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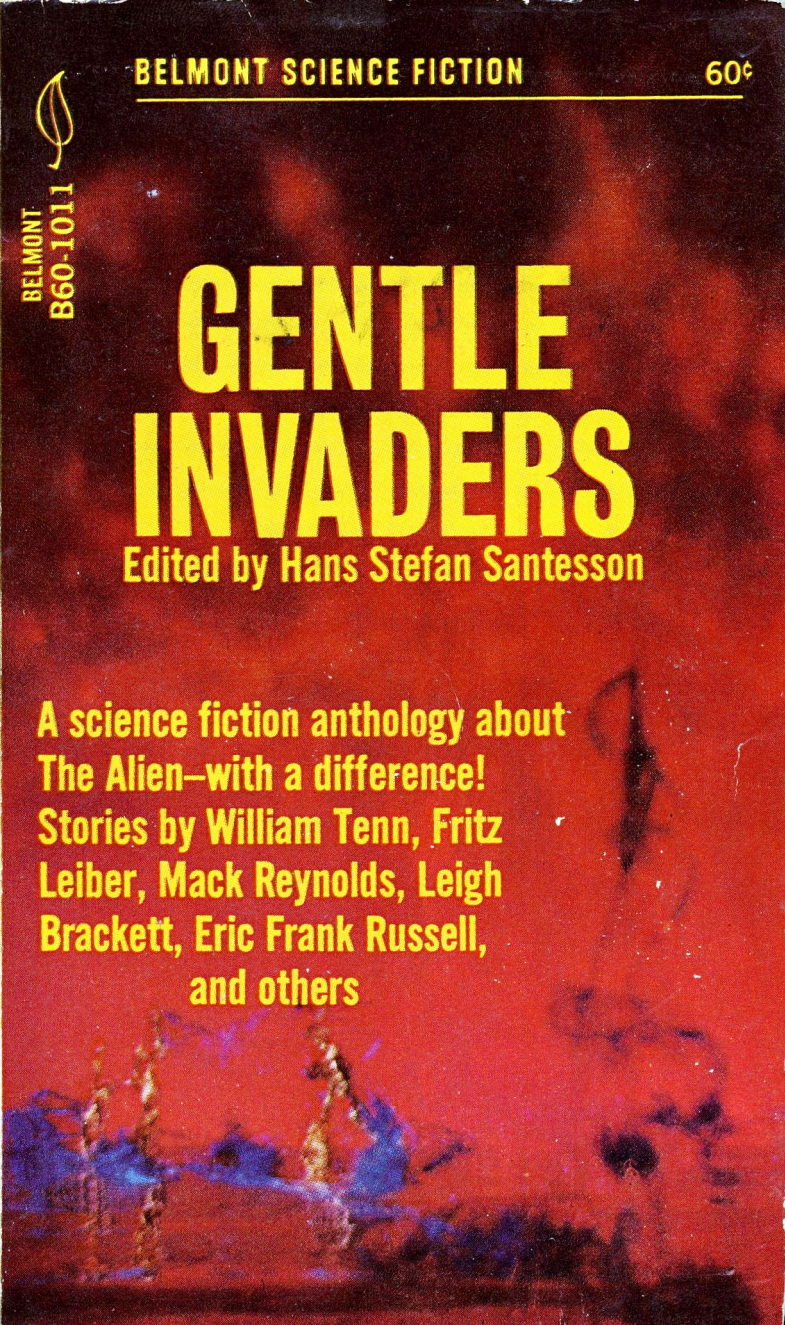
GENTLE INVADERS

Edited by Hans Stefan Santesson

A science fiction anthology about The Alien–with a difference! Stories by William Tenn, Fritz Leiber, Mack Reynolds, Leigh Brackett, Eric Frank Russell, and others



His rage exploded into action. He grabbed a great big gun out of the glove compartment. I sprang to my two transmuted nether tentacles —most handsome gams, if I, the artist, do say so. He jabbed the muzzle of the gun into my midriff. But my beautiful midriff, which I'd been at such pains to perfect, erupted into smoke and ghastly red splatter.

I did a backward flipflop out of the car. As it snorted off triumphantly, I snagged hold of the rear bumper, briefly changing my hand back to a tentacle for better gripping. Before the pavement had abraded more than a few grams of my substance, I reconstituted my vanished midriff with material from the air, the rest of my body and the paint on the trunk case. Then I whipped up a snazzy silver lame evening frock out of the chromium from the bumper.

To pass time, I mentally reviewed the thousand and some basic types of mutual affection on the million plus planets, not forgetting the one and only basic type of love. For this was my mission.

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GENTLE INVADERS

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GENTLE INVADERS

INTRODUCTION

This anthology should perhaps have been dedicated to the Lutheran minister who, without knowing he did so, suggested the theme. Let me tell you what happened . . .

Winter before last, on what turned out to be an extremely stormy night, I found myself speaking on Science Fiction at the Swedish Seamen's Church, then located near Union Square, in New York. During the question period, Pastor Björn Sahlberg, who has since then become a good friend of mine, asked this question:

"Assuming the Aliens do come here, how will we meet them? With guns! With force! Is *this* the Christian way?"

He was right of course, but still I answered, "Let us first learn how to *live* like Christians, and then we can talk about *behaving* like Christians!"

I am afraid there was a dead silence for at least half a minute before someone in the back asked a question. A safer question.

But in the weeks and months that followed I found myself thinking again and again of this exchange, and of still another point he had made, moments earlier, with considerable justice.

There's no denying that much of science fiction has, consciously or less consciously, reflected the times in which it was written. Very much aware of our own uniqueness, we have found it hard to believe in even the possibility of nonhumanoid alien intelligences, and if these intelligences were nonhumanoid, the odds were that they had all of the vices which we tend to associate with that which is alien or strange, that which we do not know. The Bug-eyed Monsters of yesteryear mirrored these fears of ours, these fears of that which seemed to menace the *status quo*, the world which we knew, the world which we had grown up in and felt certain could not be bettered, at least in our time. We were accustomed to journalistic exaggerations, to talk of the "yellow menace," to the certainty that every Chinatown (in common with Soho in more recent years) was a den

of iniquity with sinister Orientals, henchmen all of Dr. Fu Manchu, lurking in shadowed doorways, waiting to entrap the innocent and the unwary. From this, to believing in snake men, crocodile men, ant things, monsters that coveted beautiful blonde cover girls, was an easy step. We find it all too easy to believe the worst of that which seems alien to us, whether it be a matter of our urban society—or of the worlds our children's children may yet, the Gods willing, know. . . .

I have all my life fought, as an individual, against this social blindness, and it seemed to me to be important to prove, not only to Pastor Sahlberg but to others also, that there are a number of people in this field who, in their writings, have demonstrated their belief that we will one day somehow mature, in spite of these times, in spite of the immediate Tomorrows.

The present anthology, GENTLE INVADERS, is a group of stories by these authors, describing the reactions, predictable and less predictable, to the eventual coming of the Aliens among us. Tonight's headlines to the contrary, the apostles of Fear to the contrary, we may yet learn how to live together as one people, whatever our Faiths, whatever our ethnic backgrounds, *before* this coming. . . .

The words, "Peace be with you," are to be found in all languages, and in all religions. . . .

Hans Stefan Santesson

January 1969

I have a special feeling for the earlier stories, including this, of this writer whose first novel, THREE SHIPS AND THREE KINGS, has just been published by Doubleday. I hope that her publishers will, in time, want to publish a collection of these stories of hers, dealing with the strangers among us, as gentle and as sensitive as this story.

SIT BY THE FIRE

by
MYRLE BENEDICT

'TWASN'T the fust time I'd seen her, the strange wild girl trampin' over the hills, but 'twas the fust time she'd come close enough so's I could actual see whut she looked like.

She didn't look mean, like the stories folks tole made her out to be. She looked kinda lost, and awful young, like. She was just a little bitty thing, too.

Now, I take that back about her lookin' lost. She didn't exactly. She looked more like somebody had done gone off an' left her, an' she was jest bound to make do as best she could.

She didn't run off when she seen me. She helt her ground an' stared at me, long an' hard, like 'twas her as owned the meader an' not me. She was right spunky, too. Didn't look like the sight of a ol' codger like me scairt her none.

Lookin' at her up close like that I could see she mighty close

'sembled my middle girl Virgie, her whut died when she warn't much older than this here girl.

I helt out my hand an' I spoke to her. I says, "Lookie here, girl, whut you doin' on my propitty?" Only I says it real gentle like.

When she seen me holdin' my hand out like that, she jumped a few steps back, like she was scairt I was gonna throw somethin' at her.

"Now hold on, girl," I says. "I ain't gonna hurt ya none. Now whut's a pritty leetle thing like you a-doin' out in the open all the time? Ain't you 'fraid you'll get hurt, or maybe et up by a mountain-lion or somethin'?"

For the first time her face kinda softened, like she'd heard an' understood all I was sayin' only she didn't want to let on none.

"No," she says, so soft I could scarce hear her. "I ain't a-feared o' that."

Then, like it had just dawned on her she'd said a spoken word, she turned an' woulda scooted back into the brush if I hadn't said anythin'.

"Wait a minute," I says. "You don't have to run off. Not from me. Shecks, I'm jest a ol' man, livin' up here on the side o' the mountain, all alone. You don't have to be a-feared o' me."

She turned, an' kinda looked at me, like she didn't know whether to b'lieve me or not.

"Come on," I says. "Whyn't you an' me go down to my cabin an' talk? There's a mite o' corn pone and I got some ice-cole buttermilk back in th' spring-house. Won't hurt you none, by the looks o' you."

She opened her mouth an' then closed it again.

"I ain't tryin' to force you, girl," I says. "I'm a-goin' back, an' if'n you want to come, come, an' if'n you want to go without supper, do."

I turned around an' started back down the path to my little cabin. I'm a ol' man, an' all my children have gone off an' married. My ol' woman, she died some years back, an' I live up here all alone. I tend my field an' the garden patch, an' I'm a sight better off than a lot o' old men whut goes an' lives off'n their kids. Folks say I'm crotchety, but I ain't. I got a real nice life up here, an' I don't want no meddlin' busybody from down in the village messin' it up tryin' to "help." That Miz Perkins, in partic'lar. She's th' do-goodinist woman I ever seen. Thinks it's a cryin' shame my kids "neglect" their pa like they

do. Well, I don't call it neglectin'. I raised 'em up to stand on their two hind legs an' look after themselves, an' I expect them to let me do th' same thing.

I got inside my cabin, an' left th' door open a little. It was nice an' cool, after the heat of Indian Summer. I went out to th' spring-house an' got th' pitcher o' cole buttermilk an' brung it back to th' house. I poured out two glasses full, an' set the pan o' corn pone on th' table. I didn't bother none to look an' see if'n th' wild girl follered me or not.

Pretty soon I heard a little rustlin' sound, like a mouse makes in a corncrib, only a lot softer, an' then I heard her a-gulpin' that buttermilk like she was starved. I pushed the pitcher toward her a little, an' let her be. She'd drank down three glasses o' buttermilk afore she said anythin'.

"That was good," she says.

I turned around an' looked at her. She was a-sittin' on the edge o' her chair, like she was a-measurin' the distance to the door in case she had to run for it. She had a milk moustache on her, where she'd been too greedy with th' buttermilk, like a kid. She had on a darkish sort of dress an' it was all dirty an' tore from th' brambles. She didn't have on no shoes, an' I could tell she was used to wearin' shoes, 'cause her feet was little an' white an' looked soft, even though they was pretty dirty right now. She was kinda pale, an' had dark hair, all wild an' tumbled lookin'.

She saw me lookin' at her feet an' drew them up under her, like she was a-shamed.

"Whut's your name, chile?" I says. "Whut'r you doin' out roamin' the mountain? Ain't you got no folks?"

