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EDITOR'S NOTE

The pleasures of an anthologist are many and mostly immoral. It is, for instance, his undeserved privilege to receive the compliments that, in a well-ordered world, would go to the writers of the stories he prints. They, not he, cudgel their brains and pound their typewriters; they, not he, create wonderful things to say and contrive pleasurable ways of saying them. They make the book that bears his name out of blank white paper and talent; he is merely a screen, a sort of literary soot extractor, whose sole function is to keep out of print the stories which do not measure up to the mark, and transmit to the reader the stories which do.

The ten writers in this book need very little screening. Some are relatively new—Philip Dick and Richard Matheson and Jack Vance—and some, like Asimov and Williamson, have been with us for a long time. Some of them own reputations that rest on a broader base than any "category" of fiction: You need not be a science-fiction fan to recognize the name of Lester del Rey for his award-winning juveniles, or Arthur C. Clarke for his book-club nonfiction, or Ray Bradbury for the stories that have appeared in every one of the major "slicks," or Gerald Kersh for best-selling novels like NIGHT AND THE CITY. But even the newest is a star in his own right; and the stories they give us now rank with the best they have done.

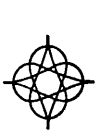
All of these ten stories are science fiction. Perhaps you are an avid subscriber to *Galaxy* or *Astounding;* perhaps you have never before heard the term "science fiction" used. Either way, this selection is tailored for you. If you're an ardent fan, here are ten new stories by your favorite writers, not one of which has ever appeared in print in America before. If this is your first venture, here are ten stories selected from the very top of what is, in your editor's firm belief, the freshest and most hopeful area of writing in the world today.

—Frederik Pohl

ISAAC ASIMOV

In the alphabet of science fiction, "A" is for Asimov by virtue of an order of precedence older than the Greeks. But the man who wrote Pebble in the Sky *needs no accident of orthography to put him at the head of any list; the man who wrote* I, Robot *and the* Foundation *novels and* The Caves of Steel *makes his own way in any company. If you haven't read any of these books, you've missed some of the best science fiction in print; but it isn't too late to repair the damage. In fact, you can start acquainting yourself with Asimov right now, with his newest story and one of his best, entitled——*

It's Such a Beautiful Day



On April 12, 2117, the field-modulator brake-valve in the Door belonging to Mrs. Richard Hanshaw depolarized for reasons unknown. As a result, Mrs. Hanshaw's day was completely upset and her son, Richard, Jr., first developed his strange neurosis.

It was not the type of thing you would find listed as a neurosis in the usual textbooks and certainly young Richard behaved, in most respects, just as a well-brought-up twelve-year-old in prosperous circumstances ought to behave.

And yet from April 12 on, Richard Hanshaw, Jr., could only with regret ever persuade himself to go through a Door.

Of all this, on April 12, Mrs. Hanshaw had no premonition. She woke in the morning (an ordinary morning) as her mekkano slithered gently into her room, with a cup of coffee on a small tray. Mrs. Hanshaw was planning a visit to New York in the afternoon and she had several things to do first that could not quite be trusted to a mekkano, so after one or two sips, she stepped out of bed.

The mekkano backed away, moving silently along the diamagnetic field that kept its oblong body half an inch above the floor, and moved back to the kitchen, where its simple computer was quite adequate to set the proper controls on the various kitchen appliances in order that an appropriate breakfast might be prepared.

Mrs. Hanshaw, having bestowed the usual sentimental glance upon the cubograph of her dead husband, passed through the stages of her morning ritual with a certain contentment. She could hear her son across the hall clattering through his, but she knew she need not interfere with him. The mekkano was well adjusted to see to it, as a matter of course, that he was showered, that he had on a change of clothing, and that he would eat a nourishing breakfast. The tergo-shower she had had installed the year before made the morning wash and dry so quick and pleasant that, really, she felt certain Dickie would wash even without supervision.

On a morning like this, when she was busy, it would certainly not be necessary for her to do more than deposit a casual peck on the boy's cheek before he left. She heard the soft chime the mekkano sounded to indicate approaching school time and she floated down the force-lift to the lower floor (her hair-style for the day only sketchily designed, as yet) in order to perform that motherly duty.

She found Richard standing at the door, with his textreels and pocket projecter dangling by their strap and a frown on his face.

"Say, Mom," he said, looking up, "I dialed the school's co-ords but nothing happens."

She said, almost automatically, "Nonsense, Dickie. I never heard of such a thing."

"Well, you try."

Mrs. Hanshaw tried a number of times. Strange, the school door was always set for general reception. She tried other co-ordinates. Her friends' Doors might not be set for reception, but there would be a signal at least, and then she could explain.

But nothing happened at all. The Door remained an inactive gray barrier despite all her manipulations. It was

obvious that the Door was out of order—and only five months after its annual fall inspection by the company.

She was quite angry about it.

It *would* happen on a day when she had much planned. She thought petulantly of the fact that a month earlier she had decided against installing a subsidiary Door on the ground that it was an unnecessary expense. How was she to know that Doors were getting to be so *shoddy?*

She stepped to the visiphone while the anger still burned in her and said to Richard, "You just go down the road, Dickie, and use the Williamsons' Door."

Ironically, in view of later developments, Richard balked. "Aw, gee, Mom, I'll get dirty. Can't I stay home till the Door is fixed?"

And, as ironically, Mrs. Hanshaw insisted. With her finger on the combination board of the phone, she said, "You won't get dirty if you put flexies on your shoes, and don't forget to brush yourself well before you go into their house."

"But, golly——"

"No back-talk, Dickie. You've got to be in school. Just let me see you walk out of here. And quickly, or you'll be late."

The mekkano, an advanced model and very responsive, was already standing before Richard with flexies in one appendage.

Richard pulled the transparent plastic shields over his shoes and moved down the hall with visible reluctance. "I don't even know how to work this thing, Mom."

"You just push that button," Mrs. Hanshaw called. "The red button. Where it says 'For Emergency Use.' And don't dawdle. Do you want the mekkano to go along with you?"

"Gosh, no," he called back, morosely, "what do you think I am? A baby? Gosh!" His muttering was cut off by a slam.

With flying fingers, Mrs. Hanshaw punched the appropriate combination on the phone board and thought of the things she intended saying to the company about this.

Joe Bloom, a reasonably young man, who had gone

through technology school with added training in force-field mechanics, was at the Hanshaw residence in less than half an hour. He was really quite competent, though Mrs. Hanshaw regarded his youth with deep suspicion.

She opened the movable house-panel when he first signaled and her sight of him was as he stood there, brushing at himself vigorously to remove the dust of the open air. He took off his flexies and dropped them where he stood. Mrs. Hanshaw closed the house-panel against the flash of raw sunlight that had entered. She found herself irrationally hoping that the step-by-step trip from the public Door had been an unpleasant one. Or perhaps that the public Door itself had been out of order and the youth had had to lug his tools even farther than the necessary two hundred yards. She wanted the Company, or its representative at least, to suffer a bit. It would teach them what broken Doors meant.

But he seemed cheerful and unperturbed as he said, "Good morning, ma'am. I came to see about your Door."

"I'm glad someone did," said Mrs. Hanshaw, ungraciously. "My day is quite ruined."

"Sorry, ma'am. What seems to be the trouble?"

"It just won't work. Nothing at all happens when you adjust co-ords," said Mrs. Hanshaw. "There was no warning at all. I had to send my son out to the neighbors through that—that thing."

She pointed to the entrance through which the repair man had come.

He smiled and spoke out of the conscious wisdom of his own specialized training in Doors. "That's a door, too, ma'am. You don't give that kind a capital letter when you write it. It's a hand-door, sort of. It used to be the only kind once."

"Well, at least it works. My boy's had to go out in the dirt and germs."

"It's not bad outside today, ma'am," he said, with the connoisseur-like air of one whose profession forced him into the open nearly every day. "Sometimes it *is* real unpleasant. But I guess you want I should fix this here Door, ma'am, so I'll get on with it."

He sat down on the floor, opened the large tool case he had brought in with him and in half a minute, by use of a point-demagnetizer, he had the control panel removed and a set of intricate vitals exposed.

He whistled to himself as he placed the fine electrodes of the field-analyzer on numerous points, studying the shifting needles on the dials. Mrs. Hanshaw watched him, arms folded.

Finally, he said, "Well, here's something," and with a deft twist, he disengaged the brake-valve.

He tapped it with a fingernail and said, "This here brake-valve is depolarized, ma'am. There's your whole trouble." He ran his finger along the little pigeonholes in his tool case and lifted out a duplicate of the object he had taken from the door mechanism. "These things just go all of a sudden. Can't predict it."

He put the control panel back and stood up. "It'll work now, ma'am."

He punched a reference combination, blanked it, then punched another. Each time, the dull gray of the Door gave way to a deep, velvety blackness. He said, "Will you sign here, ma'am? and put down your charge number, too, please? Thank you, ma'am."

He punched a new combination, that of his home factory, and with a polite touch of finger to forehead, he stepped through the Door. As his body entered the blackness, it cut off sharply. Less and less of him was visible and the tip of his tool case was the last thing that showed. A second after he had passed through completely, the Door turned back to dull gray.

Half an hour later, when Mrs. Hanshaw had finally completed her interrupted preparations and was fuming over the misfortune of the morning, the phone buzzed annoyingly and her real troubles began.

Miss Elizabeth Robbins was distressed. Little Dick Hanshaw had always been a good pupil. She hated to report him like this. And yet, she told herself, his actions were certainly queer. And she would talk to his mother, not to the principal.

She slipped out to the phone during the morning study period, leaving a student in charge. She made her connection and found herself staring at Mrs. Hanshaw's handsome and somewhat formidable head.

Miss Robbins quailed, but it was too late to turn back. She said, diffidently, "Mrs. Hanshaw, I'm Miss Robbins." She ended on a rising note.

Mrs. Hanshaw looked blank, then said, "Richard's teacher?" That, too, ended on a rising note.

"That's right. I called you, Mrs. Hanshaw," Miss Robbins plunged right into it, "to tell you that Dick was quite late to school this morning."

"He *was?* But that couldn't be. I saw him leave."

Miss Robbins looked astonished. She said, "You mean you saw him use the Door?"

Mrs. Hanshaw said quickly, "Well, no. Our Door was temporarily out of order. I sent him to a neighbor and he used that Door."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I wouldn't lie to you."

"No, no, Mrs. Hanshaw. I wasn't implying that at all. I meant are you sure he found the way to the neighbor? He might have got lost."

"Ridiculous. We have the proper maps, and I'm sure Richard knows the location of every house in District A-3." Then, with the quiet pride of one who knows what is her due, she added, "Not that he ever needs to know, of course. The co-ords are all that are necessary at any time."

Miss Robbins, who came from a family that had always had to economize rigidly on the use of its Doors (the price of power being what it was) and who had therefore run errands on foot until quite an advanced age, resented the pride. She said, quite clearly, "Well, I'm afraid, Mrs. Hanshaw, that Dick did not use the neighbor's Door. He was over an hour late to school and the condition of his flexies made it quite obvious that he tramped cross-country. They were *muddy.*"

"Muddy?" Mrs. Hanshaw repeated the emphasis on the word. "What did he say? What was his excuse?"

Miss Robbins couldn't help but feel a little glad at the

discomfiture of the other woman. She said, "He wouldn't talk about it. Frankly, Mrs. Hanshaw, he seems ill. That's why I called you. Perhaps you might want to have a doctor look at him."

"Is he running a temperature?" The mother's voice went shrill.

"Oh, no. I don't mean physically ill. It's just his attitude and the look in his eyes." She hesitated, then said with every attempt at delicacy, "I thought perhaps a routine checkup with a psychic probe——"

She didn't finish. Mrs. Hanshaw, in a chilled voice and with what was as close to a snort as her breeding would permit, said, "Are you implying that Richard is *neurotic?*"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Hanshaw, but——"

"It certainly sounded so. The idea! He has always been perfectly healthy. I'll take this up with him when he gets home. I'm sure there's a perfectly normal explanation which he'll give to *me.*"

The connection broke abruptly, and Miss Robbins felt hurt and uncommonly foolish. After all she had only tried to help, to fulfill what she considered an obligation to her students.

She hurried back to the classroom with a glance at the metal face of the wall clock. The study period was drawing to an end. English Composition next.

But her mind wasn't completely on English Composition. Automatically, she called the students to have them read selections from their literary creations. And occasionally she punched one of those selections on tape and ran it through the small vocalizer to show the students how English *should* be read.

The vocalizer's mechanical voice, as always, dripped perfection, but, again as always, lacked character. Sometimes, she wondered if it was wise to try to train the students into a speech that was divorced from individuality and geared only to a mass-average accent and intonation.

Today, however, she had no thought for that. It was Richard Hanshaw she watched. He sat quietly in his seat, quite obviously indifferent to his surroundings. He was lost deep in himself and just not the same boy he had

been. It was obvious to her that he had had some unusual experience that morning and, really, she was right to call his mother, although perhaps she ought not to have made the remark about the probe. Still it was quite the thing these days. All sorts of people got probed. There wasn't any disgrace attached to it. Or there shouldn't be, anyway.

She called on Richard, finally. She had to call twice, before he responded and rose to his feet.

The general subject assigned had been: "If you had your choice of traveling on some ancient vehicle, which would you choose, and why?" Miss Robbins tried to use the topic every semester. It was a good one because it carried a sense of history with it. It forced the youngster to think about the manner of living of people in past ages.

She listened while Richard Hanshaw read in a low voice.

"If I had my choice of ancient vehicles," he said, pronouncing the "h" in vehicles, "I would choose the stratoliner. It travels slow like all vehicles but it is clean. Because it travels in the stratosphere, it must be all enclosed so that you are not likely to catch disease. You can see the stars if it is night time almost as good as in a planetarium. If you look down you can see the Earth like a map or maybe see clouds——" He went on for several hundred more words.

She said brightly when he had finished reading, "It's pronounced vee-ick-ulls, Richard. No 'h.' Accent on the first syllable. And you don't say 'travels slow' or 'see good.' What do you say, class?"

There was a small chorus of responses and she went on, "That's right. Now what is the difference between an adjective and an adverb? Who can tell me?"

And so it went. Lunch passed. Some pupils stayed to eat; some went home. Richard stayed. Miss Robbins noted that, as usually he didn't.

The afternoon passed, too, and then there was the final bell and the usual upsurging hum as twenty-five boys and girls rattled their belongings together and took their leisurely place in line.

Miss Robbins clapped her hands together. "Quickly, children. Come, Zelda, take your place."

"I dropped my tape-punch, Miss Robbins," shrilled the girl, defensively.

"Well, pick it up, pick it up. Now children, be brisk, be brisk."

She pushed the button that slid a section of the wall into a recess and revealed the gray blankness of a large Door. It was not the usual Door that the occasional student used in going home for lunch, but an advanced model that was one of the prides of this well-to-do private school.

In addition to its double width, it possessed a large and impressively gear-filled "automatic serial finder" which was capable of adjusting the door for a number of different co-ordinates at automatic intervals.

At the beginning of the semester, Miss Robbins always had to spend an afternoon with the mechanic, adjusting the device for the co-ordinates of the homes of the new class. But then, thank goodness, it rarely needed attention for the remainder of the term.

The class lined up alphabetically, first girls, then boys. The door went velvety black and Hester Adams waved her hand and stepped through. "By-y-y——"

The 'bye' was cut off in the middle, as it almost always was.

The door went gray, then black again, and Theresa Cantrocchi went through. Gray, black, Zelda Charlowicz. Gray, black, Patricia Coombs. Gray, black, Sara May Evans.

The line grew smaller as the Door swallowed them one by one, depositing each in her home. Of course, an occasional mother forgot to leave the house Door on special reception at the appropriate time and then the school Door remained gray. Automatically, after a minute-long wait, the Door went on to the next combination in line and the pupil in question had to wait till it was all over, after which a phone call to the forgetful parent would set things right. This was always bad for the pupils involved, especially the sensitive ones who took seriously the implication that they

were little thought of at home. Miss Robbins always tried to impress this on visiting parents, but it happened at least once every semester just the same.

The girls were all through now. John Abramowitz stepped through and then Edwin Byrne——

Of course, another trouble, and a more frequent one was the boy or girl who got into line out of place. They *would* do it despite the teacher's sharpest watch, particularly at the beginning of the term when the proper order was less familiar to them.

When that happened, children would be popping into the wrong houses by the half-dozen and would have to be sent back. It always meant a mixup that took minutes to straighten out and parents were invariably irate.

Miss Robbins was suddenly aware that the line had stopped. She spoke sharply to the boy at the head of the line.

"Step through, Samuel. What are you waiting for?"

Samuel Jones raised a complacent countenance and said, "It's not my combination, Miss Robbins."

"Well, whose is it?" She looked impatiently down the line of five remaining boys. Who was out of place?"

"It's Dick Hanshaw's, Miss Robbins."

"Where is he?"

Another boy answered, with the rather repulsive tone of self-righteousness all children automatically assume in reporting the deviations of their friends to elders in authority, "He went through the fire door, Miss Robbins."

"What?"

The schoolroom Door had passed on to another combination and Samuel Jones passed through. One by one, the rest followed.

Miss Robbins was alone in the classroom. She stepped to the fire door. It was a small affair, manually operated, and hidden behind a bend in the wall so that it would not break up the uniform structure of the room.

She opened it a crack. It was there as a means of escape from the building in case of fire, a device which was enforced by an anachronistic law that did not take into account the modern methods of automatic fire-fighting

that all public buildings used. There was nothing outside, but the—outside. The sunlight was harsh and a dusty wind was blowing.

Miss Robbins closed the door. She was glad she had called Mrs. Hanshaw. She had done her duty. More than ever, it was obvious that something was wrong with Richard. She suppressed the impulse to phone again.

Mrs. Hanshaw did not go to New York that day. She remained home in a mixture of anxiety and an irrational anger, the latter directed against the impudent Miss Robbins.

Some fifteen minutes before school's end, her anxiety drove her to the Door. Last year she had had it equipped with an automatic device which activated it to the school's co-ordinates at five of three and kept it so, barring manual adjustment, until Richard arrived.

Her eyes were fixed on the Door's dismal gray (why couldn't an inactive force-field be any other color, something more lively and cheerful?) and waited. Her hands felt cold as she squeezed them together.

The Door turned black at the precise second but nothing happened. The minutes passed and Richard was late. Then quite late. Then very late.

It was a quarter of four and she was distracted. Normally, she would have phoned the school, but she couldn't, she couldn't. Not after that teacher had deliberately cast doubts on Richard's mental well-being. How could she?

Mrs. Hanshaw moved about restlessly, lighting a cigarette with fumbling fingers, then smudging it out. Could it be something quite normal? Could Richard be staying after school for some reason? Surely he would have told her in advance. A gleam of light struck her; he knew she was planning to go to New York and might not be back till late in the evening——

No, he would surely have told her. Why fool herself?

Her pride was breaking. She would have to call the school, or even (she closed her eyes and teardrops squeezed through between the lashes) the police.

And when she opened her eyes, Richard stood before

her, eyes on the ground and his whole bearing that of someone waiting for a blow to fall.

"Hello, Mom."

Mrs. Hanshaw's anxiety transmuted itself instantly (in a manner known only to mothers) into anger. "Where have you been, Richard?"

And then, before she could go further into the refrain concerning careless, unthinking sons and broken-hearted mothers, she took note of his appearance in greater detail, and gasped in utter horror.

She said, "You've been in the open."

Her son looked down at his dusty shoes (minus flexies), at the dirt marks that streaked his lower arms and at the small, but definite tear in his shirt. He said, "Gosh, Mom, I just thought I'd——" and he faded out.

She said, "Was there anything wrong with the school Door?"

"No, Mom."

"Do you realize I've been worried sick about you?" She waited vainly for an answer. "Well, I'll talk to you afterward, young man. First, you're taking a bath, and every stitch of your clothing is being thrown out. Mekkano!"

But the mekkano had already reacted properly to the phrase "taking a bath" and was off to the bathroom in its silent glide.

"You take your shoes off right here," said Mrs. Hanshaw, "then march after mekkano."

Richard did as he was told with a resignation that placed him beyond futile protest.

Mrs. Hanshaw picked up the soiled shoes between thumb and forefinger and dropped them down the disposal chute which hummed in faint dismay at the unexpected load. She dusted her hands carefully on a tissue which she allowed to float down the chute after the shoes.

She did not join Richard at dinner but let him eat in the worse-than-lack-of-company of the mekkano. This, she thought, would be an active sign of her displeasure and would do more than any amount of scolding or punishment to make him realize that he had done wrong. Richard, she frequently told herself, was a sensitive boy.

But she went up to see him at bedtime.

She smiled at him and spoke softly. She thought that would be the best way. After all, he had been punished already.

She said, "What happened today, Dickie-boy?" She had called him that when he was a baby and just the sound of the name softened her nearly to tears.

But he only looked away and his voice was stubborn and cold. "I just don't like to go through those darn Doors, Mom."

"But why ever not?"

He shuffled his hands over the filmy sheet (fresh, clean, antiseptic and, of course, disposable after each use) and said, "I just don't like them."

"But then how do you expect to go to school, Dickie?"

"I'll get up early," he mumbled.

"But there's nothing wrong with Doors."

"Don't like 'em." He never once looked up at her.

She said, despairingly. "Oh, well, you have a good sleep and tomorrow morning, you'll feel much better."

She kissed him and left the room, automatically passing her hand through the photo-cell beam and in that manner dimming the room-lights.

But she had trouble sleeping herself that night. Why should Dickie dislike Doors so suddenly? They had never bothered him before. To be sure, the Door had broken down in the morning but that should make him appreciate them all the more.

Dickie was behaving so unreasonably.

Unreasonably? That reminded her of Miss Robbins and her diagnosis and Mrs. Hanshaw's soft jaw set in the darkness and privacy of her bedroom. Nonsense! The boy was upset and a night's sleep was all the therapy he needed.

But the next morning when she arose, her son was not in the house. The mekkano could not speak but it could answer questions with gestures of its appendages equivalent to a yes or no, and it did not take Mrs. Hanshaw more than half a minute to ascertain that the boy had arisen thirty minutes earlier than usual, skimped his shower, and darted out of the house.

But not by way of the Door.

Out the other way—through the door. Small "d."

Mrs. Hanshaw's visiphone signaled genteelly at 3:10 P.M. that day. Mrs. Hanshaw guessed the caller and having activated the receiver, saw that she had guessed correctly. A quick glance in the mirror to see that she was properly calm after a day of abstracted concern and worry and then she keyed in her own transmission.

"Yes, Miss Robbins," she said coldly.

Richard's teacher was a bit breathless. She said, "Mrs. Hanshaw, Richard has deliberately left through the fire door although I told him to use the regular Door. I do not know where he went."

Mrs. Hanshaw said, carefully, "He left to come home."

Miss Robbins looked dismayed, "Do you approve of this?"

Pale-faced, Mrs. Hanshaw set about putting the teacher in her place. "I don't think it is up to you to criticize. If my son does not choose to use the Door, it is his affair and mine. I don't think there is any school ruling that would force him to use the Door, is there?" Her bearing quite plainly intimated that if there were she would see to it that it was changed.

Miss Robbins flushed and had time for one quick remark before contact was broken. She said, "I'd have him probed. I really would."

Mrs. Hanshaw remained standing before the quartzinium plate, staring blindly at its blank face. Her sense of family placed her for a few moments quite firmly on Richard's side. Why *did* he have to use the Door if he chose not to? And then she settled down to wait and pride battled the gnawing anxiety that something after all was wrong with Richard.

He came home with a look of defiance on his face, but his mother, with a strenuous effort at self-control, met him as though nothing were out of the ordinary.

For weeks, she followed that policy. It's nothing, she told herself. It's a vagary. He'll grow out of it.

It grew into an almost normal state of affairs. Then, too, every once in a while, perhaps three days in a row, she would come down to breakfast to find Richard waiting sullenly at the Door, then using it when school time came. She always refrained from commenting on the matter.

Always, when he did that, and especially when he followed it up by arriving home via the Door, her heart grew warm and she thought, "Well, it's over." But always with the passing of one day, two or three, he would return like an addict to his drug and drift silently out by the door—small "d"—before she woke.

And each time she thought despairingly of psychiatrists and probes, and each time the vision of Miss Robbins' low-bred satisfaction at (possibly) learning of it, stopped her, although she was scarcely aware that that was the true motive.

Meanwhile, she lived with it and made the best of it. The mekkano was instructed to wait at the door—small "d"—with a Tergo kit and a change of clothing. Richard washed and changed without resistance. His underthings, socks and flexies were disposable in any case, and Mrs. Hanshaw bore uncomplainingly the expense of daily disposal of shirts. Trousers she finally allowed to go a week before disposal on condition of rigorous nightly cleansing.

One day she suggested that Richard accompany her on a trip to New York. It was more a vague desire to keep him in sight than part of any purposeful plan. He did not object. He was even happy. He stepped right through the Door, unconcerned. He didn't hesitate. He even lacked the look of resentment he wore on those mornings he used the Door to go to school.

Mrs. Hanshaw rejoiced. This could be a way of weaning him back into Door usage, and she racked her ingenuity for excuses to make trips with Richard. She even raised her power bill to quite unheard-of heights by suggesting, and going through with, a trip to Canton for the day in order to witness a Chinese festival.

That was on a Sunday, and the next morning Richard marched directly to the hole in the wall he always used. Mrs. Hanshaw, having wakened particularly early, wit-

nessed that. For once, badgered past endurance, she called after him plaintively, "Why not the Door, Dickie?"

He said, briefly, "It's all right for Canton," and stepped out of the house.

So that plan ended in failure. And then, one day, Richard came home soaking wet. The mekkano hovered about him uncertainly and Mrs. Hanshaw, just returned from a four-hour visit with her sister in Iowa, cried, "Richard Hanshaw!"

He said, hang-dog fashion, "It started raining. All of a sudden, it started raining."

For a moment, the word didn't register with her. Her own school days and her studies of geography were twenty years in the past. And then she remembered and caught the vision of water pouring recklessly and endlessly down from the sky—a mad cascade of water with no tap to turn off, no button to push, no contact to break.

She said, "And you stayed out in it?"

He said, "Well, gee, Mom, I came home fast as I could. I didn't know it was going to rain."

Mrs. Hanshaw had nothing to say. She was appalled and the sensation filled her too full for words to find a place.

Two days later, Richard found himself with a running nose, and a dry, scratchy throat. Mrs. Hanshaw had to admit that the virus of disease had found a lodging in her house, as though it were a miserable hovel of the Iron Age.

It was over that that her stubbornness and pride broke and she admitted to herself that, after all, Richard had to have psychiatric help.

Mrs. Hanshaw chose a psychiatrist with care. Her first impulse was to find one at a distance. For a while, she considered stepping directly into the San Francisco Medical Center and choosing one at random.

And then it occurred to her that by doing that she would become merely an anonymous consultant. She would have no way of obtaining any greater consideration for herself than would be forthcoming to any public-Door user of the

city slums. Now if she remained in her own community, her word would carry weight——

She consulted the district map. It was one of that excellent series prepared by Doors, Inc., and distributed free of charge to their clients. Mrs. Hanshaw couldn't quite suppress that little thrill of civic pride as she unfolded the map. It wasn't a fine-print directory of Door co-ordinates only. It was an actual map, with each house carefully located.

And why not? District A-3 was a name of moment in the world, a badge of aristocracy. It was the first community on the planet to have been established on a completely Doored basis. The first, the largest, the wealthiest, the best-known. It needed no factories, no stores. It didn't even need roads. Each house was a little secluded castle, the Door of which had entry anywhere the world over where other Doors existed.

Carefully, she followed down the keyed listing of the five thousand families of District A-3. She knew it included several psychiatrists. The learned professions were well represented in A-3.

Doctor Hamilton Sloane was the second name she arrived at and her finger lingered upon the map. His office was scarcely two miles from the Hanshaw residence. She liked his name. The fact that he lived in A-3 was evidence of worth. And he was a neighbor, practically a neighbor. He would understand that it was a matter of urgency—and confidential.

Firmly, she put in a call to his office to make an appointment.

Doctor Hamilton Sloane was a comparatively young man, not quite forty. He was of good family and he had indeed heard of Mrs. Hanshaw.

He listened to her quietly and then said, "And this all began with the Door breakdown."

"That's right, doctor."

"Does he show any fear of the Doors?"

"Of course not. What an idea!" She was plainly startled.

"It's possible, Mrs. Hanshaw, it's possible. After all,

when you stop to think of how a Door works it is rather a frightening thing, really. You step into a Door, and for an instant your atoms are converted into field-energies, transmitted to another part of space and reconverted into matter. For that instant you're not alive."

"I'm sure no one thinks of such things."

"But your son may. He witnessed the breakdown of the Door. He may be saying to himself, 'What if the Door breaks down just as I'm half-way through?' "

"But that's nonsense. He still uses the Door. He's even been to Canton with me; Canton, China. And as I told you, he uses it for school about once or twice a week."

"Freely? Cheerfully?"

"Well," said Mrs. Hanshaw, reluctantly, "he does seem a bit put out by it. But really, Doctor, there isn't much use talking about it, is there? If you would do a quick probe, see where the trouble was," and she finished on a bright note, "why, that would be all. I'm sure it's quite a minor thing."

Dr. Sloane sighed. He detested the word "probe" and there was scarcely any word he heard oftener.

"Mrs. Hanshaw," he said patiently, "there is no such thing as a quick probe. Now I know the mag-strips are full of it and it's a rage in some circles, but it's much overrated."

"Are you serious?"

"Quite. The probe is very complicated and the theory is that it traces mental circuits. You see, the cells of the brains are interconnected in a large variety of ways. Some of those interconnected paths are more used than others. They represent habits of thought, both conscious and unconscious. Theory has it that these paths in any given brain can be used to diagnose mental ills early and with certainty."

"Well, then?"

"But subjection to the probe is quite a fearful thing, especially to a child. It's a traumatic experience. It takes over an hour. And even then, the results must be sent to the Central Psychoanalytical Bureau for analysis, and that could take weeks. And on top of all that, Mrs. Hanshaw,

there are many psychiatrists who think the theory of probe-analyses to be most uncertain."

Mrs. Hanshaw compressed her lips. "You mean nothing can be done."

Dr. Sloane smiled. "Not at all. There were psychiatrists for centuries before there were probes. I suggest that you let me talk to the boy."

"Talk to him? Is that all?"

"I'll come to you for background information when necessary, but the essential thing, I think, is to talk to the boy."

"Really, Dr. Sloane, I doubt if he'll discuss the matter with you. He won't talk to me about it and I'm his mother."

"That often happens," the psychiatrist assured her. "A child will sometimes talk more readily to a stranger. In any case, I cannot take the case otherwise."

Mrs. Hanshaw rose, not at all pleased. "When can you come, Doctor?"

"What about this coming Saturday? The boy won't be in school. Will you be busy?"

"We will be ready."

She made a dignified exit. Dr. Sloane accompanied her through the small reception room to his office Door and waited while she punched the co-ordinates of her house. He watched her pass through. She became a half-woman, a quarter-woman, an isolated elbow and foot, a nothing.

It *was* frightening.

Did a Door ever break down during passage, leaving half a body here and half there? He had never heard of such a case, but he imagined it could happen.

He returned to his desk and looked up the time of his next appointment. It was obvious to him that Mrs. Hanshaw was annoyed and disappointed at not having arranged for a psychic probe treatment.

Why, for God's sake? Why should a thing like the probe, an obvious piece of quackery in his own opinion, get such a hold on the general public? It must be part of this general trend toward machines. Anything man can do, machines can do better. Machines! More machines! Machines for anything and everything! O tempora! O mores!

Oh, hell!

His resentment of the probe was beginning to bother him. Was it a fear of technological unemployment, a basic insecurity on his part, a mechanophobia, if that was the word——

He made a mental note to discuss this with his own analyst.

Dr. Sloane had to feel his way. The boy wasn't a patient who had come to him, more or less anxious to talk, more or less anxious to be helped.

Under the circumstances it would have been best to keep his first meeting with Richard short and noncommittal. It would have been sufficient merely to establish himself as something less than a total stranger. The next time he would be someone Richard had seen before. The time after he would be an acquaintance, and after that a friend of the family.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Hanshaw was not likely to accept a long-drawn-out process. She would go searching for a probe and, of course, she would find it.

And harm the boy. He was certain of that.

It was for that reason he felt he must sacrifice a little of the proper caution and risk a small crisis.

An uncomfortable ten minutes had passed when he decided he must try. Mrs. Hanshaw was smiling in a rather rigid way, eyeing him narrowly, as though she expected verbal magic from him. Richard wriggled in his seat, unresponsive to Dr. Sloane's tentative comments, overcome with boredom and unable not to show it.

Dr. Sloane said, with casual suddenness, "Would you like to take a walk with me, Richard?"

The boy's eyes widened and he stopped wriggling. He looked directly at Dr. Sloane. "A walk, sir?"

"I mean, outside."

"Do you go—outside?"

"Sometimes. When I feel like it."

Richard was on his feet, holding down a squirming eagerness. "I didn't think anyone did."

"I do. And I like company."

The boy sat down, uncertainly. "Mom?——"

Mrs. Hanshaw had stiffened in her seat, her compressed lips radiating horror, but she managed to say, "Why certainly, Dickie. But watch yourself."

And she managed a quick and baleful glare at Dr. Sloane.

In one respect, Dr. Sloane had lied. He did *not* go outside "sometimes." He hadn't been in the open since early college days. True, he had been athletically inclined (still was to some extent) but in his time the indoor ultraviolet chambers, swimming pools and tennis courts had flourished. For those with the price, they were much more satisfactory than the outdoor equivalents, open to the elements as they were, could possibly be. There was no occasion to go outside.

So there was a crawling sensation about his skin when he felt wind touch it, and he put down his flexied shoes on bare grass with a gingerly movement.

"Hey, look at that." Richard was quite different now, laughing, his reserve broken down.

Dr. Sloane had time only to catch a flash of blue that ended in a tree. Leaves rustled and he lost it.

"What was it?"

"A bird," said Richard. "A blue kind of bird."

Dr. Sloane looked about him in amazement. The Hanshaw residence was on a rise of ground, and he could see for miles. The area was only lightly wooded and between clumps of trees, grass gleamed brightly in the sunlight.

Colors set in deeper green made red and yellow patterns. They were flowers. From the books he had viewed in the course of his lifetime and from the old video shows, he had learned enough so that all this had an eerie sort of familiarity.

And yet the grass was so trim, the flowers so patterned. Dimly, he realized he had been expecting something wilder. He said, "Who takes care of all this?"

Richard shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe the mekkanos do it."

"Mekkanos?"

"There's loads of them around. Sometimes they got a sort of atomic knife they hold near the ground. It cuts the grass. And they're always fooling around with the flowers and things. There's one of them over there."

It was a small object, half a mile away. Its metal skin cast back highlights as it moved slowly over the gleaming meadow, engaged in some sort of activity that Dr. Sloane could not identify.

Dr. Sloane was astonished. Here it was a perverse sort of estheticism, a kind of conspicuous consumption——

"What's that?" he asked suddenly.

Richard looked. He said, "That's a house. Belongs to the Froehlichs. Co-ordinates, A-3, 23, 461. That little pointy building over there is the public Door."

Dr. Sloane was staring at the house. Was that what it looked like from the outside? Somehow he had imagined something much more cubic, and taller.

"Come along," shouted Richard, running ahead.

Dr. Sloane followed more sedately. "Do you know all the houses about here?"

"Just about."

"Where is A-23, 26, 475?" It was his own house, of course.

Richard looked about. "Let's see. Oh, sure, I know where it is—you see that water there?"

"Water?" Dr. Sloane made out a line of silver curving across the green.

"Sure. Real water. Just sort of running over rocks and things. It keeps running all the time. You can get across it if you step on the rocks. It's called a river."

More like a creek, thought Dr. Sloane. He had studied geography, of course, but what passed for the subject these days was really economic and cultural geography. Physical geography was almost an extinct science except among specialists. Still, he knew what rivers and creeks were, in a theoretical sort of way.

Richard was still talking. "Well, just past the river, over that hill with the big clump of trees and down the other side a way is A-23, 26, 475. It's a light green house with a white roof."

"It is?" Dr. Sloane was genuinely astonished. He hadn't known it was green.

Some small animal disturbed the grass in its anxiety to avoid the oncoming feet. Richard looked after it and shrugged. "You can't catch them. I tried."

A butterfly flitted past, a wavering bit of yellow. Dr. Sloane's eyes followed it.

There was a low hum that lay over the fields, interspersed with an occasional harsh, calling sound, a rattle, a twittering, a chatter that rose, then fell. As his ear accustomed itself to listening, Dr. Sloane heard a thousand sounds, and none were man-made.

A shadow fell upon the scene, advancing toward him, covering him. It was suddenly cooler and he looked upward, startled.

Richard said, "It's just a cloud. It'll go away in a minute —looka these flowers. They're the kind that smell."

They were several hundred yards from the Hanshaw residence. The cloud passed and the sun shone once more. Dr. Sloane looked back and was appalled at the distance they had covered. If they moved out of sight of the house and if Richard ran off, would he be able to find his way back?

He pushed the thought away impatiently and looked out toward the line of water (nearer now) and past it to where his own house must be. He thought wonderingly: Light green?

He said, "You must be quite an explorer."

Richard said, with a shy pride, "When I go to school and come back, I always try to use a different route and see new things."

"But you don't go outside every morning, do you? Sometimes you use the Doors, I imagine."

"Oh, sure."

"Why is that, Richard?" Somehow, Dr. Sloane felt there might be significance in that point.

