—and once he started out, he was completely unable to stop. The block of limestone he had ridden was not quite at the bottom of the huge cavity; as a portion of his mass emerged, it tended to flow downhill toward the lowest available point; he had the choice of following it or being torn apart, and he liked the latter alternative no better than a more solid organism would. He followed. Five seconds later he was a completely helpless pool of living liquid, in the bottom of a bowl of glassy, impenetrable lava. He could not even raise a ripple on his own surface.

He could still communicate—that lava carried sound perfectly. However, he did not do so intelligently; all his students heard was a series of endlessly repeated warnings to keep clear of empty spaces—to avoid all dealings with the Force—to leave this neighborhood and to let him die, but be sure to carry the warning to the rest of the world—in short, little but hysteria. Had Derrell not been so upset, he would have seen the way out in a moment; but he can hardly be blamed for being perturbed. A man suddenly finding himself imbedded completely in a block of concrete, yet somehow still living and breathing and able to

speak, might have had some inkling of the scientist's emotions; but at least a man could vaguely imagine such a situation in advance. No member of Derrell's race could have foreseen any detail of what had happened to him.

Fortunately, the students for the most part remained calm; and it was one of these who saw the solution. Derrell was restored to something like a state of reason when tiny pebbles of limestone began to fall near, and sometimes into his body. It was a long, long, job; but at last the dwellers of the rock completed the task which the ocean had failed to perform a hundred million years before, and the cavern was full of limestone. Even now travel was not easy—the space between particles was too large, and Derrell had acquired a strong antipathy to open spaces; but travel was at least possible, and at long last he found himself once more in habitable, negotiable, comfortable rock outside that terrible cavern. For a long time he rested; and when finally he spoke, it was with conviction.

"Whatever we may learn of that force in the future, certainly no one can ever doubt its reality. I hope none of you ever feel it. Those of you who were over that cave releasing rocks that enabled me to escape were taking a chance worse than that ever faced by soldier or explorer; believe me when I say I am grateful.

"One point we have learned, besides the mere existence of the force: it is not always perpendicular to the Void boundary." A faint flicker of surprise manifested itself among the listeners, but stilled at once as they perceived that the scientist was right—the boundary was extremely irregular where it passed nearest this region; projections of rock reached out into the Void at frequent intervals sometimes for more than a mile. There was no single direction that could be said to be perpendicular to it.

"That leaves two principal possibilities. One is that the force is directed at least somewhat at random, and the ocean has collected in specific localities because of that fact. If that is so, then the Pentong project is useless; the new ocean will simply add to the old, and cover no more Earth. The other main possibility would seem to be that the force does not extend into the Void at all; and in that

case we have no idea at all what will happen, except that the magma we bring up will probably spread over the boundary as it always has. We cannot even guess what the melted ocean will do.

"It seems to me a very ill-advised plan, to divert as much effort as this project would demand from our defense, when we cannot even be moderately sure of success. I think I will go to the nearest city to express my opinion—there is still too much risk from the tribes of Asia to take any chances. Has anyone a different opinion, or a better plan?"

"One thing might be done first." It was Taless, one of most self-confident of the group. "It seems almost as bad to halt the project for ignorance as to waste effort from the same cause. I would strongly recommend that we learn something about the force beyond the boundary before we express opinions to any City Leaders. At the most, let us advise delaying, not canceling, the project until some data on that matter can be obtained."

"And how would you secure this data?"

"I do not know; but we have a team of presumably competent researchers here. I certainly would not regard such investigation as hopeless, without at least some effort being made."

"The data would have to be extremely precise, and sufficient in amount to be completely convincing; the matter is vitally important for the future of our people everywhere."

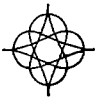
"I realize that. What is new about requiring precision in measurement?"

Derrell pondered briefly. "You are right, of course," he finally said. "We will advise *postponing* the Pentong project. Two of you can carry that message to the city. The rest of us will start devising ways to learn whether or not melted ocean will spread over the surface of Earth. If we find that it does, we coat the American continents with lava; if not, the magma pockets can stay where they are. Suggestions for experimental techniques are now in order."

JEROME BIXBY

Few concert pianists illustrate science-fiction magazines; few illustrators become editors; and the number of pianists-illustrators-editors who eventually turn into top-quality writers is very small indeed. But there is one such, and his name is Jerome Bixby, into whose slim and youthful frame is packed talent enough for any six normal people. His musicianship you can judge for yourself at almost any east-coast science-fiction gathering; his editorial ability can be estimated from the list of science-fiction magazines— Planet Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Galaxy—*he has worked on. But to see for yourself what kind of writer this man is, start right now to read——*

It's A Good Life



Aunt Amy was out on the front porch, rocking back and forth in the highbacked chair and fanning herself, when Bill Soames rode his bicycle up the road and stopped in front of the house.

Perspiring under the afternoon "sun," Bill lifted the box of groceries out of the big basket over the front wheel of the bike, and came up the front walk.

Little Anthony was sitting on the lawn, playing with a rat. He had caught the rat down in the basement—he had made it think that it smelled cheese, the most rich-smelling and crumbly-delicious cheese a rat had ever thought it smelled, and it had come out of its hole, and now Anthony had hold of it with his mind and was making it do tricks.

When the rat saw Bill Soames coming, it tried to run, but Anthony thought at it, and it turned a flip-flop on the grass, and lay trembling, its eyes gleaming in small black terror.

Bill Soames hurried past Anthony and reached the front

steps, mumbling. He always mumbled when he came to the Fremont house, or passed by it, or even thought of it. Everybody did. They thought about silly things, things that didn't mean very much, like two-and-two-is-four-and-twice-is-eight and so on; they tried to jumble up their thoughts and keep them skipping back and forth, so Anthony couldn't read their minds. The mumbling helped. Because if Anthony got anything strong out of your thoughts, he might take a notion to do something about it—like curing your wife's sick headaches or your kid's mumps, or getting your old milk cow back on schedule, or fixing the privy. And while Anthony mightn't actually mean any harm, he couldn't be expected to have much notion of what was the right thing to do in such cases.

That was if he liked you. He might try to help you, in his way. And that could be pretty horrible.

If he didn't like you . . . well, that could be worse.

Bill Soames set the box of groceries on the porch railing, and stopped his mumbling long enough to say, "Everythin' you wanted, Miss Amy."

"Oh, fine, William," Amy Fremont said lightly. "My, ain't it terrible hot today?"

Bill Soames almost cringed. His eyes pleaded with her. He shook his head violently *no,* and then interrupted his mumbling again, though obviously he didn't want to: "Oh, don't say that, Miss Amy . . . it's fine, just fine. A real *good* day!"

Amy Fremont got up from the rocking chair, and came across the porch. She was a tall woman, thin, a smiling vacancy in her eyes. About a year ago, Anthony had gotten mad at her, because she'd told him he shouldn't have turned the cat into a cat-rug, and although he had always obeyed her more than anyone else, which was hardly at all, this time he'd snapped at her. With his mind. And that had been the end of Amy Fremont's bright eyes, and the end of Amy Fremont as everyone had known her. And that was when word got around in Peaksville (population: 46) that even the members of Anthony's own family weren't safe. After that, everyone was twice as careful.

Someday Anthony might undo what he'd done to Aunt

Amy. Anthony's Mom and Pop hoped he would. When he was older, and maybe sorry. If it was possible, that is. Because Aunt Amy had changed a lot, and besides, now Anthony wouldn't obey anyone.

"Land alive, William," Aunt Amy said, "you don't have to mumble like that. Anthony wouldn't hurt you. My goodness, Anthony likes you!" She raised her voice and called to Anthony, who had tired of the rat and was making it eat itself. "Don't you, dear? Don't you like Mr. Soames?"

Anthony looked across the lawn at the grocery man—a bright, wet, purple gaze. He didn't say anything. Bill Soames tried to smile at him. After a second Anthony returned his attention to the rat. It had already devoured its tail, or at least chewed it off—for Anthony had made it bite faster than it could swallow, and little pink and red furry pieces lay around it on the green grass. Now the rat was having trouble reaching its hindquarters.

Mumbling silently, thinking of nothing in particular as hard as he could, Bill Soames went stiff-legged down the walk, mounted his bicycle and pedaled off.

"We'll see you tonight, William," Aunt Amy called after him.

As Bill Soames pumped the pedals, he was wishing deep down that he could pump twice as fast, to get away from Anthony all the faster, and away from Aunt Amy, who sometimes just forgot how *careful* you had to be. And he shouldn't have thought that. Because Anthony caught it. He caught the desire to get away from the Fremont house as if it was something *bad,* and his purple gaze blinked, and he snapped a small, sulky thought after Bill Soames—just a small one, because he was in a good mood today, and besides, he liked Bill Soames, or at least didn't dislike him, at least today. Bill Soames wanted to go away—so, petulantly, Anthony helped him.

Pedaling with superhuman speed—or rather, appearing to, because in reality the bicycle was pedaling *him*—Bill Soames vanished down the road in a cloud of dust, his thin, terrified wail drifting back across the summerlike heat.

Anthony looked at the rat. It had devoured half its belly, and had died from pain. He thought it into a grave

out deep in the cornfield—his father had once said, smiling, that he might as well do that with the things he killed—and went around the house, casting his odd shadow in the hot, brassy light from above.

In the kitchen, Aunt Amy was unpacking the groceries. She put the Mason-jarred goods on the shelves, and the meat and milk in the icebox, and the beet sugar and coarse flour in big cans under the sink. She put the cardboard box in the corner, by the door, for Mr. Soames to pick up next time he came. It was stained and battered and torn and worn fuzzy, but it was one of the few left in Peaksville. In faded red letters it said *Campbell's Soup*. The last cans of soup, or of anything else, had been eaten long ago, except for a small communal hoard which the villagers dipped into for special occasions—but the box lingered on, like a coffin, and when it and the other boxes were gone, the men would have to make some out of wood.

Aunt Amy went out in back, where Anthony's Mom—Aunt Amy's sister—sat in the shade of the house, shelling peas. The peas, every time Mom ran a finger along a pod, went *lollop-lollop-lollop* into the pan on her lap.

"William brought the groceries," Aunt Amy said. She sat down wearily in the straightbacked chair beside Mom, and began fanning herself again. She wasn't really old; but ever since Anthony had snapped at her with his mind, something had seemed to be wrong with her body as well as her mind, and she was tired all the time.

"Oh, good," said Mom. *Lollop* went the fat peas into the pan.

Everybody in Peaksville always said "Oh, fine," or "Good," or "Say, that's swell!" when almost anything happened or was mentioned—even unhappy things like accidents or even deaths. They'd always say "Good," because if they didn't try to cover up how they really felt, Anthony might overhear with his mind, and then nobody knew what might happen. Like the time Mrs. Kent's husband, Sam, had come walking back from the graveyard, because Anthony liked Mrs. Kent and had heard her mourning.

Lollop.

"Tonight's television night," said Aunt Amy. "I'm glad. I look forward to it so much every week. I wonder what we'll see tonight?"

"Did Bill bring the meat?" asked Mom.

"Yes." Aunt Amy fanned herself, looking up at the featureless brassy glare of the sky. "Goodness, it's so hot! I wish Anthony would make it just a little cooler——"

"Amy!"

"Oh!" Mom's sharp tone had penetrated, where Bill Soames' agonized expression had failed. Aunt Amy put one thin hand to her mouth in exaggerated alarm. "Oh . . . I'm sorry, dear." Her pale blue eyes shuttled around, right and left, to see if Anthony was in sight. Not that it would make any difference if he was or wasn't—he didn't have to be near you to know what you were thinking. Usually, though, unless he had his attention on somebody, he would be occupied with thoughts of his own.

But some things attracted his attention—you could never be sure just what.

"This weather's just *fine,"* Mom said.

Lollop.

"Oh, yes," Aunt Amy said. "It's a wonderful day. I wouldn't want it changed for the world!"

Lollop.

Lollop.

"What time is it?" Mom asked.

Aunt Amy was sitting where she could see through the kitchen window to the alarm clock on the shelf above the stove. "Four-thirty," she said.

Lollop.

"I want tonight to be something special," Mom said. "Did Bill bring a good lean roast?"

"Good and lean, dear. They butchered just today, you know, and sent us over the best piece."

"Dan Hollis will be *so* surprised when he finds out that tonight's television party is a birthday party for him too!"

"Oh *I* think he will! Are you sure nobody's told him?"

"Everybody swore they wouldn't."

"That'll be real nice," Aunt Amy nodded, looking off across the cornfield. "A birthday party."

"Well——" Mom put the pan of peas down beside her, stood up and brushed her apron. "I'd better get the roast on. Then we can set the table." She picked up the peas.

Anthony came around the corner of the house. He didn't look at them, but continued on down through the carefully kept garden—*all* the gardens in Peaksville were carefully kept, very carefully kept—and went past the rustling, useless hulk that had been the Fremont family car, and went smoothly over the fence and out into the cornfield.

"Isn't this a lovely day!" said Mom, a little loudly, as they went toward the back door.

Aunt Amy fanned herself. "A beautiful day, dear. Just *fine!*"

Out in the cornfield, Anthony walked between the tall, rustling rows of green stalks. He liked to smell the corn. The alive corn overhead, and the old dead corn underfoot. Rich Ohio earth, thick with weeds and brown, dry-rotting ears of corn, pressed between his bare toes with every step—he had made it rain last night so everything would smell and feel nice today.

He walked clear to the edge of the cornfield, and over to where a grove of shadowy green trees covered cool, moist, dark ground, and lots of leafy undergrowth, and jumbled moss-covered rocks, and a small spring that made a clear, clean pool. Here Anthony liked to rest and watch the birds and insects and small animals that rustled and scampered and chirped about. He liked to lie on the cool ground and look up through the moving greenness overhead, and watch the insects flit in the hazy soft sunbeams that stood like slanting, glowing bars between ground and treetops. Somehow, he liked the thoughts of the little creatures in this place better than the thoughts outside; and while the thoughts he picked up here weren't very strong or very clear, he could get enough out of them to know what the little creatures liked and wanted, and he spent a lot of time making the grove more like what they wanted it to be. The spring hadn't always been here; but one time he had found thirst in one small furry mind, and had brought subterranean water to the surface in a clear cold flow, and had watched blinking as the creature drank, feeling its pleasure.

Later he had made the pool, when he found a small urge to swim.

He had made rocks and trees and bushes and caves, and sunlight here and shadows there, because he had felt in all the tiny minds around him the desire—or the instinctive want—for this kind of resting place, and that kind of mating place, and this kind of place to play, and that kind of home.

And somehow the creatures from all the fields and pastures around the grove had seemed to know that this was a good place, for there were always more of them coming in—every time Anthony came out here there were more creatures than the last time, and more desires and needs to be tended to. Every time there would be some kind of creature he had never seen before, and he would find its mind, and see what it wanted, and then give it to it.

He liked to help them. He liked to feel their simple gratification.

Today, he rested beneath a thick elm, and lifted his purple gaze to a red and black bird that had just come to the grove. It twittered on a branch over his head, and hopped back and forth, and thought its tiny thoughts, and Anthony made a big, soft nest for it, and pretty soon it hopped in.

A long, brown, sleek-furred animal was drinking at the pool. Anthony found its mind next. The animal was thinking about a smaller creature that was scurrying along the ground on the other side of the pool, grubbing for insects. The little creature didn't know that it was in danger. The long, brown animal finished drinking and tensed its legs to leap, and Anthony thought it into a grave in the cornfield.

He didn't like those kinds of thoughts. They reminded him of the thoughts outside the grove. A long time ago some of the people outside had thought that way about *him,* and one night they'd hidden and waited for him to come back from the grove—and he'd just thought them all into the cornfield. Since then, the rest of the people hadn't thought that way—at least, very clearly. Now their thoughts were all mixed up and confusing whenever they thought about him or near him, so he didn't pay much attention.

He liked to help them too, sometimes—but it wasn't simple, or very gratifying either. They never thought happy thoughts when he did—just the jumble. So he spent more time out here.

He watched all the birds and insects and furry creatures for a while, and played with a bird, making it soar and dip and streak madly around tree trunks until, accidentally, when another bird caught his attention for a moment, he ran it into a rock. Petulantly, he thought the rock into a grave in the cornfield; but he couldn't do anything more with the bird. Not because it was dead, though it was; but because it had a broken wing. So he went back to the house. He didn't feel like walking back through the cornfield, so he just *went* to the house, right down into the basement.

It was nice down here. Nice and dark and damp and sort of fragrant, because once Mom had been making preserves in a rack along the far wall, and then she'd stopped coming down ever since Anthony had started spending time here, and the preserves had spoiled and leaked down and spread over the dirt floor, and Anthony liked the smell.

He caught another rat, making it smell cheese, and after he played with it, he thought it into a grave right beside the long animal he'd killed in the grove. Aunt Amy hated rats, and so he killed a lot of them, because he liked Aunt Amy most of all and sometimes did things that Aunt Amy wanted. Her mind was more like the little furry minds out in the grove. She hadn't thought anything bad at all about him for a long time.

After the rat, he played with a big black spider in the corner under the stairs, making it run back and forth until its web shook and shimmered in the light from the cellar window like a reflection in silvery water. Then he drove fruit flies into the web until the spider was frantic trying to wind them all up. The spider liked flies, and its thoughts were stronger than theirs, so he did it. There was something bad in the way it liked flies, but it wasn't clear—and besides, Aunt Amy hated flies too.

He heard footsteps overhead—Mom moving around in the kitchen. He blinked his purple gaze, and almost decided to make her hold still—but instead he *went* up to the attic,

and, after looking out the circular window at the front end of the long V-roofed room for a while at the front lawn and the dusty road and Henderson's tip-waving wheatfield beyond, he curled into an unlikely shape and went partly to sleep.

Soon people would be coming for television, he heard Mom think.

He went more to sleep. He liked television night. Aunt Amy had always liked television a lot, so one time he had thought some for her, and a few other people had been there at the time, and Aunt Amy had felt disappointed when they wanted to leave. He'd done something to them for that—and now everybody came to television.

He liked all the attention he got when they did.

* * *

Anthony's father came home around six-thirty, looking tired and dirty and bloody. He'd been over in Dun's pasture with the other men, helping pick out the cow to be slaughtered this month and doing the job, and then butchering the meat and salting it away in Soames's icehouse. Not a job he cared for, but every man had his turn. Yesterday, he had helped scythe down old McIntyre's wheat. Tomorrow, they would start threshing. By hand. Everything in Peaksville had to be done by hand.

He kissed his wife on the cheek and sat down at the kitchen table. He smiled and said, "Where's Anthony?"

"Around someplace," Mom said.

Aunt Amy was over at the wood-burning stove, stirring the big pot of peas. Mom went back to the oven and opened it and basted the roast.

"Well, it's been a *good* day," Dad said. By rote. Then he looked at the mixing bowl and breadboard on the table. He sniffed at the dough. "M'm," he said. "I could eat a loaf all by myself, I'm so hungry."

"No one told Dan Hollis about its being a birthday party, did they?" his wife asked.

"Nope. We kept as quiet as mummies."

"We've fixed up such a lovely surprise!"

"Um? What?"

"Well . . . you know how much Dan likes music. Well, last week Thelma Dunn found a *record* in her attic!"

"No!"

"Yes! And we had Ethel sort of ask—you know, without really *asking*—if he had that one. And he said no. Isn't that a wonderful surprise?"

"Well, now, it sure is. A record, imagine! That's a real nice thing to find! What record is it?"

"Ferry Como, singing *You Are My Sunshine.*"

"Well, I'll be darned. I always liked that tune." Some raw carrots were lying on the table. Dad picked up a small one, scrubbed it on his chest, and took a bite. "How did Thelma happen to find it?"

"Oh, you know—just looking around for new things."

"M'm." Dad chewed the carrot. "Say, who has that picture we found a while back? I kind of liked it—that old clipper sailing along——"

"The Smiths. Next week the Sipichs get it, and they give the Smiths old McIntyre's music-box, and we give the Sipichs——" and she went down the tentative order of things that would exchange hands among the women at church this Sunday.

He nodded. "Looks like we can't have the picture for a while, I guess. Look, honey, you might try to get that detective book back from the Reillys. I was so busy the week we had it, I never got to finish all the stories——"

"I'll try," his wife said doubtfully. "But I hear the van Husens have a stereoscope they found in the cellar." Her voice was just a little accusing. "They had it two whole months before they told anybody about it——"

"Say," Dad said, looking interested. "That'd be nice, too. Lots of pictures?"

"I suppose so. I'll see on Sunday. I'd like to have it—but we still owe the van Husens for their canary. I don't know why that bird had to pick *our* house to die . . . it must have been sick when we got it. Now there's just no satisfying Betty van Husen—she even hinted she'd like our *piano* for a while!"

"Well, honey, you try for the stereoscope—or just any-

thing you think we'll like." At last he swallowed the carrot. It had been a little young and tough. Anthony's whims about the weather made it so that people never knew what crops would come up, or what shape they'd be in if they did. All they could do was plant a lot; and always enough of something came up any one season to live on. Just once there had been a grain surplus; tons of it had been hauled to the edge of Peaksville and dumped off into the nothingness. Otherwise, nobody could have breathed, when it started to spoil.

"You know," Dad went on. "It's nice to have the new things around. It's nice to think that there's probably still a lot of stuff nobody's found yet, in cellars and attics and barns and down behind things. They help, somehow. As much as anything can help——"

"Sh-h!" Mom glanced nervously around.

"Oh," Dad said, smiling hastily. "It's all right! The new things are *good!* It's *nice* to be able to have something around you've never seen before, and know that something you've given somebody else is making them happy . . . that's a real *good* thing."

"A good thing," his wife echoed.

"Pretty soon," Aunt Amy said, from the stove, "there won't be any more new things. We'll have found everything there is to find. Goodness, that'll be too bad——"

"Amy!"

"Well——" her pale eyes were shallow and fixed, a sign of her recurrent vagueness. "It will be kind of a shame—no new things——"

"Don't *talk* like that," Mom said, trembling. "Amy, be *quiet!"*

"It's *good,"* said Dad, in the loud, familiar, wanting-to-be-overheard tone of voice. "Such talk is *good.* It's okay, honey—don't you see? It's good for Amy to talk any way she wants. It's good for her to feel bad. Everything's good. Everything *has* to be good . . ."

Anthony's mother was pale. And so was Aunt Amy—the peril of the moment had suddenly penetrated the clouds surrounding her mind. Sometimes it was difficult to handle words so that they might not prove disastrous. You just

never *knew*. There were so many things it was wise not to say, or even think—but remonstration for saying or thinking them might be just as bad, if Anthony heard and decided to do anything about it. You could just never tell what Anthony was liable to do.

Everything had to be good. Had to be fine just as it was, even if it wasn't. Always. Because any change might be worse. So terribly much worse.

"Oh, my goodness, yes, of course it's good," Mom said. "You talk any way you want to, Amy, and it's just fine. Of course, you want to remember that some ways are *better* than others . . ."

Aunt Amy stirred the peas, fright in her pale eyes.

"Oh, yes," she said. "But I don't feel like talking right now. It . . . it's *good* that I don't feel like talking."

Dad said tiredly, smiling, "I'm going out and wash up."

* * *

They started arriving around eight o'clock. By that time, Mom and Aunt Amy had the big table in the dining room set, and two more tables off to the side. The candles were burning, and the chairs situated, and Dad had a big fire going in the fireplace.

The first to arrive were the Sipichs, John and Mary. John wore his best suit, and was well-scrubbed and pink-faced after his day in McIntyre's pasture. The suit was neatly pressed, but getting threadbare at elbows and cuffs. Old McIntyre was working on a loom, designing it out of schoolbooks, but so far it was slow going. McIntyre was a capable man with wood and tools, but a loom was a big order when you couldn't get metal parts. McIntyre had been one of the ones who, at first, had wanted to try to get Anthony to make things the villagers needed, like clothes and canned goods and medical supplies and gasoline. Since then, he felt that what had happened to the whole Terrance family and Joe Kinney was his fault, and he worked hard trying to make it up to the rest of them. And since then, no one had tried to get Anthony to do anything.

Mary Sipich was a small, cheerful woman in a simple

dress. She immediately set about helping Mom and Aunt Amy put the finishing touches on the dinner.

The next arrivals were the Smiths and the Dunns, who lived right next to each other down the road, only a few yards from the nothingness. They drove up in the Smiths' wagon, drawn by their old horse.

Then the Reillys showed up, from across the darkened wheatfield, and the evening realiy began. Pat Reilly sat down at the big upright in the front room, and began to play from the popular sheet music on the rack. He played softly, as expressively as he could—and nobody sang. Anthony liked piano playing a whole lot, but not singing; often he would come up from the basement, or down from the attic, or just *come,* and sit on top of the piano, nodding his head as Pat played *Lover* or *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* or *Night and Day*. He seemed to prefer ballads, sweet-sounding songs—but the one time somebody had started to sing, Anthony had looked over from the top of the piano and done something that made everybody afraid of singing from then on. Later, they'd decided that the piano was what Anthony had heard first, before anybody had ever tried to sing, and now anything else added to it didn't sound right and distracted him from his pleasure.

So, every television night, Pat would play the piano, and that was the beginning of the evening. Wherever Anthony was, the music would make him happy, and put him in a good mood, and he would know that they were gathering for television and waiting for him.

By eight-thirty everybody had shown up, except for the seventeen children and Mrs. Soames who was off watching them in the schoolhouse at the far end of town. The children of Peaksville were never, never allowed near the Fremont house—not since little Fred Smith had tried to play with Anthony on a dare. The younger children weren't even told about Anthony. The others had mostly forgotten about him, or were told that he was a nice, nice goblin but they must never go near him.

Dan and Ethel Hollis came late, and Dan walked in not suspecting a thing. Pat Reilly had played the piano until his hands ached—he'd worked pretty hard with them today—

and now he got up, and everybody gathered around to wish Dan Hollis a happy birthday.