"N-No, I ain't," she says. "I ain't got nobody."

"Whut are you so scared about? I ain't gonna hurt you."

"You ain't for sure?" she asks like a kid.

"I ain't for sure. Now, how come you're actin' like a rabbit caught in a snare?"

"I—I don't like this place."

"Well, I don't blame you none, if'n all you've done lately is run away from ever'body, an' not let any of 'em get in hailin' distance."

"I know. But they was all so big . . . an' I was scared."

"Why ain't you so scared o' me?"

"I dunno. You don't seem like th' other folks I've seen. You ain't never yelled at me, nor flang a stone at me. You know when to let a body be."

"Who'd want to throw a stone at you?"

"Oh, one o' them kids over on th' yonder side o' th' hill."

"Well, I ain't gonna let nobody harm you, neither. Fact is, you c'n stay right here, if'n you've a mind to. 'Tain't nobody here close 'cept me, an' I'm a ol' man, an' I wouldn't mind havin' a purty young thing like you to sorta liven up th' place."

She looked at me, suspicious-like. "Why?" she says.

"Oh, I dunno. Maybe it's cause you look like Virgie, a little. That's my middle girl. She died some years back, when she warn't much older 'n you. B'sides, you need some place to stay, don't you?"

"I reckon."

"Wull, that's settled, then. You c'n sleep up in the loft. I'll fix Virgie's ol' bed for you up there, an' you can have it all for yourself. Whut's your name, anyway, bein' as how you'll be livin' here?"

"I don't rightly have no proper name," she says real soft. "If'n you don't care, I'd 'preciate it if'n you'd just call me . . . Virgie."

So the strange wild girl come to live with me. Once she'd gentled down an' decided to stay, she was a real joy to have around. She fixed up some of th' ol' dresses she'd found in a trunk, an' I went down to th' gen'rl store and bought her some bright stuff so's she could sew some dresses for herself. She fixed up that loft so bright an' purty, an' give the walls a fresh coat o' whitewash, an' even whitewashed th' walls in th' rest o' th' cabin. She put up green curtains at th' winders an' put a red-an'-white checkered cloth on the table. She even made me change m' overhauls twicet a week an' trim m' hair an' beard, too, an' made me wash m' hands b'fore I eat. She was a tol'ble cook, an' she got better as she went along.

We give out down at the store that she was a distant relation, with no parents, so she'd come to live with me. There was a few who knew in their hearts that she was th' wild girl, but they never knew for certain, 'cause we never told.

But even them as thought they knew, stopped their talk in time an' come to look on her as my actual kin. She even called me "Uncle Reb." That's m' name, Rebel. M' folks named me that 'cause I was borned whilest th' War was goin' on.

Warn't no surprise t' me, when spring come 'round again that some o' th' young whelps down in th' village decided to come a-courtin' Virgie.

Now, Virgie, she'd done got over all her wildness an' shyness

when she was around me, but when them lazy louts started drapin' themselves over th' porch rail, it come right back.

She'd sit there, pleased in a female way with all th' attention, but scairt, too, o' them big lumberin' boys. An' one evenin', after 'Kiah Piersall had been there, she come in a-cryin'.

"Virgie, what's that big ox done to you?" I says.

"Oh, Uncle Reb, he ain't done nothin', exactly," she says. "Only he—he tr-tried to kiss me, an' he was so hot an' the flesh around his eyes was so swollen, an' I was afeared!" She set down in the chair I'd made her an' huddled up in a heap. "He says he wants t' marry me, an' Uncle Reb, I just caint! I caint!"

"Whut do you mean, you caint? Now it's a fact that these menfolks hereabouts ain't whut you'd 'xactly call prizes, but you're gonna have t' marry somebody, some o' these days, Virgie."

"Oh, no, I ain't," she says, lookin' up sudden. "I ain't gonna marry nobody!"

"Why sure you are, Virgie. I knowed that when I took you in. You caint spend the rest o' your life lookin' after a ol' man. You gotta have a life o' your own, with a husbin' to look after you, an' kids, maybe. I ain't gonna be here always, an' you just cain't go through life without nobody. 'Tain't natural."

Her face went real white, an' I thought she was a-goin' t' swoon, but she didn't. There was two spots o' red in her cheeks, an' her voice shook a little. "Uncle Reb, I didn't know whut I was gettin' myself into, when I come here. I don't like it much, but I'm here, an' there's not much I c'n do about it now. But I just want t' be left alone! That's why I come to live with you. You let me be. I thought you understood maybe, but you don't neither."

"Don't understand whut?" I says, but she didn't 'pear to hear me.

"I c'n always go back an' roam th' hills. I c'n go far away, an' maybe find somebody else who'll take me in for a while, but I don't want to. I like it here, an' I like you, Uncle Reb. Only don't make me mix with other folks!"

"You don't seem to mind goin' down to th' store, or goin' t' meeting', or to th' barndance once in a while."

"That kinda mixin' isn't too bad, Uncle Reb. It's th' springtime mixin' I'm a-talkin' about—th' kind o' spring an' fall mixin' that's in th' blood."

I laughed. "Honey, if'n it's in your blood, it's not anythin' to be afeared of."

"But, Uncle Reb, you don't understand! It ain't in my blood . . . the folks I come from, they don't even remember it, 'xcept as it was writ down in books. But you folks, you got it so strong it likes to make a body faint from just bein' close to it!"

"Virgie, I don't understand what you're sayin', for a fact."

"Uncle Reb, listen to me. I'm not like folks around here. I'm not like anybody you ever met. I—I don't think it's quite proper for me t' mix too close with you folks. All I want is a roof over my head, an' good food, an' to be let alone!"

She meant it, I could tell. "Aw right, Virgie," I says. "I don't rightly understand why, but I'll go 'long with you, if'n that's whut you want."

"It is, Uncle Reb," she says, an' she lowered her eyes so's they caught the light for a minute an' shone out like two amber stones.

Springtime come an' went, an' when summer had come, th' young menfolk settled down a little. Virgie took t' going t' th' barndance once in a while again. But she quit it whenever th' autumn moon started shinin' big an' yeller along th' ridge o' th' hills.

When th' fust snow come, she really settled in for th' winter. Of an evenin', she'd sit by the fire, all skwoonched up with her eyes shut, for all th' world like th' ol' red cat whut come t' live with us.

Virgie hadn't been with me too long when a ol' red mamma-cat come trailin' by an' took up with her. I didn't care if'n Virgie kept it, 'cause it could keep down th' mice in th' house, so long as it didn't bring in too many kittens.

So anyhow, of an evenin' them two'd curl up afore th' fire an' toast themselves an' th' cat'd purr an' hold its head up for Virgie to pet it. She never give it no name, just called it Cat, but it seemed to know that's who she meant when she called it.

I think that's the time Virgie was happiest, when th' snow lay deep on th' ground, an' there was no call to go outdoors, nor no call for nobody else to, either.

Come spring again, Virgie started to shed the good, healthy plump she'd built up in th' winter. Th' young men started comin' back, jest the same as last year, an' Virgie, she got as snappy as a ol' turtle.

"Uncle Reb, it's gettin' me, too," she says one day. "I c'n feel this spring-thing, almost like you-all can."

"Oh, hush your mouth," I says. "I'm gettin' just a little tired

o' your complainin' 'cause the boys is after you. There's more'n one gal down to th' village whut would give a pretty to be in your shoes, let me tell you."

"I don't want th' boys after me!" she says, an' run off to hide.

I couldn't help snortin'. She was a silly little thing, not t' 'preciate that she had th' whole part o' th' young men at her heels. I couldn't see it, m'self. She was too little. Man lives in th' hills, needs a woman big an' strong 'nough to help 'im. But she did have a strange sort o' face, with th' big eyes an' little chin, an' with that cloudy dark hair an' the pretty way she had o' talkin', she didn't need to say more'n a dozen words b'fore th' boy she was a-talkin' to was plumb gone.

I didn't pay it too much mind when she didn't come home to supper. But she was gone all th' next day, too, an' didn't come in 'til 'way after dark. I could tell she'd been cryin'.

"You et supper?"

"No, Uncle Reb. I ain't hungry."

She looked at me, an' her eyes caught in th' candlelight, like they had a way o' doin'.

"Uncle Reb, whut would you say if'n I told you I wasn't one o' your folks?"

"Honey, I know that. You ain't any more kin to me than . . ."

"No, I mean, I ain't like nobody around here. Nobody a-tall."

"Virgie, are you startin' that again? I declare, chile, you got the funniest notions in your head o' anybody . . ."

"Uncle Reb, I mean it. Set down here." She took th' candle an' lighted the gasoline lantern I don't hardly never use. She went over to th' chest an' got m' readin' glasses for me. "Here, put these on. I want you to see me good."

I put 'em on, an' she set down in front o' me. "Look close at m' eyes, Uncle Reb."

I looked at 'em, an' it was a minute afore it sunk in whut I was seein'. They wasn't like ordinary eyes, they wasn't. I still couldn't see 'em too plain, even with m' glasses, but I could see 'em well enough to see they was like that ol' red mamma-cat's eyes.

"Whut are you, Virgie?" I says.

"I'm a . . . visitor, Uncle Reb," she says. "Me an' some more like me. We come from somewheres a far off. Th' others, they wanted to come a lot more'n me, an' they talked me into

it. I was feelin' awful fearful when you found me an' took me in."

"Where are th' others like you?"

"I dunno. We went all over. Most o' us is scattered through the hill countries, though, 'cause it's more dangerous for us in th' cities. Th' people there are more likely t' notice that we're diff'rent."

"I reckon you're right. But how come th' folks 'round here ain't seen how you're so diff'rent? Seems like they c'd look at them eyes an' see right off."

"I got some little bitty pieces o' special-made glass I wear on m' eyes, whenever I got to go among people. They don't hurt none, when you get used to 'em, an' they make my eyes look like ever'body else's. I ain't wore 'em too much with you, 'cause your eyesight is awful poor anyhow. M' skin is diff'rent colored, too. I keep some dye rubbed in t' give it color. That is, I did. I don't need to very much anymore."

"Why not, Virgie?"

"Uncle Reb, th' longer I stay, th' more I get like th' folks here. I guess I ain't strong 'nough t' keep m'self like I was. If'n I stay out in th' sun long anymore, I get brown. I never did before. My skin don't look silvery no more, even without the dye. O' course, there's some things I can't change, like m' eyes, an' m' feet." She stuck her feet out, with no shoes. I couldn't see anythin' diff'rent, 'til she wiggled her toes, an' there wasn't but four of 'em.

"But, Uncle Reb, I catch m'self thinkin' strange thoughts, like you folks. An' in th' springtime . . ." She started cryin' an' hid her head in her skirt. She looked up again. "I ain't used to th' feelin'. With us, it's a quiet thing, but with you-all, it's like a rollin' wave that don't never quite go down but climbs higher all th' time."

I didn't say nothin'. I jest set quiet for a while, thinkin'. After a little, Virgie got up an' went to her room in th' loft. Pretty soon she came down, dressed in th' old ragged dress she had on when I found her.

"I reckon you'll want me t' go," she says real quiet.

"No such thing," I says. "I been thinkin' long an' hard. You're a stranger, for sure, but you've lived under my roof an' you've eat my bread. I've come t' love you like one o' my own, an' you're welcome t' stay as long as you want."

She looked at me, an' those strange eyes o' hers lit up like candles. "Oh, Uncle Reb! Thank you so much!" She swooped

over t' me an' give me a kiss on th' cheek, th' fust one I've had in years.

So Virgie stayed. As th' seasons o' the year passed, I c'd tell, little by little, she was losin' her strange ways.

I'm a-gettin' old, an' a little feeble, an' I worry 'bout Virgie sometimes, an' whut'll happen t' her when I'm gone. After she told me whut she did, I can't see that it would be good, crossin' her strain an' ours.