But Richard quashed him. With his eyebrows up and a look of astonishment on his face, he said, "Well, gosh, some mornings it rains and I *have* to use the Door. I hate that, but what can you do? About two weeks ago, I got

caught in the rain and I—" he looked about him automatically, and his voice sank to a whisper "—caught a cold, and wasn't Mom upset, though."

Dr. Sloane sighed. "Shall we go back now?"

There was a quick disappointment on Richard's face. "Aw, what for?"

"You remind me that your mother must be waiting for us."

"I guess so." The boy turned reluctantly.

They walked slowly back. Richard was saying, chattily, "I wrote a composition at school once about how if I could go on some ancient vehicle" (he pronounced it with exaggerated care) "I'd go in a stratoliner and look at stars and clouds and things. Oh, boy, I was sure nuts."

"You'd pick something else now?"

"You bet. I'd go in an aut'm'bile, real slow. Then I'd see everything there was."

Mrs. Hanshaw seemed troubled, uncertain. "You don't think it's abnormal, then, doctor?"

"Unusual, perhaps, but not abnormal. He likes the outside."

"But how can he? It's so dirty, so unpleasant."

"That's a matter of individual taste. A hundred years ago our ancestors were all outside most of the time. Even today, I dare say there are a million Africans who have never seen a Door."

"But Richard's always been taught to behave himself the way a decent person in District A-3 is supposed to behave," said Mrs. Hanshaw, fiercely. "Not like an African or—or an ancestor."

"That may be part of the trouble, Mrs. Hanshaw. He feels this urge to go outside and yet he feels it to be wrong. He's ashamed to talk about it to you or to his teacher. It forces him into sullen retreat and it could eventually be dangerous."

"Then how can we persuade him to stop?"

Dr. Sloane said, "Don't try. Channel the activity instead. The day your Door broke down, he was forced outside, found he liked it, and that set a pattern. He used the trip

to school and back as an excuse to repeat that first exciting experience. Now suppose you agree to let him out of the house for two hours on Saturdays and Sundays. Suppose he gets it through his head that after all he can go outside without necessarily having to go anywhere in the process. Don't you think he'll be willing to use the Door to go to school and back thereafter? And don't you think that will stop the trouble he's now having with his teacher and probably with his fellow-pupils?"

"But then will matters remain so? Must they? Won't he ever be normal again?"

Dr. Sloane rose to his feet. "Mrs. Hanshaw, he's as normal as need be right now. Right now, he's tasting the joys of the forbidden. If you co-operate with him, show that you don't disapprove, it will lose some of its attraction right there. Then, as he grows older, he will become more aware of the expectations and demands of society. He will learn to conform. After all, there is a little of the rebel in all of us, but it generally dies down as we grow old and tired. Unless, that is, it is unreasonably suppressed and allowed to build up pressure. Don't do that. Richard will be all right."

He walked to the Door.

Mrs. Hanshaw said, "And you don't think a probe will be necessary, doctor?"

He turned and said vehemently, "No, definitely not! There is nothing about the boy that requires it. Understand? Nothing."

His fingers hesitated an inch from the combination board and the expression on his face grew lowering.

"What's the matter, Dr. Sloane?" asked Mrs. Hanshaw.

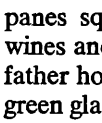
But he didn't hear her because he was thinking of the Door and the psychic probe and all the rising, choking tide of machinery. There is a little of the rebel in all of us, he thought.

So he said in a soft voice, as his hand fell away from the board and his feet turned away from the Door, "You know, it's such a beautiful day that I think I'll walk."

RAY BRADBURY

There is an adage: "No one is so boring as he who is bored himself." True enough; and just as true is the converse. No writer is more entertaining than he whom the world entertains, and none so wonderful as he whose sense of wonder stays fresh and vivid through the labor of setting it down in words on paper. The genes and chromosomes that interlocked to form Ray Bradbury produced the perfect proof of this, a story-writing organism both worldly and naive, wide-eyed enough to perceive wonders, and mature enough to shape them into such wondrous works as Fahrenheit 451 *and——*

The Strawberry Window



In his dream he was shutting the front door with its strawberry windows and lemon windows and windows like white clouds and windows like clear water in a country stream. Two dozen panes squared round the one big pane, colored of fruit wines and gelatins and cool water ices. He remembered his father holding him up as a child. "Look!" And through the green glass the world was emerald, moss, and summer mint. "Look!" The lilac pane made Concord grapes of all the passersby. And at last the strawberry glass perpetually bathed the town in roseate warmth, carpeted the world in pink sunrise, and made the cut lawn seem imported from some Persian rug bazaar. The strawberry window, best of all, cured people of their paleness, warmed the cold rain, and set the blowing, shifting February snows afire.

"Ah!"

He awoke.

He heard his boys talking before he was fully out of his dream and he lay in the dark now, listening to the sad sound their talk made, like the wind blowing the white seabottoms into the blue hills; and then he remembered.

We're on Mars, he thought.

"What?" His wife cried out in her sleep.

He hadn't realized he had spoken; he lay as still as he possibly could. But now, with a strange kind of numb reality he saw his wife rise to haunt the room, her pale face staring through the small, high windows of their quonset hut at the clear but unfamiliar stars.

"Carrie," he whispered.

She did not hear.

"Carrie," he whispered. "There's something I want to tell you. For a month now I've been wanting to say. . . . tomorrow . . . tomorrow morning, there's going to be . . ."

But his wife sat all to herself in the blue starlight and would not look at him.

He closed his eyes, tight.

If only the sun stayed up, he thought, if only there was no night. For during the day, he nailed the settlement town together, the boys were in school, and Carrie had cleaning, gardening, cooking to do. But when the sun was gone and their hands were empty of flowers or hammers and nails and arithmetics, their memories, like night birds, came home in the dark. You heard them rustle the black roof like the first rain of a new season of endless rains. You woke to the cool pattering, which was not rain, but only the slow dipping down, the flicking, brushing, touching, the whispered flight and glide of remembering toward dawn.

His wife moved, a slight turn of her head.

"Will," she said at last, "I want to go home."

"Carrie."

"This isn't home," she said.

He saw that her eyes were wet and brimming. "Carrie. Hold on awhile."

"I've got no fingernails from holding on now!"

As if she still moved in her sleep, she opened her bureau drawers and took out layers of handkerchiefs, shirts, underclothing and put it all on top of the bureau, not seeing it, letting her fingers touch and bring it out and put it down. The routine was long familiar now. She would talk and put things out and stand quietly awhile, and then later put all the things away and come, dry-faced, back to bed and dreams. He was afraid that some night she would empty

every drawer, and reach for the few ancient suitcases against the wall.

"Will. . . ." Her voice was not bitter, but soft, featureless, and as uncolored as the moonlight that showed what she was doing. "So many nights for six months I've talked this way; I'm ashamed. You work hard building houses in town. A man who works so hard shouldn't have to listen to a wife gone sad on him. But there's nothing to do but talk it out. It's the little things I miss most of all. I don't know —silly things. Our front-porch swing. The wicker rocking chair, summer nights. Looking at the people walk or ride by those evenings, back in Ohio. Our black upright piano, out of tune. My Swedish cutglass. Our parlor furniture—oh, it was like a herd of elephants, I know, and all of it old. And the Chinese hanging crystals that hit when the wind blew. And talking to neighbors there, on the front porch, July nights. All those crazy, silly things . . . they're not important. But it seems those are things that come to mind around three in the morning. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "Mars is a far place. It smells funny, looks funny, and feels funny. I think to myself nights, too. We came from a nice town."

"It was green," she said. "In the spring and summer. And yellow and red in the fall. And ours was a nice house; my, it was old, eighty-ninety years or so. Used to hear the house talking at night, whispering away. All the dry wood, the banisters, the front porch, the sills. Wherever you touched, it talked to you. Every room a different way. And when you had the whole house talking, it was a family around you in the dark, putting you to sleep. No other house, the kind they build nowadays, can be the same. A lot of people have got to go through and live in a house to make it mellow down all over. This place here, now, this hut, it doesn't know I'm in it, doesn't care if I live or die. It makes a noise like tin, and tin's cold. It's got no pores for the years to sink in. It's got no cellar for you to put things away for next year and the year after that. It's got no attic where you keep things from last year and all the other years before you were born; and without an attic, you've got no past. If we only had a little bit up here that was

familiar, Will, then we could make room for all that's strange. But when everything, *every single thing* is strange, then it takes forever to make things familiar."

He nodded in the dark. "There's nothing you say that I haven't thought."

She was looking at the moonlight where it lay upon the suitcases against the wall. He saw her move her hand down toward them.

"Carrie!"

"What?"

He swung his legs out of bed. "Carrie, I've done a crazy damfool thing. All these months I heard you dreaming away, scared, and the boys at night, and the wind, and Mars out there, the sea-bottoms and all, and . . ." He stopped and swallowed. "You got to understand what I did and why I did it. All the money we had in the bank a month ago, all the money we saved for ten years, I spent."

"Will!"

"I threw it away, Carrie, I swear, I threw it away on nothing. It was going to be a surprise. But now, tonight, there you are, and there are those damned suitcases on the floor and . . ."

"Will," she said, turning around. "You mean we've gone through all *this,* on Mars, putting away extra money every week, only to have you burn it up in a few hours?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'm a crazy fool. Look, it's not long till morning. We'll get up early. I'll take you down to see what I've done. I don't want to tell you, I want you to see. And if it's no go, then, well, there's always those suitcases and the rocket to Earth four times a week."

She did not move. "Will, Will," she murmured.

"Don't say any more," he said.

"Will, Will . . . She shook her head slowly, unbelievingly. He turned away and lay back down on his own side of the bed, and she sat on the other side, and for a moment did not lie down but only sat looking at the bureau where her handkerchiefs and jewelry and clothing lay ready in neat stacks where she had left them. Outside a wind the color of moonlight stirred up the sleeping dust and powdered the air.

At last she lay back, but said nothing more and was a cold weight in the bed, staring down the long tunnel of night toward the faintest sign of morning.

They got up in the very first light and moved in the small quonset hut without a sound. It was a pantomime prolonged almost to the time when someone might scream at the silence, as the mother and father and the boys washed and dressed and ate a quiet breakfast of toast and fruit-juice and coffee, with no one looking directly at anyone and everyone watching someone in the reflective surfaces of toaster, glassware, or cutlery, where all their faces were melted out of shape and made terribly alien in the early hour. Then, at last, they opened the quonset door and let in the air that blew across the cold blue-white Martian seas, where only the sand tides dissolved and shifted and made ghost patterns, and they stepped out under a raw and staring cold sky and began their walk toward a town which seemed no more than a motion-picture set far on ahead of them on a vast, empty stage.

"What part of town are we going to?" asked Carrie.

"The rocket depot," he said. "But before we get there, I've a lot to say."

The boys slowed down and moved behind their parents, listening. The father gazed ahead, and not once in all the time he was talking did he look at his wife or sons to see how they were taking all that he said.

"I believe in Mars," he began, quietly. "I guess I believe some day it'll belong to us. We'll nail it down. We'll settle in. We won't turn tail and run. It came to me one day a year ago, right after we first arrived. Why did we come? I asked myself. Because, I said, because. It's the same thing with the salmon every year. The salmon don't know why they go where they go, but they go, anyway. Up rivers they don't remember, up streams, jumping waterfalls, but finally making it to where they propagate and die, and the whole thing starts again. Call it racial memory, instinct, call it nothing, but there it is. And here we are."

They walked in the silent morning with the great sky

watching them and the strange blue and steam-white sands sifting about their feet on the new highway.

"So here we are. And from Mars where? Jupiter, Neptune, Pluto and on out? Right. *And on out.* Why? Some day the sun will blow up like a leaky furnace. Boom—there goes Earth. But maybe Mars won't be hurt. Or if Mars is hurt maybe Pluto won't be, or if Pluto's hurt, then where'll *we* be, our sons' sons, that is?"

He gazed steadily up into that flawless shell of plum-colored sky.

"Why, we'll be on some world with a number maybe; planet 6 of star system 97, planet 2 of system 99! So damn far off from here you need a nightmare to take it in! We'll be gone, do you see, gone off away and safe! And I thought to myself, ah, ah. So that's the reason we came to Mars, so *that's* the reason men shoot off their rockets."

"Will——"

"Let me finish; Not to make money, no. Not to see the sights, no. Those are the lies men tell, the fancy reasons they give themselves. Get rich, get famous, they say. Have fun, jump around, they say. But all the while, inside, something else is ticking along the way it ticks in salmon or whales, the way it ticks, by God, in the smallest microbe you want to name. And that little clock that ticks in everything living, you know what it says? It says get away, spread out, move along, keep swimming. Run to so many worlds and build so many towns that *nothing* can ever kill man. You *see,* Carrie? It's not just us come to Mars, it's the race, the whole darn human race, depending on how we make out in our lifetime. This thing is so big I want to laugh, I'm so scared stiff of it."

He felt the boys walking steadily behind him and he felt Carrie beside him and he wanted to see her face and how she was taking all this but he didn't look there, either.

"All this is no different than me and Dad walking the fields when I was a boy, casting seed by hand when our seeder broke down and we'd no money to fix it. It had to be done somehow, for the later crops. My God, Carrie, my God, you *remember* those Sunday-supplement articles,

THE EARTH WILL FREEZE IN A MILLION YEARS! I bawled once, as a boy, reading articles like that. My mother asked why. I'm bawlin' for all those poor people up ahead, I said. Don't worry about them, mother said. But, Carrie, that's my whole point; we *are* worrying about them. Or we wouldn't be here. It matters if Man with a capital M keeps going. There's nothing better than Man with a capital M in my book. I'm prejudiced, of course, because I'm one of the breed. But if there's any way to get hold of that immortality men are always talking about, this is the way—spread out—seed the universe. Then you got a harvest against crop failures anywhere down the line. No matter if Earth has famines or the rust comes in. You got the new wheat lifting on Pluto or where-in-hell-ever man gets to in the next thousand years. I'm crazy with the idea, Carrie, crazy. When I finally hit on it I got so excited I wanted to grab people, you, the boys, and tell them. But, hell, I knew that wasn't necessary. I knew a day or night would come when you'd hear that ticking in yourselves, too, and then you'd see, and no one'd have to say anything again about all this. It's big talk, Carrie, I know, and big thoughts for a man just short of five feet five, but by all that's holy, it's true."

They moved through the deserted streets of the town and listened to the echoes of their walking feet.

"And this morning?" said Carrie.

"I'm coming to this morning," he said. "Part of *me* wants to go home, too. But the other part says if we go everything's lost. So I thought, what bothers us most? Some of the things we once had. Some of the boys' things, your things, mine. And I thought, if it takes an old thing to get a new thing started, by God, I'll use the old thing. I remember from history books that a thousand years ago they put charcoals in a hollowed out cow-horn, blew on them during the day, so they carried their fire on marches from place to place, to start a fire every night from the sparks left over from morning. Always a new fire, but always something of the old in it. So I weighed and balanced it off. Is the Old worth all our money? I asked. No! It's only the things we *did* with the Old that have any worth.

Well, then, is the New worth *all* our money? I asked. Do you feel like investing in the day after the middle of next week? Yes! I said. If I can fight this thing that makes us want to go back to Earth, I'd dip my money in kerosene and strike a match!"

Carrie and the two boys did not move. They stood on the street, looking at him as if he were a storm that had passed over and around, almost blowing them from the ground, a storm that was now dying away.

"The freight rocket came in this morning," he said, quietly. "Our delivery's on it. Let's go and pick it up."

They walked slowly up the three steps into the rocket depot and across the echoing floor toward the freight room that was just sliding back its doors, opening for the day.

"Tell us again about the salmon," said one of the boys.

In the middle of the warm morning they drove out of town in a rented truck filled with great crates and boxes and parcels and packages, long ones, tall ones, short ones, flat ones, all numbered and neatly addressed to one William Prentiss, New Toledo, Mars.

"Will," said Carrie, over and over again. "Will."

They stopped the truck by the quonset hut and the boys jumped down and helped their mother out. For a moment, Will sat behind the wheel, and then slowly got out himself to walk around and look into the back of the truck at the crates.

And by noon all but one of the boxes were opened and their contents placed on the sea-bottom where the family stood among them.

"Carrie. . . ."

And he led her up the old porch steps that now stood un-crated on the edge of town.

"Listen to 'em, Carrie."

The steps squeaked and whispered underfoot.

"What do they say, tell me what they say?"

She stood on the ancient wooden steps, holding to herself, and could not tell him.

He waved his hand. "Front porch here, living room there, dining room, kitchen, three bedrooms. Part we'll

build new, part we'll bring. Of course all we got here now is the front porch, some parlor furniture and the old bed."

"All that money, Will!"

He turned, smiling. "You're not mad, now, look at me! You're not mad. We'll bring it all up, next month, next year. The cutglass vases, that Armenian carpet your mother gave us in 1961! Just *let* the sun explode!"

They looked at the other crates, numbered and lettered: front-porch swing, front-porch wicker rocker, hanging Chinese crystals. . . .

"I'll blow them myself to make them ring."

They set the front door on the top of the stairs, with its little panes of colored glass, and Carrie looked through the strawberry window.

"What do you see?"

But he knew what she saw, for he gazed through the colored glass, too. And there was Mars, with its cold sky warmed and its dead seas fired with color, with its hills like mounds of strawberry ice, and its sand like burning charcoals sifted by wind. The strawberry window, the strawberry window, breathed soft rose colors on the land and filled the mind and the eye with the light of a never-ending dawn. Bent there, looking through, he heard himself say:

"The town'll be out this way in a year. This'll be a shade street, you'll have your porch, and you'll have friends. You won't *need* all this so much, then. But starting right here, with this little bit that's familiar, watch it spread, watch Mars change so you'll know it as if you'd known it all your life."

He ran down the steps to the last and as-yet unopened canvas-covered crate. With his pocket knife he cut a hole in the canvas. "Guess!" he said.

"My kitchen stove? My furnace?"

"Not in a million years." He smiled very gently. "Sing me a song," he said.

"Will, you're clean off your head."

"Sing me a song worth all the money we had in the bank and now don't have, but who gives a blast in hell," he said.

"I don't know anything but 'Genevieve, Sweet Genevieve!' "

"Sing that," he said.

But she could not open her mouth and start the song. He saw her lips move and try, but there was no sound.

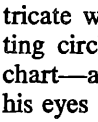
He ripped the canvas wider and shoved his hand into the crate and touched around for a quiet moment, and started to sing the words himself until he moved his hand a last time and then a single clear piano chord sprang out on the morning air.

"There," he said. "Let's take it right on to the end. Everyone! Here's the harmony."

ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Unfortunately, Arthur C. Clarke has very little in common with a ball-point pen—a pity, since he spends so much of his time under water. Writing such memorable novels as Childhood's End, Prelude to Space *and* Against the Fall of Night *might be enough in itself for an ordinary man, but for Clarke these represent only interruptions in that dominating area of his life which is spent with goggles and aqualung, competing with fish and porpoises on their own premises. Still, let us be thankful for what fate gives us; for it is unlikely that anyone without at least a trace of dolphin blood could have delighted us with——*

The Deep Range



There was a killer loose on the range. A 'copter patrol, five hundred miles off Greenland, had seen the great corpse staining the sea crimson as it wallowed in the waves. Within seconds, the intricate warning system had been alerted: men were plotting circles and moving counters on the North Atlantic chart—and Don Burley was still rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he dropped silently down to the twenty-fathom line.

The pattern of green lights on the tell-tale was a glowing symbol of security. As long as that pattern was unchanged, as long as none of those emerald stars winked to red, all was well with Don and his tiny craft. Air—fuel—power—this was the triumvirate which ruled his life. If any of them failed, he would be sinking in a steel coffin down toward the pelagic ooze, as Johnnie Tyndall had done the season before last. But there was no reason why they should fail; the accidents one foresaw, Don told himself reassuringly, were never the ones that happened.

He leaned across the tiny control board and spoke into the mike. Sub 5 was still close enough to the mother ship

for radio to work, but before long he'd have to switch to the sonics.

"Setting course 255, speed 50 knots, depth 20 fathoms, full sonar coverage. . . . Estimated time to target area, 70 minutes. . . . Will report at 10-minute intervals. That is all. . . . Out."

The acknowledgment, already weakening with range, came back at once from the *Herman Melville.*

"Message received and understood. Good hunting. What about the hounds?"

Don chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. This might be a job he'd have to handle alone. He had no idea, to within fifty miles either way, where Benj and Susan were at the moment. They'd certainly follow if he signaled for them, but they couldn't maintain his speed and would soon have to drop behind. Besides, he might be heading for a pack of killers, and the last thing he wanted to do was to lead his carefully trained porpoises into trouble. That was common sense and good business. He was also very fond of Susan and Benj.

"It's too far, and I don't know what I'm running into," he replied. "If they're in the interception area when I get there, I may whistle them up."

The acknowledgment from the mother ship was barely audible, and Don switched off the set. It was time to look around.

He dimmed the cabin lights so that he could see the scanner screen more clearly, pulled the polaroid glasses down over his eyes, and peered into the depths. This was the moment when Don felt like a god, able to hold within his hands a circle of the Atlantic twenty miles across, and to see clear down to the still-unexplored deeps, three thousand fathoms below. The slowly rotating beam of inaudible sound was searching the world in which he floated, seeking out friend and foe in the eternal darkness where light could never penetrate. The pattern of soundless shrieks, too shrill even for the hearing of the bats who had invented sonar a million years before man, pulsed out into the watery night: the faint echoes came tingling back as floating, blue-green flecks on the screen.

Through long practice, Don could read their message with effortless ease. A thousand feet below, stretching out to his submerged horizon, was the scattering layer—the blanket of life that covered half the world. The sunken meadow of the sea, it rose and fell with the passage of the sun, hovering always at the edge of darkness. But the ultimate depths were no concern of his. The flocks he guarded, and the enemies who ravaged them, belonged to the upper levels of the sea.

Don flicked the switch of the depth-selector, and his sonar beam concentrated itself into the horizontal plane. The glimmering echoes from the abyss vanished, but he could see more clearly what lay around him here in the ocean's stratospheric heights. That glowing cloud two miles ahead was a school of fish; he wondered if Base knew about it, and made an entry in his log. There were some larger, isolated blips at the edge of the school—the carnivores pursuing the cattle, insuring that the endlessly turning wheel of life and death would never lose momentum. But this conflict was no affair of Don's; he was after bigger game.

Sub 5 drove on toward the west, a steel needle swifter and more deadly than any other creature that roamed the seas. The tiny cabin, lit only by the flicker of lights from the instrument board, pulsed with power as the spinning turbines thrust the water aside. Don glanced at the chart and wondered how the enemy had broken through this time. There were still many weak points, for fencing the oceans of the world had been a gigantic task. The tenuous electric fields, fanning out between generators may miles apart, could not always hold at bay the starving monsters of the deep. They were learning, too. When the fences were opened, they would sometimes slip through with the whales and wreak havoc before they were discovered.

The long-range receiver bleeped plaintively, and Don switched over to TRANSCRIBE. It wasn't practical to send speech any distance over an ultrasonic beam, and code had come back into its own. Don had never learned to read it by ear, but the ribbon of paper emerging from the slot saved him the trouble.

COPTER REPORTS SCHOOL 50-100 WHALES HEADING 95 DEGREES GRID REF X186475 Y438034 STOP. MOVING AT SPEED. STOP. MELVILLE. OUT.

Don started to set the coordinates on the plotting grid, then saw that it was no longer necessary. At the extreme edge of his screen, a flotilla of faint stars had appeared. He altered course slightly, and drove head-on toward the approaching herd.

The copter was right: they were moving fast. Don felt a mounting excitement, for this could mean that they were on the run and luring the killers toward him. At the rate at which they were traveling he would be among them in five minutes. He cut the motors and felt the backward tug of water bringing him swiftly to rest.

Don Burley, a knight in armor, sat in his tiny dim-lit room fifty feet below the bright Atlantic waves, testing his weapons for the conflict that lay ahead. In these moments of poised suspense, before action began, his racing brain often explored such fantasies. He felt a kinship with all shepherds who had guarded their flocks back to the dawn of time. He was David, among ancient Palestinian hills, alert for the mountain lions that would prey upon his father's sheep. But far nearer in time, and far closer in spirit, were the men who had marshaled the great herds of cattle on the American plains, only a few lifetimes ago. They would have understood his work, though his implements would have been magic to them. The pattern was the same; only the scale had altered. It made no fundamental difference that the beasts Don herded weighed almost a hundred tons, and browsed on the endless savannahs of the sea.

The school was now less than two miles away, and Don checked his scanner's continuous circling to concentrate on the sector ahead. The picture on the screen altered to a fan-shaped wedge as the sonar beam started to flick from side to side; now he could count every whale in the school, and even make a good estimate of its size. With a practiced eye, he began to look for stragglers.

Don could never have explained what drew him at once toward those four echoes at the southern fringe of the

school. It was true that they were a little apart from the rest, but others had fallen as far behind. There is some sixth sense that a man acquires when he has stared long enough into a sonar screen—some hunch which enables him to extract more from the moving flecks than he has any right to do. Without conscious thought, Don reached for the control which would start the turbines whirling into life. Sub 5 was just getting under way when three leaden thuds reverberated through the hull, as if someone was knocking on the front door and wanted to come in.

"Well I'm damned," said Don. "How did *you* get here?" He did not bother to switch on the TV; he'd know Benj's signal anywhere. The porpoises must have been in the neighborhood and had spotted him before he'd even switched on the hunting call. For the thousandth time, he marveled at their intelligence and loyalty. It was strange that Nature had played the same trick twice—on land with the dog, in the ocean with the porpoise. Why were these graceful sea-beasts so fond of man, to whom they owed so little? It made one feel that the human race was worth something after all, if it could inspire such unselfish devotion.

It had been known for centuries that the porpoise was at least as intelligent as the dog, and could obey quite complex verbal commands. The experiment was still in progress, but if it succeeded then the ancient partnership between shepherd and sheep-dog would have a new lease on life.

Don switched on the speakers recessed into the sub's hull and began to talk to his escorts. Most of the sounds he uttered would have been meaningless to other human ears; they were the product of long research by the animal psychologists of the World Food Administration. He gave his orders twice to make sure that they were understood, then checked with the sonar screen to see that Benj and Susan were following astern as he had told them to.

The four echoes that had attracted his attention were clearer and closer now, and the main body of the whale pack had swept past him to the east. He had no fear of a collision; the great animals, even in their panic, could

sense his presence as easily as he could detect theirs, and by similar means. Don wondered if he should switch on his beacon. They might recognize its sound pattern, and it would reassure them. But the still unknown enemy might recognize it too.

He closed for an interception, and hunched low over the screen as if to drag from it by sheer will power every scrap of information the scanner could give. There were two large echoes, some distance apart, and one was accompanied by a pair of smaller satellites. Don wondered if he was already too late. In his mind's eye, he could picture the death struggle taking place in the water less than a mile ahead. Those two fainter blips would be the enemy—either shark or grampus—worrying a whale while one of its companions stood by in helpless terror, with no weapons of defense except its mighty flukes.

Now he was almost close enough for vision. The TV camera in Sub 5's prow strained through the gloom, but at first could show nothing but the fog of plankton. Then a vast shadowy shape began to form in the center of the screen, with two smaller companions below it. Don was seeing, with the greater precision but hopelessly limited range of ordinary light, what the sonar scanners had already told him.

Almost at once he saw his mistake. The two satellites were calves, not sharks. It was the first time he had ever met a whale with twins; although multiple births were not unknown, a cow could suckle only two young at once and usually only the stronger would survive. He choked down his disappointment; this error had cost him many minutes and he must begin the search again.

Then came the frantic tattoo on the hull that meant danger. It wasn't easy to scare Benj, and Don shouted his reassurance as he swung Sub 5 round so that the camera could search the turgid waters. Automatically, he had turned toward the fourth blip on the sonar screen—the echo he had assumed, from its size, to be another adult whale. And he saw that, after all, he had come to the right place.

"Jesus!" he said softly. "I didn't know they came that

big." He'd seen larger sharks before, but they had all been harmless vegetarians. This, he could tell at a glance, was a Greenland shark, the killer of the northern seas. It was supposed to grow up to thirty feet long, but this specimen was bigger than Sub 5. It was every inch of forty feet from snout to tail, and when he spotted it, it was already turning in toward the kill. Like the coward it was, it had launched its attack at one of the calves.

Don yelled to Benj and Susan, and saw them racing ahead into his field of vision. He wondered fleetingly why porpoises had such an overwhelming hatred of sharks; then he loosed his hands from the controls as the autopilot locked on to the target. Twisting and turning as agilely as any other sea-creature of its size, Sub 5 began to close in upon the shark, leaving Don free to concentrate on his armament.

The killer had been so intent upon his prey that Benj caught him completely unawares, ramming him just behind the left eye. It must have been a painful blow: an iron-hard snout, backed by a quarter-ton of muscle moving at fifty miles an hour is something not to be laughed at even by the largest fish. The shark jerked round in an impossibly tight curve, and Don was almost jolted out of his seat as the sub snapped on to a new course. If this kept up, he'd find it hard to use his Sting. But at least the killer was too busy now to bother about his intended victims.

Benj and Susan were worrying the giant like dogs snapping at the heels of an angry bear. They were too agile to be caught in those ferocious jaws, and Don marveled at the coordination with which they worked. When either had to surface for air, the other would hold off for a minute until the attack could be resumed in strength.

There was no evidence that the shark realized that a far more dangerous adversary was closing in upon it, and that the porpoises were merely a distraction. That suited Don very nicely; the next operation was going to be difficult unless he could hold a steady course for at least fifteen seconds. At a pinch he could use the tiny rocket torps to make a kill. If he'd been alone, and faced with a pack of sharks he would certainly have done so. But it was messy,

and there was a better way. He preferred the technique of the rapier to that of the hand-grenade.

Now he was only fifty feet away, and closing rapidly. There might never be a better chance. He punched the launching stud.

From beneath the belly of the sub, something that looked like a sting-ray hurtled forward. Don had checked the speed of his own craft; there was no need to come any closer now. The tiny, arrow-shaped hydrofoil, only a couple of feet across, could move far faster than his vessel and would close the gap in seconds. As it raced forward, it spun out the thin line of the control wire, like some underwater spider laying its thread. Along that wire passed the energy that powered the Sting, and the signals that steered it to its goal. Don had completely ignored his own larger craft in the effort of guiding this underwater missile. It responded to his touch so swiftly that he felt he was controlling some sensitive high-spirited steed.

The shark saw the danger less than a second before impact. The resemblance of the Sting to an ordinary ray confused it, as the designers had intended. Before the tiny brain could realize that no ray behaved like this, the missile had struck. The steel hypodermic, rammed forward by an exploding cartridge, drove through the shark's horny skin, and the great fish erupted in a frenzy of terror. Don backed rapidly away, for a blow from that tail would rattle him around like a pea in a can and might even cause damage to the sub. There was nothing more for him to do, except to speak into the microphone and call off his hounds.

The doomed killer was trying to arch its body so that it could snap at the poisoned dart. Don had now reeled the Sting back into its hiding place, pleased that he had been able to retrieve the missile undamaged. He watched without pity as the great fish succumbed to its paralysis.

Its struggles were weakening. It was swimming aimlessly back and forth, and once Don had to sidestep smartly to avoid a collision. As it lost control of buoyancy, the dying shark drifted up to the surface. Don did not bother to follow; that could wait until he had attended to more important business.

He found the cow and her two calves less than a mile away, and inspected them carefully. They were uninjured, so there was no need to call the vet in his highly specialized two-man sub which could handle any cetological crisis from a stomach-ache to a Caesarian. Don made a note of the mother's number, stencilled just behind the flippers. The calves, as was obvious from their size, were this season's and had not yet been branded.

Don watched for a little while. They were no longer in the least alarmed, and a check on the sonar had shown that the whole school had ceased its panicky flight. He wondered how they knew what had happened; much had been learned about communication among whales, but much was still a mystery.

"I hope you appreciate what I've done for you, old lady," he muttered. Then, reflecting that fifty tons of mother love was a slightly awe-inspiring sight, he blew his tanks and surfaced.

It was calm, so he cracked the airlock and popped his head out of the tiny conning tower. The water was only inches below his chin, and from time to time a wave made a determined effort to swamp him. There was little danger of this happening, for he fitted the hatch so closely that he was quite an effective plug.

Fifty feet away, a long slate-colored mound, like an overturned boat, was rolling on the surface. Don looked at it thoughtfully and did some mental calculations. A brute this size should be valuable; with any luck there was a chance of a double bonus. In a few minutes he'd radio his report, but for the moment it was pleasant to drink the fresh Atlantic air and to feel the open sky above his head.

A gray thunderbolt shot up out of the depths and smashed back onto the surface of the water, smothering Don with spray. It was just Benj's modest way of drawing attention to himself; a moment later the porpoise had swum up to the conning tower, so that Don could reach down and tickle its head. The great, intelligent eyes stared back into his; was it pure imagination, or did an almost human sense of fun also lurk in their depths?

Susan, as usual, circled shyly at a distance until jealousy overpowered her and she butted Benj out of the way. Don distributed caresses impartially and apologized because he had nothing to give them. He undertook to make up for the omission as soon as he returned to the *Herman Melville.*

"I'll go for another swim with you, too," he promised, "as long as you behave yourselves next time." He rubbed thoughtfully at a large bruise caused by Benj's playfulness, and wondered if he was not getting a little too old for rough games like this.

"Time to go home," Don said firmly, sliding down into the cabin and slamming the hatch. He suddenly realized that he was very hungry, and had better do something about the breakfast he had missed. There were not many men on earth who had earned a better right to eat their morning meal. He had saved for humanity more tons of meat, oil and milk than could easily be estimated.

Don Burley was the happy warrior, coming home from one battle that man would always have to fight. He was holding at bay the specter of famine which had confronted all earlier ages, but which would never threaten the world again while the great plankton farms harvested their millions of tons of protein, and the whale herds obeyed their new masters. Man had come back to the sea after aeons of exile; until the oceans froze, he would never be hungry again. . . .

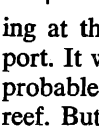
Don glanced at the scanner as he set his course. He smiled as he saw the two echoes keeping pace with the central splash of light that marked his vessel. "Hang around," he said. "We mammals must stick together." Then, as the autopilot took over, he lay back in his chair.

And presently Benj and Susan heard a most peculiar noise, rising and falling against the drone of the turbines. It had filtered faintly through the thick walls of Sub 5, and only the sensitive ears of the porpoises could have detected it. But intelligent beasts though they were, they could hardly be expected to understand why Don Burley was announcing, in a highly unmusical voice, that he was Heading for the Last Round-up. . . .

LESTER DEL REY

This is the fourth collection of original science-fiction stories published by the firm and edited by the man whose name appears on the backstrap of the book you hold in your hand. There was Star Science Fiction Stories *and* Star Science Fiction Stories No. 2 *and* Star Short Novels. *More than thirty writers have been represented in the collections, half a dozen of them in more than one of the books; but only one writer has made the list in all four. His name? Lester del Rey. His latest story—and one of his best. It's called——*

Alien



There was only a gentle swell on the Pacific, and the sails of the little thirty-foot sloop were barely filled by the dying breeze. Larry Cross let his stringy body slump over the tiller, staring at the little island of rock and strip of beach off his port. It was the first land he'd seen in three days, and improbable land, at that, since it should have been a coral reef. But it was already slipping astern, and didn't really matter, anyhow.

A drunken snore sounded from the cabin, and Cross frowned, twisting his thin face bitterly. He blew out a breath with a snort that made a wisp of sandy hair quiver annoyingly in front of his eyes, and then shrugged, returning to his dark thoughts of himself and Al Simmonds.

A dozen times when the big man had funked out during a storm and got himself stinko on his eternal cache of liquor, Cross had considered throwing him overboard. But it had remained with all his other dreams of violence and action. If he'd had any guts, he'd never have let Simmonds talk him into this crazy attempt to circle the earth in Cross's tiny sloop—or he'd have quit when he first discovered what a lazy bully the big man was.

He'd meant to quit at the first port, and had even tried

it at Capetown. But now, with New Zealand behind them, heading homeward, he'd quit pretending. If they got back, he knew he'd wind up writing their book with a joint by-line, while Simmonds somehow would get all the glory and most of the money they might make.

The wind died, and the sloop drifted to a stop. Cross considered using the auxiliary, but gasoline was more precious than time. Anyhow, if they were becalmed too long, they were near enough to a regular air route to yell for help with the emergency transmitter. He glanced up, idly seeking a plane he knew had passed two hours before; the sky was bare, and he started to look down again.

Then abruptly, the sky sprouted a red spark that lanced up from the horizon. He jerked his head to follow it. In scant seconds, it bloomed into a cylinder bearing three fins, all glaring with the fury of red-hot metal. It was like the pictures he'd seen of future rockets landing at supersonic speeds. But that was ridiculous. . . .

Now it was arcing down, already the size of a small plane. It hit the ocean in a flat trajectory. A cloud of steam leaped up, and the object bounced, skipped, and came rushing for the sloop—on a direct collision course.

Cross took one useless step toward the cabin, shouting for Al. But there was no time. He jerked savagely at the inflatable raft, pulling it free and jumping for the water behind the stern. His fingers found the valve, and the raft swelled with the hiss of compressed CO_2 gas. By luck, the raft landed right side up without spilling the attached emergency supplies. He managed to maneuver it under him, and began drifting back from the sloop.

The ocean-skipping monster was slowing, but still seemed to rush down like leviathan. There was a savage crunch and the sound of a thousand banshees wailing by. The raft leaped and spun, while hot air seemed to suck Larry up and drop him back. He bounced up to see the thing make a final leap and begin to sink, still steaming.

