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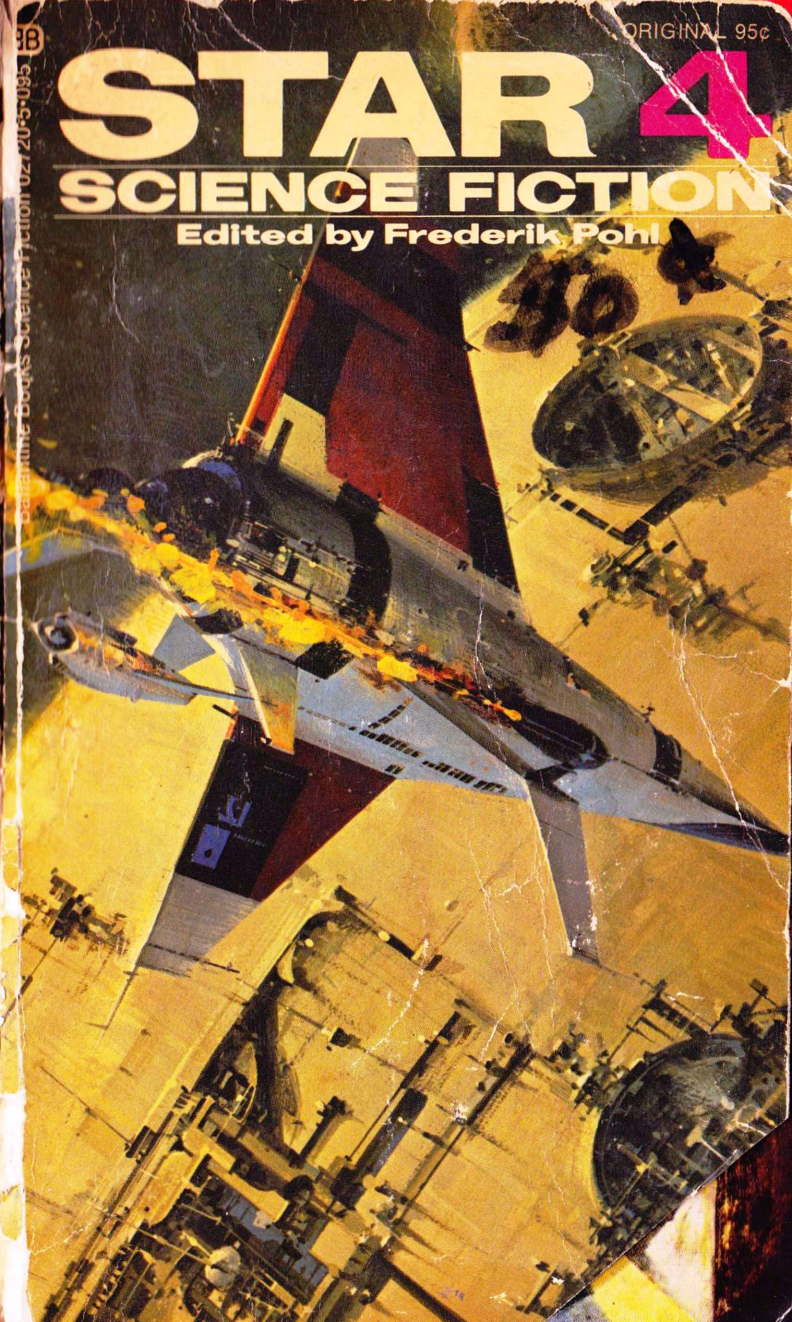
STAR 4

SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by Frederik Pohl



STAR SCIENCE FICTION STORIES NO. 4

edited by

Frederik Pohl

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Contents

A PINCH OF STARDUST

That ominous mushroom-shaped cloud you see is not another H-bomb; it's the population explosion that is currently going off.

Since 1950 the rate of population growth throughout the world has more than doubled. Now every seven months the world population increases by one per cent—twenty-odd million persons more at the end of July than there were on New Year's Day—an additional New York City or London born every ten weeks—a 40,000-man state capital born while you slept last night.

Nature is kind enough to compound the interest on our human investment, so that the one per cent dividend every seven months amounts to doubling the original capital in just about forty years.

Forty years?

Why, that means that the world should greet the new millennium with between five and six billion mouths to feed. Forty years later we will have doubled again, to more than ten billion; which means that for the first time in the history of the race a voting majority will be present; of all the human men, women and children since the first *homo sap*, more than half will then be alive on the earth.

That's a lot of people. . . .

But only a beginning, it seems. Doubling a number ten times is the same as multiplying by a thousand (plus a bit). In ten times forty years, then, for every man alive today there will be one thousand and twenty-four. Before 2360 A.D., that is to say, there will be nearly three trillion persons cluttering up the face of the earth.

And already, more than half the world's people are barely

scraping by for food. What then? Where will all those people find food?

They won't.

They'll starve, most of them; or never be born, because the persons who would have been their parents starved first.

We can be grateful that we won't live to see that particular event. . . .

Or won't we?

For those are based on static figures, assuming that the rate of growth remains the same.

But it isn't remaining the same at all. It doubled—the *rate* of increase doubled—in the past eight years. It only has to double a few more times to reach the probable maximum rate of population increase—that is, let's say, one child each year for every woman of child-bearing age.

That makes an annual increase of some 15 per cent.

At that rate—why, we double our population in some five years, instead of in forty. Instead of reaching the thousand-fold increase before 2360 A.D., we come to it in the first decades of the next century, when some of us may very well still be alive. . . .

And hungry.

Now, there's the problem: Malthusian law is about to be re-enacted; if we don't do something soon the world's in a pickle.

What to do?

Why, when you come right down to it, that's the kind of question that the eight writers in this present volume (and their colleagues) are well equipped to answer. Shall we have a hydrogen war, to cut the race down to a corporal's guard again and start the whole bloomin' thing over? Shall we build enormous rocket ships to carry our surplus population to colonize the asteroids? Shall we invent a cheap and habit-forming contraceptive pill—found a sweeping new religion with vows of chastity for all—encourage lawful cannibalism and make the weaker serve the needs of the stronger so that a few, at least, may survive?

Ask our science-fiction authors. It is their business to give

an answer. And while it is not obligatory on them that the answer be right, it is the basic rule of their business that it must stimulate thought. And that stimulus may yet turn up a few right answers, on this and other problems—

At a time when the world needs them very much indeed.

Frederik Pohl

HENRY KUTTNER

It is the custom in these pages to attempt to introduce each writer in a light vein, but here, and in the story that follows, lightness is hardly possible. Not long after Henry Kuttner wrote this story he began a new and demanding writing job for the movies; put in his first day at the studio and worked rather long; found himself tired and went home. He died in his sleep that night. Henry Kuttner was a young man, and a man who was much admired and much loved. There is no replacing him. There is only a permanent vacuum where the fine stories he would yet have written should have joined those fine stories already complete; and a permanent, personal loss to all of his friends.

A CROSS OF CENTURIES

They called him Christ. But he was not the Man Who had toiled up the long road to Golgotha five thousand years before. They called him Buddha and Mohammed; they called him the Lamb, and the Blessed of God. They called him the Prince of Peace and the Immortal One.

His name was Tyrell.

He had come up another road now, the steep path that led

to the monastery on the mountain, and he stood for a moment blinking against the bright sunlight. His white robe was stained with the ritual black.

The girl beside him touched his arm and urged him gently forward. He stepped into the shadow of the gateway.

Then he hesitated and looked back. The road had led up to a level mountain meadow where the monastery stood, and the meadow was dazzling green with early spring. Faintly, far away, he felt a wrenching sorrow at the thought of leaving all this brightness, but he sensed that things would be better very soon. And the brightness was far away. It was not quite real any more. The girl touched his arm again and he nodded obediently and moved forward, feeling the troubling touch of approaching loss that his tired mind could not understand now.

I am very old, he thought.

In the courtyard the priests bowed before him. Mons, the leader, was standing at the other end of a broad pool that sent back the bottomless blue of the sky. Now and again the water was ruffled by a cool, soft breeze.

Old habits sent their messages along his nerves. Tyrell raised his hand and blessed them all.

His voice spoke the remembered phrases quietly.

"Let there be peace. On all the troubled earth, on all the worlds and in God's blessed sky between, let there be peace. The powers of—of——" his hand wavered; then he remembered—"the powers of darkness have no strength against God's love and understanding. I bring you God's word. It is love; it is understanding; it is peace."

They waited till he had finished. It was the wrong time and the wrong ritual. But that did not matter, since he was the Messiah.

Mons, at the other end of the pool, signaled. The girl beside Tyrell put her hands gently on the shoulders of his robe.

Mons cried, "Immortal, will you cast off your stained garment and with it the sins of time?"

Tyrell looked vaguely across the pool.

"Will you bless the worlds with another century of your holy presence?"

Tyrell remembered some words.

"I leave in peace; I return in peace," he said.

The girl gently pulled off the white robe, knelt, and removed Tyrell's sandals. Naked, he stood at the pool's edge.

He looked like a boy of twenty. He was two thousand years old.

Some deep trouble touched him. Mons had lifted his arm, summoning, but Tyrell looked around confusedly and met the girl's gray eyes.

"Nerina?" he murmured.

"Go in the pool," she whispered. "Swim across it."

He put out his hand and touched hers. She felt that wonderful current of gentleness that was his indomitable strength. She pressed his hand tightly, trying to reach through the clouds in his mind, trying to make him know that it would be all right again, that she would be waiting—as she had waited for his resurrection three times already now, in the last three hundred years.

She was much younger than Tyrell, but she was immortal too.

For an instant the mists cleared from his blue eyes.

"Wait for me, Nerina," he said. Then, with a return of his old skill, he went into the pool with a clean dive.

She watched him swim across, surely and steadily. There was nothing wrong with his body; there never was, no matter how old he grew. It was only his mind that stiffened, grooved deeper into the iron ruts of time, lost its friction with the present, so that his memory would fragment away little by little. But the oldest memories went last, and the automatic memories last of all.

She was conscious of her own body, young and strong and beautiful, as it would always be. Her mind . . . there was an answer to that too. She was watching the answer.

I am greatly blessed, she thought. *Of all women on all the worlds, I am the Bride of Tyrell, and the only other immortal ever born.*

Lovingly and with reverence she watched him swim. At her feet his discarded robe lay, stained with the memories of a hundred years.

It did not seem so long ago. She could remember it very clearly, the last time she had watched Tyrell swim across the

pool. And there had been one time before that—and that had been the first. For her; not for Tyrell.

He came dripping out of the water and hesitated. She felt a strong pang at the change in him from strong sureness to bewildered questioning. But Mons was ready. He reached out and took Tyrell's hand. He led the Messiah toward a door in the high monastery wall and through it. She thought that Tyrell looked back at her, with the tenderness that was always there in his deep, wonderful calm.

A priest picked up the stained robe from her feet and carried it away. It would be washed clean now and placed on the altar, the spherical tabernacle shaped like the mother world. Dazzling white again, its folds would hang softly about the earth.

It would be washed clean, as Tyrell's mind would be washed clean too, rinsed of the clogging deposit of memories that a century had brought.

The priests were filing away. She glanced back, beyond the open gateway, to the sharply beautiful green of the mountain meadow, spring grass sensuously reaching to the sun after the winter's snow. *Immortal,* she thought, lifting her arms high, feeling the eternal blood, ichor of gods, singing in deep rhythm through her body. *Tyrell was the one who suffered. I have no price to pay for this—wonder.*

Twenty centuries.

And the first century must have been utter horror.

Her mind turned from the hidden mists of history that was legend now, seeing only a glimpse of the calm White Christ moving through that chaos of roaring evil when the earth was blackened, when it ran scarlet with hate and anguish. Ragnarok, Armageddon, Hour of the Antichrist—two thousand years ago!

Scourged, steadfast, preaching his word of love and peace, the White Messiah had walked like light through earth's descent into hell.

And he had lived, and the forces of evil had destroyed themselves, and the worlds had found peace now—had found peace so long ago that the Hour of the Antichrist was lost to memory; it was legend.

Lost, even to Tyrell's memory. She was glad of that. It

would have been terrible to remember. She turned chill at the thought of what martyrdom he must have endured.

But it was the Day of the Messiah now, and Nerina, the only other immortal ever born, looked with reverence and love at the empty doorway through which Tyrell had gone.

She glanced down at the blue pool. A cool wind ruffled its surface; a cloud moved lightly past the sun, shadowing all the bright day.

It would be seventy years before she would swim the pool again. And when she did, when she woke, she would find Tyrell's blue eyes watching her, his hand closing lightly over hers, raising her to join him in the youth that was the springtime where they lived forever.

Her gray eyes watched him; her hand touched his as he lay on the couch. But still he did not waken.

She glanced up anxiously at Mons.

He nodded reassuringly.

She felt the slightest movement against her hand.

His eyelids trembled. Slowly they lifted. The calm, deep certainty was still there in the blue eyes that had seen so much, in the mind that had forgotten so much. Tyrell looked at her for a moment. Then he smiled.

Nerina said shakily, "Each time I'm afraid that you'll forget me."

Mons said, "We always give him back his memories of you, Blessed of God. We always will." He leaned over Tyrell. "Immortal, have you truly wakened?"

"Yes," Tyrell said, and thrust himself upright, swinging his legs over the edge of the couch, rising to his feet in a swift, sure motion. He glanced around, saw the new robe ready, pure white, and drew it on. Both Nerina and Mons saw that there was no more hesitancy in his actions. Beyond the eternal body, the mind was young and sure and unclouded again.

Mons knelt, and Nerina knelt too. The priest said softly, "We thank God that a new Incarnation is permitted. May peace reign in this cycle, and in all the cycles beyond."

Tyrell lifted Nerina to her feet. He reached down and drew Mons upright too.

"Mons, Mons," he said, almost chidingly. "Every century I'm treated less like a man and more like a god. If you'd been alive a few hundred years ago—well, they still prayed when I woke, but they didn't kneel. I'm a man, Mons. Don't forget that."

Mons said, "You brought peace to the worlds."

"Then may I have something to eat, in return?"

Mons bowed and went out. Tyrell turned quickly to Nerina. The strong gentleness of his arms drew her close.

"If I never woke, sometime—" he said. "You'd be the hardest thing of all to give up. I didn't know how lonely I was till I found another immortal."

"We have a week here in the monastery," she said. "A week's retreat, before we go home. I like being here with you best of all."

"Wait a while," he said. "A few more centuries and you'll lose that attitude of reverence. I wish you would. Love's better—and who else can I love this way?"

She thought of the centuries of loneliness he had had, and her whole body ached with love and compassion.

After the kiss, she drew back and looked at him thoughtfully.

"You've changed again," she said. "It's still you, but—"

"But what?"

"You're gentler, somehow."

Tyrell laughed.

"Each time, they wash out my mind and give me a new set of memories. Oh, most of the old ones, but the total's a little different. It always is. Things are more peaceful now than they were a century ago. So my mind is tailored to fit the times. Otherwise I'd gradually become an anachronism." He frowned slightly. "Who's that?"

She glanced at the door.

"Mons? No. It's no one."

"Oh? Well . . . yes, we'll have a week's retreat. Time to think and integrate my retailored personality. And the past——" He hesitated again.

She said, "I wish I'd been born earlier. I could have been with you—"

"No," he said quickly. "At least—not too far back."

"Was it so bad?"

He shrugged.

"I don't know how true my memories are any more. I'm glad I don't remember more than I do. But I remember enough. The legends are right." His face shadowed with sorrow. "The big wars . . . hell was loosed. Hell was omnipotent! The Antichrist walked in the noonday sun, and men feared that which is high. . . ." His gaze lifted to the pale low ceiling of the room, seeing beyond it. "Men had turned into beasts. Into devils. I spoke of peace to them, and they tried to kill me. I bore it. I was immortal, by God's grace. Yet they could have killed me. I am vulnerable to weapons." He drew a deep, long breath. "Immortality was not enough. God's will preserved me, so that I could go on preaching peace until, little by little, the maimed beasts remembered their souls and reached up out of hell. . . ."

She had never heard him talk like this.

Gently she touched his hand.

He came back to her.

"It's over," he said. "The past is dead. We have today."

From the distance the priests chanted a paean of joy and gratitude.

The next afternoon she saw him at the end of a corridor leaning over something huddled and dark. She ran forward. He was bent down beside the body of a priest, and when Nerina called out, he shivered and stood up, his face white and appalled.

She looked down and her face, too, went white.

The priest was dead. There were blue marks on his throat, and his neck was broken, his head twisted monstrously.

Tyrell moved to shield the body from her gaze.

"G-get Mons," he said, unsure as though he had reached the end of the hundred years. "Quick. This . . . *get him.*"

Mons came, looked at the body, and stood aghast. He met Tyrell's blue gaze.

"How many centuries, Messiah?" he asked, in a shaken voice.

Tyrell said, "Since there was violence? Eight centuries or more. Mons, no one—no one is capable of this."

Mons said, "Yes. There is no more violence. It has been bred out of the race." He dropped suddenly to his knees. "Messiah, bring peace again! The dragon has risen from the past!"

Tyrell straightened, a figure of strong humility in his white robe.

He lifted his eyes and prayed.

Nerina knelt, her horror slowly washed away in the burning power of Tyrell's prayer.

The whisper breathed through the monastery and shuddered back from the blue, clear air beyond. None knew who had closed deadly hands about the priest's throat. No one, no human, was capable any longer of killing; as Mons had said, the ability to hate, to destroy, had been bred out of the race.

The whisper did not go beyond the monastery. Here the battle must be fought in secret, no hint of it escaping to trouble the long peace of the worlds.

No human.

But another whisper grew: *The Antichrist is born again.*

They turned to Tyrell, to the Messiah, for comfort.

Peace, he said, *peace—meet evil with humility, bow your heads in prayer, remember the love that saved man when hell was loosed on the worlds two thousand years ago.*

At night, beside Nerina, he moaned in his sleep and struck out at an invisible enemy.

"Devil!" he cried—and woke, shuddering.

She held him, with proud humility, till he slept again.

She came with Mons one day to Tyrell's room, to tell him of the new horror. A priest had been found dead, savagely hacked by a sharp knife. They pushed open the door and saw Tyrell sitting facing them at a low table. He was praying while he watched, in sick fascination, the bloody knife that lay on the table before him.

"Tyrell——" she said, and suddenly Mons drew in a quick, shuddering breath and swung around sharply. He pushed her back across the threshold.

"Wait!" he said, with violent urgency. "Wait for me here!" Before she could speak he was beyond the closing door, and she heard it lock.

She stood there, not thinking, for a long time.

Then Mons came out and closed the door softly behind him. He looked at her.

"It's all right," he said. "But . . . you must listen to me now." Then he was silent.

He tried again.

"Blessed of God——" Again he drew that difficult breath. "Nerina. I——" He laughed oddly. "That's strange. I can't talk unless I call you Nerina."

"What is it? Let me go to Tyrell!"

"No—no. He'll be all right. Nerina, he's—sick."

She shut her eyes, trying to concentrate. She heard his voice, unsure but growing stronger.

"Those killings. Tyrell did them."

"Now you lie," she said. "That is a lie!"

Mons said almost sharply, "Open your eyes. Listen to me. Tyrell is—a man. A very great man, a very good man, but no god. He is immortal. Unless he is struck down, he will live forever—as you will. He has already lived more than twenty centuries."

"Why tell me this? I know it!"

Mons said, "You must help, you must understand. Immortality is an accident of the genes. A mutation. Once in a thousand years, perhaps, or ten thousand, a human is born immortal. His body renews itself; he does not age. Neither does his brain. But his mind ages—"

She said desperately, "Tyrell swam the pool of rebirth only three days ago. Not for another century will his mind age again. Is he—*he's not dying?*"

"No—no. Nerina, the pool of rebirth is only a symbol. You know that."

"Yes. The real rebirth comes afterward, when you put us in that machine. I remember."

Mons said, "The machine. If it were not used each century, you and Tyrell would have become senile and helpless a long time ago. The mind is not immortal, Nerina. After a while it cannot carry the weight of knowledge, learning, habits. It loses flexibility, it clouds with stiff old age. The machine clears the mind, Nerina, as we can clear a computer of its units of memory. Then we replace some memories, not all, we put the

necessary memories in a fresh, clear mind, so it can grow and learn for another hundred years."

"But I know all that——"

"Those new memories form a new personality, Nerina."

"A new——? But Tyrell is still the same."

"Not quite. Each century he changes a little, as life grows better, as the worlds grow happier. Each century the new mind, the fresh personality of Tyrell is different—more in tune with the new century than the one just past. You have been reborn in mind three times, Nerina. You are not the same as you were the first time. But you cannot remember that. You do not have all the old memories you once had."

"But—but what——"

Mons said, "I do not know. I have talked to Tyrell. I think this is what has happened. Each century when the mind of Tyrell was cleansed—erased—it left a blank mind, and we built a new Tyrell on that. Not much changed. Only a little, each time. But more than twenty times? His mind must have been very different twenty centuries ago. And——"

"How different?"

"I don't know. We've assumed that when the mind was erased, the pattern of personality—vanished. I think now that it didn't vanish. It was buried. Suppressed, driven so deeply into the mind that it could not emerge. It became unconscious. Century after century this has happened. And now more than twenty personalities of Tyrell are buried in his mind, a multiple personality that can no longer stay in balance. From the graves in his mind, there has been a resurrection."

"The White Christ was never a killer!"

"No. In reality, even his first personality, twenty-odd centuries ago, must have been very great and good to bring peace to the worlds—in that time of Antichrist. But sometimes, in the burial of the mind, a change may happen. Those buried personalities, some of them, may have changed to—to something less good than they were originally. And now they have broken loose."

Nerina turned to the door.

Mons said, "We must be very sure. But we can save the Messiah. We can clear his brain, probe deep, deep, root out

the evil spirit. . . . We can save him and make him whole again. We must start at once. Nerina—pray for him."

He gave her a long, troubled look, turned, and went swiftly along the corridor. Nerina waited, not even thinking. After a while she heard a slight sound. At one end of the corridor were two priests standing motionless; at the other end, two others.

She opened the door and went in to Tyrell.

The first thing she saw was the blood-stained knife on the table. Then she saw the dark silhouette at the window, against the aching intensity of blue sky.

"Tyrell," she said hesitantly.

He turned.

"Nerina. Oh, Nerina!"

His voice was still gentle with that deep power of calm. She went swiftly into his arms.

"I was praying," he said, bending his head to rest on her shoulder. "Mons told me. . . . I was praying. What have I done?"

"You are the Messiah," she said steadily. "You saved the world from evil and the Antichrist. You've done that."

"But the rest! This devil in my mind! This seed that has grown there, hidden from God's sunlight—what has it grown into? They say I *killed!*"

After a long pause she whispered, "Did you?"

"No," he said, with absolute certainty. "How could I? I, who have lived by love—more than two thousand years—I could not harm a living thing."

"I knew that," she said. "You are the White Christ."

"The White Christ," he said softly. "I wanted no such name. I am only a man, Nerina. I was never more than that. But . . . something saved me, something kept me alive through the Hour of the Antichrist. It was God. It was His hand. God—*help me now!*"

She held him tightly and looked past him through the window, bright sky, green meadow, tall mountains with the clouds rimming their peaks. God was here, as he was out beyond the blue, on all the worlds and in the gulfs between them, and God meant peace and love.

"He will help you," she said steadily. "He walked with you two thousand years ago. He hasn't gone away."

"Yes," Tyrell whispered. "Mons must be wrong. The way it was . . . I remember. Men like beasts. The sky was burning fire. There was blood . . . there was blood. More than a hundred years of blood that ran from the beast-men as they fought."

She felt the sudden stiffness in him, a trembling rigor, a new sharp straining.

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes.

She thought of ice and fire, blue ice, blue fire.

"The big wars," he said, his voice stiff, rusty.

Then he put his hand over his eyes.

"Christ!" The word burst from his tight throat. *"God, God——"*

"Tyrell!" She screamed his name.

"Back!" he croaked, and she stumbled away, but he was not talking to her. "Back, devil!" He clawed at his head, grinding it between his palms, bowing till he was half crouched before her.

"Tyrell!" she cried. "Messiah! You are the White Christ——"

The bowed body snapped erect. She looked at the new face and felt an abysmal horror and loathing.

Tyrell stood looking at her. Then, appallingly, he gave her a strutting, derisive bow.

She felt the edge of the table behind her. She groped back and touched the heavy thickness of dried blood on the knife-blade. It was part of the nightmare. She moved her hand to the haft, knowing she could die by steel, letting her thought move ahead of the glittering steel's point into her breast.

The voice she heard was touched with laughter.

"Is it sharp?" he asked. "Is it still sharp, my love? Or did I dull it on the priest? Will you use it on me? Will you try? Other women have tried!" Thick laughter choked in his throat.

"Messiah," she whispered.

"Messiah!" he mocked. "A White Christ! Prince of Peace! Bringing the word of love, walking unharmed through the bloodiest wars that ever wrecked a world . . . oh yes, a legend, my love, twenty centuries old and more. And a lie. They've

forgotten! They've all forgotten what it was really like then!"

All she could do was shake her head in helpless denial.

"Oh yes," he said. "You weren't alive then. No one was. Except me, Tyrell. Butchery! I survived. But not by preaching peace. Do you know what happened to the men who preached love? They died—but I didn't die. I survived, not by preaching."

He pranced, laughing.

"Tyrell the Butcher," he cried. "I was the bloodiest of them all. All they could understand was fear. And they weren't easily frightened then—not the men like beasts. But they were afraid of *me*."

He lifted his clawed hands, his muscles straining in an ecstasy of ghastly memory.

"The Red Christ," he said. "They might have called me that. But they didn't. Not after I'd proved what I had to prove. They had a name for me then. They knew my name. And now——" He grinned at her. "Now that the worlds are at peace, now I'm worshiped as the Messiah. What can Tyrell the Butcher do today?"

His laughter came slow, horrible and complacent.

He took three steps and swept his arms around her. Her flesh shrank from the grip of that evil.

And then, suddenly, strangely, she felt the evil leave him. The hard arms shuddered, drew away, and then tightened again, with frantic tenderness, while he bent his head and she felt the sudden hotness of tears.

He could not speak for a while. Cold as stone, she held him.

Somehow she was sitting on a couch and he was kneeling before her, his face buried in her lap.

She could not make out many of his choking words.

"Remember . . . I remember . . . the old memories . . . I can't stand it, I can't look back . . . or ahead . . . they—they had a name for me. I remember now. . . ."

She laid one hand on his head. His hair was cold and damp.

"They called me Antichrist!"

He lifted his face and looked at her.

"Help me!" he cried in anguish. "Help me, help me!"

Then his head bowed again and he pressed his fists against his temples, whispering wordlessly.

She remembered what was in her right hand, and she lifted the knife and drove it down as hard as she could, to give him the help he needed.

She stood at the window, her back to the room and the dead immortal.

She waited for the priest Mons to return. He would know what to do next. Probably the secret would have to be kept, somehow.

They would not harm her, she knew that. The reverence that had surrounded Tyrell enfolded her too. She would live on, the only immortal now, born in a time of peace, living forever and alone in the worlds of peace. Some day, some time, another immortal might be born, but she did not want to think of that now. She could think only of Tyrell and her loneliness.

She looked through the window at the bright blue and green, the pure day of God, washed clean now of the last red stain of man's bloody past. She knew that Tyrell would be glad if he could see this cleanness, this purity that could go on forever.

She would see it go on. She was part of it, as Tyrell had not been. And even in the loneliness she already felt, there was a feeling of compensation, somehow. She was dedicated to the centuries of man that were to come.

She reached beyond her sorrow and love. From far away she could hear the solemn chanting of the priests. It was part of the rightness that had come to the worlds now, at last, after the long and bloody path to the new Golgotha. But it was the last Golgotha, and she would go on now as she must, dedicated and sure.

Immortal.

She lifted her head and looked steadily at the blue. She would look forward into the future. The past was forgotten. And the past, to her, meant no bloody heritage, no deep corruption that would work unseen in the black hell of the mind's abyss until the monstrous seed reached up to destroy God's peace and love.

Quite suddenly, she remembered that she had committed murder. Her arm thrilled again with the violence of the blow; her hand tingled with the splash of shed blood.

Very quickly she closed her thoughts against the memory. She looked up at the sky, holding hard against the closed gateway of her mind as though the assault battered already against the fragile bars.

C. M. KORNBLUTH

A month after Henry Kuttner's death, another heavy blow was dealt us all. Cyril Kornbluth, thirty-five years old, boundless in promise, was stricken in a railroad station on Long Island. He collapsed; he never regained consciousness; and in less than an hour he was dead. This is one of his last stories. Fittingly, it is one of his best. Cyril's very special talent was to expose the wry and seamy side of man's progress. Here, in a few brief and stinging pages, he shows us the demon that lurks inside the familiar TV set, in ——

THE ADVENT ON CHANNEL TWELVE

It came to pass in the third quarter of the fiscal year that the Federal Reserve Board did raise the rediscount rate and money was tight in the land. And certain bankers which sate in New York sent to Ben Graffis in Hollywood a writing which said, Money is tight in the land so let Poopy Panda up periscope and fire all bow tubes.

Whereupon Ben Graffis made to them this moan:

O ye bankers, Poopy Panda is like unto the child of my flesh and you have made of him a devouring dragon. Once was I content with my studio and my animators when we did

make twelve Poopy Pandas a year; cursed be the day when I floated a New York loan. You have commanded me to make feature length cartoon epics and I did obey, and they do open at the Paramount to sensational grosses, and we do re-release them to the nabes year on year, without end. You have commanded me to film live adventure shorts and I did obey, and in the cutting room we do devilishly splice and pull frames and flop negatives so that I and my cameras are become bearers of false witness and men look upon my live adventure shorts and say lo! these beasts and birds are like unto us in their laughter, wooing, pranks and contention. You have commanded that I become a mountebank for that I did build Poopy Pandaland whereinto men enter with their children, their silver and their wits, and wherefrom they go out with their children only, sandbagged by a thousand catch-penny engines; even this did I obey. You have commanded that Poopy Panda shill every weekday night on television between five and six for the Poopy Panda Pals, and even this did I obey though Poopy Panda is like unto the child of my flesh.