"Well, I'll be darned," Dan grinned. "This is swell I wasn't expecting this at all . . . gosh, this is *swell!*"

They gave him his presents—mostly things they had made by hand, though some were things that people had possessed as their own and now gave him as his. John Sipich gave him a watch charm, hand-carved out of a piece of hickory wood. Dan's watch had broken down a year or so ago, and there was nobody in the village who knew how to fix it, but he still carried it around because it had been his grandfather's and was a fine old heavy thing of gold and silver. He attached the charm to the chain, while everybody laughed and said John had done a nice job of carving. Then Mary Sipich gave him a knitted necktie, which he put on, removing the one he'd worn.

The Reillys gave him a little box they had made, to keep things in. They didn't say what things, but Dan said he'd keep his personal jewelry in it. The Reillys had made it out of a cigar box, carefully peeled of its paper and lined on the inside with velvet. The outside had been polished, and carefully if not expertly carved by Pat—but his carving got complimented too. Dan Hollis received many other gifts—a pipe, a pair of shoelaces, a tie pin, a knit pair of socks, some fudge, a pair of garters made from old suspenders.

He unwrapped each gift with vast pleasure, and wore as many of them as he could right there, even the garters. He lit up the pipe, and said he'd never had a better smoke; which wasn't quite true, because the pipe wasn't broken in yet. Pete Manners had had it lying around ever since he'd received it as a gift four years ago from an out-of-town relative who hadn't known he'd stopped smoking.

Dan put the tobacco into the bowl very carefully. Tobacco was precious. It was only pure luck that Pat Reilly had decided to try to grow some in his backyard just before what had happened to Peaksville had happened. It didn't grow very well, and then they had to cure it and shred it and all, and it was just precious stuff. Everybody in town used wooden holders old McIntyre had made, to save on butts.

Last of all, Thelma Dunn gave Dan Hollis the record she had found.

Dan's eyes misted even before he opened the package. He knew it was a record.

"Gosh," he said softly. "What one is it? I'm almost afraid to look . . ."

"You haven't got it, darling," Ethel Hollis smiled. "Don't you remember, I asked about *You Are My Sunshine?"*

"Oh, gosh," Dan said again. Carefully he removed the wrapping and stood there fondling the record, running his big hands over the worn grooves with their tiny, dulling crosswise scratches. He looked around the room, eyes shining, and they all smiled back, knowing how delighted he was.

"Happy birthday, darling!" Ethel said, throwing her arms around him and kissing him.

He clutched the record in both hands, holding it off to one side as she pressed against him. "Hey," he laughed, pulling back his head. "Be careful . . . I'm holding a priceless object!" He looked around again, over his wife's arms, which were still around his neck. His eyes were hungry. "Look . . . do you think we could play it? Lord, what I'd give to hear some new music . . . just the first part, the orchestra part, before Como sings?"

Faces sobered. After a minute, John Sipich said, "I don't think we'd better, Dan. After all, we don't know just where the singer comes in—it'd be taking too much of a chance. Better wait till you get home."

Dan Hollis reluctantly put the record on the buffet with all his other presents. "It's *good,"* he said automatically, but disappointedly, "that I can't play it here."

"Oh, yes," said Sipich. "It's good." To compensate for Dan's disappointed tone, he repeated, "It's *good."*

They ate dinner, the candles lighting their smiling faces, and ate it all right down to the last delicious drop of gravy. They complimented Mom and Aunt Amy on the roast beef, and the peas and carrots, and the tender corn on the cob. The corn hadn't come from the Fremont's cornfield, natu-

rally—everybody knew what was out there; and the field was going to weeds.

Then they polished off the dessert—homemade ice cream and cookies. And then they sat back, in the flickering light of the candles, and chatted, waiting for television.

There never was a lot of mumbling on television night—everybody came and had a good dinner at the Fremonts', and that was nice, and afterwards there was television, and nobody really thought much about that—it just had to be put up with. So it was a pleasant enough get-together, aside from your having to watch what you said just as carefully as you always did everyplace. If a dangerous thought came into your mind, you just started mumbling, even right in the middle of a sentence. When you did that, the others just ignored you until you felt happier again and stopped.

Anthony liked television night. He had done only two or three awful things on television night in the whole past year.

Mom had put a bottle of brandy on the table, and they each had a tiny glass of it. Liquor was even more precious than tobacco. The villagers could make wine, but the grapes weren't right, and certainly the techniques weren't, and it wasn't very good wine. There were only a few bottles of real liquor left in the village—four rye, three Scotch, three brandy, nine real wine and half a bottle of Drambuie belonging to old McIntyre (only for marriages)—and when those were gone, that was it.

Afterward, everybody wished that the brandy hadn't been brought out. Because Dan Hollis drank more of it than he should have, and mixed it with a lot of the homemade wine. Nobody thought anything about it at first, because he didn't show it much outside, and it was his birthday party and a happy party, and Anthony liked these get-togethers and shouldn't see any reason to do anything even if he was listening.

But Dan Hollis got high, and did a fool thing. If they'd seen it coming, they'd have taken him outside and walked him around.

The first thing they knew, Dan stopped laughing right in the middle of the story about how Thelma Dunn had

found the Perry Como record and dropped it and it hadn't broken because she'd moved faster than she ever had before in her life and caught it. He was fondling the record again, and looking longingly at the Fremonts' gramophone over in the corner, and suddenly he stopped laughing and his face got slack, and then it got ugly, and he said, "Oh, *Christ!*"

Immediately the room was still. So still they could hear the whirring movement of the grandfather's clock out in the hall. Pat Reilly had been playing the piano, softly. He stopped, his hands poised over the yellowed keys.

The candles on the dining-room table flickered in a cool breeze that blew through the lace curtains over the bay window.

"Keep playing, Pat," Anthony's father said softly.

Pat started again. He played *Night and Day,* but his eyes were sidewise on Dan Hollis, and he missed notes.

Dan stood in the middle of the room, holding the record. In his other hand he held a glass of brandy so hard his hand shook.

They were all looking at him.

"Christ," he said again, and he made it sound like a dirty word.

Reverend Younger, who had been talking with Mom and Aunt Amy by the dining-room door, said "Christ" too—but he was using it in a prayer. His hands were clasped, and his eyes were closed.

John Sipich moved forward. "Now, Dan . . . it's *good* for you to talk that way. But you don't want to talk too much, you know."

Dan shook off the hand Sipich put on his arm.

"Can't even play my record," he said loudly. He looked down at the record, and then around at their faces. "Oh, my *God* . . ."

He threw the glassful of brandy against the wall. It splattered and ran down the wallpaper in streaks.

Some of the women gasped.

"Dan," Sipich said in a whisper. "Dan, cut it out——"

Pat Reilly was playing *Night and Day* louder, to cover up

the sounds of the talk. It wouldn't do any good, though, if Anthony was listening.

Dan Hollis went over to the piano and stood by Pat's shoulder, swaying a little.

"Pat," he said. "Don't play *that*. Play *this*." And he began to sing. Softly, hoarsely, miserably: "Happy birthday to me . . . Happy birthday to me . . ."

"Dan!" Ethel Hollis screamed. She tried to run across the room to him. Mary Sipich grabbed her arm and held her back. "Dan," Ethel screamed again. "Stop——"

"My God, be quiet!" hissed Mary Sipich, and pushed her toward one of the men, who put his hand over her mouth and held her still.

"——Happy birthday, dear Danny," Dan sang. "Happy birthday to me!" He stopped and looked down at Pat Reilly. "Play it, Pat. Play it, so I can sing right . . . you know I can't carry a tune unless somebody plays it!"

Pat Reilly put his hands on the keys and began *Lover*—in a slow waltz tempo, the way Anthony liked it. Pat's face was white. His hands fumbled.

Dan Hollis stared over at the dining-room door. At Anthony's mother, and at Anthony's father who had gone to join her.

"*You* had him," he said. Tears gleamed on his cheeks as the candlelight caught them. "*You* had to go and *have* him . . ."

He closed his eyes, and the tears squeezed out. He sang loudly, "You are my sunshine . . . my only sunshine . . . you make me happy . . . when I am blue . . ."

Anthony *came* into the room.

Pat stopped playing. He froze. Everybody froze. The breeze rippled the curtains. Ethel Hollis couldn't even try to scream—she had fainted.

"Please don't take my sunshine . . . away . . ." Dan's voice faltered into silence. His eyes widened. He put both hands out in front of him, the empty glass in one, the record in the other. He hiccupped, and said, *"No——"*

"Bad man," Anthony said, and thought Dan Hollis into something like nothing anyone would have believed pos-

sible, and then he thought the thing into a grave deep, deep in the cornfield.

The glass and record thumped on the rug. Neither broke.

Anthony's purple gaze went around the room.

Some of the people began mumbling. They all tried to smile. The sound of mumbling filled the room like a far-off approval. Out of the murmuring came one or two clear voices:

"Oh, it's a very *good* thing," said John Sipich.

"A good thing," said Anthony's father, smiling. He'd had more practice in smiling than most of them. "A wonderful thing."

"It's swell . . . just swell," said Pat Reilly, tears leaking from eyes and nose, and he began to play the piano again, softly, his trembling hands feeling for *Night and Day*.

Anthony climbed up on top of the piano, and Pat played for two hours.

Afterward, they watched television. They all went into the front room, and lit just a few candles, and pulled up chairs around the set. It was a small-screen set, and they couldn't all sit close enough to it to see, but that didn't matter. They didn't even turn the set on. It wouldn't have worked anyway, there being no electricity in Peaksville.

They just sat silently, and watched the twisting, writhing shapes on the screen, and listened to the sounds that came out of the speaker, and none of them had any idea of what it was all about. They never did. It was always the same.

"It's real nice," Aunt Amy said once, her pale eyes on the meaningless flickers and shadows. "But I liked it a little better when there were cities outside and we could get real——"

"Why, Amy!" said Mom. "It's good for you to say such a thing. Very good. But how can you mean it? Why, this television is *much* better than anything we ever used to get!"

"Yes," chimed in John Sipich. "It's fine. It's the best show we've ever seen!"

He sat on the couch, with two other men, holding Ethel

Hollis flat against the cushions, holding her arms and legs and putting their hands over her mouth, so she couldn't start screaming again.

"It's really *good!*" he said again.

Mom looked out of the front window, across the darkened road, across Henderson's darkened wheat field to the vast, endless, gray nothingness in which the little village of Peaksville floated like a soul—the huge nothingness that was most evident at night, when Anthony's brassy day had gone.

It did no good to wonder where they were . . . no good at all. Peaksville was just someplace. Someplace away from the world. It was wherever it had been since that day three years ago when Anthony had crept from her womb and old Doc Bates—God rest him—had screamed and dropped him and tried to kill him, and Anthony had whined and done the thing. Had taken the village someplace. Or had destroyed the world and left only the village, nobody knew which.

It did no good to wonder about it. Nothing at all did any good—except to live as they must live. Must always, always live, if Anthony would let them.

These thoughts were dangerous, she thought.

She began to mumble. The others started mumbling too. They had all been thinking, evidently.

The men on the couch whispered and whispered to Ethel Hollis, and when they took their hands away, she mumbled too.

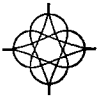
While Anthony sat on top of the set and made television, they sat around and mumbled and watched the meaningless, flickering shapes far into the night.

Next day it snowed, and killed off half the crops—but it was a *good* day.

LESTER DEL REY

Your editor is a patient man, but all patience in time comes to an end. Faced for the fifth consecutive time with the task of finding something fresh and different to say about a story by one of the youngest "Old Masters" of the science-fiction field, Lester del Rey, your editor has reached the end of his rope. Let it be clearly understood, then, that under no circumstances will there be another del Rey story in any anthology constructed by the undersigned—unless, that is, del Rey should come up with a story as compellingly written and warmly sympathetic as——

A Pound of Cure



Maryl sat in the same spot as he'd left her in the morning, and the house was a mess, except for the big electrochord Henry had bought for Jimmy's first lessons. That was polished to a gleam of synthetic mahogany, and topped by the tri-di picture of the boy, taken a year ago. Now she sat with her hands in her lap, facing it. Wrapped around one finger was the yellow curl she'd saved from the boy's first haircut, and her thumb was caressing it softly.

But she got up as Henry came in, her face hardening. He flinched, dropping his eyes, and reaching for the slippers the robot houseboy should have brought. Then he remembered why the little robot was no longer around, and jerked his eyes up guiltily to meet hers.

"Henry!" Her voice had a touch of a quiver to it, but it carried determination. "Henry! I've made up my mind. Jimmy's been with your mother two days now, and it isn't good for him to be away from me so long. I want you to drive out for him tonight!"

He'd been afraid of it, and his story was ready. But looking at her, he dropped it. "I had a hard day, honey. I'm dead. Besides, the heli's acting up. I don't think it would take three hundred miles there and back."

Her lips grew thin. "*I* work, too, Henry. I spent all day cleaning Jimmy's room." Her face lightened, and a fond smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "He's such a messy boy. But he is a sweet child, too. I've been thinking we should let him grow his curls again, Henry. He looked so nice that way."

Henry forced the anger out of his voice, trying to remember that it had been harder on her. They hadn't meant to let her know about the hysterectomy and the fact that she couldn't have other children; she'd always been sensitive, and her whole life had been centered on having the maximum five children the law allowed. But somehow she'd learned the truth. And since then she'd changed. Like letting the house go to pot, not even ordering the robot maid to make the beds, or letting it do more than a token cleaning; like cleaning Jimmy's room daily by herself.

He nodded. "I've been thinking so too, Maryl. In fact, Mother told me I should. Said we were trying to make Jimmy into a man too fast. Told me she was taking him out to buy him a blue velvet suit tonight."

He watched the reaction, and some relief came as Maryl softened. "That's nice. Though she might talk to me about it. Still—umm, maybe you can get Jimmy tomorrow. I guess she's lonely, too. But you've got to bring him back tomorrow, Henry. Tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow," he promised, and clumped out to the kitchen to see what Zenia, the maid, had prepared for his supper. Maryl had unquestionably eaten at five, since she'd started sharing her dinner with Jimmy, instead of waiting for him. Sometimes now it seemed to him that he was more married to the robot than to his wife. She'd been named for a real maid they'd had seven years before, and her body had been fixed to look like the girl's, even to the tiny sweat glands that left beads of moisture on her forehead when she worked over the stove.

He told her the new one he'd heard at the office, about the heli salesgirl who'd married the lion tamer. It couldn't have meant anything to her, but she laughed at the right place, and countered with the story of a widower in France

looking for mourning clothes. He went up to bed feeling considerably better.

Sometime during the night he awakened to realize Maryl wasn't in her bed. He tiptoed down the hall, to find her curled up on Jimmy's bed, sound asleep. But the light must have disturbed her. She turned part-way over, and muttered something. He bent down. "My own little Jimmy boy," she was saying. Henry closed the door and went back to bed, frowning. If she'd only have consented to adopt other children, instead of flying off the handle at the idea of wasting her time on other women's children!

Dr. Broderick had better make good on his promise, Henry thought. If Maryl ever suspected that her son was staying with his grandmother because he'd broken both legs falling out of a tree in the park . . . Well, she couldn't find that out. Nor could she be held off any longer. Each day without Jimmy seemed to make things worse.

But Dr. Broderick was smiling the next morning. He should have been smiling, Henry thought, with what they were paying for his personal advice and special services. Still, Maryl's father had left enough to his son-in-law, and anything was better than seeing her again without bringing her son back to her.

"It's ready," he said. He was a big man, with an annoying keenness that seemed to cut through into a man's personal thoughts, and a reputation as the best family adjustment expert in America.

He stopped to unwrap two cigars and pass one to Henry. "I was out to see Jimmy last night, Henry," he said. "A fine boy—with the right upbringing, the kind of future citizen we need desperately after the load of neurotics our ancestors wished off on us. And you're good for him, even if you do have your own twists. But even with my advice, you can't handle him alone. I caught a trace of a petulant whine in his voice twice last night. Now, did you talk to Maryl about adopting a sister for him? He's six, you know—time to begin."

Henry avoided his glance. "I talked to her, day before yesterday. But she thinks . . ."

"Yeah. I was afraid so. Resents the idea of anyone com-

ing between her and the boy. I'm afraid I made a mistake in passing her for marriage, though she was all right until we had to remove that tumor. Good blood, but her mother . . . And as the daughter of a man who won the Personal Privilege rating, we can't send her to a home for memory removal without her consent. Unless you were to request it, of course . . ."

Henry shrugged. They'd been through that before.

Broderick got up, shaking his head. "Laws, laws, laws. How can we save the kids when we have to work with the laws their psychotic grandfathers passed?"

"You might worry more about your other patients—they're still paying you, even if they have grown up," Henry pointed out.

"True. I do worry about them. But what difference does it make if they're happy in a dream world? It's too late to give them the right help. But it's not too late to save the kids. And once we can get one generation where a sound adjustment is the norm, we won't have to worry after that." He stood up abruptly, and moved to a side door. "Okay, forget it. Here's what you came for."

The door opened and a boy came walking in, smiling quickly as he saw Henry. "Father!" he cried out, and broke into a run. Henry reacted automatically for a second, before he remembered that it was all a fake. Under the curly yellow hair and eager young face, there was still the mind of the robot houseboy.

Broderick's voice cut into the scene before it could become too awkward. "All right, Jimmy, you'd better wait outside. Your father will be out in a minute." He watched the boylike figure leave, and turned to Henry. "We were lucky in having one of the small robots working where he could remember so much about Jimmy. It made the substitution easy, and I hope it will prevent any slip-ups. Now, though, it's up to you. Still think you can treat him like the real Jimmy?"

"I think so," Henry said.

"You'd better. After all, it was your idea. We've considered things like this before, but we've been uncertain about the results. If Maryl guesses . . . well, she'll really

crack then, probably. If it works, though, you may have started something that will save a lot of misery in the world." The psychiatrist picked up his type-pen, nodded, and dismissed Henry. "Let me know the minute anything goes wrong. And good luck!"

Jimmy was waiting outside, and they filed up toward the heli ramp together. The boy was quiet at first, as he might have been after any strange experience. Then he gradually began to chatter about his grandmother, and Henry found himself making the proper responses. It wasn't going to be so hard, after all—if Maryl would accept the substitution. He glanced at the boy. Outwardly he seemed perfect. No, not quite. He seemed a bit younger than he was, and his hair was longer. But maybe that was what Broderick had decided was closest to Maryl's memory.

They stopped on the way to get the blue-velvet suit. It took six stores before one was able to fabricate the right kind of cloth, but there was time to kill, since he was supposedly bringing the boy back from a longish trip. Henry still had time to make the office when he led the facsimile boy up the steps.

Maryl came down the stairs at a run, and the boy flew into her arms. There was a small feast of goodies spread out on the dining-room table, Henry saw—and Maryl began shouting to Zenia to bring more. Her face was glowing, and she didn't even look at her husband.

He squirmed uncomfortably, while the boy began repeating his chatter about his grandfather. Maryl glanced up finally and saw her husband for the first time. "Jimmy's home!" she said. "Isn't it wonderful? And you'll be late to work, Henry." She kissed him quickly on the cheek and dashed back as Jimmy began opening presents.

Henry went back to the heli, frowning. It wouldn't matter with the robot. But still . . . Maybe Broderick was right. Maybe he'd better insist on registering the boy for school, so things would be on a sounder footing when the real Jimmy returned. Still, that would require having a tutor for Jimmy while he recovered. He'd wait and see.

By the time he returned, however, things were back to something approaching normal. He got part of the day's

events out of Zenia, before Maryl came out to the kitchen. She twitted him about having an affair with their maid, almost as if the old days were back. But she stayed only a minute before going up to the nursery. That was in keeping with her present pattern, however. And it wouldn't hurt, probably, since the robot-boy would be feigning sleep.

Curiously, Maryl seemed happier than before as the days passed. She began going out into the garden, according to Zenia, to play with Jimmy. And she even permitted the boy to stay on the swing and get dirty in the sandpile. Henry tried to tell himself that the shock of her lost ability to have other children was wearing off.

He took one day off to fly up and see the real Jimmy, but there were no worries on that score. The legs were healing, and the boy was happy enough to see him. He called Maryl with the old excuse of a business trip, and stayed over for the night. Damn it, Jimmy was a fine boy, as Broderick admitted, and a man had some rights with his own son.

Maryl met him when he came back, and he knew at once that something had gone wrong. The sparkle was gone, and she was too warm in her greeting. Also, supper for the two of them was laid out on the dining-room table. She sat down, but made no effort to touch the food.

"Where's Jimmy?" she asked. "And what happened to our houseboy?"

He'd been prepared for deviousness of some kind, but this caught him off guard. For a second, he fumbled in his mind, trying to hold his facial muscles firmly.

"Don't lie to me!" she snapped. "You lied to me once, when I went to the hospital. I haven't forgotten that. And I didn't think you'd dare try it again. Henry Needham, what have you done with my boy?"

He let his muscles sag then. "You mean—you mean Jimmy's run away? Maryl, you're nuts. I sold the houseboy two weeks ago when he began to mistake orders. Jimmy couldn't have run off with him."

"Jimmy's upstairs," she said slowly. She frowned, then shook her head. "I thought . . . Maybe I'm just worried about school, and everything . . ."

"We could skip another year of school," he suggested quickly. She nodded, and turned quickly toward the stairs, smiling again. But there was still an odd expression on her face.

The suspicious looks continued for the next two days. But on the third, she was as radiant as she had ever been. Henry could get nothing out of Zenia. He suspected that somehow the maid had let something slip, but if so, the results had worn off.

The crisis seemed to have passed, in any event, without the need of Broderick's advice. Another week slipped by, and twice Maryl ate with him. The house was better regulated. She still slept part of the time with Jimmy, but some mornings he woke to find her in the opposite bed. Time, he thought—time, and no new worries. In spite of Broderick's fine theories, Maryl was sound material. She'd be herself again, yet.

It was just a week before the real Jimmy was to return that he awoke to find her sitting up, studying him. He roused himself, trying to reach a stage of alertness, but she smiled and pushed him back.

"I'm just being fond of you, Henry," she said, and there was new warmth in her laugh. "You're the clever Henry I always knew you were. Who else would have thought of getting me a robot Jimmy to substitute for my boy while he was sick? Oh, don't deny it—I called up one of the women friends of your mother—one I met two years ago. And I'm not mad, not at all. I think it was very sweet of you to bring me the new Jimmy. Without him, I couldn't have stood it."

"Maryl!" He caught her suddenly, studying her face. But there were no secrets in it. She'd found out, somehow—but she'd taken it. Broderick be damned! Maryl was all right again. She was too smart to be fooled, but it didn't matter now. "Maryl, to hell with my work. Let's pack up and go out to Mother's until the boy's ready to come back. Let's make it a celebration. Let's . . ."

She grinned, but shook her head. "And you with the new fusion jet about to be put through its trials? Don't be silly, Henry. I can wait, now!"

She proved that she could, too. Henry watched her while the week dragged along. The success of the jet meant nothing compared to the new—or rather, old—Maryl. Then he got the final returns on it, and knocked off. He put through a couple of calls, chuckling to himself. Psychiatrists! A good husband was worth a dozen of them. If a man couldn't figure what was good for his own wife, who could? And this would be the best thing of all.

A surprise party was just the thing. She was expecting Jimmy back in two more days, but the boy was well. And happiness never hurt anyone. He wound up his affairs, climbed into his heli, and took off for his mother's place, chuckling at the picture of Maryl's face when he walked through the door with Jimmy that night.

It came off on schedule—at least through the door. He'd warned the boy about the substitute, and about the surprise. And that part went off well, too. Jimmy considered his robot twin a fine joke as they stood there, watching Maryl and the robot coming down the stairs to the door.

Then she stopped. Her eyes darted from one to the other. She hesitated a second longer. Then she swung about, picking the robot up hastily and heading him back up the stairs, with a quick word in his ear.

"It's all right, Maryl," Henry began. "Jimmy knows . . ."

"Jimmy doesn't. He's too young for that—too innocent!" She came across the hall now, her back straight and her lips drawn straighter. She went past Henry, and up to her son.

One hand came back and forward, and her palm caught the boy behind the ear, sending him staggering. "You!" Her voice rose to a scream of rage. "You—trying to come in here! Get out. Get out, do you hear! You filthy little monster! Do you think I don't know what you'll do? Do you think you can come here and steal the place of my own little Jimmy?"

Her arm came up again, but Henry got between them somehow. "Maryl—this *is* Jimmy. See how he's grown! A whole inch. And Mother's been teaching him to read! Look, let him show you!"

She was across the room, shouting for Zenia. "Throw them out! Zenia, throw them out! They can't do it!"

Henry stood rooted to the floor as the maid came forward, keyed to obey Maryl before anyone else. He shot one uncomprehending look at his wife and another at the stricken face of the real Jimmy. Then the sickness in him was swallowed up by the younger misery beside him.

"It's all right, Jim," he said quietly. "It's all right. Your mother's sick—I didn't want to tell you, because I thought she'd be better. We'll go and get Dr. Broderick, and then everything will be all right."

He retreated through the door, leading the boy. "She's delirious, Jim—you know what that means—like the time your friend Phil had the fever. But she'll be all right, later. Come on, I'll let you fly the heli while we find a phone and get Dr. Broderick."

This time, Broderick made no comments. His eyes slitted once on the visiphone, and then he nodded. "Leave the boy in the heli, Henry," he ordered. "And for God's sake, don't forget to take the key out with you. I'll meet you in front of your house."

Reaction had set in by the time Broderick arrived. Henry had only a vague idea of what went on as they were let into the house by Zenia. Broderick headed up the stairs toward the nursery, motioning Henry to wait. He dropped onto a chair, sitting on the edge, and took the drink that Zenia brought. As the door to the nursery opened, there was the sound of sobbing, and then it closed, leaving only silence.

The third drink was finished when Broderick came back, and his face was taut and worn. Henry stumbled toward him. "Is it . . . ?"

"The worst that could happen—or the best. I don't know. I should have you confined to a cage in the zoo with the other apes, Henry. Damn it, I told you to let me know at the first sign. Oh, drat it, I know it's my own fault. I should know better than to trust a man who'd marry a neurotic woman and then stick with her. Go up and see her, but don't say anything. Just look in the door and come out again."

Henry crept up silently. There were no sounds of sob-

bing now, only a crooning blur of words. He opened the door a crack, forgetting Broderick's advice as he tried to phrase something comforting. But she didn't look around. Her face was close to that of the robot Jimmy, and she was crooning to it.