Somehow, he twisted around as the raft quieted, to search for the sloop. But the little ship was tilting forward, with its bow ripped off like matchwood. There was no time to rescue Al or look for more supplies. Larry stared at it,

still not sure it could have happened. He watched the sloop sink until even its mast was gone. Then he reached for the folding paddle.

Something broke the surface, and a shout close to hysteria cut through the air. "Larry! Larry! For God's sake, help me!"

Red spots spread out on the surface as Simmonds threshed about. Larry leaned his muscles into his paddling until he could reach the bobbing head. Simmonds came scrambling aboard, screaming as his obviously broken leg struck the raft. The collision must have been hell inside the cabin. He was covered with lacerations and bruises; under the dirty scrubble of beard, his face was white with fear and agony.

"Tangled in bunk, going down!" He dropped to the bottom of the raft, shaking sickly. "Dunno how I got free. Damn torpedo—*do* something, Larry!"

Larry yanked open the small medical kit and began tearing up his shirt. He couldn't do much for the leg, though, beyond a reasonable overdose of codein. "It wasn't a torpedo, Al. It was a space rocket, out of control."

"You're crazy. We don't have things like that yet. I know!"

Simmonds always knew everything, but Larry realized he was probably right this time. He shrugged. "Okay, we don't. So it came from Mars. Now lie still, while I paddle over to an island I spotted. We're lucky to be alive—don't crowd it!"

It was only after he began paddling that what he had said began to sink in, and the prickle grew along his backbone. Monsters from the stars, using Earth for a landing field! He'd read a book by Charles Fort that claimed such things happened. He'd thought once about it, getting romantic about man's first contact with alien life. But to know there were things on some of the far worlds that could cut through the immense distance of space . . . He shivered until the physical ache of paddling drove it from his mind. Simmonds groaned for a while, and then passed out as the codein hit him.

It was beginning to turn dark when Larry beached the

raft. Simmonds was unconscious, but still moaning faintly. There was a narrow strip of sandy beach, obviously covered at high tide, and then rocks ran up steeply for perhaps a total height of forty feet. At its widest, the island was less than half a mile across. Larry had landed where there was a broken slide up the rocky cliff, and now he began to look for a possible shelter. Near the top, a projecting ledge seemed to offer some cover, if he could make it.

He left Al, but picked up one can of water, the medicine and the food. It was rough climbing, but he reached the ledge. It could have offered more shelter, but it was the best he could see. The rocky overhang projected several feet beyond the entrance, and there was a flat surface for them to sleep. He left the supplies and went down again, stumbling as the twilight deepened rapidly.

Simmonds was moaning louder and running a fever. Larry gave him more of the drug. He loaded himself with the rest of the water, picked up the flashlight, worked the big man onto his back, and headed upward again. Each step was a prolonged hell, with the flash necessary most of the way, but he made it at last. Al mumbled as Larry dropped him gently onto the flat rock and slumped beside him to rest.

A little of the water helped. He poured some down Simmonds' throat, dreading the final trip. The raft would make a better bed for Simmonds, and the fishing equipment might be needed. Above all, they had to have the little transmitter; he'd have to be ready to signal when the plane went overhead tomorrow.

When he finally began the descent, it was completely dark, with no moon. Cross carried the flashlight, using it sparingly. As he reached flatter ground, he cut it off completely to save the batteries. His hands located a large rock and he guided himself around it by touch. He reached down for the raft, found it, and groped about for the transmitter.

It wasn't there. He fumbled with the switch of the flash, swearing as the light cut on. The raft was empty. He jerked the light across the ground, locating the fishing supplies,

but there was no sign of the transmitter. Then he froze, staring at the damp sand.

Footprints criss-crossed his own, circled the raft, and led off down the beach toward the cul-de-sac at the end!

Pictures of cannibals and spears leaped into his mind, to be replaced at once by the need for the pilfered transmitter. His hand jerked to his pocket and came out with a multi-bladed knife, fumbling the big blade open. He took a final look at the curve of the beach and cut off the light.

The beach was fairly flat. He broke into a slow trot, trying not to stumble or make too much noise. He judged his way by the slope of the sand; once around the bend, he quickened his run. The beach ended some four hundred feet further, bounded by the sea and an unscalable cliff nearly fifteen feet high. The sandy part was only a few feet wide at the present tide, and he should have no trouble in locating the thief, even without the light. He might need the advantage of surprise.

Fifty feet from the end, he ran full-tilt into something with the stubborn softness of flesh. He spilled onto the sand while horror clawed at his nerves. There was a thick grunt, and something sharp raked his face. Then his feet were under him, and he staggered up, flicking on the flash.

It illuminated more horror. The thing had two legs, two arms, and only one head—but there was nothing human about it. The limbs were double-jointed and too long, with cat-like claws on the toes and fingers. There were no visible ears or nose. The skin was mottled gray-green, except for a ridge of quivering purple on the hairless head and warty growths that stuck out irregularly over the whole body. Even crouched, it was taller than Larry. Under one arm, it held the transmitter from the raft; the other hand was digging into what seemed to be a natural abdominal pouch.

Larry jumped forward, swinging the knife. The blade missed, but the thing mewed. Its legs doubled under it, and it leaped upward, a full fifteen feet to the top of the cliff. It landed upright and vanished, carrying the transmitter with it. A second later, a large rock tumbled downward, missing Larry by inches.

He dropped the knife, then had to fumble for it, expect-

ing more rocks. None came. He found the knife, scooped it up, and dashed back toward the raft, beyond the cliff. He swept the rocks with the flash, but could see no sign of the creature.

It was no monster from Mars, Venus or any other solar planet. It was something that had come from a heavier planet, but an oxygen planet, and that meant it circled around another sun. Something that could swim out of a sunken ship at the bottom of the sea, could cover miles of water as fast as he could paddle a raft, and could leap fifteen feet from a standing start. Probably it could even see in the dark!

He scooped up what bits of driftwood he could find and loaded then into the raft, before heaving it onto his back. He fought his way up to the shelter, sweating with expectation of attack at every step. But none came. And now the moon was rising, casting its light over the island.

Larry caught a brief rest and again swept the flash over all the surface nearby. Half-satisfied, he turned to Simmonds. He peeled back the trouser leg, finding no sign that the bone had broken through the skin. It seemed to be a simple fracture. He pored over the first-aid book, getting little help, and then began making a crude set of splints, using their belts and what else he could find.

He tied Al's arms to his sides and dropped down on the man's thighs. Then, sick and shaken, he began the messy business of trying to set the bone. Simmonds came out of the stupor at the first twinge, to thresh about violently and howl piteously. But eventually, the bone seemed to be set, and Larry tightened the splints around it. He picked up the sobbing man and put him into the still-inflated raft.

Simmonds dragged himself to a half-sitting position where he could stare accusingly at Larry. "You could at least have given me a drink. I'm a sick man. That's what we packed the emergency bottle for."

"You drank that the third day out of New York," Larry told him woodenly. "And a dozen times later. Here, take this." He poured out two more of the codein pills, noticing how few were left, and trying to listen for sounds from outside.

Simmonds broke into a torrent of insults, and it took half an hour to quiet him, while Larry cursed himself for not leaving the man in the sea. But he swallowed the words as he'd learned to swallow all other knocks in a world where he didn't count for anything.

If there had been anything to stay for, he probably would never have left with the man on this trip. But he'd lost his parents early, and lived about with relatives who didn't want him. He'd missed a college scholarship by one point. He'd tried to write fiction and ended up doing articles about fishing and sailing. Of course, there'd been a girl once—but not after his savings ran out. The only good thing he could remember was inheriting the sloop from an uncle—and now the alien's ship had sunk that.

With Simmonds asleep again, Larry went out to scan what he could see of the island. Everything was apparently quiet. The monster was still hiding, probably investigating the transmitter, unless it had dismissed it as too simple already.

He tried to realize that the creature came from a race who could travel between the stars, and that to it he was only a savage on a backward world. It was a civilized being, not a beast of prey. It was probably as desperate and frightened as he was. If he went out to make overtures of friendship . . .

He shook his head quickly. All right, so he was the savage. But what would he do if he knew a wild, possibly cannibalistic savage was on the island with him? If indeed he was even that close. Maybe he was only a semi-intelligent beast to the thing. He wouldn't trust a gorilla, though men and gorillas came from the same family and the same world. In a situation like this, each would have to assume the other meant to kill him. And if both were creatures of good will, neither could afford to show it.

The memory of the claws on the creature's hands came back to remind him that it had natural weapons. He stared at the shadows along the rough trail, shivering and yawning. He couldn't sleep with that out there—but he caught himself dozing off, all the same. Finally, he got up to

scatter loose rocks near the head of the trail where they would rattle at the first step. Then he found a place in the deepest shadows where he could still watch, forced himself into an uncomfortable position, and tried to believe he'd waken at the first sound. It was a scream from Simmonds that jerked him out of his sleep, just as something tall and inhuman darted past him in long leaps for the trail. It was carrying something, but he couldn't focus or stir until it was already gone. He shook his way out of the nightmare fear and the acid shock of awakening and groped for the flashlight.

Simmonds was still screaming, but now in words. "Satan! The devil, coming for me! Oh, God! God, don't let him get me! Don't——"

Larry slapped him heavily, driving the hysteria back from him. "Cut it out, Al. It's just the alien out of that rocket. It came from the stars—not from any hell you're imagining. I saw it before, down on the beach. It's just another form of life, no more a devil than I am—I hope!"

"He had a long knife pointed right at me. He wanted to kill me. You'd have let him kill me!" Simmonds drew in a deep breath, held it, and then let it dribble out while sanity returned to him. His skin had been hot to Larry's touch, but he wasn't delirious yet. Now sudden excitement hit him, washing away the last of the terror.

"We're rich. Damn it, kid, we're made. What a piece of luck—all alone on this island with the first freak from Mars. Man, this is hotter than Lindbergh's first flight! You still got that knife? Yeah. And if he swam here, out of that sinking rocket, he can't have any weapons. Sure, I was just imagining the knife—too dark in here to see if he had one, anyhow." His eyes darted about the shelter, still illuminated in the dimming light of the flash. "That paddle and the knife—it'll make a fair spear."

"What am I supposed to do? Go out and kill the thing, just so we'll have a trophy to take back?" Larry asked sickly.

Simmonds nodded. "And what a trophy! We'll make a million bucks. What a book! Of course, if I could get

around, I'd figure out something to catch him alive. But you're not that much of a man, kid. You'd better just spear him. Then when you signal the plane tomorrow——"

"He's got the transmitter!"

Simmonds swore hotly as Larry gave him the details. Then he shrugged. "Okay. When you get him, you'll have it back. All the more reason. How about some water, Larry? I'm burning up."

Larry handed over the container and waited while the other drank noisily. He started to take a swallow himself, then stopped, staring at the empty spot where the second container should be. He raked his eyes over the shelter, but it was gone. The alien had taken the full container!

There was probably no fresh water on the island. If the creature needed water, and kept the transmitter so that he couldn't signal for rescue, the issue was no longer one of ethics; it was a case of kill or die of thirst. He located the paddle and some line from the fishing kit, clicked off the dying light, and went out grimly to begin on the spear Simmonds had suggested. It seemed necessary now.

Civilized beings! When a civilized man could strip the first contact with alien life down to a matter of trophies, where did good will enter? Maybe the alien had been hunting trophies, too. Maybe it had missed him and gone for Simmonds with head-hunting ideas.

The sun was up before he finished the spear. It was clumsy and awkward. but it had to do. He went inside for a sip of water, noticing that Simmonds was breathing heavily and with more fever. Then he found his way around the overhang, and to the top of the island.

It was mostly solid rock, split into two plateaus by a break beginning at the trail to the shelter. His half was forty feet above the sea, and almost level; the other side was rougher, but at an average height of about fifteen feet. Except for the beach, the island rose up directly from the sea. There was no trace of water.

But he spotted the alien. It had taken a spot on the lower plateau, opposite the shelter, partly hidden among a group of boulders, where it could watch them. Around it, the wreck of the transmitter lay spread out, beside the water

container. Larry stared down sickly, knowing that they could never reassemble the transmitter now, even if he could get it back.

Then a sound from overhead made him look up to see the big plane going directly over the island on its regular route! With the transmitter, he could have had help in minutes; but it was too high to make anything of his frantic gestures.

The alien had looked up, too. Now it looked at Larry, who shook the spear at it and started down the slide. The alien watched his advance for a second. Then it lifted a boulder that must have weighed fifty pounds and threw it casually—farther than Larry could have thrown his spear.

He lowered his useless weapon, while the other went back to whatever it was doing to the transmitter. Larry went down the slide and into the shelter, where Simmonds was tossing about.

"Drink," the big man was moaning. "Hot—gotta get a drink. Hey, barmaid, don't I get no service here? Got a new second baseman—all green. Real hot. Hot. Gimme a drink!"

Larry picked up the container and handed it to the other. Simmonds raised it uncertainly to his mouth, took a swallow, and another. Then he let out a yell. "Try'n trick me, would you? Water!"

His arms heaved the container, sending it spinning to the back of the shelter, where it landed on its side! Larry let out a sick cry and leaped for it, tilting it back. But there was only a trickle left. The rest ran across the floor, to collect in a puddle and dribble through a crack slowly.

He dropped to the rock, burying his lips in the dirty water, sucking at it greedily before it could vanish. He got some of it, along with dust and bits of rock. Then he was looking at the damp floor, cursing himself and Simmonds.

Across the slide, he could see the alien staring at them. He shook his fist at it. But there was no time for anger now, even. Without water, the vague idea he had developed would have to be rushed. He grabbed up the rain cover for the raft, knotting its corners together to form a sack, and headed down for the beach.

He worked through most of the day, carrying sand up to the plateau and spreading it into a great S O S sign. His only hope now was to have someone in the plane spot it; he couldn't be too optimistic, but the sand seemed to show up well on the darker rock.

The alien was busy with the transmitter still, seeming to be rewinding wires and making tests. About mid-day, the thing took time off to leap from the cliff out into the ocean. Minutes later, it was back with a fish. It repeated the action several times, for no reason Larry could see, and then sprawled out in the shade, as if sleeping. He debated an attempt to surprise it, decided against it, and finally slept for a couple of hours himself. It was safer during the light of day. He'd have to be up and on guard at night.

Simmonds was crying for water now, and he gave the man half of what was left. His own lips were burning, but he barely wet them. Then he went back to enlarging his signal. It seemed to be a lot of work for a man who had nothing to return to.

He gave Simmonds the last of the water. Al was over his delirium for the time being, scared and angry over the lost water. He sat sucking at the empty container, trying to draw a last drop from it, and wailing. Larry licked his own lips and went on with his work.

The moon was coming up as he made his last trip, to put a tip on the big arrow pointing to the letters. He finished it, and began heading down again, wondering if the alien eyes were still staring at him.

Then a scream from the cave sent him stumbling forward. He heard a mewing sound, and rocks grated below as a shadowy thing leaped away. Larry grabbed a rock and heaved it, but the thing was gone. He dashed into the shelter and stopped.

Simmonds was sitting up with a can tilted to his mouth. The sound of gurgling liquid came from it. Larry jerked the container away and capped it before Simmonds could bloat himself. "How'd you get this?"

"From him," Simmonds answered. His fear was giving place to mock bravery now. "Came sneaking up, holding it out so I could see it. I knew what he was up to. Meant to

let me get it, keep my attention on the water, then kill me. So I played dumb—even made like I was scared, see? When he set the water down where I'd have to reach forward, I fooled him. Let out a yell, fell back and got that big rock back there. I gave it to him good, right in the face. If I'd had a good leg——"

The rock part was a lie, Larry realized. There had been no rock within Al's reach. But the rest of it . . . He couldn't decide. It might have been a gesture of friendship. Maybe the alien didn't use water. Maybe the water was poisoned. Or maybe it had been used as a decoy, as Simmonds had said. He didn't mention the poison possibility; if it existed, the damage was done and there was no use in scaring Al. Then he stared at a group of fish on the floor.

Al followed his gaze and blinked. "Huh? I didn't see them. Now why'd he bring a bunch of dead fish around?"

"So we'd eat them, maybe," Larry guessed. "He could see which we ate and know whether any of them are poison to us—the way we do with monkeys in a jungle. Let him worry."

He threw the fish out toward the ocean. Judging by the strength of the alien, it must have a higher metabolism than men, with a greater need of food. He and Al could live on their concentrates and let it starve.

Then a hunch hit him, and he went dashing back to the top again.

He was right. Silhouetted in the moonlight, the thing was just finishing its work. As he came to the top, it let out a mewing cry and leaped over the edge. He heard it strike the water, where he couldn't follow it.

His carefully built signal was ruined. The sand had been scattered smoothly about, without any pattern. Somehow, it had guessed what he was doing and had ruined it.

Suddenly he swung, cursing his own slowness. Now was the one time when the transmitter was unguarded. It was almost certainly wrecked, but he might get it to work somehow, enough to send some kind of a signal. Al claimed he understood electronics—it was probably a lie, but might have some truth in it. And even the alien couldn't reach the top without swimming all the way around to the beach.

He dived down the slide and began scrambling over the rocks toward the alien's camp.

The mess of the transmitter now had assumed some order; it was back together, but in a different way, with thin wire stretched out into a queer spider-web all around it. And even to Larry, the purpose was almost certain. The thing was setting up an attempt to signal for help. There must be others, somewhere near in space. It seemed inconceivable that the small power of the transmitter could be made to work for that—but to a savage, it would be impossible that the few watts of power needed could carry a man's voice around the world.

Larry leaped forward toward it. One alien was bad, but a rescue party would spell the end, almost certainly. He no longer worried about reclaiming the set—he had to wreck this attempt first.

He skirted the last rock near the cliffs edge and lunged for the webbing, just as something came up in a leap from below, fifty feet away. The thing let out a shrieking mew and jumped toward him. His hand caught the thin wires of the web.

And his nerves went crazy! His muscles leaped and bucked wildly, while every pain and sensation he had ever felt hit at him. He could see the alien rushing forward and realized he was tottering at the edge of the cliff. But there was nothing he could do. His leaping muscles cried in frenzy and leaped again. And suddenly the wire was torn from his hand and he was falling.

More by luck than skill, he landed in the sand on his feet. It jolted him sickly, but he began crawling away rapidly, unhurt. The effects of the force in the webbing had vanished as soon as he broke contact.

He staggered up the slide to the shelter, hardly hearing Al's semi-delirious groaning. Whatever current had been in the web-work had been like nothing he'd known before. He'd had electric shocks, and this was completely unlike them. Another few seconds, and the misbehavior of his heart and lungs would have killed him.

Maybe it was a signal device. But it had also been a trap—and he'd walked right into it.

Then he shook his head. It proved the danger of the alien again, but not the ill will of the thing. It might have been a deliberate attempt to kill him that had failed accidentally; or it might be that the alien signal was accidentally dangerous to men. The mewing scream might even have been warning. He couldn't tell.

The next day, Al was worse, and their water supply was dwindling rapidly. Larry cursed himself for throwing away the fish—he'd finally remembered that juice could be pressed from fish that was perfectly drinkable, a fair substitute for fresh water. He'd have to try fishing, if they couldn't get help in time.

He went up to the top, carrying fresh sand. But this time, he saw that the alien had settled that. The entire top was dusted with sand now. The thing must have been busy through the whole night, and even so it seemed an impossible feat. He tried sweeping the sand away, but it had settled into every crack, and a wind was blowing, moving it back as he cleared the rock. At least for that day, there was nothing he could do.

The alien was working on the transmitter again, this time rewinding wires from the web. It leaped into the sea twice, but its movements seemed slower. He tried sneaking down while it was gone. Before he was there, a mewing cry from the slide called his attention back to where the thing stood outside the shelter.

It was stalemate. It could still travel faster than he could. But neither could get to a position to harm the other without endangering all that was at stake.

The wind picked up at night, scouring the plateau clean of sand by morning. Al had spent a hard night, but now he was quiet. Either the fever had broken and he was resting, or the trouble was getting worse. Larry had no way of knowing which. And there was nothing to could do.

He started down for sand to begin his marker again. It was too late for this morning's plane—that would come before he could carry half enough sand. But he had to be ready the next day.

Then he stopped, staring at the alien's camp. The transmitter now rested in plain view. The thing was crawling

away from it—literally crawling on all fours. It stopped, sinking to its stomach, and then laboriously began inching along again, heading for a group of rocks that would give it protection.

Larry considered it doubtfully. The outwardly reassembled transmitter was too obviously good for bait. And the creature could be feigning. On the other hand, it was possible that he'd been right about its higher metabolism resulting in quick starvation. All that energy couldn't come from nowhere.

He moved forward cautiously, studying the lower plateau for traps. The thing saw him coming, and began frantic efforts to hitch itself along into the shelter of rocks. It was between him and the transmitter now, but trying to get out of the way.

Then it collapsed. Larry stopped and considered it again. The way around offered a perfect chance for some pre-set rock to be shoved down on his head. The way near the creature seemed clear, except for the possible faking of the thing itself.

His hands were clammy as he moved forward, and his parched lips burned. How could a man who'd been stinting on water sweat so freely while suffering all the pangs of thirst? He was within twenty steps of the thing—then ten—then——

Its eyes snapped open, and it came upright, staggering a little. A hissing growl came from its lips, and the hand shot for the stomach pouch again. Larry jerked the crude spear back and drove it forward.

The thing avoided it by millimeters. It staggered back and slumped to the ground. For a second, it fought to stand again, and then gave up with an almost human shrug. Its eyes opened fully on Larry, and it seemed to be waiting.

He lifted the spear and centered it. The creature made no move. Then he dropped the spear back to his side slowly. He couldn't do it. He'd made a bow and arrow once, and gone hunting. He'd stunned a squirrel, too—and then lacked the heart to kill it. Now he was seeing another dream of his ability to be a man go up in smoke.

He swung on his heel and started for the transmitter. He

still half expected it to be booby-trapped, but he had to take the chance. He picked it up and moved back. The eyes of the thing followed him, and a sharp tongue of purple hue ran weakly over its lips.

Larry stopped. There was still concentrated food in the shelter—and sugar should be food for almost any protoplasmic thing. He started on again, however. He couldn't afford to risk it. It was the old rhyme about the devil turning saint when he was sick.

Thunder struck from the sky. It struck again, roaring out savagely in a bull bellow. He jerked his eyes up. Coming straight down toward him was a flat-ended cylinder two hundred feet or more tall and more than half as wide. There were no fins or signs of rocket exhaust, but the air shook around it as the booming sounded.

At a height of fifty feet, it skipped nimbly sidewise and began settling on a cleared space on the higher plateau. He felt the ground shake, and then it was quiet. A door began to open, and a ramp shot out.

Larry's legs finally responded. He leaped back of the rocks to which the alien had headed. He started to dive through them, then stopped. There was a hollow there, and a flat rock that could nearly cover it. It was poor shelter, but better than none, and he still had his spear.

He grinned sickly at that. But he hung onto it as he twisted the rock frantically over the hollow and eased into it. He could still see the shelter at the top of the slide, and part of the cleared section where the alien lay now with its eyes closed.

Creatures erupted from the ship and began spreading out. One suddenly pointed, and the others came swarming down the slide in great leaps. They were beside their comrade in seconds, pouring something out of balloon-like things down its throat. In a second, the alien sat up and began helping itself to an incredible quantity of whatever it was.

Its recuperative powers were fantastic. Larry expected it to point him out, but in that it seemed he was wrong. It gave a series of what seemed to be orders. Others broke away and began heading toward the ship, while the alien

Larry knew moved more slowly after them, carrying the transmitter.

Minutes later, a group came out of the ship and headed toward the shelter, carrying bundles. Over the distance, a series of screams in Al's voice sounded, and then died down. Larry could see a group of them carrying him out on something like a stretcher, while one of them seemed to be examining his thorax with some kind of instrument.

They were quick, at least. It had taken Larry days to guess that Al must be suffering from internal injuries. Working on a new form of life, they'd guessed it at once. Specimen, Larry thought. Maybe they'd even try to save Al's life. He'd make a nice trophy! At least, the alien doing the examining was suddenly motioning for speed as they headed toward the ship.

Others had been doing something inside the shelter. Now they came out empty-handed and headed up the slide, except for one who was still carrying the transmitter, doing something to it as they moved along. That one bounded toward Larry's hideout, dropped the transmitter where it had been before, and headed after the others.

Larry frowned. They couldn't leave him behind to tell about them, of course. But did they really think he was so simple that he'd try their death traps? Use the transmitter and blow up; go back to the shelter and do the same.

Then he realized he'd have to do something like that. The only hope of survival he had was through the transmitter or the food and water in the shelter. With them, he might live for a few days; without them, it would take less time. The aliens couldn't lose!

He shoved out of the hollow and headed toward the transmitter, wondering if he could somehow find what they'd done to it. Then his foot slipped on a damp spot on the rock. He caught himself, and looked down to see liquid oozing from one of the balloons they had brought the alien.

Doubtfully, he sniffed it. There was one partly full, and he lifted it to his lips, tasting it carefully, and then gulping it down. It was water. The alien had been dying of thirst, not of hunger. And yet, it had brought back the container to Simmonds. . . .

Empathy! Somehow, it had realized that Simmonds was sick and suffering. And it had taken a chance on its own rescue. Just as Larry had done, he realized; he'd hated Simmonds, but he'd let the other have most of the water. He couldn't help it. And the alien had been forced to rob itself to prevent the suffering of another.

Suddenly Larry grabbed the transmitter and flung its cover open, cutting it on. The batteries were missing, but something had replaced them. He was sure now that it would work again—any mistakes the alien had made in reassembling it had been corrected in the big ship. In another half hour, the airplane would fly over on its regular course. He could signal for help. The alien hadn't meant him to die.

In two days, he could be home.

His eyes swung up to the ship, where the ramp was now being drawn in. They'd be going back to the stars while he'd be going home—taking with them Al Simmonds, who must be too sick to wait for human rescue. And except for Simmonds and himself, they were probably glad to be going.

He kicked the transmitter with his foot, smashing it beyond repair. He let out a yell at the top of his voice, and went running across the plateau, waving his arms madly. There was nothing here for him—not even the sloop now. The only man who'd ever done him a favor without any selfish motive and against self-interest was up there in the ship—a green and ugly man with iron muscles and a heart as soft as Larry had hated his own for being.

Besides, he couldn't let a race that traveled among the stars and might be coming back some day get their ideas of mankind from a man like Al Simmonds.

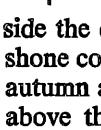
He reached the top of the slide, still yelling. The ramp had begun to run out again. He reached it, grabbing the outstretched arm of the alien who was waiting for him there.

Twenty minutes later, he was the first man to see the other side of the moon.

PHILIP K. DICK

It's a bare three years since Philip Dick's first story appeared in print—but they have been busy years for the man who has become one of the newest of the "old pros." Science-fiction magazines differ among themselves as the night from the day; but almost all of them have one feature in common, and that is the appearance, with frightening regularity, of the name "Philip K. Dick" on their contents pages. A writer is not born with such popularity; he must earn it, and a good way to earn it is by producing stories as deft and as revealing as——

Foster, You're Dead



School was agony, as always. Only today it was worse. Mike Foster finished weaving his two watertight baskets and sat rigid, while all around him the other children worked. Outside the concrete-and-steel building the late-afternoon sun shone cool. The hills sparkled green and brown in the crisp autumn air. In the overhead sky a few NATS circled lazily above the town.

The vast, ominous shape of Mrs. Cummings, the teacher, silently approached his desk. "Foster, are you finished?"

"Yes ma'am," he answered eagerly. He pushed the baskets up. "Can I leave now?"

Mrs. Cummings examined the baskets critically. "What about your trap-making?" she demanded.

He fumbled in his desk and brought out his intricate small-animal trap. "All finished, Mrs. Cummings. And my knife, it's done, too." He showed her the razor-edged blade of his knife, glittering metal he had shaped from a discarded gasoline drum. She picked up the knife and ran her expert finger doubtfully along the blade.

"Not strong enough," she stated. "You've oversharpened

it. It'll lose its edge the first time you use it. Go down to the main weapons-lab and examine the knives they've got there. Then hone it back some and get a thicker blade."

"Mrs. Cummings," Mike Foster pleaded, "could I fix it *tomorrow?* Could I not fix it right now, please?"

Everybody in the classroom was watching with interest. Mike Foster flushed; he hated to be singled out and made conspicuous, but he *had* to get away. He couldn't stay in school one minute more.

Inexorable, Mrs. Cummings rumbled, "Tomorrow is digging day. You won't have time to work on your knife."

"I will," he assured her quickly. "After the digging."

"No, you're not too good at digging." The old woman was measuring the boy's spindly arms and legs. "I think you better get your knife finished today. And spend all day tomorrow down at the field."

"What's the use of digging?" Mike Foster demanded, in despair.

"Everybody has to know how to dig," Mrs. Cummings answered patiently. Children were snickering on all sides; she shushed them with a hostile glare. "You all know the importance of digging. When the war begins the whole surface will be littered with debris and rubble. If we hope to survive we'll have to dig down, won't we? Have any of you ever watched a gopher digging around the roots of plants? The gopher knows he'll find something valuable down there under the surface of the ground. We're all going to be little brown gophers. We'll all have to learn to dig down in the rubble and find the good things, because that's where they'll be."

Mike Foster sat miserably plucking his knife, as Mrs. Cummings moved away from his desk and up the aisle. A few children grinned contemptuously at him, but nothing penetrated his haze of wretchedness. Digging wouldn't do him any good. When the bombs came he'd be killed instantly. All the vaccination shots up and down his arms, on his thighs and buttocks, would be of no use. He had wasted his allowance money: Mike Foster wouldn't be alive to catch any of the bacterial plagues. Not unless——

He sprang up and followed Mrs. Cummings to her desk.

In an agony of desperation he blurted, "Please, I have to leave. I have to do something."

Mrs. Cummings' tired lips twisted angrily. But the boy's fearful eyes stopped her. "What's wrong?" she demanded. "Don't you feel well?"

The boy stood frozen, unable to answer her. Pleased by the tableau, the class murmured and giggled until Mrs. Cummings rapped angrily on her desk with a writer. "Be quiet," she snapped. Her voice softened a shade, "Michael, if you're not functioning properly, go downstairs to the psych clinic. There's no point trying to work when your reactions are conflicted. Miss Groves will be glad to optimum you."

"No," Foster said.

"Then what is it?"

The class stirred. Voices answered for Foster; his tongue was stuck with misery and humiliation. "His father's an anti-P," the voices explained. "They don't have a shelter and he isn't registered in the Civic Defense. His father hasn't even contributed to the NATS. They haven't done anything."

Mrs. Cummings gazed up in amazement at the mute boy. "You don't have a shelter?"

He shook his head.

A strange feeling filled the woman. "But——" She had started to say, *but you'll die up here.* She changed it to, "But where'll you go?"

"Nowhere," the mild voices answered for him. "Everybody else'll be down in their shelters and he'll be up here. He even doesn't have a permit to the school shelter."

Mrs. Cummings was shocked. In her dull, scholastic way she had assumed every child in the school had a permit to the elaborate subsurface chambers under the building. But of course not. Only children whose parents were part of CD, who contributed to arming the community. And if Foster's father was an anti-P . . .

"He's afraid to sit here," the voices chimed calmly. "He's afraid it'll come while he's sitting here, and everybody else will be safe down in the shelter."

He wandered slowly along, hands deep in his pockets, kicking at dark stones on the sidewalk. The sun was setting. Snub-nosed commute rockets were unloading tired people, glad to be home from the factory strip a hundred miles to the west. On the distant hills something flashed: a radar tower revolving silently in the evening gloom. The circling NATS had increased in number. The twilight hours were the most dangerous; visual observers couldn't spot high-speed missiles coming in close to the ground. Assuming the missiles came.

A mechanical newsmachine shouted at him excitedly as he passed. War, death, amazing new weapons developed at home and abroad. He hunched his shoulders and continued on, past the little concrete shells that served as houses, each exactly alike, sturdy reinforced pillboxes. Ahead of him bright neon signs glowed in the settling gloom: the business district, alive with traffic and milling people.

Half a block from the bright cluster of neons he halted. To his right was a public shelter, a dark tunnel-like entrance with a mechanical turnstile glowing dully. Fifty cents admission. If he was here, on the street, and he had fifty cents, he'd be all right. He had pushed down into public shelters many times, during the practice raids. But other times, hideous, nightmare times that never left his mind, he hadn't had the fifty cents. He had stood mute and terrified, while people pushed excitedly past him; and the shrill shrieks of the sirens thundered everywhere.

He continued slowly, until he came to the brightest blotch of light, the great, gleaming showrooms of General Electronics, two blocks long, illuminated on all sides, a vast square of pure color and radiation. He halted and examined for the millionth time the fascinating shapes, the display that always drew him to a hypnotized stop whenever he passed.

In the center of the vast room was a single object. An elaborate, pulsing blob of machinery and support struts, beams and walls and sealed locks. All spotlights were turned on it; huge signs announced its hundred-and-one advantages—as if there could be any doubt.

THE NEW 1972 BOMB-PROOF RADIATION-SEALED SUBSURFACE SHELTER IS HERE! Check these star-studded features:

* automatic descent-lift—jambproof, self-powered, e-z locking
* triple-layer hull guaranteed to withstand 5g pressure without buckling
* A-powered heating and refrigeration system —self-servicing air-purification network
* three decontamination stages for food and water
* four hygienic stages for pre-burn exposure
* complete anti-biotic processing
* e-z payment plan

He gazed at the shelter a long time. It was mostly a big tank, with a neck at one end that was the descent tube, and an emergency escape-hatch at the other. It was completely self-contained; a miniature world that supplied its own light, heat, air, water, medicines, and almost inexhaustible food. When fully stocked there were visual and audio tapes, entertainment, beds, chairs, vidscreen, everything that made up the above-surface home. It was, actually, a home below the ground. Nothing was missing that might be needed or enjoyed. A family would be safe, even comfortable, during the most severe H-bomb and bacterial-spray attack.

It cost twenty thousand dollars.

While he was gazing silently at the massive display, one of the salesmen stepped out onto the dark sidewalk, on his way to the cafeteria. "Hi, sonny," he said automatically, as he passed Mike Foster. "Not bad, is it?"

"Can I go inside?" Foster asked quickly. "Can I go down in it?"

The salesman stopped, as he recognized the boy. "You're that kid," he said slowly, "that damn kid who's always pestering us."

"I'd like to go down in it. Just for a couple minutes. I

won't bust anything—I promise. I won't even touch anything."

The salesman was young and blond, a good-looking man in his early twenties. He hesitated, his reactions divided. The kid was a pest. But he had a family, and that meant a reasonable prospect. Business was bad; it was late September and the seasonal slump was still on. There was no profit in telling the boy to go peddle his newstapes; but on the other hand it was bad business encouraging small fry to crawl around the merchandise. They wasted time; they broke things; they pilfered small stuff when nobody was looking.

"No dice," the salesman said. "Look, send your old man down here. Has he seen what we've got?"

"Yes," Mike Foster said tightly.

"What's holding him back?" The salesman waved expansively up at the great gleaming display. "We'll give him a good trade-in on his old one, allowing for depreciation and obsolescence. What model has he got?"

"We don't have any," Mike Foster said.

The salesman blinked. "Come again?"

"My father says it's a waste of money. He says they're trying to scare people into buying things they don't need. He says——"

"Your father's an anti-P?"

"Yes," Mike Foster answered unhappily.

The salesman let out his breath. "Okay, kid. Sorry we can't do business. It's not your fault." He lingered. "What the hell's wrong with him? Does he put in on the NATS?"

"No."

The salesman swore under his breath. A coaster, sliding along, safe because the rest of the community was putting up thirty per cent of its income to keep a constant-defense system going. There were always a few of them, in every town. "How's your mother feel?" the salesman demanded. "She go along with him?"

"She says——" Mike Foster broke off. "Couldn't I go down in it for a little while? I won't bust anything. Just *once*."

"How'd we ever sell it if we let kids run through it?

We're not marking it down as a demonstration model—we've got roped into that too often." The salesman's curiosity was aroused. "How's a guy get to be an anti-P? He always feel this way, or did he get stung with something?"

"He says they sold people as many cars and washing machines and television sets as they could use. He says NATS and bomb shelters aren't good for anything, so people never get all they can use. He says factories can keep turning out guns and gas masks forever, and as long as people are afraid they'll keep paying for them because they think if they don't they might get killed, and maybe a man gets tired of paying for a new car every year and stops, but he's never going to stop buying shelters to protect his children."

"You believe that?" the salesman asked.

"I wish we had that shelter," Mike Foster answered. "If we had a shelter like that I'd go down and sleep in it every night. It'd be there when we needed it."

"Maybe there won't be a war," the salesman said. He sensed the boy's misery and fear, and he grinned good-naturedly down at him. "Don't worry all the time. You probably watch too many vidtapes—get out and play, for a change."

"Nobody's safe on the surface," Mike Foster said. "We have to be down below. And there's no place I can go."

"Send your old man around," the salesman muttered uneasily. "Maybe we can talk him into it. We've got a lot of time-payment plans. Tell him to ask for Bill O'Neill. Okay?"

Mike Foster wandered away, down the black evening street. He knew he was supposed to be home, but his feet dragged and his body was heavy and dull. His fatigue made him remember what the athletic coach had said the day before, during exercises. They were practicing breath suspension, holding a lungful of air and running. He hadn't done well; the others were still red-faced and racing when he halted, expelled his air, and stood gasping frantically for breath.