But O ye bankers, this last command will I never obey.

Whereupon the bankers which sate in New York sent to him another writing that said, Even so, let Poopy Panda up periscope and fire all bow tubes, and they said, Remember, boy, we hold thy paper.

And Ben Graffis did obey.

He called unto him his animators and directors and cameramen and writers, and his heart was sore but he dissembled and said:

In jest you call one another brainwashers, forasmuch as you addle the heads of children five hours a week that they shall buy our sponsors' wares. You have fulfilled the prophecies, for is it not written in the Book of the Space Merchants that there shall be spherical trusts? And the Poopy Panda Pals plug the Poopy Panda Magazine, and the Poopy Panda Magazine plugs Poopy Pandaland, and Poopy Pandaland plugs the Poopy Panda Pals. You have asked of the Motivational Research boys how we shall hook the little bastards and they have told ye, and ye have done it. You identify the untalented kid viewers with the talented kid performers, you

provide in Otto Clodd a bumbling father image to be derided, you furnish in Jackie Whipple an idealized big brother for the boys and a sex-fantasy for the more precocious girls. You flatter the cans off the viewers by ever saying to them that they shall rule the twenty-first century, nor mind that those who shall in good sooth come to power are doing their homework and not watching television programs. You have created a liturgy of opening hymn and closing benediction, and over all hovers the spirit of Poopy Panda urging and coaxing the viewers to buy our sponsors' wares.

And Ben Graffis breathed a great breath and looked them not in the eye and said to them, Were it not a better thing for Poopy Panda to coax and urge no more, but to command as he were a god?

And the animators and directors and cameramen and writers were sore amazed and they said one to the other, This is the bleeding end, and the bankers which sit in New York have flipped their wigs. And one which was an old animator said to Ben Graffis, trembling, O chief, never would I have stolen for thee Poopy Panda from the Winnie the Pooh illustrations back in twenty-nine had I known this was in the cards, and Ben Graffis fired him.

Whereupon another which was a director said to Ben Graffis, O chief, the thing can be done with a two-week build up, and Ben Graffis put his hands over his face and said, Let it be so.

And it came to pass that on the Friday after the two-week buildup, in the closing quarter-hour of the Poopy Panda Pals, there was a special film combining live and animated action as they were one.

And in the special film did Poopy Panda appear enhaloed, and the talented kid performers did do him worship, and Otto Clodd did trip over his feet whilst kneeling, and Jackie Whipple did urge in manly and sincere wise that all the Poopy Panda Pals out there in television-land do likewise, and the enhaloed Poopy Panda did say in his lovable growly voice, Poop-poop-poopy.

And adoration ascended from thirty-seven million souls.

And it came to pass that Ben Graffis went into his office

with his animators and cameramen and directors and writers after the show and said to them, It was definitely a TV first, and he did go to the bar.

Whereupon one which was a director looked at Who sate behind the desk that was the desk of Ben Graffis and he said to Ben Graffis, O chief, it is a great gag but how did the special effects boys manage the halo?

And Ben Graffis was sore amazed at Who sate behind his desk and he and they all did crowd about and make as if to poke Him, whereupon He in His lovable growly voice did say, Poop-poop-poopy, and they were not.

And certain unclean ones which had gone before turned unbelieving from their monitors and said, Holy Gee, this is awful. And one which was an operator of marionettes turned to his manager and said, Pal, if Graffis gets this off the ground we're dead. Whereat a great and far-off voice was heard, saying, Poop-poop-poopy, and it was even so; and the days of Poopy Panda were long in the land.

Filtered for error,
Jan. 18th 36 P.P.
Synod on Filtration & Infiltration
O. Clodd, P.P.P.
J. Whipple, P.P.P.

FRITZ LEIBER

Fritz Leiber was not born with a caul—believe it if you can! For his greatest gift is the knack of second sight, the talent that sees beneath the outer garments of flesh and matter into the heart of things, of people—and of cats. Consider, for instance, with what X-ray stare he has penetrated the heart of a kitten named Gummitch in order to instruct us in the essentials of—

SPACE-TIME FOR SPRINGERS

Gummitch was a superkitten, as he knew very well, with an I. Q. of about 160. Of course, he didn't talk. But everybody knows that I. Q. tests based on language ability are very one-sided. Besides, he would talk as soon as they started setting a place for him at table and pouring him coffee. Ashurbanipal and Cleopatra ate horsemeat from pans on the floor and they didn't talk. Baby dined in his crib on milk from a bottle and he didn't talk. Sissy sat at table but they didn't pour her coffee and she didn't talk—not one word. Father and Mother (whom Gummitch had nicknamed Old Horsemeat and Kitty-Come-Here) sat at table and poured each other coffee and they *did* talk. Q. E. D.

Meanwhile, he would get by very well on thought projection and intuitive understanding of all human speech—not even to mention cat patois, which almost any civilized

animal could play by ear. The dramatic monologues and Socratic dialogues, the quiz and panel-show appearances, the felidological expedition to darkest Africa (where he would uncover the real truth behind lions and tigers), the exploration of the outer planets—all these could wait. The same went for the books for which he was ceaselessly accumulating material: *The Encyclopedia of Odors, Anthropofeline Psychology, Invisible Signs and Secret Wonders, Space-Time for Springers, Slit Eyes Look at Life,* et cetera. For the present it was enough to live existence to the hilt and soak up knowledge, missing no experience proper to his age level—to rush about with tail aflame.

So to all outward appearances Gummitch was just a vividly normal kitten, as shown by the succession of nicknames he bore along the magic path that led from blue-eyed infancy toward puberty: Little One, Squawker, Portly, Bumble (for purring not clumsiness), Old Starved-to-Death, Fierso, Loverboy (affection not sex), Spook and Catnik. Of these only the last perhaps requires further explanation: the Russians had just sent Muttnik up after Sputnik, so that when one evening Gummitch streaked three times across the firmament of the living room floor in the same direction, past the fixed stars of the humans and the comparatively slow-moving heavenly bodies of the two older cats, and Kitty-Come-Here quoted the line from Keats:

> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken;

it was inevitable that Old Horsemeat would say, "Ah—Catnik!"

The new name lasted all of three days, to be replaced by Gummitch, which showed signs of becoming permanent.

The little cat was on the verge of truly growing up, at least so Gummitch overheard Old Horsemeat comment to Kitty-Come-Here. A few short weeks, Old Horsemeat said, and Gummitch's fiery flesh would harden, his slim neck thicken, the electricity vanish from everything but his fur, and all his delightful kittenish qualities rapidly give way to the earth-bound singlemindness of a tom. They'd be lucky, Old

Horsemeat concluded, if he didn't turn completely surly like Ashurbanipal.

Gummitch listened to these predictions with gay unconcern and with secret amusement from his vantage point of superior knowledge, in the same spirit that he accepted so many phases of his outwardly conventional existence: the murderous sidelong looks he got from Ashurbanipal and Cleopatra as he devoured his own horsemeat from his own little tin pan, because they sometimes were given canned catfood but he never; the stark idiocy of Baby, who didn't know the difference between a live cat and a stuffed teddy bear and who tried to cover up his ignorance by making goo-goo noises and poking indiscriminately at all eyes; the far more serious—because cleverly hidden—maliciousness of Sissy, who had to be watched out for warily—especially when you were alone—and whose retarded—even warped—development, Gummitch knew, was Old Horsemeat and Kitty-Come-Here's deepest, most secret, worry (more of Sissy and her evil ways soon); the limited intellect of Kitty-Come-Here, who despite the amounts of coffee she drank was quite as featherbrained as kittens are supposed to be and who firmly believed, for example, that kittens operated in the same space-time as other beings—that to get from *here* to *there* they had to cross the space *between*—and similar fallacies; the mental stodginess of even Old Horsemeat, who although he understood quite a bit of the secret doctrine and talked intelligently to Gummitch when they were alone, nevertheless suffered from the limitations of his status—a rather nice old god but a maddeningly slow-witted one.

But Gummitch could easily forgive all this massed inadequacy and downright brutishness in his felino-human household, because he was aware that he alone knew the real truth about himself and about other kittens and babies as well, the truth which was hidden from weaker minds, the truth that was as intrinsically incredible as the germ theory of disease or the origin of the whole great universe in the explosion of a single atom.

As a baby kitten Gummitch had believed that Old Horsemeat's two hands were hairless kittens permanently attached to the ends of Old Horsemeat's arms but having an inde-

pendent life of their own. How he had hated and loved those two five-legged sallow monsters, his first playmates, comforters and battle-opponents!

Well, even that fantastic discarded notion was but a trifling fancy compared to the real truth about himself!

The forehead of Zeus split open to give birth to Minerva. Gummitch had been born from the waist-fold of a dirty old terrycloth bathrobe, Old Horsemeat's basic garment. The kitten was intuitively certain of it and had proved it to himself as well as any Descartes or Aristotle. In a kitten-size tuck of that ancient bathrobe the atoms of his body had gathered and quickened into life. His earliest memories were of snoozing wrapped in terrycloth, warmed by Old Horsemeat's heat. Old Horsemeat and Kitty-Come-Here were his true parents. The other theory of his origin, the one he heard Old Horsemeat and Kitty-Come-Here recount from time to time—that he had been the only surviving kitten of a litter abandoned next door, that he had had the shakes from vitamin deficiency and lost the tip of his tail and the hair on his paws and had to be nursed back to life and health with warm yellowish milk-and-vitamins fed from an eyedropper—that other theory was just one of those rationalizations with which mysterious nature cloaks the birth of heroes, perhaps wisely veiling the truth from minds unable to bear it, a rationalization as false as Kitty-Come-Here and Old Horsemeat's touching belief that Sissy and Baby were their children rather than the cubs of Ashurpanipal and Cleopatra.

The day that Gummitch had discovered by pure intuition the secret of his birth he had been filled with a wild instant excitement. He had only kept it from tearing him to pieces by rushing out to the kitchen and striking and devouring a fried scallop, torturing it fiendishly first for twenty minutes.

And the secret of his birth was only the beginning. His intellectual faculties aroused, Gummitch had two days later intuited a further and greater secret: since he was the child of humans he would, upon reaching this maturation date of which Old Horsemeat had spoken, turn not into a sullen tom but into a godlike human youth with reddish golden hair the color of his present fur. He would be poured coffee; and he

would instantly be able to talk, probably in all languages. While Sissy (how clear it was now!) would at approximately the same time shrink and fur out into a sharp-clawed and vicious she-cat dark as her hair, sex and self-love her only concerns, fit harem-mate for Cleopatra, concubine to Ashurbanipal.

Exactly the same was true, Gummitch realized at once, for all kittens and babies, all humans and cats, wherever they might dwell. Metamorphosis was as much a part of the fabric of their lives as it was of the insects'. It was also the basic fact underlying all legends of werewolves, vampires and witches' familiars.

If you just rid your mind of preconceived notions, Gummitch told himself, it was all very logical. Babies were stupid, fumbling, vindictive creatures without reason or speech. What more natural than that they should grow up into mute sullen selfish beasts bent only on rapine and reproduction? While kittens were quick, sensitive, subtle, supremely alive. What other destiny were they possibly fitted for except to become the deft, word-speaking, book-writing, music-making, meat-getting-and-dispensing masters of the world? To dwell on the physical differences, to point out that kittens and men, babies and cats, are rather unlike in appearance and size, would be to miss the forest for the trees—very much as if an entomologist should proclaim metamorphosis a myth because his microscope failed to discover the wings of a butterfly in a caterpillar's slime or a golden beetle in a grub.

Nevertheless it was such a mind-staggering truth, Gummitch realized at the same time, that it was easy to understand why humans, cats, babies and perhaps most kittens were quite unaware of it. How safely explain to a butterfly that he was once a hairy crawler, or to a dull larva that he will one day be a walking jewel? No, in such situations the delicate minds of man- and feline-kind are guarded by a merciful mass amnesia, such as Velikovsky has explained prevents us from recalling that in historical times the Earth was catastrophically bumped by the planet Venus operating in the manner of a comet before settling down (with a cosmic sigh of relief, surely!) into its present orbit.

This conclusion was confirmed when Gummitch in the first

fever of illumination tried to communicate his great insight to others. He told it in cat patois, as well as that limited jargon permitted, to Ashurbanipal and Cleopatra and even, on the off chance, to Sissy and Baby. They showed no interest whatever, except that Sissy took advantage of his unguarded preoccupation to stab him with a fork.

Later, alone with Old Horsemeat, he projected the great new thoughts, staring with solemn yellow eyes at the old god, but the latter grew markedly nervous and even showed signs of real fear, so Gummitch desisted. ("You'd have sworn he was trying to put across something as deep as the Einstein theory or the doctrine of original sin," Old Horsemeat later told Kitty-Come-Here.)

But Gummitch was a man now in all but form, the kitten reminded himself after these failures, and it was part of his destiny to shoulder secrets alone when necessary. He wondered if the general amnesia would affect him when he metamorphosed. There was no sure answer to this question, but he hoped not—and sometimes felt that there was reason for his hopes. Perhaps he would be the first true kitten-man, speaking from a wisdom that had no locked doors in it.

Once he was tempted to speed up the process by the use of drugs. Left alone in the kitchen, he sprang onto the table and started to lap up the black puddle in the bottom of Old Horsemeat's coffee cup. It tasted foul and poisonous and he withdrew with a little snarl, frightened as well as revolted. The dark beverage would not work its tongue-loosening magic, he realized, except at the proper time and with the proper ceremonies. Incantations might be necessary as well. Certainly unlawful tasting was highly dangerous.

The futility of expecting coffee to work any wonders by itself was further demonstrated to Gummitch when Kitty-Come-Here, wordlessly badgered by Sissy, gave a few spoonfuls to the little girl, liberally lacing it first with milk and sugar. Of course Gummitch knew by now that Sissy was destined shortly to turn into a cat and that no amount of coffee would ever make her talk, but it was nevertheless instructive to see how she spat out the first mouthful, drooling a lot

of saliva after it, and dashed the cup and its contents at the chest of Kitty-Come-Here.

Gummitch continued to feel a great deal of sympathy for his parents in their worries about Sissy and he longed for the day when he would metamorphose and be able as an acknowledged man-child truly to console them. It was heartbreaking to see how they each tried to coax the little girl to talk, always attempting it while the other was absent, how they seized on each accidentally wordlike note in the few sounds she uttered and repeated it back to her hopefully, how they were more and more possessed by fears not so much of her retarded (they thought) development as of her increasingly obvious maliciousness, which was directed chiefly at Baby . . . though the two cats and Gummitch bore their share. Once she had caught Baby alone in his crib and used the sharp corner of a block to dot Baby's large-domed lightly downed head with triangular red marks. Kitty-Come-Here had discovered her doing it, but the woman's first action had been to rub Baby's head to obliterate the marks so that Old Horsemeat wouldn't see them. That was the night Kitty-Come-Here hid the abnormal psychology books.

Gummitch understood very well that Kitty-Come-Here and Old Horsemeat, honestly believing themselves to be Sissy's parents, felt just as deeply about her as if they actually were and he did what little he could under the present circumstances to help them. He had recently come to feel a quite independent affection for Baby—the miserable little proto-cat was so completely stupid and defenseless—and so he unofficially constituted himself the creature's guardian, taking his naps behind the door of the nursery and dashing about noisily whenever Sissy showed up. In any case he realized that as a potentially adult member of a felino-human household he had his natural responsibilities.

Accepting responsibilities was as much a part of a kitten's life, Gummitch told himself, as shouldering unsharable intuitions and secrets, the number of which continued to grow from day to day.

There was, for instance, the Affair of the Squirrel Mirror.

Gummitch had early solved the mystery of ordinary mir-

rors and of the creatures that appeared in them. A little observation and sniffing and one attempt to get behind the heavy wall-job in the living room had convinced him that mirror beings were insubstantial or at least hermetically sealed into their other world, probably creatures of pure spirit, harmless imitative ghosts—including the silent Gummitch Double who touched paws with him so softly yet so coldly.

Just the same, Gummitch had let his imagination play with what would happen if one day, while looking into the mirror world, he should let loosé his grip on his spirit and let it slip into the Gummitch Double while the other's spirit slipped into his body—if, in short, he should change places with the scentless ghost kitten. Being doomed to a life consisting wholly of imitation and completely lacking in opportunities to show initiative—except for the behind-the-scenes judgment and speed needed in rushing from one mirror to another to keep up with the real Gummitch—would be sickeningly dull, Gummitch decided, and he resolved to keep a tight hold on his spirit at all times in the vicinity of mirrors.

But that isn't telling about the Squirrel Mirror. One morning Gummitch was peering out the front bedroom window that overlooked the roof of the porch. Gummitch had already classified windows as semi-mirrors having two kinds of space on the other side: the mirror world and that harsh region filled with mysterious and dangerously organized-sounding noises called the outer world, into which grownup humans reluctantly ventured at intervals, donning special garments for the purpose and shouting loud farewells that were meant to be reassuring but achieved just the opposite effect. The coexistence of two kinds of space presented no paradox to the kitten who carried in his mind the 27-chapter outline of *Space-Time for Springers*—indeed, it constituted one of the minor themes of the book.

This morning the bedroom was dark and the outer world was dull and sunless, so the mirror world was unusually difficult to see. Gummitch was just lifting his face toward it, nose twitching, his front paws on the sill, when what should rear up on the other side, exactly in the space that the Gummitch Double normally occupied, but a dirty brown, narrow-

visaged image with savagely low forehead, dark evil walleyes, and a huge jaw filled with shovel-like teeth.

Gummitch was enormously startled and hideously frightened. He felt his grip on his spirit go limp, and without volition he teleported himself three yards to the rear, making use of that faculty for cutting corners in space-time, traveling by space-warp in fact, which was one of his powers that Kitty-Come-Here refused to believe in and that even Old Horsemeat accepted only on faith.

Then, not losing a moment, he picked himself up by his furry seat, swung himself around, dashed downstairs at top speed, sprang to the top of the sofa, and stared for several seconds at the Gummitch Double in the wall-mirror—not relaxing a muscle strand until he was completely convinced that he was still himself and had not been transformed into the nasty brown apparition that had confronted him in the bedroom window.

"Now what do you suppose brought that on?" Old Horsemeat asked Kitty-Come-Here.

Later Gummitch learned that what he had seen had been a squirrel, a savage, nut-hunting being belonging wholly to the outer world (except for forays into attics) and not at all to the mirror one. Nevertheless he kept a vivid memory of his profound momentary conviction that the squirrel had taken the Gummitch Double's place and been about to take his own. He shuddered to think what would have happened if the squirrel had been actively interested in trading spirits with him. Apparently mirrors and mirror-situations, just as he had always feared, were highly conducive to spirit transfers. He filed the information away in the memory cabinet reserved for dangerous, exciting and possibly useful information, such as plans for climbing straight up glass (diamond-tipped claws!) and flying higher than the trees.

These days his thought cabinets were beginning to feel filled to bursting and he could hardly wait for the moment when the true rich taste of coffee, lawfully drunk, would permit him to speak.

He pictured the scene in detail: the family gathered in conclave at the kitchen table, Ashurbanipal and Cleopatra

respectfully watching from floor level, himself sitting erect on chair with paws (or would they be hands?) lightly touching his cup of thin china, while Old Horsemeat poured the thin black steaming stream. He knew the Great Transformation must be close at hand.

At the same time he knew that the other critical situation in the household was worsening swiftly. Sissy, he realized now, was far older than Baby and should long ago have undergone her own somewhat less glamorous though equally necessary transformation (the first tin of raw horsemeat could hardly be as exciting as the first cup of coffee.) Her time was long overdue. Gummitch found increasing horror in this mute vampirish being inhabiting the body of a rapidly growing girl, though inwardly equipped to be nothing but a most bloodthirsty she-cat. How dreadful to think of Old Horsemeat and Kitty-Come-Here having to care all their lives for such a monster! Gummitch told himself that if any opportunity for alleviating his parents' misery should ever present itself to him, he would not hesitate for an instant.

Then one night, when the sense of Change was so burstingly strong in him that he knew tomorrow must be the Day, but when the house was also exceptionally unquiet with boards creaking and snapping, taps adrip, and curtains mysteriously rustling at closed windows (so that it was clear that the many spirit worlds including the mirror one must be pressing very close), the opportunity came to Gummitch.

Kitty-Come-Here and Old Horsemeat had fallen into especially sound, drugged sleeps, the former with a bad cold, the latter with one unhappy highball too many (Gummitch knew he had been brooding about Sissy). Baby slept too, though with uneasy whimperings and joggings—moonlight shone full on his crib past a window shade which had whirringly rolled itself up without human or feline agency. Gummitch kept vigil under the crib, with eyes closed but with wildly excited mind pressing outward to every boundary of the house and even stretching here and there into the outer world. On this night of all nights sleep was unthinkable.

Then suddenly he became aware of footsteps, footsteps so soft they must, he thought, be Cleopatra's.

No, softer than that, so soft they might be those of the

Gummitch Double escaped from the mirror world at last and padding up toward him through the darkened halls. A ribbon of fur rose along his spine.

Then into the nursery Sissy came prowling. She looked slim as an Egyptian princess in her long thin yellow nightgown and as sure of herself, but the cat was very strong in her tonight, from the flat intent eyes to the dainty canine teeth slightly bared—one look at her now would have sent Kitty-Come-Here running for the telephone number she kept hidden, the telephone number of the special doctor—and Gummitch realized he was witnessing a monstrous suspension of natural law in that this being should be able to exist for a moment without growing fur and changing round pupils for slit eyes.

He retreated to the darkest corner of the room, suppressing a snarl.

Sissy approached the crib and leaned over Baby in the moonlight, keeping her shadow off him. For a while she gloated. Then she began softly to scratch his cheek with a long hatpin she carried, keeping away from his eye, but just barely. Baby awoke and saw her and Baby didn't cry. Sissy continued to scratch, always a little more deeply. The moonlight glittered on the jeweled end of the pin.

Gummitch knew he faced a horror that could not be countered by running about or even spitting and screeching. Only magic could fight so obviously supernatural a manifestation. And this was also no time to think of consequences, no matter how clearly and bitterly etched they might appear to a mind intensely awake.

He sprang up onto the other side of the crib, not uttering a sound, and fixed his golden eyes on Sissy's in the moonlight. Then he moved forward straight at her evil face, stepping slowly, not swiftly, using his extraordinary knowledge of the properties of space *to walk straight through her hand and arm as they flailed the hatpin at him.* When his nose-tip finally paused a fraction of an inch from hers his eyes had not blinked once, and she could not look away. Then he unhesitatingly flung his spirit into her like a fistful of flaming arrows and he worked the Mirror Magic.

Sissy's moonlit face, feline and terrified, was in a sense the

last thing that Gummitch, the real Gummitch-kitten, ever saw in this world. For the next instant he felt himself enfolded by the foul black blinding cloud of Sissy's spirit, which his own had displaced. At the same time he heard the little girl scream, very loudly but even more distinctly, *"Mommy!"*

That cry might have brought Kitty-Come-Here out of her grave, let alone from sleep merely deep or drugged. Within seconds she was in the nursery, closely followed by Old Horsemeat, and she had caught up Sissy in her arms and the little girl was articulating the wonderful word again and again, and miraculously following it with the command—there could be no doubt, Old Horsemeat heard it too—"Hold me tight!"

Then Baby finally dared to cry. The scratches on his cheek came to attention and Gummitch, as he had known must happen, was banished to the basement amid cries of horror and loathing chiefly from Kitty-Come-Here.

The little cat did not mind. No basement would be one-tenth as dark as Sissy's spirit that now enshrouded him for always, hiding all the file drawers and the labels on all the folders, blotting out forever even the imagining of the scene of first coffee-drinking and first speech.

In a last intuition, before the animal blackness closed in utterly, Gummitch realized that the spirit, alas, is not the same thing as the consciousness and that one may lose—sacrifice—the first and still be burdened with the second.

Old Horsemeat had seen the hatpin (and hid it quickly from Kitty-Come-Here) and so he knew that the situation was not what it seemed and that Gummitch was at the very least being made into a sort of scapegoat. He was quite apologetic when he brought the tin pans of food to the basement during the period of the little cat's exile. It was a comfort to Gummitch, albeit a small one. Gummitch told himself, in his new black halting manner of thinking, that after all a cat's best friend is his man.

From that night Sissy never turned back in her development. Within two months she had made three years' progress in speaking. She became an outstandingly bright, light-footed, high-spirited little girl. Although she never told anyone this, the moonlit nursery and Gummitch's magnified

face were her first memories. Everything before that was inky blackness. She was always very nice to Gummitch in a careful sort of way. She could never stand to play the game "Owl Eyes."

After a few weeks Kitty-Come-Here forgot her fears and Gummitch once again had the run of the house. But by then the transformation Old Horsemeat had always warned about had fully taken place. Gummitch was a kitten no longer but an almost burly tom. In him it took the psychological form not of sullenness or surliness but an extreme dignity. He seemed at times rather like an old pirate brooding on treasures he would never live to dig up, shores of adventure he would never reach. And sometimes when you looked into his yellow eyes you felt that he had in him all the materials for the book *Slit Eyes Look at Life*—three or four volumes at least—although he would never write it. And that was natural when you come to think of it, for as Gummitch knew very well, bitterly well indeed, his fate was to be the only kitten in the world that did not grow up to be a man.

RICHARD WILSON

Some writers count themselves well fixed for working space when they can command a corner of a kitchen table on which to cramp their typewriters, their stacks of manuscript and their overflowing ashtrays. Richard Wilson comes of another breed. Space? The man reeks of space. He owns a house of enormous dimensions, a dozen rooms or more; and, what's more, even the house has a house, for there is a separate summer cottage a few yards away. (And a tiny two-room shed just beyond that!) Morbid is this obsession with buildings; and now we see how alarmingly it has spread into his creative life as well. Proof? Why, just look at the more-than-skyscraping colossus in which he has chosen to show us his—

MAN WORKING

Like everybody else in Chicago I took a rueful pride in the Mile-Hi Building, which soared 528 stories up from the Loop and whose architecture was such that it whistled like a tea-kettle whenever the wind was strong off Lake Michigan.

Fallon's Folly, some called it, after the visionary architect who had devoted his declining years to getting it built, then died happy—mercifully before the depression descended and

curled everybody's hair. Just the way that the treasury secretary said it would.

When the boom busted, the Mile-Hi Building became the whitest of white elephants. Its operators had no choice but to close off all but the lower ten stories. They felt lucky to be able to rent out even that much space. The top 518 stories had been abandoned to the cobwebs, it was generally supposed.

But I found out, after I ran into Buddy Portendo, that there was life in the old elephant yet.

My name is Jack Norkus. I saw Buddy in the B/G coffee shop. We had known each other in those high-living days when I was a publicity man (for an assortment of talents that had included the midget crooner and the giant Japanese boxer) and when Portendo was a hanger-on at the Chicago Stadium.

Well, Portendo was still a hanger-on, but he obviously had a better grasp now than I did. His clothes—natty—and his shoes—recently shined—showed that. I was out of a job and trying to stretch my shine through a third day by giving it a rub now and then against the backs of my pants legs.

I told Portendo I had a chance to make a small commission if I could find a mind-reading act for Orrie Einhorn's TV show that night. There didn't seem to be such an act left in town. Presumably they were all down in Miami, on the theory that unemployment was the same either in Miami or Chicago, but warmth was warmth.

"You're lucky you ran into me," Portendo said. "You name it, we've got it." When I asked him who "we" was, he took me over to the other side of the Loop to the Mile-Hi Building. "You been up before, haven't you?"

"Oh, sure," I said. It was a lie.

We walked through the ornate but faded lobby to the one bank of elevators still in service. An elevator waited, door open, but Portendo ignored it. He steered me into the next one to come down, winked at the operator and said "Ten." The operator gave me a look but said nothing. At ten he let out a shabby man with a worn plastic briefcase. Then

the doors closed, the operator pressed the Pass button and the elevator went up one more story.

There were cobwebs, all right, and a scurrying mouselike sound and semi-darkness.

I stuck close to Buddy Portendo, who said what sounded like "Haven't lost your grip, have you?" I mumbled something, and then we were at a yawning shaft with a faded sign, *Express to Observatory*. Someone had lettered on the wall in green chalk: SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF SPACE TRAVEL—523-11.

Out toward the center of the shaft, where it was just possible to reach them without toppling into the depths, were what looked like two old-fashioned sad irons, handles down, flat sides up. They were suspended without visible means of support. Like me, I thought, then I gasped and grabbed Buddy Portendo as he seemed about to hurl himself into the open shaft.

He whirled on me, angry and scared. "What are you tryna do, kill me?"

"I thought you were going to fall," I said lamely.

"Just keep the hands off the suit, Jack," he said, "and do like I do. Grab one of the handles. You take the left one. I thought you knew your way around."

"Sure I do. I just forgot."

"Forgot? I got to hand it to you, boy, if you can forget an anti-grav ride. Sure your grip's okay?"

The question made more sense now. I shivered. The eerie whistle coming faintly down the shaft didn't help any.

"Suppose I miss?" I said.

"Suppose you fall under a bus. You're dead, that's all. *Don't* miss."

Portendo swung out and grabbed the handle on the right. Concentrating my nerve, I grabbed the left one. I dangled. Portendo started rising. "Squeeze, man!" he said. I squeezed the handle and I started up too, the inverted sad iron drawing me up the shaft. I closed my eyes and hung on.