I jest hope she c'n maybe find one o' her own kind afore she gets so much like us he wouldn't be able t' tell who she was.

He'd better hurry. Last week I caught her kissin' 'Kiah Piersall, out in th' autumn moon. And this time, she warn't scairt.

Over the centuries, over the millennia in fact, Man has seldom been kind to the Alien and to the Strange. It seems to be in our blood, whatever our race, to fear and to distrust those who are "different," even in these conformist times. We wonder at times how those among whom we live *will* react to the "strange ones" who must be born the day after Tomorrow. No. Maybe we know . . .

THE QUEER ONES

by LEIGH BRACKETT

I RAN DOWN Buckhorn Mountain in the cloud and rain, carrying the boy in my arms. The green lightning flashed among the trees. Buckhorn is no stranger to lightning, but this was different. It did not come from the clouds, and there was no thunder with it. It ran low, searching the thickets, the brush-choked gullies, the wet hollows full of brambles and poison ivy. Thick green hungry snakes looking for something. Looking for me.

Looking for the boy who had started it all.

He peered up at me, clinging like a lemur to my coat as I went headlong down the slope. His eyes were copper-colored. They had seen a lot for all the two-and-a-half years they had

been open on this world. They were frightened now, not just vaguely as you might expect from a child his age, but intelligently. And in his curiously sweet shrill voice he asked:

"Why mus' they kill us?"

"Never mind," I said, and ran and ran, and the green lightning hunted us down the mountainside.

It was Doc Callendar, the County Health Officer, who got me in on the whole thing. I am Hank Temple, owner, editor, feature writer, legman, and general roustabout of the *Newhale News*, serving Newhale and the rural and mountain areas around it. Doc Callendar, Sheriff Ed Betts and I are old friends, and we work together, helping out where we can. So one hot morning in July my phone rang and it was Doc, sounding kind of dazed.

"Hank?" he said. "I'm at the hospital. Would you want to take a run up here for a minute?"

"Who's hurt?"

"Nobody. Just thought something might interest you."

Doc was being cagey because anything you say over the phone in Newhale is public property. But even so the tone of his voice put prickles between my shoulder-blades. It didn't sound like Doc at all.

"Sure," I said. "Right away."

Newhale is the county seat, a small town, and a high town. It lies in an upland hollow of the Appalachians, a little clutter of old red brick buildings with porches on thin wooden pillars, and frame houses ranging from new white to weathered silver-gray, centered around the dumpy courthouse. A very noisy stream bisects the town. The tannery and the feed-mill are its chief industries, with some mining nearby. The high-line comes down a neat cut on Tunkhannock Ridge to the east and goes away up a neat cut on Goat Hill to the west. Over all towers the rough impressive hump of Buckhorn Mountain, green on the ridges, shadowed blue in the folds, wrapped more often than not in a mist of cloud.

There is not much money nor any great fame to be made in Newhale, but there are other reasons for living here. The girl I wanted to marry couldn't quite see them, and it's hard to explain to a woman why you would rather have six pages of small-town newspaper that belong to you than the whole of the *New York Times* if you only work for it. I gave up trying, and she went off to marry a gray flannel suit, and every

time I unlimber my fishing-rod or my deer rifle I'm happy for her.

The hospital is larger than you might expect, since it serves a big part of the county. Sitting on a spur of Goat Hill well away from the tannery, it's an old building with a couple of new wings tacked on. I found Doc Callendar in his office, with Bossert. Bossert is the resident doctor, a young guy who knows more, in the old phrase, than a jackass could haul downhill. This morning he looked as though he wasn't sure of his own name.

"Yesterday," Doc said, "one of the Tate girls brought her kid in, a little boy. I wasn't here, I was out testing those wells up by Pinecrest. But I've seen him before. He's a stand-out, a real handsome youngster."

"Precocious," said Jim Bossert nervously. "Very precocious for his age. Physically, too. Coordination and musculature well developed. And his coloring—"

"What about it?" I asked.

"Odd. I don't know. I noticed it, and then forgot it. The kid looked as though he'd been through a meat-grinder. His mother said the other kids had ganged up and beaten him, and he hadn't been right for several days, so she reckoned she'd better bring him in. She's not much more than nineteen herself. I took some X-rays—"

Bossert picked up a couple of pictures from the desk and shoved them at me. His hands shook, making the stiff films rattle together.

"I didn't want to trust myself on these. I waited until Callendar could check them, too."

I held the pictures up and looked at them. They showed a small, frail bony structure and the usual shadowy outline of internal organs. It wasn't until I had looked at them for several minutes that I began to realize there was something peculiar about them. There seemed to be too few ribs, the articulation of the joints looked queer even to my layman's eyes, and the organs themselves were a hopeless jumble.

"Some of the innards," said Doc, "we can't figure out at all. There are organs we've never seen nor heard of before."

"Yet the child seems normal and perfectly healthy," said Bossert. "Remarkably so. From the beating he'd taken he should have had serious injuries. He was just sore. His body must be as flexible and tough as spring steel."

I put the X-rays back on the desk. "Isn't there quite a large literature on medical anomalies?"

"Oh, yes," said Doc. "Double hearts, upside-down stomachs, extra arms, legs, heads—almost any distortion or variation you can think of. But not like this." He leaned over and tapped his finger emphatically on the films. "This isn't a distortion of anything. This is *different*. And that's not all."

He pushed a microscope slide toward me.

"That's the capper, Hank. Blood sample. Jim tried to type it. I tried to type it. We couldn't. There isn't any such type."

I stared at them. Their faces were flushed, their eyes were bright, they quivered with excitement, and suddenly it got to me too.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Are you trying to tell me—"

"We've got something here," said Doc Callendar. "Something—" He shook his head. I could see the dreams in it. I could see Callendar standing ten feet tall on a pedestal of medical journals. I could see him on podiums addressing audiences of breathless men, and the same dreams were in Bossert's eyes.

I had my own. The *Newhale News* suddenly a famous name on the wire-services, and one Henry Temple bowing with modest dignity as he accepted the Pulitzer Prize for journalism.

"Big," said Bossert softly. "The boy is more than a freak. He's something new. A mutation. Almost a new species. The blood-type alone—"

Something occurred to me and I cut him short. "Listen," I said. "Listen, are you sure you didn't make a mistake or something? How could the boy's blood be so different from his mother's?" I hunted for the word. "Incompatibility. He'd never have been born."

"Nevertheless," said Doc Callendar, "he was born. And nevertheless, there is no such blood-type. We've run tests backward and forward, together and independently. Kindly allow us to know what we're talking about, Hank. The boy's blood obviously must have been compatible with his mother's. Possibly it's a more advanced Type O, universally compatible. This is only one of the many things we have to study and evaluate."

He picked up the X-ray films again and looked at them, with an expression of holy ecstasy in his eyes.

I lighted another cigarette. My hands were shaking now, like theirs. I leaned forward.

"Okay," I said. "What's the first thing we do?"

Doc's station wagon, with COUNTY HEALTH SERVICE painted on its side, slewed and snorted around the turns of the steep dirt road. Jim Bossert had had to stay at the hospital, but I was sitting beside Doc, hunched forward in a sweat of impatience. The road ran up around the shoulder of Tunkhannock Ridge. We had thick dark woods on our right going up, and thick dark woods on our left going down. Buckhorn hung in the north like a curtain across the sky.

"We'll have to be careful," Doc was saying. "I know these people pretty well. If they get the idea we're trying to pull something, we'll never get another look at the kid."

"You handle it," I said. "And by the way, nobody's mentioned the boy's father. Doesn't he have one?"

"Do you know the Tate girls?"

"No. I've been through Possum Creek all right, but through it is all."

"You must have gone fast," said Doc, grinning. "The answer is physiologically yes, legally are you kidding?" He shifted into second, taking it easy over a place where the road was washed and gullied. "They're not a bad bunch of girls at that, though," he added reflectively. "I kind of like them. Couple of them are downright married."

We bucketed on through the hot green shadows, the great centers of civilization like Newhale forgotten in the distance behind us, and finally in a remote pocket just under Tunkhannock's crest we came upon a few lean spry cattle, and then the settlement of Possum Creek.

There were four ancient houses straggled out along the side of the stream. One of them said GENERAL STORE and had a gas pump in front of it. Two old men sat on the steps.

Doc kept on going. "The Tates," he said, straight-faced, "live out a little from the center of town."

Two more turns of the road, which was now only a double-rutted track, brought us to a rural mailbox which said TATE. The house behind it was pretty well run down, but there was glass in most of the windows and only half the bricks were gone from the chimney. The clapboards were sort of a rusty brown, patched up with odds and ends of tarpaper. A woman was washing clothes in an old galvanized tub set on a stand in the side yard. There was a television aerial tied on cockeyed to the gable of the house. There was a sow with a litter in a pen right handy to the door, and a little way at the back was a barn with the ridge-pole swayed like an old horse. A tarpaper shack and a battered house-trailer were visible among the

trees—probably the homes of the married daughters. An ancient man sat in an ancient rocking-chair on the porch and peered at us, and an ancient dog beside him rose up heavily and barked.

I've known quite a lot of families like the Tates. They scratch out enough corn for their pigs and their still-houses, and enough garden for themselves. The young men make most of their money as guides during hunting season, and the old men make theirs selling moonshine. They have electricity now, and they can afford radios and even television sets. City folks call them lazy and shiftless. Actually, they find the simple life so pleasant that they hate to let hard work spoil their enjoyment of it.

Doc drove his station wagon into the yard and stopped. Instantly there was an explosion of dogs and children and people.

"There he is," Doc said to me, under cover of the whooping and woofing and the banging of screen doors. "The skinny little chap with the red hair. There, just coming down the steps."

I looked over and saw the boy.

He was an odd one, all right. The rest of the Tate tribe all had straight hair ranging from light brown to honey-blond. His was close and curly to his head and I saw what Jim Bossert had meant about his coloring. The red had undertones of something else in it. One would almost, in that glare of sunlight, have said silver. The Tates had blue eyes. His were copper-colored. The Tates were fair and sunburned, and so was he, but there was a different quality of fairness to his skin, a different shading to the tan.

He was a little boy. The Tate children were rangy and big boned. He moved among them lightly, a gazelle among young goats, with a totally unchildlike grace and sureness. His head was narrow, with a very high arch to the skull. His eyes were grave, precociously wise. Only in the mouth was there genuine childishness, soft and shy.

We got out of the car. The kids—a dozen of them, give or take a couple—all stopped as though on a signal and began to study their bare feet. The woman came from the washtub, wiping her hands on her skirt. Several others came out of the house.

The little boy remained at the foot of the steps. His hand was now in the hand of a buxom girl. Judging by Bossert's description, this would be his mother. Not much over nine-

teen, handsome, big-breasted, full-hipped. She was dressed in tight jeans and a boy's shirt, her bare feet stuck into sandals, and a hank of yellow hair hung down her back.

Doc spoke to them all, introducing me as a friend from town. They were courteous, but reserved. "I want to talk to Sally," he said, and we moved closer to the steps. I tried not to look at the boy lest the glitter in my eye give me away. Doc was being so casual and hearty it hurt. I could feel a curious little prickle run over my skin as I got close to the child. It was partly excitement, partly the feeling that here was a being different from myself, another species. There was a dark bruise on the child's forehead, and I remembered that the others had beaten him. Was this *otherness* at the bottom of their resentment? Did they sense it without the need for blood samples and X-rays?

Mutant. A strange word. A stranger thing to come upon here in these friendly familiar hills. The child stared at me, and the July sun turned cold on my back.

Doc spoke to Sally, and she smiled. She had an honest, friendly smile. Her mouth was wide and full, frankly sensuous but without coquetry. She had big blue eyes, and her sunburned cheeks were flushed with health, and she looked as uncomplicated and warmly attractive as a summer meadow. I wondered what strange freak of genetics had made her the fountainhead of a totally new race.