"Foster," the coach said angrily, "you're dead. You

know that? If this had been a gas attack——" He shook his head wearily. "Go over there and practice by yourself. You've got to do better, if you expect to survive."

But he didn't expect to survive.

When he stepped up on the porch of his home, he found the living-room lights already on. He could hear his father's voice, and more faintly his mother's from the kitchen. He closed the door after him and began unpeeling his coat.

"Is that you?" his father demanded. Bob Foster sat sprawled out in his chair, his lap full of tapes and report sheets from his retail furniture store. "Where have you been? Dinner's been ready half an hour." He had taken off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. His arms were pale and thin, but muscular. He was tired; his eyes were large and dark, his hair thinning. Restlessly, he moved the tapes around, from one stack to another.

"I'm sorry," Mike Foster said.

His father examined his pocket watch; he was surely the only man who still carried a watch. "Go wash your hands. What have you been doing?" He scrutinized his son. "You look odd. Do you feel all right?"

"I was down town," Mike Foster said.

"What were you doing?"

"Looking at the shelters."

Wordless, his father grabbed up a handful of reports and stuffed them into a folder. His thin lips set; hard lines wrinkled his forehead. He snorted furiously as tapes spilled everywhere; he bent stiffly to pick them up. Mike Foster made no move to help him. He crossed to the closet and gave his coat to the hanger. When he turned away his mother was directing the table of food into the dining room.

They ate without speaking, intent on their food and not looking at each other. Finally his father said, "What'd you see? Same old dogs, I suppose."

"There's the new '72 models," Mike Foster answered.

"They're the same as the '71 models." His father threw down his fork savagely; the table caught and absorbed it. "A few new gadgets, some more chrome. That's all." Suddenly he was facing his son defiantly. "Right?"

Mike Foster toyed wretchedly with his creamed chicken. "The new ones have a jamb-proof descent lift. You can't get stuck half-way down. All you have to do is get in it, and it does the rest."

"There'll be one next year that'll pick you up and carry you down. This one'll be obsolete as soon as people buy it. That's what they want—they want you to keep buying. They keep putting out new ones as fast as they can. This isn't 1972, it's still 1971. What's that thing doing out already? Can't they wait?"

Mike Foster didn't answer. He had heard it all before, many times. There was never anything new, only chrome and gadgets; yet the old ones became obsolete, anyhow. His father's argument was loud, impassioned, almost frenzied, but it made no sense. "Let's get an old one, then," he blurted out. "I don't care, any one'll do. Even a second-hand one."

"No, you want the *new* one. Shiny and glittery to impress the neighbors. Lots of dials and knobs and machinery. How much do they want for it?"

"Twenty thousand dollars."

His father let his breath out. "Just like that."

"They have easy time-payment plans."

"Sure. You pay for it the rest of your life. Interest, carrying charges, and how long is it guaranteed for?"

"Three months."

"What happens when it breaks down? It'll stop purifying and decontaminating. It'll fall apart as soon as the three months are over."

Mike Foster shook his head. "No. It's big and sturdy."

His father flushed. He was a small man, slender and light, brittle-boned. He thought suddenly of his lifetime of lost battles, struggling up the hard way, carefully collecting and holding onto something, a job, money, his retail store, bookkeeper to manager, finally owner. "They're scaring us to keep the wheels going," he yelled desperately at his wife and son. "They don't want another depression."

"Bob," his wife said, slowly and quietly, "you have to stop this. I can't stand any more."

Bob Foster blinked. "What're you talking about?" he

muttered. "I'm tired. These god-damn taxes. It isn't possible for a little store to keep open, not with the big chains. There ought to be a law." His voice trailed off. "I guess I'm through eating." He pushed away from the table and got to his feet. "I'm going to lie down on the couch and take a nap."

His wife's thin face blazed. "You have to get one! I can't stand the way they talk about us. All the neighbors and the merchants, everybody who knows. I can't go anywhere or do anything without hearing about it. Ever since that day they put up the flag. *Anti-P*. The last in the whole town. Those things circling around up there, and everybody paying for them but us."

"No," Bob Foster said. "I can't get one."

"Why not?"

"Because," he answered simply, "I can't afford it."

There was silence.

"You've put everything in that store," Ruth said finally. "And it's failing, anyhow. You're just like a packrat, hoarding everything down at that ratty little hole-in-the-wall. Nobody wants wood furniture, any more. You're a relic—a curiosity." She slammed at the table and it leaped wildly to gather the empty dishes, like a startled animal. It dashed furiously from the room and back into the kitchen, the dishes churning in its wash-tank as it raced.

Bob Foster sighed wearily. "Let's not fight. I'll be in the living room. Let me take a nap for an hour or so. Maybe we can talk about it later."

"Always later," Ruth said bitterly.

Her husband disappeared into the living room, a small, hunched-over figure, hair scraggly and gray, shoulder blades like broken wings.

Mike got to his feet. "I'll go study my homework," he said. He followed after his father, a strange look on his face.

The living room was quiet; the vidset was off and the lamp was down low. Ruth was in the kitchen setting the controls on the stove for the next month's meals. Bob Foster lay stretched out on the couch, his shoes off, his

head on a pillow. His face was gray with fatigue. Mike hesitated for a moment and then said, "Can I ask you something?"

His father grunted and stirred, opened his eyes. "What?"

Mike sat down facing him. "Tell me again how you gave advice to the President."

His father pulled himself up. "I didn't give any advice to the President. I just talked to him."

"Tell me about it."

"I've told you a million times. Every once in a while, since you were a baby. You were with me." His voice softened, as he remembered. "You were just a toddler—we had to carry you."

"What did he look like?"

"Well," his father began, slipping into a routine he had worked out and petrified over the years, "he looked about like he does in the vidscreen, Smaller, though."

"Why was he here?" Mike demanded avidly, although he knew every detail. The President was his hero, the man he most admired in all the world. "Why'd he come all the way out here to *our* town?"

"He was on a tour." Bitterness crept into his father's voice. "He happened to be passing through."

"What kind of a tour?"

"Visiting towns all over the country." The harshness increased. "Seeing how we were getting along. Seeing if we had bought enough NATS and bomb shelters and plague shots and gas masks and radar networks to repel attack. The General Electronics Corporation was just beginning to put up its big showrooms and displays—everything bright and glittering and expensive. The first defense equipment available for home purchase." His lips twisted. "All on easy-payment plans. Ads, posters, searchlights, free gardenias and dishes for the ladies."

Mike Foster's breath panted in his throat. "That was the day we got our Preparedness Flag," he said hungrily. "That was the day he came to give us our flag. And they ran it up on the flagpole in the middle of the town, and everybody was there yelling and cheering."

"You remember that?"

"I—think so. I remember people and sounds. And it was hot. It was June, wasn't it?"

"June 10, 1965. Quite an occasion. Not many towns had the big green flag, then. People were still buying cars and TV sets. They hadn't discovered those days were over. TV sets and cars are good for something—you can only manufacture and sell so many of them."

"He gave *you* the flag, didn't he?"

"Well, he gave it to all us merchants. The Chamber of Commerce had it arranged. Competition between towns, see who can buy the most the soonest. Improve our town and at the same time stimulate business. Of course, the way they put it, the idea was if we had to *buy* our gas masks and bomb shelters we'd take better care of them. As if we ever damaged telephones and sidewalks. Or highways, because the whole state provided them. Or armies. Haven't there always been armies? Hasn't the government always organized its people for defense? I guess defense costs too much. I guess they save a lot of money, cut down the national debt by this."

"Tell me what he said," Mike Foster whispered.

His father fumbled for his pipe and lit it with trembling hands. "He said, *'Here's your flag, boys. You've done a good job.'* Bob Foster choked, as acrid pipe fumes guzzled up. "He was red-faced, sunburned, not embarrassed. Perspiring and grinning. He knew how to handle himself. He knew a lot of first names. Told a funny joke."

The boy's eyes were wide with awe. "He came all the way out here, and you talked to him."

"Yeah," his father said. "I talked to him. They were all yelling and cheering. The flag was going up, the big green Preparedness Flag."

"You said——"

"I said to him, *'Is that all you brought us? A strip of green cloth?'* " Bob Foster dragged tensely on his pipe. "That was when I became an anti-P. Only I didn't know it at the time. All I knew was we were on our own, except for a strip of green cloth. We should have been a country, a whole nation, one hundred and seventy million people working together to defend ourselves. And instead, we're a

lot of separate little towns, little walled forts. Sliding and slipping back to the Middle Ages. Raising our separate armies——"

"Will the President ever come back?" Mike asked.

"I doubt it. He was—just passing through."

"If he comes back," Mike whispered, tense and not daring to hope, "can we go *see* him? Can we *look* at him?"

Bob Foster pulled himself up to a sitting position. His bony arms were bare and white; his lean face was drab with weariness. And resignation. "How much was that damn thing you saw?" he demanded hoarsely. "That bomb shelter?"

Mike's heart stopped beating. "Twenty thousand dollars."

"This is Thursday. I'll go down with you and your mother next Saturday." Bob Foster knocked out his smoldering, half-lit pipe. "I'll get it on the easy-payment plan. The fall buying season is coming up, soon. I usually do good—people buy wood furniture for Christmas gifts." He got up abruptly from the couch. "Is it a deal?"

Mike couldn't answer; he could only nod.

"Fine," his father said, with desperate cheerfulness. "Now you won't have to go down and look at it in the window."

The shelter was installed—at an additional two hundred dollars—by a fast-working team of laborers in brown coats with the words GENERAL ELECTRONICS stitched across their backs. The back yard was quickly restored, dirt and shrubs spaded in place, the surface smoothed over, and the bill respectfully slipped under the front door. The lumbering delivery truck, now empty, clattered off down the street and the neighborhood was again silent.

Mike Foster stood with his mother and a small group of admiring neighbors on the back porch of the house. "Well," Mrs. Carlyle said finally, "now you've got a shelter. The best there is."

"That's right," Ruth Foster agreed. She was conscious of the people around her; it had been some time since so many had shown up at once. Grim satisfaction filled her

gaunt frame, almost resentment. "It certainly makes a difference," she said harshly.

"Yes," Mr. Douglas from down the street agreed. "Now you have someplace to go." He had picked up the thick book of instructions the laborers had left. "It says here you can stock it for a whole year. Live down there twelve months without coming up once." He shook his head admiringly. "Mine's an old '69 model. Good for only six months. I guess maybe——"

"It's still good enough for us," his wife cut in, but there was a longing wistfulness in her voice. "Can we go down and peek at it, Ruth? It's all ready, isn't it?"

Mike made a strangled noise and moved jerkily forward. His mother smiled understandingly. "He has to go down there first. He gets first look at it—it's really for him, you know."

Their arms folded against the chill September wind, the group of men and women stood waiting and watching, as the boy approached the neck of the shelter and halted a few steps in front of it.

He entered the shelter carefully, almost afraid to touch anything. The neck was big for him; it was built to admit a full grown man. As soon as his weight was on the descent lift it dropped beneath him. With a breathless *whoosh* it plummeted down the pitch-black tube to the body of the shelter. The lift slammed hard against its shock-absorbers and the boy stumbled from it. The lift shot back to the surface, simultaneously sealing off the subsurface shelter, an impassable steel and plastic cork in the narrow neck.

Lights had come on around him automatically. The shelter was bare and empty; no supplies had yet been carried down. It smelled of varnish and motor grease: below him the generators were throbbing dully. His presence activated the purifying and decontamination systems; on the blank concrete wall meters and dials moved into sudden activity.

He sat down on the floor, knees drawn up, face solemn, eyes wide. There was no sound but the generators; the world above was completely cut off. He was in a little self-contained cosmos: everything needed was here—or would be here, soon. Food, water, air, things to do. Nothing else

was wanted. He could reach out and touch—whatever he needed. He could stay here forever, through all time, without stirring. Complete and entire. Not lacking, not fearing, with only the sound of the generators purring below him. and the sheer, ascetic walls around and above him on all sides, faintly warm, completely friendly, like a living container.

Suddenly he shouted, a loud jubilant shout that echoed and bounced from wall to wall. He was deafened by the reverberation. He shut his eyes tight and clenched his fists. Joy filled him. He shouted again—and let the roar of sound lap over him, his own voice reinforced by the near walls, close and hard and incredibly powerful.

The kids in school knew even before he showed up, the next morning. They greeted him as he approached, all of them grinning and nudging each other. "Is it true your folks got a new General Electronics Model S-72ft?" Earl Peters demanded.

"That's right," Mike answered. His heart swelled with a peaceful confidence he had never known. "Drop around," he said, as casually as he could. "I'll show it to you."

He passed on, conscious of their envious faces.

"Well, Mike," Mrs. Cummings said, as he was leaving the classroom at the end of the day. "How does it feel?"

He halted by her desk, shy and full of quiet pride. "It feels good," he admitted.

"Is your father contributing to the NATS?"

"Yes."

"And you've got a permit for our school shelter?"

He happily showed her the small blue seal clamped around his wrist. "He mailed a check to the city for everything. He said, 'as long as I've gone this far I might as well go the rest of the way.' "

"Now you have everything everybody else has." The elderly woman smiled across at him. "I'm glad of that. You're now a pro-P, except there's no such term. You're just—like everyone else."

The next day the newsmachines shrilled out the news. The first revelation of the new Soviet bore-pellets.

Bob Foster stood in the middle of the living room, the newstape in his hands, his thin face flushed with fury and despair. "God damn it, it's a plot!" His voice rose in baffled frenzy, "We just bought the thing and now look. *Look!*" He shoved the tape at his wife. "You see? I told you!"

"I've seen it," Ruth said wildly. "I suppose you think the whole world was just waiting with you in mind. They're always improving weapons, Bob. Last week it was those grain-impregnation flakes. This week it's bore-pellets. You don't expect them to stop the wheels of progress because you finally broke down and bought a shelter, do you?"

The man and woman faced each other. "What the hell are we going to do?" Bob Foster asked quietly.

Ruth paced back into the kitchen. "I heard they were going to turn out adaptors."

"Adaptors! What do you mean?"

"So people won't have to buy new shelters. There was a commercial on the vidscreen. They're going to put some kind of metal grill on the market, as soon as the government approves it. They spread it over the ground and it intercepts the bore-pellets. It screens them, makes them explode on the surface, so they can't burrow down to the shelter."

"How much?"

"They didn't say."

Mike Foster sat crouched on the sofa, listening. He had heard the news at school. They were taking their test on berry-identification, examining encased samples of wild berries to distinguish the harmless ones from the toxic, when the bell had announced a general assembly. The principal read them the news about the bore-pellets and then gave a routine lecture on emergency treatment of a new variant of typhus, recently developed.

His parents were still arguing. "We'll have to get one," Ruth Foster said calmly. "Otherwise it won't make any difference whether we've got a shelter or not. The bore-pellets were specifically designed to penetrate the surface and seek out warmth. As soon as the Russians have them in production——"

"I'll get one," Bob Foster said. "I'll get an anti-pellet grill and whatever else they have. I'll buy everything they put on the market. I'll never stop buying."

"It's not as bad as that."

"You know, this game has one real advantage over selling people cars and TV sets. With something like this we *have* to buy. It isn't a luxury, something big and flashy to impress the neighbors, something we could do without. If we don't buy this we die. They always said the way to sell something was create anxiety in people. Create a sense of insecurity—tell them they smell bad or look funny. But this makes a joke out of deodorant and hair oil. You can't escape this. If you don't buy, *they'll kill you.* The perfect sales-pitch. Buy or die—new slogan. Have a shiny new General Electronics H-bomb shelter in your back yard or be slaughtered."

"Stop talking like that!" Ruth snapped.

Bob Foster threw himself down at the kitchen table. "All right. I give up. I'll go along with it."

"You'll get one? I think they'll be on the market by Christmas."

"Oh, yes," Foster said. "They'll be out by Christmas." There was a strange look on his face. "I'll buy one of the damn things for Christmas, and so will everybody else."

The GEC grill-screen adaptors were a sensation.

Mike Foster walked slowly along the crowd-packed December street, through the late-afternoon twilight. Adaptors glittered in every store window. All shapes and sizes, for every kind of shelter. All prices, for every pocketbook. The crowds of people were gay and excited, typical Christmas crowds, shoving good-naturedly, loaded down with packages and heavy overcoats. The air was white with gusts of sweeping snow. Cars nosed cautiously along the jammed streets. Lights and neon displays, immense glowing store windows gleamed on all sides.

His own house was dark and silent. His parents weren't home yet. Both of them were down at the store working; business had been bad and his mother was taking the place of one of the clerks. Mike held his hand up to the code-

key, and the front door let him in. The automatic furnace had kept the house warm and pleasant. He removed his coat and put away his school books.

He didn't stay in the house long. His heart pounding with excitement, he felt his way out the back door and started onto the back porch.

He forced himself to stop, turn around, and re-enter the house. It was better if he didn't hurry things. He had worked out every moment of the process, from the first instant he saw the low hinge of the neck reared up hard and firm against the evening sky. He had made a fine art of it; there was no wasted motion. His procedure had been shaped, molded until it was a beautiful thing. The first overwhelming sense of *presence* as the neck of the shelter came around him. Then the blood-freezing rush of air as the descent-lift hurtled down all the way to the bottom.

And the grandeur of the shelter itself.

Every afternoon, as soon as he was home, he made his way down into it, below the surface, concealed and protected in its steel silence, as he had done since the first day. Now the chamber was full, not empty. Filled with endless cans of food, pillows, books, vidtapes, audio-tapes, prints on the walls, bright fabrics, textures and colors, even vases of flowers. The shelter was his place, where he crouched curled up, surrounded by everything he needed.

Delaying things as long as possible, he hurried back through the house and rummaged in the audio-tape file. He'd sit down in the shelter until dinner, listening to *Wind in the Willows*. His parents knew where to find him; he was always down there. Two hours of uninterrupted happiness, alone by himself in the shelter. And then when dinner was over he would hurry back down, to stay until time for bed. Sometimes late at night, when his parents were sound asleep, he got quietly up and made his way outside, to the shelter-neck, and down into its silent depths. To hide until morning.

He found the audio-tape and hurried through the house, out onto the back porch and into the yard. The sky was a bleak gray, shot with streamers of ugly black clouds. The lights of the town were coming on here and there. The yard

was cold and hostile. He made his way uncertainly down the steps—and froze.

A vast yawning cavity loomed. A gaping mouth, vacant and toothless, fixed open to the night sky. There was nothing else. The shelter was gone.

He stood for an endless time, the tape clutched in one hand, the other hand on the porch railing. Night came on; the dead hole dissolved in darkness. The whole world gradually collapsed into silence and abysmal gloom. Weak stars came out; lights in nearby houses came on fitfully, cold and faint. The boy saw nothing. He stood unmoving, his body rigid as stone, still facing the great pit where the shelter had been.

Then his father was standing beside him. "How long have you been here?" his father was saying. "How long, Mike? Answer me!"

With a violent effort Mike managed to drag himself back. "You're home early," he muttered.

"I left the store early on purpose. I wanted to be here when you—got home."

"It's gone."

"Yes." His father's voice was cold, without emotion. "The shelter's gone. I'm sorry, Mike. I called them and told them to take it back."

"Why?"

"I couldn't pay for it. Not this Christmas, with those grills everyone's getting. I can't compete with them." He broke off and then continued wretchedly, "They were damn decent. They gave me back half the money I put in." His voice twisted ironically. "I knew if I made a deal with them before Christmas I'd come out better. They can resell it to somebody else."

Mike said nothing.

"Try to understand," his father went on harshly. "I had to throw what capital I could scrape together into the store. I have to keep it running. It was either give up the shelter or the store. And if I gave up the store——"

"Then we wouldn't have anything."

His father caught hold of his arm. "Then we'd have to give up the shelter, too." His thin, strong fingers dug in

spasmodically. "You're growing up—you're old enough to understand. We'll get one later, maybe not the biggest, the most expensive, but something. It was a mistake, Mike. I couldn't swing it, not with the god-damn adaptor-things to buck. I'm keeping up the NAT payments, though. And your school tab. I'm keeping that going. This isn't a matter of principle," he finished desperately. "I can't help it. Do you understand, Mike? *I had to do it.*"

Mike pulled away.

"Where are you going?" His father hurried after him. "Come back here!" He grabbed for his son frantically, but in the gloom he stumbled and fell. Stars blinded him as his head smashed into the edge of the house; he pulled himself up painfully and groped for some support.

When he could see again, the yard was empty. His son was gone.

"Mike!" he yelled. "Where are you?"

There was no answer. The night wind blew clouds of snow around him, a thin bitter gust of chilled air. Wind and darkness, nothing else.

Bill O'Neill wearily examined the clock on the wall. It was nine-thirty: he could finally close the doors and lock up the big dazzling store. Push the milling, murmuring throngs of people outside and on their way home.

"Thank God," he breathed, as he held the door open for the last old lady, loaded down with packages and presents. He threw the code-bolt in place and pulled down the shade. "What a mob. I never saw so many people."

"All done," Al Conners said, from the cash register. "I'll count the money—you go around and check everything. Make sure we got all of them out."

O'Neill pushed his blond hair back and loosened his tie. He lit a cigarette gratefully, then moved around the store, checking light switches, turning off the massive GEC displays and appliances. Finally he approached the huge bomb shelter that took up the center of the floor.

He climbed the ladder to the neck and stepped onto the lift. The lift dropped with a *whoosh* and a second later he stepped out in the cave-like interior of the shelter.

In one corner Mike Foster sat curled up in a tight heap, his knees drawn up against his chin, his skinny arms wrapped around his ankles. His face was pushed down; only his ragged brown hair showed. He didn't move as the salesman approached him, astounded.

"Jesus!" O'Neill exclaimed. "It's that kid."

Mike said nothing. He hugged his legs tighter and buried his head as far down as possible.

"What the hell are you doing down here?" O'Neill demanded, surprised and angry. His outrage increased. "I thought your folks got one of these." Then he remembered. "That's right. We had to repossess it."

Al Conners appeared from the descent-lift. "What's holding you up? Let's get out of here and——" He saw Mike and broke off. "What's he doing down here? Get him out and let's go."

"Come on, kid," O'Neill said gently. "Time to go home."

Mike didn't move.

The two men looked at each other. "I guess we're going to have to drag him out," Conners said grimly. He took off his coat and tossed it over a decontamination-fixture. "Come on. Let's get it over with."

It took both of them. The boy fought desperately, without sound, clawing and struggling and tearing at them with his fingernails, kicking them, slashing at them, biting them when they grabbed him. They half-dragged, half-carried him to the descent-lift and pushed him into it long enough to activate the mechanism. O'Neill rode up with him; Conners came immediately after. Grimly, efficiently, they bundled the boy to the front door, threw him out, and locked the bolts after him.

"Wow," Conners gasped, sinking down against the counter. His sleeve was torn and his cheek was cut and gashed. His glasses hung from one ear; his hair was rumpled and he was exhausted. "Think we ought to call the cops? There's something wrong with that kid."

O'Neill stood by the door, panting for breath and gazing out into the darkness. He could see the boy sitting on the pavement. "He's still out there," he muttered. People pushed by the boy on both sides. Finally one of them

stopped and got him up. The boy struggled away, and then disappeared into the darkness. The larger figure picked up its packages, hesitated a moment, and then went on. O'Neill turned away. "What a hell of a thing." He wiped his face with his handkerchief. "He sure put up a fight."

"What was the matter with him? He never said anything, not a god-damn word."

"Christmas is a hell of a time to repossess something," O'Neill said. He reached shakily for his coat. "It's too bad. I wish they could have kept it."

Conners shrugged. "No tickie, no laundly."

"Why the hell can't we give them a deal? Maybe——" O'Neill struggled to get the word out. "Maybe sell the shelter wholesale, to people like that."

Conners glared at him angrily. *"Wholesale?* And then everybody wants it wholesale. It wouldn't be fair—and how long would we stay in business? How long would GEC last that way?"

"I guess not very long," O'Neill admitted moodily.

"Use your head." Conners laughed sharply. "What you need is a good stiff drink. Come on in the back closet—I've got a fifth of Haig and Haig in a drawer back there. A little something to warm you up, before you go home. That's what you need."

Mike Foster wandered aimlessly along the dark street, among the crowds of shoppers hurrying home. He saw nothing; people pushed against him but he was unaware of them. Lights, laughing people, the honking of car horns, the clang of signals. He was blank, his mind empty and dead. He walked automatically, without consciousness or feeling.

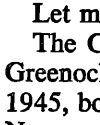
To his right a garish neon sign winked and glowed in the deepening night shadows. A huge sign, bright and colorful.

PEACE ON EARTH GOOD WILL TO MEN
PUBLIC SHELTER ADMISSION 50c

GERALD KERSH

What Jessamyn West did for Star Short Novels, *Gerald Kersh does for us here in* Star No. 3. *For here is a distinguished writer whose idiom is not science fiction, venturing into a specialized field and mastering it. No story in any of the previous* Star *volumes, and none of the others in this one, ever appeared in print anywhere on Earth before; it is a measure of the delight we took in this one that, although it has been published in England (though never here), we trampled on the technicalities with a clear conscience in order to bring you——*

Whatever Happened to Corporal Cuckoo?



Several thousand officers and privates of the U. S. Army who fought in Europe in World War II can bear witness to certain basic facts in this otherwise incredible story.

Let me refresh my witnesses' memories:

The Cunard White Star liner *Queen Mary* sailed from Greenock, at the mouth of the river Clyde, on July 6th, 1945, bound for New York, packed tight with passengers. No one who made that voyage can have forgotten it: there were fourteen thousand men aboard; a few ladies; and one dog. The dog was a gentle, intelligent German shepherd, saved from slow and painful death by a young American officer in Holland. I was told that this brave animal, exhausted, and weak with hunger, had tried to jump over a high barbed-wire fence, and had got caught in the barbs on the top strand, where it hung for days, unable to go forward or backward. The young officer helped it down, and so the dog fell in love with the man, and the man fell in love with the dog. Pets are not allowed on troopships. Still, the young officer managed to get his

dog on board. Rumor has it that his entire company swore that they would not return to the United States without the dog, so that the authorities were persuaded to stretch a point, just for once; this is what Kipling meant when he referred to The Power Of The Dog. Everyone who sailed on the *Queen Mary* from Greenock on July 6th, 1945 remembers that dog. It came aboard in a deplorable state, arching its bedraggled back to ease its poor injured stomach, and when you stroked it, you felt its skeleton under the sickly, staring coat. After about three days of affectionate care—half a hundred strong hungry men begged or stole bits of meat for its sake—the dog began to recover. By July 11th, when the *Queen Mary* docked in New York, the dog was taking a dog's interest in a soft rubber ball with which several officers were playing on the sun deck.

I bring all this back into memory to prove that I was there, as a war correspondent, on my way to the Pacific. Since I was wearing battledress and a beard, I also must have been conspicuous, that voyage. And the secret school of illicit crapshooters must remember me with nostalgic affection: I arrived in New York with exactly fifteen cents, and had to borrow five dollars from an amiable Congregationalist minister named John Smith, who also will testify to the fact that I was on board. If further evidence were needed, a lady nurse, Lieutenant Grace Dimichele, of Vermont, took my photograph as we came into port.

But in the excitement of that tremendous moment, when thousands of men were struggling and jostling, laughing and crying, and snapping cameras at the New York skyline, which is the most beautiful in the world, I lost Corporal Cuckoo. I have made exhaustive inquiries as to his whereabouts, but that extraordinary man had disappeared like a puff of smoke.

Surely, there must be scores of men who retain some memory of Cuckoo, whom they must have seen hundreds and hundreds of times on the *Queen Mary* between July 6th and July 11th, 1945?

He was a light-haired man of medium height, but he must have weighed at least a hundred and ninety pounds, for he was ponderously built, and had enormously heavy

bones. I beg my fellow passengers to remember, if they can. He had watery eyes of greenish-gray, and limped a little on his right leg. His teeth were powerful—large, square and slightly protruding; but generally he kept them covered with his thick, curiously wrinkled lips. People in general are unobservant, I know, but no one who saw Corporal Cuckoo could fail to remember his scars. There was a frightful indentation in his skull, between his left eyebrow and his right ear. When I first noticed him, I remembered an ax murder at which I shuddered many years ago when I was a crime reporter. He must have an extraordinary constitution if he lives to walk around with a scar like that, I thought. His chin and throat were puckered scar tissue such as marks the place where flesh has been badly burned and well healed. Half of his right ear was missing and close by there was another scar, from cheekbone to mastoid. The back of his right hand appeared to have been hacked with a knife—I counted at least four formidable cuts, all old and white and deep. He conveyed this impression: that a long time ago, a number of people had got together to butcher him with hatchets, sabers, and knives, and that in spite of their most determined efforts he had survived. For all his scars were old. Yet the man was young—not more than thirty-five, as I guessed.

He filled me with a burning curiosity. One of you *must* remember him! He went about, surly and unsociable, smoking cigarettes which he never took out of his mouth—he smoked them down and spat the ends out only when the fire touched his lips. That, I thought, must be why his eyes are so watery. He moped about, thinking, or brooding. He was particularly addicted to loitering on the stairs and lurking in dark corners. I made tentative inquiries about him around the decks; but just then everyone was passionately interested in an officer who looked like Spencer Tracy. But in the end I found out for myself.

Liquor, also, was prohibited on troopships. Having been warned of this, I took the precaution of smuggling some bottles of whiskey aboard. On the first day out I offered a drink to a captain of infantry. Before I knew where I was,

I had made seventeen new friends who overwhelmed me with affability and asked for my autograph; so that on the second day, having thrown the last of the empty bottles out of the porthole, I was glad to sponge a drink off Mr. Charles Bennett, the Hollywood playwright. (He, too, if his modesty permits, will bear witness that I am telling the truth.) He gave me a ginger-ale bottle full of good Scotch, which I concealed in the blouse of my battledress, not daring to let any of my friends know that I had it. Late in the evening of the third day, I withdrew to a quiet spot where there was a strong-enough diffusion of yellow light for me to read by. I intended to struggle again through some of the poems of François Villon, and to refresh myself at intervals with a spot of Mr. Bennett's Scotch. It was hard to find an unoccupied place beyond locked doors on the *Queen Mary* at that time, but I found one. I was trying to read Villon's *Ballade Of Good Counsel,* which that great poet wrote in medieval underworld slang, which is all but incomprehensible even to erudite Frenchmen who have studied the argot of the period. I repeated the first two lines aloud, hoping to talk some new meaning into them:

Car ou soie porteur de bulles
Pipeur ou hasardeur de dez

Then a languid voice said: "Hello there! What do *you* know about it?"

I looked up and saw the somber, scarred face of the mysterious corporal half in and half out of the shadows. There was nothing to do but offer him a drink, for I had the bottle in my hand, and he was looking at it. He thanked me curtly, half emptied the little bottle in one gulp and returned it to me. *"Pipeur ou hasardeur de dez,"* he said, sighing. "That's old stuff. Do you like it, sir?"

I said, "Very much indeed. What a great man Villon must have been. Who else could have used such debased language to such effect? Who else could have taken thieves' patter—which is always ugly—and turned it into beautiful poetry?"

"You understand it, eh?" he asked, with a half laugh.

"I can't say that I do," I said, "but it certainly makes poetry."

"Yes, I know."

"*Pipeur ou hasardeur de dez.* You might as well try to make poetry out of something like this, *'I don't care if you run some Come-to-Jesus racket, or shoot craps . . . !'* Who are you? What's the idea? It's a hell of a long time since they allowed you to wear a beard in the army."

"War correspondent," I said. "My name is Kersh. You might as well finish this."

He emptied the little bottle and said, "Thanks, Mr. Kersh. My name is Cuckoo."

He threw himself down beside me, striking the deck like a sack of wet sand. "Yeahp . . . I think I will sit down," he said. Then he took my little book in his frightfully scarred right hand, flapped it against his knee, and then gave it back to me. *"Hasardeur de dez!"* he said, in an outlandish accent.

"You read Villon, I see," I said.

"No, I don't. I'm not much of a reader."

"But you speak French? Where did you learn it?" I asked.

"In France."

"On your way home now?"

"I guess so."

"You're not sorry, I daresay."

"No, I guess not."

"You were in France?"

"Holland."

"In the army long?"

"Quite a while."

"Do you like it?"

"Sure. It's all right, I guess. Where are you from?"

"London," I said.

He said, "I've been there."

"And where do you come from?" I asked.

"What? . . . Me? . . . Oh, from New York, I guess."

"And how did you like London?" I asked.

"It's improved."

"Improved? I was afraid you'd seen it at a disadvantage, what with the bombing, and all that," I said.

"Oh, London's all right. I guess."

"You should have been there before the war, Corporal Cuckoo."

"I was there before the war."

"You must have been very young then," I said.

Corporal Cuckoo replied, "Not so damn young."

I said, "I'm a war correspondent, and newspaperman, and so I have the right to ask impertinent questions. I might, you know, write a piece about you for my paper. What sort of name is Cuckoo? I've never heard it before."

For the sake of appearances I had taken out a notebook and pencil. The corporal said, "My name isn't really Cuckoo. It's a French name, originally—*Lecocu*. You know what that means, don't you?"

Somewhat embarrassed, I replied, "Well, if I remember rightly, a man who is *cocu* is a man whose wife has been unfaithful to him."

"That's right."

"Have you any family?"

"No."

"But you have been married?" I asked.

"Plenty."

"What do you intend to do when you get back to the States, Corporal Cuckoo?"

He said, "Grow flowers, and keep bees and chickens."

"All alone?"

"That's right," said Corporal Cuckoo.

"Flowers, bees and chickens! . . . What kind of flowers?" I asked.

"Roses," he said, without hesitation. Then he added, "Maybe a little later on I'll go south."

"What on earth for?" I asked.

"Turpentine."

Corporal Cuckoo, I thought, must be insane. Thinking of this, it occurred to me that his brain might have been deranged by the wound that had left that awful scar on his head. I said, "They seem to have cut you up a bit, Corporal Cuckoo."

"Yes, sir, a little bit here and there," he said, chuckling. "Yeahp, I've taken plenty in my time."

"So I should think, Corporal. The first time I saw you I was under the impression that you'd got caught up in some machinery, or something of the sort."

"What do you mean, machinery?"

"Oh, no offense, Corporal, but those wounds on your head and face and neck haven't the appearance of wounds such as you might get from any weapon of modern warfare——"

"Who said they were?" said Corporal Cuckoo, roughly. Then he filled his lungs with air, and blew out a great breath which ended in an exclamation: "*Phoo*—wow! What was that stuff you gave me to drink?"

"Good Scotch. Why?"

"It's good all right. I didn't ought to drink it. I've laid off the hard stuff for God knows how many years. It goes to my head. I didn't ought to touch it."

"Nobody asked you to empty a twelve-ounce ginger-ale bottle full of Scotch in two drinks," I said resentfully.

"I'm sorry, mister. When we get to New York, I'll buy you a whole bottle, if you like," said Corporal Cuckoo, squinting as if his eyes hurt and running his fingers along the awful crevasse of that scar in his head.

I said, "That was a nasty one you got, up there."

"What? *This?*" he said, carelessly striking the scar with the flat of a hard hand. "This? Nasty one? I'll say it was a nasty one. Why, some of my brains came out. And look here——" he unbuttoned his shirt and pulled up his undershirt with his left hand, while he opened and lit a battered Zippo with his right. "Take a look at that."

I cried out in astonishment. I had never seen a living body so incredibly mauled and mutilated. In the vacillating light of the flame I saw black shadows bobbing and weaving in a sort of blasted wilderness of crags, chasms, canyons and pits. His torso was like a place laid waste by the wrath of God—burst asunder from below, scorched from above, shattered by thunderbolts, crushed by landslides, ravaged by hurricanes. Most of his ribs, on the left-hand side, must have been smashed into fragments no bigger

than the last joint of a finger by some tremendously heavy object. The bones, miraculously, had knit together again, so that there was a circle of hard, bony knobs rimming a deep indentation; in that light it reminded me of one of the dead volcanoes on the moon. Just under the sternum there was a dark hole, nearly three inches long, about half an inch wide, and hideously deep. I have seen such scars in the big muscles of a man's thigh—but never in the region of the breastbone. "Good God, man, you must have been torn in two and put together again!" I said. Corporal Cuckoo merely laughed, and held his lighter so that I could see his body from stomach to hips. Between the strong muscles, just under the liver, there was an old scar into which, old and healed though it was, you might have laid three fingers. Cutting across this, another scar, more than half as deep but more than twelve inches long, curved away downward toward the groin on the left. Another appalling scar came up from somewhere below the buckle of his belt and ended in a deep triangular hole in the region of the diaphragm. And there were other scars—but the lighter went out, and Corporal Cuckoo buttoned up his shirt.

"Is that something?" he asked.

"Is that something!" I cried. "Why, good God, I'm no medical man, but I can see that the least of those wounds you've got down there ought to be enough to kill any man. How do you manage to be alive, Cuckoo? How is it possible?"

"You think you've seen something? Listen, you've seen nothing till you see my back. But never mind about that now."

"Tell me," I said, "how the devil did you come by all that? They're old scars. You couldn't have got them in this war——"

He slid down the knot of his tie, unbuttoned his collar, pulled his shirt aside, and said, dispassionately; "No. Look —this is all I got this time." He pointed nonchalantly to his throat. I counted five bullet scars in a cluster, spaced like the fingertips of a half-opened hand, at the base of the throat. "Light machine-gun," he said.

"But this is impossible!" I said, while he readjusted his tie. "That little packet there must have cut one or two big arteries and smashed your spine to smithereens."

"Sure it did," said Corporal Cuckoo.

"And how old did you say you were?" I asked.

Corporal Cuckoo replied, "Round about four hundred and thirty-eight."