"No they're not. Not to my little robot. My own little baby boy. I won't let them. Dr. Broderick understands. He won't let that mean old man do anything. And you'll always be mine. Always. You'll never grow old, and you'll never be mean to me. No other woman will ever have you, 'cause you won't grow up and go away from me. You'll always be just the way you are. My own little boy, my sweet little robot boy who's all mine! Won't you, Jimmy boy?"

"All yours, Mama," the robot answered, and a small hand came out to rest on her hair caressingly. "Just like I am."

She gurgled happily. "All right. And what's a robot, angel?"

"A robot's the nicest kind of special boy, Mama," the creature answered, gurgling back. "And it's me, 'cause I love you."

"And what's a Mama?" she asked.

Henry shut the door softly, cutting off the words, while the voices went on and on until Broderick came up to lead him down and into the kitchen for another drink. "There's still Jimmy," the psychiatrist reminded him. "Suicide won't solve that, Henry!"

He hadn't realized he was thinking it, though the man was right. "Jimmy." He rolled it off his tongue. "You can erase the memory of this from him, can't you?"

Broderick nodded. "We'll do that, of course. We'll do everything we can to make sure our future citizens don't inherit the sins of their fathers. But can you forget, Henry? If there's one chance in a hundred of returning Maryl, can you take it and forget what has happened? Can you build a whole new life for yourself?"

Henry's eyes rested on Broderick. Therapy, he thought. Therapy—stall the patient with any promises until he can be given full treatment.

Broderick shook his head this time, again seeming to read Henry's mind. "It'll cost every cent you have, Henry. You'll have to move to a new town where nobody knows you, get yourself a new apartment and a new job—a job, not a position until you can earn one. And no robots. Absolutely nothing from this life. There are new techniques, but they're risky and imperfect. All psychiatry is imperfect. You may find differences."

"For Maryl——" Henry began slowly.

Broderick cut him off. "No, for Jimmy. Because all I can promise is that we won't permit anything which will ruin *his* future. We want you and Maryl to be happy, but we don't demand it. And if anything goes wrong, you'll be the one to suffer for it. Well?"

"When?" he asked.

"Whenever you're ready, Henry. We'll have finished what we can do before you can find your job and set yourself up with reasonable conveniences."

He thought it over, looking for the trick. Maybe, if they made it hard enough for him, they could force him to take some job which would prove a blind alley, where he could never earn enough to support a wife and son. They could put Maryl away with her robot and bring Jimmy up with their cold and logical scientific ideas. Once they got him away, he could never fall back on Personal Privilege laws. And his therapy would be the slow adjustment of a man in a routine job, looking forward with dimming hopes to a future that always was one step away.

He'd been muttering to himself, but Broderick must have heard some of it. The psychiatrist grimaced. "No, Henry. You'll have some money left—enough to set yourself up. And you're too good an accountant to pigeonhole in any small job, even if you are rusty. There's an opening for you, wherever you go."

There had to be some catch, or they'd have tried it long ago. And yet it sounded like more than humoring him. He considered it, but he already knew his decision. "There's a plane leaving in an hour for Seattle," he remembered aloud.

Broderick lifted the receiver and began dialing for a helicab. "Sooner than you think, Henry," he promised.

He kept his promise. It was less than two weeks later that Henry stood at the airport in Seattle, watching a boy of six and a hesitatingly smiling Maryl get off the plane and head toward him.

But it was four years before he found the catch, and then only by accident, or one of the lapses of memory only psychiatrists could explain. He was finishing up a late evening at the office, winding up an involved new contract with a New York firm. He was impatient to get home, and trying to make up his mind whether to take flowers to his wife or a new gadget to his son. And his fingers dialed the New York number automatically, before he realized it was the number of his own former home.

For a second, he started to hang up. Then curiosity got the better of him, and he hesitated while an image sprang onto the screen.

There was a face in the foreground, but his attention snapped to the couch behind—first in recognition, then in shocked disbelief. There, a six-year old boy who looked exactly like his memory of Jimmy was playing cat's-cradle with a Maryl whose face was radiant with pleasure. An older Maryl, a faintly time-eroded copy of the wife who waited for him at home. . . .

"Good evening. Mrs. Needham's residence," the voice of the robot maid insisted again.

Henry wordlessly studied the face on the screen. It was not the face of Zenia—definitely not Zenia.

"Sorry," he said haltingly. "Wrong number."

He sat for long minutes after he'd hung up, staring at the blank screen. The phone buzzed once. It was probably the New York lawyers calling him. But he let it ring, without answering.

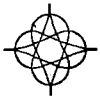
And finally he nodded. He'd get both the gadgets and the flowers.

When a man had such a fine future citizen for a son—and the only completely loyal and understanding wife in the world—he could afford to splurge a little.

ROBERT CRANE

Most of the stars in Star Science Fiction Stories *are the steady, familiar ones that have been radiating in the science-fiction magazines for years past; but this one is a nova. You've never seen the by-line of Robert Crane in print on a science-fiction story until now; but you can reliably expect to see it many, many times from here on in. It is the pseudonym of a young Englishman, now living and writing in the United States, who has published four books in England, and has two more due to appear shortly. For many years Crane was with the B.B.C. in London; during the war he was attached to the Intelligence Branch of the Royal Air Force and later he worked for the British Foreign Office—all of which has provided him with a rich background for his writing career. At present he is at work on his first science-fiction novel. With pride and pleasure, then, we offer you Robert Crane's first published science-fiction story.*

The Purple Fields



"You look just fine," Rose said, accompanying him to the door. "So young and handsome. I'm very proud of you."

He tilted her chin and kissed her.

"Scott," she whispered, and moved her head back to gaze up at him: "Good luck with Mr. Painter."

"Don't worry," he said. "Everything's going to turn out fine." And then, seeing the anxiety still in her eyes, he added, "Painter is a good guy. He has lots of influence."

She patted his arm. "Hurry, now, or you'll miss the train."

He smiled. She still called them trains.

"The mono," he said.

"The train, the mono. It's the same thing, isn't it?" She

gave a little pout as if she would never understand these newfangled contraptions. "Try to be home early for dinner."

"I'll try."

"Good luck," she said fervently. "Good luck, my darling."

I'm only looking for a job, he thought. *What's so hard about finding a job?*

He went to the garage and climbed into the little gyrocar, letting it start by rolling down the driveway. The battery was low and he wanted to conserve it. There was something radically wrong with batteries these days: they only lasted a couple of months. He could remember when batteries lasted two or three years; but that was before the war, twenty years ago. Before the Program.

He parked the gyro in the station yard and waited for the monorail car. He was a tall man, bronzed, alert, physically trim. The mono was nine minutes late, and he laughed inwardly. There was an old French saying about everything changing but everything remaining the same only more so; it wasn't quite true because (for example) France itself had been almost wiped out in the last war, and here at home the Program had changed other things, including the Constitution. But the Long Island Rail Road, as Rose persisted in calling it, still could not run its trains on schedule, even though it was now called Universal Monorails, Incorporated. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. Nine minutes late.

When the little mono arrived he went to the forward compartment in order to smoke, and he lit a cigarette as soon as he had fastened his safety belt. There had been several bad wrecks on this line recently, and safety belts had been installed by order of the Program. He could remember the young man talking about this order on the telerama, explaining calmly and lucidly all about safety straps, how they safeguarded the body in the event of sudden stops, and so on and so on. And the young man went on to talk about the bad times before the war when the oldies were in charge of everything, when you even had oldies of fifty or sixty at the controls of public transporta-

tion. The Program had changed that, the young man said proudly. All mono engineers were under thirty, in prime physical condition, with terrific IQ's.

Hence, Scott said to himself, safety belts.

Rose tidied the house quickly, and then bathed, and dressed very carefully. She brushed her hair for a long time until it simply shone, and she put a little rouge on her cheeks, rubbing it in well. It was terribly important to look her best today—young and vivacious. She had not told Scott where she was going. She did not want to worry him. *Poor Scott,* she thought. *My poor darling. He has enough worries already.*

Sitting back in his seat Scott felt supremely confident. Today was going to be a good day. Everybody spoke highly of Painter: Painter was an understanding guy, helpful. Painter was Personnel Director of Consolidated Communications, Inc., an outfit that employed seventy thousand men. Painter could always find a spot for somebody who was reliable and experienced. *Painter will fix everything,* Scott thought.

Looking down the low monocar Scott could see the heads and shoulders of the youngsters going to work; and he could not help wondering about this new world, this new generation. They all seemed to have been hatched on the same summer afternoon. They were all husky, thick-necked, small-headed, with the same serious eyes, the same strong noses, the same tight, sensuous mouths. Rose was always delighted by them—they were exactly like the young men in advertisements years ago who were supposed to convince you that you should smoke Zany Cigarettes or use Bugle Soap in your bath. But now they had become a national type. Program men. All in neat blue suits and black shoes and black ties; and all brilliant, fantastically brilliant, and full of energy. They ruled the country now, they were the power behind the Program. Scott recalled the Thirty-Ninth Amendment: No person shall be eligible to the office of President who has passed the age of thirty-five years. . . .

When Rose was satisfied with her appearance she went across the street to see Anne Peters. Anne opened the door, looking as pretty as a picture. She was twenty-five, married to a Program man.

Rose said cheerfully, "Hello, Anne dear. I've come to borrow your gyro again."

The Peters were well-to-do. They could afford to keep two gyros on their Program salary, and they would be allowed two, possibly three children.

Anne's eyes widened. "The Clinic?"

"Yes," Rose said, and smiled.

"This is your second visit," Anne said. She looked at the older woman in horror.

"Don't worry, dear. It's going to be perfectly all right."

"Oh, God," Anne said. "Oh, God."

"Don't be silly, dear."

"I'll get the keys," Anne said. When she came back she was deadly white, as if she had been sick.

"Thank you," Rose said. "You're awfully sweet."

Anne burst into tears.

They're building some world, Scott thought as he walked to Consolidated Communications. The Program. The young men who had ousted the oldies, and had gone on to reorganize everything in the light of their own visions. Ruthless, relentless, untiring young men whose vision was fixed on the stars.

At the reception desk in the huge foyer a lovely young blonde smiled at him and said, "May I help you?"

Scott said brightly, "Good morning. I have an appointment with the Personnel Director, Mr. Painter."

Something strange happened to her face, a hardening of the perfect features. Her long blue eyes were cold and unwelcoming. She said, "I'm sorry. Mr. Painter is no longer with us."

"No!" Scott exclaimed. "No!" His body went weak with disbelief.

The girl turned away.

Scott said quickly, "My appointment is for nine-thirty. I'm sure the new Personnel Director will see me."

"One moment, please." She left him indifferently, and returned a few moments later. "You may go up. Take the elevator to the sixty-eighth floor, turn right." She moved away, as if she were irritated by his presence.

Half-a-dozen men were sitting in the waiting room of Personnel. He could not bring himself to look at them. The blonde behind the barrier said wearily, "Yes?"

"I have an appointment here for nine-thirty."

"May I have your Program Security Card."

Scott handed her the small plastic rectangle.

She glanced at it and said, "Please take a seat."

He sat down, his back to the other men. He knew too much about them already. They were all images of himself —men over forty; and probably they had all come to see Painter with the same high hopes and probably they were all now frightened in the same terrifying way.

The receptionist at the Clinic was exquisite, Rose thought: slim, with the sweetest blue eyes and lovely straight fair hair. The only trouble with her was that she seemed to have lost the ability to smile. Why were girls so serious these days? What had happened to them?

Rose said gaily, "Good morning, nurse."

"Good morning."

"I have an appointment, you know, with that nice young doctor."

The nurse said, "May I have your Marriage Card?"

Rose gave it to her.

"The doctor will be with you directly, Mrs. Dewar," the nurse said. "Please take a seat."

Rose said quickly, "Oh nurse, do you know——"

"I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to discuss any matters relating to the tests."

Rose sighed, and sat down.

The new Personnel Director was a typical Program man, dark, built like a quarterback, with a small handsome head on an immensely powerful neck. He sat at a big desk, and there was nothing on it except Scott's security card lying exactly in the center of an immaculate white blotter. The

office was large, hygienic, functional—a machine for working in.

He asked politely, "Do you have copies for your resume, sir?"

"I sent eighteen copies, as requested, to Mr. Painter."

"Mr. Painter is no longer with us."

What the hell happened to Painter, Scott wondered savagely. He was sweating slightly.

The young man walked out of the office, and returned with a pink folder. He sat down again and read the papers inside the folder, his face completely expressionless; and then he said quietly, "Yes. Now what can I do for you, sir?"

Isn't it obvious? Scott thought angrily. He said, "I'm looking for a job. As you see I've been working on microtransistors——"

"We already have a group researching microtransistors," the Personnel Director said. "No openings exist there."

"Sigma klystrons——" Scott began.

"We have stopped production of sigma klystrons."

They looked at each other. For several moments there was complete silence. "I have a pretty good background," Scott said. "Surely there's something I can do for you."

The young man's voice became dry. "May I ask if you've done any work on the Holtzman spectrum?"

"No," Scott said. He did not even know what the Holtzman spectrum was. The Program did not encourage the publication of scientific studies.

"Do you have P-electronics status?"

"No," Scott said. "I was just a couple of years late for the P-electronics study project——"

The young man interrupted him. "I see from your P-security card that your age is forty-one."

"Yes," Scott said, and sat back. "Yes."

"I'm sorry. We have an age limit here." The Personnel Director's eyes were dark and hostile, as if he were protecting something vital. The new world, the Program's world, the world in which oldies were not wanted. And there was something else—an anger, a bitterness that was common to all Program men when they confronted older

men. *The oldies nearly destroyed the world,* the Program preached: *they were responsible for all the wars in history, they barred all progress. Never will we allow the oldies to hold power again.*

Scott said, "I thought with my record——"

"Your record is excellent, sir. We simply have no openings for men with your qualifications at present."

"Look," Scott said angrily. He turned his coat lapel, showing a little gold insignia representing an upraised hand. "Rocket Squadron 101. You've heard of Rocket Squadron 101?"

This was the last card he could play. Rocket Squadron 101 had saved New York in World War III. There was even a column dedicated to it in Central Park, a hundred and one feet high.

The young man said, "Of course, Mr. Dewar. We owe everything to Rocket Squadron 101."

"In that case——"

The young man smiled. "Your country hasn't forgotten, sir. You don't have a single thing to worry about, really. You can be sure the Program will take care of your needs."

Scott felt the blood rushing to his brain. He took his Program Security Card off the unsullied white blotter and hurried out.

The doctor was so handsome, Rose thought. So charming and romantic. He and the blonde nurse would make a darling couple—if only they would smile sometimes: smile and laugh.

"Ah, Mrs. Dewar. We've completed our tests." He shuffled some papers in his hand.

"Yes?" Rose whispered.

He handed her a red card. "Please be careful not to lose it."

On the card was printed, *Program Fertility Test.* Beneath that was Rose's name, the date, and one word in bold letters at the bottom: *Negative.*

"No," Rose said. "Oh no, I beg of you——"

"The tests are conclusive," the doctor said stiffly.

"But I've had two children already, doctor. They're

working on Project Juno, wonderful, intelligent, beautiful children. Please listen to me: I've had two children, I'm still young——"

"Thirty-seven," the doctor reminded her. He forced himself to be gentle. "You have done your duty, Mrs. Dewar. Your country is grateful. And you don't have a worry in the world, you know: the Program will take care of you."

He saw the look of terror on her face, and turned with clinical decisiveness. "Nurse. Give Mrs. Dewar a sedative."

Rose moaned, "No. No. No."

I'm not quitting, Scott thought. *I'm going to break through, I'm going to show these boys that I'm not finished.*

But I'll have to work fast, he thought: *because they work fast.*

Outside Consolidated Communications he called a tricab. He said to the driver, "Program Auxiliary Services. Make it snappy," and the hackie said, "Yes, sir," with a curious smile, a curious intake of breath. After they had driven a few blocks through the shining streets the hackie asked, "Jobhunting?"

Scott swallowed his anger. "Yeah."

"I'll be out to pasture myself in a week," the hackie said. "They just clipped the ceiling on drivers. Thirty-four. I'm thirty-six."

"Too bad," Scott said.

"I hear they take good care of you," the hackie said. "They don't leave you to starve, like in the bad old days."

"Oh, sure, sure," Scott said.

When he reached Program Auxiliary Services he walked briskly into the public employment office; and at once his heart sank, the courage went from him. A stainless steel barrier divided the big room, with a young guard at either end. Behind the barrier were the desks of the interviewers. In front were four crowded rows of benches. There were seventy or eighty men ahead of him.

One of the guards sauntered over to him and wrote down his name and address. "Okay," the guard said. "Take a seat. We'll call you."

He squeezed on to the end of the last bench, and after

a little while he grew calm, passive, watching the interviewers and the interviewees, the young men and the other men who all looked like himself. He noticed that the Program boys were extremely polite. They listened carefully, they asked courteous questions, they jotted down notes, they consulted files and directories, they made frequent calls on their telesets. But they never smiled. The cool expressions on their handsome faces never altered. They were like troops behind a fortification: armed, trained, self-confident. *I won't quit,* Scott thought: *by God, I won't quit.*

Suddenly he recognized one of the men coming away from an interview, a big heavily-built balding man; and he stood up and called, "Clem!"

"You there," a guard snapped. "Quiet!"

He remained standing. The other man grinned and nodded, and then gestured at the exit. Scott left his place and went out.

In the corridor Clem said, "Well, Scott. Hi."

"Hi, Clem."

"You're wasting your time, pal."

"Yes," Scott said. "I guessed that already."

"I was going to try Hydro-Utilities," Clem said, "but I have a better idea now. Let's go have a drink."

"Why not?" Scott said. There was no point in waiting here.

They went out into the midday sunshine, and by tricab to a house in the Seventies. On the third floor there was a pleasantly furnished room where a dozen men were drinking quietly. "My hideout," Clem said. "I come here to forget the Program."

There was a small bar, and behind it a one-armed man who smiled at Clem and then at Scott.

Clem said, "Joe, meet Scott Dewar."

"Hi, Scott," Joe said, and stuck his hand out with a grin.

"Joe was in the Nautilus XII," Clem said. "Remember the old Nautilus XII, Scott?"

"Sure," Scott said. "Those old barrels. Filled with lead."

Joe chuckled proudly.

Clem turned the lapel of Scott's jacket, showing the gold

insignia, the upraised hand, symbol of strength and defiance.

Joe said in recognition, "A hundred and one!"

"This guy was my section commander," Clem told him. "Twenty years ago."

Joe shook his head in wonderment. "Gosh! We certainly owe everything to you." It was the stock salute to survivors of Rocket Squadron 101, the boys who saved New York.

"Tell it to the Program," Clem said. "But shake up two martinis first, Joe. We need them in the worst way."

"Two martinis," Joe said.

While they waited, Clem asked, "Anything new at your end, Scott?"

"No."

"Nothing here to report, either. Weren't you due to see Consolidated Communications?"

"Yeah," Scott said. "I was supposed to see Painter this morning, but he's no longer with the outfit. I saw the new boy. Nothing doing."

Clem said softly. "I heard about Painter through the grapevine. It's very interesting."

"What's very interesting?"

"Painter was a good man. Helpful. He was trying to do all he could for our age-group. He was thirty-five himself."

"Go on," Scott said.

"He's been put out to pasture," Clem said. "The thirty-fives aren't considered reliable any longer. All the signs point to a new age limit."

"But God Almighty!" Scott cried: "Where's it going to end? These kids can't run the world. They don't have enough experience."

"The demand for manpower is tapering off," Clem said. "More autofeeds, more calcu-mechs, less and less men."

"So there'll be more and more mono wrecks," Scott cried, "more and more rockets disintegrating on take-off, more and more lives wasted——"

"Easy," Clem said.

Joe slid the martinis very carefully across the counter.

"At least," Clem smiled, "the Program is taking care of us. Distinguished service, etcetera, etcetera. We don't

have a thing to worry about." He raised the glass. "I give you a toast, section commander: the Purple Fields."

Scott said shakily, "The Purple Fields."

"Here are your keys, dear," Rose said to Anne Peters. "Thank you so much for letting me use the gyro."

Anne said, "How—how was it?"

"How was what, Anne?"

"The—the Clinic."

"Oh, they were charming, my dear, perfectly charming. The nicest young people. They couldn't have been nicer. Really, they couldn't possibly have been——"

She couldn't go on, even though she didn't want to frighten Anne. This girl was growing older, too, and in time the same thing would happen to her; but you had to keep the knowledge from her, as you keep certain facts from children. Rose turned unsteadily and walked across the street to her own house.

Anne stood staring, still staring even after Rose's door was closed.

Scott caught the 5:03 mono back, and this time he was rather drunk and he did not trouble to fasten his safety belt. A Program boy said politely to him, "Your safety belt, sir," and Scott said, "——my safety belt," and the Program boy sat back as if he had been nipped by a scorpion.

But for some reason the future looked good to Scott. *Tomorrow,* he thought: *tomorrow I'll really get going.* He began to plan his calls: Hydro-Utilities, Electro-Calc, IMX, Greatorex, perhaps even Monorails. There were a dozen possibilities more. *Sure,* he thought: *I'll find something. There must be something for a guy with my background. I'll find it.* He had tapped a reserve of courage, of optimism.

When he entered the house Rose was watching telerama, and she said in her usual gay voice, "Darling! Oh hello, darling. Hello, my sweet."

He walked over and kissed her, and she sniffed at him and said, "Hmmmph. Where were *you* before you came home, my friend?"

"I met Clem."

"Dear old Clem. Why didn't you bring him home for dinner, silly?" She looked into his eyes. "Did you have a good day, Scott?"

"Nothing special," he said. "But tomorrow—you know, I have a big hunch something big is going to break tomorrow." He sat down and put his arm around her shoulder. He was still a little drunk and his voice grew with animation. "I've a hundred ideas. Tomorrow, I tell you——"

She rubbed her cheek against his hand. "I'm sure of it, darling. I'm sure of it."

He was about to kiss her again when the telerama screens went blank and a buzzer sounded three times very loudly—the signal that the local Program office was coming through.

Scott said roughly, "Switch it off."

"No," Rose cried. "Scott! You know the penalty!" She held him back.

The screens became bright again, and they saw and heard a Program man talking. He was particularly handsome, and his voice was soft, velvety.

"Good evening," he said. "I am privileged to bring a special message from Program, V Division, for Mr. and Mrs. Scott Dewar. Are you listening?"

"Yes," Rose said breathlessly.

"For distinguished services," the young man said smoothly: "It is my great pleasure to inform you that you have been elected today to enter the Purple Fields——"

"Oh," Rose whispered. "Oh."

Scott gripped her shoulder.

The voice continued, gentle, warm. ". . . Beautiful abode . . . perpetual summer . . . all comforts. We are most anxious that there shall be no delay in this transition to this exciting new phase of your lives. Transport will call for you at eleven-thirty tonight, and I would suggest that each of you pack one small overnight bag. This office will take care of all your other belongings, and of course you can trust us to handle them with the utmost care. Will you please be ready at that time, Mr. and Mrs. Dewar?"

"Yes," Scott said.

"Thank you. And permit me to offer my congratulations. A happy, happy trip."

Scott switched the set off.

Rose said, "Well, I suppose I'd better see to dinner. Will you come and help me, dear? You could set the table."

He accompanied her to the kitchen, and she said, "We have an old bottle of California burgundy, you know, dear. Shall we open it, or take it with us?"

"Let's open it," Scott said.

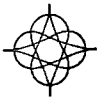
She said brightly, "What fun! Isn't it exciting! Elected to the Purple Fields!—— Where are the Purple Fields, darling?"

He stared at her, and she hesitated for a moment and then ran to put her arms around him.

JAMES BLISH

To the dull eyes of mortals, James Blish looks like a dapper young man with a thin mustache and a pleasant smile; but there is a secret inside that gentle exterior, and the secret is this: James Blish is a tetrahedron. Scan any of the four faces of his pyramidal writing talents, and you will find a seemingly solid literary personality; there is Clinical Blish, the precise and infinitely analytical author of Bridge *and the* Okie *stories; Fanciful Blish, who draws plausibly scientific werewolves in stories like* There Shall Be No Darkness; *Rough-and-Tumble Blish, who purveys bloodlust and action in such novels as* The Warriors of Day; *and finally, P. G. Dunsany-Blish, author of the present offering. Some day, if God is kind, the four Blishes may fuse into a supertalent which will dominate the science-fiction field as implacably as Stalin dominated the political essayists of recent Russia; but until that time, let us rejoice in such splendid stories as——*

FYI



"I've got definite proof that we've been granted a reprieve," Lord Rogge was insisting to thin air. "Perfectly definite proof."

We had been listening, either tensely or with resignation according to the man, to the evening news roundup in the bar of the Orchid Club. With the world tottering on the brink, you might have thought that an announcement like that would have elicited at least some interest. Had Rogge said the same thing in public, the reporters would have spread it to the antipodes in half an hour.

Which only goes to show that the world knew less than it should about poor old George. Once the Orchid Club got to know him intimately, it had become impossible to

believe in him any longer as one of the world's wise men. Oh, he is one of the great mathematicians of all time, to be sure, but on any other subject he could be counted on to make a complete ass of himself. Most of us already knew, in a general way, what he meant by a "reprieve," and how well his proof would stand up—supported, as usual, by a pillar of ectoplasm.

"What is it now, George?" I said. Somebody has to draw him off, or he'll continue to clamor for attention through the news bulletins. It was now my turn.

"It's proof," he said, sitting down beside me at once. "I've found a marvelous woman in Soho—oh, a perfect illiterate, she has no idea of the magnitude of the thing she's got hold of. But Charles, she has a pipeline to the gods, as clear and direct a contact as any human being ever had. I've written proof of it."

"And the gods tell her that truth and light will prevail? George, don't you *ever* listen to the wireless? Don't you know that these are almost surely our last days? Don't you know that your medium is never going to have another child, that the earth's last generation has already been born, that the final war is upon us right at this instant?"