I have no idea how many minutes later it was when we reached the top and my handle, to which I was now clinging with both hands, clinked against the roof of the shaft.

I watched to see how Portendo did it, then swung myself

over to the floor and stepped quickly away from the mile-high abyss.

"I'd just as soon walk the next time," I said.

Portendo laughed. "You get used to it. You get used to anything."

We turned a corner in the corridor and I shied violently. The purple monster who had almost run me down smiled apologetically.

"Surbis," the monster said, showing jagged red-stained teeth in a horrible smile as it brushed past.

"What was *that?*" I asked, shuddering and looking over my shoulder. Then I looked ahead again quickly, because the monster was also looking over *his* shoulder. I had to lean against the wall a minute.

"Nobody," Buddy Portendo said. "Strictly a nobody. An unemployed actor. You got nothing against the unemployed, have you, Jack?"

I shook my head. "But does he have to wear his make-up when he's not working?"

"That ain't make-up," Buddy said. "That's his natural skin." He looked at me, puzzled. "I thought you said you'd been up here before."

"Sure I have. Lots of times." I was stretching it. I'd never been higher than the tenth story of the Mile-Hi Building. And I thought the top 518 stories were as empty as my wallet.

The halls were cleaner than on the eleventh floor, as if somebody dusted once in a while, and we passed doors with lettering on their frosted glass. *A. Zichl, Imported Spirits,* one said. *All-Planets Films,* another said.

"Here we are," Buddy Portendo said, opening a door. I hadn't caught the name on it. What I did see was a blue-black glob of a creature covering the top of a desk like a partly deflated balloon.

Portendo said: "This is Okkam. Not much to look at from our point of view, but all mentality. Okkam, meet Jack Norkus. He needs a mind-reading act for tonight, as if you didn't already know."

Okkam didn't say anything, for which I was grateful. It gave me a little more time to get used to him, if I was going

to. It would be hard to know where his mouth was, if he had a mouth. Or his head, for that matter. He expanded and contracted his blue-black mass, as if someone were blowing him up in fits and starts.

Then my head started to tingle as if a dozen spiders were running around inside it and I knew without being told that every thought I ever had was now in the possession of Okkam.

These included such unspoken protests as "When I said a mind-reading *act* I didn't mean the real thing" and "I more had in mind somebody who could be on television."

"I've got a tuxedo," Okkam said. The voice came out of a speaker in the ceiling.

I couldn't picture him in a tux. He was like Miss Eppie Hogg in the old Toonerville Trolley strip, only without a head, and black, or midnight blue.

I wasn't getting used to him at all. I tried to keep my feeling of revulsion under control but Okkam was a perceptive one.

"Insults!" Okkam said through the speaker. "Not even the decency of filtration. Take him away, Portendo, before my own filter breaks down."

Portendo pushed me out the door, saying "Surbis, surbis" to the outraged Okkam.

In the hall he said: "I don't think you been up here before at all, frankly. And frankly, this could get you killed. All Okkam has to do is think straight at you instead of through the speaker and whammo! No more Jack Norkus."

"All right," I said, "I admit it. This is my first trip up. But I was desperate, Buddy. I'm broke. If I don't find a mind-reading act I don't get the commission and I get turned out of my hotel."

"Yeah?" Portendo softened up. He always did like a leveler and I guess I should have told him the truth earlier. "Well, you got guts, boy. I have to admire that. You faced up to Okkam and that Aldebaran actor—the purple one—without turning a hair."

This was a considerable exaggeration, but I was grateful for it. "Don't forget the anti-grav," I said. "That was even worse. But now that you know I'm a greenhorn and I can

stop faking, maybe you'll tell me what goes on up here? What is it—winter quarters for the freak show?"

Portendo glanced around. "Watch how you talk, son. Everybody up here is perfectly normal. And they're sensitive. You saw that with Okkam. The only difference between them and us is that they're normal where they come from—but they ain't where they come from."

"And where *do* they come from?"

"From all over," he said. "From as all over as you can get."

"You mean," I said, "they're from other planets?"

"Where else? Saskatoon, Saskatchewan?"

I let that sink in awhile, then I asked him: "How did they get here?"

Buddy Portendo looked up and down the hall. "Don't ask too many questions, is my advice to you. Times ain't too good and with these people a lot of guys that otherwise wouldn't be eating are picking up a buck here, a few bucks there. You got to think of them as people, too. Inside of whatever they wear on their outside they got souls, just like you. Pretty decent bunch, all things considered."

"What are they doing here?"

"Different things. Okkam's writing a book about Earth for the Little-Known Planets series. That actor you saw—he hires out for low-budget horror pictures. But back home he's considered pretty handsome. Plays leading men."

We wandered over to a window and I looked out. I could see part of the city far below and a good stretch of Lake Michigan and maybe even part of Indiana. Everything looked peaceful. I wondered how many of them down there had even an inkling of what was going on up here, a mile in the sky, in this crazy tower pointing into outer space.

"Who knows about these—these aliens?" I asked Buddy.

"Aliens-schmaliens," he said. "You better cut out that Earth-supremacy talk if you want to get along up here. Besides that, just about every one of them is better than you are in one way or another. Remember, they're the ones who got here to Earth, not vice versa."

"All right. I'm sorry. But who *does* know about them?"

"Not too many. Mostly just the people they come into con-

tact with in the normal course of things. They're in research, mostly, studying us, making notes, things like that."

"Studying us for what? Are they getting ready to take us over?"

"Nuts. What for? You see a guy studying anthills, this means he wants to be king of the ants? Come on; we still got to get you a mind-reading act. We'll see Mogle. He's a talent agent."

"Okay," I said. "I hope he's prettier than Okkam."

"Maybe I better prepare you this time. Mogle's a triped. Looks something like an octopus who tangled with too many sharks. He hasn't got what you'd call a face but he makes it up to look like one—false nose, mustache, hairpiece. Sometimes they fall off or get twisted around. Just make believe you don't notice."

Portendo opened Mogle's door. Mogle, who had been hovering near the ceiling, whipped through the air like a fast blimp and settled himself in a swivel chair behind the desk, two tentacles supporting him, one tentacle twirling the mustache, which was red and pointed.

"Ah, gentlemen," Mogle said. "At your service."

Buddy introduced us and we shook hands—my hand and his tentacle, that is. I felt pleased with myself for not shuddering. It really wasn't any worse than the moist feel of an elephant's trunk when you feed it peanuts.

Mogle spoke a clickety sort of English. "Mr. Portendo," he said, "do you ever by chance engage in the literary racket? It happens I have a very fine novel here, fresh from Cygnus and ripe for piracy."

"No interplanetary copyright, of course," Buddy told me. "I'll look at it later, Mogle. Right now we got to fix up my friend Jack with a mind-reading act for TV. You got anything in that line?"

"Mind-reading." Mogle moved his wig around. "Pseudo-mind-reading it would have to look like. And the talent would have to pass for Earthstyle humans, if it's for TV."

"No flies on Mogle," Buddy said admiringly. "Listen to him working on it."

"Okkam is out," Mogle said, patting his nose. "Too ugly,

by any standards. Have you considered Wallavan? Is he back from Allyria?"

"That tout!" Portendo was angry. "He better not be! Not after what he done to me at Sportsman's Park. Him and his eight-horse parlay! Him and his blurry visions!"

"I guess Wallavan is out, too," Mogle said. He checked off names on a list under the glass top of his desk with his free tentacle. "In that case, Mr. Norkus, it doesn't look as if I'll be able to help you—unless you'd accept a substitute. I think I could get JorenzO the Magician for you."

"Take my advice," Portendo told me, "and don't take JorenzO. This JorenzO happens to be the real genuine article and his magic is as black as the ace of spades."

"But he can pass," Mogle said. "He's *just* the right shape."

"Sure," Portendo said, "you put him in whiskers and a cloak and nobody can tell, but don't tell me you forgot that stink at the Amphitheater when he made the girl disappear? We had to ice practically the whole police force to square things. Now I hear a rumor JorenzO's got her upstairs in the observatory. You know anything about that, Mogle?"

"I never interfere in the private lives of my clients," Mogle said. "Surbis, there's the phone." He picked up an instrument that didn't look like anything Illinois Bell had provided and held a conversation consisting of a series of bubbling clicks. Mogle was looking at me when he hung up.

"That was Lopi of All-Planets Films. He's been cutting his new horror picture, *The Earth Monsters Attack,* and he needs a re-take."

"Well, if you're going to be busy——" Buddy got up.

"Wait," Mogle said. "Lopi needs a monster for a close-up."

"An Earth monster, you mean?" Portendo said. "Want me to shanghai you one from West Madison Street?"

Mogle tapped a tentacle on the desk top. "He's in a hurry. Wants to make the midnight shipment. Ever done any acting, Mr. Norkus?"

"I carried a spear once at the Civic Opera. *Aida.*"

"Excellent. Lopi's in his studio right now. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes. No lines to learn. Just mess up your

hair and snarl a little. No costume. Your street clothes will be alien enough for his audience."

"Audience where?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter. It'll never come back to embarrass you, I can promise. It's not the kind of thing anybody would put English titles on."

I felt my wallet. Mighty thin.

But Buddy Portendo said, "He won't do it. Jack came up here a respectable talent scout and I'm not letting him go back a substitute for a Madison Street bum."

"I'm broke, Buddy," I reminded him. "What would it pay?"

"Seeing it's a rush job," Mogle said, "I think five dollars. I waive my commission, seeing you're a friend of Buddy."

Five dollars would take care of me for at least a week, depression-style. "I'll do it," I said, "if you think I'll make a good monster."

Mogle twirled his mustache right off his face. "Where this footage is going you'll be perfect."

"Okay," I said. "You've got yourself an actor. Where's the studio?"

"You ought to know," Buddy Portendo said. "You passed that other actor coming out of it. Little did I know this would be the outcome of your first visit to the Mile-Hi Building. Surbis, pal."

"His first visit?" Mogle said. "Then I'm delighted I got him the job." He hunched two of his tentacles in a passable shrug. "Just so his visit shouldn't be a total loss."

I gave Mogle a big smile. He flew up from his chair to the corner of the ceiling where he'd been when we came in. He lost his nose and wig on the way.

"Surbis," he apologized. "After all this time I'm *still* not used to you Earth people. Tell you what you do. Instead of snarling for Lopi's camera, you smile for him. *That* ought to scare the tailflaps off his audience."

LESTER DEL REY

Fletcher Pratt is fondly remembered for many things, but surely not the least of them was his pepper-and-ginger beard. It may be that science-fiction writers go to beards more than normal humans. It is only necessary to mention Sturgeon's curly spade, H. L. Gold's jet-black monster or a score less notable chinpieces. Science-fiction's newest beard, however, surrounds the imp's chin of one of our oldest-established writers—the man who wrote *Nerves* and *Helen O'Loy* and many, many others—more important, the man who presently entertains and delights us with——

HELPING HAND

Mankind's first contact with an intelligent alien race didn't come on some shuddersome foreign planet around a distant star, long after men had built a galactic empire.

Nor did it take place in the backyard of a flying-saucer initiate. No hordes of alien fighting ships plunged into Earth's skies for plunder and slaves. No primitive Venusians or Martians were discovered ready to worship us. No telepathic monsters took over our minds. There wasn't even a hassle of misunderstanding while the aliens tried to get through the blue

ribbon and red tape of our governments. They made no such attempts.

The event took place on the least likely place for races to meet in the whole galaxy—the lifeless surface of the Moon.

Sam Osheola had no doubt about its being lifeless, and he wasn't expecting any surprises. The first manned Moon expedition had proved that the satellite was dead and always had been. Sam's only doubts concerned his being there at all, rubbing elbows with the hundred or so scientists important enough to be included this time. But mostly, he was too busy to think about that. After some of the places he'd worked, even the Moon didn't seem too strange.

He was inside the garage dome, swearing a blue streak in the nineteen languages he knew fluently and improvising in a dozen others. In the eighteen hours since landing, the schedule stated, they should have had the tractor tanks out and rolling. But somehow the labor crew had smuggled in a load of rotgut, and now they were locked up in one of the ships, with his two best mechanics passed out too cold for even pure oxygen to revive. That meant he'd have to correct their half-done work and finish it, with whatever help little Commander Larsen could dig up among the ships' crews and the scientists.

Larsen came back then, snapping off his bowl helmet as he passed through the lock. He stopped to listen admiringly as his labor boss finally ran down into a muttering of Seminole and English.

"I've got a bunch of volunteers waiting in the main dome. You can brief 'em over coffee," Larsen announced. Then he grinned. "I always thought you Indians were an unemotional race, Sam. Where's your heap big stone face?"

"Lay off the plains pidgin!" Sam snapped back. Then he caught a glimpse of his face reflected in one of the tractor bubble-tops and chuckled. Any stone in that face must have been cracked in shipment. His nose was broken from the football he had played to earn his M. E., there was a scar across his forehead from an Arab bullet while he'd been laying oil pipe in Israel, and a network of broken veins from the time his helmet had cracked while working on the first space station.

"Yeah," he admitted. "We Seminoles don't have emotions

at all, Bill. We're so unemotional we refused to sign a treaty. And we go around to this day bragging that we're still technically at war with the United States. Let's get that coffee!"

They were just coming out of the garage when they saw the alien ship.

Sam stared at it unbelievingly through the polarized plastic of his helmet. His mind jumped back ten years to fears that should have been long gone. *Russians—coming to blow us off the Moon!* His hand was pawing for a gun he hadn't carried for a decade, before he checked the motion. It was a long time since that mess of politics had been cleared up; for that matter, there were a dozen Russian scientists with this expedition.

But it certainly was no ship that he'd ever seen. It was neither a winged trans-atmosphere rocket, a cylindrical ferry, nor one of the piles of girders and tanks used to reach the Moon. Instead, it seemed to be simply a huge sphere, maybe a hundred feet in diameter, and gleaming a bright blue all over. It was coming down in a great curve, slowing steadily, but there was no sign of atomic or even chemical exhaust.

It passed over his head and slowed to a stop over the expedition ships—hovering a hundred feet off the ground! Then, as if making up its mind, it began to settle gently beside the largest of the five ships.

There was a babble of voices in Sam's headphones; others had seen it. But the words made no sense. It certainly wasn't one of their scheduled supply ships, and the nonsense about flying saucers had been finally disposed of before the station was built.

Sam heard Larsen ordering somebody back. He glanced around toward the main dome, to see a few men in spacesuits moving reluctantly back inside. It made good sense to wait until they saw what developed. But the commander was moving forward himself.

Sam fell in step with him, the hair on the back of his neck prickling faintly. "Martians?" he asked. It was a fool question, and he expected to be told so.

But Larsen shook his head. "Don't ask me, Sam! Mars couldn't produce any advanced technology with her atmos-

phere—I think. But that thing never came from Earth. Wrong orbit, for one thing. See anything like weapons?"

"I don't see a thing," Sam told him. "What'll you do if they turn up with ray guns?"

Larsen snarled: "If they turn up with bows and arrows, I'll surrender. This expedition has a total armament of one .38 automatic with seven bullets—in case someone falls into a crater where we can't rescue him. Wait a minute!" Larsen came to a stop, pointing.

A crack had appeared in the side of the blue sphere. Now it widened and a section peeled downward, to form a curved ramp to the surface. Under it was a gray substance of some kind, from which something that looked like a flight of folding steps shot out. The final step had barely appeared when the gray stuff seemed to give way.

A figure emerged from it.

Whatever it was looked human.

Sam grunted in surprise. He was ready for anything except that. A winged octopus wouldn't have bothered him. But a *man?* If any place on Earth had a ship like that and let the Moon expedition take off with the old atomic style rockets, something rotten was really going on! Better a monster than some types of human beings!

Then he wondered. The figure was in a glaring white spacesuit of too slim a build—more like a man in tights than in one of the heavy suits he knew. And there was something wrong about the way it walked. Something almost rubbery, as if the legs bent all over instead of at fixed joints.

Larsen and Sam moved forward again. Another figure came from the strange ship, carrying something. This one gestured toward the two men, but it turned toward the expedition ship, following the first figure. It was running as it neared the ship, holding out whatever gadget it was using.

There was a ten second conference between the two. Then both turned and headed back toward Sam and Larsen.

"Wallah!" Sam's harsh voice seemed to echo in his helmet, and he felt Larsen tense beside him. But he had eyes only for the face in the other helmet nearest him.

ii

The creature's head looked as if someone had managed to cross a man and a frog; a smooth, hairless skull, almost no nose, a wide mouth now partly open in a straight line, eyes that seemed to have independent motion, and a smooth, hairless skin that was so purple it seemed almost black.

The incredible part of it was that the thing was beautiful. Grotesque as it seemed in its blend of human and non-human, it had a certain innate rightness of good design about it, as a racehorse or a cat has.

Abruptly, fifteen feet away, it spread its arms straight out, with hands seeming to droop. The hands, he saw now, had only three fingers, set at even intervals around the palms, all more or less opposed.

"Peace," Sam guessed. He'd seen various human races use signs that were all different for the same idea, but all with some of the same idea behind them. "Better do the same, Bill—and pray it means what I think."

The two men moved forward to the two aliens. Sam stopped three feet away from his opposite, but the creature came on until their helmets touched.

"Ssa*tah!*" it said.

"Hello yourself!" Sam answered. It hadn't been an unpleasant voice, from what he could tell by sound that had traveled through two helmet shells. It seemed to match the velvety quality of the skin he could see. He tapped his chest, then his head. "Sam!"

The straight slit of the mouth narrowed and opened. "Sam." The alien motioned toward the commander. At Sam's introduction, the same mouth gesture was repeated. "Birr. Va. Sam t' Birr." One finger tapped its chest. "Ato. Ato t' Mu'an." A gesture indicated that the second name applied to the other alien.

Then finally Ato stepped back, and motioned to the ship. A lithe leg moved over the ground, drawing circles into a haze around a central point. Beside it, another picture that could only be a crude schematic of a rocket appeared. Ato waited, as if expecting a reaction, then made a gesture curiously like a shrug. He put his hands together, began lifting them and spreading them out, sketching a slim upright with a big circle

at the top.

"VvvvPWOOMB!"

Sam jumped, feeling cold chills run up his back. He had been so busy watching the hands that he hadn't seen the other alien bend forward to touch helmets with him. Then the meaning of it all suddenly registered, and his pulse quieted down again.

But Larsen was ahead of him. He could have heard the sound only faintly, but he'd decoded the symbols. "He's figured out the ship rockets are atom powered!" His voice came over Sam's phones. "That gadget they're carrying must be some kind of radiation detector."

Abruptly, his voice sobered. "Sam, maybe I shouldn't have agreed. Damn it, *that was an atom bomb explosion he was signaling.* They must have used atomics for weapons."

"Might as well concede what the other side already knows," Sam told him. Down inside him, the amazement was just beginning to register. *Aliens!* Martians, Venusians—starmen—here! Alien friends to lead them across space—or alien enemies to attack from God knew where. Aliens—and Sam Osheola, a quarter million miles from the swamps where he'd been born—a billion cultures, perhaps, farther apart than he'd been from any human race he'd met!

And over his mind, the old defense mechanism was dropping down. This didn't matter, any more than football had. It was all a game—a play he was acting in—he had to go through the motions, say the right lines, but it couldn't really affect him, because things like this didn't really happen to Sam Osheola.

Other men in spacesuits were coming out now, clustering around them, and other figures from the blue ship, all in the same white, slim suits. Larsen swung around to direct the men of his command, as Ato seemed to be doing to his.

Nothing escaped the alien. One eye swiveled slightly toward the commander, and Sam was sure what passed over the purple face was surprise. Ato was guilty of picking the wrong horse, and he was just realizing it as he saw Larsen giving commands instead of Sam.

At least that meant the things weren't telepaths.

This time Ato made no mistake. He headed for Larsen, motioning to his own ship. With one hand beside his mouth, he made opening and closing signs, then used his other hand to repeat the gesture beside the commander's face. With hands facing each other, he pantomimed a conversation, and again pointed to the ship. Larsen's gesture toward the main dome brought a complicated set of signs that were probably refusal and explanation of some sort, then another motion toward the blue ship.

Finally, Ato swung on his "heels" and headed toward it alone. His fellows watched him, making no move to follow. When the alien reached whatever served as an airlock, he stopped and stood waiting patiently.

"Maybe he's got some kind of educating machine there, Bill," Sam offered. "He's pretty insistent. We could use one —it took me three months to learn Arabic, and that's a *human* language!"

The back of his mind was warning him that he was stepping over the line. Leave the guesses and suggestions to the brass, it told him, just as it had ordered him to stay on the ground when the space station began, or to stay clear of the girl who could teach him to read Arabic—or the little crook in Burma. . . . Some day his curiosity would get him killed.

Larsen took the bait, probably deliberately. "All right, Sam. I'm no linguist. If you're willing to volunteer, see what he wants."

Ato still waited as Sam started across the pumice and dust toward the blue ship. If the alien was surprised at the switch, there was no sign of it. But that was only good dickering. "Don't let 'em get your signals," Sam muttered to himself.

Then he wondered what equivalent of that could exist in Ato's language. A speech was more than semantic noises—it was a whole history of culture, and you couldn't know a thing about anyone until you knew how he thought in his own tongue.

Disappointingly, the steps and what showed of the hull section looked no different from the normal alloys Earth used. The gray stuff was some flexible plastic. Earth had been ex-

perimenting on flexible locks that would let a man go through without losing air or taking up much space, but so far none had worked. Still, the principle was familiar enough.

Sam nodded as Ato touched his shoulder and backed through. Sam followed. The gray stuff molded to him without too much resistance, and then he was inside a metal-walled, featureless passageway and the alien was shedding his suit.

Underneath, it was plain that Sam's first impression had been right. The purple man's bony structure hadn't fully ossified; the joints seemed to be sections where a flexible cartilege permitted bending. It would make for neater spacesuit design, of course. His nude, purple body was that of a slim, graceful watersprite, but there was an air of strength and endurance to it.

From a cabinet, Ato took out a mess of equipment. He studied Sam's suit for a moment, then located the escape valve for exhaled air and got a sample. Things moved, changed color, and precipitated, until a series of dials began registering. The alien studied them silently, then wiggled his mouth. "Va!"

At his gesture, Sam reached for his helmet snaps. He was consciously brave. Look at the way his ancestors had faced danger and torture without a whimper . . . no, damn it, those were the Sioux and the Apache! And besides, he was no dratted savage. . . .

He suddenly realized that he was holding his breath.

He let it out with a *whoosh*. When he breathed in, there was an odd odor, somewhat pungent, a trifle sweet, that seemed to come from the alien. But his lungs accepted the atmosphere gratefully. It was a bit heavier than that used in the domes and suits, and it felt good.

They went down hallways and up some kind of elevator, to reach a room that obviously had something to do with the control of the ship. There were indicators in panels along the walls, television screens showing the outside in color but with too much emphasis on blue for human eyes, and instruments that only vaguely made sense to Sam. Two other purple-skinned men were working in obvious haste on a complicated maze of wiring, with tiny bumps that might have

been transistor, coils and other parts. It was obviously electronic, and they were changing the circuits.

One of them stopped to rattle off a string of high-pitched words to Ato, indicating a device on a table.

Ato nodded. He motioned to a three-legged chair that proved surprisingly comfortable, then took a seat across the table. He moved a button connected to a wire between them, then drew a switchboard from the machine within easy reach. His other hand picked up a slim shaft and made hasty marks on a writing surface with it. Apparently his palm was flexible enough to let any two fingers oppose a third. He held up the shaft.

"Ssompa," he said carefully. He made marks again. "Pir," he said. Then he pointed to a cluster of marks at a time, repeating: "Edomi."

It wasn't even well-organized speech instruction, much less anything as wonderful as a mechanical educator!

Sam felt the disappointment thicken in him as he drew out his own pen and wrote down a group of words. "Va—yes. Va—yes. Ssompa pir edomi. Pen write word. Va. And you'd better let someone who knows how take over, Ato, or we'll be here until hell freezes over finding out how to tell each other useless sentences. Now, *one!*"

Ato shrugged and let the control pass to Sam. They went through the numbers and common operating words of arithmetic, the simplest nouns and verbs, and a negative—Ato apparently picked one from several.

Sam had already decided that grammar could go out of the window. He elected pidgin English as the simplest, most consistent language he knew. The vocabulary was limited, the rules were simple, and anything they needed to say could be conveyed by it. Anyhow, it gave him an ace up his sleeve—Ato would have a deuce of a time figuring out Sam's cultural pattern from it, no matter how clever he was.

Then he began to suspect that Ato was doing something of the same nature.

But when he finished his basic list of words and began going through applications of them to fix them indelibly in

their memories, Ato would have none of it. *"No!"* he said firmly. "Make word." He was stubborn about it.

Sam frowned, but went on. If the aliens had memories that would let them master a vocabulary from a single hearing, they had him beaten. He hunched forward, sweating a little as he tried to force his mind to memorize every word and phrase. But it couldn't be done! The harder he tried, the more he lost.

Sometime during the long hours, one of the technicians sweating over the electronic panel went out and came back with a package for Sam and a bowl for Ato. Larsen must have sent the food over. Sam wolfed it down, stalling as long as he could while he went over what he could remember. Then the exchange of words resumed. At least by now they had a few basic expressions they could use to clear up doubtful points, and things moved faster.

Sometime during the session he began smoking.

Ato went into a dither until the smoke had been analyzed with the aid of a quick glittering little machine, then paid no more attention to it. He seemed to understand the coffee that was sent over, though, and began drinking a reddish liquid himself. But even with the coffee, Sam was almost dead with fatigue when Ato carefully and experimentally stretched his wide lips into what must have been meant for a human smile and leaned back. "Good," he said. He patted the machine in front of him, touched a button, and listened as Sam's voice came out of it.

"Va—yes. Ssompa pir edomi. Pen write word. One, two, three, four. . . ."

Sam watched a technician remove one of the two spools inside the machine and thread the thin plastic into a duplicate machine, showing how it worked with a few simple gestures. He'd been a fool! Of course the aliens had perfect memories —so did men, since the invention of the tape recorder!

He was still cursing to himself as he threw the machine they gave him onto a bench and began shucking off his clothes in his little private cubicle. While he was working on his shoes Larsen came in, bringing glasses and a small bottle. The commander looked worried, but he was grinning.

"I know it's illegal to give whiskey to an Indian, Sam," he said. "But maybe the law won't reach this far."

"It's illegal to give anything to an Indian, Bill. You're supposed to take things away from them. Luck!" The liquor seemed to cut through his stomach and into his nerves at once, reminding him he hadn't picked up supper. He needed this more, though. He took a second glass, then reported briefly what had happened, playing a bit of the "tape" back. "What gives here?"

Larsen shook his head. "I wish I knew. Sam, even with this it'll take a week to get on real speaking terms, won't it? Umm. Why are they willing to spend all that time and effort? What do they want from us?"

"Why do they have to want anything?"

"They must," said Larsen patiently. "Look, suppose we'd found a strange ship already on the Moon? Would we have dropped down beside them, or would we have cased the layout first? Dropping in like that doesn't make sense, unless they needed something from us enough to take chances on our being armed—or unless they're completely invulnerable." He paused, tasting that thought. "But if so, why this desperate urge to get into communication with us? Did you see anything on the ship—their power plant, say?"

"I didn't try."

Larsen sighed. "No, naturally. But they've seen about everything we have. Their men paired up with some of ours; and I couldn't risk saying no, so they've been everywhere. And they're *good,* Sam. Too damned good. They spotted our trouble with the tractors, and they pitched in at once. You know how those things come for assembly—and how much it takes to see they're put together right? But these creatures —Perui, or whatever you call them—were hep to it all in ten minutes, and doing twice as much as our emergency crewmen could do. What's more, they didn't make any mistakes. They know machinery. What do they want?"

"You tell me," Sam suggested.

"I wish I could. But for one idea, maybe they want to know what weapons we have back on Earth."

Sam grunted. "You've been in touch with the station, Bill," he guessed. The other nodded. "Of course I have. That's my

duty. And once the station scope spotted their ship, all hell was to pay down on Earth. How do we know this isn't just a scout for an invasion? They're certainly not from one of our planets. We've picked up a mess of high-frequency radiation they use in communicating from ship to men here, and we'd spot that stuff from any planet in the system that had it developed to that degree. Besides, from what you say of their air, they must come from a planet like Earth, and we know that doesn't fit any other planet here. How come we get a call from God knows just what star the minute our expedition touches the Moon?"

"Earth's seeing bogey men again," Sam said in disgust. "Either we're getting set to take someone over or someone's after us. Can't two equals simply get together?"

"Two equals, maybe. But we're not their equals."

Larsen got up to leave, scowling at his own thoughts. "What has always happened when a superior culture meets an inferior one? You know the answer. See what you can learn tomorrow."

Sam muttered to himself. Well, what had happened when the whites met his people? War, of course. But it hadn't been all bad. Then he amended that; it hadn't been all bad, but it would have been if both sides had had atomic weapons. He reached for the tape recorder and turned it on, trying to concentrate on mastering more of the vocabulary. But before half an hour had passed he was sound asleep, dreaming he was playing Hermes in some tragedy.

And no matter how he read his lines or went up on them, he couldn't get it to move, and he knew the author had messed up the ending beyond all repair.

iii

In the morning Ato was waiting for him outside the dome, with a smile on his purple face that now seemed almost natural to him, rather than a learned trick.

Sam saw that the other purple men were scattered about the field, mixing with the humans. Some crude measure of sign language seemed to have been worked out already, but it would be no good for abstractions. The labor gang had recovered from their binge and were out, looking somewhat

chastened. Most of them were Andean Indians—a hangover from the building of the station, when it was thought they'd have a certain margin of safety in an accident. Most of them were avoiding the Perui, and he saw them making signs to ward off evil whenever a purple creature came near them. They were driving tractors on the Moon, but carrying their primitive superstition with them.