Doc said, "Is this the little boy you brought in to the hospital?"

"Yes," she said. "But he's better now."

Doc bent over and spoke to the boy. "Well," he said. "And what's your name, young man?"

"Name's Billy," he answered, in a grave sweet treble that had a sound in it of bells being rung far off. "Billy Tate."

The woman who had come from the washtub said with unconcealed dislike, "He ain't no Tate, whatever he might be."

She had been introduced as Mrs. Tate, and was obviously the mother and grandmother of this numerous brood. She had lost most of her teeth and her gray-blonde hair stood out around her head in an untidy brush. Doc ignored her.

"How do you do, Billy Tate," he said. "And where did you get that pretty red hair?"

"From his daddy," said Mrs. Tate sharply. "Same place he got his sneaky-footed ways and them yellow eyes like a bad hound. I tell you, Doctor, if you see a man look just like that child, you tell him to come back and get what belongs to him!"

A corny but perfectly fitting counterpoint to her words, thunder crashed on Buckhorn's cloudy crest, like the ominous laughter of a god.

Sally reached down suddenly and caught up the boy into her arms. . . .

The thunder quivered and died on the hot air. I stared at Doc and he stared at me, and Sally Tate screamed at her mother.

"You keep your dirty mouth off my baby!"

"That ain't no way to talk to Maw," said one of the older girls. "And anyhow, she's right."

"Oh," said Sally. "You think so, do you?" She turned to Doc, her cheeks all white now and her eyes blazing. "They set their young ones on my baby, Doctor, and you know why? They're jealous. They're just sick to their stomachs with it, because they all got big hunkety kids that can't do nothin' but eat, and big hunkety men that treat them like they was no better'n brood sows."

She had reached her peak of fury so quickly that it was obvious this row had been going on for a long while, probably ever since the child was born.

Possibly even before, judging by what she said then.

"Jealous," she said to her sisters, showing her teeth. "Every last one of you was dancing up and down to catch his eye, but it was me he took to the hayloft. *Me.* And if he ever comes back he can have me again, for as often and as long as he wants me. And I won't hear no ill of him nor the baby!"

I heard all this. I understood it. But not with all, or even most of my mind. That was busy with another thing, a thing it didn't want to grapple with at all and kept shying away from, only to be driven back shivering.

Doc put it into words.

"You mean," he said, to no one in particular, "the baby looks just like his father?"

"Spit an' image," said Sally fondly, kissing the red curls that had that queer glint of silver in them. "Sure would like to see that man again, I don't care what they say, Doctor, I tell you, he was beautiful."

"Handsome is as handsome does," said Mrs. Tate. "He was no good, and I knew it the minute I saw—"

"Why, Maw," said Mr. Tate, "he had you eating out of his hand, with them nicey ways of his." He turned to Doc Callendar, laughing. "She'd a' gone off to the hayloft with him herself if he'd asked her, and that's a fact. Ain't it, Harry?"

Harry said it was, and they all laughed.

Mrs. Tate said furiously, "It'd become you men better to do something about getting some support for that brat from its father, instead of making fool jokes in front of strangers."

"Seems like, when you bring it up," said Mr. Tate, "it would become us all not to wash our dirty linen for people who aren't rightly concerned." He said courteously to Doc, "Reckon you had a reason for coming here. Is there something I can do?"

"Well—," said Doc uncertainly, and looked at the boy. "Just like his father, you say."

And if that is so, I thought, *how can he be a mutant? A mutant is something new, something different, alien from the parent stem. If he is the spit an' image outside, then build and coloring bred true. And if build and coloring bred true, probably blood-type and internal organs—*

Thunder boomed again on Buckhorn Mountain. And I thought, *Well, and so his father is a mutant, too.*

But Doc said, "Who was this man, Sally? I know just about everybody in these hills, but I never saw anyone to answer that description."

"His name was Bill," she said, "just like the boy's. His other name was Jones. Or he said it was."

"He lied," said Mrs. Tate. "Wasn't Jones no more than mine is. We found that out."

"How did he happen to come here?" asked Doc. "Where did he say he was from?"

"He come here," Mrs. Tate said, "driving a truck for some appliance store, Grover's I think it was, in Newhale. Said the place was just new and was making a survey of teevees around here, and offering free service on them up to five dollars, just for goodwill. So I let him look at ours, and he fussed with it for almost an hour, and didn't charge me a cent. Worked real good afterward, too. That would 'a been the end of it, I guess, only Sally was under his feet all the time and he took a shine to her. Kept coming back, and coming back, and you see what happened."

I said, "There isn't any Grover's store in Newhale. There never has been."

"We found that out," said Mrs. Tate. "When we knew the baby was coming we tried to find Mr. Jones, but it seems he'd told us a big pack of lies."

"He told me," Sally said dreamily, "where he come from."

Doc said eagerly, "Where?"

Twisting her mouth to shape the unfamiliar sounds, Sally said, "Hrylliannu."

Doc's eyes opened wide. "Where the hell is that?"

"Ain't no place," said Mrs. Tate. "Even the schoolteacher couldn't find it in the atlas. It's only another of his lies."

But Sally murmured again, "Hryllianu. Way he said it, it sounded like the most beautiful place in the world."

The stormcloud over Buckhorn was spreading out. Its edges dimmed the sun. Lightning flicked and flared and the thunder rolled. I said, "Could I take a look at your television?"

"Why," said Mrs. Tate, "I guess so. But don't you disturb it, now. Whatever else he done, he fixed that teevee good."

"I won't disturb it," I said. I went up the sagging steps past the old man and the fat old dog. I went into the cluttered living room, where the springs were coming out of the sofa and there was no rug on the floor, and six kids apparently slept in the old brass bed in the corner. The television set was maybe four years old, but it was the best and biggest made that year. It formed a sort of shrine at one end of the room, with a piece of red cloth laid over its top.

I took the back off and looked in. I don't know what I expected to see. It just seemed odd to me that a man would go to all the trouble of faking up a truck and tinkering with television sets for nothing. And apparently he hadn't. What I did see I didn't understand, but even to my inexpert eye it was obvious that Mr. Jones had done something quite peculiar to the wiring inside.

A totally unfamiliar component roosted on the side of the case, a little gadget not much bigger than my two thumbnails.

I replaced the back and turned the set on. As Mrs. Tate said, it worked real good. Better than it had any business to. I got a peculiar hunch that Mr. Jones had planned it that way, so that no other serviceman would have to be called. I got the hunch that that component was important somehow to Mr. Jones.

I wondered how many other such components he had put in television sets in this area, and what they were for.

I turned off the set and went outside. Doc was still talking to Sally.

". . . some further tests he wants to make," I heard him say. "I can take you and Billy back right now . . ."

Sally looked doubtful and was about to speak. But the decision was made for her. The boy cried out wildly, "No! No!" With the frantic strength of a young animal he twisted out of his mother's arms, dropped to the ground, and sped

away into the brush so swiftly that nobody had a chance even to grab for him.

Sally smiled. "All them shiny machines and the funny smells frightened him," she said. "He don't want to go back. Isn't anything wrong with him, is there? The other doctor said he was all right."

"No," said Doc reluctantly. "Just something about the X-rays he wanted to check on. It could be important for the future. Tell you what, Sally. You talk to the boy, and I'll come back in a day or two."

"Well," she said. "All right."

Doc hesitated, and then said, "Would you want me to speak to the sheriff about finding this man? If that's his child he should pay something for its support."

A wistful look came into her eyes. "I always thought maybe if he knew about the baby—"

Mrs. Tate didn't give her time to finish. "Yes, indeed," she said. "You speak to the sheriff. Time somebody did something about this, 'fore that brat's a man grown himself."

"Well," said Doc, "we can try."

He gave a last baffled glance at the woods where the boy had disappeared, and then we said goodbye and got into the station wagon and drove away. The sky was dark overhead now, and the air was heavy with the smell of rain.

"What do you think?" I said finally.

Doc shook his head. "I'm damned if I know. Apparently the external characteristics bred true. If the others did—"

"Then the father must be a mutant too. We just push it back one generation."

"That's the simplest explanation," Doc said.

"Is there any other?"

Doc didn't answer that. We passed through Possum Creek, and it began to rain.

"What about the television set?" he asked.

I told him. "But you'd have to have Jud or one of the boys from Newhale Appliance look at it, to say what it was."

"It smells," said Doc. "It stinks, right out loud."

The bolt of lightning came so quickly and hit so close that I wasn't conscious of anything but a great flare of livid green. Doc yelled. The station wagon slewed on the road that now had a thin film of mud over it, and I saw trees rushing at us, their tops bent by a sudden wind so that they seemed to be literally leaping forward. There was no thunder. I remembered that, I don't know why. The station wagon tipped over

and hit the trees. There was a crash. The door flew open and I fell out through a wet whipping tangle of branches and on down to the steep-tilted ground below. I kept on falling, right down the slope, until a gully pocket caught and held me. I lay there dazed, staring up at the station wagon that now hung over my head. I saw Doc's legs come out of it, out the open door. He was all right. He was letting himself down to the ground. And then the lightning came again.

It swallowed the station wagon and the trees and Doc in a ball of green fire, and when it went away the trees were scorched and the paint was blistered on the wrecked car, and Doc was rolling over and over down the slope, very slowly, as if he was tired and did not want to hurry. He came to rest not three feet away from me. His hair and his clothes were smoldering, but he wasn't worrying about it. He wasn't worrying about anything, any more. And for the second time there had not been any thunder, close at hand where the lightning was.

The rain came down on Doc in heavy sheets, and put the smoldering fire out.

Jim Bossert had just come from posting Doc Callendar's body. For the first time I found myself almost liking him, he looked so sick and beat-out. I pushed the bottle toward him, and he drank out of it and then lighted a cigarette and just sat there shaking.

"It was lightning," he said. "No doubt at all."

Ed Betts, the sheriff said, "Hank still insists there was something screwy about it."

Bossert shook his head at me. "Lightning."

"Or a heavy electric charge," I said. "That comes to the same thing, doesn't it?"

"But you saw it hit, Hank."

"Twice," I said. "Twice."

We were in Bossert's office at the hospital. It was late in the afternoon, getting on for supper time. I reached for the bottle again, and Ed said quietly,

"Lightning does that, you know. In spite of the old saying."

"The first time, it missed," I said. "Just. Second time it didn't. If I hadn't been thrown clear I'd be dead too. And there wasn't any thunder."

"You were dazed," Bossert said. "The first shock stunned you."

"It was green," I said.

"Fireballs often are."

"But not lightning."

"Atmospheric freak." Ed turned to Jim Bossert. "Give him something and send him home."

Bossert nodded and got up, but I said, "No. I've got to write up a piece on Doc for tomorrow's paper. See you."

I didn't want to talk any more. I went out and got my car and drove back to town. I felt funny. Hollow, cold, with a veil over my brain so I couldn't see anything clearly or think about anything clearly. I stopped at the store and bought another bottle to see me through the night, and a feeling of cold evil was in me, and I thought of green, silent lightning, and little gimcracks that didn't belong in a television set, and the grave wise face of a child who was not quite human. The face wavered and became the face of a man. A man from Hyrlliannu.

I drove home, to the old house where nobody lives now but me. I wrote my story about Doc, and when I was through it was dark and the bottle was nearly empty. I went to bed.

I dreamed Doc Callendar called me on the phone and said, "I've found him but you'll have to hurry." And I said, "But you're dead. Don't call me, Doc, please don't." But the phone kept ringing and ringing, and after a while I woke part way up and it really was ringing. It was two-forty-nine A.M.

It was Ed Betts. "Fire up at the hospital, Hank. I thought you'd want to know. The south wing. Gotta go now."