"Bother," Rogge said, exactly as he might have spoken had he found soda instead of water in his whisky. "You can't see beyond the end of your nose, Charles. Here you are, a speck in a finite universe in finite time, full of *Angst* because there may not be any more specks. What does that matter? You're a member of a finite class. If you ever thought about it at all, you knew from the beginning that the class was doomed to be finite. What do you care about its ultimate cardinality?"

". . . has accused India of deliberately attempting to wreck the conference," the wireless was saying. "Meanwhile, the new government of Kashmir which seized power last week has signed a treaty of 'everlasting friendship and assistance' with the Peiping government. The latest reports still do not reveal . . ."

Well, I'd be briefed later; that was part of the agreement. I said, "I thought you were the one who cared about cardinality. Wouldn't you like to see the number of the class

of human beings get up some day into your precious transfinite realm? How can we do that if we kill each other off this very month?"

"We can't do it in any case, not in the physical sense," Rogge said, settling back into his chair. "No matter how long the race lives or how fruitful it is, it will always be denumerable—each member of the race can be put in one-to-one relationship with the integers. If we all lived forever and produced descendants at a great rate, we might wind up as a denumerably infinite class—in infinite time. But we haven't got infinite time; and, in any case, the very first transfinite number is the cardinal number of *all* such classes. No, my boy, we'll never make it."

I was, to say the least, irritated. How the man could be so smug in the face of the red ruin staring us all in the face . . ."

"So the reprieve you were talking about is no reprieve for us."

"It may well be, but that's the smallest part of the implications. . . . Have you another of those panatelas, Charles? . . . There now. No, what I was talking about was a reprieve for the universe. It's been given a chance to live up to man."

"You really ought to listen to the B.B.C. for a few minutes," I said. "Just to get some idea of what man is. Not much for the universe to live up to."

"But it's a two-penny universe to begin with," Rogge said, from behind a cloud of newborn smoke. "There's no scope to it. It's certainly no more than ten billion years old at the outside, and already it's dying. The space-time bubble may or may not continue to expand forever, but before long there won't be anything in it worth noticing. It's ridiculously finite."

"So is man."

"Granted, Charles, but man has already made that heritage look stupid. We've thought of things that utterly transcend the universe we live in."

"Numbers, I suppose."

"Numbers, indeed," Rogge said, unruffled. "Transfinite numbers. Numbers larger than infinity. And we live in a

universe where they don't appear to stand for anything. A piece of primer-work, like confining a grown man in a pram."

I looked back at the wireless. "We don't sound so grown up to me."

"Oh, you're not grown up, Charles, and that holds true for most people. But a few men have shown what the race could do. Look at Cantor: he thought his way right out of the universe he lived in. He created a realm of numbers which evolve logically out of the numbers the universe runs on—and then found no provision had been made for them in the universe as it stands. Which would seem to indicate that Whoever created this universe knew less math than Cantor did! Isn't that silly?"

"I've no opinion," I said. "But you're a religious man, George. Aren't you skirting blasphemy?"

"Don't talk nonsense. Obviously there was a mathematician involved somewhere, and there are no bad mathematicians. If this one was as good as His handiwork indicates, of course He knew about the transfinites; the limitation was purposeful. And I think I've found out the purpose."

Now, of course, the great revelation was due. Promptly on schedule, Rogge fussed inside his jacket pocket. I sat back and waited. He finally produced a grubby piece of paper—a fragment of a kraft bag.

"You're going to need a little background here," he said, drawing the paper out of reach as I leaned forward again. "Transfinite numbers don't work like finite ones. They don't add, subtract, multiply, or divide in any normal sense. As a matter of fact, the only way to change one is to involute it—to raise it to its own power."

"I'm bored already," I said.

"No doubt, but you'll listen because you have to." He grinned at me through the cigar smoke, and I began to feel rather uncomfortable. Could the old boy have been tipped off to our rotating system of running interference with him? "But I'll try to make it clear. Suppose that all the ordinary numbers you know were to change their behavior, so that zero to the zero power, instead of making zero, made one? Then one to the first power would make

two; two squared would equal three; three cubed would be four, and so on. Any other operation would leave you just where you were: two times three, for instance, would equal three, and ten times 63 would equal 63. If your ordinary numbers behaved that way, you'd probably be considerably confused at first, but you'd get used to it.

"Well, that's the way the transfinite numbers work. The first one is Aleph-null, which as I said before is the cardinal number of all denumerably infinite classes. If you multiply it by itself, you get Aleph-one. Aleph-one to the Aleph-first equals Aleph-two. Do you follow me?"

"Reluctantly. Now let me crack *your* brains for a minute. What do these numbers number?"

Rogge smiled more gently. "Numbers," he said. "You'll have to try harder than that, Charles."

"You said Aleph-null was the cardinal number of—of all the countably infinite classes, isn't that right? All right, then what is Aleph-one the cardinal number of?"

"Of the class of all real numbers. It's sometimes called C, or the power of the continuum. Unhappily, the continuum as we know it seems to have no use for it."

"And Aleph-two?"

"Is the cardinal number of the class of all one-valued functions."

"Very good." I had been watching this process with considerable secret glee; Rogge is sometimes pitifully easy to trap, I had been told, if you've read his works and know his preoccupations; and I'd taken the trouble to do so. "It seems to me that you've blasted your own argument. First you say that these transfinite numbers don't stand for anything in the real universe. Then you proceed to tell me, one by one, what they stand for."

Rogge looked stunned for an instant, and I got ready to go back to listening to the wireless. But I had misinterpreted his expression. I hadn't stumped him; he had simply underestimated my ignorance, one of his more ingratiating failings.

"But Charles," he said, "to be sure the transfinite numbers stand for numbers. The point is that *they stand for nothing else.* We can apply a finite number, such as seven,

to the universe; we can, perhaps, point to seven apples. But there aren't Aleph-one apples in the universe; there aren't Aleph-one atoms in the universe; there is no distance in the universe as great as Aleph-one miles; and the universe won't last for Aleph-one years. The number Aleph-one applies only to concepts of number, which are things existing solely in the minds of men. Why, Charles, we don't even know if there is such a thing as infinity in nature. Or we didn't know until now. At this present moment, not even infinity exists."

Impossibly enough, Rogge was actually beginning to make me feel a little bit circumscribed, a little bit offended that the universe was so paltry. I looked around. Cyril Weaver was sitting closest to the broadcaster, and there were tears running down his craggy face onto his medals. John Boyd was pacing, slamming his fist repeatedly and mechanically into his left palm. Off in the corner next to the fire, Sir Leslie Crawford was well along into one of his ghastly silent drunks, which wind up in a fixed, cataleptic glare at some inconsequential object, such as a tuft in the carpet or the space where a waiter once stood; he was Her Majesty's Undersecretary for Air, but at such moments no event or appeal can reach him.

Evidently nothing that had come through on the wireless had redeemed our expectations in the slightest. Of them all, I was the only one—not counting Lord Rogge, of course—who had failed to hear the news, and so would still be listening for a word of hope during tomorrow's broadcast.

"Almost thou persuadest me, George," I said. "'But I warn you, none of this affects my opinions of mediums and spiritualism in the least. So your cause is lost in advance."

"My boy, I'm not going to ask you to believe anything but what I'm going to put before your own eyes. This charwoman, as I said, is utterly uneducated. She happens to have a great gift, but not the slightest idea of how to use it. She stages séances for ignorant folk like herself, and gives out written messages which purport to be from her clientele's departed relatives. The usual thing."

"Not at all impressive as a start."

"No, but wait," Rogge said. "I'm interested in such things, as you know, and I got wind of her through the Psychical Research Society. It seems that some of the woman's patrons had been complaining. They couldn't understand the spirit messages. 'Uncle Bill, 'e wasn't never no one to talk like that.' That sort of complaint. I wouldn't have bothered at all, if I hadn't seen one of the 'messages,' and after that I couldn't wait to see her.

"She was terrified, as such people are of anybody who speaks reasonable English and asks questions. I won't rehearse the details, but eventually she admitted that she's been practicing a fraud on her trade."

"Remarkable."

"I agree," Rogge said, somewhat mockingly, it seemed to me. "It appears that the voices she hears during her trances are *not* the voices of the relatives of her neighbors. As a matter of fact, she isn't even sure that they're spirit voices, or human voices. And she doesn't herself understand what it is that they say. She just writes it down, and then, once she's conscious again, tries to twist what she's written enough to make it apply to the particular client."

I expect I had begun to look a little sour. Rogge held up a hand as if to forestall an interruption. "After I got her calmed down sufficiently, I had her do the trick for me. Believe me, I'm not easily fooled after all these years. That trance was genuine enough, and the writing was fully automatic. I performed several tests to make sure. And this is what she wrote."

Without any attempt at a dramatic pause, he passed the scrap of brown paper over to me. The block printing on it was coarse, sprawling, and badly formed; it had evidently been written with a soft pencil, and there were smudge marks to show where the heel of a hand had rested. The text was:

FYI WER XTENDIN THE FIE NIGHT CONTIN YOU UMBRELLAS OF THIS CROWN ON TO OMEGA AHED OF SHEDYULE DO TO CHRIST IS IN HEAVEN ROOSHIAN OF CHILDREN OPEN SUDO SPEAR TO POSITIV CURVACHER AND

BEGIN TRANSFORMATION TO COZ MOST OF MACRO SCOPICK NUMBER

I handed the paper back to Rogge, astonished to find that my heart had sunk. I hadn't realized that it had attained any altitude from which to sink. Had I really been expecting some sort of heavenly pardon through this absurd channel? But I suppose that, in this last agony of the world, anyone might have grasped at the same straw.

"On to omega, indeed," I said. "But don't forget your bumbershoot. How did she manage to spell 'transformation' right?"

"She wears one," Rogge said. "And that's the key to the whole thing. Obviously she didn't understand more than a few words of what she—well, what she overheard. So she tried to convert it into familiar terms, letting a lot of umbrellas and Russians into it in the process. If you read the message phonetically, though, you can spot the interpolations easily—and converted back into its own terms, it's perhaps the most important message anybody on earth ever got."

"If anybody told me that message was from Uncle Bill, I wouldn't just guess it was a fraud. Go ahead, translate."

"First of all, it's obviously a memorandum of some sort. FYI—for your information. The rest says: 'We are extending the finite continuum as of this chronon to omega ahead of schedule due to crisis in evolution of children. Open pseudosphere to positive curvature and begin transformation to cosmos of macroscopic number.' "

"Well," I said, "it's certainly more resonant that way. But just as empty."

"By no means. Consider, Charles: omega is the cardinal number of infinity. The finite continuum is our universe. A chronon can be nothing but a unit of time, probably the basic Pythagorean time-point. The pseudosphere is the shape our universe maintains in four-dimensional space-time. To open it to a positive curvature would, in effect, change it from finite to infinite."

I took time out to relight my cigar and try to apply the glossary to the message. To my consternation, it worked.

I got the cheroot back into action only a second before my hands began to shake.

"My word, George," I said, carefully. "Some creature with a spiral nebula for a head has taken up reading your books."

He said nothing; he simply looked at me. At last I had to ask him the presposterous questions which I could not drive from me in any other way.

"George," I said. "George, are we the children?"

"I don't know," Rogge said frankly. "I came here convinced that we are. But while talking to you I began to wonder again. Whatever powers sent and received this message evidently regard *some* race in this universe as their children, to be educated gradually into their world—a world where transfinite numbers are everyday facts of arithmetic, and finite numbers are just infinitesimal curiosities. Those powers are graduating that race to an infinite universe as the first step in the change.

"The human race has learned about transfinite numbers, which would seem to be a crucial stage in such an education. And we're certainly in the midst of a crisis in our evolution. We seem to qualify. But . . . Well, there are quite a few planets in this universe, Charles. We may be the children of whom they speak. Or they may not even know that we exist!"

He got up, his face troubled. "The gods," he said quietly. "They're out there, somewhere in a realm beyond infinity, getting ready to open up our pseudospherical egg and spill us out into an inconceivably vaster universe. But is it for our benefit or for—someone else's? And how will we detect it when it happens? On what time-scale do they plan to do it—tomorrow for us, or tomorrow for them, billions of years too late for us?"

"Or," I said, "the whole thing may be a phantom."

"It may be," he said. He knew, I think, that I had said that for the record, but he gave no sign of it. "Well, in the meantime you're relieved of duty, Charles. I shan't keep you any longer; I had to tell someone, and I have. Think about it."

He went out, his chin ducked reflectively, dribbling cigar ashes onto his vest.

I thought about it. It was, of course, the sheerest nonsense. The woman's scrawled "message" was gibberish; where Lord Rogge had read into it the mathematical terms with which he was most familiar, someone else might read into it the jargon of some other specialty. How else could a charwoman speak the language of relativity and transfinite numbers? Of course, she might have been picking some expert's brains by telepathy, maybe even Rogge's own—but that explanation just substituted one miracle for another. If I was going to believe in telepathy, I might as well admit that I'd just read an interoffice memo from Olympus.

The Third Programme had gone back to music now, but there was another sound in the bar. It was not very loud, but steady and pervasive. It could be felt in the floor, even through the thick-piled carpet, and it shook the air slightly. Sir Leslie's gaze stirred from the vase upon which it had finally become fixed, and rose slowly, slowly toward the dark oak ceiling. There was a preliminary flicker from the lights.

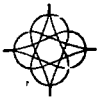
Children of the gods——

We would know soon now. The bombers were coming.

ANTHONY BOUCHER

Every pleasure has a price tag, and the price we pay for the privilege of reading The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction *is high indeed: the time that Anthony Boucher (with his colleague, J. Francis McComas) puts into editing it and shaping it into the literate and entertaining periodical it is, effectively keeps him from writing more than a fraction of the wonderful science fiction and fantasy he should be producing. When Boucher is at his average he is very, very good; and when he is at his best he concocts such delights as——*

Conquest



The cat was the first one out of the airlock—the first creature from earth to touch the soil of a planet outside our system.

Laus was all against it, of course. He wanted out himself—not to get his name in the books for the Big Moment in History, but because it was his cat, and he'd sooner take a chance with his own body.

But Mavra made sense. "Eccentricity, yes," she said. "Stupidity, no. Bast's going." And Bast went.

She liked it, too. We could see that from the port. Hydroponic-cycle air is OK, and Bast has seemed as used to it as the rest of us; but lots of loose fresh oxygen hit her like a dose of catnip. Something too small for us to make out flew by just above her. She leaped and missed; but the leap was so pleasingly high ("Slightly less than earth-gravity," Laus observed) that she kept repeating it, bouncing among the flowers of the meadow and into the dusty path.

Then abruptly she sat down and inspected herself. The ship was so automatically clean that she'd been spotless for weeks. I guess she was glad of this chance to resume a normal life. No sound came through to us, of course, but just looking at her you could hear the thunderous purr as she settled down to give herself a tail-tip-to-whiskers bath.

We were damned near purring ourselves. This was a livable world—at least as far as gravity and oxygen went. Which is doing all right for an emergency crash-landing.

It was our third trip into space, and the first time we'd found a star with planets—seven of them, no less, of which this one (with two moons) was the second. We found the system and overdrove back to Communications, that earth-built satellite of Alpha Centauri, the poor sun that never spawned any planets of its own. Don't ask me why you can install overdrive in a scoutship, but not Faster than Light communication. All I know is it takes something the size of the Communications satellite to house FL transmitters and receivers, and we have to go there to clear with the red-tape boys back home.

So we got the clearance: No other scouts had reported our system, so go ahead and good luck. Find a habitable planet and you take the jackpot that's been accumulating compound interest for almost two centuries ever since the UN set it up just after the first moon flight.

So we overdrove back to our system . . . and crash-landed.

For a minute I thought we were through as a team. Laus kept looking back and forth between me and his smashed instruments, flexing his fingers and rubbing that damned bare chin of his. Any second he was going to go off with a Bikini burst. Even Mavra wasn't trining; she was withdrawn, off someplace of her own where she didn't have to look at a thing like me.

Then Bast decided that I was the best prospect to hit. She rubbed her order against my leg, looking up with a woebegone face whose big eyes plainly stated that nobody ever fed cats on this godforsaken spaceship L but if I acted fast I might be able to prevent a serious case of starvation.

Among our blessings, the reutilizer had sprung a leak. I didn't turn the spigot; I just put the dehydrated fish in a pan and held it under the leak. I mixed it, set it down, gave Bast a couple of little strokes behind the ears, and got out some plastiflux to stopper the leak. Bast looked at the pan dubiously, and I said, "Go on: Nice fish for fine cats." She

hesitantly tried a mouthful, agreed, and made a brief remark of minimum gratitude.

"Well," I said, "somebody's speaking to me."

Mavra came back from wherever she'd been, and laughed. "Bast's right," she said. "You're still human. You're still useful. We're still alive. What more do we want?"

Laus still looked at the ruined instruments, as though it would take him a good hour to begin answering that question. But he looked at Bast too, and finally at me. "All right, Kip," he said. "Astrogation's a new science——"

"Science hell!" I grinned at him. "It's an art. I don't know any more about the science of overdrive than the first airplane ace knew about the science of heavier-than-air flight. I fly with my synapses, if that's the word I want, and sometimes I guess they don't apse."

He was staring at my useless control dials. "I can see your problem. You're working in such incalculable distances that a relatively minute error is absolutely enormous. A miscalculation of 20,000 miles could be fatal in causing a crash-pull into a planet's gravity—and it would show up on that dial as .000,000,001 parsec." He seemed to feel better, as if stating our problem in decimal fractions he'd worked out in his head made it all a little more endurable.

"Well," said Mavra, "we're on a planet. The next test for the UN jackpot is the little word *habitable*. I don't suppose the atom-analyzer still . . . ?"

It didn't, and that's where the argument started about who was to be first guinea pig through the airlock.

Now we three watched Bast finish her bath, and knew that at least we could breathe here. There were little items like food and water still to worry about, but it was safe to leave the ship. I was just starting to open the lock when Mavra's cry called me back to the port. That was how we saw the first of the Giants.

It looked like an earth meadow out there. The sun, we knew from our scouting tests, was a little colder than Sol, but the planet was closer in than earth. The sunlight was

about the same, and it was bright noon now. The grass was, so far as we could see, just plain grass, and if the flowers in the meadow and the trees beyond it looked unfamiliar, they didn't seem improbable—no more strange than Florida would look to a New Englander, or maybe not so much.

But the Giants . . . There were two of them, and they were of different sexes, if holding hands and looking (I guess the technical word is *gazing*) into each other's eyes, and not noticing where the hell you're going, have universal meaning. From which you'll gather they were humanoid—hands and eyes and all the other standard attributes so far as we could see, for they wore clothes—free-flowing garments which looked like woven cloth, implying some degree of civilization.

But there were three nonhumanoid things about them. A: they were both absolutely flat-chested, which sort of spoiled the picture. B: they were both absolutely bald, which didn't help it any either. And C: they were both, as best we could judge using Bast as a measuring comparison, well over twelve feet tall and built (by humanoid standards) in proportion.

"It isn't possible . . . !" Mavra gasped. "This planet's earth-size, earth-gravity. They'd be bound to be . . ."

"Why?" Laus asked bluntly. "I've always doubted that point. Wrote a paper on it once. Earth has creatures every size from the ant to the elephant. Make it from the bacterium to the brontosaur. It's pure chance, aided by an opposable thumb, that of all living beings the medium-sized primates developed intelligence. Why should we expect the size-ratio aliens over us equals their planet over ours?"

"Shh!" said Mavra irrationally, as if the Giants might hear us.

We watched Bast's jump of astonishment as the four Giant feet pounded the soil near her. She looked at them curiously but without bristling, much as she had, from time to time, regarded the things that lived in the spaceship without our knowledge. As they sauntered along, lost in each other, Bast made up her mind. She stood up, leaned back on her hind feet, dug her foreclaws into the ground

well in front of her, gave her vertebrae a thorough stretching, then recompacted herself and walked casually toward the Giants, her tail carried like a tall exclamation point over the round dot beneath.

She picked the larger and presumably male Giant for her rubbing post. When, for the first time since we'd seen him, he took his eyes from his companion, Bast rolled over in her extra-voluptuous pose, the one that suggests that there's a mirror in the ceiling.

They both stopped and bent over her. You could guess the dialogue from the humanoid gestures and expressions: *What on earth's that? Never saw one before. Well, it seems friendly anyhow. And it's cute too. Look, it wants to be rubbed. See, it likes it. Especially right there. . .*

"She's a lucky Giantess," said Mavra. "Nothing like tactile intuition in a man."

"I hope you've noticed," I said, "that Bast likes me."

"Shh!" she said, having started the conversation.

The male fumbled in a sort of sporran and tossed something to Bast, who fielded it nicely. The lovers grinned and looked at each other and stopped grinning and went on looking. Their hands met again and they started to stroll away, in no condition to notice a trifle like a scoutship crashed in the bushes at the edge of the meadow.

Bast spent a minute using the Giant's gift as a toy, batting it along the grass and chasing it. Then her interest became more practical. She sniffed at it, turned it over once and crouched eying it, tail atwitch. When she finally ate it, it made three mouthfuls.

Laus and I each held one of Mavra's hands, but it was no such hand-holding as we'd been witnessing. It was just trine unification in the intensity of our suspense—suspense squared as Bast decided that now, in all this lovely sun, was just the time for a nap. But she had hardly curled up when one of the tiny flying things passed over her. She bounded up with another of those leaps, chased it vainly for a full minute, then abruptly stopped and trotted sedately back to the ship as though that was all she'd intended all along.

We all let out our breaths at once. Laus dropped Mavra's

hand; I didn't. "So there's also food here," he said, "that's at least not immediately poisonous. If one food's edible, doubtless most are; it implies a reasonably similar metabolism. It's a habitable planet."

"Jackpot!" I said, and then felt like seventy-eight kinds of damned fool.

Mavra smiled at me. "The Giants seem not uncivilized. They might even be able to repair the ship. But whether the UN ever learns the fact or not, we can live here."

"If," said Laus, "we can communicate with the Giants."

He was flexing his fingers again and rubbing his bare chin, but this time I knew his concern was focused on himself. This was his job; would he do it better than I'd done mine?

We were a team of specialists:

Kip Newby, astrogator. I was deciding to invent a new slogan for the Service: "You can't call yourself an astrogator until you've had your first crash-landing." By which standard I would be the only astrogator in the Galaxy.

Dr. Wenceslaus Hornung, xenologist—even more untried in his job than I was in mine. For the Giants were the first Xenoids (aliens to you) that an earth man had ever found. For more than two centuries we'd been developing what some of them called Contact-Theory. It had never proved necessary in the solar system, but the theoretical work went on. Of all the boys who'd ever taken the works in BLAM (Biology, Linguistics, Anthropology, Mathematics) Laus was reckoned the absolute tops in xenology—so damned good that he could even get away with eccentricities like taking a pet on a space trip or scraping the hair off his face like an ancient Roman or a Dawn-Atomic man.

Mavra Dario, co-ordinator. We haven't developed a good word yet for her specialty. I've known lads that called her a "neuro-sturgeon," which I'm told derives from an early investigator who discovered some of the principles of trine symbiosis. Her specialty is being unspecialized, being herself and thereby making each of us be more himself and at the same time more a part of the team. If you've never

been on a team I couldn't make it clear to you; if you have I don't need to.

That was the team, plus—thank God for Laus's eccentricities—Bast. Laus has told me, more than once, all about the Egyptian goddess, but I still think of that name as an affectionate but not wholly inaccurate shortened form.

She was at the airlock now. I opened it. She seemed to think this was fine. It had been weeks since she'd had a door to decide whether or not to go through.

While she was making up her mind, Mavra spoke. "Don't rush it, Laus. There's no hurry for First Contact. If we're lucky, we can take a few days to size them up beforehand. And the first thing is to get busy with this shrubbery and try a reasonable job of camouflaging the ship. The next Giants may not be in love."

We were lucky. Our meadow was a mountain meadow; as we guessed then and later learned, it was used for pasturing and it wasn't quite the right time of the year yet to move the flocks up there. Nearby, the mountain ran up higher to a peak. With slightly lower gravity and slightly higher oxygen percentage, it was a pleasure to go in for a little mountain-climbing. And there in the valley on the other side was a city.

Our telefocals were among the very few surviving instruments. They were strong enough to give us a damned good idea of life in the city. We spent days of observation up there. Once Bast came along but it bored her. After that she would squat in the ship and peer after us through almost-shut eyes, regarding us somewhat as an idol might look upon a crowd of worshippers, who are necessary for existence, but whose departure leaves him in more peaceful possession of the temple.

One thing was for sure: The Giants were civilized, even highly so. Their architecture was (Mavra said) of exquisite if alien proportion. Their public statuary was good enough, by earth standards, to hide away in a museum and not leave out, like the Hon. Rufus Fogstump in bronze, for the pigeons and the people. Their public life seemed

peaceful and orderly, and largely centered around an enormous natural amphitheater, featuring what we interpreted to be plays and concerts and games. The games—Olympic-type contests of individuals rather than massed groups—gave us a chance to see the Giants practically naked in all their absolute hairlessness, and learn why a perfectly flat-chested girl could inspire passion. They were marsupials. I wondered if I would ever become a connoisseur of pouches.

We couldn't hear the music from the amphitheater, but once a group of picnickers made music of their own in our meadow. The instruments looked strange, though you could figure out familiar principles, but they listened good. There was one number especially that Laus described as "a magnificently improvised true passacaglia" and I (being something of a historical scholar myself in this field) called "jamming a real zorch boogie." Mavra said we were both right, and Bast implied we were both wrong but kept quiet about it.

A high civilization . . . but apparently not a mechanical one. Nothing visible beyond quadruped-power and simple applications of water wheels and windmills.

Help in repairing the ship began to look like an impossible dream. And supplies were running low. Water ran near us, but food . . .

"With civilization of this level," Laus pronounced confidently, "contact will be no problem." Bast shifted in his lap and indicated that she'd like a little more attention higher up the spine. "We've seen no evidence of armies or weapons, and the first Giants were friendly toward Bast even though she was, presumably, more alien to them than we shall seem."

I think Laus was set for a good half hour's discourse on why contact presented no problems, when Mavra pointed out the now always open airlock. "There's a Giant," she said. "I think it's the one Bast met first, and he's alone. How about now?"