And maybe the whole Earth was doing the same about the aliens.

Inside the control room of the blue ship, the big electronic gadget seemed to be finished, and the technicians were gone. Ato dropped onto his seat, pointing to a queer glass of some liquid. "Drink it, Sam. We tested some of your drink, and this won't hurt you."

Sam gasped. It had been in pidgin, of course, but the words had been completely fluent. Yet he could have sworn Ato was saying something in Peruta at the same time. For a second, ideas of telepathy that needed initial word symbols before it could work raced through his mind. He reached for the drink, his nose telling him it was mildly alcoholic; at the moment he didn't care what else was in it, and it seemed palatable enough, though too sweet.

Then sober thought replaced the fantasy, and he turned to the electronic panel.

Ato's voice came, but there was a lag this time. Then the machine spoke—and now Sam could recognize his own voice behind the words.

"It's a putting from language to language machine," it announced. "The word, please?"

"Translating," Sam said automatically. That pause had come when the machine found no word for Ato's expression, and had to hunt for another way to say it—and found one! Maybe a human technican could have taken one of the huge plotting computers used to plan their orbits and adapted it into a translating machine in a few months; such machines had been used long enough on Earth to speed the exchange of scientific knowledge. But to make one that could overcome its own ignorance was another matter.

Bill Larsen had been right; these boys were *good!*

Then he shrugged. There was still Larsen's job to do. "All

right," he said, while the machine clucked out words in Peruta. "In that case, Ato, what do you want?"

The smile came quickly this time. "A chance to talk, Sam —to talk until the machine won't make mistakes or have to hunt for words. About history, perhaps. Shall I talk, or will you?"

"Go ahead."

The purple head nodded—the first use of the motion Sam had seen.

His soft voice picked up the story of the beginnings of life from the primal seas—almost the same as the one Sam had learned. The machine spent a lot of time at first in hunting for ways to carry across the meaning, but it grew more fluent as its vocabulary increased. Sometimes it missed in its use of words, but it never made the same mistake twice.

Sam listened, fascinated in spite of himself. This was no wild story, no monstrously different way of life. It was Earth all over again, with names and events, orders of discoveries, and intervals of time changed. But it was a history he could understand as readily as his own. Fire, weapons, domestic animals, agriculture. Cities and then cruel empires. Writing and metal. Race and culture against race and culture, war, slavery. . . .

He broke in abruptly, forgetting his resolve to give away as little about Earth as he could. "Our culture probably started on a little part of our mainland, too. We called it Greece. About twenty-five hundred years ago."

Ato listened, then drew something of a parallel, though with no Alexander, and with some strange ethical religion that sounded like a cross between Buddhism and Christianity. There had even been something like the crusades, and a discovery, much later, of four small continents occupied by savages.

Sam took over again. They alternated until they were through the current stage of Earth.

"We were earlier," Ato said. "All that came for us about two hundred of your years ago. We reached our planets—barely useful enough to encourage us to go on. We had one

major atomic war, but fortunately the peace screen was discovered just in time."

The peace screen, thought Sam, filing the words.

"Then the two great powers had to get together. And we found the star ship secret. How to travel at thousands of times the speed of light—in theory; though we can't do better than hundreds yet. After that, we've been spreading, trading, growing. We've found three very primitive forms of intelligence, but too low for speech.

"And now, for the first time, another race and culture."

Sam sat back suddenly, the spell broken. Yeah, Earth would have gone through it all—but they'd missed it by two hundred years. In America, the Indians would have gone through Europe's progress in time; they'd found some measure of metal-working, the beginnings of writing, agriculture, and a lot of other things. They were moving ahead—not just the Mayans, but the Five Nations up north. The Seminoles hadn't done too badly, all things considered. But they'd missed by a couple thousand years or so, and the higher-cultured whites from Europe had found them.

Now those same whites at their planet-leaping stage had been found by a race a couple hundred years ahead.

And in a technical civilization, a couple of centuries were the same as millennia to barbarians. Earth had missed it by two hundred years—but she'd missed it. The Perui had the techniques, the star ships, and the empire. They'd crossed the galactic Atlantic, looking for trade routes—and found primitive mankind.

And the worst part of it, as he listened somberly to Ato, was that it hadn't even been deliberately planned as a voyage of discovery.

Ato ran a trading ship. He had been going from a new solar system to an older one when detectors on his ship had registered certain radiation that looked like space flight. He'd spun around and backtracked—to find the trail of the Moon ships and follow them down to their base.

"You took an awful chance, landing like that," Sam said quickly, hoping that it would at least worry the other.

But Ato seemed unconcerned. "Not at all. We saw the

Moon was airless, so we knew there was no life. Why should a race able to cross space take weapons—when weight means so much in those little ships?"

"Why?"

"Why?" the purple man hesitated, then shrugged. "Wouldn't you be curious if you'd found another race? We expected to some day. Of course, we hoped it might be at our own level. But I guess we're lucky you weren't ahead of our progress . . . though I wonder. Our social scientists worked out the steps to be taken for any contingency, of course."

Sam leaned forward. "I suppose you know those steps then?"

He'd expected a denial, but Ato seemed perfectly willing to talk about it. And it seemed like a reasonable plan, all things considered, as Sam listened to it. A lot better than the Aztecs had got from Spain. Maybe as good as India and Egypt had managed with England. There'd be other ships here, of course—and the Perui would even supply Earth with engines to drive her ships to the planets and the nearer stars —the ones around here had not yet been taken over by the Perui. Some Earth scholars would probably be sent to Perui schools to learn more about the techniques, such as faster-than-light drive, than could be given directly to Earth technicians. There'd be little interfering with Earth rule, and a chance for Earth to lift herself up to complete independence as a part of the Peruvui empire. It would take time, of course, but. . . .

"All this for nothing?" Sam asked doubtfully.

Ato shook his head. "Of course not, Sam. We're a practical people, like you. We're back in the trading stage—on a larger scale. We'll get things from you. There are a lot of things you can afford to do cheaper than we can, since your standard of living is so much lower for workers. You can do a lot of our smaller machining, produce certain special plants we need . . . after all, it's cheaper now to ship across space than across an ocean, though there's still a little more time involved. Oh, you'll earn your way."

One of the Perui came in then, snapping quick words to Ato.

To his surprise, Sam found he could understand most of

them—the constant hearing of the two languages at once was wearing connections in his brain. Larsen wanted Sam.

Sam stood up as the machine began, and for the first time he saw surprise register clearly on Ato's face.

"All right, I'd better go," he said quickly. "Be back as soon as I can."

One of the men outside pointed to the big flagship.

Sam hurried to it and up to the control room. It was practically stripped by now, but the radio was still there, and Larsen sat before it. He listened to Sam's report, frowning heavily.

"No weapons on the ship?" he asked at last.

"How would I know, Bill? I don't suppose so, on a trading ship between friendly suns. But they could have. They must have had some dillies in that last war of theirs. What's up?"

Larsen grimaced. "All hell. Earth tried to contact the Perui. They found the right frequency, apparently, but they got no answer. Then reports came in from some amateur comet watchers—reports of stars suddenly being displaced along a line—and they've figured the Perui came in at a hundred or more times light speed and literally buckled space in doing it. Now they're scared sick down there that this is the spy for an invasion. They're dying to find what makes the ship tick. So am I, for that matter. But they want the ship held until Donahue can get here on the supply ship. . . ."

"Donahue?" Sam repeated. He was the President's own troubleshooter—and in his case, there had been plenty of signs that the word meant a man who solved troubles by shooting them. There'd been a near riot in Burma over some of his methods, and diplomatic relations with Poland were still messed up from his last visit there. He'd had excellent reasons for his actions, of course, but. . . .

"Donahue!" Larsen repeated. "He'll be here in three days. And I gather from something else that he's equipped."

"Equipped?"

Larsen nodded. "With a missile containing an H-warhead —to make sure the ship doesn't pull out after he gets here. But that's just a guess."

It would have to be true. There'd be no point in trying to

hold the alien ship without some form of force. "So what do I do?" Sam asked.

"Hold Ato until Donahue gets here. Then pray to every manitou you know," Larsen told him. "And don't give away any secrets of ours, of course."

He started to swing back to the radio, then stopped. "Oh, yeah. And find out whether their home world knows about us yet. And how far away it is, and any other little military secret you can think of. That's all, Sam!"

Sam went out sickly. And the Aztec governor sent word to the men who'd sighted the big ship of Cortez, saying to hold him and to get his military secrets. And the king sent the governor out, armed with a specially powerful obsidian sword and a mantle of the choicest feathers. All he had to do was threaten Cortez enough to hold him until the king could find a way to steal the ship. It was all simple.

But it probably wouldn't matter, he realized. It hadn't really mattered in Mexico.

In the long run, up north, where the settlers came in peacefully to trade and steal a little, the results had been the same. The white man had taken on the White Man's Burden, as he'd done in India and in Africa—except for a few tribes like the Zulus, who'd refused it with some success.

Now the Perui would take on the Spaceman's Burden, and Earth could like it or not. She'd get the castoff culture of the Perui, she'd be given a helping hand up to "independence"—and to a second-rate Perui culture. They'd have a chance to forget about being themselves and try to be something they never were. They'd be rich, in a way—just as some of the plains Indians had grown rich on oil and decay.

Thank God, Sam's ancestors had refused to suck up to the whites! They'd pulled into their swamps instead, after some bitter fighting. And today, the funny thing was, they'd somehow got into the present civilization without losing their respect for themselves or the white men's respect for them. Their war had become a good-natured joke he and Larsen could kid about.

They'd made it without being the White Man's Burden.

He looked at some of the labor crew, still crossing their fingers to ward off evil spirits. Sure, they had television back

home, and cars—and they were here on the Moon now, with him—doing the work the scientists didn't have time for, and still only halfway to being men.

It was a great future that lay ahead of them all, because of a two hundred year lag in technology.

And Donahue was coming out with his little bomb to make it merrier. He'd insult the superior race and provoke them to force, maybe even kill this group. Then there'd be a quick retaliation, a few lessons that would end Earth's final vestige of pride, and a somewhat harsher version of the same program of Spaceman's Burden.

Running feet jarred the ground behind him, and sounded through his shoes. He turned to see Larsen, holding out a small object. "Take it and hide it," the commander said bitterly. "Orders!"

He was gone, as Sam shoved the only revolver on the Moon into his pocket and headed into the alien ship.

iv

Ato looked up, smiling. "Your government wants to talk to me, I hear," he greeted Sam. "Don't they know I'm only a trader? I can't make any arrangements with them, and I don't have time to waste on politicians. I've got to get off here tomorrow, your time, to keep on schedule. Besides, I want to report all this as soon as I can."

"You haven't reported it yet?" Sam asked, trying to control his voice.

The other nodded. "By radio on tight beam, of course. But it will take forty years for word to reach the settlement there —radio won't beat light speed. That's just a formality."

He let it drop.

Sam pondered it, his brain prickling slowly. "Suppose something happened to ground you here, Ato? What then? You'd have to stay here until the radio signal reached them, wouldn't you?"

"It's happened," the alien admitted. "That's the real reason for the signal—to locate me. Then, of course, once it reached a settlement, plans for a rescue would take a few days, and the ship would need a month more to get here. Of course, if I had bad luck, and the settlement wasn't visited

for a few years, there'd be a longer wait. Now, about those plans my people have worked out, if you want more details——"

Sam shook his head. He'd gone upstage on his lines as much as the script would let him, but there came a time when it had to be torn up and an adlibbed ending was better than none. When the signals failed, and the game was in the final minutes, and the score was 7-0 against you, you got the ball if you could and put it up to your legs and your guts.

He pulled out the revolver. "Know what this is, Ato?"

The other studied it slowly. "I can guess. We had them. Fatal, of course?"

"Quite fatal. Better call your men in, but keep them out of here. And get ready to lift ship, Ato. I'm not making a joke. I'll shoot—in fact, my government would want me to shoot rather than let you leave tomorrow."

"You can't hold the weapon forever—and if I lift ship, you'll be beyond help," Ato pointed out. "Why?"

It took some fifteen seconds to tell him what Sam thought of the Spaceman's Burden business for Earth. He'd already figured out what would happen to himself. If those were the lines, and that was the game, he'd have to prove that a Seminole was as good as an Apache any day.

But he couldn't tell that to the alien. They hadn't exchanged enough cultural history for that.

"Ten seconds, Ato," he said. "If you don't obey by then, I'll shoot."

The purple head nodded slowly, and a finger reached out for a button; Ato began giving orders. The screens showed the Perui drifting back to the ship.

By the time the men began to notice, they were all aboard.

"Lift ship," Sam ordered. "Take it up at less than light speed, and head for our space station, if you know where that is."

Sam had expected difficulty at this stage, but the alien only shrugged and moved slowly toward the big control panel, dragging the translating machine microphone with him. Sam followed, moving along the wall where he could keep an eye on the door. In a moment, without any feeling of motion,

the big ship was lifting; the screens showed the Moon dropping below. One, set for greater magnification, showed Larsen looking up, but it was too far to read his face.

Maybe he'd understand. If not, maybe his kids might, some day—if this worked.

"There's a ship heading for the Moon, somewhere between us and the station," Sam said. "I want you to locate it, Ato. Then I want you to set up a stable circular orbit around Earth that will intersect the path of that ship. Got it?"

"As you say," Ato said quietly.

There was something strange on the alien's face, but Sam couldn't read it. He tightened his grip on the gun, keeping his eyes firmly on the face of Ato. He was counting on luck and Ato's ignorance of the fact that the supply ship was carrying a hydrogen-fusion bomb. And the fact that nothing could be much worse than it would be anyhow, so it wouldn't matter if he failed.

If Earth thought the aliens were enemies and expected a follow-up attack, she wouldn't sit still and wait for it. History told him that much about his planet, at least. She was often wrong, but rarely cowardly. She'd do her best to get ready to repel any attack—and that best was pretty phenomenal. Men had compressed twenty years of progress into five often enough before in wartime, and they could do it again, if they had to.

They'd have forty years, until that radio message reached some place or other. Then, maybe with luck, they'd only have a rescue ship to deal with, and a little more time before all the Perui realized it was war. If Earth could recover even a little of the technology of the Perui ship and blend it with her own, she'd be able to hold them off. She'd be operating from the strength of a planet base, and they'd have to carry the war to her.

It would be a period of intolerable hell. But no profitless war goes on forever, and there would be an end.

With luck—and with her own determination—Earth could at least hold her own.

History had proved what happened to the races that bowed to their superiors and accepted the help offered them so often

in good faith; the history of Ato's people and his own agreed on that. And they agreed on something else—that sometimes the best way to make sure another race respected you was to fight it. One side couldn't fight a hard battle over long years against an enemy without gaining some respect. And when wars were finished, alliances could be worked out. There was England and America—and Japan. Germany and New France. Even, to some extent, Jordan and Israel. There was the respect his own people had won among the whites of their swamplands.

Enemies could become friends. But the distance between inferiors and superiors only widened, until the lesser was swallowed up in the greater.

It was better this way.

And yet. . . .

Ato looked around. "We're going to cross the little ship's orbit soon, Sam. I suppose you want me to threaten it—and then wait for the bomb it must carry?"

Sam stared at the purple man, without anything to say. It was exactly his plan. And if the other could guess it so easily. . . .

"I have nearly fifty other men aboard, Sam," Ato said quietly. "Some are my friends, and I'm responsible for all of them. There's a life raft large enough to get them to the planet you call Mars. No farther, Sam. They can manage to live there. Let them go and I'll call your ship."

It could be a trick, Sam knew. And with all the lives already at stake, a few more shouldn't matter. But he nodded.

"Send them off."

A minute later, almost as soon as Ato finished speaking, there was a lurch, and one of the screens showed a part of the blue ship apparently dropping away and picking up speed away from the sun.

Ato reached for the dials on his board and began fiddling until a barrage of words spilled in through the speaker. They were obviously coming from the supply ship.

"I have the power high enough to reach Earth with this," Ato said. He pulled the translator over and began speaking harshly into the microphone. "Earth ship, you are my pris-

oner! Earth ship, you are my prisoner! Surrender at once and prepare to let my men aboard. Or I shall destroy you!"

Then he cut the switch and swung back to face Sam again.

Sam stared at him unbelievingly. If the Perui were as easily cowed as this, or as willing to sell their race short—but they couldn't be: not if any part of their history was true.

"Why?" he asked savagely.

Ato shrugged. "Shoot me and find out, Sam. Go ahead. Or no, I'll tell you. It would do you no good to shoot, because there is the peace shield we found between you and me. There has been since you walked in with what my detectors said was a weapon. And there's one around the ship, too. No weapon you now have could wreck it."

Sam fired—coldly and deliberately. A moment later, the useless gun hung empty in his hands, and there were seven blobs of melted lead on the floor. Ato stood unharmed.

"All right," Sam said finally. "I suppose I should have saved the final one for myself. Now what?"

"Who knows what comes after death?" Ato asked softly. "Sam, do you think we *want* what you call the Spaceman's Burden? Don't you realize that our history shows us the results, too? It's no kinder to the superior than the inferior—it rots him inside. Doesn't your history show—as mine shows—that no true peace and progress can come until it comes among equals?"

He made a sound curiously like a sigh. "I don't like your solution either, Sam. I don't like it at all. But I like ours less. And if you can die for it, can one of the Perui do less?"

He threw down a small red lever.

"You can come here now, Sam. That breaks the screen between us. But now, if there is to be anything of this ship and its library left for your people, I'll need your help. It takes two to maintain part of a shield while canceling the other part. There—that button—and this lever—so. . . ."

I told you so, something in the back of Sam's head said. *You WOULD go to the Moon. Now you'll die.*

And another part of his mind was playing the game, fumbling for the ball to boot over the posts.

He stood quietly beside Ato, watching the screens and

holding down the lever while the missile headed toward them from the supply ship. It was bad to die, he thought. But if death had to be, it was good that it was shared . . . with a friend.

MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

Not every writer has the stamina to set words on paper with one foot in a cast and one arm in a sling; but there is at least one who has, and that one is a member of what we are taught to think of as the frailer sex, by name Miriam Allen deFord. And not every writer, too, has the talent to find a delightful explanation, in science-fiction terms, for one of the grislier riddles of the Decade of the Mobster. But, here again, it is this same Miss deFord who has done it; and the story she has done it in is——

THE LONG ECHO

Dutch Schultz—which wasn't his real name, either, but the one by which he was known in his heyday as a New York gangster—lay dying on a hospital bed one day in 1935.

A group of hoodlums from a rival gang had invaded the room back of a saloon where he was in consultation with some of his henchmen. They had pumped him full of machine gun bullets. And they had escaped. Now, in a high fever, he mumbled ceaselessly and unintelligibly.

No mourning family (though he had one) sat around his deathbed. His last companions were doctors, nurses and a detective from the homicide squad. The doctors and nurses were there to keep him alive as long as possible, so that the

detective might perhaps extort from him the name of his murderer.

A doctor murmured: "You'd better try again; he's going fast."

The detective leaned forward.

"Come on, Schultz," he exhorted. "It can't hurt you now. You knew them—who was it?"

The dying gangster went on mumbling in delirium.

Then suddenly his eyes opened. He stared straight into the detective's face. He tried to raise his head, fell back on the pillow and said, clearly and distinctly, just ten words: "A boy has never wept, or dashed a thousand krim."

All this is history. You can read it in the files of any newspaper. What you can't read is. . . .

On the Earth-type Planet II of Alpha Centauri, known to its colonists as Novaterra, in the year 3935 of our Earth, a party of young students on holiday was making camp for the night near the ruins of the city of Ish. They were two youths and a girl. Sha, the girl, was a psychophysicist in the making, Rof was in training as a space navigator, Lerin was a budding archaeologist with a special flair for philology; he also fancied himself as a poet and was something of a show-off.

He could not resist now.

"Have you heard that they've got this translated at last?" he asked, gesturing toward the massive city gates. The whole of the great unbroken stone arch was covered with minute incised writing, in a script like bird-tracks.

"Who cares?" yawned Rof.

"*I* care. It's the biggest thing in Novaterran prehistory. It means we can interpret all the records of the aborigines—and the last native died a thousand years before the first Terran spaceship landed here."

"How were their records any different from those of human-like natives of any other planet?" Sha inquired. She was not very curious, either—specialization went far on Novaterra—but she was polite.

"Not much, I admit. They were still essentially barbarians when the spore plague wiped them out. But this city was destroyed centuries before that. It was mined and burned—they

were barbarous, but they had some form of explosive—in revenge by a queen for the killing of her three sons in a local revolution. The city was utterly demolished, and every living being in it perished, whichever side of the rebellion he was on."

"Did you say a queen?" Rof's tone sounded livelier. "Were they governed by queens?"

"You can call her that. It was a matriarchy. Almost like a beehive back on Earth, except that of course they were thoroughly human, sexually. The women were rulers and administrators, the men were soldiers. The manual labor seems to have been done by both sexes when they grew too old for ruling or fighting."

"Not a bad set-up," Sha smiled. "We might try it ourselves."

"Except that we have no need for soldiers. Or for kings or queens, either. Anyway, this inscription up here is a poem—a sort of elegy. Of course Aboihaz herself didn't do it. She died with the rest when she blew up the city."

"Aboihaz—was that her name?"

"Yes. They had outlandish names. Her three sons, for instance, were named Dasht, Krim, and—I guess Athow would come nearest to pronouncing it. And the leader of the rebellion was named Godahuk. People from another city, probably another queen, must have had the inscription made as a sort of warning to future rebels who might get ideas.

"I made a rough translation of the poem myself the other day," Lerin added with specious modesty.

Rof groaned.

"Shut up, Rof," Sha said. "I'm interested."

"No, you're not," Rof retorted. "Ten to one he's put it into some remote Terran tongue nobody can understand, instead of into good Interlinguan."

"Well, I did do it in Early English," Lerin admitted. "It seemed appropriate—about the same cultural period on Earth as it was on Novaterra when the thing happened. I can give it to you in Interlinguan, of course. But if I recite it to you now in an ancient Terran language, it might reverber-

ate on Earth, back even to its own time. Not that I'd ever know if it did."

"Now look what you started, Sha! What do you mean, Lerin—reverberate?"

"It's a theory—Sha can tell you more about it than I can. The underlying principle is that time is cyclic and circular——"

"We all know that; it's elementary psychophysics."

"Exactly. Well, then, any utterance made in time-space may enter the time-space spiral, at any point, and go forward or backward forever till it returns to its point of origin. You tell him, Sha."

"Lerin's right, Rof, though I'd never thought of it as applying to the recitation of a poem. The words have to reach a receptive mind—which is only an improbable possibility. Then, if it's a writer, say, he calls it an inspiration; or a visionary might consider it a prediction of the future; or a financier or a gambler might say it was a detailed hunch."

"Or a criminal might think he had the blueprint for a perfect crime."

"Yes, the receptive mind doesn't have to be a superior or noble one. But the receptor—at least that's the theory—must be in—well, let's say an open state in order to receive it. Perhaps lost in a trance. Or absorbed in artistic creation, or delirious. Or even insane.

"Of course the reverberation may come from the past instead of the future. Then the poor author is accused of plagiarism when he's entirely innocent. Or the lunatic repeats passages from books he never read."

"I know just what you mean," interrupted the irrepressible Rof. "I received a reverberation myself only this morning. I distinctly heard a voice saying, 'I want a drink of *quizik.*' So I gave the poor thirsty creature one—by taking it myself."

"Oh, stop it, Rof! Your mind was never in a receptive state in your life."

"*Can* you recite some of your poem, Lerin? I know a little Early English—not much, but enough to get the general idea. Rof can stand it, to punish him for being so frivolous."

Rof groaned again. Lerin cleared his throat.

"Well, my translation's not a masterpiece or anything; it's

just an approximation. I had an awful time fitting in all those weird personal names. I'll just give you the first dozen lines or so, and spare you the rest."

"It's probably all he remembers, or he'd inflict it all on us."

"Rof, will you—— Go on, Lerin."

Lerin cleared his throat again and began to declaim:

Behold a mother's anguish, behold a queen's revenge.
Three valiant sons and young, by foul rebellion slain,
Three, standing sword by sword to guard their mother's throne.
Of Ish the mighty city a funeral pyre she made,
The city's self alone worthy to be their tomb.
None lived of friend or foe, in scorching flame they fell,
And she herself, Aboihaz, lay down in fire and died.

When at her feet they laid the corpses of her sons,
Aboihaz never wept o'er Dasht, Athow, and Krim:
Vengeance was all her tears, as fits the grief of queens.

"And so on, for about a hundred lines more."

"I think it's very impressive," said Sha.

"So now it goes reverberating back and forth through the ages," Rof jeered. "Let's hope it meets a soft, perceptive mind somewhere, in a highly susceptible condition, to make you immortal without your knowledge, my boy. Somebody who loves the thought of savage vengeance, by preference, and who can use your translation to frustrate civilization.

"Incidentally, I didn't understand a word of it. So how about giving it to us in Interlinguan, for the sake of a poor uncultured Space Cadet, so that we can meditate on those happy days, to provide us with a good night's sleep?"

Dutch Schultz said loudly: "A boy has never wept or dashed a thousand krim."

He uttered no other intelligible word before he died.

The men at his bedside looked blankly at one another.

"It was clear enough," a doctor said, "and most of it seemed to be English, but it didn't make any sense to me."

"Just nonsense, as far as I could get it," the detective agreed. "He certainly didn't finger any mobster I ever heard the name of.

"Well, I guess that's that. We're right back where we started. Nobody will ever know what that gibberish meant—if it meant anything at all."

They kept on trying.

But nobody knows to this day who murdered Dutch Schultz. And it was not until 2000 years had passed that, four light-years away, anybody understood those ten words.

EDMUND COOPER

A young and endlessly fertile writer, Edmund Cooper is perhaps best known in this country for his wonderful new science-fiction novel, DEADLY IMAGE, the story of the doppelgangers that may rule tomorrow's sad new world and of the crude man from the twentieth century who teaches them what humankind has always known. More than that, Cooper is an urbane and thoughtful creator of short stories in the marvelous English science-fiction school, a fit companion to Clarke and Wyndham and Christopher—as witness this one, from his forthcoming collection of the same name——

TOMORROW'S GIFT

Tomorrow's gift of joy or pain
renews the problem of desire.
Behind each vacant pair of eyes
lurks the sad prisoner of fire.

Anonymous Elizabethan Poet
Circa 1950.

From the twenty-seventh story of the Central Administrative Building, the city looked like an enormous target, or a com-

plex geometrical amoeba whose nucleus combined the functions of stomach, heart and brain.

Within this duodenal cerebrum were the Coordinators, the architects of Nova Mancunia, the self-appointed masters of its fate. Their circular colony was exactly one mile in diameter, for though there were no more than fifty Co-ordinators to the total population of fifty thousand, they were careful to emphasize the privileges of rank.

Each Co-ordinator lived according to his taste. Pre-Elizabethan farmhouses mingled with late Windsor mansions. A Norman church—rebuilt stone by stone, with the obvious addition of central heating and a swimming pool styled as a South Sea lagoon—lay facing an opaque glass windmill whose sails actually revolved. The most striking residence, perhaps, was that of the Director. He chose to live in a replica of a nineteenth century mill chimney, which perpetually belched forth a harmless synthetic smoke.

The Central Administrative Building, the only functional element in the whole area, was no more than a hundred feet square and five hundred feet high. It was built entirely of stainless metal and plastic.

Surrounding the entire digestive brain-center of the city was a green belt, also a mile wide. It was a natural park where herds of deer appreciated, by simple analogy, the concept of a finite universe.

Beyond this again lay the mile-wide band which was the domain of five hundred Technicians. Their accommodation was less ambitious than that of the Co-ordinators and occupied less space. They lived in four different types of houses, according to status. There was the semi-detached cottage, the cottage, the cottage-residence and the residence. Alpha Technicians alone enjoyed the luxury of a residence and its indoor swimming pool. Altogether, there were fifty residences.

Exactly ninety-five per cent of the Technicians' belt was occupied by electronic factories, power units and a hydroponics plant that, by itself, accounted for a thousand acres. The hydroponics installation, subdivided for convenience into five separate groups, produced Nova Mancunia's entire food supply—from yeast to yams, from apples to apricots, from milk substitute to synthetic mutton.

With the Technicians' belt, the vital region of the city ended. Outside it, there was another green belt and then the Prefrontals' Reservation—the territory reserved for numerous failed human beings. It was the home of men and women who were not Illiterates but who were maladjusted. Some of them had been, potentially or actually, Alpha Technicians—even Alpha Co-ordinators. But they had become unhappy. Partial readjustment was simple; even the old pre-atomic surgeons were able to perform the operation of prefrontal leucotomy. A few brain fibers to be severed, the removal of a small amount of cerebral garbage—anxiety, doubt, resentment, despair—and then there was nothing to worry about. (Except that the patient was automatically sentenced to a life of happy retirement, his services being no longer required.)

Beyond the Prefrontals' Reservation was the epidermis of Nova Mancunia, the final layer of skin, the mass of the people. They lived in twenty-five glass and concrete hives, each containing one thousand flats. They lived and procreated and died. Their enormous blocks of flats were equally fertility symbols and tombstones.

Not being Co-ordinators, or Technicians, or Prefrontals, they were classified as Illiterates. Some of them were craftsmen or painters; some wrote imaginative histories or old-fashioned poems; some worked the land and produced unhygienic, unnecessary food; some designed clothes that would eventually wear out; and enough of them committed suicide to relieve the Co-ordinators of the population problem.

Encircling this outer ring of hives was the wilderness, spotted here and there with other concentric cities; spotted also with round lakes whose waters would never drain away through their beds of glass and diamond. These were the monuments of the old Hydrogen Wars.

Six miles to the north was Lake Manchester. It had been one of the first cities to die.