He hung up and I began to put clothes on the leaden dummy that was me. The south wing, I thought, and sirens went whooping up Goat Hill. The south wing. That's where X-ray is. That's where the pictures of the boy's insides are on file.

What a curious coincidence, I thought.

I drove after the sirens up Goat Hill, through the clear cool night with half a moon shining silver on the ridges, and Buckhorn standing calm and serene against the stars, thinking the lofty thoughts that seem to be reserved for mountains.

The south wing of the hospital burned brightly, a very pretty orange color against the night.

I pulled off the road and parked well below the center of activity and started to walk the rest of the way. Patients were being evacuated from the main building. People ran with things in their hands. Firemen yelled and wrestled with hoses and streams of water arced over the flames. I didn't think they were going to save the south wing. I thought they would be doing well to save the hospital.

Another unit of the fire department came hooting and clanging up the road behind me. I stepped off the shoulder and as I did so I looked down to be sure of my footing. A flicker of movement on the slope about ten feet below caught my eye. Dimly, in the reflected glow of the fire, I saw the girl.

She was slim and light as a gazelle, treading her furtive way among the trees. Her hair was short and curled close to her head. In that light it was merely dark, but I knew it would be red in the sunshine, with glints of silver in it. She saw me or heard me, and she stopped for a second or two, startled, looking up. Her eyes shone like two coppery sparks, as the eyes of an animal shine, weird in the pale oval of her face. Then she turned and ran.

I went after her. She ran fast, and I was in lousy shape. But I was thinking about Doc.

I caught her.

It was dark all around us under the trees, but the firelight and the moonlight shone together into the clearing where we were: She didn't struggle or fight me. She turned around kind of light and stiff to face me, holding herself away from me as much as she could with my hands gripping her arms.

"What do you want with me?" she said, in a breathless little voice. It was accented, and sweet as a bird's. "Let me go."

I said, "What relation are you to the boy?"

That startled her. I saw her eyes widen, and then she turned her head and looked toward the darkness under the trees. "Please let me go," she said, and I thought that some new fear had come to her.

I shook her, feeling her small arms under my hands, wanting to break them, wanting to torture her because of Doc. "How was Doc killed?" I asked her. "Tell me. Who did it, and how?"

She stared at me. "Doc?" she repeated. "I do not understand." Now she began to struggle. "Let me go! You hurt me."

"The green lightning," I said. "A man was killed by it this morning. My friend. I want to know about it."

"Killed?" she whispered. "Oh, no. No one has been killed."

"And you set that fire in the hospital, didn't you? Why? Why were those films such a threat to you? Who are you? Where—"

"Hush," she said. "Listen."

I listened. There were sounds, soft and stealthy, moving up the slope toward us.

"They're looking for me," she whispered. "Please let me go. I don't know about your friend, and the fire was—necessary. I don't want anyone hurt, and if they find you like this—"

I dragged her back into the shadows underneath the trees. There was a huge old maple there with a gnarly trunk. We stood behind it, and now I had my arm around her waist and her head pressed back against my shoulder, and my right hand over her mouth.

"Where do you come from?" I asked her, with my mouth close to her ear. "Where is Hrylliannu?"

Her body stiffened. It was a nice body, very much like the boy's in some ways, delicately made but strong, and with superb coordination. In other ways it was not like the boy's at all. I was thinking of her as an enemy, but it was impossible not to think of her as a woman, too.

She said, her voice muffled under my hand, "Where did you hear that name?"

"Never mind," I said. "Just answer me."

She wouldn't.

"Where do you live now? Somewhere near here?"

She only strained to get away.

"All right," I said. "We'll go now. Back up to the hospital. The sheriff wants to see you."

I started to drag her away up the hill, and then two men came into the light of the clearing.

One was slender and curly-headed in that particular way I was beginning to know. He looked pleasantly excited, pleasantly stimulated, as though by a game in which he found enjoyment. His eyes picked up the fitful glow of the fire and shone eerily, as the girl's had.

The other man was a perfectly ordinary type. He was dark and heavy-set and tall, and his khaki pants sagged under his belly. His face was neither excited nor pleasant. It was obvious that to him this was no game. He carried a heavy automatic, and I thought he was perfectly prepared to use it.

I was afraid of him.

". . . to send a dame, anyway," he was saying.

"That's your prejudice speaking," said the curly-haired man. "She was the only one to send." He gestured toward the flames. "How can you doubt it?"

"She's been caught."

"Not Vadi." He began to call softly. "Vadi? Vadi!"

The girl's lips moved under my hand. I bent to hear, and she said in the faint ghost of a whisper:

"If you want to live, let me go to them."

The big dark man said grimly, "She's been caught. We'd better do something about it, and do it quick."

He started across the clearing.

The girl's lips shaped one word. "Please!"

The dark man came with his big gun, and the curly-headed one came a little behind him, walking as a stalking cat walks, soft and springy on its toes. If I dragged the girl away they would hear me. If I stayed where I was, they would walk right onto me. Either way, I thought, I would pretty surely go to join Doc on the cold marble.

I let the girl go.

She ran out toward them. I stood stark and frozen behind the maple tree, waiting for her to turn and say the word that would betray me.

She didn't turn, and she didn't say the word. The curly-headed man put his arms around her and they talked rapidly for perhaps half a minute, and I heard her tell the dark man that she had only waited to be sure they would not be able to put the fire out too soon. Then all three turned and went quickly away among the dark trees.

I stayed where I was for a minute, breathing hard, trying to think. Then I went hunting for the sheriff.

By the time I found Ed Betts, of course, it was already too late. But he sent a car out anyway. They didn't find a trace of anyone on the road who answered the descriptions I gave.

Ed looked at me closely in the light of the dying fire, which they had finally succeeded in bringing under control. "Don't get sore at me now, Hank," he said. "But are you real sure you saw these people?"

"I'm sure," I said. I could still, if I shut my eyes and thought about it, *feel* the girl's body in my arms. "Her name was Vadi. Now I want to talk to Croft."

Croft was the Fire Marshal. I watched the boys pouring water on what was left of the south wing, which was nothing more than a pile of hot embers with some pieces of wall standing near it. Jim Bossert joined us, looking exhausted and grimy. He was too tired even to curse. He just wailed a little about the loss of all his fine X-ray equipment, and all his records.

"I met the girl who did it," I said. "Ed doesn't believe me."

"Girl?" said Bossert, staring.

"Girl. Apparently an expert at this sort of thing." I wondered what the curly-haired man was to her. "Was anybody hurt?"

"By the grace of God," said Bossert, "no."

"How did it start?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden I woke up and every window in the south wing was spouting flame like a volcano."

I glanced at Ed, who shrugged. "Could have been a short in that high-voltage equipment."

Bossert said, "What kind of a girl? A lunatic?"

"Another one like the boy. There was a man with her, maybe the boy's father, I don't know. The third one was just a man. Mean looking bastard with a gun. She said the fire was necessary."

"All this, just to get rid of some films?"

"It must be important to them," I said. "They had already killed Doc. They tried to kill me. What's a fire?"

Ed Betts swore, his face twisted between unbelief and worry. Then Croft came up. Ed asked him, "What started the fire?"

Croft shook his head. "Too early to tell yet. Have to wait till things cool down. But I'll lay you any odds you like, it was started by chemicals."

"Deliberately?"

"Could be," said Croft, and went away again.

I looked at the sky. It was almost dawn, that beautiful bleak time when the sky is neither dark nor light and the mountains are cut from black cardboard, without perspective. I said, "I'm going up to the Tates'. I'm worried about the boy."

"All right," said Ed quickly, "I'll go with you. In my car. We'll stop in town and pick up Jud. I want him to see that teevee."

"The hell with Jud," I said. "I'm in a hurry." And suddenly I was. Suddenly I was terribly afraid for that grave-faced child who was obviously the unwitting key to some secret that was important enough to justify arson and murder to those who wanted to keep it.

Ed hung right behind me. He practically shoved me into his car. It had COUNTY SHERIFF painted on its door, and I thought of Doc's station wagon with its COUNTY HEALTH SERVICE, and it seemed like a poor omen but there was nothing I could do about it.

There was nothing I could do about stopping for Jud

Spofford, either. Ed went in and routed him out of bed, taking the car keys with him. I sat smoking and looking up at Tunkhannock Ridge, watching it brighten to gold at the crest as the sun came up. Finally Jud came out grumbling and climbed in the back seat, a tall lanky young fellow in a blue coverall with *Newhale Electric Appliance Co.* embroidered in red on the pocket. His little wife watched from the doorway, holding her pink wrapper together.

We went away up Tunkhannock Ridge. There was still a black smudge of smoke above the hospital on Goat Hill. The sky over Buckhorn Mountain was clear and bright.

Sally Tate and her boy were already gone.

Mrs. Tate told us about it, while we sat on the lumpy sofa in the living room and the fat old dog watched us through the screen door, growling. Sally's sisters, or some of them at least, were in the kitchen listening.

"Never was so surprised at anything in my life," said Mrs. Tate. "Pa had just gone out to the barn with Harry and J.P. —them's the two oldest girls' husbands, you know. I and the girls was washing up after breakfast, and I heard this car drive in. Sure enough it was him. I went out on the stoop—"

"What kind of a car?" asked Ed.

"Same panel truck he was driving before, only the name was painted out. Kind of a dirty blue all over. 'Well,' I says, 'I never expected to see *your* face around here again!', I says, and he says—"

Boiled down to reasonable length, the man had said that he had always intended to come back for Sally, and that if he had known about the boy he would have come much sooner. He had been away, he said, on business, and had only just got back and heard about Sally bringing the child in to the hospital, and knew that it must be his. He had gone up to the house, and Sally had come running out into his arms, her face all shining. Then they went in together to see the boy, and Bill Jones had fondled him and called him Son, and the boy had watched him sleepily and without affection.

"They talked together for a while, private," said Mrs. Tate, "and then Sally come and said he was going to take her away and marry her and make the boy legal, and would I help her pack. And I did, and they went away together, the three of 'em. Sally didn't know when she'd be back."

She shook her head, smoothing her hair with knotted fingers. "I just don't know," she said. "I just don't know."

"What?" I asked her. "Was there something wrong?" I knew there was, but I wanted to hear what she had to say.

"Nothing you could lay your hand to," she said. "And Sally was so happy. She was just fit to burst. And he *was* real pleasant, real polite to me and Pa. We asked him about all them lies he told, and he said they wasn't lies at all. He said the man he was working for did plan to open a store in Newhale, but then he got sick and the plan fell through. He said his name was Bill Jones, and showed us some cards and things to prove it. And he said Sally just misunderstood the name of the place he come from because he give it the old Spanish pronunciation."

"What did he say it was really?" Ed asked, and she looked surprised.

"Now I think of it, I guess he didn't say."

"Well, where's he going to live, with Sally?"

"He isn't settled yet. He's got two or three prospects, different places. She was so happy," said Mrs. Tate, "and I ought to be too, 'cause Lord knows I've wished often enough he would come back and get that peaky brat of his, and Sally too if she was minded. But I ain't. I ain't happy at all, and I don't know why."

"Natural reaction," said Ed Betts heartily. "You miss your daughter, and probably the boy too, more than you know."

"I've had daughters married before. It was something about this man. Something—" Mrs. Tate hesitated a long time, searching for a word. "Queer," she said at last. "Wrong. I couldn't tell you what. Like the boy, only more so. The boy has Sally in him. This one—" She made a gesture with her hands. "Oh, well, I expect I'm just looking for trouble."

"I expect so, Mrs. Tate," said Ed, "but you be sure and get in touch with me if you don't hear from Sally in a reasonable time. And now I'd like this young man to look at your teevee."

Jud, who had been sitting stiff and uncomfortable during the talking, jumped up and practically ran to the set. Mrs. Tate started to protest, but Ed said firmly, "This may be important, Mrs. Tate. Jud's a good serviceman, he won't upset anything."