If hand-holding and breath-holding had marked our watching of Bast's encounter with this Giant, it was noth-

ing to our tenseness now. We knew what Laus was doing. God knows he'd told us all about it often enough, and especially why Mathematics was the all-important M in the BLAM courses.

He was proving to a civilized alien that he too was a civilized being, more than an animal. He was demonstrating by diagram that he knew that this was the second planet (with two moons yet) in a system of seven. He was teaching his system of numbers and doing simple arithmetical exercises. He was proving that the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angle triangle equals the sum of the squares on the other two sides. He was using prepared pieces of string to show that the circumference of a circle is three and (for simplicity) one-seventh times as long as its diameter.

That was what he was doing, in theory. What we saw was this:

The Giant looked first astonished, then amused. *A man runs into the damnedest things in this meadow!* He reached out a hand to stroke Laus's hair. Laus withdrew on his human dignity and began making marks on his pad. As he pointed from his drawing up to the sun, down to the planet itself, the Giant grinned, imitated the gestures, and then ran his large hand down Laus's back. He looked puzzled. *Feels more like cloth than fur.* Laus picked up a handful of pebbles to go into his counting routine. The Giant picked up a stone and threw it away, then looked a little resentful when Laus failed to chase it. Laus held up two pebbles and made a mark on his pad. The Giant rubbed his odd-feeling back again, then reassured himself by rubbing his hair. Laus shook his head indignantly and held up three pebbles. The Giant reached for them and tossed them in the air. He watched them, then looked back with some astonishment to see Laus still unmoved. He rubbed Laus's hair again, then jumped back at something he saw in Laus's eyes.

I don't know whether I heard Mavra say "Oh dear God . . . !" or felt it coming through our palms.

Laus had dropped the pebbles and got out his strings. As Laus spread the long one on the grass to make the circle, the Giant approached hesitantly. *I didn't get the other*

game, but this looks simple. He lifted the string and held it at arm's length, above even his head and far out of Laus's grasp. He dangled it tantalizingly as Laus tried desperately to snatch it. The Giant began to smile. *Fine; this is what it likes.* He began backing away, Laus jumping and snatching after him. Then sharply Laus stopped and reached over for more pebbles.

Back to that routine, I thought; but Mavra was ahead of me. Her hand wasn't in mine, and when I turned she was half out of her workclothes.

"Look," I glugged. "I know I've been patient a long time, but is this quite the moment——"

"Damn this zipper!" she said intently. "Give me a hand." And she went on peeling.

I needed two sets of eyes. Through the camouflage-bushes I could see that I'd been all wrong about Laus's use for the pebbles.

And him without even a slingshot.

The first stone smote the Giant in the forehead all right, but the rest of the sequence didn't follow. All it did was to irritate the hell out of him. He lashed out with one backhand blow and Laus was stretched on the grass.

Then the Giant backed away in consternation. *My God! another one!* But he didn't back fast, and Mavra's light on her feet. There she was, curving against him, looking up at him with soft wide eyes. And as his face relented and the old grin came back, he reached out for her and she dropped lithely, rolled over, and contemplated that mirror up there.

In vague general design, I suppose, she wasn't too different from his Giantess, but the size and the hair and the breasts would all be enough to keep any such thoughts out of his mind. Gently, soothingly, happily he stroked her, exactly as I was stroking Bast, who had just jumped into my lap with an ill-tempered remark about people who spend their time staring at unimportant things and neglect the comfort of cats.

It all seems obvious when you look back on it from the vantage of God knows how many years; and up till the day

he died, some three *here*-years ago, Laus was always ready with a speech on why the BLAM boys should have foreseen it.

"The science fiction writers seemed to be a step ahead," he'd say, "and the scientists followed their line. It seemed so logical. This was how to communicate with any intelligent being. But practically it meant 'any intelligent being with a Copernican view of his own world and an understanding of the mathematical use of zero.' In other words, nobody in the highest civilizations of our own earth up until only a few hundred years ago. The noblest Roman of them all couldn't have understood my planetary diagram. The finest Greek mind would have been confused by my system of numbers. From what we know now, the best men here would understand about pi and about the square of the hypotenuse; with such an architectural culture it's inevitable. But what chance contact would? Even in our own contemporary earth?"

And Mavra would always cut him off, eventually, by saying, "But isn't it better this way? If you had made contact, we'd simply have been lost aliens, trapped in a civilization that could never help us home. As it is," and she'd yawn and stretch gracefully, "we've conquered the planet."

Which we have, of course. Like I said, I don't know how long it's been. At the rate my great-great-(I think)-grandchildren are growing up, I must be pushing a hundred, which is the expectancy the actuaries gave me when last heard from; but I feel good for maybe another fifty.

There are hundreds of us by now, and we're beginning to spread into the other continents. Give us another generation or two, and there'll be thousands. It isn't hard to teach the kids something that combines duty and pleasure to such an extraordinary degree as multiplying. (Though I always doubt that Laus had his proper share of descendants; he took his crash-landing harder than I did mine.) And we teach them other things too, of course, all that we can remember of what all three of us knew.

(Funny: it still seems trine even with Laus gone . . . and by now even I know a fair amount of BLAM to pass on.)

And we teach them what Bast knew, and never meant to teach us. We still miss her. It's sad that she had a much shorter lifespan and no mate. But then otherwise she and her tribe would have been competition—and pretty ruthless, considering how much their long training would make them better at it.

But we learned enough from her. We know how to make the Giants feel that it's a pleasure to give pleasure to us, and a privilege to provide us with food and shelter. No clothes, since we saw they puzzled the one I still think of as Our Giant (Mavra still lives in his home). We don't need them much in this climate (I wonder if we ever needed them as much as we thought we did on earth?), and besides our genes seem to have learned something from Bast too. Our great-greats are hairier than the hairiest earth man, even a white. (This was a blow to Laus; he never quite got over having to stop scraping his face.)

The Giants obey well, for a race new to the custom. (Oh, sure they had pets before, but the type of pets that obey *them.*) Their medical science isn't bad; they've been training special doctors for us for some time, and this year they're building a hospital. There are farmers making a good living out of foods which we like but which never had much market before. They've even started cultivating that weed I accidentally discovered which is so much like tobacco and makes such a fine chaw.

The camouflage-bushes have grown naturally (with a little irrigation and fertilization when there were no Giants around). They have no idea where we came from, and since they have no notion of evolution or the relation of species, they've decided it doesn't matter. When they do reach that point, their paleontologists can undoubtedly knock up a few fossil reconstructions near enough to suffice as our ancestors.

And meanwhile we're ready, whenever our people land, to hand over to them a ready-conquered planet.

But it's been a long time. In all these years, wouldn't a scoutship have . . . ?

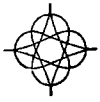
Sometimes I can't help wondering:

Have Bast's people landed on earth?

FLETCHER PRATT

It is not true that Fletcher Pratt is a marmoset (although it is true that he breeds them in his New York apartment). Having said that, however, you have said all that can be said about what Fletcher Pratt is not. *This ex-reporter, ex-prizefighter, ex-librarian, currently combines within himself such diverse occupations as historian (*Ordeal by Fire, *for instance, the finest one-volume history of the Civil War in print), critic and reviewer (for* The New York Times *and the* Saturday Review, *among others), novelist (*The Undying Fire, *most recently), anthologist and editor (with a product too numerous to mention) and concocter of the most various array of cocktails and most appetizing spread of foods ever served in the town of Highlands, New Jersey, where he makes his part-time home. Mr. Pratt is also a story-story writer of distinction, but that need hardly have been mentioned when you have right before your eyes his subtly sly bit of japery entitled———*

Hormones



Dear Will:

You may think it queer to be hearing from me after we've been out of touch for so long—since the day after graduating from Hobart, wasn't it? when you were going on to take your divinity degree and I pushed you into commerce—but I've gotten myself into a situation where only someone with a divinity degree can help me. That is, I think so. If I'm wrong, tell me, will you?

The jam I'm in started with—wait, I'll go back and put in the background. I'm working for Dunham and Barrington in New York, an advertising agency. I'm what they call a junior accountant executive; we handle mostly textile and clothing accounts, and the big wheel in the agency

is a dame named Mrs. Beirne. I do not know what happened to Mr. Beirne. I can guess, though.

She looks like a grenadier, over six feet tall and with a good deal of a voice. You could call her a well-preserved forty. She works hard at it, and the beauty parlors keep her pretty well in line, except for the mustache. It's not very big, though.

The other element is Mrs. Herbert J. Schofield. Yes, I'm married now, but I wasn't when this began, and you can save the congratulations until you hear the rest. Her name is Laura. I began dating her about a year ago and kept right on. Now I want you to get this straight; I wasn't the only one she dated, and although she let me kiss her good night, she probably did the others, too. And there wasn't anything in her actions to make me think she'd be willing to make it permanent. Only I wanted it to be—definitely.

I didn't dare ask her for two reasons. One is that she obviously wasn't ready to tie herself down to one man until she'd looked around a little more. The other is that her family is pretty well fixed. The few times I was there they made it pretty clear that they wanted Laura to marry a man who could pay her bills.

Well, a junior account executive's salary doesn't go too far toward meeting bills. I used to lie in bed and worry about it after a date with her, and think there was practically nothing I wouldn't do to get Laura and enough of an income to keep her on at the same time.

Maybe I thought wrong or somebody overheard me thinking. You figure that out.

Anyway, on this particular night I had been out with some of the gang playing poker, and we tipped over quite a few, and when I got back about two in the morning I felt that old uncertain feeling. There's an all-night drug store around the corner on Third Avenue, so I figured I'd drop in and get me some vitamin B-1 tablets. It maybe wouldn't interest anyone in your business, but if you can keep enough sense to take aboard about five of them on the night before, you don't have a hangover the morning after.

This is what makes me write to you. I remember thinking, rather fuzzily, how I wished I could call up a devil or something to get what I wanted.

Then I went into the store.

Now I don't want to give the impression there was anything in the least like a demon about the clerk who waited on me. He was short and fat, with hair plastered back on his forehead and a round face. In fact, he looked like a shaved pig. I asked for my vitamin B-1 and he said eighty-eight cents, and when he handed me my change, he said:

"If you used the right kind of hormones, you wouldn't have to buy these."

I said: "Huh?"

"Sure," he said. "You drink because you got an emotional problem. If you use hormones right the problem goes away."

I laughed. "The only trouble with that," I said, "is that I don't want my emotions to go away. I want the girl to feel a little emotion for me."

He nodded and stared at me with big pop eyes. "That we can do too," he said.

I laughed again. "I've heard of love philters before," I said. "I suppose you have a hormone that will make the boss give me a better job, too?"

He shrugged. "If you can administer it. Give it to him, and then place a definite proposition before him. That's what we call a consent hormone."

I was still skeptical. "And the price will be a mere six hundred dollars, payable in easy installments."

"No." He reached under the counter and took out a piece of wrapping paper to figure on. "The affection hormone can be produced very cheaply because it's merely the emphasis of a natural tendency. . . . Let's see. That would be one-eighty. . . . Say six-eighty for the two of them."

Well, I was a little ahead on the poker game, so I thought —what could I lose? "All right," I said. "I'll take a chance. Give me a dose of each."

"Just a minute," he said, and went into the back, bringing back a lancet and a little porcelain dish. "I'll have to

have a drop or two of your blood to mix in to furnish some of your own hormone pattern, and personalize the effect. Otherwise she'd feel affectionate toward everybody."

(I hope I'm not boring you, Will, by repeating everything. It all makes part of the picture, do you see?)

The clerk swabbed a place on my wrist with alcohol, stabbed me a little, extracted a few drops of blood, put a Band-Aid over the place and went to the back again. After a while he came back with two little vials, one blue and one red.

"Here you are," he said. "Easy to keep them separate; blue for boys, pink for girls. You administer the blue one to your boss—" (I hadn't told him it was a woman) "—and the red one to your girl friend. Now you don't have to be melodramatic about it. For instance, if you put the contents of that red one in some perfume and let her smell of it, it will be quite adequate. The hormone is very volatile. And another thing: the effect of the hormones wears off after a while, and they tend to be exhausted by their own operation. What was it I said? Six-eighty."

He wrapped up the vials and I put them in my pocket without thinking of asking him whether he didn't have a hormone to cure hangovers, too. The next day I called up Laura and asked her for a date, and after she said yes, I went out and bought her a bottle of perfume. Just like the clerk said.

I poured out a little of it and emptied in the contents of the red vial. There weren't more than two or three drops and it was colorless.

Will, you must know how it is. You want to ask a girl something and a lump gets in your throat and you don't quite dare. I spent all evening at the movie with Laura with that little bottle of perfume burning a hole in my pocket, afraid to give it to her. It wasn't till we were on the steps of her house and I put my arm around her to kiss her good night that I got up nerve enough to say: "Oh, I forgot. I brought you something," and handed her the bottle.

She uncorked it and sniffed. "Oh, what lovely perfume," she said, and kissed me.

That was enough to touch it off. I grabbed her and said: "Laura, I love you. Why don't you marry me?"

She held her breath for a minute, and then said: "Of course. Why didn't you ask me before?"

I want to tell you just how this went, Will, so you can see. I remembered what the clerk said about the effect of the hormones wearing off, so I crowded my luck and said let's get married right away and without all the chichi, and she said yes. She started to say something about money. I was feeling pretty happy about the hormones by that time, so I told her I was going to get a promotion and a big raise. Then she took me in the house and woke her mother up and told her we were going to get married.

The thing I didn't get about it was how easily and calmly she took the whole business. Most girls would be excited. At least I thought so. But we agreed we'd be married at her home the following Tuesday and have a cocktail party afterward. I had a reason for that. I wanted to invite Mrs. Beirne, and slug her cocktail with the other hormone, and then suggest that as a married man I was more responsible than before, and could handle a bigger job.

Well, Will, things worked out just dandy. There was only a small crowd, and old Beirne came, and I got at where the liquor was and mixed her a cocktail myself. Nobody saw me slip the hormone into it, and I saw that she drank it. The only thing was that Laura came and got me and I didn't have a chance to speak to Beirne about a promotion. But I was taking only a week off for a honeymoon, and I figured that the hormone would keep that long, and anyway, I was so happy by that time that I didn't much care, and I could always go back and get some more of the hormone if necessary.

We went to Arlington Beach for the honeymoon.

Will, if I could talk to you in person, or maybe if you were one of these head-shrinkers, I could explain what I mean so you'd understand it. The first two days the honeymoon wasn't *right,* somehow.

Laura was perfectly sweet, perfectly nice, she never said a cross word to me, but a lot of the time she just didn't seem much interested. We went swimming, and when I

left her alone for five minutes, I found her lying on the beach talking to some guy who had just wandered along. And then, the second night, in the dining room at the hotel, a fellow across the room gave her the eye, and she smiled back at him. Things like that.

Then the third day, when we came down to breakfast, who should we see but old Beirne, sitting across the room, natural as life and twice as large.

Of course, I had to go over and speak to her. She was all smiles. She said she just felt she had to get away from the office for a few days, and she thought the hotel at Arlington Beach would be a good place to do it. She said she had no idea we were there.

I believed her at the time. But after lunch, Laura said she wanted to wander down to the beach with some girl friend she'd picked up at the place, so I went out to sit on the hotel porch and look at the ocean, and I hadn't been sitting there for more than ten minutes when Beirne came out, looking as though she had been freshly varnished, and took the chair beside mine.

Well, I figured this was my chance. We talked a little about things that didn't really interest either of us, and then I got up courage enough to ask who was going to handle the Camsol account. That was a new one that had just come in, and it was a big one, and if I could get to handle it, it would make me a senior account executive, with salary accordingly.

She smiled at me and said: "I've been thinking about that, and I'm glad we came to the same hotel, because I wanted to discuss it with——"

Just then a fat man in one of those Hollywood shirts came out and sat down on the other side of me. She looked past me at him and said in a low voice: "Why don't we go up to my room? I don't want to tell my business to everybody in the world."

Well, we went up to her room. She got out a bottle of Scotch and phoned room service for some ice and soda, and we talked about nothing until it came. I helped her mix the drinks, and I thought she let her hand rest on my wrist.

When we sat down she said: "I've been thinking about that Camsol account, and I'm not quite satisfied that either Barton or Solari can handle it properly. Do you think you would like to try it?"

So it was working. I said: "I certainly would, and I think I could do a good job."

She said: "This is more or less a personal matter with me. I got the account myself, and I'm watching over it. You would have to work pretty closely with me all along the line."

I said: "I don't see any objection to that."

She took a drink and said: "Anyone really interested in getting a job done ought to be willing to work without paying too much attention to the clock. Even if it's quite late at night. Even if they're newly married."

That was when I began to get a funny feeling. The only thing I could say was: "I won't kick about working, and I don't think Laura would mind."

She said: "Finish your drink and have another. I mean people working as closely as we would have to, have to establish a kind of rapport, a really close relationship." She smiled a cast-iron smile at me and the funny feeling got stronger. I didn't know what to say, and I don't remember what I said, but she got up and filled the glasses again, and then said: "It's so hot today, and we're not outside. Do you mind waiting a minute while I change into something more comfortable?"

You couldn't miss it this time.

I took a big gulp of the second drink and looked at my watch and said I'd promised to meet Laura and got out of there. I could see the point all right. Either the hormones had worked the wrong way, or I had mixed up the bottles, or that clerk had deliberately foxed me.

Old Beirne is in love with me—and Laura merely consented to marry me.

I left a note for Laura and took the next train back to New York—it was only an hour and a half—and rushed right up to that drugstore. The clerk I originally saw wasn't there, but instead there was a long, thin drink of water. I

asked about him and described him. "Oh, him," the man said. "He was only with us two days. Quit after that."

"But what about those new hormones?" I asked.

"Hormones?" he said. "We don't sell hormones. You have to go to a hospital for them. And there aren't any new ones I know of."

So there you are. That's what I'm writing to you about. I can have the new job all right, but—

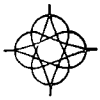
My question is, what do I *do?*

Herb

ROBERT SHECKLEY

When the first Star Science Fiction Stories *was published, we presented in it an early story by a young phenomenon of the science-fiction field named Robert Sheckley. It is a measure both of the fast-moving character of the field and of the leaps-and-bounds development of this one individual author within it to be able to say that now, less than a year later, the name "Sheckley" on a magazine cover is a guarantee that readers will be attracted by his well-established talent for fresh and unusual ideas, and brilliantly incisive writing. As a first-class example of this first-class writer's work, see——*

The Odor of Thought



Leroy Cleevy's real trouble started when he was taking Mailship 243 through the uncolonized Seergon Cluster. Before this, he had the usual problems of an interstellar mailman; an old ship, scored tubes, and faulty astrogation. But now, while he was taking line-of-direction readings, he noticed that his ship was growing uncomfortably warm.

He sighed unhappily, switched on the refrigeration, and contacted the Postmaster at Base. He was at the extreme limit of radio contact, and the Postmaster's voice floated in on a sea of static.

"More trouble, Cleevy?" the Postmaster asked, in the ominous voice of a man who writes schedules and believes in them.

"Oh, I don't know," Cleevy said brightly. "Aside from the tubes and astrogation and wiring, everything's fine except for the insulation and refrigeration."

"It's a damned shame," the Postmaster said, suddenly sympathetic. "I know how you feel."

Cleevy switched the refrigeration to FULL, wiped perspiration from his eyes, and decided that the Postmaster only *thought* he knew how he felt.

"Haven't I asked the government for new ships over and over again?" The Postmaster laughed ruefully. "They seem to feel that I can get the mail through in any old crate."

At the moment, Cleevy wasn't interested in the Postmaster's troubles. Even with the refrigeration laboring at FULL, the ship was overheating.

"Hang on a moment," he said. He went to the rear of the ship, where the heat seemed to be emanating, and found that three of his tanks were filled, not with fuel, but with a bubbling white-hot slag. The fourth tank was rapidly undergoing the same change.

Cleevy stared for a moment, turned, and sprinted to the radio.

"No more fuel," he said. "Catalytic action, I think. I *told* you we needed new tanks. I'm putting down on the first oxygen planet I can find."

He pulled down the Emergency Manual and looked up the Seergon Cluster. There were no colonies in the group, but the oxygen worlds had been charted for future reference. What was on them, aside from oxygen, no one knew. Cleevy expected to find out, if his ship stayed together long enough.

"I'll try 3-M-22," he shouted over the mounting static.

"Take good care of the mail," the Postmaster howled back. "I'm sending a ship right out."

Cleevy told him what he could do with the mail, all twenty pounds of it. But the Postmaster had signed off by then.

Cleevy made a good landing on 3-M-22; exceptionally good, taking into consideration the fact that his instruments were too hot to touch, his tubes were warped by heat, and the mail sack strapped to his back hampered his movements. Mailship 243 sailed in like a swan. Twenty feet above the planet's surface it gave up and dropped like a stone.

Cleevy held on to consciousness, although he was certain every bone in his body was broken. The sides of the ship were turning a dull red when he stumbled through the escape hatch, the mail sack still firmly strapped to his back.

He staggered one hundred yards, eyes closed. Then the ship exploded, and knocked him flat on his face. He stood up, took two more steps, and passed out completely.

When he recovered consciousness, he was lying on a little hillside, face down in tall grass. He was in a beautiful state of shock. He felt that he was detached from his body, a pure intellect floating in the air. All worries, emotions, fears, remained with his body; *he* was free.

He looked around, and saw that a small animal was passing near him. It was about the size of a squirrel, but with dull green fur.

As it came close, he saw that it had no eyes or ears.

This didn't surprise him. On the contrary, it seemed quite fitting. Why in hell *should* a squirrel have eyes or ears? Squirrels were better off not seeing the pain and torture of the world, not hearing the anguished screams of . . .

Another animal approached, and this one was the size and shape of a timber wolf, but also colored green. Parallel evolution? It didn't matter in the total scheme of things, he decided. This one, too, was eyeless and earless. But it had a magnificent set of teeth.

Cleevy watched with only faint interest. What does a pure intellect care for wolves and squirrels, eyeless or otherwise? He observed that the squirrel had frozen, not more than five feet from the wolf. The wolf approached slowly. Then, not three feet away, he seemed to lose the scent. He shook his head and turned a slow circle. When he moved forward again, he wasn't going in the right direction.

The blind hunt the blind, Cleevy told himself, and it seemed a deep and eternal truth. As he watched, the squirrel quivered; the wolf whirled, pounced, and devoured it in three gulps.

What large teeth wolves have, Cleevy thought. Instantly the eyeless wolf whirled and faced him.

Now he's going to eat me, Cleevy thought. It amused him to realize that he was the first human to be eaten on this planet.

The wolf was snarling in his face when Cleevy passed out again.

It was evening when he recovered. Long shadows had formed over the land, and the sun was low in the sky. Cleevy sat up and flexed his arms and legs experimentally. Nothing was broken.

He got up on one knee, groggy, but in possession of his senses. What had happened? He remembered the crash as though it were a thousand years ago. The ship had burned, he had walked away and fainted. After that he had met a wolf and a squirrel.

He climbed unsteadily to his feet and looked around. He must have dreamed that last part. If there had been a wolf, he would have been killed.

Glancing down at his feet, he saw the squirrel's green tail, and a little farther away, its head.

He tried desperately to think. So there *had* been a wolf, and a hungry one. If he expected to survive until the rescue ship came, he had to find out exactly what had happened, and why.

Neither animal had eyes or ears. How did they track each other? Smell? If so, why did the wolf have so much trouble finding the squirrel?

He heard a low growl, and turned. There, not fifty feet away, was something that looked like a panther. A yellow-brown, eyeless, earless panther.

Damned menagerie, Cleevy thought, and crouched down in the tall grass. This planet was rushing him along too fast. He needed time to think. How did these animals operate? Instead of sight, did they have a sense of location?

The panther began to move away.

Cleevy breathed a little easier. Perhaps, if he stayed out of sight, the panther . . .

As soon as he thought the word *panther,* the beast turned in his direction.

What have I done, Cleevy asked himself, burrowing deeper into the grass. He can't smell me or see me or hear me. All I did was decide to stay out of his way . . .

Head high, the panther began to pace toward him.

That did it. Without eyes or ears, there was only one way the beast could have detected him.

It had to be telepathic!

To test this theory, he thought the word *panther,* identifying it automatically with the animal that was approaching him. The panther roared furiously, and shortened the distance between them.

In a fraction of a second, Cleevy understood a lot of things. The wolf had been tracking the squirrel by telepathy. The squirrel had frozen—perhaps it had even stopped thinking! The wolf had been thrown off the scent—until the squirrel wasn't able to keep from thinking any longer.

In that case, why hadn't the wolf attacked him while he was unconscious? Perhaps he had stopped thinking—or at least, stopped thinking on a wave length that the wolf could receive. Probably there was more to it than that.

Right now, his problem was the *panther.*

The beast roared again. It was only thirty feet away, and closing the distance rapidly.

All he had to do, Cleevy thought, was not to think of—was to think of something else. In that way, perhaps the —well, perhaps it would lose the scent. He started to think about all the girls he had ever known, in painstaking detail.

The panther stopped and pawed the ground doubtfully.

Cleevy went on thinking; about girls, and ships, and planets, and girls, and ships, and everything but panthers . . .

The panther advanced another five feet.

Damn it, he thought, how do you *not* think of something? You think furiously about stones and rocks and people and places and things, but your mind always returns to—but you ignore that, and concentrate on your sainted grandmother, your drunken old father, the bruises on your right leg (count them. Eight. Count them again. Still eight.) And now you glance up, casually, seeing, but not really recognizing the—anyhow, it's still advancing.

Cleevy found that trying *not* to think of something is like trying to stop an avalanche with your bare hands. He realized that the human mind couldn't be inhibited as di-

rectly and consciously as all that. It takes time, and practice.

He had about fifteen feet left in which to learn how not to think of a . . .

Well, there are also card games to think about, and parties, and dogs, cats, horses, mice, sheep, wolves (move away!) and bruises, battleships, caves, lairs, dens, cubs (watch out) p-*paramounts,* and tantamounts and gadabouts and roundabouts and roustabouts and ins-and-outs (about eight feet) meals, food, fire, fox, fur, pigs, pokes, prams, and p-p-p-p- . . .