Dr. Krypton gazed through his office window on the twenty-seventh storey of C.A.B. and watched the sails of the Deputy Director's glass windmill go round. It was his business to look for obscure meanings, and he wondered for the hundredth time if there was one here. Perhaps it was the

Deputy Director's method of subtly announcing his deviationist tendencies. Certainly, the sails described a revolution, impelled by a material force. Certainly, the law governing the revolution had its sociological parallel. But would the Deputy Director be so subtle? Would he, also, with tested Happiness Quotient of a hundred and fifty, and an Intelligence Quotient of a hundred and eighty, seek to change the status quo? Dr. Krypton dismissed these idle speculations with a shrug, and turned to face the man in the room.

The visitor was a young man, under thirty—more than seventy years younger than the Alpha psychiatrist who now confronted him.

He wore an air of aggressive resentment. But practically all Dr. Krypton's visitors did. It was either that or injured innocence.

What was the man's name? All Dr. Krypton could remember was that it was one he should have remembered. He glanced at the passport in his hands. *Byron, Mark Antony: Ph. D. Elec.: Technician Beta: H. Q. 105, I.Q. 115: D.O.B. 2473: Male.*

That was all the information. It was all that need be known. It was more than enough to distinguish Byron, Mark Antony from Byron, Caesar Augustus—if there was one. For it was the story of a life.

"Why has your passport reached my office?" asked Dr. Krypton suddenly.

For a moment the young man's expression was blank, then he jerked out an answer: "I don't know, sir. I was about to ask you the same question."

It was the usual reaction. Dr. Krypton studied his patient objectively, wondering whether he would be likely to bore or entertain. A recommendation for immediate prefrontal would take care of the first possibility, and an observation visa would provide for the latter.

"You know who I am, of course?" asked the psychiatrist briskly.

"Yes, sir. Co-ordinator Alpha, consultant psychiatrist and neurosurgeon."

"You are aware of my H.Q./I.Q.?"

"One three five, and one seventy."

"Good, we shall perhaps save time. I have the advantage, I see, of fifty-five intelligence points. I have also the ultimate privilege of deciding your fate."

"I understand."

"I hope so. You, on the other hand, theoretically retain the choice of working with or against me. If you feel able to lie successfully, do so by all means. It will be a game of chess. You will play without a queen."

Dr. Byron appeared to pull himself together. He gazed at the psychiatrist coolly. "I presume my passport was sent to you because my efficiency is questioned?"

Dr. Krypton shook his head. "Reasons are never given. While I hold your passport, you are my patient. You will provide the reasons."

"I could suggest a conspiracy."

"That would be tedious. Everyone does—even, on occasion, Co-ordinators Alpha. Fear temporarily decreases intelligence by perhaps twenty per cent."

"Suppose I have no fear?"

Dr. Krypton sighed. "When a man no longer has fear, he is acutely unhappy. I invariably recommend prefrontal."

Dr. Byron seemed suddenly to relax. He smiled. "As I am no longer afraid, I accept both your diagnosis and treatment, sir. When may I expect the operation?"

The psychiatrist became interested. Here, at least, was an unusual approach. Many of those whose passports reached Dr. Krypton anticipated his recommendation and prepared for it in various ways—some by opening an artery, and some by getting drunk. But here was one who seemed willing to short-circuit the entire analysis.

"You are in a hurry," observed Dr. Krypton. "Why do you want your present personality to die?"

The younger man appeared to restrain himself from laughing. "Isn't it already dead?"

"Demonstrably not."

"Then there is no time to lose. In the interests of communal stability, you should amputate it as soon as possible."

"Why?"

"Because," said Dr. Byron calmly, "it generates delusions."

"Perhaps there is no future for anyone without them," suggested Krypton in a dry voice.

Dr. Byron raised his eyebrows. "Do you say that officially?"

It was the psychiatrist's turn to laugh. "Heresy has been permitted for the *elite* ever since the Christian Church began the fashion. Officially, I may find it necessary."

Byron was silent for a moment. Then he spoke at great speed. "In the Country of the Blind, the one-eyed man is merely a psychotic. I am a psychotic, Dr. Krypton, because I do not share the reality of blindness. I am obsessed by the delusion of sight. I can see nothing but a slow disintegration in this stupid system of caste. On a planet that once supported three thousand million human beings there are now only ten million. They live in a couple of hundred hygienic Nova Mancunias. They do not procreate; they merely reproduce. I have discovered that there is a subtle difference. Has it occurred to you that in the last hundred years history has stopped? Nothing happens any more—nothing is lost and nothing is gained. All the Nova Mancunias everywhere are as dead and sterile as the lakes of the Hydrogen Wars. They are toy civilizations slowly running down. And there is no one to wind them up."

"Except you," said Krypton with sarcasm. "Why didn't you find a Technician Beta Female, marry her, and sublimate these quixotic notions in an orderly domestic rhythm?"

"The classification of Technician Beta Female supersedes that of Woman," returned Byron. "In any case, I have not found that any variation on the theme of mating is a permanent cure for ideals."

"What do you define as 'ideals'?"

"Irrelevancies," said Byron, "such as truth, love, beauty. And humanity."

"The first three are nonsensical abstractions. The last is a collective noun. No one has agreed on the meanings of any of them, yet they have caused more destruction than the Hydrogen Wars. That is why, in our city-states, we have sacrificed 'ideals' on the altar of stability."

"Assuming that it is better to be a happy pig than an unhappy Socrates?" demanded Byron.

Dr. Krypton shrugged. "Pigs—lamentably now extinct—

never had a reasonable Happiness Quotient. At best, they experienced contentment. Socrates, on the other hand, enjoyed himself hugely—if the old accounts are to be believed."

"But happiness consists in adjusting oneself to the world. I do not think——"

"On the contrary, you do think, Dr. Byron. But not expertly. Otherwise you would see that only contentment is obtained by adjusting oneself to the world—a proposition supported by the extinct pig, which was a creature adequately conditioned to its environment. Conversely, Socrates preferred to adjust the world to himself—and derived the greatest happiness. As you know, he died tranquilly—which is to say, happily. Death, for him, was the final luxury. He was fulfilled."

Dr. Byron looked perplexed. "Perhaps a prefrontal will turn me into a happy Socrates," he said.

Krypton smiled. "Or it may save you from being an unhappy pig. Here is your passport. You will need it because tonight you will visit Illiterates Block Seven, where the girl Thalia doubtless awaits you. One is reluctant to believe that all philosophy derives from sex, but the confirmation is provided daily."

For the first time, Byron displayed fear. "What do you know about Thalia?"

"My dear fellow, I warned you that you would have to play without a queen. You came to me yesterday, also, and I gave you deep hypnosis. Believe me, it is less tiring for all concerned. Not only did you tell me all about this Thalia, but you described her charms so minutely that I would have no difficulty in recognizing her in the flesh. She is twenty-three and affects subjective painting. Her H.Q. is about twenty points higher than yours, and her I.Q. about twenty-five lower. Her father was a Technician Alpha Prefrontal, and her mother an Illiterate. She is volatile and resilient. Need I say more?"

"What are you going to do about her?" Byron could not keep the anxiety from his voice.

"I am a psychiatrist, not an inquisitor. She is an Illiterate. I need take no action."

The younger man was genuinely puzzled. "Why, then, are you allowing me to see her again?"

"I should have thought that was self-evident. By leaving you free to visit her I weaken your resistance. If you take advantage of this final opportunity you will be emotionally exhausted when you come to me tomorrow. If you do not see her you will be frustrated by an unresolved conflict. Either is advantageous, for I shall have to decide what to do with you tomorrow. It will be useful to observe you under stress."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"I can afford to have no secrets. Good morning, Dr. Byron. Here, you are forgetting your passport!"

"Will he give you a prefrontal?" she asked quietly.

They were walking hand in hand through the few acres of carefully designed woodland between Block Seven and Block Eight. Lights, shining from the uncurtained windows of flats, appeared to dance between the leaves of birch, oak and sycamore. Here and there, in symmetrical grassy hollows, Illiterates Male lay with Illiterates Female, transforming the mechanics of coition into an old subjective mystery.

"I expect so," he answered. "There is no other solution."

"We could run away," she said. "We could try to reach the Primitives in the Highlands. They say there are several thousand of them north of the Grampians."

He shook his head. "The Co-ordinators would allow an Illiterate to escape, but not a Technician. Besides, we can't even be sure that the Primitives exist."

"Are you afraid?" asked Thalia.

"Yes, for both of us. It will be better when I am sent to the Reservation. Then we shall be able to meet frequently."

She gripped his hand tightly. "After the operation, you may not love me any more."

"You can teach me all over again."

"I—I may not want to. You'll feel different about things. With the Prefrontals, nothing matters deeply. You'll get bored, and make love to some Prefrontal woman, and won't be able to understand how I feel about it."

He stopped, put his arm round her and whispered: "Look at the stars. They're the memory patterns of the cosmos. They

are patterns of inconceivable purpose on the brain of space. To them, Nova Mancunia is nothing. It is not even the characteristic of a diseased astrospore! The constellations are outside our time. They shone with the same brilliance when Lake Manchester was a teeming city. They will continue to shine when Nova Mancunia is a more doubtful legend than Troy."

"I'm not sure I understand," she said slowly. "But when you talk like that I want to believe without understanding."

"Do the stars," he asked, "seem still and tranquil?"

"When we look at them together," she answered, "I begin to think we might borrow their stillness."

She heard him laugh softly. "They are hurtling by at millions of kilometers an hour," he said. "They are burning themselves to death to illuminate a journey without destination. They are racing headlong to extinction, or else they are the only still points in a whirlpool of space. Which is it?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I; and that, my darling, is the greatest secret in the world. Just as they might be dying by the trillion, so we might expand one moment of life into eternity."

Slowly, insistently, he pulled her down into the grassy hollow where they stood. Down through a tunnel of darkness to the oldest innocence of all. Presently, in its own compelling ritual, love became a communicable experience of death.

There they lay, a Technician Beta Male and an Illiterate Female; each, in a different fashion, awaiting the slow metabolism of resurrection.

Dr. Krypton stared absently through his office window at the Deputy Director's glass windmill. The enigma remained. Some day, perhaps, the sails would cease to turn, and the passport of a Co-ordinator Alpha would lie on the psychiatrist's desk.

Revolution or evolution? It seemed to be the peculiar genius of twenty-fifth-century man to be an enemy of both.

The psychiatrist heard the door open and said, without turning round: "Good morning, Dr. Byron. If one and a half squirrels ate one and a half nuts in one and a half minutes, how many nuts would nine squirrels eat in nine minutes?"

"Fifty-four," said Byron, after a short pause.

"Three seconds," observed Krypton. "You are moderately alert. . . . I trust you achieved catharsis last night?"

"I did. I killed her!"

Dr. Krypton turned to face his visitor. "That is interesting. Why did you not kill yourself also?"

"Because I needed to live in order to kill you."

"You are probably stronger than I am," said the psychiatrist calmly. "It appears that Nova Mancunia will presently need a new Co-ordinator Alpha. And neurosurgeons are difficult to replace. Unfortunately, Dr. Byron, you cannot kill the system."

"I can try."

"You can fail. That is all. Now you had better begin your failure by killing me."

Byron moved forward, then suddenly stopped. He moved forward again, then stopped. His whole body was trembling. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead.

"I am afraid," said the psychiatrist, "that I took advantage of the deep hypnosis to rearrange, temporarily, your pattern of compulsion and tabu. As you see, it was quite justified. If you can lay a hand on me, I assure you there will be no resistance. I have considered your case since yesterday. There does not seem to be any alternative to a prefrontal leucotomy —officially."

"And unofficially?" asked Byron, staring at him dully.

"I shall operate on you, Dr. Byron, but I shall merely make an incision, then close it. There will be no severance of brain fiber."

"Why?"

"Because, my dear fellow, the human race needs you. Until that need is manifest, you will live in the Prefrontal Reservation."

"One of us is quite mad," said Byron slowly.

"I am," admitted Krypton. "It is incurable. You see, I too have no faith in Nova Mancunia. The present society is not static, and there will come a time when it will fail. That will be the signal for a return to humanity."

"Did you make me kill her?" demanded Byron abruptly.

"I did. You, perhaps, will need to die before a new society is established. I have merely made it easier for you."

For a minute, Dr. Byron remained silent. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, his manner calm. "When will you operate?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Are you really not going to cut the fiber, or is that suggestion part of the treatment?"

Dr. Krypton smiled as he ushered his guest out. "It is an interesting point, because you will never know."

DAMON KNIGHT

Damon Knight is a lean man with a large head, which he all the time uses for thinking, thinking, thinking. Much of his thinking turns, in time, into the sort of total-penetration book reviewing that has earned him awards and resulted in his being one of the few reviewers in any medium whose essays are reissued in hard covers. (There are those who have questioned the accuracy of some of his judgments, but there is no one who can doubt the good faith, the work and the skill that go into making them.) What thinking time is left, Knight devotes to the creation of bizarre cultures and of off-beat aliens, as for example those aliens in——

IDIOT STICK

The ship came down out of a blue sky to land in a New Jersey meadow. It sank squashily into the turf. It was about a mile long, colored an iridescent blue-green, like the shell of a beetle.

A door opened, and a thin, stick-bodied man came out to sniff the cool air. The sky overhead was full of fluffy cumulus clouds and criss-crossing contrails. Across the river, the tall buildings of New York were picturesquely gilded by the early sun.

A dun-colored Army copter came into view, circling the

ship at a cautious distance. The stick man saw it, blinked at it without interest, and looked away.

The river was smooth and silvery in the sunlight. After a long time the sound of bullhorns came blaring distantly across the marshes. Then there was a clanking and a roaring, and two Army tanks pulled into sight, followed by two more. They deployed to either side, and slewed around with their 90 mm. guns pointing at the ship.

The alien watched them calmly. More helicopters appeared, circling and hovering. After a while a gray-painted destroyer steamed slowly into view up the river.

More tanks arrived. There was a ring of them around the spaceship, rumbling and smelling of Diesel oil. Finally a staff car pulled up, and three perspiring general officers got out of it.

From his low platform the alien looked down with a patient expression. His voice carried clearly: "Good morning," he said, "this is a ship of the Galactic Federation. We come in peace; your guns will not fire, please take them away. Now then. I shall tell you what I am going to do. The Federation wishes to establish a cultural and educational organization upon your continent; and for your land and your cooperation, we will pay you generously. Here, catch these." He raised his arm, and a cloud of glittery objects came toward them.

One of the officers, white-faced, tugged at the pistol in his belt holster; but the objects dropped harmlessly in and around the car. The eldest officer picked one up. It was insubstantial to the touch, more like a soap bubble than anything else. Then it tingled suddenly in his palm. He sat down, glassy-eyed.

The other two shook him. "Frank! Frank!"

His eyes slowly cleared; he looked from one to the other. "Are you still here?" he said faintly, and then: "My God!"

"Frank, what was it? Did it knock you out?"

The eldest officer looked down at the glittery thing in his hand. It felt now like nothing in particular; just a piece of plastic, perhaps. There was no more tingle. The zip was gone out of it.

"It was—happiness," he said.

The rest of the objects glittered and gleamed in the rank

grass around the car. "Go on," called the alien encouragingly, "take all you want. Tell your superiors—tell your friends. Come one, come all! We bring happiness!"

Within half a day, the word was out.

Work stopped in New York offices. By ferry and tube, people poured across the river. The governor flew in from Trenton and was closeted with the aliens for half an hour. He emerged with a dazed and disbelieving look, wearing a shoulder bag full of the glittering little capsules.

The crowd milled around the ship, muddy to the knee. Every hour the thin alien appeared and tossed out another handful of capsules. There were shouts and screams; the crowd clotted briefly where the capsules fell, then spread apart again like filings released from a magnet.

Dull, used-up capsules littered the grass. Everywhere you saw the dazed expression, the transported look of a man who had had one.

Some few of the capsules got carried home to wives and children. The word continued to spread. No one could describe the effect of the capsules satisfactorily. It lasted only a few seconds, yet seemed to take a long time. It left them satiated and shaken. It was not pleasure of any specific kind, they said. It was happiness and they wanted more.

Expropriation measures to give the aliens what they wanted passed the state and national legislatures with blinding speed. There was furious debate elsewhere, but nobody who had had one of the capsules was in any doubt that he was getting a bargain. And the kicker was, "What else can we do?"

The aliens, it appeared, wanted five hundred acres of level ground to put up certain buildings and other structures. Their explanations to the press and public were infrequent and offhand in tone. Some people found them unsatisfactory. When asked why the aliens had chosen a site so near heavily populated centers, rather than wasteland which would have been plentiful elsewhere, the spokesman replied (he was either the same stick-thin man who had appeared first, or one just like him): "But then who would build us our buildings?"

New York, it seemed, represented a source of native labor to the aliens.

The pay would be generous: three capsules a day a man.

When the aliens announced they were hiring, half the population of New York tried to get over onto the Jersey flats. Three-quarters of the population of Hoboken, Jersey City, Hackensack and Paterson was already there.

In the queues that eventually formed out of the confusion, the mayor of New York City was seen alongside an upstate senator and two visiting film stars.

Each person, as he reached the head of the line, was handed a light metal or plastic rod, five feet long, with a curved handle and a splayed tip. The lucky workers were then herded out onto the designated acreage. Some of it was marshland, some was a scraggly part of the New Jersey parks system, some was improved land. The buildings on the site, a few homes, some factories and warehouses, had all been evacuated but not torn down. The workers with their rods were lined up at one edge of this territory, facing the opposite side.

"When the command 'Go' is heard," said the alien's voice clearly, "you will all proceed directly forward at a slow walking pace, swinging your sticks from side to side."

The voice stopped. Apparently that was going to be all.

In the middle of the line, young Ted Cooley looked at his neighbor, Eli Baker. They both worked in the same pharmaceuticals house, and had come out together to try their luck. Cooley was twenty-five, blond and brawny; Baker, about the same age, was slight and dark. Their eyes met, and Baker shrugged, as if to say, *Don't ask me.*

It was a clear, cool day. The long line of men and women stood waiting in the sunlight.

"Go!" said the alien's voice.

The line began to move.

Cooley stepped forward and waggled his stick hesitantly. There was no feeling of movement in the stick, but he saw a line of darkness spring out on the ground ahead of him. He paused instinctively, thinking that the stick must be squirting oil or some other liquid.

Up and down the line, other people were stopping, too. He looked more closely, and saw that the ground was not wet at

all. It was simply pressed down flat, dirt, stones, weeds, everything all at once, to form one hard, dark surface.

"Keep going," said the alien's voice.

Several people threw down their sticks and walked away. Others moved forward cautiously. Seeing that nothing happened to them when they stepped on the dark strip, Cooley moved forward also. The dark ground was solid and firm underfoot. As he moved forward, swinging the stick, the dark area spread; and looking closely now, he could see the uneven ground leap downward and darken as the stick swept over it.

"Get in rhythm," called the voice. "Leave no space between one man's work and the next."

The line moved forward, a little raggedly at first, then faster as they got the hang of it. The dark, hard strip, running the whole length of the area, widened as they moved. Everything under the business end of the stick was instantly compressed and smoothed down. Looking closely, you could see the traces of anything that had been there before, like the patterns in marbled linoleum: stones, sticks, grass and weeds.

"How the heck does it work?" said Baker, awed.

"Search me," said Cooley. In his hands, the tube felt light and empty, like the aluminum shaft of a tank vacuum cleaner. He didn't see how it could possibly have any mechanism inside. There were no controls; he hadn't turned anything on to make it operate.

A few yards ahead there was a stone wall, overgrown with weeds. "What's going to happen when we come to that?" Baker asked, pointing.

"Search me." Cooley felt bewildered; he walked mechanically forward, swinging the stick.

The wall grew nearer. When they were within a few paces of it, a rabbit burst suddenly out of cover. It darted one way, then the other, hind legs pumping hard. Confused by the advancing line, it leaped for the space between Baker and Cooley.

"Look out!" shouted Cooley instinctively. Baker's swinging stick went directly over the rabbit.

Nothing happened. The rabbit kept on going.

Cooley and a few others turned to watch it. It bounded

away across the level strip, and disappeared into the tall grass on the other side.

Baker and Cooley looked at each other. "Selective," said Cooley through dry lips. "Listen, if I——" He shortened his grip on the stick, moving the splayed end toward himself.

"Better not," said Baker nervously.

"Just to see——" Cooley slowly brought the stick nearer, slowly thrust the tip of one shoe under it.

Nothing happened.

He moved the stick nearer. Bolder, he ran it over his leg, his other foot. Nothing. "Selective!" he repeated. "But how?"

The weeds were dried vegetable fiber. The stick compressed them without hesitation, stamped them down flat like everything else. His trousers were dried vegetable fiber, part of them, anyhow—cotton. His socks, his shoelaces—how did the stick know the difference?

They kept on going.

When they came to the stone wall, Cooley waved his stick at it. A section of the wall slumped, as if a giant had taken a bite out of it. He waved it again.

The rest of the wall fell.

Somebody laughed hysterically. The line was advancing. The wall was just a lighter stripe in the smooth floor over which they walked.

The sun crept higher. Behind the line of men and women stretched a level, gleaming floor. "Listen," said Cooley nervously to Baker, "how bad do you want those happiness gadgets?"

Baker looked at him curiously. "I don't know, what do you mean?"

Cooley moistened his lips. "I'm thinking. We get the gadgets, we use them up——"

"Or sell them," Baker interrupted.

"Or sell them, but then either way, they're gone. Suppose we walked off with *these*." He hefted his stick. "If we could find out what makes it do what it does——"

"Are you kidding?" said Baker. His dark face was flushed; beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He waved his stick. "You know what this is? A shovel. An idiot stick."

"How's that?" said Cooley.

"A shovel," Baker told him patiently, "is a stick with some dirt on one end and an idiot on the other. Old joke. Didn't you ever do any common labor?"

"No," said Cooley.

"Well, you're doing some now. This thing that looks so wonderful to us—that's just a shovel, to them. An idiot stick. And we're the idiots."

"I don't like that," said Cooley.

"Who likes it?" Baker demanded. "But there isn't a thing you can do about it. Do your work, take your pay, and that's all. Don't kid yourself we can ever get the bulge on them. We haven't got what it takes."

Cooley thought hard about it, and was one of the fifty-odd people who walked off the site with Galactic tools that day. The Galactics made no complaint. When daylight failed, they called the first crew in and sent another out, under lights that floated overhead.

The work went on around the clock. The tools were stolen at a steady rate; the Galactics handed out more indifferently.

The site became level and smooth. The surface was glassy-hard, almost too slick to walk on. The next thing the aliens did was to set up a tall pole on a tripod in the middle of the site. Most of the floating lights went out and drifted away. In the dusk, a network of fluorescent lines appeared on the glassy surface. It looked like the ground plan for a huge building. Some of the pale lines went a little askew because of minor irregularities in the surface, but the Galactics did not seem to mind.

They called in part of the crew and made some adjustment in each man's stick. A narrow tab, something like the clip in an automatic, came out of the butt. A different one went in.

So equipped, the reduced crew was sent back onto the site, and scattered along the diagram, one man every few hundred yards or so. They were instructed to walk backwards along the lines, drawing their sticks after them.

There was some confusion. The tools now worked only on contact, and instead of flattening the surface down, they made it bulge up, like suddenly rising dough, to form a foot-

high ridge. The ridge was pale in color, and felt porous and hard to the touch, like styrene foam.

A few men were called in and had still another set of control tabs put into their sticks. Wherever somebody had jumped, or twitched, and made a ridge where it didn't belong, these men wiped it out like wiping chalk with a wet sponge: the expanded material shrank again and became part of the dark surface.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crew, finishing the first set of lines, was walking along beside them, making the ridges twice as wide. They repeated this process until each ridge was nearly a yard across. Then they stepped up on top of the ridges and began again, making a second foot-high bulge on top of the first.

The building was going up.

It was irregularly shaped, a little like an arrowhead, with an outer shell composed of many small compartments. The interior was left unpartitioned, a single area more than half a mile across.

When the shell was up ten feet, the aliens had connecting doorways cut between all the small chambers. A stick, looking no different from the others, was tossed into each chamber from the wall above. Where it landed, clear liquid immediately began to gush. The liquid rose, covered the stick, and kept on rising. It rose until it reached the level of the walls, and then stopped. A few minutes later, it was cold to the touch. In half an hour, it was frozen solid.

The control tabs were changed again, and a crew began walking across the frozen surface, forming another layer of the hard, dark, glassy substance. Afterward, more doorways were cut in the outer shell, and the liquid drained off toward the river. The sticks that had been dropped into each chamber were recovered. Each had left a slight irregularity in the floor, which was smoothed out.

The second story went up in the same way. Walking backward along the high walls, a good many people fell off. Others quit.

The aliens hired more and the construction went on.

Hardly anybody except a few high government officials got

to see the inside of the alien spaceship; but the Galactics themselves became familiar sights in the towns and cities of the eastern seaboard.

They walked the streets in inquisitive, faintly supercilious pairs, looking at everything, occasionally stopping to aim little fist-sized machines which might or might not have been cameras.

Some of them fraternized with the populace, asking many earnest questions about local laws and customs. Some bought vast quantities of potatoes, playing cards, Cadillacs, junk jewelry, carpets, confetti, nylons and other goods, paying as usual with the happiness capsules. They ate local foods with interest, and drank heroically—without getting drunk, or even tipsy.

Skin-tight clothes cut in imitation of the Galactics' bottle-green uniform began to appear on the market. There were Galactic dolls, and Galactic spaceship toys.

Legislatures everywhere were relaxed and amiable. Wherever the Galactics had trouble, or sensed it coming, they smoothed the way with more of the happiness capsules. Prices were beginning to be marked not only in "$" and "¢," but in "Hc," for "Hapcap."

Business was booming.

In the laboratories of the Bureau of Standards in Washington there was a concerted program, one of many, to discover the secrets of the Galactic all-purpose tool. Specimens had been measured, X-rayed and cut apart. The material, whatever it was, seemed to have been formed in one piece. It was light, chemically inert and fairly strong. The hollow inside was irregularly curved, according to no discernible principle.

There were only two parts—the tool proper, and the control tab which fitted into a slot in the handle. With the tab in, the tool functioned. It did work, while the dials of every test instrument indicated that no energy was being released.

With the tab out, nothing happened at all.

The tabs for various functions could be distinguished by color. Otherwise, in shape and dimensions, they seemed identical.

The first—and last—breakthrough came when the tabs

were examined by X-ray microscopy. The substance, which had seemed amorphous, was found to have a crystalline structure, permanently stressed in patterns which differed consistently between tabs that produced different functions.

By an elaborate series of test heatings, compressions and deformations, Dr. Crawford Reed succeeded in altering the stress pattern of a tab, type "A," to approximately that of a tab, type "C."

When the tab was inserted in a tool, the laboratory went up in an explosion that demolished buildings within a radius of three city blocks.

The explosion was recorded by instruments in the giant spaceship. When he saw the record, the bored officer on duty smiled.

One of the aliens, who said his name was Pendrath go Pendrath, showed up frequently in the pleasant little town of Riverdale, N.J. He poked his nose into church bazaars, Little League baseball games, soda fountains, summer camps, chamber of commerce meetings. At first he gathered crowds wherever he went; then the natives, and even the tourists, got used to him.

Three nights after the rough shell of the building was finished, a young *Star-Ledger* reporter named Al Jenkins found him in the back of a bar, maudlin drunk.

Pendrath looked up as Jenkins slid into the booth next to him. "Ah, my friend," he said blurrily, "how I regret your poor planet."

"You don't like our planet?" said Jenkins.

"No, it is a nice little planet. Extremely picturesque. Pardon me." Pendrath sipped from the glass he was holding. He blinked, and straightened up slightly.

"You must understand, that is Galactic progress," he said. "It cannot be helped. We all must go some day."

Jenkins looked at him critically. "You've been having quite a few of those, haven't you?" he said. "I thought you people were immune to alcohol, or somehing."

"No, it is the aps—as—aspirin," said the alien. He produced a small bottle, and solemnly shook a tablet out into his palm. "Your liquors gave me a headache, and so I took

an apsirin—aspirin. And your aspirin is wonderful." He looked lugubrious. "To think, no more aspirin. No more church bazaar. No more baseball."

"Why, what's going to happen to them?"

Pendrath spread his fingers and made an expressive fizzing noise with his mouth.

"Blooie," he said.

Jenkins said incredulously, "You're going to blow up the world?"

The alien nodded sadly. "Soon our building will be finished. Then we will put in the big machines, and drill, drill." He made twisting motions downward with one hand. "We will drill to the core. Then we will drop the transformer and close up the shaft. Then we will go away. Then your poor little planet will go——" He made the fizzing noise again. "Blooie."

Jenkins' fists were clenched. "But why? Why would you do a thing like that?"

"For dust," Pendrath explained. "Your little planet will all be dust. No big pieces left—nothing bigger than this." He pinched his thumb and forefinger together, squinting, to show how tiny. "We are making defenses for the Galaxy. This sector is too open. We will make a little screen of dust here. If there is dust, a ship cannot go very fast. The dust slows it down. Some places, there is already dust. Other places, we will make it. It is the only way to protect ourselves from invasion."

"Invasion by who?"

Pendrath shrugged. "Who can tell? We have to look ahead."

Jenkins' hands began to shake. He took a dog-eared notebook out of his pocket, thumbing it open automatically; looked at it and put it back. His hands didn't want to do anything but make fists. He said thickly, "You lousy——" and swung a left to Pendrath's beaky face.

The blow never landed.

His fist slowed down and stopped. Strain as hard as he would, he couldn't push it any farther.

"No, no," said Pendrath, smiling sadly. "No use. I regret very much."

Jenkins' heart was thumping. "Why us?" he burst out

angrily. "If you had to have dust, why couldn't you take one of the other planets? Jupiter—Venus—any of them—why pick the one we live on?"