"I hope not," she said. "It does run real good."

Jud turned it on and watched it for a minute. "It sure does," he said. "And in this location, too."

He took the back off and looked inside. After a minute he let go a long low whistle.

"What is it?" said Ed, going closer.

"Damnedest thing," said Jud. "Look at that wiring. He's loused up the circuits, all right—and there's a couple tubes in there like I never saw before." He was getting excited. "I'd have to tear the whole thing down to see what he's really done, but somehow he's boosted the power and the sensitivity way up. The guy must be a wizard."

Mrs. Tate said loudly, "You ain't tearing anything down, young man. You just leave it like it is."

I said, "What about that dingus on the side?"

"Frankly," said Jud, "that stops me. It's got a wire to it, but it don't seem to hitch up anywhere in the set." He turned the set off and began to poke gently around. "See here, this little hairline wire that comes down and bypasses the whole chassis? It cuts in here on the live line, so it draws power whether the set's on or not. But I don't see how it can have anything to do with the set operating."

"Well, take it out," said Ed. "We'll take it down to the shop and see whether we can make anything of it."

"Okay," said Jud, ignoring Mrs. Tate's cry of protest. He reached in and for the first time actually touched the enigmatic little unit, feeling for what held it to the side of the case.

There was a sharp pop and a small bright flare, and Jud leaped back with a howl. He put his scorched fingers in his mouth and his eyes watered. Mrs. Tate cried, "Now, you've done it, you've ruined my teevee!" There was a smell of burning on the air. The girls came running out of the kitchen and the old dog barked and clawed the screen.

One of the girls said, "What happened?"

"I don't know," Jud said. "The goddamned thing just popped like a bomb when I touched it."

There was a drift of something gray—ash or dust—and that was all. Even the hairline wire was consumed.

"It looks," I said, "as though Mr. Jones didn't want anybody else to look over his technological achievements."

Ed grunted. He looked puzzled and irresolute. "Hurt the set any?" he asked.

"Dunno," said Jud, and turned it on.

It ran as perfectly as before.

"Well," said Mrs. Tate, "thank goodness."

"Yeah," said Ed. "I guess that's all, then. What do you say, Hank? We might as well go."

I said we might as well. We climbed back into Ed's car and

started—the second time for me—back down Tunkhannock Ridge.

Jud was still sucking his fingers. He wondered out loud if the funny-looking tubes in the set would explode the same way if you touched them, and I said probably. Ed didn't say anything. He was frowning deeply. I asked him what he thought about it.

"I'm trying to figure the angle," he said. "This Bill Jones. What does he get out of it? What does he *make?* On the television gag, I mean. People usually want to get paid for work like that."

Jud offered the opinion that the man was a nut. "One of these crazy guys like in the movies, always inventing things that make trouble. But I sure would like to know what he done to that set."

"Well," said Ed, "I can't see what more we can do. He did come back for the girl, and apart from that he hasn't broken any laws."

"Hasn't he?" I said, looking out the window. We were coming to the place where Doc had died. There was no sign of a storm today. Everything was bright, serene, peaceful. But I could feel the cold feeling of being watched. Someone, somewhere, knew me. He watched where I went and what I did, and decided whether or not to send the green lightning to slay me. It was a revelation, like the moments you have as a young child when you become acutely conscious of God. I began to shake. I wanted to crawl down in the back seat and hide. Instead I sat where I was and tried to keep the naked terror from showing too much. And I watched the sky. And nothing happened.

Ed Betts didn't mention it, but he began to drive faster and faster until I thought we weren't going to need any green lightning. He didn't slow down until we hit the valley. I think he would have been glad to get rid of me, but he had to haul me all the way back up Goat Hill to get my car. When he did let me off, he said gruffly,

"I'm not going to listen to you again till you've had a good twelve hours' sleep. And I need some myself. So long."

I went home, but I didn't sleep. Not right away. I told my assistant and right-hand man, Joe Streckfoos, that the paper was all his today, and then I got on the phone. I drove the local exchange crazy, but by about five o'clock that afternoon I had the information I wanted.

I had started with a map of the area on my desk. Not just

Newhale, but the whole area, with Buckhorn Mountain roughly at the center and showing the hills and valleys around its northern periphery. By five o'clock the map showed a series of red pencil dots. If you connected them together with a line they formed a sprawling, irregular, but unbroken circle drawn around Buckhorn, never exceeding a certain number of miles in distance from the peak.

Every pencil dot represented a television set that had within the last three years been serviced by a red-haired man—for free.

I looked at the map for a long time, and then I went out in the yard and looked up at Buckhorn. It seemed to me to stand very high, higher than I remembered. From flank to crest the green unbroken forest covered it. In the winter time men hunted there for bear and deer, and I knew there were a few hunting lodges, hardly more than shacks, on its lower slopes. These were not used in summer, and apart from the hunters no one ever bothered to climb those almost perpendicular sides, hanging onto the trees as onto a ladder, up to the fog and storm that plagued the summit.

There were clouds there now. It almost seemed that Buckhorn pulled them down over his head like a cowl, until the gray trailing edges hid him almost to his feet. I shivered and went inside and shut the door. I cleaned my automatic and put in a full clip. I made a sandwich and drank the last couple of drinks in last night's bottle. I laid out my boots and my rough-country pants and a khaki shirt. I set the alarm. It was still broad daylight. I went to bed.

The alarm woke me at eleven-thirty. I did not turn on any lamps. I don't know why, except that I still had that naked feeling of being watched. Light enough came to me anyhow from the intermittent sulfurous flares in the sky. There was a low mutter of thunder in the west. I put the automatic in a shoulder holster under my shirt, not to hide it but because it was out of the way there. When I was dressed I went downstairs and out the back door, heading for the garage.

It was quiet, the way a little town can be quiet at night. I could hear the stream going over the stones, and the million little songs of the crickets, the peepers, and the frogs were almost stridently loud.

Then they began to stop. The frogs first, in the marshy places besides the creek. Then the crickets and the peepers. I stopped too, in the black dark beside a clump of rhododendrons my

mother used to be almost tiresomely proud of. My skin turned cold and the hair bristled on the back of my neck and I heard soft padding footsteps and softer breathing on the heavy air.

Two people had waded the creek and come up into my yard.

There was a flare and a grumble in the sky and I saw them close by, standing on the grass, looking up at the unlighted house.

One of them was the girl Vadi, and she carried something in her hands. The other was the heavy-set dark man with the gun.

"It's okay," he told her. "He's sleeping. Get busy."

I slid the automatic into my palm and opened my mouth to speak, and then I heard her say:

"You won't give him a chance to get out?"

Her tone said she knew the answer to that one before she asked it. But he said with furious sarcasm:

"Why certainly, and then you can call the sheriff and explain why you burned the house down. And the hospital. Christ. I told Arnek you weren't to be trusted." He gave her a rough shove. "Get with it."

Vadi walked five careful paces away from him. Then very swiftly she threw away, in two different directions, whatever it was she carried. I heard the two things fall, rustling among grass and branches where it might take hours to find them even by daylight. She spun around. "Now," she said in a harsh defiant voice, "what are you going to do?"

There was a moment of absolute silence, so full of murder that the far-off lightning seemed feeble by comparison. Then he said:

"All right, let's get out of here."

She moved to join him, and he waited until she was quite close to him. Then he hit her. She made a small bleating sound and fell down. He started to kick her, and then I jumped out and hit him over the ear with the flat of the automatic. It was his turn to fall down.

Vadi got up on her hands and knees. She stared at me, sobbing a little with rage and pain. Blood was running from the corner of her mouth. I took the man's gun and threw it far off and it splashed in the creek. Then I got down beside the girl.

"Here," I said. "Have my handkerchief."

She took it and held it to her mouth. "You were outside here all the time," she said. She sounded almost angry.

"It just happened that way. I still owe you thanks for my

life. And my house. Though you weren't so tender about the hospital."

"There was no one to be killed there. I made sure. A building one can always rebuild, but a life is different."

She looked at the unconscious man. Her eyes burned with that catlike brilliance in the lightning flares.

"I could kill him," she said, "with pleasure."

"Who is he?"

"My brother's partner." She glanced toward Buckhorn and the light went out of her eyes. Her head became bowed.

"Your brother sent you to kill me?"

"He didn't say—"

"But you knew."

"When Marlin came with me I knew."

She had begun to tremble.

"Do you make a career of arson?"

"Arson? Oh. The setting of fires. No. I am a chemist. And I wish I—"

She caught herself fiercely and would not finish.

I said, "Those things are listening devices, then."

She had to ask me what I meant. Her mind was busy with some thorny darkness of its own.

"The little gadgets your brother put in the television sets," I said. "I figured that's what they were when I saw how they were placed. A string of sentry posts all around the center of operations, little ears to catch every word of gossip, because if any of the local people get suspicious they're bound to talk about it and so give warning. He heard my calls this afternoon, didn't he? That's why he sent you. And he heard Doc and me at the Tates'. That's why—"

Moving with that uncanny swiftness of hers, she rose and ran away from me. It was like before. She ran fast, and I ran after her. She went splashing through the shallow stream and the water flew back against me, wetting my face, spattering my clothes. On the far bank I caught her, as I had before. But this time she fought me.

"Let me go," she said, and beat her hands against me. "Do you know what I've done for you? I've asked for the knife for myself. Let me go, you clumsy fool—"

I held her tighter. Her soft curls pressed against my cheek. Her body strove against me, and it was not soft but excitingly strong.

"—before I regret it," she said, and I kissed her.

It was strange, what happened then.

I've kissed girls who didn't want to be kissed, and I've kissed girls who didn't like me particularly. I've kissed a couple of the touch-me-not kind who shrink from any sort of physical contact. I've had my face slapped. But I never had a girl *withdraw* from me the way she did. It was like something closing, folding up, shutting every avenue of contact, and yet she never moved. In fact she had stopped moving entirely. She just stood with my arms around her and my lips on hers, and kind of a coldness came out of her, a rejection so total I couldn't even get mad. I was shocked, and very much puzzled, but you can't get mad at a thing that isn't personal. This was too deep for that. And suddenly I thought of the boy.

"A different breed," I said. "Worlds apart. Is that it?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "Worlds apart."

And the coldness spread through me. I stood on the bank of the stream in the warm night, the bank where I had stood ten thousand times before, boy and man, and saw the strange shining of her eyes, and I was more than cold, I was afraid. I stepped back away from her, still holding her but in a different way.

"It wasn't like this," I said, "between your brother and Sally Tate."

The girl-thing said, "My brother Arnek is a corrupt man."

"Vadi," I said. "Where is Hryllianu?"

The girl-thing looked past my shoulder and said, "Marlin is running away."

I looked too, and it was so. The big man's head was harder than I had thought. He had got up, and I saw him blundering rapidly away along the side of my house, heading for the street.

"Well," I said, "he's gone now. You must have come in a car, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"Good," I said. "It won't be challenged as soon as mine. We'll take it."

"Where are you going?" she asked, catching her breath sharply.

"Where I was going when you stopped me. Up Buckhorn."

"Oh, no," she said. "No, you can't, you mustn't." She was human again, and afraid. "I saved your life, isn't that enough for you? You'll never live to climb Buckhorn and neither will I if—"

"Did Sally and the boy live to climb it?" I asked her, and

she hung her head and nodded. "Then you'll see to it that we do."

"But tonight!" she said in a panic. "Not tonight!"

"What's so special about tonight?" She didn't answer, and I shook her. "What's going on up there?"

She didn't answer that, either. She said with sudden fierceness, "All right, then, come on. Climb Buckhorn and see. And when you're dying, remember that I tried to stop you."

She didn't speak again. She led me without protest to the car parked on the dirt road. It was a panel truck. By day it would have been a dirty blue.