"Thirty-eight?"

"I said four hundred and thirty-eight."

The man is mad, I thought. "Born 1907?" I asked.

"1507," said Corporal Cuckoo, fingering the dent in his skull. Then he went on, half-dreamily. (How am I to describe his manner? It was repulsively compounded of thick stupidity, low cunning, anxiety, suspicion and sordid calculation—it made me remember a certain peasant who tried to sell me an American wristwatch near Saint Jacques in 1944. But Corporal Cuckoo talked American, at first leering at me in the dim light, and feeling his shirt as if to assure himself that all his scars were safely buttoned away.) He said, slowly, "Look . . . I'll give you the outline. It's no use you trying to sell the outline, see? You're a newspaperman. Though you might know what the whole story would be worth, there's no use you trying to sell what I'm giving you now, because you haven't got a hope in hell. But I've got to get back to work, see? I want some dough."

I said, "For roses, chickens, bees and turpentine?"

He hesitated, and then said, "Well, yes," and rubbed his head again.

"Does it bother you?" I asked.

"Not if I don't touch that stuff you gave me," he replied, dreamily resentful.

"Where did you get that scar?" I asked.

"Battle of Turin," he said.

"I don't remember any Battle of Turin, Corporal Cuckoo. When was that?"

"Why, *the* Battle of Turin. I got this in the Pass of Suze."

"You were wounded in the Pass of Suze at the Battle of Turin, is that right? When was that?" I asked.

"In 1536 or 1537. King François sent us up against the

Marquess de Guast. The enemy was holding the pass, but we broke through. That was my first smell of gunpowder."

"You were there of course, Corporal Cuckoo?"

"Sure I was there. But I wasn't a corporal then, and my name was not Cuckoo. They called me Lecocu. My real name was Lecoq. I came from Yvetot. I used to work for a man who made linen—Nicolas, the——"

Two or three minutes passed, while the corporal told me what he thought of Nicolas. Then, having come down curse by curse out of a red cloud of passion, he continued: . . . To cut it short, Denise ran off, and all the kids in the town were singing:

Lecoq, lecoq, lecoq,
Lecoq, lecoq, lecocu.

I got the hell out of it and joined the army. . . . I'm not giving you anything you can make anything of, see? This is the layout, see? . . . Okay. I was about thirty, then, and in pretty good shape. Well, so when King François sent us to Turin—Monsieur de Montagan was Colonel-General of Infantry—my Commander, Captain Le Rat, led us up a hill to a position, and we sure had a hot five minutes! It was anybody's battle until the rest cut through, and then we advanced, and I got *this.*"

The Corporal touched his head. I asked, "How?"

"From a halberdier. You know what a halberd is, don't you? It's a sort of heavy ax on the end of a ten-foot pole. You can split a man down to the waist with a halberd, if you know how to handle it. See? If it had landed straight—well, I guess I wouldn't be here right now. But I saw it coming, see, and I ducked, and just as I ducked my foot slipped in some blood, and I fell sideways. But all the same that halberdier got me. Right here, just where the scar is. See? Then everything went sort of black-and-white, and black, and I passed out. But I wasn't dead, see? I woke up, and there was the army doctor, with a cheap steel breast-plate on—no helmet—soaked with blood up to the elbows. *Our* blood, you can bet your life—you know what medical officers are?"

I said soothingly, "Oh yes, I know, I know. And this, you say, was in 1537?"

"Maybe 1536, I don't remember exactly. As I was saying, I woke up, and I saw the doctor, and he was talking to some other doctor that I couldn't see; and all around men were shouting their heads off—asking their friends to cut their throats and put them out of their misery . . asking for priests . . . I thought I was in hell. My head was split wide open, and I could feel a sort of draft playing through my brains, and everything was going *bump-bump, bumpety-bump, bump-bump-bump.* But although I couldn't move or speak I could see and hear what was going on. The doctor looked at me and said . . ."

Corporal Cuckoo paused. "He said?" I asked, gently.

"Well," said Corporal Cuckoo, with scorn, "you don't even know the meaning of what you were reading in your little book—*Pipeur ou hasardeur de dez,* and all that—even when it's put down in cold print. I'll put it so that you'll understand. The doctor said something like this: 'Come here and look, sir, come and see! This fellow's brains were bursting out of his head. If I had applied Theriac, he would be buried and forgotten by now. Instead, having no Theriac, for want of something better, I applied my Digestive. And see what has happened. His eyes have opened! Observe, also that the bones are creeping together and over this beating brain a sort of skin is forming. My treatment must be right, because God is healing him!' Then the one I couldn't see said something like: 'Don't be a fool, Ambroise. You're wasting your time and your medicine on a corpse.' Well, the doctor looked down at me, and touched my eyes with the ends of his fingers—like this—and I blinked. But the one I couldn't see said: 'Must you waste time and medicine on the dead?'

"After I blinked my eyes, I couldn't open them again. I couldn't see. But I could still hear, and when I heard that, I was as scared as hell they were going to bury me alive. And I couldn't move. But the doctor I'd seen said: 'After five days this poor soldier's flesh is still sweet, and, weary as I am, I have my wits about me, and I swear to you that I saw his eyes open.' Then he called out: 'Jehan! Bring the Digestive! . . . By your leave, sir, I will keep this man

until he comes back to life, or begins to stink. And into this wound I am going to pour some more of my Digestive.'

"Then I felt something running into my head. It hurt like hell. It was like ice water dripped into your brains. I thought *This is it!*—and then I went numb all over, and then I went dead again, until I woke up later in another place. The young doctor was there, without his armor this time, but he had a sort of soft hat on. This time I could move and talk, and I asked for something to drink. When he heard me talk, the doctor opened his mouth to let out a shout, but stopped himself, and gave me some wine out of a cup. But his hands were shaking so that I got more wine in my beard than in my mouth. I used to wear a beard in those days, just like you—only a bigger one, all over my face. I heard somebody come running from the other end of the room. I saw a boy—maybe fifteen or sixteen years old. This kid opened his mouth and started to say something, but the doctor got him by the throat and said . . . put it like this: 'For your life, Jehan, be quiet!'

"The kid said: 'Master! You have brought him back from the dead!'

"Then the doctor said: 'Silence, for your life, or do you want to smell burning faggots?'

"Then I went to sleep again, and when I woke up I was in a little room with all the windows shut and a big fire burning so that it was hotter than hell. The doctor was there, and his name was Ambroise Paré. Maybe you have read about Ambroise Paré?"

"Do you mean the Ambroise Paré who became an army surgeon under Anne de Montmorency in the army of Francis the First?"

Corporal Cuckoo said, "That's what I was saying, wasn't it? François Premier, Francis the First, De Montmorency was our Lieutenant-General, when we got mixed up with Charles V. The whole thing started between France and Italy, and that's how I came to get my head cracked when we went down the hill near Turin. I told you, didn't I?"

"Corporal Cuckoo," I said, "you have told me that you are four hundred and thirty-eight years old. You were born in 1507, and left Yvetot to join the army after your wife

made a fool of you with a linen merchant named Nicolas. Your name was Lecoq, and the children called you Lecocu. You fought at the Battle of Turin, and were wounded in the Pass of Suze about 1537. Your head was cut open with a halberd, or poleax, and some of your brains came out. A surgeon named Ambroise Paré poured into the wound in your head what you called a Digestive. So you came back to life—more than four hundred years ago! Is this right?"

"You've got it," said Corporal Cuckoo, nodding. "I knew you'd get it."

I was stupefied by the preposterousness of it all, and could only say, with what must have been a silly giggle, "Well, my venerable friend; by all accounts, after four hundred and thirty-odd years of life you ought to be tremendously wise—as full of wisdom, learning, and experience as the British Museum Library."

"Why?" asked Corporal Cuckoo.

"Why? Well," I said, "it's an old story. A philosopher, let us say, or a scientist, doesn't really begin to learn anything until his life is almost ended. What wouldn't he give for five hundred extra years of life? For five hundred years of life he'd sell his soul, because given that much time, knowledge being power, he could be master of the whole world."

Corporal Cuckoo said, "Baloney! What you say might go for philosophers, and all that. They'd just go on doing what they were interested in, and they might—well—learn how to turn iron into gold, or something. But what about a baseball player, for instance, or a boxer? What would they do with five hundred years? What they were fit to do—swing bats or throw leather! What would *you* do?"

"Why, of course, you're right, Corporal Cuckoo," I said. "I'd just go on and on banging a typewriter and chucking my money down the drain, so that in five hundred years from now I'd be no wiser and no richer than I am at this moment."

"No, wait a minute," he said, tapping my arm with a finger that felt like a rod of iron, and leering at me shrewdly. "You'd go on writing books and things. You're paid on a

percentage basis, so in five hundred years you'd have more than you could spend. But how about me? All I'm fit for is to be in the army. I don't give a damn for philosophy, and all that stuff. It don't mean a thing to me. I'm no wiser now than I was when I was thirty. I never did go in for reading, and all that stuff, and I never will. My ambition is to get me a place like Jack Dempsey's on Broadway."

"I thought you said you wanted to grow roses, and chickens, and bees, and turpentine trees and whatnot," I said.

"Yeah, that's right."

"How do you reconcile the two? . . . I mean, how does a restaurant on Broadway fit in with bees and roses et cetera?"

"Well, it's like this . . ." said Corporal Cuckoo.

". . . I told you about how Doctor Paré healed up my head when it was split open so that my brains were coming out. Well, after I could walk about a bit he let me stay in his house, and I can tell you, he fed me on the fat of the land, though he didn't live any too damn well himself. Yeahp, he looked after me like a son—a hell of a lot better than my old man ever looked after me: chickens, eggs in wine, anything I wanted. If I said, 'I guess I'd like a pie made with skylarks for dinner," I had it. If I said, 'Doc, this wine is kind of sour,' up came a bottle of Alicante or something. Inside two or three weeks, I was fitter and stronger than I'd ever been before. So then I got kind of restless and said I wanted to go. Well, Doctor Paré said he wanted me to stay. I said to him, 'I'm an active man, Doc, and I've got my living to get; and before I got this little crack on the head I heard that there was money to be made in one army or another right now.'

"Well, then Doctor Paré offered me a couple of pieces of gold to stay in his house for another month. I took the money, but I knew then that he was up to something, and I went out of my way to find out. I mean, he was Army Surgeon, and I was nothing but a lousy infantryman. There was a catch in it somewhere, see? So I acted dumb, but I kept my eyes open, and made friends with Jehan, the kid

that helped around the doctor's office. This Jehan was a big-eyed, skinny kid, with one leg a bit shorter than the other, and he thought I was a hell of a fellow when I cracked a walnut between two fingers, and lifted up the big table, that must have weighed about five hundred pounds, on my back. This Jehan, he told me he'd always wanted to be a powerful guy like me. But he'd been sick since before he was born, and might not have lived at all if Doctor Paré hadn't saved his life. Well, so I went to work on Jehan, and I found out what the doctor's game was. You know doctors, eh?"

Corporal Cuckoo nudged me, and I said, "Uhuh, go on."

"Well it seems that up to the time when we got through the Pass of Suze, they'd treated what they called 'poisoned wounds' with boiling oil of elder with a dash of what they called Theriac. Theriac was nothing much more than honey and herbs. Well, so it seems that by the time we went up the hill, Doctor Paré had run out of the oil of elder and Theriac, and so, for want of something better, he mixed up what he called a Digestive.

"My Commander, Captain Le Rat, the one that got the bullet that smashed up his ankle, was the first one to be dosed with the Digestive. His ankle got better," said Corporal Cuckoo, snapping his fingers, "like *that*. I was the third or fourth soldier to get a dose of Doctor Paré's Digestive. The doc was looking over the battlefield, because he wanted a dead body to cut up on the side. You know what doctors are. This kid Jehan told me he wanted a brain to play around with. Well, there was I, see, with my brains showing. All the doctor had to do was, reach down and help himself. Well, to cut it short, he saw that I was breathing, and wondered how the hell a man could be breathing after he'd got what I had. So he poured some of his Digestive into the hole in my head, tied it up, and watched for developments. I told you what happened then. I came back to life. More than that, the bones in my head grew together. Doctor Ambroise Paré believed he'd got something. So he was keeping me sort of under observation, and making notes.

"I know doctors. Well, anyway, I went to work on Jehan. I said, 'Be a good fellow, Jehan, tell a pal what *is* this Digestive, or whatever your master calls it?'

"Jehan said, 'Why, sir, my master makes no secret of it. It is nothing but a mixture of egg yolks, oil of roses, and turpentine.' (I don't mind telling you that, bub, because it's already been printed)."

I said to Corporal Cuckoo, "I don't know how the devil you come by these curious facts, but I happen to know that they're true. They are available in several histories of medicine. Ambroise Paré's Digestive, with which he treated the wounded after the Battle of Turin, was, as you say, nothing but a mixture of oil of roses, egg yolks, and turpentine. And it is also a fact that the first wounded man upon whom he tried it really was Captain Le Rat, in 1537. Paré said at the time. 'I dressed his wounds and God healed him.' . . . Well?"

"Yeahp," said Corporal Cuckoo, with a sneer. "Sure. Turpentine, oil of roses, egg. That's right. You know the proportions?"

"No, I don't," I said.

"I know you don't, bub. Well, I do. See? And I'll tell you something else. It's not just oil of roses, eggs and turpentine—there was one another thing Doc Paré slipped in in my case, for an experiment—see? And I know what it is."

I said, "Well, go on."

"Well, I could see that this Doctor Ambroise Paré was going to make something out of me, see? So I kept my eyes open, and I waited, and I worked on Jehan, until I found out just where the doctor kept his notebook I mean, in those days you could get sixty or seventy thousand dollars for a bit of bone they called a 'unicorn's horn.' Hell, I mean, if I had something that could just about bring a man back from the dead—draw his bones together and put him on his feet in a week or two, even if his brains were coming out—hell, everybody was having a war then, and I could have been rich in a few minutes."

I said, "No doubt about that. What——"

"What the hell——" said Corporal Cuckoo, "what the

hell right did he have to use me for a guinea pig? Where would he have been if it hadn't been for me? And where do you think I'd have been after? Out on my neck with two or three gold pieces, while the doctor grabbed the credit and made millions out of it. I wanted to open a place in Paris—girls and everything, see? Could I do that on two or three gold pieces? I ask you! Okay; one night when Doctor Paré and Jehan were out, I took his notebook, slipped out of a window, and got the hell out of it.

"As soon as I thought I was safe, I went into a saloon, and drank some wine, and got into conversation with a girl. It seems somebody else was interested in this girl, and there was a fight. The other guy cut me in the face with a knife. I had a knife too. You know how it is—all of a sudden I felt something pulling my knife out of my hand, and I saw that I'd pushed it between this man's ribs. He was one of those mean little guys, about a hundred and twenty pounds, with a screwed-up face. (She was a great big girl with yellow hair). I could see that I'd killed him, so I ran for my life, and I left my knife where it was—stuck tight between his ribs. I hid out, expecting trouble. But they never found me. Most of that night I lay under a hedge. I was pretty sick. I mean, he'd cut me from just under the eye to the back of my head—and cut me deep. He'd cut the top of my right ear off, clean. It wasn't only that it hurt like hell, but I knew I could be identified by that cut. I'd left half an ear behind me. It was me for the gallows, see? So I kept as quiet as I could, in a ditch, and went to sleep for a few hours before dawn. And then, when I woke up, that cut didn't hurt at all, not even my ear—and I can tell you that a cut ear sure does hurt. I went and washed my face in a pond, and when the water got still enough so I could see myself, I saw that that cut and this ear had healed right up so that the marks looked five years old. All that in half a night! So I went on my way. About two days later, a farmer's dog bit me in the leg—took a piece out. Well, a bite like that ought to take weeks to heal up. But mine didn't. It was all healed over by next day, and there was hardly a scar. That stuff Paré poured into my head had made me so that any wound

I might get, anywhere, any time, would just heal right up—like magic. I know I had something when I grabbed those papers of Paré's. But this was terrific!"

"You had them still, Corporal Cuckoo?"

"What do you think? Sure I had them, wrapped up in a bit of linen and tied round my waist, four pieces of it . . . not paper, the other stuff, parchment. That's it, parchment. Folded across, and sewn up along the fold. The outside bit was blank, like a cover. But the six pages inside were all written over. The hell of it was, I couldn't read. I'd never been learned. See? Well, I had the best part of my two gold pieces left, and I pushed on to Paris."

I asked, "Didn't Ambroise Paré say anything?"

Corporal Cuckoo sneered again. "What the hell could he say?" he asked. "Say what? Say he'd resurrected the dead with his Digestive? That would have finished him for sure. Where was his evidence? And you can bet your life that kid Jehan kept *his* mouth shut; he wouldn't want the doctor to know he'd squealed. See? No, nobody said a word. I got into Paris okay."

"What did you do there?" I asked.

"My idea was to find somebody I could trust to read those papers for me, see? If you want to know how I got my living, well, I did the best I could—never mind what. Well, one night, in a place where I was, I came across a student, mooching drinks, an educated man with no place to sleep. I showed him the doctor's papers, and asked him what they meant. They made him think a bit, but he got the hang of them. The doctor had written down just how he'd mixed that Digestive of his, and that only filled up one page. Four of the other pages were full of figures, and the only other writing was on the last page. It was all about me. And how he'd cured me."

I said, "With the yolks of eggs, oil of roses, and turpentine?"

Corporal Cuckoo nodded, and said, "Yeahp. Them three and something else."

I said, "I'll bet you anything you like I know what the fourth ingredient is, in this Digestive."

"What'll you bet?" asked Corporal Cuckoo.

I said, "I'll bet you a beehive."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, Corporal, it stands to reason. You said you wanted to raise chickens, roses, and bees. You said you wanted to go south for turpentine. You accounted for egg yolks, oil of roses, and turpentine in Doctor Paré's formula. What would a man like you want with bees? Obviously the fourth ingredient is honey."

"Yeahp," said Corporal Cuckoo. "You're right, bub. The doctor slipped in some honey." He opened a jackknife, looked at me narrowly, then snapped the blade back again and pocketed the knife, saying, "You don't know the proportions. You don't know how to mix the stuff. You don't know how hot it ought to be, or how slow you've got to let it cool."

"So you have the Secret of Life?" I said. "You're four hundred years old, and wounds can't kill you. It only takes a certain mixture of egg yolks, oil of roses, turpentine and honey. Is that right?"

"That's right," said Corporal Cuckoo.

"Well, didn't you think of buying the ingredients and mixing them yourself?"

"Well, yes, I did. The doctor had said in his notes how the Digestive he'd given to me and Captain Le Rat had been kept in a bottle in the dark for two years. So I made a wine bottle full of the stuff and kept it covered up away from the light for two years, wherever I went. Then me and some friends of mine got into a bit of trouble, and one of my friends, a guy called Pierre Solitude got a pistol bullet in the chest. I tried the stuff on him, but he died. At the same time I got a swordcut in the side. Believe me or not, that healed up in nine hours, inside and out, of its own accord. You can make what you like of that. It all came out of something to do with robbing a church.

"I got out of France, and lived as best I could for about a year until I found myself in Salzburg. That was about four years after the battle in the Pass of Suze. Well, in Salzburg I came across some guy who told me that the greatest doctor in the world was in town. I remember this doctor's name, because, well, who wouldn't? It was Aureo-

lus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim. He'd been a big shot in Basle a few years before. He was otherwise known as Paracelsus. He wasn't doing much then. He hung around, most of the time, drinking himself crazy in a wine cellar called The Three Doves. I met him there one night —it must have been in 1541—and said my piece when nobody else was listening." Corporal Cuckoo laughed harshly.

I said, "Paracelsus was a very great man. He was one of the great doctors of the world."

"Oh, hell, he was only a fat old drunk. Certainly was higher than a kite when I saw him. Yelling his head off, banging on the table with an empty can. When I told him about this stuff, in strict confidence, he got madder than ever, called me everything he could think of—and believe me, he could think of plenty—and bent the can over my head. Broke the skin just where the hair starts. I was going to take a poke at him, but then he calmed down a bit and said in Swiss-German, I think it was, 'Experiment, experiment! A demonstration! A demonstration! If you come back tomorrow and show me that cut perfectly healed, charlatan, I'll listen to you.' Then he burst out laughing, and I thought to myself, I'll give you something to laugh at, bub. So I took a walk, and that little cut healed up and was gone inside an hour. Then I went back to show him. I'd sort of taken a liking to the old soak, see? Well, when I get back to this tavern there's doctor Von Hohenheim, or Paracelsus, if you like, lying on his back dying of a dagger stab. He'd gotten into a fight with a woodcarver, and this woodcarver was as soused as he was, see? And so he let this Paracelsus have it. I never did have no luck, and I never will. We might have got along together, me and him, I only talked to him for half an hour, but so help me, you knew who was the boss when he was there, all right! Oh well, that was that."

"And then?" I asked.

"I'm just giving you the outline, see? If you want the whole story it's going to cost you plenty," said Corporal Cuckoo. "I bummed around Salzburg for a year, got whipped out of town for being a beggar, got the hell out of

it to Switzerland, and signed on with a bunch of paid soldiers, what they called *Condottieri,* under a Swiss colonel, and did a bit of fighting in Italy. There was supposed to be good pickings there. But somebody stole my little bit of loot, and we never even got half our pay in the end. Then I went to France, and met a sea captain by the name of Bordelais who was carrying brandy to England and was short of a man. A fast little English pirate boat stopped us in the Channel, and grabbed the cargo, cut Bordelais' throat and slung the crew overboard—all except me. The Limey Captain, Hawker, liked the look of me. I joined the crew, but I never was much of a sailor. That hooker—hell, she wasn't bigger than one of the lifeboats on this ship—was called the *Harry,* after the King of England, Henry VIII, the one they made a movie about. Still, we did all right. We specialized in French brandy: stopped the Froggy boats in mid-channel, grabbed the cargo, shoved the captain and crew overboard. 'Dead men tell no tales,' old Hawker always said. Well, I jumped the ship somewhere near Rommey, with money in my pocket—I didn't like the sea, see? I'd had half-a-dozen nasty wounds, but they couldn't kill me. I was worried about what'd happen if I went overboard. You could shoot me through the head and not kill me, though it'd hurt like hell for a few days while the wound healed itself. But I just hated to think of what would happen if somebody tried to drown me. Get it? I'd have to wait under water till the fishes ate me, or till I just sort of naturally rotted away—alive all the time. And that's not nice.

"Well, as I was saying, I quit at Rommey and got to London. There was an oldish widow with a linen-draper's business near London Bridge. She had a bit of dough, and she took a fancy to me. Well, what the hell? I got married to her. Lived with her about thirteen years. She was a holy terror, at first, but I corrected her. Her name was Rose, and she died just about when Queen Elizabeth got to be Queen of England. That was around 1558, I guess. She was scared of me—Rose, I mean, not Queen Elizabeth, because I was always playing around with honey, and eggs, and turpentine, and oil of roses. She got older and older,

and I stayed exactly the same as I was when I married her, and she didn't like that one little bit. She thought I was a witch. Said I had the Philosophers' Stone, and knew the secret of perpetual youth. Hah, so help me, she wasn't so damn far wrong. She wanted me to let her in on it. But, as I was saying, I kept working on those notes of Doctor Paré's, and I mixed honey, turpentine, oil of roses, and the yolks of eggs, just as he'd done, in the right proportions, at the proper temperature, and kept the mixture bottled in the dark for the right length of time—and still it didn't work."

I asked Corporal Cuckoo, "How did you find out that your mixture didn't work?"

"Well, I tried it on Rose. She kept on at me till I did. Every now and again we had kind of a lovers' quarrel, and I tried the Digestive on her afterward. But she took as long to heal as any ordinary person would have taken. The interesting thing was, that I not only couldn't be killed by a wound, *I couldn't get any older! I couldn't catch any diseases! I couldn't die!* And you can figure this for yourself: if some stuff that cured any sort of wound was worth a fortune, what would it be worth to me if I had something that would make people stay young and healthy for ever? Eh?" He paused.

I said, "Interesting speculation. You might have given some of the stuff, for example, to Shakespeare. *He* got better and better as he went on. I wonder what he would have arrived at by now? I don't know, though. If Shakespeare had swallowed an elixir of life and perpetual youth when he was very young, he would have remained as he was, young and undeveloped. Maybe he might still be holding horses outside theatres—or whistling for taxis, a stage-struck country boy of undeveloped genius.

"If, on the other hand, he had taken the stuff when he wrote, say, *The Tempest*—there he'd be still, burnt up, worn out, world-weary, tired to death and unable to die. On the other hand, of course, some debauched rake of the Elizabethan period could go on being a debauched rake at high pressure, for centuries and centuries. But, oh my God, how bored he would get after a hundred years or so,

and how he'd long for death! That would be dangerous stuff, that stuff of yours, Corporal Cuckoo!"

"Shakespeare?" he said, "Shakespeare? William Shakespeare. I met him. I met a buddy of his when I was fighting in the Netherlands, and he introduced us when we got back to London. William Shakespeare—puffy-faced man, bald on top; used to wave his hands about when he talked. He took an interest in me. We talked a whole lot together."

"What did he say?" I asked.

Corporal Cuckoo replied, "Oh, hell, how can I remember every god-damn word? He just asked questions, the same as you do. We just talked."

"And how did he strike you?" I asked.

Corporal Cuckoo considered, and then said, slowly, "The kind of man who counts his change and leaves a nickel tip. . . . One of these days I'm going to read his books, but I've never had much time for reading."

I said, "So, I take it that your only interest in Paré's Digestive has been a financial interest. You merely wanted to make money out of it. Is that so?"

"Why, sure," said Corporal Cuckoo. I've had *my* shot of the stuff. *I'm* all right."

"Corporal Cuckoo, has it occurred to you that what you are after is next door to impossible?"

"How's that?"

"Well," I said, "your Paré's Digestive is made of egg yolk, oil of roses, turpentine and honey. Isn't that so?"

"Well, yes. So what? What's impossible about that?"

I said, "You know how a chicken's diet alters the taste of an egg, don't you?"

"Well?"

"What a chicken eats changes not only the taste, but the color of an egg. Any chicken farmer can tell you that. Isn't that so?"

"Well?"

"Well, what a chicken eats goes into the egg, doesn't it—just as the fodder that you feed a cow comes out in the milk? Have you stopped to consider how many different sorts of chickens there have been in the world since the Battle of Turin in 1537, and the varieties of chicken feed

they might have pecked up in order to lay their eggs? Have you thought that the egg yolk is only one of four ingredients mixed in Ambroise Paré's Digestive? Is it possible that it has not occurred to you that this one ingredient involves permutations and combinations of several millions of other ingredients?"

Corporal Cuckoo was silent. I went on, "Then take roses. If no two eggs are exactly alike, what about roses? You come from wine-growing country, you say: then you must know that the mere thickness of a wall can separate two entirely different kinds of wine—that a noble vintage may be crushed out of grapes grown less than two feet away from a vine that is good for nothing. The same applies to tobacco. Have you stopped to think of your roses? Roses are pollinated by bees, bees go from flower to flower, making them fertile. Your oil of roses, therefore, embodies an infinity of possible ingredients. Does it not?"

Corporal Cuckoo was still silent. I continued, with a kind of malicious enthusiasm. "You must reflect on these things, Corporal. Take turpentine. It comes out of trees. Even in the sixteenth century there were many known varieties of turpentine—Chian Terebinthine, and what not. But above all, my dear fellow, consider honey! There are more kinds of honey in the world than have ever been categorized. Every honeycomb yields a slightly different honey. You must know that bees living in heather gather and store one kind of honey, while bees in an apple orchard give us something quite different. It is all honey, of course, but its flavor and quality are variable beyond calculation. Honey varies from hive to hive, Corporal Cuckoo. I say nothing of wild bees' honey."

"Well?" he said, glumly.

"Well. All this is relatively simple, Corporal, in relation to what comes next. I don't know how many beehives there are in the world. Assume that in every hive there are—let us be moderate—one thousand bees. (There are more than that, of course, but I am trying to simplify). You must realize that every one of these bees brings home a slightly different drop of honey. Every one of these bees may, in its travels, take honey from fifty different flowers.

The honey accumulated by all the bees in the hive is mixed together. Any single cell in any honeycomb out of any hive contains scores of subtly different elements! I say nothing of the time element; honey six months old is very different from honey out of the same hive, left for ten years. From day to day, honey changes. Now taking all possible combinations of eggs, roses, turpentine and honey —where are you? Answer me that, Corporal Cuckoo."

Corporal Cuckoo struggled with this for a few seconds, and then said, "I don't get it. You think I'm nuts, don't you?"

"I never said so," I said, uneasily.

"No, you never *said* so. Well, listen. Don't give me all that double talk. I'm doing you a favor. Look——"

He took out and opened his jackknife, and scrutinized his left hand, looking for an unscarred area of skin. "No!" I shouted, and gripped his knife-hand. I might have been trying to hold back the piston rod of a great locomotive. My grip and my weight were nothing to Corporal Cuckoo.

"Look," he said, calmly, and cut through the soft flesh between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand until the knifeblade stopped on the bone, and the thumb fell back until it touched the forearm. "See that?"

I saw it through a mist. The great ship seemed, suddenly, to roll and plunge. "Are you crazy?" I said, as soon as I could.

"No," said Corporal Cuckoo. "I'm showing you I'm not, see?" He held his mutilated hand close to my face.

"Take it away," I said.

"Sure," said Corporal Cuckoo. "Watch this." He pushed the almost-severed thumb back into place, and held it down with his right hand. "It's okay," he said, "there's no need to look sick. I'm showing you, see? Don't go—sit down. I'm not kidding. I can give you a hell of a story, a fact-story. I can show you Paré's little notebook and everything. You saw what I showed you when I pulled up my shirt? You saw what I've got right here, on the left side?"

I said, "Yes."

"Well, that's where I got hit by a nine-pound cannonball when I was on the *Mary Ambree,* fighting against the

Spanish Armada—it smashed my chest so that the ribs went through my heart—and I was walking about in two weeks. And this other one on the right, under the ribs—tomorrow I'll show you what it looks like from the back—I got that one at the battle of Fontenoy; and there's a hell of a good story there. A French cannonball came down and hit a broken sword that a dead officer had dropped, and it sent that sword flying right through me, lungs and liver and all. So help me, it came out through my right shoulder-blade. The other one lower down was a bit of bombshell at the Battle of Waterloo—I was opened up like a pig—it wasn't worth the surgeon's while to do anything about it. But I was on my feet in six days, while men with broken legs were dying like flies. I can prove it, I tell you! And listen—I marched to Quebec with Benedict Arnold. Sit still and listen—my right leg was smashed to pulp all the way down from the hip to the ankle at Balaklava. It knitted together before the surgeon had a chance to get around to me; he couldn't believe his eyes—he thought he was dreaming. I can tell you a hell of a story! But it's worth dough, see? Now, this is my proposition: I'll tell it, you write it, and we'll split fifty-fifty, and I'll start my farm. What d'you say?"

I heard myself saying, in a sickly, stupid voice, "Why didn't you save some of your pay, all those years?"

Corporal Cuckoo replied, with scorn, "Why didn't I save my pay! Because I'm what I *am,* you mug! Hell, once upon a time, if I'd kept away from cards, I could've bought Manhattan Island for less than what I lost to a Dutchman called Bruncker, drawing ace-high for English guineas! Save my pay! If it wasn't one thing it was another. I lay off liquor. Okay. So if it's not liquor it's a woman. I lay off women. Okay. Then it's cards or dice. I always *meant* to save my pay; but I never had it *in* me to save my goddam pay! Doctor Paré's stuff fixed me—and when I say it fixed me, I mean, it *fixed* me, just like I was, and am, and always will be. See? A foot-soldier, ignorant as dirt. It took me nearly a hundred years to learn to write my name, and four hundred years to get to be a corporal. How d'you like that? And it took will power, at that! Now here's my propo-

sition: fifty-fifty on the story. Once I get proper publicity in a magazine, I'll be able to let the Digestive out of my hands with an easy mind, see? because nobody'd dare to try any funny business with a man with nationwide publicity. Eh?"

"No, of course not," I said.

"Eh?"

"Sure, sure, Corporal."

"Good," said Corporal Cuckoo. "Now in case you think I'm kidding, take a look at this. You saw what I done?"

"I saw, Corporal."

"Look," he said, thrusting his left hand under my nose. It was covered with blood. His shirt cuff was red and wet. Fascinated, I saw one thick, sluggish drop crawl out of the cloth near the buttonhole, and hang, quivering, before it fell on my knee. The mark of it is in the cloth of my trousers to this day.

"See?" said Corporal Cuckoo, and he licked the place between his fingers where his knife had cut down. A pale area appeared. "Where did I cut myself?" he asked.

I shook my head; there was no wound—only a white scar. He wiped his knife on the palm of his hand—it left a red smear—and let the blade fall with a sharp click. Then he wiped his left hand on his right, rubbed both hands clean upon the backs of his trouser legs, and said: "Am I kidding?"

"Well!" I said, somewhat breathlessly. "Well——"

"Oh what the hell!" groaned Corporal Cuckoo, weary beyond words, exhausted, worn out by his endeavors to explain the inexplicable and make the incredible sound reasonable. ". . . Look. You think this is a trick? Have you got a knife?"

"Yes. Why?"

"A big knife?"

"Moderately big."

"Okay. Cut my throat with it, and see what happens. Stick it in me wherever you like. And I'll bet you a thousand dollars I'll be all right inside two or three hours. Go

on. Man to man, it's a bet. Or go borrow an ax if you like; hit me over the head with it."

"Be damned if I do," I said, shuddering.

"And that's how it is," said Corporal Cuckoo, in despair. "And that's how it is every time. There they are, making fortunes out of soap and toothpaste, and here I am, with something in my pocket to keep you young and healthy forever—ah, go chase yourself! I never ought to've drunk your rotten Scotch. This is the way it always is. You wear a beard just like I used to wear before I got a gunpowder-burn in the chin at Zutphen, when Sir Philip Sidney got his; or I wouldn't have talked to you. Oh, you dope! I could murder you, so help me I could! Go to hell."

Corporal Cuckoo leaped to his feet and darted away so swiftly that before I found my feet he had disappeared. There was blood on the deck close to where I had been sitting—a tiny pool of blood, no larger than a coffee saucer, broken at one edge by the imprint of a heel. About a yard and a half away I saw another heel mark in blood, considerably less noticeable. Then there was a dull smear, as if one of the bloody rubber heels had spun around and impelled its owner toward the left. "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" I shouted. "Oh, Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

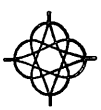
But I never saw Corporal Cuckoo again, and I wonder where he can be. It may be that he gave me a false name. But what I heard I heard, and what I saw I saw; and I have five hundred dollars here in an envelope for the man who will put me in touch with him. Honey and oil of roses, eggs and turpentine; these involve, as I said, infinite permutations and combinations. So does any comparable mixture. Still, it might be worth investigating. Why not? Fleming got penicillin out of mildew. Only God knows the glorious mysteries of the dust, out of which come trees and bees, and life in every form, from mildew to man.

I lost Corporal Cuckoo before we landed in New York on July 11th, 1945. Somewhere in the United States, I believe, there is a man tremendously strong in the arms and covered with terrible scars who has the dreadfully dangerous secret of perpetual youth and life. He appears to be about thirty-odd years of age, and has watery, greenish eyes.

RICHARD MATHESON

On one day the world of science fiction was as ignorant of the name "Richard Matheson" as of the name of the owner of your corner delicatessen; on the next the name ranked in the same rarefied levels as most of the contributors to this volume. What worked the change? It was a simple-enough event; it was the publication of an issue of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, *outwardly no different from any other issue of that very good magazine, but internally distinguished by a story called "Born of Man and Woman." That was Richard Matheson's first, and it was a scary, creepy beauty. And let no man tell you he has since lost the knack; for the proof that he has it still is——*

Dance of The Dead



I wanna RIDE!
with my Rota-Mota honey
by my SIDE!
As we whiz along the highway
"We will HUG and SNUGGLE and we'll have a little STRUGGLE!"

struggle (strŭg' el), **n.**, act of promiscuous love-play; usage evolved during W.W. III.

Double beams spread buttery lamplight on the highway. *Rotor-Motors Convertible, Model C, 1987,* rushed after it. Light spurted ahead, yellow glowing. The car pursued with a twelve-cylindered, snarling pursuit. Night blotted in behind, jet and still. The car sped on.

ST. LOUIS—10

"I wanna FLY!" they sang, "with the Rota-Mota apple of my EYE!" they sang, "It's the only way of living . . ."

The quartet singing: Len, 23
Bud, 24
Barbara, 20
Peggy, 18

Len with Barbara, Bud with Peggy. Bud at the wheel, snapping around tilted curves, roaring up black-shouldered hills, shooting the car across silent flatlands. At the top of three lungs (the fourth gentler), competing with wind that buffeted their heads, that whipped their hair to lashing threads—singing:

"You can have your walkin' under MOONLIGHT BEAMS!

At a hundred miles an hour let me DREAM my DREAMS!"

Needle quivering at 130, two 5-M.P.H. notches from gauge's end. *A sudden dip!* Their young frames jolted and the thrown-up laughter of three was wind-swept into night. Around a curve, darting up and down a hill, flashing across a leveled plain—an ebony bullet skimming earth.

"In my *ROTORY, MOTORY, FLOATERY,* drivin' machi-i-i-i-ine!"

YOU'LL BE A FLOATER
IN YOUR ROTOR-MOTOR

In the back seat: "Have a jab, Bab."

"Thanks, I had one after supper."

(Pushing away needle fixed to eye-dropper.)