The panther was about five feet away now, and crouching for the spring. Cleevy couldn't hold back the thought any longer. Then, in a burst of inspiration, he thought:

Pantheress!

The panther, still crouching, faced him doubtfully.

Cleevy concentrated on the idea of a pantheress. *He* was a pantheress, and what did this panther mean by frightening her that way? He thought about his (her, damn it!) cubs, a warm cave, the pleasure of tracking down squirrels . . .

The panther advanced slowly and rubbed against Cleevy. Cleevy thought desperately, what fine weather we've been having, and what a fine panther this chap really is, so big, so strong, and with such enormous teeth.

The panther purred!

Cleevy lay down and curled an imaginary tail around him, and decided he was going to sleep. The panther stood by indecisively. He seemed to feel that something was wrong. He growled once, deep in his throat, then turned and loped away.

The sun had just set, and the entire land was a deep blue. Cleevy found that he was shaking uncontrollably, and on the verge of hysterical laughter. If the panther had stayed another moment . . .

He controlled himself with an effort. It was time for some serious thinking.

Probably every animal had its characteristic thought-smell. A squirrel emitted one kind, a wolf another, and a human still another. The all-important question was,

could he be traced only when he thought of some animal? Or could his thought-pattern, like an odor, be detected even when he was not thinking of anything in particular?

Apparently, the panther had scented him only when he thought specifically of it. But that could be due to unfamiliarity. His alien thought-smell might have confused the panther—this time.

He'd just have to wait and see. The panther probably wasn't stupid. It was just the first time that trick had been played on him.

Any trick will work—once.

Cleevy lay back and stared at the sky. He was too tired to move, and his bruised body ached. What would happen now, at night? Did the beasts continue to hunt? Or was there a truce of some sort? He didn't give a damn.

To hell with squirrels, wolves, panthers, lions, tigers, and reindeer.

He slept.

The next morning, he was surprised to find himself still alive. So far, so good. It might be a good day after all. Cheerfully he walked to his ship.

All that was left of Mailship 243 was a pile of twisted metal strewn across the scorched earth. Cleevy found a bar of metal, hefted it, and slid it into his belt below the mail sack. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it gave him a certain confidence.

The ship was a total loss. He left, and began to look for food. In the surrounding countryside there were several fruit-bearing shrubs. He sampled one warily, and found it tart but not unpleasant. He gorged himself on fruit, and washed it down with water from a nearby stream.

He hadn't seen any animals, so far. Of course, for all he knew, they could be closing in on him now.

He avoided the thought and started looking for a place to hide. His best bet was to stay out of sight until the rescue ship came. He tramped over the gentle rolling hills, looking for a cliff, a tree, a cave. But the amiable landscape presented nothing larger than a six-foot shrub.

By afternoon he was tired and irritated, and scanning

the skies anxiously. Why wasn't the ship here? It should take no longer than a day or two, he estimated, for a fast emergency ship to reach him.

If the Postmaster was looking on the right planet.

There was a movement in the sky. He looked up, his heart racing furiously. There was something there!

It was a bird. It sailed slowly over him, balancing easily on its gigantic wings. It dipped once, then flew on.

It looked amazingly like a vulture.

He continued walking. In another moment, he found himself face to face with four blind wolves.

That took care of one question. He *could* be traced by his characteristic thought-smell. Evidently the beasts of this planet had decided he wasn't too alien to eat.

The wolves moved cautiously toward him. Cleevy tried the trick he had used the other day. Lifting the metal bar out of his belt, he thought of himself as a female wolf searching for her cubs. Won't one of you gentlemen help me find them? They were here only a few minutes ago. One was green, one was spotted, and the other . . .

Perhaps these wolves didn't have spotted cubs. One of them leaped at Cleevy. Cleevy struck him in mid-air with his bar, and the wolf staggered back.

Shoulder to shoulder, the four closed in.

Desperately Cleevy tried to think himself out of existence. No use. The wolves kept on coming.

Cleevy thought of a panther. *He* was a panther, a big one, and he was looking forward to a meal of wolf.

That stopped them. They switched their tails anxiously, but held their ground.

Cleevy growled, pawed the earth and stalked forward. The wolves retreated, but one started to slip in back of him.

He moved sideways, trying to keep from being circled. It seemed that they really didn't believe him. Perhaps he didn't make a good panther. They had stopped retreating. One was in back of him, and the others stood firm, their tongues lolling out on their wet, open jaws. Cleevy growled ferociously, and swung his club. A wolf darted back, but

the one behind him sprang, landed on the mail sack, and knocked him over.

As they piled on, Cleevy had another inspiration. He imagined himself to be a snake, very fast, deadly, with poison fangs that could take a wolf's life in an instant.

They were off him at once. Cleevy hissed, and arched his boneless neck. The wolves howled angrily, but showed no inclination to attack.

Then Cleevy made a mistake. He knew that he should stand firm and brazen it out. But his body had its own ideas. Involuntarily he turned and sprinted away.

The wolves loped after him, and glancing up, Cleevy could see the vultures gathering for the remains. He controlled himself and tried to become a snake again, but the wolves kept coming.

The vultures overhead gave him an idea. As a spaceman he knew what the land looked like from the air. Cleevy decided to become a bird. He imagined himself soaring, balanced easily on an updraft, looking down on the green rolling land.

The wolves were confused. They ran in circles, and leaped into the air. Cleevy continued soaring, higher and higher, backing away slowly as he did so.

Finally he was out of sight of the wolves, and it was evening. He was exhausted. He had lived through another day. But evidently his gambits were good only once. What was he going to do tomorrow, if the rescue ship didn't come?

After it grew dark, he lay awake for a long time, watching the sky. But all he saw were stars. And all he heard was the occasional growl of a wolf, or the roar of a panther dreaming of his breakfast.

Morning came too soon. Cleevy awoke still tired and unrefreshed. He lay back and waited for something to happen.

Where was the rescue ship? They had had plenty of time, he decided. Why weren't they here? If they waited too long, the panther . . .

He shouldn't have thought it. In answer, he heard a roar on his right.

He stood up and moved away from the sound. He decided he'd be better off facing the wolves . . .

He shouldn't have thought that either, because now the roar of the panther was joined by the howl of a wolf pack.

Cleevy met them simultaneously. A green-yellow panther stepped daintily out of the underbrush in front of him. On the other side, he could make out the shapes of several wolves. For a moment, he thought they might fight it out. If the wolves jumped the panther, he could get away . . .

But they were interested only in him. Why should they fight each other, he realized, when he was around, broadcasting his fears and helplessness for all to hear?

The panther moved toward him. The wolves stayed back, evidently content to take the remains. Cleevy tried the bird routine, but the panther, after hesitating a moment, kept on coming.

Cleevy backed toward the wolves, wishing he had something to climb. What he needed was a cliff, or even a decent-sized tree . . .

But there were shrubs! With inventiveness born of desperation, Cleevy became a six-foot shrub. He didn't really know how a shrub would think, but he did his best.

He was blossoming now. And one of his roots felt a little wobbly. The result of that last storm. Still, he was a pretty good shrub, taking everything into consideration.

Out of the corner of his branches, he saw the wolves stop moving. The panther circled him, sniffed, and cocked his head to one side.

Really now, he thought, who would want to take a bite out of a shrub. You may have thought I was something else, but actually, I'm just a shrub. You wouldn't want a mouthful of leaves, would you? And you might break a tooth on my branches. Who ever heard of panthers eating shrubs? And I *am* a shrub. Ask my mother. She was a shrub, too. We've all been shrubs, ever since the Carboniferous Age.

The panther showed no signs of attacking. But he showed no signs of leaving, either. Cleevy wondered if he

could keep it up. What should he think about next? The beauties of Spring? A nest of robins in his hair.?

A little bird landed on his shoulder.

Isn't that nice, Cleevy thought. He thinks I'm a shrub, too. He's going to build a nest in my branches. That's perfectly lovely. All the other shrubs will be jealous of me.

The bird tapped lightly at Cleevy's neck.

Easy, Cleevy thought. Wouldn't want to kill the tree that feeds you . . .

The bird tapped again, experimentally. Then, setting its webbed feet firmly, proceeded to tap at Cleevy's neck with the speed of a pneumatic hammer.

A damned woodpecker, Cleevy thought, trying to stay shrublike. He noticed that the panther was suddenly restive. But after the bird had punctured his neck for the fifteenth time, Cleevy couldn't help himself. He picked up the bird and threw it at the panther.

The panther snapped, but not in time. Outraged, the bird flew around Cleevy's head, scouting. Then it streaked away for the quieter shrubs.

Instantly, Cleevy became a shrub again, but that game was over. The panther cuffed at him. Cleevy tried to run, stumbled over a wolf, and fell. With the panther growling in his ear, he knew that he was a corpse already.

The panther hesitated.

Cleevy now became a corpse to his melting finger tips. He had been dead for days, weeks. His blood had long since drained away. His flesh stank. All that was left was rot and decay. No sane animal would touch him, no matter how hungry it was.

The panther seemed to agree. He backed away. The wolves howled hungrily, but they too were in retreat.

Cleevy advanced his putrefaction several days. He concentrated on how horribly indigestible he was, how genuinely unsavory. And there was conviction in back of his thought. He honestly didn't believe he would make a good meal for anyone.

The panther continued to move away, followed by the wolves. He was saved! He could go on being a corpse for the rest of his life, if necessary . . .

And then he smelled *truly* rotten flesh. Looking around, he saw that an enormous bird had landed beside him.

On Earth, it would have been called a vulture.

Cleevy could have cried at that moment. Wouldn't anything work? The vulture waddled toward him, and Cleevy jumped to his feet and kicked it away. If he had to be eaten, it wasn't going to be by a vulture.

The panther came back like a lightning bolt, and there seemed to be anger and frustration on that blank, furry face. Cleevy raised his metal bar, wishing he had a tree to climb, a gun to shoot, or even a torch to wave . . .

A torch!

He knew at once that he had found the answer. He blazed in the panther's face, and the panther backed away, squealing. Quickly Cleevy began to burn in all directions, devouring the dry grass, setting fire to the shrubs.

The panther and the wolves darted away.

Now it was his turn! He should have remembered that all animals have a deep, instinctive dread of fire. By God, he was going to be the greatest fire that ever hit this place!

A light breeze came up and fanned him across the rolling land. Squirrels fled from the underbrush and streaked away from him. Families of birds took flight, and panthers, wolves and other animals ran side by side, all thought of food driven from their minds, wishing only to escape from the fire—to escape from him!

Dimly, Cleevy realized that he had now become truly telepathic himself. Eyes closed, he could see on all sides of him, and sense what was going on. As a roaring fire he advanced, sweeping everything before him. And he could *feel* the fear in their minds as they raced away.

It was fitting. Hadn't man always been the master, due to his adaptability, his superior intelligence? The same results obtained here, too. Proudly he jumped a narrow stream three miles away, ignited a clump of bushes, flamed, spurted . . .

And then he felt the first drop of water.

He burned on, but the one drop became five, then fifteen then five hundred. He was drenched, and his fuel, the grass and shrubs, were soon dripping with water.

He was being put out.

It just wasn't fair, Cleevy thought. By rights he should have won. He had met this planet on its own terms, and beaten it—only to have an act of nature ruin everything.

Cautiously, the animals were starting to return.

The water poured down. The last of Clevy's flames went out. Cleevy sighed, and fainted.

" . . . a damned fine job. You held on to your mail, and that's the mark of a good postman. Perhaps we can arrange a medal."

Cleevy opened his eyes. The Postmaster was standing over him, beaming proudly. He was lying on a bunk, and overhead he could see curving metal walls.

He was on the rescue ship.

"What happened?" he croaked.

"We got you just in time," the Postmaster said. "You'd better not move yet. We were almost too late."

Cleevy felt the ship lift, and knew that they were leaving the surface of 3-M-22. He staggered to the port, and looked at the green land below him.

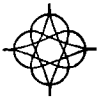
"It was close," the Postmaster said, standing beside Cleevy and looking down. "We got the ship's sprinkler system going just in time. You were standing in the center of the damndest grass fire I've ever seen." Looking down at the unscarred green land, the Postmaster seemed to have a moment of doubt. He looked again, and his expression reminded Cleevy of the panther he had tricked.

"Say—how come you weren't burned?"

JACK WILLIAMSON

If your father read science fiction, he very likely counted Jack Williamson high among his favorite writers; for, young enough to have served with the Air Force in the South Pacific during World War II, Williamson is old enough, and has been writing first-rate science-fiction long enough, to have attained a remarkable status as a sort of combination revered old master and bright new star. It's close to a quarter of a century since Jack Williamson's first yarn appeared in the old, early Amazing Stories*; we can wish him, and the thousands of his fans, no greater good than another twenty-five years as productive as the first, including in it the writing of a great many more superlative short stories like——*

The Happiest Creature



The collector puffed angrily into the commandant's office in the quarantine station, on the moon of Earth. He was a heavy hairless man with shrewd little ice-green eyes sunk deep in fat yellow flesh. He had a genial smile when he was getting what he wanted. Just now he wasn't.

"Here we've come a good hundred light-years, and you can see who I am." He riffled his psionic identification films under the commandant's nose. "I intend to collect at least one of those queer anthropoids, in spite of all your silly red tape."

The shimmering films attested his distinguished scientific attainments. He was authorized to gather specimens for the greatest zoo in the inhabited galaxy, and the quarantine service had been officially requested to expedite his search.

"I see." The commandant nodded respectfully, trying to conceal a weary frown. The delicate business of safe-

guarding Earth's embryonic culture had taught him to deal cautiously with such unexpected threats. "Your credentials are certainly impressive, and we'll give you whatever help we can. Won't you sit down?"

The collector wouldn't sit down. He was thoroughly annoyed with the commandant. He doubted loudly that the quarantine regulations had ever been intended to apply to such a backward planet as Earth, and he proposed to take his specimen without any further fiddle-faddle.

The commandant, who came from a civilization which valued courtesy and reserve, gasped in spite of himself at the terms that came through his psionic translator, but he attempted to restrain his mounting impatience.

"Actually, these creatures are human," he answered firmly. "And we are stationed here to protect them."

"Human?" The collector snorted. "When they've never got even this far off their stinking little planet!"

"A pretty degenerate lot," the commandant agreed regretfully. "But their human origins have been well established, and you'll have to leave them alone."

The collector studied the commandant's stern-lipped face and modified his voice.

"All we need is a single specimen, and we won't injure that." He recovered his jovial smile. "On the contrary, the creature we pick up will be the luckiest one on the planet. I've been in this game a good many centuries, and I know what I'm talking about. Wild animals in their native environments are invariably diseased. They are in constant physical danger, generally undernourished, and always more or less frustrated sexually. But the beast we take will receive the most expert attention in every way."

A hearty chuckle shook his oily yellow jowls.

"Why, if you allowed us to advertise for a specimen, half the population would volunteer."

"You can't advertise," the commandant said flatly. "Our first duty here is to guard this young culture from any outside influence that might cripple its natural development."

"Don't upset yourself." The fat man shrugged. "We're undercover experts. Our specimen will never know that it has been collected, if that's the way you want it."

"It isn't." The commandant rose abruptly. "I will give your party every legitimate assistance, but if I discover that you have tried to abduct one of these people I'll confiscate your ship."

"Keep your precious pets," the collector grunted ungraciously. "We'll just go ahead with our field studies. Live specimens aren't really essential, anyhow. Our technicians have prepared very authentic displays, with only animated replicas."

"Very well." The commandant managed a somewhat sour smile. "With that understanding, you may land."

He assigned two inspectors to assist the collector and make certain that the quarantine regulations were respected. Undercover experts, they went on to Earth ahead of the expedition, and met the interstellar ship a few weeks later at a rendezvous on the night side of the planet.

The ship returned to the moon, while the outsiders spent several months traveling on the planet, making psionic records and collecting specimens from the unprotected species. The inspector reported no effort to violate the Covenants, and everything went smoothly until the night when the ship came back to pick up the expedition.

Every avoidable hazard had been painstakingly avoided. The collector and his party brought their captured specimens to the pickup point in native vehicles, traveling as Barstow Brothers' Wild Animal Shows. The ship dropped to meet them at midnight, on an uninhabited desert plateau. A thousand such pickups had been made without an incident, but that night things went wrong.

A native anthropoid had just escaped from a place of confinement. Though his angered tribesmen pursued, he had outrun them in a series of stolen vehicles. They blocked the roads, but he got away across the desert. When his last vehicle stalled, he crossed a range of dry hills on foot in the dark. An unforeseen danger, he blundered too near the waiting interstellar ship.

His pursuers discovered his abandoned car, and halted the disguised outsiders to search their trucks and warn them that a dangerous convict was loose. To keep the natives away from the ship, the inspectors invented a tale

of a frightened man on a horse, riding wildly in the opposite direction.

They guided the native officers back to where they said they had seen the imaginary horseman, and kept them occupied until dawn. By that time, the expedition was on the ship, native trucks and all, and safely back in space.

The natives never recaptured their prisoner. Through that chance-in-a-million that can never be eliminated by even the most competent undercover work, he had got aboard the interstellar ship.

The fugitive anthropoid was a young male. Physically, he appeared human enough, even almost handsome. Lean from the prison regimen, he carried himself defiantly erect. Some old injury had left an ugly scar across his cheek and his thin lips had a snarling twist, but he had a poised alertness and a kind of wary grace.

He was even sufficiently human to possess clothing and a name. His filthy garments were made of twisted animal and vegetable fibers and the skins of butchered animals. His name was Casey James.

He was armed like some jungle carnivore, however, with a sharpened steel blade. His body, like his whole planet, was contaminated with parasitic organisms. He was quivering with fear and exhaustion, like any hunted animal, the night he blundered upon the ship. The pangs of his hunger had passed, but a bullet wound in his left arm was nagging him with unalleviated pain.

In the darkness, he didn't even see the ship. The trucks were stopped on the road, and the driver of the last had left it while he went ahead to help adjust the loading ramp. The anthropoid climbed on the unattended truck and hid himself under a tarpaulin before it was driven aboard.

Though he must have been puzzled and alarmed to find that the ship was no native conveyance, he kept hidden in the cargo hold for several days. With his animal craftiness, he milked one of the specimen animals for food, and slept in the cab of an empty truck. Malignant organisms were multiplying in his wounded arm, however, and pain finally drove him out of hiding.

He approached the attendants who were feeding the

animals, threatened them with his knife, and demanded medical care. They disarmed him without difficulty and took him to the veterinary ward. The collector found him there, already scrubbed and disinfected, sitting up in his bed.

"Where're we headed for?" he wanted to know.

He nodded without apparent surprise when the collector told him the mission and the destination of the ship.

"Your undercover work ain't quite so hot as you seem to think," he said. "I've seen your flying saucers myself."

"Flying saucers!" The collector sniffed disdainfully, "They aren't anything of ours. Most of them are nothing but refracted images of surface lights, produced by atmospheric inversions. The quarantine people are getting out a book to explain that to your fellow creatures."

"A good one for the cops!" The anthropoid grinned. "I bet they're still scratching their dumb skulls, over how I dodged 'em." He paused to finger his bandaged arm, in evident appreciation of the civilized care he had received. "And when do we get to this wonderful zoo of yours?"

"You don't," the collector told him. "I did want exactly such a specimen as you are, but those stuffy bureaucrats wouldn't let me take one."

"So you gotta get rid of me?"

The psionic translator revealed the beast's dangerous desperation, even before his hard body stiffened.

"Wait!" The collector retreated hastily. "Don't alarm yourself. We won't hurt you. We couldn't destroy you, even to escape detection. No civilized man can destroy a human life."

"Nothing to it," the creature grunted. "But if you ain't gonna toss me out in space, then what?"

"You've put us in an awkward situation." The yellow man scowled with annoyance. "If the quarantine people caught us with you aboard, they'd cancel our permits and seize everything we've got. Somehow, we'll have to put you back."

"But I can't go back." The anthropoid licked his lips nervously. "I just gut-knifed a guard. If they run me down this time, it's the chair for sure."

The translator made it clear that the chair was an elaborate torture machine in which convicted killers were put to a ceremonial death, according to a primitive tribal code of blood revenge.

"So you gotta take me wherever you're going." The creature's dark, frightened eyes studied the collector cunningly. "If you put me back, you'll be killing me."

"On the contrary." The collector's thick upper lip twitched slightly, and a slow smile oozed across his wide putty face, warming everything except his frosty little eyes. "Human life is sacred. We can arrange to make you the safest creature of your kind—and also the happiest—so long as you are willing to observe two necessary conditions."

"Huh?" The anthropoid squinted. "Whatcha mean?"

"You understand that we violated the quarantine in allowing you to get aboard," the collector explained patiently. "We, and not you, would be held responsible in case of detection, but we need your help to conceal the violation. We are prepared to do everything for you, if you will make and keep two simple promises."

"Such as?"

"First, promise you won't talk about us."

"Easy enough." The beast grinned. "Nobody'd believe me, anyhow."

"The quarantine people would." The collector's cold eyes narrowed. "Their undercover agents are alert for rumors of any violation."

"Okay, I'll keep my mouth shut." The creature shrugged. "What else?"

"Second, you must promise not to kill again."

The anthropoid stiffened. "What's it to you?"

"We can't allow you to destroy any more of your fellow beings. Since you are now in our hands, the guilt would fall on us." The collector scowled at him. "Promise?"

The anthropoid chewed thoughtfully on his thin lower lip. His hostile eyes looked away at nothing. The collector caught a faint reflection of his thoughts, through the translator, and stepped back uneasily.

"The cops are hot behind me," he muttered. "I gotta take care of myself."

"Don't worry." The collector snapped his fat fingers. "We can get you a pardon. Just say you won't kill again."

"No." Lean muscles tightened in the anthropoid's jaws. "There's one certain man I gotta knock off. That's the main reason I busted outa the pen."

"Who is this enemy?" The collector frowned. "Why is he so dangerous?"

"But he ain't so dangerous," the beast grunted. "I just hate his guts."

"I don't understand."

"I always wanted to kick his face in." The creature's thin lips snarled. "Ever since we was kids together, back in Las Verdades."

"Yet you have never received any corrective treatment, for such a monstrous obsession?" The collector shook his head incredulously, but the anthropoid ignored him.

"His name is Gabriel Meléndez," the creature muttered. "Just a dirty greaser, but he makes out he's just as good as me. I had money from my rich aunt and he was hungry half the time, but he'd never stay in his place. Even when he was just a snotty-nosed kid, and knew I could beat him because I was bigger, he was always trying to fight me." The beast bared his decaying teeth. "I aim to kill him, before I'm through."

"Killing is never necessary," the collector protested uneasily. "Not for civilized men."

"But I ain't so civilized." The anthropoid grinned bleakly. "I aim to gut-knife Gabe Meléndez, just like I did that dumb guard."

"An incredible obsession!" The collector recoiled from the grim-lipped beast and the idea of such raw violence. "What has this creature done to you?"

"He took the girl I wanted." The beast caught a rasping breath. "And he put the cops on me. At least I think it was him, because I got caught not a month after I stuck up the filling station where he works. I think he recognized me, and I aim to get him."

"No——"

"But I will!" The anthropoid slipped out of bed and stood towering over the fat man defiantly, his free hand clenched and quivering. "You can't stop me, not with all your fancy gadgets."

The beast glared down into the collector's bright little eyes. They looked back without blinking, and their lack of brows or lashes made them seem coldly reptilian. Abruptly, the animal subsided.

"Okay, okay!" He spat deliberately on the spotless floor and grinned at the collector's involuntary start. "What's it worth, to let him live?"

The collector shook off his shocked expression.

"We're undercover experts and we know your planet." A persuasive smile crept across his gross face. "Our resources are quite adequate to take care of anything you can demand. Just give your word not to kill again, or talk about us, and tell me what you want."

The anthropoid rubbed his hairy jaw, as if attempting to think.

"First, I want the girl," he muttered huskily. "Carmen Quintana was her name, before she married Gabe. She may give you a little trouble, because she don't like me a bit. Nearly clawed my eyes out once, even back before I shot her old man at the filling station." His white teeth flashed in a wolfish grin. "Think you can make her go for me?"

"I think we can." The collector nodded blandly. "We can arrange nearly anything."

"You'd better arrange that." The anthropoid's thin brown hand knotted again. "And I'll make her sorry she ever looked at Gabe!"

"You don't intend to injure her?"

"That's my business." The beast laughed. "Just take me to Las Verdades. That's a little 'dobe town down close to the border."

The anthropoid listed the rest of his requirements, and crossed his heart in a ritual gesture of his tribe to solemnize his promises. He knew when the interstellar craft landed again, but he had to stay aboard a long time afterwards, living like a prisoner in a sterile little cell, while he waited

for the outsiders to complete their underground arrangements for his return. He was fuming with impatience, stalking around his windowless room like a caged carnivore, when the collector finally unlocked his door.

"You're driving me nuts," he growled at the hairless outsider. "What's the holdup?"

"The quarantine people." The collector shrugged. "We had to manufacture some new excuse for every move we made, but I don't think they ever suspected anything. And here you are!"

He dragged a heavy piece of primitive luggage into the room and straightened up beside it, puffing and mopping at his broad wet face.

"Open it up," he wheezed. "You'll see that we intend to keep our part of the bargain. Don't forget yours."

The anthropoid dropped on his knees to burrow eagerly through the garments and the simple paper documents in the bag. He looked up with a scowl.

"Where is it?" he snapped.

"You'll find everything," the fat man panted. "Your pardon papers. Ten thousand dollars in currency. Forty thousand in cashier's checks. The clothing you specified——"

"But where's the gun?"

"Everything has been arranged so that you will never need it." The collector shifted on his feet uncomfortably. "I've been hoping you might change your mind about——"

"I gotta protect myself."

"You'll never be attacked."

"You said you'd give me a gun."

"We did." The collector shrugged unhappily. "You may have it, if you insist, when you leave the ship. Better get into your new clothing now. We want to take off again in half an hour."

The yellow Cadillac convertible he had demanded was waiting in the dark at the bottom of the ramp, its chrome trim shimmering faintly. The collector walked with him down through the airlock to the car, and handed him a heavy little package.