"He's going to kill them, isn't he?" I said. "He killed Doc. You admit he wants to kill me. What's going to save Sally and the child?"

"You torture me," she said. "This is a world of torture. Go on. Go on, and get it done."

I started the panel truck. Like the television set, it worked better than it had any business to. It fled with uncanny strength and swiftness over the dirt roads toward Buckhorn, soft-sprung as a cloud, silent as a dream.

"It's a pity," I said. "Your brother has considerable genius."

She laughed. A bitter laugh. "He couldn't pass his second year of technical training. That's why he's here."

She looked at Buckhorn as though she hated the mountain, and Buckhorn, invisible behind a curtain of storm, answered her look with a sullen curse, spoken in thunder.

I stopped at the last gas station on the road and honked the owner out of bed and told him to call Sheriff Betts and tell him where I'd gone. I didn't dare do it myself for fear Vadi would get away from me. The man was very resentful about being waked up. I hoped he would not take out his resentment by forgetting to call.

"You're pretty close to Buckhorn," I told him. "The neck you save may be your own."

I left him to ponder that, racing on toward the dark mountain in that damned queer car that made me feel like a character in one of my own bad dreams, with the girl beside me—the damned queer girl who was not quite human.

The road dropped behind us. We began to climb the knees of the mountain. Vadi told me where to turn, and the road became a track, and the track ended in the thick woods beside a rickety little lodge the size of a piano-box, with a garage behind it. The garage only looked rickety. The headlights showed up new and sturdy timbers on the inside.

I cut the motor and the lights and reached for the hand-brake. Vadi must have been set on a hair-trigger waiting for that moment. I heard her move and there was a snap as though she had pulled something from a clip underneath the dashboard. The door on her side banged open.

I shouted to her to stop and sprang out of the truck to catch her. But she was already out of the garage, and she was waiting for me. Just as I came through the door there was a bolt of lightning, bright green, small and close at hand. I saw it coming. I saw her dimly in the backflash and knew that in some way she had made the lightning with a thing she held in her hand. Then it hit me and that was all.

When I came to I was alone and the rain was falling on me just the way it had on Doc. . . .

But I wasn't dead.

I crawled around and finally managed to get up, feeling heavy and disjointed. My legs and arms flopped around as though the coordinating controls had been burned out. I stood inside the garage out of the rain, rubbing my numb joints and thinking.

All the steam had gone out of me. I didn't want to climb Buckhorn Mountain any more. It looked awfully black up there, and awfully lonesome, and God alone knew what was going on under the veil of cloud and storm that hid it. The lightning flashes—real sky-made lightning—showed me the dripping trees going right up into nothing, and the wind thrashing them, and then the following thunder cracked my eardrums. The rain hissed, and I thought, it's crazy for one man to go up there alone.

Then I thought about Sally Tate and the little red-headed kid, and I thought how Ed Betts might already be up there somewhere, plowing his way through the woods looking for me. I didn't know how long I'd been out.

I made sure I still had my gun, and I did have. I wished I had a drink, but that was hopeless. So I started out. I didn't go straight up the mountain. I figured the girl would have had time to find her brother and give him warning, and that he might be looking for me to come that way. I angled off to the east, where I remembered a ravine that might give me some cover. I'd been up Buckhorn before, but only by daylight, with snow on the ground and a couple of friends with me, and not looking for anything more sinister than a bear.

I climbed the steep flank of the mountain, leaning almost

into it, worming and floundering and pulling my way between the trees. The rain fell and soaked me. The thunder was a monstrous presence, and the lightning was a great torch that somebody kept tossing back and forth so that sometimes you could see every vein of every leaf on the tree you were fighting with, and sometimes it was so dark that you knew the sun and stars hadn't been invented yet. I lost the ravine. I only knew I was still going up. There wasn't any doubt about that. After a while the rain slacked off and almost stopped.

In an interval between crashes of thunder I heard voices. They were thin and far away. I tried to place them, and when I thought I had them pegged I started toward them. The steep pitch of the ground fell away into a dizzying downslope and I was almost running into a sort of long shallow trough, thickly wooded, its bottom hidden from any view at all except one directly overhead. And there were lights in it, or at least a light.

I slowed down and went more carefully, hoping the storm would cover any noise I made.

The voices went on, and now I could hear another sound, and scrinch and screek of metal rubbing on metal.

I was on the clearing before I knew it. And it wasn't a clearing at all really, just one of those natural open places where the soil is too thin to support trees and runs to brush instead. It wasn't much more than ten feet across. Almost beside me were a couple of tents so cleverly hidden among the trees that you practically had to fall on them, as I did, to find them at all.

From one of them came the sleepy sobbing of a child.

In the small clearing Vadi and Arnek were watching a jointed metal mast build itself up out of a pit in the ground. The top of it was already out of sight in the cloud but it was obviously taller than the trees. The lamp was on the ground beside the pit.

The faces of Vadi and her brother were both angry, both set and obstinate. Perhaps it was their mutual fury that made them seem less human, or more unhuman, than ever, the odd bone-structure of cheek and jaw accentuated, the whole head elongated, the silver-red hair fairly bristling, the copper-colored eyes glinting with that unpleasantly catlike brilliance in the light. They had been quarreling, and they still were, but not in English. Arnek had a look like a rattlesnake.

Vadi, I thought, was frightened. She kept glancing at the tents, and in a minute the big man, Marlin, came out of one

of them. He was pressing a small bandage on the side of his head, over his ear. He looked tired and wet and foul-tempered, as though he had not had an easy time getting back to base.

He started right in on Vadi, cursing her because of what she had done.

Arnek said in English, "I didn't ask her to come here, and I'm sending her home tonight."

"That's great," Marlin said. "That's a big help. We'll have to move our base anyway now."

"Maybe not," said Arnek defiantly. He watched the slim mast stretching up and up with a soft screeking of its joints.

"You're a fool," said Marlin, in a tone of cold and bitter contempt. "You started this mess, Arnek. You had to play around with that girl and make a kid to give the show away. Then you pull that half-cocked trick with those guys in the station wagon and you can't even do that right. You kill the one but not the other. And then *she* louses up the only chance we got left. You know how much money we're going to lose? You know how long it'll take us to find a location half as good as this? You know what I ought to do?"

Arnek's voice was sharp, but a shade uncertain. "Oh, stop bitching and get onto those scanners. All we need is another hour and then they can whistle. And there are plenty of mountains."

"Are there?" said Marlin, and looked again at Vadi. "And how long do you think she'll keep her mouth shut at *your* end?"

He turned and walked back into the tent. Arnek looked uncertainly at Vadi and then fixed his attention on the mast again. Vadi's face was the color of chalk. She started once toward the tent and Arnek caught her roughly and spoke to her in whatever language they used, and she stopped.

I slid around the back of the tents to the one Marlin was in. There was a humming and whining inside. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled carefully over the wet grass between the tents, toward the front. The mast apparently made its last joint because it stopped and Arnek said something to Vadi and they bent over what seemed to be a sunken control box in the ground. I took my chance and whipped in through the tent flap.

I didn't have long to look around. The space inside was crammed with what seemed to be electronic equipment. Marlin was sitting hunched up on a stool in front of a big panel with a dozen or so little screens on it like miniature television

monitors. The screens, I just had time to see, showed an assortment of views of Buckhorn and the surrounding areas, and Marlin was apparently, by remote control, rotating one by one the distant receivers that sent the images to the screens. They must have been remarkably tight-beamed, because they were not much disturbed by static. I knew now how the eye of God had watched Doc and me on Tunkhannock Ridge.

I didn't know yet how the lightning-bolts were hurled, but I was pretty sure Ed Betts would get one if his car showed up on a scanner screen, and who would be the wiser? Poor Ed hit by lightning just like old Doc, and weren't the storms something fierce this summer?

Marlin turned around and saw it wasn't Arnek. He moved faster than I would have thought possible. He scooped up the light stool he was sitting on and threw it at me, leaping sideways himself in a continuation of the same movement. In the second in which I was getting my head out of the way of the stool he pulled a gun. He had had a spare, just as he must have had a car stashed somewhere in or near the town.

He did not quite have time to fire. I shot him twice through the body. He dropped but I didn't know if he was dead. I kicked the gun out of his hand and jumped to stand flat against the canvas wall beside the front flap, not pressing against it. The canvas was light-proof, and the small lamps over the control panels did not throw shadows.

Arnek did not come in.

After a second or two I got nervous. I could hear him shouting "Marlin! Marlin!" I ran into the narrow space behind the banks of equipment, being extremely careful how I touched anything. I did not see any power leads. It dawned on me that all this stuff had come up out of a pit in the ground like the mast and that the generator must be down there below. The floor wasn't canvas at all, but some dark gray material to which the equipment was bolted.

I got my knife out and started to slit the canvas at the back. And suddenly the inside of the tent was full of green fire. It sparked off every metal thing and jarred the gun out of my hand. It nearly knocked me out again. But I was shielded by the equipment from the full force of the shock. It flicked off again almost at once. I got the canvas cut and squirmed through it and then I put three or four shots at random into the back of the equipment just for luck.

Then I raced around the front and caught Arnek just as he was deciding not to enter the tent after all.

He had a weapon in his hand like the one Vadi had used on me. I said, "Drop it," and he hesitated, looking evil and upset. "Drop it!" I told him again, and he dropped it. "Now stand away," I said. "Walk out toward your sister, real slow, one step at a time."

He walked, and I picked up the weapon.

"Good," I said. "Now we can all relax." And I called Sally Tate, telling her it was safe to come out now.

All this time since I was where I could see her Vadi had stood with one hand over her mouth, looking up into the mist.

Sally Tate came out of the other tent. She was carrying the boy, and both their faces were pale and puffy-eyed and streaked with tears.

"It's all right now," I said. "You can go—" I was going to say "home," and then there was a sound in the sky that was not wind or thunder, that was hardly a sound at all, but more of a great sigh. The air pressed down on me and the grass was flattened as by a down-driven wind and all the branches of the trees bowed. The mist rolled, boiled, was rent, torn apart, scattered.

Something had come to rest against the top of the mast.

Arnek turned and ran to Vadi and I did not stop him. I moved closer to Sally Tate, standing with her mouth open and her eyes big and staring.

The mast began to contract downward, bringing the thing with it.

I suppose I knew then what the thing was. I just didn't want to admit it. It was cylindrical and slender, about fifty feet long, with neither wings nor jets. I watched it come slowly and gracefully down, attached by its needle-sharp nose to the magnetic grapple on top of the mast. The mast acted as automatic guide and stabilizer, dropping the ship into a slot between the trees as neatly as you would drop a slice of bread into the slot of a toaster.

And all the time the bitter breath of fear was blowing on me and little things were falling into place in my mind and I realized that I had known the answer for some time and had simply refused to see it.

A port opened in the side of the ship. And as though that was the final symbolic trigger I needed, I got the full impact

of what I was seeing. Suddenly the friendly protecting sky seemed to have been torn open above me as the veiling cloud was torn, and through the rent the whole Outside poured in upon me, the black freezing spaces of the galaxy, the blaze and strangeness of a billion billion suns. I shrank beneath that vastness. I was nothing, nobody, an infinitesimal fleck in a cosmos too huge to be borne. The stars had come too close. I wanted to get down and howl and grovel like a dog.

No wonder Arnek and Vadi and the boy were queer. They were not mutants—they were not even that Earthly. They came from another world.

A little ladder had extended itself downward from the port. A man came briskly to the ground and spoke to Arnek. He resembled Arnek except that he was dressed in a single close-fitting garment of some dark stuff. Arnek pointed to me, speaking rapidly. The man turned and looked at me, his body expressing alarm. I felt childish and silly standing there with my little gun. Lone man of Earth at an incredible Thermopylae, saying, "You shall not land."