In the front seat: "You meana tell me this is the first time you ever been t'Saint Loo!"

"But I just started school in September."

"Hey, you're a *frosh*!"

Back seat joining front seat: "Hey, *frosh,* have a mussle-tussle."

(Needle passed forward, bulb quivering amber juice.)

"*Live* it, girl!"

mussle-tussle (mus' el-tus' el), n., slang for the result of injecting a drug into a muscle; usage evolved during W.W. III.

Peggy's lips failed at smiling. Her fingers twitched.

"No, thanks, I'm not——"

"Come *on*, frosh!" Len leaning hard over the seat, white-browed under black, blowing hair. Pushing the needle at her face. "Live it, girl! Grab a li'l mussle-tussle!"

"I'd rather not," said Peggy, "If you don't——"

"What's *'at*, frosh?" yelled Len and pressed his leg against the pressing leg of Barbara.

Peggy shook her head and golden hair flew across her cheeks and eyes. Underneath her yellow dress, underneath her white brassiere, underneath her young breast—a heart throbbed heavily. *Watch your step, darling, that's all we ask. Remember, you're all we have in the world now.* Mother words drumming at her; the needle making her draw back into the seat.

"*Come* on, frosh!"

The car groaned its shifting weight around a curve; centrifugal force pressed Peggy into Bud's lean hip. His hand dropped down and fingered at her leg. Underneath her yellow dress, underneath her sheer stocking—flesh crawled. Lips failed again; the smile was a twitch of red.

"Frosh, live it up!"

"Lay off, Len, jab your own dates."

"But we gotta teach frosh how to mussle-tussle!"

"Lay off, I said! She's my date!"

The black car roared, chasing its own light. Peggy anchored down the feeling hand with hers. The wind whistled over them and grabbed down chilly fingers at their hair. She didn't want his hand there but she felt grateful to him.

Her vaguely frightened eyes watched the road lurch beneath the wheels. In back, a silent struggle began, taut hands rubbing, parted mouths clinging. Search for the sweet elusive at 120-miles-per-hour.

"Rota-Mota honey," Len moaned the moan between salivary kisses. In the front seat a young girl's heart beat unsteadily.

ST. LOUIS—6

"No kiddin', you never been to Saint Loo?"

"No, I——"

"Then you never saw the loopy's dance?"

Throat contracting suddenly. "No, I—. Is that what—we're going to——"

"Hey, frosh never saw the loopy's dance!" Bud yelled back.

Lips parted, slurping; skirt was adjusted with blasé aplomb. "No kiddin'!" Len fired up the words. "Girl, you haven't lived!"

"Oh, she's *got* to see *that*," said Barbara, buttoning a button.

"Let's go there then!" yelled Len, "Let's give frosh a thrill!"

"Good enough," said Bud and squeezed her leg, "Good enough up here, right, Peg?"

Peggy's throat moved in the dark and the wind clutched harshly at her hair. She'd heard of it; she'd read of it but never had she thought she'd——

Choose your school friends carefully, darling. Be very careful.

But when no one spoke to you for two whole months? When you were lonely and wanted to talk and laugh and be alive? And someone spoke to you finally and asked you to go out with them?

"I yam Popeye, the sailor man!" Bud sang.

In back, they crowed artificial delight. Bud was taking a course in *PRE-WAR COMICS AND CARTOONS—2*. This week the class was studying Popeye. Bud had fallen in love with the one-eyed seaman and told Len and Barbara all about him; taught them dialogue and song.

"I yam Popeye, the sailor man! I like to go swimmin' with bow-legged women! I yam Popeye, the sailor man!"

Laughter. Peggy smiled falteringly. The hand left her leg as the car screeched around a curve and she was thrown against the door. Wind dashed blunt coldness in her eyes and forced her back, blinking—110—115—120 miles per hour.

ST. LOUIS—3

Be very careful, dear.

Popeye cocked a wicked eye.

"O, Olive Oyl, you is my sweet patootie."

Elbow nudging Peggy. "You be Olive Oyl—*you.*"

Peggy smiled nervously. "I can't."

"Sure."

In the back seat, Wimpy came up for air to announce, "I will gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today."

Three fierce voices and a faint fourth raged against the howl of wind. "I fights to the *fi*-nish 'cause I eats my *spin*-ach! I yam Popeye, the sailor man! Toot! Toot!"

"I yam what I yam," reiterated Popeye gravelly and put his hand on the yellow-skirted leg of Olive Oyl. In the back, two members of the quartet returned to feeling struggle.

ST. LOUIS—1

The black car roared through the darkened suburbs. "On with the nosies!" Bud sang out. They all took out their plasticate nose-and-mouth pieces and adjusted them.

ANCE IN YOUR PANTS WOULD BE A PITY!
WEAR YOUR NOSIES IN THE CITY!!

Ance (anse), n., slang for anti-civilian germs; usage evolved during W.W. III.

"You'll like the loopy's dance!" Bud shouted to her over the shriek of wind, "It's sen*saysh!*"

Peggy felt a cold that wasn't of the night or of the wind. *Remember, darling, there are terrible things in the world today. Things you must avoid.*

"Couldn't we go somewhere else?" Peggy said but her voice was inaudible. She heard Bud singing, "I like to go swimmin' with bow-legged women!" She felt his hand on her leg again while, in the back, was the silence of grinding passion without kisses.

Dance of the dead. The words trickled ice across Peggy's brain.

ST. LOUIS

The black car sped into the ruins.

It was a place of smoke and blatant joys. Air resounded

with the bleating of revelers and there was a noise of sounding brass spinning out a cloud of music—1987 music, a frenzy of twisted dissonances. Dancers, shoe-horned into the tiny square of open floor, ground pulsing bodies together. A network of bursting sounds lanced through the mass of them; dancers singing:

"Hurt me! Bruise me! Squeeze me TIGHT!
Scorch my blood with hot DELIGHT!
Please abuse me every NIGHT!
LOVER, LOVER, LOVER, be a *beast-to-me"*

Elements of explosion restrained within the dancing bounds—instead of fragmenting, quivering. "Oh, be a beast, beast, beast, *Beast, BEAST* to me!"

"How is *this,* Olive old goil?" Popeye inquired of the light of his eye as they struggled after the waiter, "Nothin' like this in Sykesville, eh?"

Peggy smiled but her hand in Bud's felt numb. As they passed by a murky lighted table, a hand she didn't see clutched at her leg. She twitched and bumped against a hard knee across the narrow aisle. As she stumbled and lurched through the hot and smoky, thick-aired room, she felt a dozen eyes disrobing her, abusing her. Bud jerked her along and she felt her lips trembling.

"Hey, how about that!" Bud exulted as they sat. "Right by the stage!"

From cigarette mists, the waiter plunged and hovered, pencil-poised, beside their table.

"What'll it be?" his questioning shout cut through cacaphony.

"Whiskey-water!" Bud and Len paralleled orders, then turned to their dates. "What'll it be!" the waiter's request echoed from their lips.

"Green Swamp!" Barbara said *"Green Swamp* here!" Len passed it along. Gin, Invasion Blood (1987 Rum) lime juice, sugar, mint spray, splintered ice—a popular college-girl drink.

"What about you, honey?" Bud asked his date.

Peggy smiled. "Just some ginger ale," she said, her voice a fluttering frailty in the massive clash and fog of smoke.

"What's that, didn't hear!" the waiter shouted.

"Ginger ale."

"What?"

"Ginger ale!"

"GINGER ALE!" Len screamed it out and the drummer, behind the raging curtain of noise that was the band's music, almost heard it. Len banged down his fist. *One—Two—Three!*

CHORUS: *Ginger Ale was only twelve years old! Went to church and was as good as gold! Till that day when——*

"Come *on*, Come *on*!" the waiter squalled, "Let's have that order, kids! I'm busy!"

"Two whiskey-waters and two green swamps!" Len sang out and the waiter was gone into the swirling maniac mist.

Peggy felt her young heart flutter helplessly. *Above all, don't drink when you're out on a date. Promise us that, darling, you must promise us that.* She tried to push away instructions etched in brain.

"How you like this place, honey? *Loopy*, ain't it?" Bud fired the question at her; a red-faced, happy-faced Bud.

loopy (lo͞o′pi), adj., common alter. of L.U.P.

She smiled at Bud, a smile of nervous politeness. Her eyes moved around, her face inclined and she was looking up at the stage. *Loopy*. The word scalpeled at her mind. *Loopy, loopy.*

The stage was five yards deep at the radius of its wooden semi-circle. A waist-high rail girdled in circumference, two pale purple spotlights, unlit, hung at each rail end. Purple on white—the thought came. *Darling, isn't Sykesville Business College good enough? No! I don't want to take a business course, I want to major in art at the University!*

The drinks were brought and Peggy watched the disembodied waiter arm thud down a high, green-looking glass before her. *Presto!*—the arm was gone. She looked into the murky green swamp depths and saw chipped ice bobbing.

"A toast! Pick up your glass, Peg!" Bud clarioned.

They all clinked glasses: "To lust primordial!" Bud toasted.

"To beds inviolate!" Len added.

"To flesh insensate!" Barbara added a third link.

Their eyes zeroed in on Peggy's face, demanding. She didn't understand.

"*Finish* it!" Bud told her, plagued by freshman sluggishness.

"To—u-*us*," she faltered.

"How o-*rig*-inal," stabbed Barbara and Peggy felt heat licking up her smooth cheeks. It passed unnoticed as three Youths of America With Whom The Future Rested gurgled down their liquor thirstily. Peggy fingered at her glass, a smile printed to lips that would not smile unaided.

"Come on, *drink* girl!" Bud shouted to her across the vast distance of one foot, "Chuggalug!"

"Live it, girl," Len suggested abstractedly, fingers searching once more for soft leg. And finding, under table, soft leg waiting.

Peggy didn't want to drink, she was afraid to drink. Mother words kept pounding—*never on a date, honey, never*. She raised the glass a little.

"Uncle Buddy will help, will help!"

Uncle Buddy leaning close, vapor of whiskey haloing his head. Uncle Buddy pushing cold glass to shaking young lips. "Come on, Olive Oyl, old goil! Down the hatch!"

Choking sprayed the bosom of her dress with green swamp droplets. Flaming liquid trickled into her stomach, sending off shoots of fire into her veins.

Bangity boom crash smash POW!! The drummer applied the coup de grâce to what had been, in ancient times, a lover's waltz. Lights dropped and Peggy sat coughing and tear-eyed in the smoky cellar club.

She felt Bud's hand clamp strongly on her shoulder and, in the murk, she felt herself pulled off balance and felt Bud's hot wet mouth pressing at her lips. She jerked away and then the purple spots went on and a mottle-faced Bud drew back, gurgling, "I fights to the finish," and reaching for his drink.

"Hey, the loopies now, the loopies!" Len said eagerly, releasing exploratory hands.

Peggy's heart jolted and she thought she was going to cry out and run thrashing through the dark, smoke-filled room. But a sophomore hand anchored her to the chair and she looked up in white-faced dread at the man who came out on the stage and faced the microphone which, like a metal spider, had swung down to meet him.

"May I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen," he said, a grim-faced, sepulchral-voiced man whose eyes moved out over them like flicks of doom. Peggy's breath was labored, she felt thin lines of green swamp water filtering hotly through her chest and stomach. It made her blink dizzily. *Mother.* The word escaped cells of the mind and trembled into conscious freedom. *Mother, take me home.*

"As you know, the act you are about to see is not for the faint of heart, the weak of will." The man plodded through the words like a cow enmired. "Let me caution those of you whose nerves are not what they ought to be—*leave now.* We make no guarantees of responsibility. We can't even afford to maintain a house doctor."

No laughter appreciative: "Cut the crap and get off stage," Len grumbled to himself. Peggy felt her fingers twitching.

"As you know," the man went on, his voice gilded with learned sonority. "This is not an offering of mere sensation but an honest scientific demonstration."

"Loophole for Loopy's!" Bud and Len heaved up the words with the thoughtless reaction of hungry dogs salivating at a bell.

It was, in 1987, a comeback so rigidly standard it had assumed the status of a catechism answer. A crenel in the post-war law allowed the L.U.P. performance if it was orally prefaced as an exposition of science. Through this legal chink had poured so much abusing of the law that few cared any longer. A feeble government was grateful for recognition of the law at all.

When hoots and shoutings had evaporated in the smoke-clogged air, the man, his arms upraised in patient benediction, spoke again.

Peggy watched the studied movement of his lips, her

heart swollen, then contracted in slow, spasmodic beats. An iciness was creeping up her legs. She felt it rising toward the thread-like fires in her body and her fingers twitched around the chilly moisture of the glass. *I want to go, please take me home*—will-spent words were in her mind again.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the man concluded, "brace yourselves."

A gong sounded its hollow, shivering resonance, the man's voice thickened and slowed.

"The L.U.P. Phenomenon!"

The man was gone, the microphone had risen and was gone. Music began; a moaning brassiness, all muted. A jazzman's conception of *the palpable obscure*—mounted on a pulse of thumping drum. A dolor of saxophone, a menace of trombone, a harnessed bleating of trumpet—they raped the air with stridor.

Peggy felt a shudder plaiting down her back and her gaze dropped quickly to the murky whiteness of the table. Smoke and darkness, dissonance and heat surrounded her.

Without meaning to but driven by an impulse of nervous fear, she raised the glass and drank. The glacial trickle in her throat sent another shudder rippling through her. Then further shoots of liquored heat budded in her veins and a numbness settled in her temples. Through parted lips, she forced out a shaking breath.

Now a restless, murmuring movement started through the room, the sound of it like willows in a soughing wind. Peggy dared not lift her gaze to the purpled silence of the stage. She stared down at the shifting glimmer of her drink, feeling muscle strands draw tightly in her stomach, feeling the hollow thumping of her heart. *I'd like to leave, please let's leave.*

The music labored toward a rasping dissonant climax, its brass components struggling, in vain, for unity.

A hand stroked once at Peggy's leg and it was the hand of Popeye, the sailor man, who muttered roupily, "Olive Oyl, you is my goil." She barely felt or heard, Automaton-like, she raised the cold and sweating glass again and felt the chilling in her throat and then the flaring warmth.

SWISH!!

The curtain swept open with such a rush, she almost dropped her glass. It thumped down heavily on the table, swamp water cascading up its sides and raining on her hand. The music exploded shrapnel of ear-cutting cacaphony and her body jerked. On the tablecloth, her hands twitched white on white, while claws of uncontrollable demand pulled up her frightened eyes.

The music fled, frothing behind a wake of swelling drum rolls.

The night club was a wordless crypt, all breathing checked.

Cobwebs of smoke drifted in the purple light across the stage.

No sound except the muffled, rolling drum.

Peggy's body was a petrifaction in its chair, smitten to rock around her leaping heart, while, through the wavering haze of smoke and liquored dizziness, she looked up in horror to where it stood.

It had been a woman.

Her hair was black, a framing of snarled ebony for the tallow mask that was her face. Her shadow-rimmed eyes were closed behind lids as smooth and white as ivory. Her mouth, a lipless and unmoving line, stood like a clotted sword wound beneath her nose. Her throat, her shoulders and her arms were white, were motionless. At her sides, protruding from the sleeve ends of the green transparency she wore, hung alabaster hands.

Across this marble statue, the spotlight coated purple shimmer.

Still paralyzed, Peggy stared up at its motionless features, her fingers knitted in a bloodless tangle on her lap. The pulse of drumbeats in the air seemed to fill her body, its rhythm altering her heartbeat.

In the black emptiness behind her, she heard Len muttering, "I love my wife but oh, you corpse," and heard the wheeze of helpless snickers that escaped from Bud and Barbara. The cold still rose in her, a silent tidal dread.

Somewhere in the smoke-fogged darkness, a man cleared viscid nervousness from his throat and a murmur of appreciative relief strained through the audience.

Still no motion on the stage, no sound but the sluggish cadence of the drum, thumping at the silence like someone seeking entrance at a far-off door. The thing that was a nameless victim of the plague stood palely rigid while the distillation sluiced through its blood-clogged veins.

Now the drum throbs hastened like the pulsebeat of a rising panic. Peggy felt the chill begin to swallow her. Her throat began to tighten, her breathing was a string of lip-parted gasps. The loopy's eyelid twitched.

Abrupt, black, straining silence webbed the room. Even the breath choked off in Peggy's throat when she saw the pale eyes flutter open. Something creaked in the stillness; her body pressing back unconsciously against the chair. Her eyes were wide, unblinking circles that sucked into her brain the sight of the thing that had been a woman.

Music again; a brass-throated moaning from the dark, like some animal made of welded horns mewling its derangement in a midnight alley.

Suddenly, the right arm of the loopy jerked at its side, the tendons suddenly contracted. The left arm twitched alike, snapped out, then falling back and thudding in purple-white limpness against the thigh. The right arm out, the left arm out, the right, the left-right-left-right—like marionette arms twitching from an amateur's dangling strings.

The music caught the time, drum brushes scratching out a rhythm for the convulsions of the loopy's muscles. Peggy pressed back further, her body numbed and cold, her face a livid, staring mask in the fringes of the stage light.

The loopy's right foot moved now, jerking up inflexibly as the distillation constricted muscles in its leg. A second and a third contraction caused the leg to twitch, the left leg flung out in a violent spasm and then the woman's body lurched stiffly forward, filming the transparent silk to its light and shadow.

Peggy heard the sudden hiss of breath that passed the clenching teeth of Bud and Len and a wave of nausea sprayed foaming sickness up her stomach walls. Before her eyes, the stage abruptly undulated and it seemed as if the flailing loopy were headed straight for her.

Gasping dizzily, she pressed back in horror, unable to take her eyes from its now agitated face.

She watched the mouth jerk to a gaping cavity, then a twisted scar that split into a wound again. She saw the dark nostrils twitching, saw writhing flesh beneath the ivory cheeks, saw furrows dug and undug in the purple whiteness of the forehead. She saw one lifeless eye wink monstrously and heard the gasp of startled laughter in the room.

While music blared into a fit of grating noise, while the woman's arms and legs kept jerking with convulsive cramps that threw her body around the purpled stage like a full-size rag doll given spastic life.

It was nightmare in an endless sleep. Peggy shivered in helpless terror as she watched the loopy's twisting, leaping dance. The blood in her had turned to ice, there was no life in her but the endless, pounding stagger of her heart. Her eyes were frozen spheres staring at the woman's body writhing white and flaccid underneath the clinging silk.

Then, something went wrong.

Up till then, its muscular seizures had bound the loopy to an area of several yards before the amber flat which was the background for its paroxysmal dance. Now its erratic surging drove the loopy toward the stage-encircling rail.

Peggy heard the thump and creaking strain of wood as the loopy's hip collided with the rail. She cringed into a shuddering knot, her eyes still raised fixedly to the purple-splashed face whose every feature was deformed by throes of warping convulsion.

The loopy staggered back and Peggy saw and heard its leprous hands slapping with a fitful rhythm at its silk-scaled thighs.

Again it sprang forward like a maniac marionette and the woman's stomach thudded sickeningly into the railing wood. The dark mouth gaped, clamped shut and then the loopy twisted through a jerking revolution and crashed back against the rail again, almost above the table where Peggy sat.

Peggy couldn't breathe. She sat rooted to the chair, her lips a trembling circle of stricken dread, a pounding of

blood at her temples as she watched the loopy spin again, its arms a blur of flailing white.

The lurid bleaching of its face dropped toward Peggy as the loopy crashed into the waist-high rail again and bent across its top. The mask of lavender-rained whiteness hung above her, dark eyes twitching open in a hideous stare.

Peggy felt the floor begin to move and the livid face was blurred with darkness, then reappeared in a burst of luminosity. Sound fled on brass shod feet, then plunged into her brain again—a smearing discord.

The loopy kept on jerking forward, driving itself against the rail as though it meant to scale it. With every spastic lurch, the diaphanous silk fluttered like a film about its body and every savage collision with the railing tautened the green transparency across its swollen flesh. Peggy looked up in rigid muteness at the loopy's fierce attack, her eyes unable to escape the wild distortion of the woman's face with its black frame of tangled, snapping hair.

What happened then happened in a blurring passage of seconds.

The grim-faced man came rushing across the purple-lighted stage, the thing that had been a woman went crashing, twitching, flailing at the rail, doubling over it, the spasmodic hitching flinging up its muscle-knotted legs.

A clawing fall.

Peggy lurched back in her chair and the scream that started in her throat was forced back into a strangled gag as the loopy came crashing down onto the table, its limbs a thrash of naked whiteness.

Barbara screamed, the audience gasped and Peggy saw, on the fringe of vision, Bud jumping up, his face a twist of stunned surprise.

The loopy flopped and twisted on the table like a new-caught fish. The music went grinding into silence, a rush of agitated murmur filled the room and blackness swept in brain-submerging waves across Peggy's mind.

Then the cold white hand slapped across her mouth, the dark eyes stared at her in purple light and Peggy felt the darkness flooding.

The horror-smoked room went turning on its side.

Consciousness. It flickered in her brain like gauze-veiled candlelight. A murmuring of sound, a blur of shadow before her eyes.

Breath dripped like syrup from her mouth.

"Here, Peg."

She heard Bud's voice and felt the chilly metal of a flask neck pressed against her lips. She swallowed, twisting slightly at the trickle of fire in her throat and stomach, then coughed and pushed away the flask with deadened fingers.

Behind her, a rustling movement. "Hey, she's *back,*" Len said, "Ol' Olive Oyl is back."

"You feel all right?" asked Barbara.

She felt all right. Her heart was like a drum hanging from piano wire in her chest, slowly, slowly beaten. Her hands and feet were numb not with cold but with a sultry torpor. Thoughts moved with a tranquil lethargy, her brain a leisurely machine imbedded in swaths of woolly packing.

She felt all right.

Peggy looked across the night with sleepy eyes. They were on a hilltop, the convertible braked crouching on a jutting edge. Far below, the country slept, a carpet of light and shadow beneath the chalky moon.

An arm snake moved around her waist. "Where are we?" she asked him in a languid voice.

"Few miles outside school," Bud said, "How d'ya feel, honey?"

She stretched, her body a delicious strain of muscles. She sagged back, limp, against his arm.

"Wonderful," she murmured with a dizzy smile and scratched the tiny itching bump on her left shoulder. Warmth radiated through her flesh; the night was a sabled glow. There seemed—*somewhere*—to be a memory but it crouched in secret behind folds of thick content.

"Woman, you were *out,*" laughed Bud and Barbara added and Len added, *"Were* you!" and "Olive Oyl went *plunko!*"

"Out?" Her casual murmur went unheard.

The flask went around and Peggy drank again, relaxing further as the liquor needled fire through her veins.

"Man, I never saw a loopy dance like that!" Len said.

A momentary chill across her back, then warmth again. "Oh," said Peggy. "That's right. I forgot."

She smiled.

"That was what I calls a grande finale!" Len said, dragging back his willing date, who murmured, *"Lenny* boy."

"L.U.P.," Bud muttered, nuzzling at Peggy's hair, "Son of a gun." He reached out idly for the radio knob.

L.U.P. (Lifeless Undead Phenomenon)—This freak of physiological abnormality was discovered during the war when, following certain germ-gas attacks, many of the dead troops were found erect and performing the spasmodic gyrations which, later, became known as the "loopy's" (L.U.P's) dance. The particular germ spray responsible was later distilled and is now used in carefully controlled experiments which are conducted only under the strictest of legal license and supervision.

Music surrounded them, its melancholy fingers touching at their hearts. Peggy leaned against her date and felt no need to curb exploring hands. Somewhere, deep within the jellied layers of her mind, there was something trying to escape. It fluttered like a frantic moth imprisoned in congealing wax, struggling wildly but only growing weaker in attempt as the chrysalis hardened.

Four voices sang softly in the night.

"If the world is here tomorrow
I'll be waiting, dear, for you
If the stars are there tomorrow
I'll be wishing on them too."

Four young voices singing, a murmur in immensity. Four bodies, two by two, slackly warm and drugged. A singing, an embracing—a wordless accepting.

"Star light, star bright
Let there be another night."

The singing ended but the song went on.

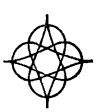
A young girl sighed.

"Isn't it romantic?" said Olive Oyl.

CHAD OLIVER

Astute readers of Shadows in the Sun *will have observed that the author of that novel* (a) *possessed an exact knowledge of small-town American life;* (b) *brought to science fiction the disciplines of anthropology; and* (c) *had fused the familiar and the hypothetical into as exciting a novel of the conflict of cultures as has yet appeared. This is not at all surprising when you consider that Chad Oliver comes to science fiction via Crystal City, Texas (Pop. 7,198), the University of California at Los Angeles (where he is completing the requirements for a Ph.D. in Anthropology) and* The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction *(which published his first story, "The Boy Next Door," back in 1950). Forty short stories and novelettes have since established the distinctive quality of Chad Oliver's fiction—qualities you will want to sample for yourself in——*

Any More at Home Like You?



The ship came down through the great night, across a waterless sea where the only islands were stars and the warm winds never blew.

It glowed into a high, cold yellow when it brushed into the atmosphere above the Earth. It lost speed, floating down toward the distant shore that marked the end of its voyage. It whistled in close, feeling the tug of the world below.

At first, only darkness.

Then lights.

A new kind of darkness.

The ship angled up again, trying to rise, but it was too late. It crashed gently and undramatically into a hillside and was still.

Journey's end.

The ship's only occupant, cushioned by automatic safety devices, was shaken but unhurt. He spoke rapidly in a strange language into a microphone. He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and climbed out of his broken ship, his hands trembling. A damp and chilly night closed in around him.

If he could get away before he was seen it would simplify matters greatly. He looked around. He seemed to be about a quarter of the way down a brush-covered hill. There were lights on the black ridge above him, and a string of lights marking a canyon road below him. There was a house on the hill, not fifty yards away. He would have to hurry. . . .

No. Too late for that now.

A flashlight moved toward him along the path, picking him out. He had been seen. His hand moved toward his pocket, nervously.

A voice, "What happened? Are you all right?"

He tried to remember his instructions. He must be very careful. Everything depended on these first few moments.

"I'm all right," he said, blinking at the light. "There's been an accident."

The light shifted to the ship that had smashed into the brush. "What's that? I never saw a plane like that before."

Be careful. "It's an experimental model."

"You a test pilot?"

"No."

"You an Air Force man?"

"No."

"I think you'd better come inside. It's cold out here."

He hesitated.

"I'll have to report this, you know. You got any identification?"

He tried to change the subject. "Where am I? I lost my bearings."

The man with the flashlight waved down below. "That there is Beverly Glen. Up on top is Bel-Air road, right at the end of it."

"What city is this?"

"Man, you *are* confused. This is Los Angeles. Come on inside."

Los Angeles.

He followed the man along a path flanked by orange trees to a small bungalow. He walked into the house, into the light. A refrigerator hummed in the little room back of the kitchen.

"Let's have a look at you," the man with the flashlight said.

The man from the ship stood still, his face expressionless. He was quite young, tall, with straw-colored hair. He was dressed in sport clothes.

"You *look* okay," the man said, still holding his flashlight. "My name's Frank Evans."

"I am called Keith."

"Keith what?"

"Just—Keith."

"Ummmm."

A young woman came in from the living room. She was dressed in matador pants and a red shirt, but was passably attractive.

"My wife, Babs," Frank Evans introduced them. "This guy is Keith Somebody. He was in that ship that tore up the hill."

"I thought this was the Arizona desert," Keith said, trying to smile.

"I'd hate to see you make a *real* mistake, mister," Babs said throatily.

"So would I," Keith said seriously.

"You got no identification, you say?" Frank repeated.

"No. It's not necessary."

"Well, I have to report this. You understand. Unidentified aircraft and stuff. You got nothing to worry about if you're on the level. Phone the cops, Babs."

The woman went into the living room. They were alone.

"Care for a beer?" Frank asked.

It's too late. I'll have to play along. "Thank you."

"Come on in and be comfortable while we're waiting," Frank said. "You were lucky to get out of that one alive."

He followed Frank into the living room, which was

painted a singular shade of green, and sat down on a couch. He lit a cigarette and noticed that his hands were still shaking.

"You like bop?" Frank said suddenly.

"Bop?"

"You'll like *this,*" Babs said, coming in from the telephone. "Frank knows his music."

"It'll help you relax," Frank said. "Hi-fi and everything. I work in a record shop over in Westwood." He adjusted a mammoth speaker. "You go for Dizzy? Theolonius Monk on piano. Great bongo solo, too."

Noise filled the room.

The man called Keith sipped his beer nervously and was almost glad when the police arrived ten minutes later. The two policemen looked at the wrecked ship, whistled, and promised to send a crew out in the morning.

"You'd better ride in with us," one of them said finally. "You must be pretty well shaken up."

"I'm all right," Keith said.

"I think you'd better ride in with us. Just a formality, really."

Don't get into any trouble. Don't antagonize anyone. "I suppose you're right. Thanks for the beer, Frank."

"Don't mention it. Hope everything turns out okay."

The policemen led him up a narrow, winding asphalt trail to Bel-Air Road. A black police car, with a red light on top that flashed monotonously on and off, was parked on a bluff. There were people gathered around the car.

Keith paused a moment, ignoring the crowd. They were high above the city, and he could see Bel Air Road winding down the hill like a string of white Christmas tree bulbs. Far below was the city of Los Angeles, a design mosaic with a billion twinkling lights.

"I guess I'll have to go all the way to the President," he said wearily.

"Yeah," said one cop, not unkindly. "Come on, we'll see if the door's unlocked at the White House."

They got into the black car and went down through the night, past all the palaces of the Bel-Air elite. It was cold and damp, and a long way down.

The next day the papers had the story, and they kicked it around joyfully.

Four of them played it strictly for laughs:

COFFEE SPILLED IN BEL-AIR AS SAUCER FALLS. PROMINENT MARTIAN ARRIVES HERE FOR VISIT. SPACE INVADER FOILED BY SMOG. INTERPLANETARY PATROL GETS SIGNALS MIXED.

One tabloid, with tongue firmly in cheek, ran it straight:

FANTASTIC SHIP FALLS IN BEL-AIR; SCIENTISTS TO INVESTIGATE

All of the papers carried pictures of the crashed ship, which looked nothing whatever like a saucer, flying or otherwise. All of the papers carried pictures of the man called Keith, and the overwhelming impression given by the photographs was that of his extreme youth. He could not have been over twenty-five, by Earthly standards, and it was difficult to take him seriously as a menace.

The second day after the crash the papers had two further bits of concrete information to pass along to their readers. The first was that engineers were subjecting the ship to a surprisingly intensive analysis. The second was that Keith had taken to writing down in a strange script all the conversations that occurred within his hearing. By this time, of course, the stories were buried in the back pages of the papers.

In a way, the most interesting thing was what the newspapers *didn't* print. The usual follow-up story was conspicuous by its absence. No one tried to explain the so-called flying saucer away as a promotion stunt for a new George Pal movie. No enterprising reporter dug up the leads that would connect Keith to the Pacific Rocket Society, the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, the White Sands proving grounds, the Rosicrucians, the November elections or the end of the world.

And Keith wasn't volunteering any information. He went out of his way to be agreeable, and he kept on taking careful, detailed notes on what people said to him. After the third day, there were no more stories. As far as the readers were concerned, Keith had been a three-day wonder who

had run his course, and there were two diverting new Hollywood divorces to fill up the headlines.

What the papers knew, but couldn't print, was that Keith had been quietly hustled off to Washington.

Eventually, after being shuttled through the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the UnAmerican Activities Committee, Keith reached the State Department.

He was still taking elaborate notes, often asking a person to repeat a word or phrase that he had not heard clearly. His writing might have been anything from Aztec to the International Phonetic Alphabet, so far as anyone could tell.

John William Walls of the State Department looked so much like a diplomat that he could hardly have found employment as anything else short of a whiskey ad in *The New Yorker*. He was slim to the point of emaciation, immaculately dressed, and his perfectly brushed hair was graying at the temples. He drummed his well-manicured nails on his highly polished desk and pursed his thin lips.

"Your case poses many extremely serious problems for us, Keith," he said, smiling disarmingly.

Keith scribbled in his notebook. "I didn't mean to cause any trouble," he said. His hair was freshly cut, but he had deep circles under his eyes. He lit another cigarette and tried not to fidget on his leather chair.

"Of course you didn't, Keith. But the unpleasant fact remains that we must deal with actions, not intentions. You have placed this government in a quite intolerable position."

"I'm sorry. I have tried to explain my willingness to cooperate fully with the authorities here."

John William Walls leaned back in his chair and built pyramids with his long, clean fingers. "Your reticence really gives us very little choice in the matter, Keith," he said, warming to his topic. "I wish to be entirely frank with you. Your ship is unquestionably of extra-terrestrial origin. You have come through space, from some unknown world,

and landed on our territory without official permission. Do you realize what this means?"

"I'm beginning to," Keith said.

"Of course." Walls inserted a cigarette in a long ivory holder and lit it with a gleaming lighter. "Let us proceed, then. "You have crossed the void between the worlds in a ship of very advanced design. There is no getting around the fact that you represent a civilization far more powerful than our own. Candidly—for I wish to be entirely honest with you, Keith—you are stronger than we are. You would agree to that?"

"I suppose so."

"Yes. Exactly. Now, we would like to believe that you have come to us with peaceful intentions. We would like to believe that you have come here to facilitate peaceful commerce between our two civilizations. We are, I may say, willing to make some concessions. However, we would *not* like to think that your intentions toward us are hostile. We should really be forced to take stern measures if we had reason to doubt your good will. I hope I make myself entirely clear, Keith. We want to be your friends."

The implied threat was not lost on Keith. He looked up wearily, the stub of a cigarette burning in the corner of his mouth. "I have no hostile intentions. I've told you that, just as I've told about one million senators and policemen. You'll just have to take my word for it."

The refined mouth of Mr. Walls curved gently into a smile. "We are grown men, Keith. We have larger considerations to think about. It is imperative that we nail this thing down, so to speak. You have been briefed on the political situation that exists on this planet. It is necessary that we establish the relationship between our two civilizations on a firm foundation. Do you understand me?"

"Well——"

"Clearly, there is no alternative." John William Walls crossed his long legs, being careful not to disturb the razor crease in his trousers. "I think you will agree that we have extended to you every courtesy. The time has now come for you to demonstrate your good will in return. We have indicated to you the proper way to proceed, and our staff

is willing and able to give you every assistance. I trust you will not disappoint us."

Keith wrote earnestly in his notebook. He remembered his instructions. "I've told you that I don't want to cause any trouble," he said. "We'll play it your way."

Mr. Walls beamed, his well-tended face radiating pleasure like shaving lotion. "I knew we would be friends, Keith. I'm proud to have had a small part in the birth of a new era."

Keith started to say something, but changed his mind. Nervously, he lit a fresh cigarette.

Within a week, photographs of Keith shaking hands with the President appeared in every newspaper in the world. The President looked exceptionally serious, and Keith looked very young, and vaguely troubled. The government played its hand with considerable skill. Keith was kept under wraps while the tension built up, and around the world people wondered and worried and hoped.

This concise editorial appeared in *The New York Times:*

"A young man has come from nowhere to our planet. He has come in a ship so advanced that it makes our finest aircraft look like the amusing toy of a child. It may be assumed that the civilization which designed and built that ship has also designed and built other ships.

"The emissary they have sent to us appears to be a rather shy, personable young man. He seems well-intentioned, although the evidence on this point leaves much to be desired. We can meet this man on his own terms if we wish, if not as equals, then at least as friends.

"But as we look at this man, so much like ourselves, we cannot but wonder why *he* was chosen for this task. We know nothing of his world. We know nothing of the people he represents. They may, as he says, wish to be our friends. They may be offering us the greatest opportunity we have ever had.

"We remember the Indians who first lived in our land. The first white men they saw did not frighten them. They thought these men were godlike, and they admired their strange ways and vastly superior technologies. The Indians

knew nothing of the white men who were still to come.

"We look today at this young man who has come among us. We look at him and like him and admire the ship in which he came. We would ask of him only one question:

"Are there any more at home like you?"

The editorial was widely quoted, and seemed certain to bring another Pulitzer Prize to *The New York Times.*

Late in January, Keith lived up to his obligations by addressing the United Nations. There was, of course, tremendous popular interest in his speech, and the television and radio crews turned out in force.

Keith took careful notes all during the elaborate introductory speeches, and seemed genuinely interested in listening to what the assorted delegates had to say. His appearance was still on the haggard side, and he looked anything but eager.

He took his place under the bright lights before the cameras and microphones with reluctance. His hands were trembling. He had to clear his throat several times.

Once he got going, however, his speech was impressive.

"I have come to a New World," he began in English, pausing to permit accurate translation of his words. "I have come across the greatest sea of them all. I have come not at the head of an armed flotilla, but alone and defenseless. I have come in peace and in friendship, to extend the hand of welcome from one civilization to another."

There was spontaneous applause from the assembled diplomats.

"It is time," he went on with greater confidence, "that you put your differences aside and take your rightful place in the family of the worlds. War must be a thing of the past, so that we may all march forward side by side down the long corridors of Destiny. On all the planets of a million suns, there is no stronger might than friendship, no finer aspiration than the harmony of strong men."

More applause.

He talked for over an hour in the same vein, and finally concluded: "Be proud of your great world, and yet know humility too. I have come to say something good about

the human race, and to hold out to you the torch of confidence and faith. Remember my visit well in the years that are to come, and I pray that you are today all my friends, even as I am yours."

He brought the house down.

Everyone seemed satisfied.

Several days passed before a few people began to wonder about the speech they had heard. What, they asked themselves, had Keith really said, beyond glittering generalities and vague sentiments about friendship?

Most people, having never heard any other kind of speech, continued to accept it as a masterpiece.