Pendrath blinked at him. "But on your other planets no one lives," he said. "Who, then, would do the work for us?" He popped another tablet into his mouth. "And besides," he said, "remember that this dust will make a blanket around your sun. It will make the planets very cold. You see, I have thought of all these things. And then suppose we went to some other sun, and did not come here at all. It would be just the same. You would make big spaceships, and we would have to come and finish you anyway. This way, it will be very quick—you will not feel a thing."

Jenkins had lost his hat. He fumbled on the floor for it. "We'll stop you," he said, red-faced over the table top. "You'll be sorry you ever opened your mouth to me, mister. I'll spread this from here to Belfast."

"You are going to tell?" the alien asked, in dull surprise.

"You bet your sweet life I'm going to tell!"

Pendrath nodded owlishly. "It does not matter now. The work is nearly done. You cannot stop us, my poor friend."

The story broke the following day, when the installation of the complex system of girders and braces in the interior of the building had already been finished.

A hatch in the side of the ship was open. Under the aliens' direction, crews were carrying out a steady stream of machine parts to be assembled inside the building.

There were a thousand and one pieces of different sizes and shapes: gigantic torus sections, tubes, cylinders, globes; twisted pipes, jigsaw puzzle pieces. The material was not metal, but the same light substance the tools were made of.

Some of the tools were serving as grip-sticks: they clung like magnets to the machine parts, and to nothing else. Some, applied to massive pieces of equipment, made them extraordinarily slippery, so that it was easy to slide them across the site and into the building. Others were used in assembling: drawn along the join between two pieces, they made the two flow together into one.

The story did not reach the day shift at all. The second

and third shifts turned up a little under strength: the aliens hired enough people from the crowd of curiosity-seekers to make up the difference.

At his regular press conference, the alien spokesman, Mr. Revash go Ren, said. "Mr. Jenkins' story is a malicious fabrication. The machines you mention will provide pleasant heating, air conditioning, Galactic standard gravitation, and other necessary services for the clerical workers in our offices. We are accustomed to having many conveniences of this kind, and that is why we cannot live or work in buildings suitable for you."

Hersch of the *Times* demanded: "Why does that take a half-mile area, when your office space is only a thin ring around the outside of the building?"

Revash smiled. "Why do you take a whole cellar to heat your buildings?" he asked. "One of your savages would say that a fire of sticks and a hole in the ceiling are sufficient."

Hersch had no answer to that; nevertheless, belief in the story spread.

By the end of the week, half a dozen newspapers were thumping the drum for a crusade. A congressional investigating committee was appointed. More workers quit. When the labor supply slackened, the aliens doubled the pay, and got more applicants than there were jobs. Riots broke out on the Jersey side of the tubes. There were picket lines, fulminations from the pulpit, attempts at sabotage.

The work went on just the same.

Baker said: "The whole problem is psychological. We know what kind of people they are—it sticks out all over them—they're decadent. That's their weak point. That's where we've got to hit them. They've got the perfect machines, but they don't know how to use them. Not only that, they don't want to, it would soil their lily-white hands. So they come here, and they get us to do their dirty work, even though it means an extra risk."

"That doesn't sound so decadent to me," said Cooley argumentatively. It was past midnight, and they were still sitting in Baker's living room over a case of beer, hashing it all out. Cooley's face was flushed, and his voice a little loud.

"Take an archaeological expedition, say—I don't know, maybe to Mesopotamia or somewhere. Do they drag along a lot of pick and shovel men? They do not. They take the shovels, maybe, but they hire native labor on the spot. That isn't decadence, that's efficiency."

"All right, but if we had to, we could get out there and pick up a shovel. They can't. It just wouldn't occur to them. They're overrefined, Ted. They've got to the point where the machines *have* to be perfect, or they couldn't stay alive. That's dangerous. That's where we've got to hit them."

"I don't see it. Wars are won with weapons."

"So what are we supposed to do, hit them with atom bombs that don't go off, or guns that don't shoot?"

Cooley put down his stein and reached for the tool that lay on the floor. It had rolled the last time he put it down. He said, "Damn," and reached farther. He picked it up, the same "idiot stick" he had stolen from the Galactic site the first day.

"I'm betting on this," he said. "You know and I know they're working on it, day and night. I'm betting they'll crack it. *This* is a weapon, boy. A Galactic weapon. If we just get that——"

"Go ahead, wish for the moon," said Baker bitterly. "What you're talking about happens to be impossible. We can change the stress patterns in the control tabs, yes. We can even duplicate the formative conditions, probably, and get as many tabs as you want with the same pattern. But it's all empirical, Ted, just blind chance. We don't know *why* such and such a stress pattern makes the tool do a certain thing. And until we know that, all we can do is vary it at random."

"So?"

"So there are millions of wrong patterns for every right one. There's the patterns that make things explode, like in Washington. There's the ones that boil the experimenter alive or freeze him solid. Or bury him in a big lump of solid lead. There's the radioactive ones, the corrosive ones—and for every wrong guess, we lose at least one man."

"Remote control?" said Cooley.

"First figure out what makes the tools operate when somebody's holding them, and stop when they let go."

Cooley drank, frowning.

"And remember," said Baker, "there's just about one choice that would do us any good against the Galactics. One pattern, out of millions. No. It won't be technology that licks them—it'll be guts."

He was right. But he was wrong.

Al Jenkins was in the *Star-Ledger* city room, gloomily reading a wire story about denunciations of the aliens issued by governors of eight states.

"What good is that?" he said, tossing it back onto the city editor's desk. "Look at it."

Through the window, they could see the top of the alien building, shining in the distance. Tiny figures were crawling over the domed roof. The aliens had inflated a hemispherical membrane, and now the workers were going over it with the tools, forming a solid layer.

The dome was almost finished. Work on the interior of the building had stopped two days before.

"He knew what he was talking about," said Jenkins. "We couldn't stop them. We had three weeks to do it in, but we just couldn't get together that fast."

Cigarette ash was spilling down the front of his shirt. He scrubbed at it absently, turned, and walked out of the office. The editor watched him go without saying anything. . . .

One morning in July, two months after the aliens' landing, a ragged mob armed with Galactic tools appeared near the spaceship. Similar mobs had formed several times during the last ten-night. When a native grew desperate, he lost what little intelligence he had.

The officer in charge, standing in the open doorway, looked them over disdainfully as they approached. There was no need for any defensive measures; they would try to club him with the tools, fail, and go away.

The native in the lead, a big, burly male, raised his tool like a pitchfork. The Galactic watched him with amusement.

The next instant, he was dead, turned into bloody mush on the floor of the airlock.

The mob poured into the ship. Inside, the green-lit hallways were dim and vast as a cathedral. Bored Galactics

looked out of doorways. Their bland expressions changed to gapes of horror. Some ran; some hid.

The tools cut them down.

The long corridors echoed to the rattle of running feet, to shouts of excitement and triumph, screams of dismay. The mob swept into every room; it was over in fifteen minutes.

The victors stopped, panting and sweaty, looking around them with the beginnings of wonder. The high-ceilinged rooms were hung with gleaming gold-and-green tapestries; the desks were carved crystal. Music breathed from somewhere, soothing and quiet.

A tray of food was steaming on a table. A transparent chart had been pulled out of a wall. Under each was a pulpy red smear, a puddle of disorganized tissue.

Baker and Cooley looked up and recognized each other. "Guts," said Baker wryly.

"Technology," said Cooley. "They underrated us—so did you." He raised the tool he held, careful not to touch the butt. "Ten thousand tries, I hear—and ten thousand dead men. All right, have it your way. I call that guts, too." He lifted his head, staring off into the distance, trying to imagine the hundreds of research stations, hidden in remote areas, with their daily, ghastly toll of human life. "Ten thousand," he said. Baker was shaking with reaction. "We were lucky—it might have been a million. . . ." He tried to laugh. "Have to find a new name for this now. No more idiot stick."

Cooley glanced at the floor.

"It depends," he said grimly, "which end of the stick the idiot's on."

JAMES E. GUNN

James E. Gunn is a young and talented Midwest writer whose greatest joy is to look over the prairies and lakes of his home state and imagine them torn under the tragedies that tomorrow may bring. It isn't that he loves Kansas the less; it is just that he knows it so well—well enough to imagine it ruled by as strange a monarch as any story ever owned and yet to remain pure Kansas all the same. To meet this ruler, and to enjoy one of the finest short novels in recent science fiction, you have only to read——

THE IMMORTALS

The first patient was a young woman—an attractive enough creature, with blond hair worn long around her shoulders and a ripe body—if you could forgive the dirt and the odor.

Dr. Harry Elliott refrained from averting his nose. It would do no good. He was a physician with a sacred trust —even though (or perhaps especially because) he was only eighteen years old. Even a citizen was entitled to his care—even a citizen, without a chance at immortality, without even the prospect of a reprieve!

He looked her over thoughtfully. There was very little of interest in her case, no matter what disgusting ailment she might possess. The interesting areas of medicine—the re-

search, say, that might synthesize the elixir of immortality —they had nothing to do with citizens or clinics. Harry Elliott's greatest interest in the clinic was in getting done with it. Once his residency was complete, then research loomed ahead.

"Hello, doc-tor," she said cheerfully. He muttered something, it didn't matter what. Outside in the waiting room there were fifty like her. In the halls beyond, where the Blood Bank was handing out its $5 bills for guaranteed germ-ridden citizen blood, there were hundreds more. Well, they were essential; he had to remember that. The blood they sold so cheerfully for five dollars (which instantly they took and ran with to some shover of illicit antibiotics and nostrums) was a great pool of immunities. Out of filth came health. It was a great lesson, and one which young Harry Elliott tried to keep in mind.

"I don't feel good, Doc-tor," she said sadly. "I'm always tired, like."

He grunted and resisted an impulse to have her disrobe. Not because of any danger involved—what was a citizen's chastity? A mythical thing like the unicorn. Besides, they expected it. From the stories the other doctors told, he thought they must come to the clinic for that purpose. But there was no use tempting himself. He would feel unclean for days.

She babbled as they always did. She had sinned against nature. She had not been getting enough sleep. She had not been taking her vitamins regularly. She had bought illicit terramycin from a shover for a kidney infection. It was all predictable and boring.

"I see," he kept muttering. And then, "I'm going to take a diagnosis now. Don't be frightened."

He switched on the diagnostic machine. A sphygmomanometer crept up snakelike from beneath the Freudian couch and squeezed her arm. A mouthpiece inserted itself between her lips. A stethoscope kissed her breast. A skull cap cupped her head. Metal caps pressed her fingertips. Bracelets caressed her ankles. A band embraced her hips. The machine punctured, sampled, counted, measured, listened, compared, correlated. . . .

In a moment it was over. Harry had his diagnosis. She

was anemic; they all were. They couldn't resist that five dollars.

"Married?" he asked.

"Nah?" she said hesitantly.

"Better not waste any time. You're pregnant."

"Prag-nant?" she repeated.

"You're going to have a baby."

A joyful light broke across her face. "Aw! Is that all! I thought maybe it was a too-more. A baby I can take care of nicely. Tell me, Doctor, will it be boy or girl?"

"A boy," Harry said wearily. The slut! Why did it always irritate him so?

She got up from the couch with lithe, careless grace. "Thank you, Doctor. I will go tell Georgie. He will be angry for a little, but I know how to make him glad."

There were others waiting in their consultation rooms, contemplating their symptoms. Harry checked the panel: a woman with pleurisy, a man with cancer, a child with rheumatic fever. . . . But Harry stepped out into the clinic to see if the girl dropped anything into the donation box as she passed. She didn't. Instead she paused by the shover hawking his wares just outside the clinic door.

"Get your aureomycin here," he chanted, "your penicillin, your terramycin. A hypodermic with every purchase. Good health! Good health! Stop those sniffles before they lay you low, low, low. Don't let that infection cost you your job, your health, your life. Get your filters, your antiseptics, your vitamins. Get your amulets, your good luck charms. I have here a radium needle which has already saved thirteen lives. And here is an ampule of elixir vitae. Get your ilotycin here. . . ."

The girl bought an amulet and hurried off to Georgie. A lump of anger burned in Harry's throat.

The throngs were still marching silently in the street. In the back of the clinic a woman was kneeling at the operating table. She took a vitamin pill and a paper cup of tonic from the dispensary.

Behind the walls the sirens started. Harry turned toward the doorway. The gate in the Medical Center wall rolled up.

First came the outriders on their motorcycles. The people in the street scattered to the walls on either side, leaving a

lane down the center of the street. The outriders brushed carelessly close to them—healthy young squires, their nose filters in place, their goggled eyes haughty, their guns slung low on their hips.

That would have been something, Harry thought enviously, to have been a company policeman. There was a dash to them, a hint of violence. They were hell on wheels. And if they were one-tenth as successful with women as they were reputed to be, there was no woman—from citizen through technician and nurse up to their suburban peers—who was immune to them.

Well, let them have the glamor and the women. He had taken the safer and more certain route to immortality. Few company policemen made it.

After the outriders came an ambulance, its armored ports closed, its automatic 40-millimeter gun roaming restlessly for a target. More outriders covered the rear. Above the convoy a helicopter swooped low.

"Raid!" somebody screamed—too late.

Something glinted in the sunlight, became a line of small, round objects beneath the helicopter, dropping in an arc toward the street. One after another they broke with fragile, popping sounds. They moved forward through the convoy.

Like puppets when the puppeteer has released the strings, the outriders toppled to the street, skidding limply as their motorcycles slowed and stopped on their single wheels.

The ambulance could not stop. It rolled over one of the fallen outriders and crashed into a motorcycle, bulldozing it out of the way. The 40-millimeter gun had jerked erratically to fix its radar sight on the helicopter, but the plane was skimming the rooftops. Before the gun could get the range the plane was gone.

Harry smelled something sharply penetrating. His head felt swollen and light. The street tilted and then straightened.

In the midst of the crowd beyond the ambulance an arm swung up. Something dark sailed through the air and smashed against the top of the ambulance. Flames splashed across it. They dripped down the sides, ran into gun slits and observation ports, were drawn into the air intake.

A moment followed in which nothing happened. The scene

was like a frozen tableau—the ambulance and the motorcycles balanced in the street, the outriders and some of the nearest citizens crumpled and twisted on the pavement, the citizens watching, the flames licking up toward greasy, black smoke.

Then the side door of the ambulance fell open.

A medic staggered out, clutching something in one hand, beating at flames on his white jacket with the other.

The citizens watched silently, not moving to help or hinder. From among them stepped a dark-haired man. His hand went up. It held something limp and dark. The hand came down against the medic's head.

No sound came to Harry over the roar of the idling motorcycles and ambulance. The pantomime continued, and he was part of the frozen audience as the medic fell and the man stooped, patted out the flames with his bare hands, picked the object out of the medic's hand, and looked at the ambulance door.

There was a girl standing there, Harry noticed. From this distance Harry could tell little more than that she was dark-haired and slender.

The flames on the ambulance had burned themselves out. The girl stood in the doorway, not moving. The man beside the fallen medic looked at her, started to hold out a hand, and, letting it drop, turned and faded back into the crowd.

Less than two minutes had passed since the sirens began.

Silently the citizens pressed forward. The girl turned and went back into the ambulance. The citizens stripped the outriders of their clothing and weapons, looted the ambulance of its black bag and medical supplies, picked up their fallen fellows, and disappeared.

It was like magic. One moment the street was full of them. The next moment they were gone. The street was empty of life.

Behind the Medical Center walls the sirens began again.

It was like a release. Harry began running down the street, his throat swelling with wordless shouts.

Out of the ambulance came a young boy. He was slim and small—no more than seven. He had blond hair, cut very short, and dark eyes in a tanned face. He wore a ragged

T-shirt that once might have been white and a pair of blue jeans cut off above the knees.

He reached an arm back into the ambulance. A yellowed claw came out to meet it and then an arm. The arm was a gnarled stick encircled with ropy blue veins like lianas. Attached to it was a man on stiff, stiltlike legs. He was very old. His hair was thin, white silk. His scalp and face were wrinkled parchment. A tattered tunic fell from bony shoulders, around his permanently bent back, and was caught in folds around his loins.

The boy led the old man slowly and carefully into the ruined street, because the old man was blind, his eyelids flat and dark over empty sockets. The old man bent painfully over the fallen medic. His fingers explored the medic's skull. Then he moved to the outrider who had been run over by the ambulance. The man's chest was crushed; a pink froth edged his lips as punctured lungs gasped for breath.

He was as good as dead. Medical science could do nothing for injuries that severe, that extensive.

Harry reached the old man, grabbed him by one bony shoulder. "What do you think you're doing?"

The old man didn't move. He held to the outrider's hand for a moment and then creaked to his feet. "Healing," he answered in a voice like the whisper of sandpaper.

"That man's dying," Harry said.

"So are we all," said the old man.

Harry glanced down at the outrider. Was he breathing easier or was that illusion?

It was then the stretcher bearers reached them.

Harry had a difficult time finding the Dean's office. The Medical Center covered hundreds of city blocks, and it had grown under a strange stimulus of its own. No one had ever planned for it to be so big, but it had sprouted an arm here when demand for medical care and research outgrew the space available, a wing there, and arteries through and under and around.

He followed the glowing guidestick through the unmarked corridors, and tried to remember the way. But it was useless. He inserted the stick into the lock on the armored door. The

door swallowed the stick and opened. As soon as Harry had entered, the door swung shut and locked.

He was in a bare anteroom. On a metal bench bolted to the floor along one wall sat the boy and the old man from the ambulance. The boy looked up at Harry curiously and then his gaze returned to his folded hands. The old man rested against the wall.

A little farther along the bench was a girl. She looked like the girl who had stood in the doorway of the ambulance, but she was smaller than he had thought and younger. Her face was pale. Only her blue eyes were vivid as they looked at him with a curious appeal and then faded. His gaze dropped to her figure; it was boyish and unformed, clad in a simple, brown dress belted at the waist. She was no more than twelve or thirteen, he thought.

The reception box had to repeat the question twice: "Name?"

"Dr. Harry Elliott," he said.

"Advance for confirmation."

He went to the wall beside the far door and put his right hand against the plate set into it. A light flashed into his right eye, comparing retinal patterns.

"Deposit all metal objects in the receptacle," the box said.

Harry hesitated and then pulled his stethoscope out of his jacket pocket, removed his watch, emptied his pants pockets of coins and pocket knife and hypospray.

Something clicked. "Nose filters," the box said.

Harry put those into the receptacle, too. The girl was watching him, but when he looked at her, her eyes moved away. The door opened. He went through the doorway. The door closed behind him.

Dean Mock's office was a magnificent room, twenty feet long and thirty feet wide, was decorated in a dark, mid-Victorian style. The furnishings all looked like real antiques, especially the yellow-oak rolltop desk and the mahogany instrument cabinet.

It looked rich and impressive. Personally, though, Harry preferred Twentieth Century Modern. Clean chromium-and-glass lines were esthetically pleasing; moreover, they were

from the respectable first days of medical science—that period when mankind first began to realize that good health was not merely an accident, that it could be bought if men were willing to pay the price.

Harry had seen Dean Mock before, but never to speak to. His parents couldn't understand that. They thought he was the peer of everyone in the Medical Center because he was a doctor. He kept telling them how big the place was, how many people it contained: 75,000—100,000—only the statisticians knew how many. It didn't do any good; they still couldn't understand. Harry had given up trying.

The Dean didn't know Harry. He sat behind the rolltop desk in his white jacket and studied Harry's record cast up on the frosted glass insert. He was good at it, but you couldn't deceive a man who had studied like that for ten years in this Center alone.

The Dean's black hair was thinning. He was almost eighty years old, of course. He didn't look it. He came of good stock, and he had the best of medical care. He was good for another twenty years, Harry estimated, without longevity shots. By that time, surely, with his position and his accomplishments, he would be voted a reprieve.

Once, in the confusion when a bomb had exploded in the power room, some of the doctors had whispered in the safe darkness that Mock's youthful appearance had a more reasonable explanation than heredity, but they were wrong. Harry had searched the lists, and Mock's name wasn't on them.

Mock looked up suddenly and caught Harry staring at him. Harry glanced away quickly but not before he had seen in Mock's eyes a look of—what—fright? desperation?

Harry couldn't understand it. The raid had been daring, this close to the Center walls, but nothing new. There had been raids before; there would be raids again. Any time something is valuable, lawless men will try to steal it. In Harry's day it happened to be medicine.

Mock said abruptly, "Then you saw the man? You could recognize him if you saw him again or if you had a good solidograph?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said. Why was Mock making such a

production out of it? He had already been over this with the head resident and the chief of the company police.

"Do you know Governor Weaver?" Mock asked.

"An Immortal!"

"No, no," Mock said impatiently. "Do you know where he lives?"

"In the governor's mansion. Forty miles from here, almost due west."

"Yes, yes," Mock said. "You're going to carry a message to him. The shipment has been hijacked. Hijacked." Mock had a nervous habit of repeating words. "It will be a week before another shipment is ready. A week. How we will get it to him I don't know." The last was muttered to himself.

Harry tried to make sense out of it. Carry a message to the governor? "Why don't you call him?" he said, unthinking.

But the question only roused Mock out of his introspection. "The underground cables are cut! No use repairing them. Repair men get shot. And even if they're fixed, they're only cut again next night. Radio and television are jammed. Jammed. Get ready. You'll have to hurry to get out the southwest gate before curfew."

"Curfew is for citizens," Harry said, uncomprehending. Was Mock going insane?

"Didn't I tell you?" Mock passed the back of his hand across his forehead as if to clear away cobwebs. "You're going alone, on foot, dressed as a citizen. A convoy would be cut to pieces. We've tried. We've been out of touch with the governor for three weeks. Three weeks! He must be getting impatient. Never make the governor impatient. It isn't healthy."

For the first time Harry really understood what the Dean was asking him to do. The governor! He had it in his power to cut half a lifetime off Harry's search for immortality. "But my residency——"

Mock looked wise. "The governor can do you more good than a dozen boards. More good."

Harry caught his lower lip between his teeth and counted off on his fingers. "I'll need nose filters, a small medical kit, a gun——"

Mock was shaking his head. "None of those. Out of

character. If you reach the governor's mansion, it will be because you pass as a citizen, not because you defend yourself well or heal up your wounds afterward. And a day or two without filters won't reduce your life expectancy appreciably. Well, Doctor? Will you get through?"

"As I hope for immortality!" Harry said earnestly.

"Good, good. One more thing. You must deliver the poeple you saw in the anteroom. The boy's name is Christopher; the old man calls himself Pearce. He's some kind of neighborhood leech. The governor has asked for him."

"A leech?" Harry said incredulously.

Mock shrugged. His expression said that he considered the exclamation impertinent, but Harry could not restrain himself. "If we made an example of a few of these quacks——"

"The clinics would be more crowded than they are now. They serve a good purpose. Besides, what can we do? He doesn't claim to be a physician. He calls himself a healer. He doesn't drug, operate, advise, or manipulate. Sick people come to him and he touches them, touches them. Is that practicing medicine?"

Harry shook his head.

"If the sick people claim to be helped? Pearce claims nothing. He charges nothing. If the sick people are grateful, if they want to give him something, who is to stop them? Besides," he muttered, frowning, "that outrider is going to live. Anyway, the Governor insists on seeing him."

Harry sighed. "They'll get away. I'll have to sleep."

Mock jeered, "A feeble old man and a boy?"

"The girl's lively enough."

"Marna?" Mock reached into a drawer and brought out a hinged silver circle. He tossed it to Harry. Harry caught it and looked at it.

"It's a bracelet. Put it on."

It looked like nothing more. Harry shrugged, slipped it over his wrist, and clamped it shut. It seemed too big for a moment, and then it tightened. His wrist tingled where it rested.

"It's tuned to the one on the girl's wrist, tuned. When the girl moves away from you, her wrist will tingle. The farther she goes, the more it will hurt. After a little she will come

back. I'd put bracelets on the boy and the old man, but they only work in pairs. If someone tries to remove the bracelet forcibly the girl will die. Die. It links itself to the nervous system. The governor has the only key. You'll tell him the girl is fertile."

Harry stared at Mock. "What about this bracelet?"

"The same. That way it's a warning device, too."

Harry took a deep breath and looked down at his wrist. The silver gleamed now like a snake's flat eyes.

"Why didn't you have one on the medic?"

"We did. We had to amputate his arm to get it off." Mock turned to his desk and started the microfilmed reports flipping past the window again. In a moment he looked up and seemed startled that Harry had not moved. "Still here? Get started. Wasted too much time now if you're going to beat curfew."

Harry turned and started toward the door through which he had come.

"One more thing," Dean Mock said. "Watch out for ghouls, ghouls. And headhunters. Headhunters."

Shortly after they set out, Harry had evolved a method of progress for his little group that was mutually unsatisfactory.

"Hurry up," he would say. "There's only a few minutes left before curfew."

The girl would look at him once and look away. Pearce, already moving more rapidly than Harry had any reason to expect, would say, "Patience. We'll get there."

None of them would speed up although it was vital to reach the City Gate before curfew. Harry would walk ahead rapidly, outdistancing the others. His wrist would begin to tingle, then to smart, to burn, and to hurt actively. The farther he left Marna behind, the worse the pain grew. Only the thought that her wrist felt just as bad sustained him.

After a little the pain would begin to ebb. He knew, then, without looking, that she had broken. When he would turn, she would be twenty feet behind him, no closer, willing to accept that much pain to keep from approaching him.

Then he would have to stop and wait for the old man. Once, she walked on past, but after a little she could stand

the pain no more, and she returned. After that she stopped when he did.

It was a small triumph for Harry, but something to strengthen him when he started thinking about the deadly thing on his wrist and the peculiar state of the world in which the Medical Center had been out of touch with the governor's mansion for three weeks, in which a convoy could not get through, in which a message had to be sent by a foot messenger.

Under other conditions, Harry might have thought Marna a lovely thing. She was slim and graceful, her skin was clear and unblemished, her features were regular and pleasing, and the contrast between her dark hair and her blue eyes was striking. But she was young and spiteful and linked to him by a hateful condition. They had been thrown together too intimately too soon and, besides! she was only a child.

They reached the City Gate with only a minute to spare.

On either side of them the chain link double fence stretched as far as Harry could see. There was no end to it, really. It completely encircled the town. At night it was electrified, and savage dogs roamed the space between the fences.

Somehow citizens still got out. They formed outlaw bands that attacked defenseless travelers. That would be one of the dangers.

The head guard at the gate was a dark-skinned, middle-aged squire. At sixty he had given up any hopes for immortality; he intended to get what he could out of this life. That included bullying his inferiors.

He looked at the blue, daylight-only pass and then at Harry. "Topeka? On foot." He chuckled. It made his big belly shake until he had to cough. "If the ghouls don't get you, the headhunters will. The bounty on heads is twenty dollars now. Outlaw heads only, but then heads don't talk. Not if they're detached from bodies. Of course, that's what you're figuring on doing—joining a wolf pack." He spat on the sidewalk beside Harry's foot.

Harry jerked back his foot in revulsion. The guard's eyes brightened.

"Are you going to let us through?" Harry asked.

"Let you through?" Slowly the guard looked at his wristwatch. "Can't do that. Past curfew. See?"

Automatically Harry bent over to look. "But we got here before curfew——" he began. The guard's fist hit him just above the left ear and sent him spinning away.

"Get back in there and stay in there, you filthy citizens!" the guard shouted.

Harry's hand went to his pocket where he kept the hypospray, but it was gone. Words that would blast the guard off his post and into oblivion trembled on his lips, but he didn't dare utter them. He wasn't Dr. Elliott any more, not until he reached the governor's mansion. He was Harry Elliott, citizen, fair game for any man's fist, who should consider himself lucky it was only a fist.

"Now," the guard said suggestively, "if you were to leave the girl as security——" He coughed.

Marna shrank back. She touched Harry accidentally. It was the first time they had touched, in spite of a more intimate linkage that joined them in pain and release, and something happened to Harry. His body recoiled automatically from the touch, as it would from a burning-hot sterilizer. Marna stiffened, aware of him.

Harry, disturbed, saw Pearce shuffling toward the guard, guided by his voice. Pearce reached out, his hand searching. He touched the guard's tunic, then his arm, and worked his way down the arm to the hand. Harry stood still, his hand doubled into a fist at his side, waiting for the guard to hit the old man. But the guard gave Pearce the instinctive respect due age and only looked at him curiously.

"Weak lungs," Pearce whispered. "Watch them. Pneumonia might kill before antibiotics could help. And in the lower left lobe, a hint of cancer——"

"Aw, now!" The guard jerked his hand away, but his voice was frightened.

"X-ray," Pearce whispered. "Don't wait."

"There ain't nothing wrong with me," the guard stammered. "You—you're trying to scare me." He coughed.

"No exertion. Sit down. Rest."

"Why, I'll—I'll——" He began coughing violently. He

jerked his head at the gate. "Go on," he said, choking. "Go out there and die."

The boy, Christopher, took the old man's hand and led him through the open gateway. Harry caught Marna's upper arm—again the contact—and half helped her, half pushed her through the gate, keeping his eye warily on the guard. But the man's eyes were turned inward toward something far more vital.

As soon as they were through, the gate slammed down behind them and Harry released Marna's arm as if it were distasteful to hold it. Fifty yards beyond, down the right-hand lanes of the disused six-lane divided highway, Harry said, "I suppose I ought to thank you."

Pearce whispered, "That would be polite."

Harry rubbed his head where the guard had hit him. It was swelling. He wished for a medical kit. "How can I be polite to a charlatan?"

"Politeness is cheap."

"Still—to lie to the man about his condition. To say—cancer——" Harry had a hard time saying it. It was a dirty word, the one disease, aside from death itself, for which medical science had found no final cure.

"Was I lying?"