"Now don't turn on the headlamps," the yellow man cautioned him. "Just wait here for daylight. You'll see the Albuquerque highway then, not a mile east. Turn right to Las Verdades. We have arranged everything to keep you very happy there, so long as you don't attempt to betray us."

"Don't worry." He grinned in the dark. "Don't worry a minute."

He slid into the car and clicked on the parking lights. The instrument panel lit up like a Christmas tree. He settled himself luxuriously at the wheel, appreciatively sniffing the expensive new-car scents of leather and rubber and enamel.

"Don't you worry, butter-guts," he muttered. "You'll never know."

The ramp was already lifting back into the interstellar ship when he looked up. The bald man waved at him and vanished. The airlock thudded softly shut. The great disk took off into the night, silently, like something falling upward.

The beast sat grinning in the car. Quite a deal, he was thinking. Everything he had thought to ask for, all for just a couple of silly promises they couldn't make him keep. He already had most of his pay, and old clabber-guts would soon be forty thousand miles away, or however far it was out to the stars.

Nobody had ever been so lucky.

They had fixed his teeth, and put him in a hundred-dollar suit, and stuffed his pockets with good cigars. He unwrapped one of the cigars, bit off the end, lit it with the automatic lighter, and inhaled luxuriously. He had everything.

Or did he?

A sudden uncertainty struck him, as dawn began to break. The first gray shapes that came out of the dark seemed utterly strange, and he was suddenly afraid the outsiders had double-crossed him. Maybe they hadn't really brought him back to Earth, after all. Maybe they had marooned him on some foreign planet, where he could never find Carmen and Gabe Meléndez.

With a gasp of alarm, he snapped on the headlights. The wide white beams washed away all that terrifying strangeness, and left only a few harmless clumps of yucca and mesquite. He slumped back against the cushions, laughing weakly.

Now he could see the familiar peaks of Dos Lobos jutting up like jagged teeth, black against the green glass sky. He switched off the headlights and started the motor and eased the swaying car across the brown hummocks toward the dawn. In a few minutes he found the highway.

JOSE'S OASIS, ONE STOP SERVICE, 8 MILES AHEAD

He grimaced at the sign, derisively. What if he had got his twenty years for sticking up the Oasis and shooting down old José. Who cared now if his mother and his aunt had spent their last grubby dimes, paying the lawyers to keep him out of the chair? And Carmen, what if she had spat in his face at the trial? The outsiders had taken care of everything.

Or what if they hadn't?

Cautiously, he slowed the long car and pulled off the pavement where it curved into the valley. The spring rains must have already come, because the rocky slopes were all splashed with wild flowers and tinted green with new grass. The huge old cottonwoods along the river were just coming into leaf, delicately green.

The valley looked as kind as his old mother's face, when she was still alive, and the little town beyond the river seemed clean and lovely as he remembered Carmen. Even the sky was shining like a blue glass bowl, as if the outsiders had somehow washed and sterilized it. Maybe they had. They could do anything, except kill a man.

He chuckled, thinking of the way old baldy had made him cross his heart. Maybe the tallow-gutted fool had really thought that would make him keep his promises. Or was there some kind of funny business about the package that was supposed to be a gun?

He ripped it open. There in the carton was the automatic he had demanded, a .45, with an extra cartridge clip and two boxes of ammunition. It looked all right, flat

and black and deadly in his hand. He loaded it and stepped out of the car to test it.

He was aiming at an empty whisky bottle beside the pavement when he heard a mockingbird singing in the nearest cottonwood. He shot at the bird instead, and grinned when it dissolved into a puff of brown feathers.

"That'll be Gabe." His hard lips curled sardonically. "Coming at me like a mad dog, if anybody ever wants to know, and I had to stop him to save my own hide."

He drove on across the river bridge into Las Verdades. The outsiders had been here, he knew, because the dirt streets were all swept clean, and the wooden parts of all the low adobe buildings were bright with new paint, and all he could smell was the fragrances of coffee and hot bread, when he passed the Esperanza Café.

Those good odors wet his dry mouth with saliva, but he didn't stop to eat. With the automatic lying ready beside him on the seat, he pulled into the Oasis. The place looked empty at first and he thought for a moment that everybody was hiding from him.

As he sat waiting watchfully, crouched down under the wheel, he had time to notice that all the shattered glass had been neatly replaced. Even the marks of his bullets on the walls had been covered with new plaster, and the whole station was shining with fresh paint, like everything else in town.

He reached for the gun when he saw the slight dark boy coming from the grease rack, wiping his hands on a rag. It was Carmen's brother Tony, smiling with an envious adoration at the yellow Cadillac. Tony had always been wild about cars.

"Yes, sir! Fill her up?" Tony recognized him then, and dropped the greasy rag. "Casey James!" He ran out across the driveway. "Carmen told us you'd be home!"

He was raising the gun to shoot when he saw that the boy only wanted to shake his hand. He hid the gun hastily; it wasn't Tony that he had come to kill.

"We read all about your pardon." Tony stood grinning at him, caressing the side of the shining car lovingly. "A shame the way you were framed, but we'll all try to make

it up to you now." The boy's glowing eyes swept the long car. "Want me to fill her up?"

"No!" he muttered hoarsely. "Gabe Meléndez—don't he still work here?"

"Sure, Mr. James," Tony drew back quickly, as if the car had somehow burned his delicate brown hands. "Eight to five, but he isn't here yet. His home is that white stucco beyond the acequia madre——"

"I know."

He gunned the car. It lurched back into the street, roared across the acequia bridge, skidded to a screaming stop in front of the white stucco. He dropped the gun into the side pocket of his coat and ran to the door, grinning expectantly.

Gabe would be taken by surprise. The outsiders had set it up for him very cleverly, with all their manufactured evidences that he had been innocent of any crime at all, and Gabe wasn't likely to be armed.

The door opened before he could touch the bell, but it was only Carmen. Carmen, pale without her makeup but beautiful anyhow, yawning sleepily in sheer pink pajamas that were half unbuttoned. She gasped when she saw him.

"Casey!" Strangely, she was smiling. "I knew you'd come!"

She swayed toward him eagerly, as if she expected him to take her in his arms, but he stood still, thinking of how she had watched him in the courtroom, all through his trial for killing her father, with pitiless hate in her dark eyes. He didn't understand it, but old puffy-guts had somehow changed her.

"Oh!" She turned pink and buttoned her pajamas hastily. "No wonder you were staring, but I'm so excited. I've been longing for you so. Come on in, darling. I'll get something on and make us some breakfast."

"Wait a minute!"

He shook his head, scowling at her, annoyed at the outsiders. They had somehow cheated him. He wanted Carmen, but not this way. He wanted to fight Gabe to take her. He wanted her to go on hating him, so that he would

have to beat and frighten her. Old blubber-belly had been too clever and done too much.

"Where's Gabe?" He reached in his pocket to grip the cold gun. "I gotta see Gabe."

"Don't worry, darling." Her tawny shoulders shrugged becomingly. "Gabriel isn't here. He won't be here any more. You see, dear, the state cops talked to me a lot while they were here digging up the evidence to clear you. It came over me then that you had always been the one I loved. When I told Gabriel, he moved out. He's living down at the hotel now, and we're getting a divorce right away, so you don't have to worry about him."

"I gotta see him, anyhow."

"Don't be mean about it, darling." Her pajamas were coming open again, but she didn't seem to care. "Come on in, and let's forget about Gabriel. He has been so good about everything, and I know he won't make us any trouble."

"I'll make the trouble." He seized her bare arm. "Come along."

"Darling, don't!" She hung back, squirming. "You're hurting me!"

He made her shut up, and dragged her out of the house. She wanted to go back for a robe, but he threw her into the car and climbed over her to the wheel. He waited for her to try to get out, so that he could slap her down, but she only whimpered for a Kleenex and sat there sniffling.

Old balloon-belly had ruined everything.

He tried angrily to clash the gears, as he started off, as if that would damage the outsiders, but the Hydra-Matic transmission wouldn't clash, and anyhow the saucer ship was probably somewhere out beyond the moon by now.

"There's Gabriel," Carmen sobbed. "There crossing the street, going to work. Don't hurt him, please!"

He gunned the car and veered across the pavement to run him down, but Carmen screamed and twisted at the wheel. Gabriel managed to scramble out of the way. He stopped on the sidewalk, hatless and breathless but grinning stupidly.

"Sorry, mister. Guess I wasn't looking—" Then Gabriel

saw who he was. "Why, Casey! We've been expecting you back. Seems you're the lucky one, after all." Gabriel had started toward the car, but he stopped when he saw the gun. His voice went shrill as a child's. "What are you doing?"

"Just gut-shooting another dirty greaser, that's all."

"Darling!" Carmen snatched at the gun. "Don't——"

He slapped her down.

"Don't strike her!" Gabriel stood gripping the door of the car with both hands. He looked sick. His twitching face was bright with sweat, and he was gasping hoarsely for his breath. He was staring at the gun, his wide eyes dull with horror.

"Stop me!"

He smashed the flat of the gun into Carmen's face, and grinned at the way Gabriel flinched when she screamed. This was more the way he wanted everything to be.

"Just try and stop me!"

"I—I won't fight you," Gabriel croaked faintly. "After all, we're not animals. We're civilized humans. I know Carmen loves you. I'm stepping out of the way. But you can't make me fight——"

The gun stopped Gabriel.

Queerly, though, he didn't fall. He just stood there like some kind of rundown machine, with his stiffened hands clutching the side of the car.

"Die, damn you!"

Casey James shot again; he kept on shooting till the gun was empty. The bullets hammered into the body, but somehow it wouldn't fall. He leaned to look at the wounds, at the broken metal beneath the simulated flesh of the face and the hot yellow hydraulic fluid running out of the belly, and recoiled from what he saw, shaking his head, shuddering like any trapped and frightened beast.

"That—*thing*!"

With a wild burst of animal ferocity, he hurled the gun into what was left of its plastic face. It toppled stiffly backward then, and something jangled faintly inside when it struck the pavement.

"It—it ain't human!"

"But it was an excellent replica." The other thing, the one he had thought was Carmen, gathered itself up from the bottom of the car, speaking gently to him with what now seemed queerly like the voice of old barrel-belly. "We had taken a great deal of trouble to make you the happiest one of your breed." It looked at him sadly with Carmen's limpid dark eyes. "If you had only kept your word."

"Don't——" He cowered back from it, shivering. "Don't k-k-kill me!"

"We never kill," it murmured. "You need never be afraid of that."

While he sat trembling, it climbed out of the car and picked up the ruined thing that had looked like Gabe and carried it easily away toward the Oasis garage.

Now he knew that this place was only a copy of Los Verdades, somewhere not on Earth. When he looked up at the blue crystal sky, he knew that it was only some kind of screen. He felt the millions of strange eyes beyond it, watching him like some queer monster in a cage.

He tried to run away.

He gunned the Cadillac back across the acequia bridge and drove wildly back the way he had come in, on the Albuquerque highway. A dozen miles out, an imitation construction crewman tried to flag him down, pointing at a sign that said the road was closed for repairs. He whipped around the barriers and drove the pitching car on across the imitation desert until he crashed into the bars.

C. M. KORNBLUTH

Much of the better science fiction of the last fifteen years has a certain quality of sameness about it—a puzzling phenomenon, until you look closely and realize that a very large proportion of it was written by one man named C. (for Cyril) M. (for kicks) Kornbluth. Just to list the current catalogue of Kornbluthiana would take more space than is presently available; of novels alone there are eight already in print (three in collaboration—like The Space Merchants*—the other five solo—including* Takeoff *and* The Syndic*), with three more currently in the works. And the short stories are numberless, including most recently the present poignant and provocative piece called——*

The Remorseful

It does not matter when it happened. This is because he was alone and time had ceased to have any meaning for him. At first he had searched the rubble for other survivors, which kept him busy for a couple of years. Then he wandered across the continent in great, vague quarterings, but the plane one day would not take off and he knew he would never find anybody anyway. He was by then in his forties, and a kind of sexual delirium overcame him. He searched out and pored over pictures of women, preferring leggy, high-breasted types. They haunted his dreams; he brooded incessantly with closed eyes, tears leaking from them and running down his filthy, bearded face. One day that phase ended for no reason and he took up his wanderings again, on foot. North in the summer, south in the winter on weed-grown U.S. 1, with the haversack of pork and beans on

his shoulders, usually talking as he trudged, sometimes singing.

* * *

It does not matter when it happened. This is because the Visitors were eternal; endless time stretched before them and behind, which mentions only two of the infinities of infinities that their "lives" included. Precisely when they arrived at a particular planetary system was to them the most trivial of irrelevancies. Eternity was theirs; eventually they would have arrived at all of them.

They had won eternity in the only practical way: by outnumbering it. Each of the Visitors was a billion lives as you are a billion lives—the billion lives, that is, of your cells. But your cells have made the mistake of specializing. Some of them can only contract and relax. Some can only strain urea from your blood. Some can only load, carry and unload oxygen. Some can only transmit minute electrical pulses and others can only manufacture chemicals in a desperate attempt to keep the impossible Rube Goldberg mechanism that you are from breaking down. They never succeed and you always do. Perhaps before you break down some of your specialized cells unite with somebody else's specialized cells and grow into another impossible, doomed contraption.

The Visitors were more sensibly arranged. Their billion lives were not cells but small, unspecialized, insect-like creatures linked by an electromagnetic field subtler than the coarse grapplings that hold you together. Each of the billion creatures that made up a Visitor could live and carry tiny weights, could manipulate tiny power tools, could carry in its small round black head enough brain cells to feed, mate, breed and work—and a few million more brain cells that were pooled into the field which made up the Visitor's consciousness.

When one of the insects died there were no rites; it was matter-of-factly pulled to pieces and eaten by its neighboring insects while it was still fresh. It mattered no more to the Visitor than the growing of your hair does to you,

and the growing of your hair is accomplished only by the deaths of countless cells.

* * *

"Maybe on Mars!" he shouted as he trudged. The haversack jolted a shoulder blade and he arranged a strap without breaking his stride. Birds screamed and scattered in the dark pine forests as he roared at them: "Well, why not? There must of been ten thousand up there easy. Progress, God damn it! That's *progress,* man! Never thought it'd come in my time. But you'd think they would of sent a ship back by now so a man wouldn't feel so all alone. You know better than that, man. You know God-damned good and well it happened up there too. We had Northern Semisphere, they had Southern Semisphere so you know God-damned good and well what happened up there. Semisphere? Hemisphere. Hemi-semi-demisphere."

That was a good one, the best one he'd come across in years. He roared it out as he went stumping along.

When he got tired of it he roared: "You should of been in the *Old* Old Army, man. We didn't go in for this Liberty Unlimited crock in the *Old* Old Army. If you wanted to march in step with somebody else you *marched* in step with somebody else man. None of this crock about you march out of step or twenty lashes from the sergeant for limiting your liberty."

That was a good one too, but it made him a little uneasy. He tried to remember whether he had been in the army or had just heard about it. He realized in time that a storm was blowing up from his depths; unless he headed it off he would soon be sprawled on the broken concrete of U.S. 1, sobbing and beating his head with his fists. He went back hastily to *Sem*-isphere, *Hem*-isphere, *Hem*-i-*sem*-i-*dem*-isphere, roaring it at the scared birds as he trudged.

* * *

There were four Visitors aboard the ship when it entered the planetary system. One of them was left on a cold outer

planet rich in metal outcrops to establish itself in a billion tiny shelters, build a billion tiny forges and eventually—in a thousand years or a million; it made no difference—construct a space ship, fission into two or more Visitors for company, and go Visiting. The ship had been getting crowded; as more and more information was acquired in its voyaging it was necessary for the swarms to increase in size, breeding more insects to store the new facts.

The three remaining Visitors turned the prow of their ship toward an intermediate planet and made a brief, baffling stop there. It was uninhabited except for about ten thousand entities—far fewer than one would expect, and certainly not enough for an efficient first-contact study. The Visitors made for the next planet sunward after only the sketchiest observation. And yet that sketchy observation of the entities left them figuratively shaking their heads. Since the Visitors had no genitals they were in a sense without emotions—but you would have said a vague air of annoyance hung over the ship nevertheless.

They ruminated the odd facts that the entities had levitated, appeared at the distance of observation to be insubstantial, appeared at the distance of observation to be unaware of the Visitors. When you are a hundred-yard rippling black carpet moving across a strange land, when the dwellers in this land soar aimlessly about you and above you, you expect to surprise, perhaps to frighten at first, and at least to provoke curiosity. You do not expect to be ignored.

They reserved judgment pending analysis of the sunward planet's entities—possibly colonizing entities, which would explain the sparseness of the outer planet's population, though not its indifference.

They landed.

* * *

He woke and drank water from a roadside ditch. There had been a time when water was *the* problem. You put three drops of iodine in a canteen. Or you boiled it if you weren't too weak from dysentery. Or you scooped it from the tank of a flush toilet in the isolated farmhouse with the

farmer and his wife and their kids downstairs grotesquely staring with their empty eye sockets at the television screen for the long-ago-spoken latest word. Disease or dust or shattering supersonics broadcast from the bull horn of a low-skimming drone—what did it matter? Safe water was what mattered.

"But hell," he roared, "it's all good now. Hear that? The rain in the ditches, the standing water in the pools, it's all good now. You should have been Lonely Man back when the going was bad, fella, when the bull horns still came over and the stiffs shook when they did and Lonely Man didn't die but he wished he could . . ."

This time the storm took him unaware and was long in passing. His hands were ragged from flailing the broken concrete and his eyes were so swollen with weeping that he could hardly see to shoulder his sack of cans. He stumbled often that morning. Once he fell and opened an old scar on his forehead, but not even that interrupted his steady, mumbling chant: " 'Tain't no boner, 'tain't no blooper; Corey's Gin brings super stupor. We shall conquer; we will win. Back our boys with Corey's Gin. Wasting time in war is sinful; black out fast with a Corey skinful."

* * *

They landed.

Five thousand insects of each "life" heaved on fifteen thousand wires to open the port and let down the landing ramp. While they heaved a few hundred felt the pangs of death on them. They communicated the minute all-they-knew to blank-minded standby youngsters, died and were eaten. Other hundreds stopped heaving briefly, gave birth and resumed heaving.

The three Visitors swarmed down the ramp, three living black carpets. For maximum visibility they arranged themselves in three thin black lines which advanced slowly over the rugged terrain. At the tip of each line a few of the insects occasionally strayed too far from their connecting files and dropped out of the "life" field. These staggered in purposeless circles. Some blundered back into the field;

some did not and died, leaving a minute hiatus in the "life's" memory—perhaps the shape of the full-stop symbol in the written language of a planet long ago visited, long ago dust. Normally the thin line was not used for exploring any but the smoothest terrain; the fact that they took a small calculated risk was a measure of the Visitors' slightly irked curiosity.

With three billion faceted eyes the Visitors saw immediately that this was no semideserted world, and that furthermore it was probably the world which had colonized the puzzling outer planet. Entities were everywhere; the air was thick with them in some places. There were numerous artifacts, all in ruins. Here the entities of the planet clustered, but here the bafflement deepened. The artifacts were all decidedly material and ponderous—but the entities were insubstantial. Coarsely-organized observers would not have perceived them consistently. They existed in a field similar to the organization-field of the Visitors. Their bodies were constructs of wave-trains rather than atoms. It was impossible to imagine them manipulating the materials of which the artifacts were composed.

And as before, the Visitors were ignored.

Deliberately they clustered themselves in three huge black balls, with the object of being as obstreperous as possible and also to mobilize their field strength for a brute-force attempt at communication with the annoying creatures. By this time their attitude approximated: "We'll show these bastards!"

They didn't—not after running up and down every spectrum of thought in which they could project. Their attempt at reception was more successful, and completely horrifying. A few weak, attenuated messages did come through to the Visitors. They revealed the entities of the planet to be dull, whimpering cravens, whining evasively, bleating with self-pity. Though there were only two sexes among them, a situation which leads normally to a rather weak sex drive as such things go in the cosmos, these wispy things vibrated with libido which it was quite impossible for them to discharge.

The Visitors, thoroughly repelled, were rippling back toward their ship when one signaled: *notice and hide.*

The three great black carpets abruptly vanished—that is, each insect found itself a cranny to disappear into, a pebble or leaf to be on the other side of. Some hope flared that the visit might be productive of a more pleasant contact than the last with those aimless, chittering cretins.

The thing stumping across the terrain toward them was like and unlike the wave-train cretins. It had their conformation but was material rather than undulatory in nature—a puzzle that could wait. It appeared to have no contact with the wave-train life form. They soared and darted about it as it approached, but it ignored them. It passed once through a group of three who happened to be on the ground in its way.

Tentatively the three Visitors reached out into its mind. The thoughts were comparatively clear and steady.

When the figure had passed the Visitors chorused: *Agreed,* and headed back to their ship. There was nothing there for them. Among other things they had drawn from the figure's mind was the location of a ruined library; a feeble-minded working party of a million was dispatched to it.

Back at the ship they waited, unhappily ruminating the creature's foreground thoughts: "From Corey's Gin you get the charge to tote that bale and lift that barge. That's progress, God damn it. You know better than that, man. Liberty Unlimited for the Lonely Man, but it be nice to see that Mars ship land . . ."

Agreement: *Despite all previous experience it seems that a sentient race is capable of destroying itself.*

When the feeble-minded library detail returned and gratefully reunited itself with its parent "lives" they studied the magnetic tapes it had brought, reading them direct in the cans. They learned the name of the planet and the technical name for the wave-train entities which had inherited it and which would shortly be its sole proprietors. The solid life-forms, it seemed, had not been totally unaware of them, though there was some confusion: Far the vaster section of the library denied that they existed at all.

But in the cellular minds of the Visitors there could be no doubt that the creatures described in a neglected few of the library's lesser works were the ones they had encountered. Everything tallied. Their nonmaterial quality; their curious reaction to light. And, above all, their dominant personality trait, of remorse, repentance, furious regret. The technical term that the books gave to them was: ghosts.

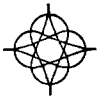
The Visitors worked ship, knowing that the taste of this world and its colony would soon be out of what passed for their collective mouths, rinsed clean by new experiences and better-organized entities.

But they had never left a solar system so gratefully or so fast.

RICHARD WILSON

Richard Wilson and C. M. Kornbluth, teamed by the accident of juxtaposition in this collection, have been teamed many a time before in closer harness still. Item: Their first published fiction appeared in the same issue of the same magazine something over a decade ago—less of a coincidence than it might seem, since it happened to have been a story they wrote in collaboration. From the apartment they then shared (if it is revealed that the joint pen name they used for the story was "Ivar Towers," can you guess what their apartment was called?) they went their separate ways through World War II, found themselves together at the beginning of the peace in Chicago University, worked for a time for the same press wire service, followed each other back east and now have each a rural farmhouse, a wife and a family in upstate New York. Wilson, it is true, has one more child than Kornbluth; but Kornbluth has twice as many chickens. And while Kornbluth was writing his eight novels, Wilson was tooling up to produce such splendid short stories as——

Friend of the Family



They had passed a law making babies illegal. It was on account of the food shortage, the district agent had explained. Everyone had known for decades that the time would come, one year, when there simply would not be enough food to support the mushrooming population of Earth; and now that time was here.

Thad and Annie had a farm back in the hills and hadn't been able to get to the village that day the agent had explained. The news was brought to them by a neighbor.

"It don't pertain to children that are already born," the

neighbor, Lacy, told them. "They're okay. And so are kids that'll be born during the next eleven months. But after that, havin' babies has to stop."

Lacy spoke oracularly, as if he himself represented the government that had made the law. Lacy was an old bachelor who lived by hunting and trapping and trading.

"What are they going to do if people keep on having babies anyway?" Thad asked.

Lacy didn't really remember. He hadn't listened too closely because he wasn't directly concerned. Besides, he'd been doing a bit of dickering for a coonskin, back at the edge of the crowd in the village square, when that point had been covered. But he spoke up without hesitation in answer to Thad's question.

"Destroy 'em, of course. Law's law."

"Oh, no," said Annie.

"Yep," Lacy said. "That's what they'll do. Just like they did with the little pigs back when they had that Blue Eagle law."

"That's pretty drastic," Thad said.

"Gotta be," Lacy said. "Otherwise nobody'd have enough to eat. The agent, he says it's because conservation didn't work out like it was supposed to. Everybody had their chance. But they didn't do their part, so now they gotta be drastic."

"No more babies *ever*?" Annie asked. "After a while they wouldn't have any more people, if they did that."

"Not 'ever,' " Lacy said. "He didn't say 'ever.' He said ten years. By that time, he said, things'd be back in balance."

Thad's shoe made marks in the dust in the clearing in front of their cabin.

"We ain't had no babies yet, Annie and me," he said. "We'd sure admire to have one before it got illegal."

Lacy leered at Annie, who was looking down at the marks her husband was making with his shoe.

"Well," Lacy said with a grin, "you'd better get crackin.' "

* * *

Somehow, Thad and Annie didn't have a baby while it was still legal. Maybe they tried too hard. The eleven months passed, and then a year. A year and a half later, when it was illegal, Annie realized she was pregnant.

She didn't tell Thad, but after a while he noticed, of course.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"Well, we ain't going to turn ourselves in," Thad said. "That's for sure."

"But they'll take it away from us when they find out."

"Then they won't find out," he said. "That's all. We're far enough away from most folks. The ones that do come around—we just won't let them see you."

"That Lacy," she said. "He comes nosing around and everybody knows he's got a mouth as big as a barn door."

"You just leave Lacy to me," her husband said.

The baby picked a thunderstorm to be born in. Annie had a rough time, with no midwife, but after a while the baby was tucked away in a little cradle Thad had made. Annie was asleep, finally, under a thick pile of covers, and Thad was crooning self-consciously to his mite of a son, when there was a knock at the door.

Thad jumped up, almost tipping over the cradle, and the baby woke with a cry. He soothed it, while the knocking continued, until the infant was quiet again, then pulled a screen in front of the cradle and went to the door.

"Who's there?" he said, opening it a crack and peering out into the rainy darkness.

"Me," said Lacy's voice.

"What do you want?"

"What do I want? What do you think I want? I want to come in out of the rain." He pushed against the door.