Keith was troubled and nervous, and locked himself up in his suite. He worked with almost desperate haste on his notebooks, going over even the most trivial phrase again and again. He refused to see anyone, pleading that he had an urgent report to prepare for his government.

When he did leave, much to the consternation of the secret service, he simply disappeared. The last person to see him was a paper boy at a busy intersection. He swore to investigators that Keith had paused at his stand and bought a paper, muttering to himself what sounded like, "God, I just can't go through with this any longer."

There the matter rested.

Keith reappeared somewhat furtively several days later on the third floor of the Social Sciences Building of Western University in Los Angeles. He had dyed his hair black, and he walked quickly down the hall past the Anthropology Museum and stopped at a closed office door. A white card on the door had a name and title typed on it: *Dr. George Alan Coles, Professor of Linguistics.* He took a deep breath and knocked.

"Come in!"

Keith walked inside and shut the door behind him.

"Are you Dr. Coles?"

"I have that dubious distinction, yes." The man behind the desk was slightly built and his rimless glasses were almost hidden behind the fumes from a virulent black cigar. "What can I do for you?"

Keith took the plunge. He had tried to follow his instructions to the letter, but the strain had told on him. There came a time when a man had to act for himself. "Dr. Coles, I'm in terrible trouble."

Coles lowered the cigar and looked more closely at the young man before him. He arched his rather bushy eyebrows. "Dyed your hair didn't you?"

"I didn't know it was that obvious."

Coles shrugged. "Keith, I've seen your picture in my morning paper every day for what seems to be a lifetime. I can't claim to be any Sherlock Holmes, but I've patterned my existence on the assumption that I'm not feebleminded."

Keith sank into a chair. "I was going to tell you anyway, sir."

"Look here, young man." Coles waved his cigar. "You really can't stay here. About half a billion people are looking for you, at last count, and if the Board of Regents stumbles over you in my office——"

Keith lit a cigarette and wiped his hands on his trousers. The circles under his eyes were more pronounced than usual, and he was in need of a shave. "Sir, I'm desperate. I've come to you as one man to another. You're my last hope. Won't *you* listen to me?"

Coles chewed on his cigar. He took off his rimless glasses and polished them on a Kleenex. "Lock the door," he said finally. "I'll hear you out, but I'll hate myself in the morning."

A ray of what might have been hope touched Keith's face. He hurriedly locked the office door.

"Cards on the table now, young man. What the hell is going on here?"

"Believe me, sir, this is all damnably embarrassing."

"As the actress said to the Bishop," Coles said, knocking off the ash from his cigar.

Keith took a deep drag on his cigarette. "My people will be coming for me very soon," he said. "I got a message off to them when I crashed. If they could have only got here sooner, this whole mess would never have happened."

"That's Greek to me, son. I had hoped you might be

able to make more sense in person than you did at the United Nations."

Keith flushed. "Look," he said. "There's nothing complicated about it, really. You just don't have the picture yet. You'll have to toss out all your preconceived notions to begin with."

"Haven't got any," Coles assured him.

"Here's the first thing, then. There *is* no galactic civilization. I'm not the representative of anything."

Coles blew a small cloud of smoke at the ceiling and said nothing.

Keith talked fast, anxious to get it all out. "I landed in Los Angeles by accident; you know that. I'd hoped to come down in the Arizona desert, where no one would see me and I could go about my business in peace. But, dammit, I was spotted right away, and from then on I never had a chance. I had strict instructions about what to do if I was discovered by the natives—that is, by the citizens of Earth——"

"Just a second." Coles crushed out his cigar. "I thought you said there *wasn't* any galactic civilization."

"There is a civilization out there, sure, if you want to call it that," Keith said impatiently. "But not that *kind* of a civilization. There are hundreds of thousands of inhabited worlds in this galaxy alone. Don't you see what that means, just in terms of your own science?"

"Well, the notion did pop into my cerebrum that the communications problem would be a tough nut to crack. I admit I did wonder a little about this mammoth civilization of yours. I couldn't quite figure how it could *work*."

"It *doesn't* work. There's some contact between us, but not a lot. Why, one whole planet couldn't hold the government officials for a set-up like that! There isn't any uniform government. War isn't very popular except for would-be suicides, so each of us goes pretty much our own way. The plain fact is—excuse me, Dr. Coles—that we don't really give a hoot in hell about the planet Earth. The last time one of us visited you, so far as I know, was in 974 A.D., and I expect it'll be a few more centuries before anyone comes again."

"Ummm." Dr. Coles prepared another cigar and stuck it in his mouth. "I believe your speech mentioned the hand of friendship clasping ours across the great sea of space——"

"I'm sorry." Keith flushed again. "I did have to say all that hokum, but it wasn't *my* idea."

"I'm glad to hear it, frankly. I'd hate to think that our friends out in the stars would be as tedious as all that."

"All I did was to be agreeable!" Keith shifted on his chair and rubbed his eyes. "Our instructions are very explicit on that point: if you get found out in a primitive culture, play along with them and stay out of trouble. If they think you're a god, be a god. If they think you're a fraud, be a fraud. You know—when in Rome, and all that. I tried to be what I was expected to be, that's all."

Coles smiled a little. "Once we found out you were a spaceman you were cooked, hey?"

"Exactly! I not only was a spaceman but I had to be *their* kind of a spaceman. They couldn't even consider any other kind. I never had a chance—it got to the point where I was either the emissary from a benevolent super-civilization peopled by fatherly geniuses or I was some kind of monster come to destroy the Earth! What could I do? I didn't want to cause any trouble, and I didn't want to go to jail. What would you have done?"

Coles shrugged and lit his cigar.

"I haven't handled things very well," Keith said nervously. "I've botched it all. It was rough learning English from radio broadcasts—you can imagine—and now everything is ruined."

"Let's start at the beginning, young man. What the devil *are* you anyhow? An anthropologist from the stars doing an ethnological study of poor, primitive Earth?"

"No." Keith got to his feet and paced the floor. "I mentioned a previous visit by a student in 974? Well, I wanted to follow it up. I'm studying the vowel-shift from Old English to the present. We'd predicted a shift of the long vowels upward and into dipthongal types. I'm happy to say I've been able to confirm this, at least roughly."

Coles put down his cigar. "You're a linguist, then?"

Keith looked at the floor. "I had hoped to be. I'll be honest with you, sir. I'm still a graduate student. I'm working on what you'd call a Ph.D. I came here to do a field study, but my notes are hopelessly incomplete. I'll never be able to get another research grant——"

Dr. George Alan Coles put his head in his hands and began to laugh. He had a big laugh for such a small man. He laughed so hard the tears streaked his glasses and he had to take them off. He had the best laugh he had had in years.

"I guess this is all very amusing to you, sir," Keith said. "But I've come to you for help. If you just want to laugh at me——"

"Sorry, Keith." Coles blew his nose, loudly. "I was laughing at us, not at you. We've built ourselves up for a huge anticlimax, and I must say it's typical."

Keith sat down, somewhat mollified. "Can you help me? *Will* you help me? I'm ashamed to ask, but my whole lifework may depend on this thing. You just don't know."

Coles smiled. "I do know, I'm afraid. I was a graduate student once myself. How much time do we have?"

"Three days. If you can help me, just give me a hand this once——"

"Easy does it." Coles got to his feet and went over to a section of the metal bookcases that lined his walls. "Let's see, Keith. I've got Bloomfield's *Language* here; that's got a lot of the data you'll need in it. We'll start with that. And I've got some more stuff at home that should come in handy."

Keith wiped his forehead, his eyes shining.

He had learned many words in English, but somehow none of them seemed adequate to express his thanks.

Three nights later it was clear and unseasonally warm. The two men drove up Bel-Air Road in Coles's Chevrolet, turned out the lights, and parked on the bluff.

Silently, they unloaded a crate of books and journals and started down the winding asphalt trail to the house where Frank Evans lived.

"We'll have to sneak along the back of their house,"

Keith whispered. "If we can just get out past that patio we'll be okay."

"Shouldn't be difficult," Coles panted, shifting the crate. "I don't think they could hear a cobalt bomb with all that racket."

The hi-fi set was going full blast, as usual. Keith winced.

They made it undetected, and proceeded along the dark path under the orange trees. They went fifty yards, until they could see the brush scar where Keith's ship had crashed.

Coles looked at his watch. "Five minutes, I figure," he said.

They sat on the crate, breathing hard.

"Dr. Coles, I don't know how to thank you," Keith said quietly.

"I've enjoyed knowing you, Keith. It isn't every professor who can draw students from so far away."

Keith laughed. "Well, if they ever figure out how that ship of mine works maybe you can send a student to me sometime."

"We'll both be long dead by then, but it's an intriguing idea anyhow."

Exactly on schedule, a large sphere, almost invisible in the night, settled into the hillside next to them. A panel hissed open and yellow light spilled out.

"Good-by, sir."

"So long, Keith. Good luck to you."

The two men shook hands.

Keith lifted the crate into the sphere and climbed in after it. He waved and the panel closed behind him. Soundlessly, the sphere lifted from the Earth, toward the ship that waited far above.

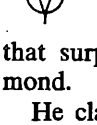
Coles worked his way silently back along the path to the house, and up the asphalt trail to his car. He paused a moment, catching his breath. As Keith had done before him, he looked down on the great city glittering in the distance. Then he looked up. A blaze of stars burned in the sky, and they seemed closer now, and warmer.

He smiled a little and drove back down the hill, into his city.

JACK VANCE

. A first-rate science-fiction story is sometimes a quagmire. You venture out on its attractive and solid-looking surface and, at a point of no return, you find the ground dissolving under you. An alien planet is NOT merely a more distant Earth. To say more would be to say much too much; so, with no more warning than that, now set boldly forth to meet——

The Devil on Salvation Bluff



A few minutes before noon the sun took a lurch south and set.

Sister Mary tore the solar helmet from her fair head and threw it at the settee—a display that surprised and troubled her husband, Brother Raymond.

He clasped her quivering shoulders. "Now, dear, easy does it. A blow-up can't help us at all."

Tears were rolling down Sister Mary's cheeks. "As soon as we start from the house the sun drops out of sight! It happens every time!"

"Well—we know what patience is. There'll be another soon."

"It may be an hour! Or ten hours! And we've got our jobs to do!"

Brother Raymond went to the window, pulled aside the starched lace curtains, peered into the dusk. "We could start now, and get up the hill before night."

" 'Night?' " cried Sister Mary. "What do you call this?"

Brother Raymond said stiffly, "I mean night by the Clock. *Real* night."

"The Clock. . . ." Sister Mary sighed, sank into a chair. "If it weren't for the Clock we'd all be lunatics."

Brother Raymond, at the window, looked up toward Salvation Bluff, where the great clock bulked unseen. Mary joined him; they stood gazing through the dark.

Presently Mary sighed. "I'm sorry, dear. But I get so upset."

Raymond patted her shoulder. "It's no joke living on Glory."

Mary shook her head decisively. "I shouldn't let myself go. There's the Colony to think of. Pioneers can't be weaklings."

They stood close, drawing comfort from each other.

"Look!" said Raymond. He pointed. "A fire, and up in Old Fleetville!"

In perplexity they watched the far spark.

"They're all supposed to be down in New Town," muttered Sister Mary. "Unless it's some kind of ceremony. . . . The salt we gave them . . ."

Raymond, smiling sourly, spoke a fundamental postulate of life on Glory. "You can't tell anything about the Flits. They're liable to do most anything."

Mary uttered a truth even more fundamental. "*Anything* is liable to do anything."

"The Flits most liable of all. . . . They've even taken to dying without our comfort and help!"

"We've done our best," said Mary. "It's not our fault!" —almost as if she feared that it was.

"No one could possibly blame us."

"Except the Inspector. . . . The Flits were thriving before the Colony came."

"We haven't bothered them; we haven't encroached, or molested, or interfered. In fact we've knocked ourselves out to help them. And for thanks they tear down our fences and break open the canal and throw mud on our fresh paint!"

Sister Mary said in a low voice, "Sometimes I hate the Flits. . . . Sometimes I hate Glory. Sometimes I hate the whole Colony."

Brother Raymond drew her close, patted the fair hair that she kept in a neat bun. "You'll feel better when one of the suns comes up. Shall we start?"

"It's dark," said Mary dubiously. "Glory is bad enough in the daytime."

Raymond shot his jaw forward, glanced up toward the

Clock. "It *is* daytime. The Clock says it's daytime. That's Reality; we've got to cling to it! It's our link with truth and sanity!"

"Very well," said Mary, "we'll go."

Raymond kissed her cheek. "You're very brave, dear. You're a credit to the Colony."

Mary shook her head. "No, dear. I'm no better or braver than any of the others. We came out here to found homes and live the Truth. We knew there'd be hard work. So much depends on everybody; there's no room for weakness."

Raymond kissed her again, although she laughingly protested and turned her head. "I still think you're brave—and very sweet."

"Get the light," said Mary. "Get several lights. One never knows how long these—these insufferable darknesses will last."

They set off up the road, walking because in the Colony private power vehicles were considered a social evil. Ahead, unseen in the darkness, rose the Grand Montagne, the preserve of the Flits. They could feel the harsh bulk of the crags, just as behind them they could feel the neat fields, the fences, the roads of the Colony. They crossed the canal, which led the meandering river into a mesh of irrigation ditches. Raymond shone his light into the concrete bed. They stood looking in a silence more eloquent than curses.

"It's dry! They've broken the banks again."

"Why?" asked Mary. *"Why?* They don't use the river water!"

Raymond shrugged. "I guess they just don't like canals. Well," he sighed, "all we can do is the best we know how."

The road wound back and forth up the slope. They passed the lichen-covered hulk of a star-ship which five hundred years ago had crashed on Glory. "It seems impossible," said Mary. "The Flits were once men and women just like us."

"Not like *us,* dear," Raymond corrected gently.

Sister Mary shuddered. "The Flits and their goats! Sometimes it's hard to tell them apart."

A few minutes later Raymond fell into a mudhole, a bed of slime, with enough water-seep to make it sucking and dangerous. Floundering, panting, with Mary's desperate help, he regained solid ground, and stood shivering —angry, cold, wet.

"That blasted thing wasn't there yesterday!" He scraped slime from his face, his clothes. "It's these miserable things that makes life so trying."

"We'll get the better of it, dear." And she said fiercely: "We'll fight it, subdue it! Somehow we'll bring order to Glory!"

While they debated whether or not to proceed, Red Robundus belled up over the northwest horizon, and they were able to take stock of the situation. Brother Raymond's khaki puttees and his white shirt of course were filthy. Sister Mary's outfit was hardly cleaner.

Raymond said dejectedly, "I ought to go back to the bungalow for a change."

"Raymond—do we have time?"

"I'll look a fool going up to the Flits like this."

"They'll never notice."

"How can they help?" snapped Raymond.

"We haven't time," said Mary decisively. "The Inspector's due any day, and the Flits are dying like flies. They'll say it's our fault—and that's the end of Gospel Colony." After a pause she said carefully, "Not that we wouldn't help the Flits in any event."

"I still think I'd make a better impression in clean clothes," said Raymond dubiously.

"Pooh! A fig they care for clean clothes, the ridiculous way they scamper around."

"I suppose you're right."

A small yellow-green sun appeared over the southwest horizon. "Here comes Urban. . . . If it isn't dark as pitch we get three or four suns at once!"

"Sunlight makes the crops grow," Mary told him sweetly.

They climbed half an hour, then, stopping to catch their breath, turned to look across the valley to the colony they loved so well. Seventy-two thousand souls on a checkerboard green plain, rows of neat white houses, painted and

scrubbed, with snowy curtains behind glistening glass; lawns and flower gardens full of tulips; vegetable gardens full of cabbages, kale and squash.

Raymond looked up at the sky. "It's going to rain."

Mary asked, "How do you know?"

"Remember the drenching we had last time Urban and Robundus were both in the west?"

Mary shook her head. "That doesn't mean anything."

"Something's got to mean something. That's the law of our universe—the basis for all our thinking!"

A gust of wind howled down from the ridges, carrying great curls and feathers of dust. They swirled with complicated colors, films, shades, in the opposing lights of yellow-green Urban and Red Robundus.

"There's your rain," shouted Mary over the roar of the wind. Raymond pressed on up the road. Presently the wind died.

Mary said, "I believe in rain or anything else on Glory when I see it."

"We don't have enough facts," insisted Raymond. "There's nothing magic in unpredictability."

"It's just—unpredictable." She looked back along the face of the Grand Montagne. "Thank God for the Clock—something that's dependable."

The road wandered up the hill, through stands of horny spile, banks of gray scrub and purple thorn. Sometimes there was no road; then they had to cast ahead like surveyors; sometimes the road stopped at a bank or at a blank wall, continuing on a level ten feet above or below. These were minor inconveniences which they overcame as a matter of course. Only when Robundus drifted south and Urban ducked north did they become anxious.

"It wouldn't be conceivable that a sun should set at seven in the evening," said Mary. "That would be too normal, too matter-of-fact."

At seven-fifteen both suns set. There would be ten minutes of magnificent sunset, another fifteen minutes of twilight, then night of indeterminate extent.

They missed the sunset because of an earthquake. A tumble of stones came pelting across the road; they took

refuge under a jut of granite while boulders clattered into the road and spun on down the mountainside.

The shower of rocks passed, except for pebbles bouncing down as an afterthought. "Is that all?" Mary asked in a husky whisper.

"Sounds like it."

"I'm thirsty."

Raymond handed her the canteen; she drank.

"How much farther to Fleetville?"

"Old Fleetville or New Town?"

"I don't care," she said wearily. "Either one."

Raymond hesitated. "As a matter of fact, I don't know the distance to either."

"Well, we can't stay here all night."

"It's day coming up," said Raymond as the white dwarf Maude began to silver the sky to the northeast.

"It's night," Mary declared in quiet desperation. "The Clock says it's night; I don't care if every sun in the galaxy is shining, including Home Sun. As long as the Clock says it's night, it's night!"

"We can see the road anyway. . . . New Town is just over this ridge; I recognize that big spile. It was here last time I came."

Of the two, Raymond was the more surprised to find New Town where he placed it. They trudged into the village. "Things are awful quiet."

There were three dozen huts, built of concrete and good clear glass, each with filtered water, a shower, wash-tub and toilet. To suit Flit prejudices the roofs were thatched with thorn, and there were no interior partitions. The huts were all empty.

Mary looked into a hut. "Mmmph—horrid!" She puckered her nose at Raymond. "The smell!"

The windows of the second hut were innocent of glass. Raymond's face was grim and angry. "I packed that glass up here on my blistered back! And that's how they thank us."

"I don't care whether they thank us or not," said Mary. "I'm worried about the Inspector. He'll blame us for

——" she gestured—"this filth. After all it's supposed to be our responsibility."

Seething with indignation Raymond surveyed the village. He recalled the day New Town had been completed—a model village, thirty-six spotless huts, hardly inferior to the bungalows of the Colony. Arch-Deacon Burnette had voiced the blessing; the volunteer workers knelt to pray in the central compound. Fifty or sixty Flits had come down from the ridges to watch—a wide-eyed ragged bunch: the men all gristle and unkempt hair; the women sly, plump and disposed to promiscuity, or so the colonists believed.

After the invocation Arch-Deacon Burnette had presented the chief of the tribe a large key of gilded plywood. "In your custody, Chief—the future and welfare of your people! Guard it—cherish it!"

The chief stood almost seven feet tall; he was lean as a pike, his profile cut in and out, sharp and hard as a turtle's. He wore greasy black rags and carried a long staff, upholstered with goat-hide. Alone in the tribe he spoke the language of the colonists, with a good accent that always came as a shock. "They are no concern of mine," he said in a casual, hoarse voice. "They do as they like. That's the best way."

Arch-Deacon Burnette had encountered this attitude before. A large-minded man, he felt no indignation, but rather sought to argue away what he considered an irrational attitude. "Don't you want to be civilized? Don't you want to worship God, to live clean, healthy lives?"

"No."

The Arch-Deacon grinned. "Well, we'll help anyway, as much as we can. We can teach you to read, to cipher; we can cure your disease. Of course you must keep clean and you must adopt regular habits—because that's what civilization means."

The chief grunted. "You don't even know how to herd goats."

"We are not missionaries," Arch-Deacon Burnette continued, "but when you choose to learn the Truth, we'll be ready to help you."

"Mmph-mmph—where do you profit by this?"

Arch-Deacon smiled. "We don't. You are fellow-humans; we are bound to help you."

The chief turned, called to the tribe; they fled up the rocks pell-mell, climbing like desperate wraiths, hair waving, goat-skins flapping.

"What's this? What's this?" cried the Arch-Deacon. "Come back here," he called to the chief, who was on his way to join the tribe.

The chief called down from a crag. "You are all crazy people."

"No, no," exclaimed the Arch-Deacon, and it was a magnificent scene, stark as a stage-set: the white-haired Arch-Deacon calling up to the wild chief with his wild tribe behind him; a saint commanding satyrs, all in the shifting light of three suns.

Somehow he coaxed the chief back down to New Town. Old Fleetville lay half a mile farther up, in a saddle funnelling all the winds and clouds of the Grand Montagne, until even the goats clung with difficulty to the rocks. It was cold, dank, dreary. The Arch-Deacon hammered home each of Old Fleetville's drawbacks. The chief insisted he preferred it to New Town.

Fifty pounds of salt made the difference, with the Arch-Deacon compromising his principles over the use of bribes. About sixty of the tribe moved into the new huts with an air of amused detachment, as if the Arch-Deacon had asked them to play a foolish game.

The Arch-Deacon called another blessing upon the village; the colonists knelt; the Flits watched curiously from the doors and windows of their new homes. Another twenty or thirty bounded down from the crags with a herd of goats which they quartered in the little chapel. Arch-Deacon Burnette's smile became fixed and painful, but to his credit he did nothing to interfere.

After a while the colonists filed back down into the valley. They had done the best they could, but they were not sure exactly what it was they had done.

Two months later New Town was deserted. Brother Raymond and Sister Mary Dunton walked through the

village; and the huts showed dark windows and gaping doorways.

"Where have they gone?" asked Mary in a hushed voice.

"They're all mad," said Raymond. "Stark staring mad." He went to the chapel, pushed his head through the door. His knuckles shone suddenly white where they gripped the door frame.

"What's the trouble?" Mary asked anxiously.

Raymond held her back. "Corpses. . . . There's—ten, twelve, maybe fifteen bodies in there."

"Raymond!" They looked at each other. "How? Why?"

Raymond shook his head. With one mind they turned, looked up the hill toward Old Fleetville.

"I guess it's up to us to find out."

"But this is—is such a nice place," Mary burst out. "They're—they're *beasts!* They should *love* it here!" She turned away, looked out over the valley, so that Raymond wouldn't see her tears. New Town had meant so much to her; with her own hands she had white-washed rocks and laid neat borders around each of the huts. The borders had been kicked askew, and her feelings were hurt. "Let the Flits live as they like, dirty, shiftless creatures. They're irresponsible," she told Raymond, "just completely *irresponsible!*"

Raymond nodded. "Let's go on up, Mary; we have our duty."

Mary wiped her eyes. "I suppose they're God's creatures, but I can't see why they should be." She glanced at Raymond. "And don't tell me about God moving in a mysterious way."

"Okay," said Raymond. They started to clamber up over the rocks, up toward Old Fleetville. The valley became smaller and smaller below. Maude swung up to the zenith and seemed to hang there.

They paused for breath. Mary mopped her brow. "Am I crazy, or is Maude getting larger?"

Raymond looked. "Maybe it is swelling a little."

"It's either a nova or we're falling into it!"

"I suppose anything could happen in this system," sighed

Raymond. "If there's any regularity in Glory's orbit it's defied analysis."

"We might very easily fall into one of the suns," said Mary thoughtfully.

Raymond shrugged. "The System's been milling around for quite a few million years. That's our best guarantee."

"Our only guarantee." She clenched her fists. "If there were only some certainty somewhere—something you could look at and say, this is immutable, this is changeless, this is something you can count on. But there's nothing! It's enough to drive a person crazy!"

Raymond put on a glassy smile. "Don't, dear. The Colony's got too much trouble like that already."

Mary sobered instantly. "Sorry. . . . I'm sorry, Raymond. Truly."

"It's got me worried," said Raymond. "I was talking to Director Birch at the Rest Home yesterday."

"How many now?"

"Almost three thousand. More coming in every day." He sighed. "There's something about Glory that grinds at a person's nerves—no question about it."

Mary took a deep breath, pressed Raymond's hand. "We'll fight it, darling, and beat it! Things will fall into routine; we'll straighten everything out."

Raymond bowed his head. "With the Lord's help."

"There goes Maude," said Mary. "We'd better get up to Old Fleetville while there's still light."

A few minutes later they met a dozen goats, herded by as many scraggly children. Some wore rags; some wore goatskin clothes; others ran around naked, and the wind blew on their washboard ribs.

On the other side of the trail they met another herd of goats—perhaps a hundred, with one urchin in attendance.

"That's the Flit way," said Raymond, "twelve kids herd twelve goats and one kid herds a hundred."

"They're surely victims of some mental disease. . . . Is insanity hereditary?"

"That's a moot point. . . . I can smell Old Fleetville."

Maude left the sky at an angle which promised a long twilight. With aching legs Raymond and Mary plodded

up into the village. Behind came the goats and the children, mingled without discrimination.

Mary said in a disgusted voice, "They leave New Town —pretty, clean New Town—to move up into this filth."

"Don't step on that goat!" Raymond guided her past the gnawed carcass which lay on the trail. Mary bit her lip.

They found the chief sitting on a rock, staring into the air. He greeted them with neither surprise nor pleasure. A group of children were building a pyre of brush and dry spile.

"What's going on?" asked Raymond with forced cheer. "A feast? A dance?"

"Four men, two women. They go crazy, they die. We burn them."

Mary looked at the pyre. "I didn't know you cremated your dead."

"This time we burn them." He reached out, touched Mary's glossy golden hair. "You be my wife for a while."

Mary stepped back, and said in a quivering voice. "No, thanks. I'm married to Raymond."

"All the time?"

"All the time."

The chief shook his head. "You are crazy. Pretty soon you die."

Raymond said sternly, "Why did you break the canal? Ten times we've fixed it; ten times the Flits come down in the dark and pulled down the banks."

The chief deliberated. "The canal is crazy."

"It's not crazy. It helps irrigate, helps the farmers."

"It goes too much the same."

"You mean, it's straight?"

"Straight? Straight? What word is that?"

"In *one* line—in one direction."

The chief rocked back and forth. "Look—mountain. Straight?"

"No, of course not."

"Sun—straight?"

"Look here——"

"My leg." The chief extended his left leg, knobby and covered with hair. "Straight?"

"No," sighed Raymond. "Your leg is not straight."

"Then why make canal straight? Crazy." He sat back. The topic was disposed of. "Why do you come?"

"Well," said Raymond. "Too many Flits die. We want to help you."

"That's all right. It's not me, not you."

"We don't want you to die. Why don't you live in New Town?"

"Flits get crazy, jump off the rocks." He rose to his feet. "Come along, there's food."

Mastering their repugnance, Raymond and Mary nibbled on bits of grilled goat. Without ceremony, four bodies were tossed into the fire. Some of the Flits began to dance.

Mary nudged Raymond. "You can understand a culture by the pattern of its dances. Watch."

Raymond watched. "I don't see any pattern. Some take a couple hops, sit down; others run in circles; some just flap their arms."

Mary whispered, "They're all crazy. Crazy as sandpipers."

Raymond nodded. "I believe you."

Rain began to fall. Red Robundus burnt the eastern sky but never troubled to come up. The rain became hail. Mary and Raymond went into a hut. Several men and women joined them, and with nothing better to do, noisily began loveplay.

Mary whispered in agony. "They're going to do it right in front of us! They don't have any shame!"

Raymond said grimly, "I'm not going out in that rain. They can do anything they want."

Mary cuffed one of the men who sought to remove her shirt; he jumped back. "Just like dogs!" she gasped.

"No repressions there," said Raymond apathetically. "Repressions mean psychoses."

"Then I'm psychotic," sniffed Mary, "because I have repressions!"

"I have too."

The hail stopped; the wind blew the clouds through the notch; the sky was clear. Raymond and Mary left the hut with relief.

The pyre was drenched; four charred bodies lay in the ashes; no one heeded them.

Raymond said thoughtfully, "It's on the tip of my tongue —the verge of my mind . . ."

"What?"

"The solution to this whole Flit mess."

"Well?"

"It's something like this: The Flits are crazy, irrational, irresponsible."

"Agreed."

"The Inspector's coming. We've got to demonstrate that the Colony poses no threat to the aborigines—the Flits, in this case."

"We can't force the Flits to improve their living standards."

"No. But if we could make them sane; if we could even make a start against their mass psychosis . . ."

Mary looked rather numb. "It sounds like a terrible job."

Raymond shook his head. "Use rigorous thinking, dear. It's a real problem: a group of aborigines too psychotic to keep themselves alive. But we've *got* to keep them alive. The solution: remove the psychoses."

"You make it sound sensible, but how in heaven's name shall we begin?"

The chief came spindle-legged down from the rocks, chewing at a bit of goat-intestine. "We've got to begin with the chief," said Raymond.

"That's like belling the cat."

"Salt," said Raymond. "He'd skin his grandmother for salt."

Raymond approached the chief, who seemed surprised to find him still in the village. Mary watched from the background.

Raymond argued; the chief looked first shocked, then sullen. Raymond expounded, expostulated. He made his telling point: salt—as much as the chief could carry back up the hill. The chief stared down at Raymond from his seven feet, threw up his hands, walked away, sat down on a rock, chewed at the length of gut.

Raymond rejoined Mary. "He's coming."

Director Birch used his heartiest manner toward the chief. "We're honored! It's not often we have visitors so distinguished. We'll have you right in no time!"

The chief had been scratching aimless curves in the ground with his staff. He asked Raymond mildly, "When do I get the salt?"

"Pretty soon now. First you've got to go with Director Birch."

"Come along," said Director Birch. "We'll have a nice ride."

The chief turned and strode off toward the Grand Montagne. "No, no!" cried Raymond. "Come back here!" The chief lengthened his stride.

Raymond ran forward, tackled the knobby knees. The chief fell like a loose sack of garden tools. Director Birch administered a shot of sedative, and presently the shambling, dull-eyed chief was secure inside the ambulance.

Brother Raymond and Sister Mary watched the ambulance trundle down the road. Thick dust roiled up, hung in the green sunlight. The shadows seemed tinged with bluish-purple.

Mary said in a trembling voice, "I do so hope we're doing the right thing. . . . The poor chief looked so—*pathetic.* Like one of his own goats trussed up for slaughter."

Raymond said, "We can only do what we think best, dear."

"But *is* it the best?"

The ambulance had disappeared; the dust had settled. Over the Grand Montagne lightning flickered from a black-and-green thunderhead. Faro shone like a cat's-eye at the zenith. The Clock—the staunch Clock, the good, sane Clock—said twelve noon.

"The best," said Mary thoughtfully. "A relative word . . ."

Raymond said, "If we clear up the Flit psychoses—if we can teach them clean, orderly lives—surely it's for the

best." And he added after a moment, "Certainly it's best for the Colony."

Mary sighed. "I suppose so. But the chief looked so stricken."

"We'll go see him tomorrow," said Raymond. "Right now, sleep!"

When Raymond and Mary awoke, a pink glow seeped through the drawn shades: Robundus, possibly with Maude. "Look at the clock," yawned Mary. "Is it day or night?"

Raymond raised up on his elbow. Their clock was built into the wall, a replica of the Clock on Salvation Bluff, and guided by radio pulses from the central movement. "It's six in the afternoon—ten after."

They rose and dressed in their neat puttees and white shirts. They ate in the meticulous kitchenette, then Raymond telephoned the Rest Home.

Director Birch's voice came crisp from the sound box. "God help you, Brother Raymond."

"God help you, Director. How's the chief?"

Director Birch hesitated. "We've had to keep him under sedation. He's got pretty deep-seated troubles."

"Can you help him? It's important."

"All we can do is try. We'll have a go at him tonight."

"Perhaps we'd better be there," said Mary.

"If you like. . . . Eight o'clock?"

"Good."

The Rest Home was a long, low building on the outskirts of Glory City. New wings had recently been added; a set of temporary barracks could also be seen to the rear.

Director Birch greeted them with a harassed expression. "We're so pressed for room and time; is this Flit so terribly important?"

Raymond gave him assurance that the chief's sanity was a matter of grave concern for everyone.

Director Birch threw up his hands. "Colonists are clamoring for therapy. They'll have to wait, I suppose."

Mary asked soberly, "There's still—the trouble?"

"The Home was built with five hundred beds," said Director Birch. "We've got thirty-six hundred patients

now; not to mention the eighteen hundred colonists we've evacuated back to Earth."

"Surely things are getting better?" asked Raymond. The Colony's over the hump; there's no need for anxiety."

"Anxiety doesn't seem to be the trouble."

"What *is* the trouble?"

"New environment, I suppose. We're Earth-type people; the surroundings are strange."

"But they're not really!" argued Mary. "We've made this place the exact replica of an Earth community. One of the nicer sort. There are Earth houses and Earth flowers and Earth trees."

"Where is the chief?" asked Brother Raymond.

"Well—right now, in the maximum-security ward."

"Is he violent?"

"Not unfriendly. He just wants to get out. Destructive! I've never seen anything like it!"

"Have you any ideas—even preliminary?"

Director Birch shook his head grimly. "We're still trying to classify him. Look." He handed Raymond a report. "That's his zone survey."

"Intelligence zero." Raymond looked up. "I *know* he's not that stupid."

"You'd hardly think so. It's a vague referent, actually. We can't use the usual tests on him—thematic perception and the like; they're weighted for our own cultural background. But these tests here——" he tapped the report "——they're basic; we use them on animals—fitting pegs into holes; matching up colors; detecting discordant patterns; threading mazes."

"And the chief?"

Director Birch sadly shook his head. "If it were possible to have a negative score, he'd have it."

"How so?"

"Well, for instance, instead of matching a small round peg into a small round hole, first he broke the star-shaped peg and forced it in sideways, and then he broke the board."

"But why?"

Mary said, "Let's go see him."

"He's safe, isn't he?" Raymond asked Birch.

"Oh, entirely."

The chief was confined in a pleasant room exactly ten feet on a side. He had a white bed, white sheets, gray coverlet. The ceiling was restful green, the floor was quiet gray.

"My!" said Mary brightly, "you've been busy!"

"Yes," said Director Birch between clenched teeth. "He's been busy."

The bedclothes were shredded, the bed lay on its side in the middle of the room, the walls were befouled. The chief sat on the doubled mattress.

Director Birch said sternly, "Why do you make this mess? It's really not clever, you know!"

"You keep me here," spat the chief. "I fix the way I like it. In your house you fix the way *you* like." He looked at Raymond and Mary. "How much longer?"

"In just a little while," said Mary. "We're trying to help you."

"Crazy talk, everybody crazy." The chief was losing his good accent; his words rasped with fricatives and glottals. "Why you bring me here?"

"It'll be just for a day or two," said Mary soothingly, "then you get salt—lots of it."

"Day—that's while the sun is up."

"No," said Brother Raymond. "See this thing?" He pointed to the clock in the wall. "When this hand goes around twice—that's a day."

The chief smiled cynically.

"We guide our lives by this," said Raymond. "It helps us."

"Just like the big Clock on Salvation Bluff," said Mary.

"Big devil," the chief said earnestly. "You good people; you all crazy. Come to Fleetville. I help you; lots of good goat. We throw rocks down at Big Devil."

"No," said Mary quietly, "that would never do. Now you try your best to do what the doctor says. This mess for instance—it's very bad."

The chief took his head in his hands. "You let me go. You keep salt; I go home."

"Come," said Director Birch kindly. "We won't hurt you." He looked at the clock. "It's time for your first therapy."

Two orderlies were required to conduct the chief to the laboratory. He was placed in a padded chair, and his arms and legs were constricted so that he might not harm himself. He set up a terrible, hoarse cry. "The Devil, the Big Devil—it comes down to look at my life. . . ."

Director Birch said to the orderly, "Cover over the wall clock; it disturbs the patient."

"Just lie still," said Mary. "We're trying to help you —you and your whole tribe."

The orderly administered a shot of D-beta hypnidine. The chief relaxed, his eyes open, vacant, his skinny chest heaving.

Director Birch said in a low tone to Mary and Raymond, "He's now entirely suggestible—so be very quiet; don't make a sound."

Mary and Raymond eased themselves into chairs at the side of the room.

"Hello, Chief," said Director Birch.

"Hello."

"Are you comfortable?"

"Too much shine—too much white."

The orderly dimmed the lights.

"Better?"

"That's better."

"Do you have any troubles?"

"Goats hurt their feet, stay up in the hills. Crazy people down the valley; they won't go away."

"How do you mean 'crazy?' "

The chief was silent. Director Birch said in a whisper to Mary and Raymond, "By analyzing his concept of sanity we get a clue to his own derangement."

The chief lay quiet. Director Birch said in his soothing voice, "Suppose you tell us about your own life."

The chief spoke readily. "Ah, that's good. I'm chief. I understand all talks; nobody else knows about things."

"A good life, eh?"

"Sure, everything good." He spoke on, in disjointed

phrases, in words sometimes unintelligible, but the picture of his life came clear. "Everything go easy—no bother, no trouble—everything good. When it rain, fire feels good. When suns shine hot, then wind blow, feels good. Lots of goats, everybody eat."

"Don't you have troubles, worries?"

"Sure. Crazy people live in valley. They make town: New Town. No good. Straight—straight—straight. No good. Crazy. That's bad. We get lots of salt, but we leave New Town, run up hill to old place."