Harry stared sharply at the old man and then shrugged. He looked at Marna. "We're all in this together. We might as well make it as painless as possible. If we try to get along, we might even all make it alive."

"Get along?" Marna said. Harry heard her speak for the first time; her voice was low and melodious even in anger. "With this?" She held up her arm. The silver bracelet gleamed in the last red rays of the sun.

Harry said harshly, raising his wrist, "You think it's any better for me?"

Pearce whispered, "We will cooperate, Christopher and I—I, Dr. Elliott, because I am too old to do anything else and Christopher because he is young and discipline is good for the young."

Christopher grinned. "Grampa used to be a doctor before he learned how to be a healer."

"Pride dulls the senses and warps the judgment," Pearce whispered.

Harry held back a comment. Now was no time to argue about medicine and quackery.

The road was deserted. The once-magnificent pavement was cracked and broken. Grass sprouted tall and thick in the cracks. The weeds stood like young trees along both edges, here and there the big, brown faces of sunflowers, fringed in yellow, nodding peacefully.

To either side were the ruins of what had once been called the suburbs. Then the distinction between that and the city had been only a line drawn on a map; there had been no fences. But when these had gone up, the houses outside had soon crumbled.

The real suburbs were far out. First it was turnpike time to the city that had become more important than distance, then helicopter time. Finally time had run out for the city. It had become so obviously a sea of carcinogens and disease that the connection to the suburbs had been broken. Shipments of food and raw materials went in and shipments of finished materials came out, but nobody went there any more —except to the medical centers. They were located in the cities because their raw material was there: the blood, the organs, the diseases, the bodies for experiment. . . .

Harry walked beside Marna, ahead of Christopher and Pearce, but the girl didn't look at him. She walked with her eyes straight ahead, as if she were alone. Harry said finally, "Look, it's not my fault. I didn't ask for this. Can't we be friends?"

She glanced at him just once. "No!"

His lips tightened, and he dropped back. He let his wrist tingle. What did he care if a thirteen-year-old girl disliked him?

The western horizon was fading from scarlet into lavendar and purple. Nothing moved in the ruins or along the road. They were alone in an ocean of desolation. They might have been the last people on a ruined earth.

Harry shivered. Soon it would be hard to keep to the road.

"Hurry!" he snapped at Pearce, "if you don't want to spend the night out here with the ghouls and the headhunters."

"There are worse companions," Pearce whispered.

By the time they reached the motel, the moonless night was completely upon them and the old suburbs were behind. The sprawling place was dark except for a big neon sign that said "M TEL," a smaller sign that said "Vacancy," and, at the gate in the fence that surrounded the whole place, a mat that said "Welcome," and a frosted glass plate that said, "Push button."

Harry was about to push the button when Christopher said urgently, "Dr. Elliott. Look!" He pointed toward the fence at the right with a stick he had picked up half a mile back.

"What?" Harry snapped. He was tired and nervous and dirty. He peered into the darkness. "A dead rabbit."

"Christopher means the fence is electrified," Marna said, "and the mat you're standing on is made out of metal. I don't think we should go in there."

"Nonsense!" Harry said sharply. "Would you rather stay out here at the mercy of whatever roams the night? I've stopped at these motels before. There's nothing wrong with them."

Christopher held out his stick. "Maybe you'd better push the button with this."

Harry frowned, took the stick, and stepped off the mat. "Oh, all right," he said ungraciously. At the second try, he pushed the button.

The frosted glass plate became a television eye. "Who rings?"

"Four travelers bound for Topeka," Harry said. He held up the pass in front of the eye. "We can pay."

"Welcome," said the speaker. "Cabins thirteen and fourteen will open when you deposit the correct amount of money. What time do you wish to be awakened?"

Harry looked at his companions. "Sunrise," he said.

"Good night," said the speaker. "Sleep tight."

The gate rolled up. Christopher led Pearce around the Welcome mat and down the driveway beyond. Marna followed. Irritated, Harry jumped over the mat and caught up with them.

A single line of glass bricks along the edge of the driveway glowed fluorescently to point out the direction they should go. They passed a tank trap and a machine-gun emplacement, but the place was deserted.

When they reached cabin thirteen, Harry said, "We won't need the other one. We'll stay together." He put three twenty-dollar uranium pieces into the coin slot.

"Thank you," the door said. "Come in."

As the door opened, Christopher darted inside. The small room held a double bed, a chair, a desk, and a floor lamp. In the corner was a small, partioned bathroom with an enclosed shower, a lavatory, and a toilet. The boy went immediately to the desk, found a plastic menu card, returned to the door. He helped Pearce into the room and then waited by the door until Harry and Marna were inside. He cracked the menu into two pieces. As the door swung shut, he slipped one of the pieces between the door and the jamb. He started back toward Pearce, stumbled against the lamp and knocked it over. It crashed and went out. They were left with only the illumination from the bathroom light.

"Clumsy little fool!" Harry said sharply.

Marna was at the desk, writing. She turned and handed the paper to Harry. Impatiently he edged toward the light and looked at it. It said:

> Christopher has broken the eye, but the room is still bugged. We can't break that without too much suspicion. Can I speak to you outside?

"That is the most ridiculous——" Harry began.

"This seems adequate." Pearce's voice was noticeably penetrating. "You two can sleep in fourteen." His blind face was turned intently toward Harry.

Harry sighed. If he didn't humor them, he would get no rest at all. He opened the door and stepped into the night with Marna. The girl moved close to him, put her arms around his neck and her cheek against his. Without his volition, his arms went around her waist. Her lips moved against his ear; a moment later he realized that she was speaking.

"I do not like you, Dr. Elliott, but I do not want us all killed. Can you afford another cabin?"

"Of course, but—I'm not going to leave those two alone."

"That's beside the point. Naturally it would be foolish for us not to stick together. Please, now. Ask no questions. When we go in fourteen, take off your jacket and throw it casually over the lamp. I'll do the rest."

Harry let himself be led to the next cabin. He fed the door. It greeted them and let them in. The room was identical with thirteen. Marna slipped a piece of plastic between the door and the jamb as the door closed. She looked at Harry expectantly.

He shrugged, took off his jacket, and tossed it over the lamp. The room took on a shadowy and sinister appearance. Marna knelt, rolled up a throw rug, and pulled down the covers on the bed. She went to the wall phone, gave it a little tug, and the entire flat vision plate swung out on hinges. She reached into it, grabbed something, and pulled it out. There seemed to be hundreds of turns of copper wire on a spool.

Marna went to the shower enclosure, unwinding wire as she went. She stood outside the enclosure and fastened one end of the wire to the hot water faucet. Then she strung it around the room like a spider's web, broke it off, and fastened the free end to the drain in the shower floor. This she threaded through the room close to but not touching the first wire.

She tiptoed her way out between the wires, picked up the throw rug, and tossed it on the bed.

"Well, 'night," she said, motioning Harry toward the door and to be careful of the wires. When Harry reached it without mishap, Marna turned off the lamp, removed the jacket, and slipped over to join him.

She let the door slam behind them and sighed a big sigh.

"Now you've fixed it," Harry whispered savagely. "Neither of the showers will work, and I'll have to sleep on the floor."

"You wouldn't want to take a shower anyway," Marna said. "It would be your last one. They're wired." Resentfully, and feeling foolish, Harry returned with Marna to cabin thirteen, where he dumped the boy in with the old man, and aggressively occupied one entire bed for himself.

Harry couldn't sleep. First it had been the room, shadowed and silent, and then the harsh breathing of the old man and the softer breaths of Christopher and Marna. As a resident, he was not used to sleeping in the same room with other persons.

Then his arm had tingled—not much but just enough to keep him awake. He had got out of bed and crawled to where Marna was lying on the floor. She, too, had been awake. Silently he had urged her to share the bed with him, gesturing that he would not touch her, he had no desire to touch her, and if he had, he swore by Hippocrates that he would restrain himself. He only wanted to ease the tingling under the bracelet so that he could go to sleep.

She motioned that he could lie on the floor beside her, but he shook his head. Finally she relented enough to move to the floor beside the bed. By lying on his stomach and letting his arm dangle, Harry relieved the tingling and fell into an uneasy sleep.

He had dreams. He was performing a long and difficult lung resection. The microsurgical controls slipped in his sweaty fingers; the scalpel sliced through the aorta. The patient started up on the operating table, the blood spurting from her heart. It was Marna. She began to chase him down long hospital halls.

The overhead lights kept getting farther and farther apart until Harry was running in complete darkness through warm, sticky blood that kept rising higher and higher until it closed over his head.

Harry woke up, smothering, fighting against something that enveloped him completely, relentlessly. There was a sound of scuffling nearby. Something spat and crackled. Someone cursed.

Harry fought, futilely. Something ripped. Again. Harry caught a glimpse of a grayer darkness, struggled toward it, and came out through a long rip in the taut blanket, which had been pulled under the bed on all four sides.

"Quick!" Christopher said, folding up his pocket knife. He headed for the door where Pearce was already standing patiently.

Marna picked up a metal leg which had been unscrewed

from the desk. Christopher slipped the chair out from under the doorknob and silently opened the door. He led Pearce outside. Marna followed. Dazedly, Harry followed her.

In cabin fourteen someone screamed. Something flashed blue. A body fell. Harry smelled the odor of burning flesh.

Marna ran ahead of them toward the gate. She rested the ferule of the desk leg on the ground and let the metal bar fall toward the fence. The fence spat blue flame. It ran, crackling, down the leg. The leg glowed redly and sagged. Then everything went dark, including the neon sign above them and the light at the gate.

"Help me!" Marna panted.

She was trying to lift the gate. Harry put his hands underneath and lifted. The gate moved a foot and stuck.

Up the drive someone yelled hoarsely, without words. Harry strained at the gate. It yielded, rolled up silently. Harry put up his hand to hold it while Marna got through and then Pearce and the boy. Harry edged through and let it drop.

A moment later the electricity flickered on again. The desk leg melted through and dropped away.

Harry looked back. Coming toward them was a motorized wheelchair. In it was something lumpy and monstrous, a nightmarish menace—until Harry recognized it for what it was: a basket case, a quadruple amputee complicated by a heart condition. An artificial heart-and-lung machine rode on the back of the wheelchair like a second head. Behind galloped a gangling scarecrow creature with hair that flowed out behind. It wore a dress in imitation of a woman. . . .

Harry stood there watching, fascinated, while the wheelchair stopped beside the gun emplacement. Wires reached out from one of the chair arms like medusan snakes, inserted themselves into control plugs. The machine gun started to chatter. Something plucked at Harry's sleeve.

The spell was broken. He turned and ran into the darkness.

Half an hour later he was lost. Marna, Pearce, and the boy were gone. All he had left was a tired body, an arm that burned, and a wrist that hurt worse than anything he could remember.

He felt his upper arm. His sleeve was wet. He brought his fingers to his nose. Blood. The bullet had creased him.

He sat disconsolately on the edge of the turnpike, the darkness as thick as soot around him. He looked at the fluorescent dial of his watch. Three-twenty. A couple of hours until sunrise. He sighed and tried to ease the pain in his wrist by rubbing around the bracelet. It seemed to help. In a few minutes it dropped to a tingle.

"Dr. Elliott," someone said softly.

He turned. Relief and something like joy flooded through his chest. There, outlined against the dim starlight, were Christopher, Marna and Pearce.

"Well," Harry said gruffly, "I'm glad you didn't try to escape."

"We wouldn't do that, Dr. Elliott," Christopher said.

"How did you find me?" Harry asked.

Marna silently held up her arm.

The bracelet. Of course. He had given them too much credit, Harry thought sourly. Marna sought him out because she could not help herself, and Christopher, because he was out here alone with a senile old man to take care of and he needed help.

Although, honesty forced him to admit, it had been himself and not Christopher and Pearce who had needed help back there a mile or two. If they had depended on him, their heads would be drying in the motel's dry-storage room, waiting to be turned in for the bounty. Or their still-living bodies would be on their way to some organ bank somewhere.

"Christopher," Harry said to Pearce, "must have been apprenticed to a bad-debt evader."

Pearce accepted it for what it was: a compliment and an apology. "Dodging the collection agency traps and keeping out of the way of the health inspector," he whispered, "make growing up in the city a practical education. You're hurt."

Harry started. How did the old man know? Even with eyes, it was too dark to see more than silhouettes. Harry steadied himself. It was an instinct, perhaps. Diagnosticians got it, sometimes, he was told. After they had been practicing for years. They could smell disease before the patient lay down on the couch. From the gauges they got only confirmation.

Or maybe it was simpler than that. Maybe the old man smelled the blood with a nose grown keen to compensate for his blindness.

The old man's fingers were on his arm, surprisingly gentle. Harry pulled his arm away roughly. "It's only a crease."

The charlatan's fingers found his arm again. "It's bleeding. Find some dry grass, Christopher."

Marna was close. She had made a small, startled movement toward him when Pearce had discovered his wound. Harry could not accept her actions for sympathy; her hate was too tangible. Perhaps she was wondering what she would do if he were to die.

Pearce ripped the sleeve away.

"Here's the grass, Grampa," Christopher said.

How did the boy find dry grass in the dark? "You aren't going to put that on the wound!" Harry said quickly.

"It will stop the bleeding," Pearce whispered.

"But the germs—"

"Germs can't hurt you, unless you want them to."

He put the grass on the wound and bound it with the sleeve. "That will be better soon."

He would take it off, Harry told himself, as soon as they started walking. Somehow, though, it was easier to let it alone now that the harm was done. Then he forgot about it.

When they started walking again, Harry found himself beside Marna. "I suppose you got your education dodging health inspectors in the city, too?" he said drily.

She shook her head. "No. There's never been much else to do. Ever since I can remember I've been trying to escape. I got free once." Her voice was filled with remembered happiness. "I was free for twenty-four hours, and then they found me."

"But I thought——" Harry began. "Who are you?"

"Me? I'm the governor's daughter." She said it so bitterly that Harry recoiled.

Sunrise found them on the turnpike. They had outdistanced the last ruined motel. Now, on either side of the turnpike, were rolling, grassy hills, valleys filled with trees, and the river winding muddily beside them, sometimes so close they

could throw a rock into it, sometimes turning beyond the hills out of sight.

The day was warm. Above them the sky was blue with only a trace of fleecy cloud on the western horizon. Occasionally a rabbit would hop across the road in front of them and vanish into the brush on the other side. Once they saw a deer lift its head beside the river and stare at them curiously.

Harry stared back with hunger in his eyes.

"Dr. Elliott," Christopher said.

Harry looked at him. In the boy's soiled hand was an irregular lump of solidified brown sugar. It was speckled with lint and other unidentifiable accretions, but at the moment it was the most desirable object Harry could think of. His mouth watered and he swallowed hard. "Give it to Pearce and the girl. They'll need their strength. And you, too."

"That's all right," Christopher said. "I have more." He held up three other pieces in his left hand. He gave one to Marna and one to Pearce. The old man bit into his with the brown stubs that served him as teeth.

Harry picked off the largest pieces of foreign matter and then could restrain his hunger no more. Breakfast was unusually satisfying.

They kept walking, not moving rapidly but steadily. Pearce never complained. He kept his bent old legs tottering forward, and Harry gave up trying to move him faster.

They passed a hydroponic farm with an automated canning factory close beside it. No one moved around either building. Only the belts turned, carrying the tanks toward the factory to be harvested or away from it refilled with nutrients, replanted with new crops.

"We should pick up something for lunch," Harry said. It would be theft but in a good cause. He could get his pardon directly from the governor.

"Too dangerous," Christopher said.

"Every possible entrance," Marna said, "is guarded by spy beams and automatic weapons."

"Christopher will get us a good supper," Pearce whispered.

They saw a suburban villa on a distant hill, but there was no one around it. They plodded on along the grass-grown double highway toward Lawrence.

Suddenly Christopher said, "Down! In the ditch beside the road!"

This time Harry moved quickly, without questions. He helped Pearce down the slope—the old man was very light—and threw himself down into the ditch beside Marna. A minute later motors raced by not far away. As the sound dwindled, Harry risked a glance above the top of the ditch. A group of motorcycles was disappearing on the road toward the city. "What was that?" Harry asked, shaken.

"Wolfpack!" Marna said, hatred and disgust mingled in her voice.

"But they looked like company police," Harry objected.

"When they grow up they will be company policemen," Marna said.

"I thought the wolfpacks were made up of escaped citizens," Harry said.

Marna looked at him scornfully. "Is that what they tell you?"

"A citizen," Pearce whispered, "is lucky to stay alive when he's alone. A group of them wouldn't last a week."

They got back up on the turnpike and started walking again. Christopher was nervous as he led Pearce. He kept turning to look behind them and glancing from side to side. Soon Harry was edgy too.

"Down!" Christopher shouted.

Something whistled. A moment later Harry was struck a solid blow in the middle of the back. It knocked him hard to the ground. Marna screamed.

Harry rolled over, feeling as if his back were broken. Christopher and Pearce were on the pavement beside him, but Marna was gone.

A rocket blasted a little ahead and above. Then another. Pearce looked up. A powered glider zoomed toward the sky. Marna was dangling from it, her body twisting and struggling to get free. From a second glider swung empty talons—padded hooks like those which had closed around Marna and had almost swooped up Harry.

Harry got to his knees, clutching his wrist. It was beginning to send stabs of pain up his arm like a prelude to a symphony of anguish. The only thing that kept him from

falling to the pavement in writhing torment was the black anger that surged through his veins. He shook his fist at the turning gliders, climbing on smoking jets.

"Dr. Elliott!" Christopher said urgently.

With blurred eyes Harry looked for the voice. The boy was in the ditch again. So was the old man.

"They'll be back! Get down!" the boy said.

"But they've got Marna!" Harry said.

"It won't help if you get killed."

One glider swooped like a hawk toward a mouse. The other, carrying Marna, continued to circle as it climbed. Harry rolled toward the ditch. A line of chattering bullets chipped at the pavement where he had been.

"I thought," he gasped, "they were trying to take us alive."

"They hunt heads, too," Christopher said.

"Anything for a thrill," Pearce whispered.

"I never did anything like that," Harry moaned. "I never knew anyone who did."

"You were busy," Pearce said.

It was true. Since four years old he had been in school constantly, most of that time in medical school. He had been home only for a brief day now and then; he scarcely knew his parents any more. What would he know of the pastimes of young squires? But this—this wolfpack business!

The first glider was a small cross in the sky; Marna, a speck hanging from it. It straightened and glided toward Lawrence. The second followed.

Suddenly Harry began beating the ground with his aching arm. "Why did I dodge? I should have let myself be captured with her. She'll die."

"She's strong," Pearce whispered, "stronger than you or Christopher, stronger than almost anyone. But sometimes strength is the cruelest thing. Follow her. Get her away."

Harry looked at the bracelet from which pain lanced up his arm and through his body. Yes, he could follow her. As long as he could move he could find her. But feet were so slow against glider wings.

"The motorcycles will be coming back," Christopher said. "The gliders will have radioed them."

"But how do we capture a motorcycle?" Harry asked. The pain wouldn't let him think clearly.

Christopher had already pulled up his T-shirt. Around his thin waist was wrapped turn after turn of nylon cord. "Sometimes we fish," he said. He stretched the cord across the two-lane pavement in the concealment of grass grown tall in a crack. He motioned Harry to lie flat on the other side. "Let them pass, all but the last one," he said. "Hope that he's a straggler, far enough behind so that the others won't notice when we stand up. Wrap the cord around your waist. Get it up where it will catch him around the chest."

Harry lay beside the pavement while his left arm felt as though it were a swelling balloon, and the balloon was filled with pain. He looked at it once, curiously, but it was still the same size.

After an eternity came the sound of motors, many of them. As the first passed, Harry cautiously lifted his head. There was a straggler. He was about a hundred feet behind the others; he was speeding now to catch up.

The others passed. As the straggler got within twenty feet Harry jumped up, bracing himself against the impact. Christopher sprang up at the same instant. The young squire had no time to move; he had time only to look surprised before he hit the cord. The cord pulled Harry out into the middle of the pavement, his heels skidding. Christopher had tied his end to the trunk of a young tree.

The squire smashed into the pavement—but the motorcycle slowed and heeled over into the bank of weeds. Beyond, far down the road, the others didn't look back.

Harry untangled himself from the cord and ran to the squire. He was as old as Harry and as big. He had a harelip and a withered leg. His skull was crushed. He was dead.

Harry closed his eyes. He had seen men die before, but he had never been the cause of it. It was like breaking his Hippocratic Oath.

"Some must die," Pearce whispered. "It is better for the evil to die young."

Harry stripped quickly and got into the squire's clothes and goggles. He strapped the pistol down on his hip and turned to Christopher and Pearce. "What about you?"

"We won't try to escape," Pearce said.

"I don't mean that. Will you be all right?"

Pearce put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Christopher will take care of me. And he will find you after you have rescued Marna."

The confidence in Pearce's voice strengthened Harry. He did not pause to question that confidence. He mounted the motorcycle, settled himself into the saddle seat, and turned the throttle. The motorcycle took off violently.

It was tricky, riding on one wheel, but he had had experience on similar vehicles in the Subterranean Medical Center thoroughfares.

His arm hurt, but it was not like it had been before when he was helpless. Now it was a guidance system. As he rode, he could feel the pain lessen. That meant he was getting closer to Marna.

It was night before he found her. The other motorcycles had completely outdistanced him, and he had swept past the side road several miles before the worsening pain warned him. He cruised back and forth before he finally located the curving ramp that led across the cloverleaf ten miles east of Lawrence.

From this a ruined asphalt road turned east, and the pain in Harry's arm had dropped to an ache. The road ended in an impenetrable thicket. Harry stopped just before he crashed into it. He sat immobile on the seat, thinking.

He hadn't considered what he was going to do when he found Marna; he had merely taken off in hot pursuit, driven half by the painful bracelet upon his wrist, half by his emotional involvement with the young girl.

Somehow—he could scarcely trace back the involutions of chance to its source—he had been trapped into leading this pitiful expedition from the Medical Center to the governor's mansion. Moment by moment it had threatened his life—and not, unless all his hopes were false, just a few years but eternity. Was he going to throw it away here on a quixotic attempt to rescue a girl from the midst of a pack of cruel young wolves?

But what would he do with the thing on his wrist? What of the governor? And what of Marna?

"Ralph?" someone asked out of the darkness, and the decision was taken out of his hands.

"Yes," he muttered. "Where is everybody?"

"Usual place—under the bank."

Harry moved toward the voice, limping. "Can't see a thing."

"Here's a light."

The trees lighted up, and a black form loomed in front of Harry. Harry blinked once, squinted, and hit the squire with the edge of his palm on the fourth cervical vertebra. As the man dropped, Harry picked the everlight out of the air, and caught the body. He eased the limp form into the grass and felt the neck. It was broken all right, but the squire was still breathing. He straightened the head, so that there would be no pressure on nerve tissue, and looked up.

Light glimmered and flickered somewhere ahead. There was no movement, no sound; apparently no one had heard him. He flickered the light on, saw the path, and started through the young forest.

The campfire was built under a clay overhang so that it could not be seen from above. Roasting over it was a whole young deer being slowly turned on a spit by one of the squires. Harry found time to recognize the empty ache in his midriff for what it was: hunger.

The rest of the squires sat in a semicircle around the fire. On the far side was Marna, seated, her hands bound behind her. Her head was raised; her eyes searched the darkness around the fire. What was she looking for? Of course. For him. She knew by the bracelet on her wrist that he was near.

He wished that he could signal her in some way, but there was no way. He studied the squires: one was an albino, a second a macrocephalic, a third a spastic. The others might have had physical impairments that Harry could not see. All except one, who seemed older than the rest and leaned against the edge of the clay bank. He was blind, but inserted surgically into his eye sockets were electrically operated binoculars. He carried a power pack on his back with leads to the binoculars and to an antenna in his coat.

Harry edged cautiously around the forest edge beyond the firelight toward where Marna was sitting.

"First the feast," the albino gloated, "then the fun."

The one who was turning the spit said, "I think we should have the fun first—then we'll be good and hungry."

They argued back and forth, good-naturedly for a moment and then as others chimed in, with more heat. Finally the albino turned to the one with the binoculars. "What do you say, Eyes?"

In a deep voice, Eyes said, "Sell the girl. Young parts are worth top prices."

"Ah," said the albino slyly, "but you can't see what a pretty little thing she is, Eyes. To you she's only a pattern of white dots against a gray cathode-ray tube. To us she's white and pink and black and——"

"One of these days," Eyes said in a calm voice, "you'll go too far."

"Not with her, I won't."

A stick broke under Harry's foot. Everyone stopped talking and listened. Harry eased his pistol out of its holster.

"Is that you, Ralph?" the albino said.

"Yes," Harry said, limping out into the edge of the firelight, keeping his head in the darkness, his pistol concealed in a fold of pants at his side.

"Can you imagine," the albino said, "the girl says she's the governor's daughter?"

"I am," Marna said clearly. "He will have you cut to pieces slowly for what you are going to do."

"But I'm the governor dearie," said the albino in a falsetto, "and I don't give a——"

Eyes said sharply, "That's not Ralph. His leg's all right."

Harry cursed his luck. The binoculars were equipped to pick up X-ray reflections as well as radar. "Run!" he shouted in the silence that followed.

His first shot was for Eyes. The man was turning, and it struck his power pack. He began screaming and clawing at the binoculars that served him for eyes. But Harry wasn't watching. He was releasing the entire magazine into the clay bank above the fire. Already loosened by the heat from the

fire, the bank collapsed, smothering the fire and burying several of the squires sitting close to it.

Harry dived to the side. Several bullets went through the space he had just vacated.

He scrambled for the forest and started running. He kept slamming into trees, but he picked himself up and ran again. Somewhere he lost his everlight. Behind, the pursuit thinned and died away.

He ran into something soft and warm that yielded before him. It fell to the ground. He tripped over it and toppled, his fist drawn back.

"Harry!" Marna said.

His fist turned into a hand that went around her, pulled her tight. "Marna!" he gasped. "I didn't know. I didn't think I could do it. I thought you were——"

Their bracelets clinked together. Marna, who had been soft beneath him, suddenly stiffened and pushed him away. "Let's not get slobbery about it," she said angrily. "I know why you did it. Besides, they'll hear us."

Harry drew a quick, outraged breath and then let it sigh out. What was the use? She'd never believe him. Why should she? He wasn't sure himself why he had done it. Now that it was over and he had time to realize the risks he had taken, he began to shiver. He sat there in the dark forest, his eyes closed, and tried to control his shaking.

Marna put her hand out hesitantly, touched his arm, started to say something, stopped, and the moment was past.

"B-b-brat-t-t!" he chattered. "N-n-nasty, un—ungrateful, b-b-brat!" And then the shakes were gone.

She started to move. "Sit still!" he whispered. "We've got to wait until they give up the search."

At least he had eliminated the greatest danger: Eyes with his radar, X-ray vision that was just as good by night as by day.

They sat in the darkness and waited, listening to the forest noises. An hour passed. Harry was going to say that perhaps it was safe to move when he heard something rustling nearby. Animal or enemy? Marna, who had not touched him again or spoken, clutched his upper arm with a panic-strengthened hand. Harry doubled his fist and drew back his arm.

"Dr. Elliott?" Christopher whispered. "Marna?"

Relief surged over Harry like a warm, enervating current. "You wonderful little imp! How'd you find us?"

"Grampa helped me. He has a sense for that. I have a little, but he's better. Come." Harry felt a small hand fit itself into his. Christopher began to lead them through the darkness. At first Harry was distrustful and then, as the boy kept them out of bushes and trees, he moved more confidently. The hand became something he could depend on. He knew how Pearce felt and how bereft he must be now.

Christopher led them a long way before they reached another clearing. A bed of coals glowed dimly beneath a sheltering bower of green leaves. Pearce sat near the fire slowly turning a spit fashioned from a green branch. It rested on two forked sticks. On the spit two skinned rabbits were golden brown and sizzling.

Pearce's sightless face turned up as they entered the clearing. "Welcome back," he said.

Harry felt a warmth inside him that was like coming home.

Marna fell to her knees in front of the fire, raising her hands to it to warm them. Rope dangled from them, frayed in the center where she had methodically picked it apart while she had waited by another fire. She must have been cold, Harry thought, and I let her shiver through the forest while I was warm in my jacket.

But there was nothing to say.

When Christopher removed the rabbits from the spit, they almost fell apart. He wrapped four legs in damp green leaves and tucked them away in a cool hollow between two tree roots. "That's for breakfast," he said.

The four of them fell to work on the remainder. Even without salt, it was the most delicious meal Harry had ever eaten. When it was finished, he licked his fingers, sighed, and leaned back on a pile of old leaves. He felt more contented than he could remember. He was a little thirsty because he had refused to drink from the brook that ran through the woods close to their improvised camp, but he could stand that. A man couldn't surrender all his principles. It would be ironic to die of typhoid so close to his chance at immortality.

That the governor would confer immortality upon him—

or at least put him into a position where he could earn it—he did not doubt. After all, he had saved the governor's daughter.

Marna was a pretty little thing. It was too bad she was still a child. An alliance with the governor's family would not hurt his chances. Perhaps in a few years—— He put the notion away from him. Marna hated him.

Christopher shoveled dirt over the fire with a large piece of bark. Harry sighed again and stretched luxuriously. Sleeping would be good tonight.

Marna had washed at the brook. Her face was clean and shining. "Will you sleep here beside me?" Harry asked her, touching the dry leaves. He held up his bracelet apologetically. "This thing keeps me awake when you're very far away."

She nodded coldly and sat down beside him—but far enough away so that they did not touch.

Harry said, "I can't understand why we've run across so many teratisms. I can't remember ever seeing one in my practice at the Medical Center."

"You were in the clinics?" Pearce asked. And without waiting for an answer he went on, "Increasingly, the practice of medicine becomes the treatment of monsters. In the city they would die; in the suburbs they are preserved to perpetuate themselves. Let me look at your arm."