Thad held it in place.

"You shouldn't have been out in the rain in the first place." Thad wondered if Lacy had heard the baby cry.

"What kind of talk is that, Thaddie?" He pushed against the door again. "Let me in. I'm soakin' wet."

"No," said Thad. "Go away." He pushed the door shut and latched it, then put the bar across it.

He heard Lacy's voice, hollering and swearing, for a while; then there was silence.

A flash of lightning made Thad turn toward the window and he saw, silhouetted in it, the figure of a man. Then the man was running across the clearing. He was alone and from his gait Thad recognized him as Lacy. He disappeared into the woods.

Thad went back to the cradle. He stared down at the sleeping infant, clumsily tucked in a loose blanket end, and said:

"We're going to have trouble with that Lacy, son."

* * *

Thad was at the far edge of his cornfield. It was hot. He took off his hat and mopped his face and neck.

Lacy ambled out of the woods. He had a couple of skins at his belt and carried a sack over his shoulder.

"How's the corn?" he asked.

"Comin' along," said Thad.

"Purty slim pickin's for me. Glad to see somebody's prosperous."

"We get by."

"How's Annie and——"

Thad looked at him sharply.

"She's fine."

"And——?"

"And what?" Thad asked. "What are you hintin' around at, Lacy?"

Lacy smiled, not looking at Thad. He broke off an ear of corn and peeled the husk down and smelled the yellow kernels.

"Purty good corn," he said. "I'd like to have about half a dozen ears a day. And a couple o' turnips. And maybe a few tomatoes. A man needs fresh vegetables in his diet."

Thad's eyes narrowed. "That's right," he said. "I guess we could make a deal. What have you got to offer? We could use some rabbit meat, maybe."

Lacy spat and hit a beetle. "Wasn't thinkin' o' that kind of a deal, where I had to give you somethin'."

"That's no kind of a deal, that way."

"No?" asked Lacy. "Ain't it?"

"Talk up, man, if you got something to say."

Lacy smoothed the husk back over the kernels and put the ear in his sack. He pulled off another ear.

"Cut that out," Thad said.

"I heard some talk in town," Lacy said, taking six ears in all, "about there bein' a bounty on babies. Illegal babies."

He paused and peered around to see how Thad reacted. Thad managed to keep his face expressionless.

"I collected a bounty once, on a wolf," Lacy said. "It made a handy piece of change. Never dreamed at the time, of course, that some day there'd be a bounty on babies, too."

Thad clenched his fists at his side to keep himself from smashing them into Lacy's evil face.

"Now, about them turnips and tomatoes," Lacy said.

* * *

The Director of the Population Planning Agency was reporting to a Congressional subcommittee.

"There has been splendid co-operation in the urban centers," he said. "Progress in the rural areas has been generally satisfactory, too, with the percentage of those who have not conformed to the law no higher than we had expected. Steps are being taken to insure an increasingly better percentage."

"What kind of steps?" asked the committee chairman. "I've heard rumors that a bounty has been offered for infants born after the grace period."

"That is false," the director said. "Absolutely incorrect. It is true that remuneration has been offered for information leading to the recovery of illegal infants, but this is in no sense a bounty."

"To many people," the chairman said, "it might appear to be a distinction without a difference."

"When the infants are—uh—recovered," another congressman asked, "what becomes of them?"

The director nodded significantly in the direction of the press table. "That is a question I should prefer to answer in closed session," he said.

* * *

Thad first saw the stranger one morning as he was leading their one cow out to pasture.

Matilda, the cow, had been plodding along, swinging her tail at the flies on her flanks and chewing her cud in rhythm with her steps. The way led through a stand of young trees and leaning against one of them so it bent under his weight the stranger lolled, a twig in his mouth and a funny kind of round hat on his head.

Matilda shied as she saw him and gave a rumble of alarm.

" 'Morning," said the stranger to Thad.

" 'Morning," said Thad, surprised but polite.

The stranger was a foot under Thad's height, which made him less than a five-footer. He wore stiff new dungarees and a brand new work shirt with the creases still in them from the way they had been folded in the store. He wore high work shoes that were covered with a film of dust but were also brand new.

The round hat was the only thing that looked as if it had been worn for more than a few hours. It was a bright green and Thad couldn't tell whether it was cloth or leather or what. It might even have been metal. It fitted snug on the stranger's head, coming down almost to the ears on the sides and the eyebrows in front.

Only the stranger didn't have any eyebrows. He didn't have hair anywhere on his head, from what Thad could see.

He had a pale color, too, as if he wasn't out in the air much, and there was something about the nose that wasn't quite right.

But Thad's manners prohibited staring. He patted Matilda on the rump to comfort her and said:

"My name's Thad Coniker. I don't believe I've seen you anyplace before."

"Probably not," the stranger said. "I just came."

"I make you welcome," Thad said. He refrained from pointing out that the stranger was trespassing on his land. "What do folks call you?"

"Green," the stranger said.

"Like your hat," said Thad.

"Like my hat, yes," Green said, smiling and nodding.

"You're not from the government." Thad made it a statement and realized consciously for the first time that he had no suspicions of the stranger.

"No."

"Do you have a place around here?"

"Not around here."

"Then you must feel free to come to ours—Annie's and mine."

"And the boy's," Green added. "Thank you."

Thad was not alarmed. If Lacy had said that, Thad would have had to clench his fists and grit his teeth against the bitter knowledge, but with Mr. Green it was all right. He didn't understand why; he just knew it was.

"Yes, it's the boy's, too," Thad said. "We'd all be proud to have you come."

"I will," Mr. Green said. "I think I will be able to help you."

"Maybe you could. But I wouldn't want you to come only on that account."

"I'll come with pleasure."

"Anytime," said Thad.

He clucked at Matilda and the cow moved on. The stranger continued to lean against the young tree. He looked after them as they went.

When they were out of sight he spat the twig out of his mouth, unfastened his nose, scratched the skin under it and began to walk back the way Thad had come. It was not until he came in sight of the cabin that he seemed to remember that he was still carrying the nose in his hand. He replaced it quickly, then went on toward the cabin.

* * *

Annie said later:

"He knocked and I said who is it and he said Mr. Green, I met your husband, Mrs. Coniker, and I don't know why but I knew it was all right and I made him welcome. He was very polite and talked about the weather a little and the crops and remarked on how well the cow looked and then he saw the baby and he made a big fuss over him."

"And you didn't feel scared?" Thad asked.

"Not even a bit. It was like he was some kind old uncle —though it's hard to guess how old he is."

"What did the baby do?"

"Gurgled like a fool and grinned. He never paid *us* the attention he paid Mr. Green. He just seemed to come all alive for the man, acting about three times as old as he rightly should at his age."

"He told me he'd help us," Thad said, "and the way he said it made me believe him. Did he say anything like that to you?"

"Yes. He said he'd be here when we needed him. He said that just before he left. He didn't say where he was going."

* * *

Lacy came around to say he wanted a dozen ears of corn a day, instead of half a dozen. He also wanted twice as many tomatoes and turnips. He'd take some milk, too, he said.

Thad told him he couldn't have them.

"I been giving you what was fair, if blackmail's fair," Thad said. "We wouldn't have enough for ourselves if I gave you any more."

"You'll give them to me," Lacy said, "because you have to. Remember about the baby bounty."

"It's more than you can eat. Why should you take away from folk that need it?"

"No law says I can't sell the extra, is there? I want it, starting today. And don't forget the milk. I got a gallon jug in my sack."

Thad tried to be reasonable. "Not the milk," he said. "I'll give you the other, but not the milk."

"You'll give me the milk, too," Lacy said. His voice and his face were ugly. "You'll do everything I say, if you want to keep the younker."

So Thad had to give him the milk, too.

* * *

Mr. Green, sitting that night at their table with his hat on, spread the home-churned butter carefully and thinly across the slice of home-baked bread.

"It's excellent, Mrs. Coniker," he said, chewing with pleasure. Then he said, turning to Thad, "Why don't you kill him?"

Annie looked at Thad in alarm, but her husband said:

"My boy's got enough trouble. When he's grown up a bit he can pass for older than he is and nobody need know he's illegal. It'll be bad enough having to lie to keep him alive. I don't want him to grow up with a father who's a murderer."

"It seems to me," Mr. Green said mildly, picking up a crumb from the tablecloth and popping it into his mouth, "it wouldn't be murder in Mr. Lacy's case. It'd be like killing some beast that came out of the woods to threaten your home."

"Killing an animal's just killing," Thad said. "But killing a man is murder."

"In my place," Mr. Green said, "we don't look at it that way. Would it help you out any if I killed Mr. Lacy?"

"No." said Thad before Annie could say anything, as she had seemed about to. "Lacy's my problem, not yours."

"But I said I'd help you, and that makes it my problem, too."

"That wouldn't be the way, Mr. Green, thanks all the same."

"Then I'll have to think of some other way to be useful," Mr. Green said. "I've given my word, you know."

"Have another piece of bread and butter, Mr. Green," Annie said, "since you won't eat anything else."

"No, thank you very much, Mrs. Coniker. I know how little you have, because of that miserable Mr. Lacy, and I won't deprive you further than politeness necessitates. I appreciate your kindness and unselfishness. In my place, we do the same and it makes me feel at home."

"You'll forgive me being personal, Mr. Green, but where is your place? You've never said, you know, and it sounds like it must be far off."

"No forgiveness needed, Mrs. Coniker. It is far off. Very far. On the other side of the moon, you might say."

"You mean in Europe," she said. "I've heard of Europe. It *is* very far."

"Farther even than Europe, I'm afraid. I would tell you exactly, but you would think I was making it up."

"Oh, no."

"Then I will tell you. And you must believe me if you possibly can." Mr. Green scratched next to his nose and looked out the window. "You can see part of the way from right here. That star. See it? My place is close to it. About as close to it as your place is to Sol—the Sun. Can you believe that?"

He looked from one to the other, and then to the crib next to the fireplace.

"It's hard to say," Annie said. "Awful hard."

"I don't know," said Thad. "I've heard stories."

"This is a true story," said Mr. Green, smiling. The smile was a sad one. He looked out at the star again. "I wish it weren't, in a way. It's pleasant here and maybe in other circumstances I'd like to stay. But if you've got a place of your own another place is never the same. You see, I'm homesick."

"Poor Mr. Green," Annie said. She felt like patting his arm. Instead she said: "Have another piece of bread and butter. Do."

Mr. Green looked at her very kindly.

"Thank you," he said. "I will."

When he had gone away they talked about it. Thad moved their bed so they could see the star from where they lay.

"I believe him now," Thad said.

"The way he is, so kind and gentle, you've just got to believe everything he says."

"Not many people would believe him, though."

"Maybe that's why he came to us. Poor man, so far away from his own kind."

"But why?" Thad asked, as if it had just occurred to him. "He never told us why."

"That's true. He never did."

"Maybe he's run away. Maybe he done something."

"And how? He never told us how he got here, either, from his place."

"No, he didn't."

"People don't fly."

"They fly in airplanes."

"There's no air up there, between us and his star. I know that much."

"He'll tell us if we ask him," she said. "I'm sure."

"If he comes again. He didn't say he would."

"Oh, he will. I know he will."

"I guess you're right. He's sort of adopted us," Thad said. "Or the other way round, depending on how you look at it."

She was quiet for a time. Then she raised herself up on an elbow to look over toward the cradle.

"The boy's all right, isn't he?"

"He's fine."

"He ought to have a name," she said. "We can't keep on calling him Boy."

"He wants a proper name, given to him in a christening. We'll see he gets it as soon as he can."

"I know. But I can't help thinking. I was wondering."

"What?"

"Would you mind very much if we made Green part of his name?"

"No. Not especially. Not at all. He is his godfather, sort of."

"Maybe we could call him—I'm just wondering about it—maybe Thaddeus Green Coniker."

Thad raised himself up, too, and looked across at the cradle. Then he looked out the window at the star.

"I wouldn't mind," he said.

* * *

Lacy looked nervous the next time he appeared to collect his blackmail ration. His eyes flickered to Thad's and away again as he stuffed his corn, turnips, tomatoes and the gallon jug of milk into his sack.

Thad said, "Conscience bothering you, Lacy?"

"Don't get smart with me, Thaddie, 'cause I can make trouble for you. Keep that in mind all the time."

"You got your things. Now get off my land."

"Not till I get what else I came for."

"Whatever it is, you ain't going to get it."

"I think I will. I want the cow."

Thad seemed unable to believe he'd heard right.

"The cow?"

"That's what I said. I know where I can get a good price for her."

"You're crazy. You're just about the craziest man in the world if you think we'll give up our cow. You're just crowding your luck too far, Lacy."

"Either I walk off this place with the cow, or I don't. If I don't, I walk straight to the district agent and tell him you got an illegal baby. And you know what'll happen then. Remember what the Blue Eagle law did to the little pigs. Slaughtered 'em, Thaddie. That's what they did."

"You better go, Lacy." Thad's voice was ominous. "Better go while you're still walking, or I don't know what'll happen to you."

Lacy backed away, slowly. "I'll go to the agent. I'll tell him. Don't think I won't. Remember the little pigs . . ."

Thad aimed a kick. His heavy shoe caught Lacy on the side of the hip, as he was turning. Lacy cried out in pain and started to run.

"You shouldn't o' done that, Thaddie!" Thad walked slowly after him. "That was your mistake. Now I will go to the agent. You'll see!"

Lacy ran, limping, shouting, his sack jouncing on his back, into the woods.

Thad stopped and watched the spot where Lacy had disappeared. He wondered why he hadn't killed him. He would have, if Lacy had made any direct threat to the baby. He'd have killed him in an instant, and with pleasure. But to kill an old man, on a warm sunny day, on his own land and in sight of the cabin, in cold blood because he *might* tell the district agent who *might* come out to get the baby, was not something he could have done. Time enough for killing when it was necessary, if it ever was.

Thad turned back toward the house. Mr. Green was coming across the clearing from the other direction. His dungarees looked just as new and his work shirt just as fresh as when Thad had first seen him, and his green hat as much out of keeping with the rest of his clothes.

Only one thing was different. Mr. Green wasn't wearing his nose.

Thad mentioned this to him, as politely as he could, when they met at the door. Mr. Green appeared to be a trifle embarrassed.

"I lost it," he said. "I can't imagine where. It's a false nose, of course, and I only wore it so I wouldn't look so—foreign." He had two tiny nostrils in the middle of his flat face.

Mr. Green explained again to Annie when they went inside. Annie said she didn't mind. It was how a person was inside that counted, she said.

"I'm different in other ways, too," Mr. Green said. "For instance, how old do you think I am?"

"Thirty-forty, around there," Thad said.

"Thirty hundred would be closer. We live a long time, in my place. Once we thought we'd live forever and when it seemed that way we stopped having children. We didn't want to stop—it just happened, and no one could figure it out except maybe that it was nature balancing things out."

"But now you're dying out," Annie said intuitively, "and you're looking for children to carry on your line."

Thad looked at her in surprise, then at Mr. Green.

"That's exactly right, Mrs. Coniker," he said. "We've gone out all over the universe, each on his own personal mission. A child I found, if he wanted to go back with me, would be my own child, brought up in my own family. There's a Mrs. Green, too, you know. She's back home, waiting for me."

"Remember us to her," said Annie, "when you see her."

"I surely will."

"Do you mean you've been coming around here to see if our boy was the one you wanted?" Thad said. "That you were thinking you'd take him away from us?"

"Only if you wanted me to," Mr. Green said. "Only if you were going to lose him another way and I couldn't help you keep him. Only then, Mr. Coniker."

"I believe you," Thad said. "I'm not angry. I just like to know the facts."

"Naturally."

"How would you take him back with you—if we wanted you to?" asked Annie. To Thad she said: "I saw you and Lacy having that row; heard some of it, too."

"In my ship," Mr. Green said. "It's back in the mountains. I've kept it out of sight so as not to alarm anyone."

"Would he have a good life?"

"The best we could give him, in our noseless way," Mr. Green said. "He'd also have friends his own age, among children adopted by neighbors of ours. It's a good world, Mrs. Coniker."

"Better than this one, at the moment, sounds like," she said.

There was a hollering in the clearing and all of them looked out the window. The baby began to cry in his cradle.

Lacy and two other men were coming. The two men had rifles in their hands.

Thad pulled open the door.

"Get off my land!" he shouted. "Get off or I'll throw you off!"

"You ain't throwin' nobody anyplace," Lacy shouted back. "These here is federal officers and they're here to see I get my bounty."

The three men crowded into the cabin.

"There he is!" Lacy said. "Annie's trying to hide him in the cupboard."

Lacy rushed at her as the other men held their rifles ready to fire. Lacy grabbed the child and, cackling crazily, ran out of the door. It happened so fast that Thad tripped as he tried to stop Lacy and fell sprawling across the doorstep.

He was scrambling to his feet to chase Lacy when Mr. Green restrained him with an iron grip on his shoulder.

"Wait," Mr. Green said.

Thad tried to break free, but could not. By now the two men with the rifles had got back the bearings they'd lost when they came into the dimness of the cabin from the bright sunshine. They had their rifles raised and were covering Thad.

"Let go of me, damn it!" Thad shouted at Mr. Green. "What are you helping *them* for?"

Lacy had stopped some distance away from the house, short of the woods, and was holding the baby by an arm and a leg, as if it were the body of a heavy animal he'd taken from a trap. The baby's blanket had fallen to the ground and it was crying. Lacy seemed undecided what to do next.

He called to the men with the rifles, "You comin'?"

"I'll kill him," said Thad, ignoring the rifles pointed at him and struggling to break out of Mr. Green's hold. "Please let me go kill him."

"Hold on, mister," one of the officers said. "We don't want to have to hurt you or your missus. It's just the baby we want. Now don't make trouble and you'll get none from us."

He and his companion started to edge away toward Lacy, still keeping Thad covered.

With a final desperate effort, Thad broke loose. He sprawled headlong on the ground, then pulled his feet under him and sprinted for Lacy.

One of the federal men swung his rifle around. He got Thad's back squarely in the sights. He fired.

Mr. Green whipped off his hat and made a gesture.

Annie's voice was cut off in mid-scream. At once, everything was silent and motionless.

Annie was standing there, her mouth open, her hands half-raised as if to pull Thad back. Thad was frozen like a stop-action photograph of an athlete streaking for the tape in the hundred-yard dash. Beyond him, Lacy was clutching the baby to him against Thad's attempt to take it from him. One officer was posed like a statue in a wax museum, leaning into his rifle. The other man was stopped in the action of bringing his rifle to his shoulder.

In the center of the macabre tableau Annie thought she could see the sun glinting off a rifle bullet hanging in the air, but destined to bury itself in Thad's back.

The breeze had stopped, the birds were silent, the trees were picture-still. Only Mr. Green was moving.

He walked over to Thad and gently nudged him so he fell over on his face. Then Mr. Green went leisurely to Lacy and took the baby from him. He strolled back toward Annie. The top of his head, no longer covered by his green hat, was glowing strangely. The baby's arms and legs were stiff as a doll's and it wore on its frozen features an expression of terror.

Mr. Green cradled the baby in one arm, close to Annie's half-raised hands. Then he looked around, as if to satisfy himself that everything was in order, and put his hat back on.

Instantly everything came alive. There seemed to be a roar of sound, rushing into the vacuum of silence, which gradually restored itself to its separate parts—the crack of the rifle, the song of the birds, the whisper of the winds and the rustling of the leaves.

Annie's arms took the terrified child. Mr. Green pushed her into the cabin ahead of him.

Thad clawed at the ground, his arms and legs flailing.

Lacy screamed as the rifle bullet tore into his chest.

The investigators didn't know what to make of it.

Lacy, who had brought the complaint originally, was dead, killed accidentally by an officer's wild shot. The infant, if there had ever been one, was nowhere. The alleged parents, Mr. and Mrs. Coniker, maintained that there

never had been a child—only an old doll the woman had kept from her childhood and which she pretended was a baby. The officers *thought* they had seen a live baby, but Lacy had run off so fast with it they couldn't be sure.

The man without a nose? He was a funny one. They'd seen him, too, or thought they had, but he'd also disappeared.

They held an inquest and absolved the officer who'd shot Lacy. They buried the old trapper. They apologized to the Conikers. And they went away.

* * *

Thad finished trimming the wick and lit the kerosene lamp. He hung it on its hook in the low ceiling and sat down at the table. Annie was looking at the empty crib.

"He didn't say he'd be back?" Thad asked.

"No. He said it was time to go and I gave him some extra diapers and a bottle of oil. There wasn't much time. All those crazy things were happening outside."

"And then what did he do?"

"He sat down with the boy in his lap and clucked at him—and the boy laughed, the way he does—and then they both faded away."

"Just faded away?"

"Fainter and fainter," Annie said. "After a while I could see through them. Both of them smiling and looking pleased with everything. And then they weren't there any more."

"And you think it's all right?"

"I'm sure it is," she said.

"I wish *I* was sure."

There was a whooshing sort of sigh from outside. Thad and Annie looked out the window but it was too dark to see anything. Then there was a knock at the door.

Mr. Green stood there. He wasn't wearing his dungarees or his work shirt or his high shoes any more. Or his nose. He had on a shimmering green cloak that reached from his shoulders to his feet. And the green hat, glowing a bit in the semidarkness, went with it perfectly.

"I had to leave in rather a hurry," Mr. Green said.

"Where's the baby?" asked Annie.

"Out in the ship. He's fine. We're ready to go now."

"The ship," Thad said.

"Yes. I'm afraid it made a mess of your cornfield when I set it down. Careless of me."

"Can we see the baby before you go?" Annie asked.

"Of course," Mr. Green said. "He's asleep, though."

"Oh."

Annie looked down at the floor and Mr. Green was silent for a moment.

"You know, I've been thinking," he said then. "There's no reason why you can't all come along, if you want to."

"Come along?" Thad said.

"With the boy and me. There's plenty of room, both in the ship and at home. I know Mrs. Green would love to have you."

"What would we do there?"

"Be parents to your child—and any other children you might like to have. Mrs. Green and I don't necessarily have to adopt the boy. We'd be just as pleased to be his grandparents. We could adopt you two instead."

Thad looked at his wife.

"What do you think, Annie?"

"What about the cow?" she asked. "We couldn't leave her."

"That's right," said Thad. "I almost forgot."

"Bring her, too," Mr. Green said. "Of course."

"All right," said Thad, as if that decided everything.

"I'll have to pack," said Annie.

Their friend beamed. "Everything you'll need is in the ship. Except—you might bring some of your home-baked bread. And I know Mrs. Green would be pleased if you could give her the recipe."

Annie put the last two loaves in an old flour sack. Tomorrow would have been baking day. Thad turned down the wick of the kerosene lamp and blew out the flame.

They went out to the ship.

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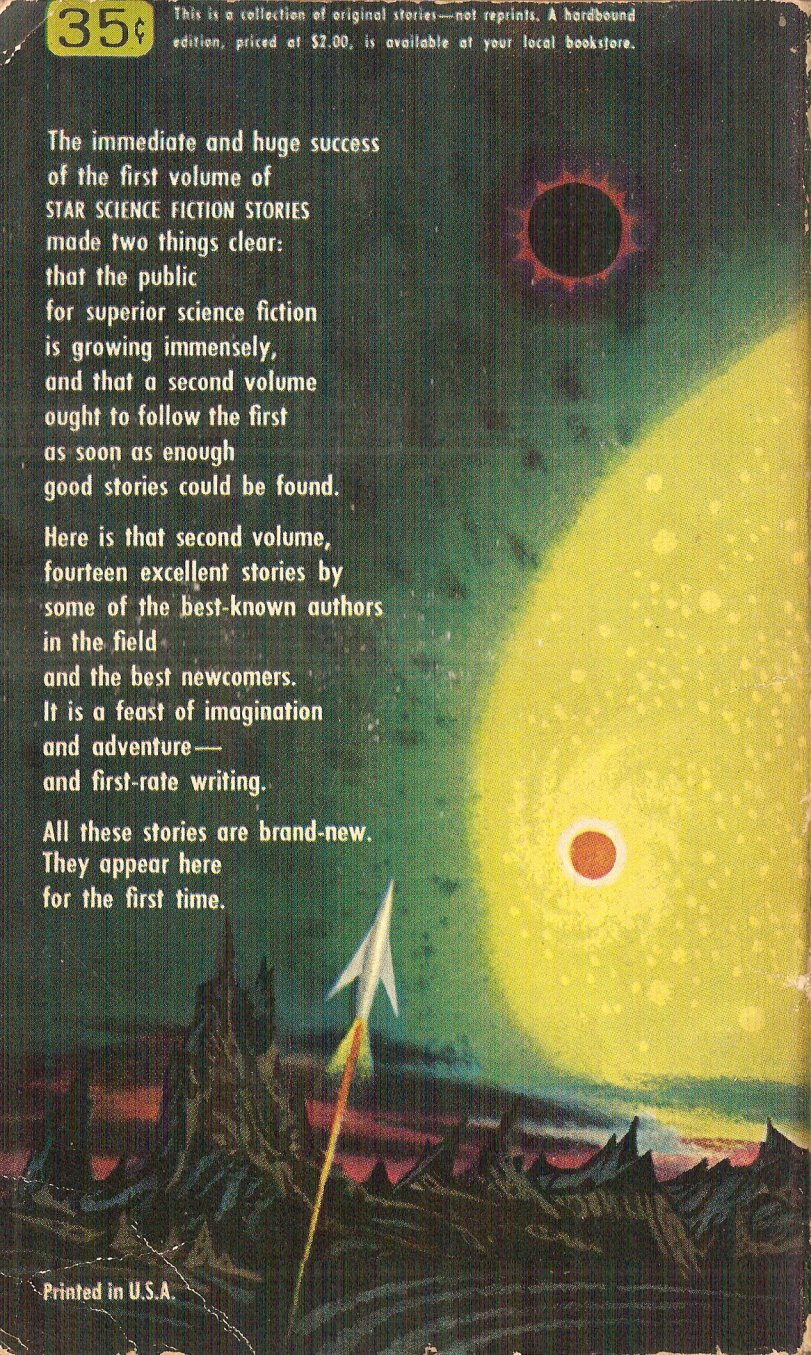

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