"You don't like the people in the valley?"

"They good people, they all crazy. Big Devil bring them to valley. Big Devil watch all time. Pretty soon all go tick-tick-tick—like Big Devil."

Director Birch turned to Raymond and Mary, his face in a puzzled frown. "This isn't going so good. He's too assured, too forthright."

Raymond said guardedly, "Can you cure him?"

"Before I can cure a psychosis," said Director Birch, "I have to locate it. So far I don't seem to be even warm."

"It's not sane to die off like flies," whispered Mary. "And that's what the Flits are doing."

The Director returned to the chief. "Why do your people die, Chief? Why do they die in New Town?"

The chief said in a hoarse voice, "They look down. No pretty scenery. Crazy cut-up. No river. Straight water. It hurts the eyes; we open canal, make good river. . . . Huts all same. Go crazy looking at all same. People go crazy; we kill 'em."

Director Birch said, "I think that's all we'd better do just now till we study the case a little more closely."

"Yes," said Brother Raymond in a troubled voice. "We've got to think this over."

They left the Rest Home through the main reception hall. The benches bulged with applicants for admission and their relatives, with custodian officers and persons in their care. Outside the sky was wadded with overcast. Sallow light indicated Urban somewhere in the sky. Rain spattered in the dust, big, syrupy drops.

Brother Raymond and Sister Mary waited for the bus at the curve of the traffic circle.

"There's something wrong," said Brother Raymond in a bleak voice. "Something very very wrong."

"And I'm not so sure it isn't in us." Sister Mary looked around the landscape, across the young orchards, up Sarah Gulvin Avenue into the center of Glory City.

"A strange planet is always a battle," said Brother Raymond. "We've got to bear faith, trust in God—and fight!"

Mary clutched his arm. He turned. "What's the trouble?"

"I saw—or I thought I saw—someone running through the bushes."

Raymond craned his neck. "I don't see anybody."

"I thought it looked like the chief."

"Your imagination, dear."

They boarded the bus, and presently were secure in their white-walled, flower-gardened home.

The communicator sounded. It was Director Birch. His voice was troubled. "I don't want to worry you, but the chief got loose. He's off the premises—where we don't know."

Mary said under her breath, "I knew, I knew!"

Raymond said soberly, "You don't think there's any danger?"

"No. His pattern isn't violent. But I'd lock my door anyway."

"Thanks for calling, Director."

"Not at all, Brother Raymond."

There was a moment's silence. "What now?" asked Mary.

"I'll lock the doors, and then we'll get a good night's sleep."

Sometime in the night Mary woke up with a start. Brother Raymond rolled over on his side. "What's the trouble?"

"I don't know," said Mary. "What time is it?"

Raymond consulted the wall clock. "Five minutes to one."

Sister Mary lay still.

"Did you hear something?" Raymond asked.

"No. I just had a—twinge. Something's wrong, Raymond!"

He pulled her close, cradled her fair head in the hollow of his neck. "All we can do is our best, dear, and pray that it's God's will."

They fell into a fitful doze, tossing and turning. Raymond got up to go to the bathroom. Outside was night—a dark sky except for a rosy glow at the north horizon. Red Robundus wandered somewhere below.

Raymond shuffled sleepily back to bed.

"What's the time, dear?" came Mary's voice.

Raymond peered at the clock. "Five minutes to one."

He got into bed. Mary's body was rigid. "Did you say—five minutes to one?"

"Why yes," said Raymond. A few seconds later he climbed out of bed, went into the kitchen. "It says five minutes to one in here too. I'll call the Clock and have them send out a pulse."

He went to the communicator, pressed buttons. No response.

"They don't answer."

Mary was at his elbow. "Try again."

Raymond pressed out the number. "That's strange."

"Call Information," said Mary.

Raymond pressed for Information. Before he could frame a question, a crisp voice said, "The Great Clock is momentarily out of order. Please have patience. The Great Clock is out of order."

Raymond thought he recognized the voice. He punched the visual button. The voice said, "God keep you, Brother Raymond."

"God keep you, Brother Ramsdell . . . What in the world has gone wrong?"

"It's one of your protegés, Raymond. One of the Flits—raving mad. He rolled boulders down on the Clock."

"Did he—did he—"

"He started a landslide. We don't have any more Clock."

Inspector Coble found no one to meet him at the Glory City space-port. He peered up and down the tarmac; he was

alone. A scrap of paper blew across the far end of the field; nothing else moved.

Odd, thought Inspector Coble. A committee had always been on hand to welcome him, with a program that was flattering but rather wearing. First to the Arch-Deacon's bungalow for a banquet, cheerful speeches and progress reports, then services in the central chapel, and finally a punctilious escort to the foot of the Grand Montagne.

Excellent people, by Inspector Coble's lights, but too painfully honest and fanatical to be interesting.

He left instructions with the two men who crewed the official ship, and set off on foot toward Glory City. Red Robundus was high, but sinking toward the east; he looked toward Salvation Bluff to check local time. A clump of smoky lace-veils blocked his view.

Inspector Coble, striding briskly along the road, suddenly jerked to a halt. He raised his head as if testing the air, looked about him in a complete circle. He frowned, moved slowly on.

The colonists had been making changes, he thought. Exactly what and how, he could not instantly determine: The fence there—a section had been torn out. Weeds were prospering in the ditch beside the road. Examining the ditch, he sensed movement in the harp-grass behind, the sound of young voices. Curiosity aroused, Coble jumped the ditch, parted the harp-grass.

A boy and girl of sixteen or so were wading in a shallow pond; the girl held three limp water-flowers, the boy was kissing her. They turned up startled faces; Inspector Coble withdrew.

Back on the road he looked up and down. Where in thunder was everybody? The fields—empty. Nobody working. Inspector Coble shrugged, continued.

He passed the Rest Home, and looked at it curiously It seemed considerably larger than he remembered it: a pair of wings, some temporary barracks had been added. He noticed that the gravel of the driveway was hardly as neat as it might be. The ambulance drawn up to the side was dusty. The place looked vaguely run down. The in-

spector for the second time stopped dead in his tracks. Music? From the Rest Home?

He turned down the driveway, approached. The music grew louder. Inspector Coble slowly pushed through the front door. In the reception hall were eight or ten people—they wore bizarre costumes: feathers, fronds of dyed grass, fantastic necklaces of glass and metal. The music sounded loud from the auditorium, a kind of wild jig.

"Inspector!" cried a pretty woman with fair hair. "Inspector Coble! You've arrived!"

Inspector Coble peered into her face. She wore a kind of patchwork jacket sewn with small iron bells. "It's—it's Sister Mary Dunton, isn't it?"

"Of course! You've arrived at a wonderful time! We're having a carnival ball—costumes and everything!"

Brother Raymond clapped the inspector heartily on the back. "Glad to see you, old man! Have some cider—it's the early press."

Inspector Coble backed away. "No, no thanks." He cleared his throat. "I'll be off on my rounds . . . and perhaps drop in on you later."

Inspector Coble proceeded to the Grand Montagne. He noted that a number of the bungalows had been painted bright shades of green, blue, yellow; that fences in many cases had been pulled down, that gardens looked rather rank and wild.

He climbed the road to Old Fleetville, where he interviewed the chief. The Flits apparently were not being exploited, suborned, cheated, sickened, enslaved, forcibly proselyted or systematically irritated. The chief seemed in a good humor.

"I kill the Big Devil," he told Inspector Coble. "Things go better now."

Inspector Coble planned to slip quietly to the spaceport and depart, but Brother Raymond Dunton hailed him as he passed their bungalow.

"Had your breakfast, Inspector?"

"Dinner, darling!" came Sister Mary's voice from within. "Urban just went down."

"But Maude just came up."

"Bacon and eggs anyway, Inspector!"

The inspector was tired; he smelled hot coffee. "Thanks," he said, "don't mind if I do."

After the bacon and eggs, over the second cup of coffee, the inspector said cautiously, "You're looking well, you two."

Sister Mary looked especially pretty with her fair hair loose.

"Never felt better," said Brother Raymond. "It's a matter of rhythm, Inspector."

The inspector blinked. "Rhythm, eh?"

"More precisely," said Sister Mary, "a lack of rhythm."

"It all started," said Brother Raymond, "when we lost our Clock."

Inspector Coble gradually pieced out the story. Three weeks later, back at Surge City he put it in his own words to Inspector Keefer.

"They'd been wasting half their energies holding onto—well, call it a false reality. They were all afraid of the new planet. They pretended it was Earth—tried to whip it, beat it, and just plain hypnotize it into being Earth. Naturally they were licked before they started. Glory is about as completely random a world as you could find. The poor devils were trying to impose Earth rhythm and Earth routine upon this magnificent disorder; this monumental chaos!"

"No wonder they all went nuts."

Inspector Coble nodded. "At first, after the Clock went out, they thought they were goners. Committed their souls to God and just about gave up. A couple of days passed, I guess—and to their surprise they found they were still alive. In fact, even enjoying life. Sleeping when it got dark, working when the sun shone."

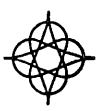
"Sounds like a good place to retire," said Inspector Keefer. "How's fishing out there on Glory?"

"Not so good. But the goat-herding is great!"

JACK WILLIAMSON

Count the science-fiction novels you have most enjoyed over the past quarter-century, and see how many of them—The Humanoids, Dragon's Island, Darker Than You Think, *and many more—were written by a friendly and unassuming New Mexican named Jack Williamson. It is a pity that so few Williamsons appear in the science-fiction magazines these days. Perhaps New Mexico is too easy-going an environment to keep a writer chained to his typewriter, or perhaps it is only that his excursions into other areas of the science-fiction field (*item, *the comic strip* Beyond Mars, *which brightens the weekends of five million or so readers of the New York Sunday* News; *and* item, *the juvenile novel* Undersea Quest, *written in collaboration with your editor), don't leave him enough time. But though the quantity of new Williamson stories is low, the quality is high; see for yourself in——*

Guinevere for Everybody



The girl stood chained in the vending machine.

"Hi, there!" Her plaintive hail whispered wistfully back from the empty corners of the gloomy waiting room. "Won't somebody buy me?"

Most of the sleepy passengers trailing through the warm desert night from the Kansas City jet gaped at her and hurried on uneasily, as if she had been a tigress inadequately caged, but Pip Chimberley stopped, jolted wide awake.

"Hullo, mister." The girl smiled at him, with disturbingly huge blue eyes. The chains tinkled as her hands came up hopefully, to fluff and smooth her copper-blond hair. Her long tan body flowed into a pose that filled her sheer chemistic halter to the bursting point. "You like me, huh?"

Chimberley gulped. He was an angular young man, with

a meat-cleaver nose, an undernourished mouse-colored mustache, and three degrees in cybernetic engineering. His brown, murky eyes fled from the girl and fluttered back again, fascinated.

"Won't you buy me?" She caressed him with her coaxing drawl. "You'd never miss the change, and I know you'd like me. I like you."

He caught his breath, with a strangled sound.

"No!" He was hoarse with incipient panic. "I'm not a customer. My interest is—uh—professional."

He sidled hastily away from the shallow display space where she stood framed in light, and resolutely shifted his eyes from her to the vending machine. He knew machines, and it was lovely to him, with the seductive sweep of its streamlined contours and the exciting gleam of its blinding red enamel. He backed away, looking raptly up at the blazing allure of the 3-D sign:

GUINEVERE
THE VITAL APPLIANCE!
NOT A ROBOT—WHAT IS SHE?

The glowing letters exploded into galaxies of dancing light, that condensed again into words of fire. Guinevere, the ultimate appliance, was patented and guaranteed by Solar Chemistics, Inc. Her exquisite body had been manufactured by automatic machinery, untouched by human beings. Educated by psionic processes, she was warranted sweet-tempered and quarrel-free. Her special introductory price, for a strictly limited time, was only four ninety-five.

"Whatever your profession is, I'm very sure you need me." She was leaning out of the narrow display space, and her low voice followed him melodiously. "I have everything, for everybody."

Chimberley turned uncertainly back.

"That might be," he muttered reluctantly. "But all I want is a little information. You see, I'm a cybernetics engineer." He told her his name.

"I'm Guinevere." She smiled, with a flash of precise white teeth. "Model 1, Serial Number 1997-A-456. I'd be delighted to help you, but I'm afraid you'll have to pay for me first. You do want me, don't you?"

Chimberley's long equine countenance turned the color of a wet brick. The sorry truth was, he had never wholeheartedly wanted any woman. His best friends were digital computers; human beings had always bored him. He couldn't understand the sudden pounding in his ears, or the way his knobby fists had clenched.

"I'm here on business," he said stiffly. "That's why I stopped. You see, I'm a trouble-shooter for General Cybernetics."

"A shooter?" Psionic educational processes evidently had their limits, but the puzzled quirk of her eyebrows was somehow still entrancing. "What's a shooter?"

"My company builds the managerial computers that are replacing human management in most of the big corporations," he informed her patiently. "I'm supposed to keep them going. Actually, the machines are designed to adjust and repair themselves. They never really go wrong. The usual trouble is that people just don't try to understand them."

He snapped his bony fingers at human stupidity.

"Anyhow, when I got back to my hotel tonight, there was this wire from Schenectady. First I'd heard about any trouble out here in the sun country. I still don't get it." He blinked at her hopefully. "Maybe you can tell me what's going on."

"Perhaps I can," she agreed sweetly. "When I'm paid for."

"You're the trouble, yourself," he snapped back accusingly. "That's what I gather, though the wire was a little too concise—our own management is mechanized, of course, and sometimes it fails to make sufficient allowances for the limitations of the human employee."

"But I'm no trouble," she protested gaily. "Just try me."

A cold sweat burst into the palms of his hands. Spots danced in front of his eyes. He scowled bleakly past her at the enormous vending machine, trying angrily to insulate himself from all her disturbing effects.

"Just four hours since I got the wire. Drop everything. Fly out here to trouble-shoot Athena Sue—she's the installation we made to run Solar Chemistics. I barely caught

the jet, and I just got here. Now I've got to find out what the score is."

"Score?" She frowned charmingly. "Is there a game?"

He shrugged impatiently.

"Seems the directors of Solar Chemistics are unhappy because Athena Sue is manufacturing and merchandising human beings. They're threatening to throw out our managerial system, unless we discover and repair the damage at once."

He glowered at the shackled girl.

"But the wire failed to make it clear why the directors object. Athena Sue was set to seek the greatest possible financial return from the processing and sale of solar synthetics, so it couldn't very well be a matter of profits. There's apparently no question of any legal difficulty. I can't see anything for the big wheels to clash their gears about."

Guinevere was rearranging her flame-tinted hair, smiling with a radiance he couldn't entirely ignore.

"Matter of fact, the whole project looks pretty wonderful to me." He grinned at her and the beautiful vending machine with a momentary admiration. "Something human management would never have had the brains or the vision to accomplish. It took one of our Athena-type computers to see the possibility, and to tackle all the technical and merchandising problems that must have stood in the way of making it a commercial reality."

"Then you do like me?"

"The directors don't, evidently." He tried not to see her hurt expression. "I can't understand why, but the first part of my job here will be to find the reason. If you can help me——"

He paused expectantly.

"I'm only four ninety-five," Guinevere reminded him. "You put the money right here in this slot——"

"I don't want you," he interrupted harshly. "Just the background facts about you. To begin with—just what's the difference betwen a vital appliance and an ordinary human being?"

He tried not to hear her muffled sob.

"What's the plant investment?" He raised his voice, and ticked the questions off on his skinny fingers. "What's the production rate? The profit margin? Under what circumstances was the manufacture of—uh—vital appliances first considered by Athena Sue? When were you put on the market? What sort of consumer acceptance are you getting now? Or don't you know?"

Guinevere nodded brightly.

"But can't we go somewhere else to talk about it?" She blinked bravely through her tears. "Your room, maybe?"

Chimberley squirmed uncomfortably.

"If you don't take me," she added innocently, "I can't tell you anything."

He stalked away, angry at himself for the way his knees trembled. He could probably find out all he had to know from the memory tapes of the computer, after he got out to the plant. Anyhow, he shouldn't let her upset him. After all, she was only an interesting product of chemistic engineering.

A stout, pink-skinned business man stepped up to the vending machine, as the wailing urchin was dragged away. He unburdened himself of a thick briefcase and a furled umbrella, removed his glasses, and leaned deliberately to peer at Guinevere with bugging, putty-colored eyes.

"Slavery!" He straightened indignantly. "My dear young lady, you do need help." He replaced his glasses, fished in his pockets, and offered her a business card. "As you see, I'm an attorney. If you have been forced into any kind of involuntary servitude, my firm can certainly secure your release."

"But I'm not a slave," Guinevere said. "Our management has secured an informal opinion from the attorney general's office to the effect that we aren't human beings—not within the meaning of the law. We're only chattels."

"Eh?" He bent unbelievingly to pinch her golden arm. "Wha——"

"Alfred!"

He shuddered when he heard that penetrating cry, and snatched his fingers away from Guinevere as if she had become abruptly incandescent.

"Oh!" She shrank back into her narrow prison, rubbing at her bruised arm. "Please don't touch me until I'm paid for."

"Shhh!" Apprehensively, his bulging eyes were following a withered little squirrel-faced woman in a black-veiled hat, who came bustling indignantly from the direction of the ladies' room. "My—ah—encumberance."

"Alfred, whatever are you up to now?"

"Nothing, my dear. Nothing at all." He stooped hastily to recover his briefcase and umbrella. "But it must be time to see about our flight——"

"So! Shopping for one of them synthetic housekeepers?" She snatched the umbrella and flourished it high. "Well, I won't have 'em in any place of mine!"

"Martha, darling——"

"I'll Martha-darling you!"

He ducked away.

"And you!" She jabbed savagely at Guinevere. "You synthetic whatever-you-are, I'll teach you to carry on with any man of mine!"

"Hey!"

Chimberley hadn't planned to interfere, but when he saw Guinevere gasp and flinch, an unconsidered impulse moved him to brush aside the stabbing umbrella. The seething woman turned on him.

"You sniveling shrimp!" she hissed at him. "Buy her yourself—and see what you get!"

She scuttled away in pursuit of Alfred.

"Oh, thank you, Pip!" Guinevere's voice was muted with pain, and he saw the long red scratch across her tawny shoulder. "I guess you do like me!"

To his own surprise, Chimberley was digging for his billfold. He looked around self-consciously. Martha was towing Alfred past the deserted ticket windows, and an age-numbed janitor was mopping the floor, but otherwise the waiting room was empty. He fed five dollars into the slot, and waited thriftily for his five cents change.

A gong chimed softly, somewhere inside the vending machine. Something whirred. The shackles fell from Guinevere's wrists and flicked out of sight.

SOLD OUT! a 3-D sign blazed behind her. BUY *YOURS* TOMORROW!

"Darling!" She had her arms around him before he recovered his nickel. "I thought you'd never take me!"

He tried to evade her kiss, but he was suddenly paralyzed. A hot tingling swept him, and the scent of her perfume made a veil of fire around him. Bombs exploded in his brain.

"Hold on!" He pushed at her weakly, trying to remind himself that she was only an appliance. "I've got work to do, remember. And there's some information you've agreed to supply."

"Certainly, darling." Obediently, she disengaged herself. "But before we leave, won't you buy my accessory kit?" A singsong cadence came into her voice. "With fresh undies and a makeup set and gay chemistic nightwear, packed in a sturdy chemyl case, it's all complete for only nineteen ninety-five."

"Not so fast! That wasn't in the deal——"

He checked himself, with a grin of admiration for what was evidently an astutely integrated commercial operation. No screws loose so far in Athena Sue!

"Okay," he told Guinevere. "If you'll answer all my questions."

"I'm all yours, darling!" She reached for his twenty. "With everything I know."

She fed the twenty into the accessory slot. The machine chimed and whirred and coughed out a not-so-very-sturdy chemistic case. Guinevere picked it up and hugged him gratefully, while he waited for the clink of his nickel.

"Never mind the mugging, please!" He felt her cringe away from him, and tried to soften his voice. "I mean, we've no time to waste. I want to start checking over Athena Sue as soon as I can get out to the plant. We'll take a taxi, and talk on the way."

"Very well, Pip, dear." She nodded meekly. "But before we start, couldn't I have something to eat? I've been standing here since four o'clock yesterday, and I'm simply famished."

With a grimace of annoyance at the delay, he took her

into the terminal coffee shop. It was almost empty. Two elderly virgins glared at Guinevere, muttered together, and marched out piously. Two sailors tittered. The lone counterman looked frostily at Chimberley, attempting to ignore Guinevere.

Chimberley studied the menu unhappily and ordered two T-bones, resolving to put them on his expense account. The counterman was fresh out of steaks, and not visibly sorry. It was chemburgers or nothing.

"Chemburgers!" Guinevere clapped her hands. "They're made by Solar Chemistics, out of golden sunlight and pure sea water. They're absolutely tops, and everybody loves 'em!"

"Two chemburgers," Chimberley said, "and don't let 'em burn."

He took Guinevere back to a secluded booth.

"Now let's get started," he said. "I want the whole situation. Tell me everything about you."

"I'm a vital appliance. Just like all the others."

"So I want to know all about vital appliances."

"Some things I don't know." She frowned fetchingly. "Please, Pip, may I have a glass of water? I've been waiting there all night, and I'm simply parched."

The booth was outside the counterman's domain. He set out the water grudgingly, and Chimberley carried it back to Guinevere.

"Now what don't you know?"

"Our trade secrets." She smiled mysteriously. "Solar Chemistics is the daring pioneer in this exciting new field of chemistic engineering applied to the mass manufacture of redesigned vital organisms. Our mechanized management is much too clever to give away the unique know-how that makes us available to everybody. For that reason, deliberate gaps were left in our psionic education."

Chimberley blinked at her shining innocence, suspecting that he had been had.

"Anyhow," he urged her uneasily, "tell me what you do know. What started the company to making—uh—redesigned vital organisms?"

"The Miss Chemistics tape."

"Now I think we're getting somewhere." He leaned quickly across the narrow table. "Who's Miss Chemistics?"

"The world's most wanted woman." Guinevere sipped her water gracefully. "She won a prize contest that was planned to pick out the woman that every man wanted. A stupid affair, organized by the old human management before the computer was put in. There was an entry blank in every package of our synthetic products. Forty million women entered. The winner was a farm girl named Gussie Schlepps before the talent agents picked her up—now she's Guinevere Golden."

"What had she to do with you?"

"We're copies." Guinevere smirked complacently. "Of the world's most wonderful woman."

"How do you copy a woman?"

"No human being could," she said. "It takes too much know-how. But our computer was able to work everything out." She smiled proudly. "Because you see the prize that Miss Chemistics won was immortality."

"Huh?" He gaped at her untroubled loveliness. "How's that?"

"A few cells of scar tissue from her body were snipped off and frozen, in our laboratory. Each cell, you know, contains a full set of chromosomes—a complete genetic pattern for the reproduction of the whole body—and the legal department got her permission for the company to keep the cells alive forever and to produce new copies of her whenever suitable processes should be discovered."

"Maybe that's immortality." Chimberley frowned. "But it doesn't look like much of a prize."

"She was disappointed when they told her what it was." Guinevere nodded calmly. "In fact, she balked. She didn't want anybody cutting her precious body. She was afraid it would hurt, and afraid the scar would show—but she did want the publicity. All the laboratory needed was just a few cells. She finally let a company doctor take them, where the scar wouldn't show. And the publicity paid off. She's a realies actress now, with a million-dollar contract."

"One way to the top." Chimberley grinned. "But what does she think of vital appliances?"

"She thinks we're wonderful." Guinevere beamed. "You see, she gets a royalty on every copy sold. Besides, her agent says we're sensational publicity."

"I suppose you are." A reluctant admiration shone through his mud-colored eyes, before he could bring his mind back to business. "But let's get on with it. What about this Miss Chemistics tape?"

"The contest closed before our management was mechanized," she said, "while old Matt Skane was still general manager. But when the computer took over, all the company records were punched on chemistic tapes and filed in its memory banks."

He sat for a moment scowling. His eyes were on Guinevere, but he was reaching in his mind for the tidy rows of crackle-finished cabinets that housed Athena Sue, groping for the feel of her swift responses. The thinking of managerial computers was sometimes a little hard to follow, even for cybernetic engineers—and even when there was no question of any defective circuits.

Guinevere was squirming uncomfortably.

"Is something wrong with my face?"

"Not a thing," he assured her solemnly. He scratched his chin. "I heard you tell your legal friend, back there at the vending machine, that you aren't a human being within the meaning of the law. What's the difference?"

"The original cells are all human." She dabbed at her eyes with a paper napkin and looked up to face him bravely. "The differences come later, in the production lines. We're attached to mechanical placentas, and grown under hormone control in big vats of chemistic solutions. We're educated as we grow, by psionic impulses transmitted from high-speed training tapes. All of that makes differences, naturally. The biggest one is that we are better."

She frowned thoughtfully.

"Do you think the women are jealous?"

"Could be." Chimberley nodded uncertainly. "I never pretended to understand women. They all seem to have a lot of circuits out of kilter. Give me Athena Sue. Let's get out to the plant——"

Guinevere sniffed.

"Oh, Pip!" she gasped. "Our chemburgers!"

The counterman stood rubbing his hands on a greasy towel, staring at her with a fascinated disapproval. The forgotten chemburgers were smoking on the griddle behind him. Her wail aroused him. He scraped them up and slapped them defiantly on the counter.

Chimberley carried them silently back to Guinevere. He didn't care for chemburgers in any condition, but she consumed them both in ecstasy, and begged for a piece of chemberry pie.

"It's awfully good," she told him soulfully. "Made from the most ambrosial synthetics, by our exclusive chemistic processes. Won't you try a piece?"

When they approached a standing cab out in the street, the driver stiffened with hostility. But he took them.

"Keep her back," he growled. "Outa sight. Mobs smashed a couple hacks yesterday, to get at 'em."

Guinevere sat well back out of sight, crouching close to Chimberley. She said nothing, but he felt her shiver. The cab went fast through empty streets, and once when the tires squealed as it lurched around a corner she caught his hand apprehensively.

"See that, mister?" The driver slowed as they passed a block of charred wreckage. "Used to be one of them mechanized markets. Mob burned it yesterday. Machines inside selling them. See what I mean?"

Chimberley shook his head. Guinevere's clutching hand felt cold on his. Suddenly he slipped his arm around her. She leaned against him, and whispered fearfully:

"What does he mean?"

"I don't quite know."

The Solar Chemistics plant was ominously black. A few tattered palms straggled along the company fence. A sharp, yeasty scent drifted from the dark sea of solar reaction vats beyond, and blue floodlights washed the scattered islands where enormous bright metal cylinders towered out of intertwining jungles of pipes and automatic valves.

Chimberley sniffed the sour odor, and pride filled his narrow chest. Here was the marvelous body to Athena Sue's intricate brain. It breathed air and drank sea water and fed on sunlight, and gave birth to things as wonderful as Guinevere.

The driver stopped at a tall steel gate, and Chimberley got out. The rioters had been there. The palms along the fence were burned down to black stumps. Rocks had smashed gaping black holes in the big 3-D sign on the side of the gray concrete building beyond the fence, and broken glass grated on the pavement as he walked to the gate.

He found the bell, but nothing happened. Nobody moved inside the fence. All those dark miles of solar reactors had been designed to run and maintain themselves, and Athena Sue controlled them. A thousand fluids flowed continuously through a thousand processes to form a thousand new synthetics. Human labor was only in the way.

"Your almighty machine!" the driver jeered behind him. "Looks like it don't know you."

He jabbed the bell again, and an unhurried giant with a watchman's clock came out of the building toward the gate. Chimberley passed his company identification card through the barrier, and asked to see somebody in the office.

"Nobody there." The watchman chuckled cheerfully. "Unless you count that thinking machine."

"The computer's what I really want to see, if you'll let me in——"

"Afraid I couldn't, sir."

"Listen." Chimberley's voice lifted and quivered with incipient frustration. "This is an emergency. I've got to check the computer right away."

"Can't be that emergent." The watchman gave him a sun-bronzed grin. "After all the hell yesterday, the directors shut off the power to stop your gadget."

"But they can't——" Alarm caught him, as if his own brain had been threatened with oxygen starvation. "Without power, her memory tubes will discharge. She'll—well, die!"

"So what?" The watchman shrugged. "The directors are

meeting again in the morning, with our old legal staff, to get rid of her."

"But I'll have her checked and balanced again by then," he promised desperately. "Just let me in!"

"Sorry, sir. But after all that happened yesterday, they told me to keep everybody out."

"I see." Chimberley drew a deep breath and tried to hold his temper. "Would you tell me exactly what did happen?"

"If you don't know." The watchman winked impudently at the cab where Guinevere sat waiting. "Your big tin brain had developed those synthetic cuties secretly. It put them on the market yesterday morning. I guess they did look like something pretty hot, from a gadget's point of view. The item every man wanted most, at a giveaway price. Your poor old thinking machine will probably never understand why the mobs tried to smash it."

Chimberley bristled. "Call the responsible officials. Now. I insist."

"Insist away." The brown giant shrugged. "But there aren't any responsble officials, since the computer took over. So what can I do?"

"You might try restraining your insolence," Chimberley snapped. "And give me your name. I intend to report you in the morning."

"Matt Skane," he drawled easily. "Used to be general manager."

"I see," Chimberley muttered accusingly. "You hate computers!"

"Why not?" He grinned through the bars. "I fought 'em for years, before they got the company. Lost my health in the fight, and most of the money I had. It's tough to admit you're obsolete."

Chimberley stalked back to the cab and told the driver to take him to the Gran Desierto Hotel. The room clerk there gave Guinevere a chilling stare, and failed to find any record of his reservation. Another taxi driver suggested his life would be simpler, and accommodations easier to arrange, if he would ask the police to take her off his hands, but by that time his first annoyed bewilder-

ment was crystalizing into stubborn anger.

"I can't understand people," he told Guinevere. "They aren't like machines. I sometimes wonder how they ever managed to invent anything like Athena Sue. But whatever they do, I don't intend to give you up."

Day had come before he found an expensive room in a shabby little motel, where the sleepy manager demanded his money in advance and asked no questions at all. It was too late to sleep, but he took time for a shower and a shave.

His billfold was getting thin, and it struck him that the auditing machines might balk at some of his expenses on account of Guinevere, Prudently, he caught a bus at the corner. He got off in front of the plant, just before eight o'clock. The gate across the entrance drive was open now, but an armed guard stepped out to meet him.

"I'm here from General Cybernetics——"

He was digging nervously for his identification card, but the tall guard gestured easily to stop him.

"Mr. Chimberley?"

"I'm Chimberley. And I want to inspect our managerial installation here, before the directors meet this morning."

"Matt Skane told me you were coming, but I'm afraid you're late." The guard gestured lazily at a row of long cars parked across the drive. "The directors met an hour ago. But come along."

A wave of sickness broke over him as the guard escorted him past an empty reception desk and back into the idle silence of the mechanized administrative section. A sleek, feline brunette, who must have been a close runner-up in the Miss Chemistics contest, sat behind the chrome railing at the dead programming panel, intently brushing crimson lacquer on her talons. She glanced up at him with a spark of interest that instantly died.

"The hot shot from Schenectady," the guard said. "Here to overhaul the big tin brain."

"Shoulda made it quicker." She flexed her claws, frowning critically at the fresh enamel. "Word just came out of the board room. They're doing away with the brain. High time, too, if anybody wants to know."

"Why?"

"Didn't you see 'em?" She blew on her nails. "Those horrible synthetic monsters it was turning loose everywhere."

He remembered that she must have been a runner-up.

"Anyhow," he muttered stubbornly, "I want to check the computer."

With a bored nod, she reached to unlatch the little gate that let him through the railing into the metal-paneled, air-conditioned maze that had been the brain of Athena Sue. He stopped between the neat banks of pastel-painted units, saddened by their silence.

The exciting sounds of mechanized thought should have been whispering all around him. The germanium pentodes, cells of the cybernetic mind, had always been as silent as his own, but punched cards should have been riffling through the whirring sorters, as Athena Sue remembered. Perforators should have been munching chemistic tape, as she recorded new data. Relays should have been clicking as she reached her quick decisions, and automatic typewriters murmuring with her many voices.

But Athena Sue was dead.

She could be revived, he told himself hopefully. Her permanent memories were all still intact, punched in tough chemistic film. He could set her swift electronic pulse to beating again, through her discharged tubes, if he could find the impossible flaw that had somehow led to her death.

He set to work.

Three hours later he was bent over a high-speed scanner, reading a spool of tape, when a hearty shout startled him.

"Well, Chimberley! Found anything?"

He snatched the spool off the scanner and shrank uneasily back from the muscular giant stalking past the programming desk. It took him a moment to recognize Matt Skane, without the watchman's clock. Clutching the tape, he nodded stiffly.

"Yes." He glanced around him. The billowy brunette and the guard had disappeared. He wet his lips and gulped. "I—I've found out what happened to the computer."

"So?"

Skane waited, towering over him, a big, red, weather-

beaten man with horny hands shaped as if to fit a hammer or the handles of a plow, a clumsy misfit in this new world where machines had replaced both his muscles and his mind. He was obsolete—but dangerous.

"It was sabotaged." Chimberley's knobby fist tightened on the spool of tape, in sweaty defiance.

"How do you know?"

"Here's the whole story." He brandished the chemistic reel. "Somebody programmed Athena Sue to search for a project that would result in her destruction. Being an efficient computer, she did what she was programmed to do. She invented vital appliances, and supplied a correct prediction that the unfavorable consumer reaction to them would completely discredit mechanized equipment. So the saboteur re-programmed her to ignore the consequences and put them on the market."

"I see." Skane's bright blue eyes narrowed ominously. "And who was this cunning saboteur?"

Chimberley caught a rasping, uneven breath. "I know that he was somebody who had access to the programming panel at certain times, which are recorded on the input log. So far as I've been able to determine, the only company employee who should have been here at those times was a watchman—named Matt Skane."

The big man snorted.

"Do you call that evidence?"

"It's good enough for me. With a little further investigation, I think I can uncover enough supporting facts to interest the directors."

Skane shifted abruptly on his feet, and his hard lips twitched as Chimberley flinched. "The directors are gone," he drawled softly. "And there isn't going to be any further investigation. Because we've already gone back to human management. We're junking your big tin brain. I'm the general manager now. And I want that tape."

He reached for the chemistic spool.

"Take it." Chimberley crouched back from his long bronze arm, and ignominiously gave up the tape. "See what good it does you. Maybe I can't prove much of anything without it. But you're in for trouble, anyhow."

Skane grunted contemptuously.

"You can't turn the clock back," Chimberley told him bitterly. "Your competitors won't go back to human management. You'll still have all their computers to fight. They had you against the wall once, and they will again."

"Don't bet on it." Skane grinned. "Because we've learned a thing or two. We're going to use machines, instead of trying to fight them. We're putting in a new battery of the smaller sort of auxiliary computers—the kind that will let us keep a man at the top. I think we'll do all right, with no further help from you."

Chimberley hastily retreated from the smoldering blue eyes. He felt sick with humiliation. His own future was no serious problem; a good cybernetics engineer could always find an opening. What hurt was the way he had failed Athena Sue.

But there was Guinevere, waiting in his room.

His narrow shoulders lifted, when he thought of her. Most women irked and bored him, with all their fantastic irrationalities and their insufferable stupidities, but Guinevere was different. She was more like Athena Sue, cool and comprehensible, free of all the human flaws that he detested.

He ran from the bus stop back to the seedy motel, and his heart was fluttering when he rapped at the door of their room.

"Guinevere!"

He listened breathlessly. The latch clicked. The door creaked. He heard her husky-throated voice.

"Oh, Pip! I thought you'd never come."

"Guin——"

Shock stopped him, when he saw the woman in the doorway. She was hideous with old age. She felt feebly for him with thin blue claws, peering toward him blindly.

"Pip?" Her voice was somehow Guinevere's. "Isn't it you?"

"Where——" Fright caught his throat. His glance fled into the empty room beyond, and came back to her stooped and tottering frame, her wasted, faded face. He saw a

dreadful likeness there, but his mind rejected it. "Where's Guinevere?"

"Darling, don't you even know me?"

"You couldn't be——" He shuddered. "But still—your voice——"

"Yes, dear, I'm yours." Her white head nodded calmly. "The same vital appliance you bought last night. Guinevere Model 1, Serial Number 1997-A-456."

He clutched weakly at the door frame.

"The difference you have just discovered is our rapid obsolescence." A strange pride lifted her gaunt head. "That's something we're not supposed to talk about, but you're an engineer. You can see how essential it is, to insure a continuous replacement demand. A wonderful feature, don't you think, darling?"

He shook his head, with a grimace of pain.

"I suppose I don't look very lovely to you any longer, but that's all right." Her withered smile brightened again. "That's the way the computer planned it. Just take me back to the vending machine where you bought me. You'll get a generous trade-in allowance, on tomorrow's model."

"Not any more," he muttered hoarsely. "Because our computer's out. Skane's back in, and I don't think he'll be making vital appliances."

"Oh, Pip!" She sank down on the sagging bed, staring up at him with a blind bewilderment. "I'm so sorry for you!"

He sat down beside her, with tears in his murky eyes. For one bitter instant, he hated all computers, and the mobs—and Matt Skane as well.

But then he began to get hold of himself.

After all, Athena Sue was not to blame for anything. She had merely been betrayed. Machines were never evil, except when men used them wrongly.

He turned slowly back to Guinevere, and gravely kissed her shriveled lips.

"I'll make out," he whispered. "And now I've got to call Schenectady."

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