Harry started. Pearce had said it so naturally that for a moment he had forgotten that the old man couldn't see. The old man's gentle fingers untied the bandage and carefully pulled the matted grass away. "You won't need this any more."

Harry put his hand wonderingly to the wound. It had not hurt for hours. Now it was only a scar. "Perhaps you really were a doctor. Why did you give up practice?"

Pearce whispered, "I grew tired of being a technician. Medicine had become so desperately complicated that the relationship between doctor and patient was not much different from that between mechanic and patient."

Harry objected, "A doctor has to preserve his distance. If he keeps caring, he won't survive. He must become calloused to suffering, inured to sorrow, or he couldn't continue in a calling so intimately associated with them."

"No one ever said," Pearce whispered, "that it was an easy thing to be a doctor. If he stops caring, he loses not only his patient but his own humanity. But the complication of medicine had another effect. It restricted treatment to those who could afford it. Fewer and fewer people grew healthier and healthier. Weren't the rest human, too?"

Harry frowned. "Certainly. But it was the wealthy contributors and the foundations that made it all possible. They had to be treated first so that medical research could continue."

Pearce whispered, "And so society was warped all out of shape, to the god of medicine everything was sacrificed—all so that a few people could live a few years longer. Who paid the bill?

"And the odd outcome was that those who received care grew less healthy, as a class, than those who had to survive without it. Premies were saved to reproduce their weaknesses. Faults that would have proved fatal in childhood were repaired so that the patient reached maturity. Non-survival traits were passed on. Physiological inadequates multiplied, requiring greater care——"

Harry sat upright. "What kind of medical ethics are those? Medicine can't count the cost or weigh the value. Its business is to treat the sick."

"Those who can afford it. If medicine doesn't evaluate then someone else will: power or money or groups. One day I walked out on all that. I went among the citizens, where the future was, where I could help without discrimination. They took me in; they fed me when I was hungry, laughed with me when I was happy, cried with me when I was sad. They cared, and I helped them as I could."

"How?" Harry asked. "Without a diagnostic machine, without drugs or antibiotics."

"The human mind," Pearce whispered, "is still the best diagnostic machine. And the best antibiotic. I touched them. I helped them to cure themselves. So I became a healer instead of a technician. Our bodies want to heal themselves, you know, but our minds give counter-orders and death-instructions."

"Witch doctor!" Harry said scornfully.

"Yes. Always there have been witch doctors. Healers. Only

in my day have the healer and the doctor become two persons. In every other era the people with the healing touch were the doctors. They existed; they exist. Countless cures are testimony. Only today do we call it superstition. And yet we know that some doctors, no wiser nor more expert than others, have a far greater recovery rate. Some nurses—not always the most beautiful ones—inspire in their patients a desire to get well.

"It takes you two hours to do a thorough examination; I can do it in two seconds. It may take you months or years to complete a treatment; I've never taken longer than five minutes."

"But where's your control?" Harry demanded. "How can you prove you've helped them? If you can't trace cause and effect, if no one else can duplicate your treatment, it isn't science. It can't be taught."

"When a healer is successful, he knows," Pearce whispered. "So does his patient. As for teaching—how do you teach a child to talk?"

Harry shrugged impatiently. Pearce had an answer for everything. There are people like that, so secure in their mania that they can never be convinced that the rest of the world is sane. Man had to depend on science—not superstition, not faith healers, not miracle workers. Or else he was back in the Dark Ages.

He lay back in the bed of leaves, feeling Marna's presence close to him. He wanted to reach out and touch her but he didn't.

Else there would be no law, no security. And no immortality.

The bracelet awoke him. It tingled. Then it began to hurt. Harry put out his hand. The bed of leaves beside him was warm, but Marna was gone.

"Marna!" he whispered. He raised himself on one elbow. In the starlight that filtered through the trees above, he could just make out that the clearing was empty of everyone but himself. The spots where Pearce and the boy had been sleeping were empty. "Where is everybody?" he said, louder.

He cursed under his breath. They had picked their time

and escaped. But why, then, had Christopher found them in the forest and brought them here? And what did Marna hope to gain? Make it to the mansion alone?

He started up. Something crunched in the leaves. Harry froze in that position. A moment later he was blinded by a brilliant light.

"Don't move!" said a high-pitched voice. "I will have to shoot you. And if you try to dodge, the Snooper will follow." The voice was cool and cultured. The hand that held the gun, Harry thought, would be as cool and accurate as the voice.

"I'm not moving," Harry said. "Who are you?"

The voice ignored him. "There were four of you. Where are the other three?"

"They heard you coming. They're hanging back, waiting to rush you."

"You're lying," the voice said contemptuously.

"Listen to me!" Harry said urgently. "You don't sound like a citizen. I'm a doctor. Ask me a question about medicine, anything at all. I'm on an urgent mission. I'm taking a message to the governor."

"What is the message?"

Harry swallowed hard. "The shipment was hijacked. There won't be another ready for a week."

"What shipment?"

"I don't know. If you're a squire, you've got to help me."

"Sit down." Harry sat down. "I have a message for you. Your message won't be delivered."

"But——" Harry started up.

From somewhere behind the light came a small explosion —little more than a sharply expelled breath. Something stung Harry in the chest. He looked down. A tiny dart clung there between the edges of his jacket. He tried to reach for it and couldn't. His arm wouldn't move. His head wouldn't move either. He toppled over onto his side, not feeling the impact. Only his eyes, his ears, and his lungs seemed unaffected. He lay there, paralyzed, his mind racing.

"Yes," the voice said calmly, "I am a ghoul. Some of my friends are headhunters, but I hunt bodies and bring them in alive. The sport is greater. So is the profit. Heads are worth

only twenty dollars; bodies are worth more than a hundred. Some with young organs like yours are worth much more.

"Go, Snooper. Find the others."

The light went away. Something crackled in the brush and was gone. Slowly Harry made out a black shape that seemed to be sitting on the ground about ten feet away.

"You wonder what will happen to you," the ghoul said. "As soon as I find your companions, I will paralyze them, too, and summon my stretchers. They will carry you to my helicopter. Then, since you came from Kansas City, I will take you to Topeka."

A last hope died in Harry.

"That works best, I've found," the high-pitched voice continued. "Avoids complications. The Topeka hospital I do business with will buy your bodies, no questions asked. You are permanently paralyzed, so you will never feel any pain, although you will not lose consciousness. That way the organs never deteriorate. If you're a doctor, as you said, you know what I mean. You may know the technical name for the poison in the dart; all I know is that it is like the poison of the digger wasp. By use of intravenous feeding, these eminently portable organ banks have been kept alive for years until their time comes."

The voice went on, but Harry didn't listen. He was thinking that he would go mad. They often did. He had seen them lying on slabs in the organ bank, and their eyes had been quite mad. Then he had told himself that the madness was why they had been put there, but now he knew the truth. He would soon be one of them.

Perhaps he would strangle before he reached the hospital, before they got the tube down his throat and the artificial respirator on his chest and the needles into his arms. They strangled sometimes, even under care.

He would not go mad, though. He was too sane. He might last for months.

He heard something crackle in the brush. Light flashed across his eyes. Something moved. Bodies thrashed. Someone grunted. Someone else yelled. Something went *pouf!* Then the sounds stopped except for someone panting.

"Harry!" Marna said anxiously. "Harry! Are you all right?"

The light came back as the squat Snooper snuffled into the little clearing again. Pearce moved painfully through the light. Beyond him were Christopher and Marna. On the ground near them was a twisted creature. Harry couldn't figure out what it was and then he realized it was a dwarf, a gnome, a man with thin little legs and a twisted back and a large, lumpy head. Black hair grew sparsely on top of the head, and the eyes looked out redly, hating the world.

"Harry!" Marna said again, a wail this time.

He didn't answer. He couldn't. It was a momentary flash of pleasure, not being able to answer, and then it was buried in a flood of self-pity.

Marna picked up the dart gun and threw it deep into the brush. "What a filthy weapon!"

Reason returned to Harry. They had not escaped after all. Just as he had told the ghoul, they had only faded away in order to rescue him if they could. But they had returned too late.

The paralysis was permanent; there was no antidote. Perhaps they would kill him. How could he make them understand that he wanted to be killed?

He blinked his eyes rapidly.

Marna had moved to him. She cradled his head in her lap. Her hand moved restlessly, smoothing his hair.

Carefully, Pearce removed the dart from his chest and shoved it deep into the ground. "Be calm," he said. "Don't give up. There is no such thing as permanent paralysis. If you will try you can move your little finger." He held up Harry's hand, patted it.

Harry tried to move his finger, but it was useless. What was the matter with the old quack? Why didn't he kill him and get it over with? Pearce kept talking, but Harry didn't listen. What was the use of hoping? It would only make his torment worse.

"A transfusion might help," Marna said.

"Yes," Pearce agreed. "Are you willing?"

"You know what I am?"

"Of course. Christopher, search the ghoul. He will have tubing and needles on him for emergency treatment of his

victims." Pearce spoke to Marna again. "There will be some commingling. The poison will enter your body."

Marna's voice was bitter. "You couldn't hurt me with cyanide."

There were movements and preparations. Harry couldn't concentrate on them. Things blurred. Time passed like a glacier.

As the first gray light of morning came on tiptoes through the trees, Harry felt life moving painfully in his little finger. It was worse than anything he had ever experienced, a hundred times worse than the pain from the bracelet. The pain spread to his other fingers, to his feet, up his legs and arms toward his trunk. Harry wanted to plead with Pearce to restore the paralysis, but by the time his throat relaxed, the pain was almost gone.

When he could sit up, he looked around for Marna .She was leaning back against a tree trunk, her eyes closed, looking paler than ever. "Marna!" Her eyes opened wearily; an expression of joy flashed across them as they focused on him, and then they clouded.

"I'm all right," she said.

Harry scratched his left elbow where the needle had been. "I don't understand—you and Pearce—you brought me back from that—but——"

"Don't try to understand," she said. "Just accept it."

"It's impossible," he muttered. "What are you?"

"The governor's daughter."

"What else?"

"A Cartwright," she said bitterly.

His mind recoiled. One of the immortals! He was not surprised that her blood had counteracted the poison. Cartwright blood was specific against any foreign substance. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," she said. She looked down at her slim figure. "We mature late, we Cartwrights. That's why Weaver sent me to the Medical Center, to see if I was fertile. A fertile Cartwright can waste no breeding time."

There was no doubt: she hated her father.

"He will have you bred," Harry repeated stupidly.

"He will try to do it himself," she said without emotion.

"He is not very fertile; that is why there are only three of us. My grandmother, my mother and me. Then we have some control over conception. Particularly after maturity. We don't want his children, even though they might make him less dependent on us. I'm afraid—" her voice broke—"I'm afraid I'm not mature enough."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Harry demanded.

"And have you treat me like a Cartwright?" Her eyes glowed with anger. "A Cartwright isn't a person, you know. A Cartwright is a walking blood-bank, a living fountain of youth, something to be possessed, used, guarded, but never allowed to live. Besides"—her head drooped—"you don't believe me. About Weaver."

"But he's the governor!" Harry exclaimed. He saw her face and turned away. How could he explain? You had a job and you had a duty. You couldn't go back on those. And then there were the bracelets. Only the governor had the key. They couldn't survive long linked together like that. They would be separated again, by chance or by force, and he would die.

He got to his feet. The forest reeled for a moment and then settled back. "I owe you thanks again," he said to Pearce.

"You fought hard to preserve your beliefs," Pearce whispered, "but there was a core of sanity that fought with me, that said it was better to be a whole man with crippled beliefs than a crippled man with whole beliefs."

Harry stared soberly at the old man. He was either a real healer who could not explain how he worked his miracles or the world was a far crazier place than Harry had ever imagined. "If we start moving now," he said, "we should be in sight of the mansion by noon."

As he passed the dwarf, he looked down, stopped, and looked back at Marna and Pearce. Then he stopped, picked up the misshapen little boy, and walked toward the road.

The helicopter was beside the turnpike. "It would be only a few minutes if we flew," he muttered.

Close behind him Marna said, "We aren't expected. We would be shot down before we got within five miles."

Harry strapped the dwarf into the helicopter seat. The

ghoul stared at him out of hate-filled eyes. Harry started the motor, pressed the button on the autopilot marked "Return," and stepped back. The helicopter lifted, straightened and headed southeast.

Christopher and Pearce were waiting on the pavement when Harry turned. Christopher grinned suddenly and held out a rabbit leg. "Here's breakfast."

They marched down the turnpike toward Lawrence.

The governor's mansion was built on the top of an L-shaped hill that stood tall between two river valleys. Once it had been the site of a great university, but taxes for supporting such institutions had been diverted into more vital channels. Private contributions had dwindled as the demands of medical research and medical care had intensified. Soon there was no interest in educational fripperies, and the university died.

The governor had built his mansion there some seventy-five years ago when Topeka became unbearable. Long before that it had become a lifetime office—and the governor would live forever.

The state of Kansas was a barony—a description that would have meant nothing to Harry, whose knowledge of history was limited to the history of medicine. The governor was a baron, and the mansion was his keep. His vassals were the suburban squires; they were paid with immortality or its promise. Once one of them had received an injection, he had two choices: remain loyal to the governor and live forever, barring accidental death, or die within thirty days.

The governor had not received a shipment for four weeks. The squires were getting desperate.

The mansion was a fortress. Its outer walls were five-foot-thick pre-stressed concrete faced with five-inch armor plate. A moat surrounded the walls; it was stocked with piranha.

An inner wall rose above the outside one. The paved, unencumbered area between the two could be flooded with napalm. Inside the wall were hidden guided missile nests.

The mansion rose, ziggurat fashion, in terraced steps. On each rooftop was a hydroponic farm. At the summit of the buildings was a glass penthouse; the noon sun turned it into silver. On a mast towering above, a radar dish rotated.

Like an iceberg, most of the mansion was beneath the surface. It dived through limestone and granite almost a mile deep. The building was almost a living creature; automatic mechanisms controlled it, brought in air, heated and cooled it, fed it, watered it, watched for enemies and killed them if they got too close. . . .

It could be run by a single hand. At the moment it was.

There was no entrance to the place. Harry stood in front of the walls and waved his jacket. "Ahoy, the mansion! A message for the governor from the Medical Center. Ahoy, the mansion!"

"Down!" Christopher shouted.

An angry bee buzzed past Harry's ear and then a whole flight of them. Harry fell to the ground and rolled. In a little while the bees stopped.

"Are you hurt?" Marna asked quickly.

Harry lifted his face out of the dust. "Poor shots," he said grimly. "Where did they come from?"

"One of the villas," Christoper said, pointing at the scattered dwellings at the foot of the hill.

"The bounty wouldn't even keep them in ammunition," Harry said.

In a giant, godlike voice, the mansion said, "Who comes with a message for me?"

Harry shouted from his prone position, "Dr. Harry Elliott. I have with me the governor's daughter, Marna, and a leech. We're under fire from one of the villas."

The mansion was silent. Slowly then a section of the inside wall swung open. Something flashed into the sunlight, spurting flame from its tail. It darted downward. A moment later a villa lifted into the air and fell back, a mass of rubble.

Over the outer wall came a crane arm. From it dangled a large metal car. When it reached the ground a door opened.

"Come into my presence," the mansion said.

The car was dusty. So was the penthouse where they were deposited. The vast swimming pool was dry; the cabanas were rotten; the flowers and bushes and palm trees were dead.

In the mirror-covered central column, a door gaped at them like a dark mouth. "Enter," said the door.

The elevator descended deep into the ground. Harry's

stomach surged uneasily; he thought the car would never stop, but eventually the doors opened. Beyond was a spacious living room. It was decorated in shades of brown. One entire wall was a vision screen.

Marna ran out of the car. "Mother!" she shouted. "Grandmother!" She raced through the apartment. Harry followed her more slowly.

There were six bedrooms opening off a long hall. At the end of it was a nursery. On the other side of the living room were a dining room and a kitchen. Every room had a wall-wide vision screen. Every room was empty.

"Mother?" Marna said.

The dining room screen flickered. Across the giant screen flowed the giant image of a creature who lolled on pneumatic cushions. It was a thing incredibly fat, a sea of flesh rippling and surging. Although it was naked, its sex was a mystery. Its breasts were great pillows of fat, but there was a sprinkling of hair between them. Its face, moon though it was, was small on the fantastic body; in it eyes were stuck like raisins.

It drew sustenance out of a tube; then, as it saw them, it pushed the tube away with one balloonlike hand. It giggled. The giggle was godlike.

"Hello, Marna," it said in the mansion's voice. "Looking for somebody? Your mother and your grandmother thwarted me, you know. Sterile creatures! I connected them directly to the blood bank; now there will be no delay about blood."

"You'll kill them!" Marna gasped.

"Cartwrights? Silly girl! Besides, this is our bridal night, and we would not want them around, would we, Marna?"

Marna shrank back into the living room, but the creature looked at her from that screen, too. It turned its raisin eyes toward Harry. "You are the doctor with the message. Tell me."

Harry frowned. "You—are Governor Weaver?"

"In the flesh, boy." The creature chuckled. It made waves of fat surge across his body and back again.

Harry took a deep breath. "The shipment was hijacked. It will be a week before another shipment is ready."

Weaver frowned and reached a stubby finger toward something beyond the camera's range. "There!" He looked back

at Harry and smiled the smile of an idiot. "I just blew up Dean Mock's office. He was inside it at the time. It's justice, though. He's been sneaking shots of elixir for twenty years."

"Elixir? But——!" The information about Mock was too unreal to be meaningful; Harry didn't believe it. It was the mention of elixir that shocked him.

Weaver's mouth made an "O" of sympathy. "I've shocked you. They tell you the elixir has not been synthesized. It was. Some one hundred years ago by a doctor named Russell Pearce. You were planning on synthesizing it, perhaps, and thereby winning yourself immortality as a reward. No—I'm not telepathic. Fifty out of every one hundred doctors dream that dream. I'll tell you, Doctor. I am the electorate. I decide who shall be immortal, and it pleases me to be arbitrary. Gods are always arbitrary. That is what makes them gods. I could give you immortality. I will; I will. Serve me well, Doctor, and when you begin to age, I will make you young again. I could make you dean of the Med Center. Would you like that?"

Weaver frowned again. "But no—you would sneak elixir like Mock, and you would not send me the shipment when I need it for my squires." He scratched between his breasts. "What will I do?" he wailed. "The loyal ones are dying off. I can't give them their shots, and then their children are ambushing their parents. Whitey crept up on his father the other day; sold him to a junk collector. Old hands keep young hands away from the fire. But the old ones are dying off, and the young ones don't need the elixir, not yet. They will, though. They'll come to me on their knees, begging, and I'll laugh at them and let them die. That's what gods do, you know."

Weaver scratched his wrist. "You're still shocked about the elixir. You think we should make gallons of it, keep everybody young forever. Now think about it! We know that's absurd, eh? There wouldn't be enough of anything to go around. And what would be the value of immortality if everybody lived forever?" His voice changed suddenly, became businesslike. "Who hijacked the shipment? Was it this man?"

A picture flashed on the lower quarter of the screen.

"Yes," Harry said. His brain was spinning. Illumination

and immortality, all in one breath. It was coming too fast. He didn't have time to react.

Weaver rubbed his doughy mouth. "Cartwright! How can he do it?" There was a note of godlike fear in the voice. "To risk—forever. He's mad—that's it, the man is mad. He wants to die." The great mass of flesh shivered; the body rippled. "Let him try me. I'll give him death."

Cartwright, Harry thought. Weaver must mean Marshall Cartwright, the original Immortal. But why would Cartwright attack the convoy, risk—eternity? Because, perhaps, he had learned that eternity was worthless without courage, without honor, without love. By hijacking the elixir shipment he had dealt Weaver a deadly blow.

Weaver looked at Harry again and scratched his neck. "How did you get here, you four?"

"We walked," Harry said tightly.

"Walked? Fantastic!"

"Ask a motel manager just this side of Kansas City or a pack of wolves that almost got away with Marna or a ghoul that paralyzed me. They'll tell you we walked."

Weaver scratched his mountainous belly. "Those wolf-packs. They can be a nuisance. They're useful, though. They keep the countryside tidy. But if you were paralyzed, why is it you are here instead of waiting to be put to use on some organ bank slab?"

"The leech gave me a transfusion from Marna." Too late Harry saw Marna motioning for him to be silent.

Weaver's face clouded. "You've stolen my blood. Now I can't bleed her for a month. I will have to punish you. Not now but later when I have thought of something fitting the crime."

"A month is too soon," Harry said. "No wonder the girl is pale if you bleed her every month. You'll kill her."

"But she's a Cartwright," Weaver said in astonishment, "and I need the blood."

Harry's lips tightened. He held up the bracelet on his wrist. "The key, sir?"

"Tell me," Weaver said, scratching under one breast, "is Marna fertile?"

"No, sir." Harry looked levelly into the eyes of the Governor of Kansas. "The key?"

"Oh, dear," Weaver said. "I seem to have misplaced it. You'll have to wear the bracelets yet a bit. Well, Marna. We will see how it goes tonight, eh, fertile or no? Find something suitable for a bridal night, will you? And let us not mar the occasion with weeping and moaning and screams of pain. Come reverently and filled with a great joy, as Mary came unto God."

"If I have a child," Marna said, her face white, "it will have to be a virgin birth."

The sea of flesh surged with anger. "Perhaps there will be screams tonight. Yes. Leech! You—the obscenely old person with the boy. You are a healer."

"So I have been called," Pearce whispered.

"They say you work miracles. Well, I have a miracle for you to work." Weaver scratched the back of one swollen hand. "I itch. Doctors have found nothing wrong with me, and they have died. It drives me mad."

"I cure by touch," Pearce said. "Every person cures himself; I only help."

"No man touches me," Weaver said. "You will cure me by tonight. I will not hear of anything else. Otherwise I will be angry with you and the boy. Yes, I will be very angry with the boy if you do not succeed."

"Tonight," Pearce said, "I will work a miracle for you."

Weaver smiled and reached out for a feeding tube. His dark eyes glittered like black marbles in a huge dish of custard. "Tonight, then!" The image vanished from the screen.

"A grub," Harry whispered. "A giant white grub in the heart of a rose. Eating away at it, blind, selfish, and destructive."

"I think of him," Pearce said, "as a fetus who refuses to be born. Safe in the womb, he destroys the mother, not realizing that he is thereby destroying himself." He turned slightly toward Christopher. "There is an eye?"

Christopher looked at the screen. "Every one."

"Bugs."

"All over."

Pearce said, "We will have to take the chance that he will

not audit the recordings or that he can be distracted long enough to do what must be done."

Harry looked at Marna and then at Pearce and Christopher. "What can we do?"

"You're willing?" Marna said. "To give up immortality? To risk everything?"

Harry grimaced. "What would I be losing? A world like this?"

"What is the situation?" Pearce whispered. "Where is Weaver?"

Marna shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. My mother and grandmother never knew. He sends the elevator. There are no stairs, no other exits. And the elevators are controlled from a console beside his bed. There are thousands of switches. They also control the rest of the building, the lights, water, air, heat, and food supplies. He can release toxic or anesthetic gases or flaming gasoline. He can set off charges not only here but in Topeka and Kansas City or send rockets to attack other areas. There's no way to reach him."

"You will reach him," Pearce whispered.

Marna's eyes lighted up. "If there were some weapon I could take! But there's an inspection in the elevator—magnetic and fluoroscopic detectors."

"Even if you could smuggle in a knife, say," Harry said, frowning, "it would be almost impossible to hit a vital organ. And even though he isn't able to move his body, his arms must be fantastically strong."

"There is, perhaps, one way," Pearce said. "If we can find a piece of paper, Christopher will write it out for you."

The bride waited near the elevator doors, dressed in white satin and old lace. The lace was pulled up over the head for a veil. In front of the living room screen, in a brown velour grand rapids overstuffed chair, sat Pearce. At his feet, leaning against his bony knee, was Christopher.

The screen flickered, and Weaver was there, grinning his divine-idiot's grin. "You're impatient, Marna. It pleases me to see you so eager to rush into the arms of your bridegroom. The wedding carriage arrives."

The doors of the elevator sighed open. The bride stepped

into the car. As the doors began to close, Pearce got to his feet, pushing Christopher gently to one side, and said, "You seek immortality, Weaver, and you think you have found it. But what you have is only a living death. I am going to show you the only real immortality."

The car dropped. It plummeted to the tune of the wedding march from Lohengrin. Detectors probed at the bride and found only cloth. The elevator began to slow. After it came to a full stop, the doors remained closed for a moment, and then, squeaking, they opened.

The stench of decay flowed into the car. For a moment the bride recoiled, and then she stepped forward out of the car. The room had once been a marvelous mechanism: a stainless steel womb. Not much bigger than the giant pneumatic mattress that occupied the center, the room was completely automatic. Temperature regulators kept it at blood heat. Food came directly from the processing rooms through the tubes without human aid. Daily sprays of water swept dirt and refuse to collectors around the edge of the room that disposed of it. An overhead spray washed the creature who occupied the mattress. Around the edges of the mattress like a great, circular organ with ten thousand keys was a complex control console. Directly over the mattress, on the ceiling, was a view screen.

Some years before, apparently, a water pipe had broken through some shift in the earth, a small leak that made the rock swell, or a hard freeze. The cleansing sprays no longer worked, and the occupant of the room was afraid to have intruders trace the trouble or he no longer cared.

The floor was littered with decaying food, with cans and wrappers, with waste matter. As the bride stepped into the room cockroaches rose in a cloud and scattered. Mice scampered into hiding places.

The bride pulled the long white satin skirt up above her hips. She unwound a thin, nylon cord from her waist. There was a loop fastened into the end. She shook it out until it hung free.

Then she looked to see what Weaver was doing. He was watching the overhead screen with almost hypnotic concentration. Pearce was talking. "Aging is not a physical disease;

it is mental. The mind grows tired and lets the body die. Only half the Cartwrights' immunity to death lies in their blood; the other half is their unflagging will to live.

"You are one hundred and fifty-three years old. I tended your father, who died before you were born. I gave him, unwittingly, a transfusion of Marshall Cartwright's golden blood."

Weaver whispered, "But that would make you——" His voice was thin and high; it was not godlike at all. It was ridiculous coming from that vast mass of flesh.

"Almost two hundred years old," Pearce said. His voice was stronger, richer, deeper, no longer a whisper. "Without ever a transfusion of Cartwright blood, ever an injection of the *elixir vitae*. The effective mind can achieve conscious control of the autonomic nervous system, of the very cells that make up the blood stream and the body."

The bride craned her neck to see the screen on the ceiling. Pearce looked odd. He was taller. His legs were straight and muscular. His shoulders were broader. As the bride watched, muscle and fat built up beneath his skin, firming it, smoothing out wrinkles. His facial bones receded beneath young flesh and skin. Silky white hair thickened and grew darker.

"You wonder why I stayed old," Pearce said, and his voice was resonant and powerful. "It is something one does not use for oneself. It comes through giving, not taking."

His sunken eyelids puffed, paled, opened. And Pearce looked out at Weaver, tall, strong, and straight—no more than thirty, surely. There was power latent in that face—power leashed, gentled, under control. But Weaver recoiled from it.

Then, onto the screen, walked Marna.

Weaver's eyes bulged. His head swiveled toward the bride. Harry tossed off the veil and swung the looped cord lightly between two fingers. The importance of his next move was terrifying. The first throw had to be accurate, because he might never have a chance for another. His surgeon's fingers were deft, but he had never thrown a lariat. Christopher had described how he should do it, but there had been no chance to practice.

And if he were dragged within reach of those doughy arms! A hug would smother him.

And in that startled moment, Weaver's head lifted with surprise and his hand stabbed toward the console. Harry flipped the cord. The loop dropped over Weaver's head and tightened around his neck.

Quickly Harry wrapped the cord several times around his hand and pulled it tight. Weaver jerked against it, tightening it further. The thin cord disappeared into the neck's soft flesh. Weaver's stubby fingers clawed at it, tearing the skin, as his body thrashed on the mattress.

He had, Harry thought, an immortal at the end of his fishing line—a great white whale struggling to free itself so that it could live forever, smacking the pneumatic waves with fierce lunges and savage tugs. For him it became dreamlike and unreal.

Weaver, by some titanic effort, had turned over. He had his hands around the cord now. He rose onto soft, flowing knees and pulled at the cord, dragging Harry forward toward the mattress. Weaver's eyes were beginning to bulge out of his pudding-face.

Harry dug his heels into the floor. Weaver came up, like the whale leaping its vast bulk incredibly out of the water, and stood, shapeless and monstrous, his face purpling. Then, deep inside, a heart gave up, and the body sagged. It flowed like a melting wax image back to the mattress on which it had spent almost three-quarters of a century.

Harry dazedly unwrapped the cord from his hand. It had cut deep into the skin; blood welled out. He didn't feel anything as he dropped the cord. He shut his eyes and shivered. After a period of time he never remembered, he heard someone calling him. "Harry!" Marna cried. "Are you all right? Harry, please!"

He took a deep breath. "Yes. Yes, I'm all right."

"Go to the console," said the young man who had been Pearce. "You'll have to find the right controls, but they should be marked. We've got to release Marna's mother and grandmother. And then we've got to get out of here ourselves. Marshall Cartwright is outside, and I think he's getting impatient."

How did Pearce know? Harry thought dazedly. But he knew the answer. Pearce's powers did not stop with healing. Allied to that, perhaps stemming from that, were other perceptions of people and locations, and things, sometimes of thoughts themselves. Christopher, too. He had picked it up.

Harry nodded, but he did not move. It would take a strong man to go out into a world where immortality was a fact rather than a dream. He would have to live with it and its terrifying problems. They would be greater than anything he had imagined.

He moved forward to begin the search.

STAR 4

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