All the time Arnek and the stranger had been talking there had been other activities around the ship. A hatch in the stern had opened and now from both hatches people began to come out helter-skelter as though haste was the chief necessity. There were men and women both. They all looked human. Slightly odd, a little queer perhaps, but human. They were different types, different colors, sizes, and builds, but they all looked a little excited, a little scared, considerably bewildered by the place in which they found themselves. Some of the women were crying. There were maybe twenty people in all.

I understood then exactly what Arnek and Marlin had been up to and it seemed so grotesquely familiar and prosaic that I began to laugh.

"Wetbacks," I said aloud. "That's what you're doing, smuggling aliens."

Aliens. Yes indeed.

It did not seem so funny when I thought about it.

The stranger turned around and shouted an order. The men and women stopped, some of them still on the ladders were shoved aside and eight men in uniform jumped out, with weapons in their hands.

Sally Tate let go one wild wavering shriek. The child fell out of her arms. He sat on the wet ground with the wind knocked out of him so he couldn't cry, blinking in shocked dismay. Sally tottered. Her big strong healthy body was sunken and collapsed,

every muscle slack. She turned and made a staggering lunge for the tent and fell partly in through the doorway, crawled the rest of the way like a hurt dog going under a porch, and lay there with the flap pulled over her head.

I didn't blame her. I don't even know what obscure force kept me from joining her.

Of the eight men, five were not human. Two of them not even remotely.

I can't describe them. I can't remember what they looked like, not clearly.

Let's be honest. I don't *want* to remember.

I suppose if you were used to things like that all your life it would be different. You wouldn't think anything about it.

I was not used to things like that. I knew that I never would be, not if we ourselves achieved space-flight tomorrow. I'm too old, too set in the familiar pattern of existence that has never been broken for man since the beginning. Perhaps others are more resilient. They're welcome to it.

I picked up the boy and ran.

It came on again to rain. I ran down Buckhorn Mountain, carrying the boy in my arms. And the green lightning came after us, hunting us along the precipitous slope.

The boy got his breath back. He asked me why we had to die. I said never mind, and kept on running.

I fell with him and rolled to the bottom of a deep gully. We were shaken. We lay in the dripping brush looking up at the lightning lancing across the night above us. After a while it stopped. I picked him up again and crept silently along the gully and onto the slope below.

And nearly got shot by Ed Betts and a scratch posse, picking their cautious way up the mountainside.

One of the men took the child out of my arms. I hung onto Ed and said inanely, "They're landing a load of wetbacks."

"Up there?"

"They've got a ship," I told him. "They're aliens, Ed. Real aliens."

I began to laugh again. I didn't want to. It just seemed such a hellishly clever play on words that I couldn't help it.

Fire bloomed suddenly in the night above us. A second later the noise of the explosion reached us.

I stopped laughing. "They must be destroying their installations. Pulling out. Marlin said they'd have to. Christ. And Sally is still up there."

I ran back up the mountain, clambering bearlike through the trees. The others followed.

There was one more explosion. Then I came back to the edge of the clearing. Ed was close behind me. I don't think any of the others were really close enough to see. There was a lot of smoke. The tents were gone. Smoking trees were slowly toppling in around the edges of a big raw crater in the ground. There was no trace of the instruments that had been in the tents.

The ship was still there. The crew, human and unhuman, were shoving the last of the passengers back into the ship. There was an altercation going on beside the forward port.

Vadi had her arm around Sally Tate. She was obviously trying to get her aboard. I thought I understood then why Sally and the boy were still alive. Probably Vadi had been insisting that her brother send them along where they wouldn't be any danger to him, and he hadn't quite had the nerve to cross her. He was looking uncertain now, and it was the officer who was making the refusal. Sally herself seemed to be in a stupor.

Vadi thrust past the officer and led Sally toward the ladder. And Sally went, willingly. I like to remember that, now, when she's gone.

I think—I hope—that Sally's all right out there. She was younger and simpler than I, she could adapt. I think she loved Bill Jones—Arnek—enough to leave her child, leave her family, leave her world, and still be happy near him.

Ed and I started to run across the clearing. Ed had not said a word. But his face was something to look at.

They saw us coming but they didn't bother to shoot at us. They seemed in a tremendous hurry. Vadi screamed something, and I was sure it was in English and a warning to me, but I couldn't understand it. Then she was gone inside the ship and so were Arnek and Sally and the officer and crewmen, and the ladders went up and the ports shut.

The mooring mast began to rise and so did the ship, and the trees were bent with the force of its rising.

I knew then what the warning was.

I grabbed Ed and bodily hauled him back. The ship didn't have to be very high. Only above the trees. I hauled him as far as blind instinct told me I could go and then I yelled, "Get down! Get down!" to everybody within earshot and made frantic motions. It all took possibly thirty seconds. Ed understood and we flopped and hugged the ground.

The mast blew.

Dirt, rocks, pieces of tree rained down around us. The shock

wave pounded our ears. A few moments later, derisive and powerful, a long thin whistling scream tore upward across the sky, and faded, and was gone.

We got up after a while and collected the muddy and startled posse and went to look at what was left of the clearing. There was nothing. Sally Tate was gone as though she had never existed. There was no shred of anything left to prove that what Ed and I had seen was real.

We made up a story, about a big helicopter and an alien racket. It wasn't too good a story, but it was better than the truth. Afterward, when we were calmer, Ed and I tried to figure it out for ourselves. How was it done, I mean, and why.

The "how" was easy enough, given the necessary technology. Pick a remote but not too inconveniently isolated spot, like the top of Buckhorn Mountain. Set up your secret installation —a simple one, so compact and carefully hidden that hunters could walk right over it and never guess it was there when it was not in use. On nights when conditions are right—that is to say, when the possibility of being observed is nearest to zero—run your cargo in and land it. We figured that the ship we saw wasn't big enough to transport that many people very far. We figured it was a landing-craft, ferrying the passengers down from a much bigger mother-ship way beyond the sky.

A star-ship. It sounded ridiculous when you said it. But we had seen the members of the crew. It is generally acknowledged by nearly everybody now that there is no intelligent life of any terrestrial sort on the other planets of our own system. So they had to come from farther out.

Why? That was a tougher one to solve. We could only guess at it.

"There must be a hell of a big civilization out there," said Ed, "to build the ships and travel in them. They obviously know we're here."

Uneasy thought.

"Why haven't they spoken to us?" he wondered. "Let us in on it too."

"I suppose," I said, "they're waiting for us to develop space-flight on our own. Maybe it's a kind of test you have to pass to get in on their civilization. Or maybe they figure we're so backward they don't want to have anything to do with us, all our wars and all. Or both. Pick your own reason."

"Okay," said Ed. "But why dump their people on us like that? And how come Marlin, one of our own people, was in on it?"

"There *are* Earthmen who'll do anything for money," I said. "Like Marlin. It'd not be too hard to contact men like him, use them as local agents."

"As for why they dump their people on us," I went on, "it probably isn't legal, where they came from. Remember what Marlin said about Vadi? *How long will she keep her mouth shut at* your *end?* My guess is her brother was a failure at home and got into a dirty racket, and she was trying to get him out of it. There must be other worlds like Earth, too, or the racket wouldn't be financially sound. Not enough volume."

"But the wetbacks," Ed said. "Were they failures, too? People who couldn't compete in the kind of society they must have? And how the hell many do you suppose they've run in on us already?"

I've wondered about that myself. How many aliens has Marlin, and probably others like him, taken off the star-boats and dressed and instructed and furnished with false papers, in return doubtless for all the valuables the poor devils had? How many of the people you see around you every day, the anonymous people that just look a little odd somehow, the people about whom you think briefly that they don't even look human —the queer ones you notice and then forget—how many of them *aren't* human at all in the sense that we understand that word?

Like the boy.

Sally Tate's family obviously didn't want him back. So I had myself appointed his legal guardian, and we get on fine together. He's a bright kid. His father may have been a failure in his own world, but on ours the half-breed child has an I.Q. that would frighten you. He's also a good youngster. I think he takes after his aunt.

I've thought of getting married since then, just to make a better home for the boy, and to fill up a void in my own life I'm beginning to feel. But I haven't quite done it yet. I keep thinking maybe Vadi will come back some day, walking with swift grace down the side of Buckhorn Mountain. I do not think it is likely, but I can't quite put it out of my mind. I remember the cold revulsion that there was between us, and then I wonder if that feeling would go on, or whether you couldn't get used to that idea of differentness in time.

The trouble is, I guess, that Vadi kind of spoiled me for the general run of women.

I wonder what her life is like in Hryllíannu, and where it is. Sometimes on the bitter frosty nights when the sky is dia-

mond-clear and the Milky Way glitters like the mouth of hell across it, I look up at the stars and wonder which one is hers. And old Buckhorn sits black and silent in the north, and the deep wounds on his shoulder are healing into grassy scars. He says nothing. Even the thunder now has a hollow sound. It is merely thunder.

But, as Arnek said, there are plenty of mountains.

*T*here's been a lot of talk, from Charles Fort to William Tenn, about how we are a "secretly supervised" planet. Perhaps we are. The possibility has also been raised, and more often, that we are being studied, coldly and dispassionately, by alien intelligences who feel they could do a better job with this Earth than we've done 'til now. Perhaps they have a point.

FREAK SHOW

by
MIRIAM ALLEN de FORD

"WHO RUNS this outfit?" Rasi asked the first roustabout he saw on the carnival lot. He flicked a thumb toward the poster announcing the Human Oddities.

"Spencer," grunted the roustabout.

"Is he around?"

"Don't know why not."

Rasi lifted the flap of the tent, and found it empty. He walked toward the cluster of trailers drawn up on the new

grounds an hour before. He had followed the carnival all night from its pitch of yesterday.

He knocked at the door of the nearest trailer. It opened a crack and a colorless eye in a pink face crowned by snow-white fluffy hair peered out at him. He had been lucky; this must be one of the Oddities.

"Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Spencer?"

A pink arm, apparently unclothed, pointed to the left.

"That's his car, over there—the green one with the window curtains," said a husky feminine voice. "But brother, watch your step. He's mad as hops. Goofoo the Nuthead didn't show up today. Blotto again, I wouldn't wonder. Prob'ly locked in the hoosegow at Cedartown."

The door closed on Rasi's thanks.

Goofoo—so that was the name, the stage name at least, of the likely-looking one he'd picked up after the carnival closed last night in that other town. Three drinks from his special flask, and Goofoo had been easy to deposit in a nearby cornfield to sleep it off for 24 hours or so. Everything was working out right.

Spencer came to the door with an irritated frown, but at least he was dressed. It was easier to look at them when they were covered. Rasi had been intensively trained and explicitly briefed, his camouflage was perfect, but nobody can control his psychological reactions completely.

"Mr. Spencer?" he said. "It's about a job. I was told there might be a vacancy."

The heavy-set middle-aged man with a shock of greying hair stared at him.

"Who told you?" he growled. "Anyway, I run a freak show. There'd be nothing for you."

"If I may come in for a moment—"

The manager opened the door grudgingly and stepped aside. It was a neat little place, shipshape and compact—a lot better, Rasi guessed, than the spot that would be allotted to him if he should be taken on.

Spencer sat down on the bunk and waved him to the chair.

"Make it snappy," he said. "I've bailed out that drunken idiot for the last time. But you couldn't take his place."

Rasi did not answer. Instead, he took off his hat, then his wig. Then slowly he removed the mask, with its unobservable transparency in the middle of the forehead. Spencer sat with his mouth open, his face turning slightly green. Rasi pulled off

his gloves. He stooped and began to unfasten his shoes. Spencer put up his hand.

"That's enough." His voice sounded thick. "I don't know. I thought I'd seen everything. It might be too much—I don't want to have to be paying damages to women who have miscarriages after they see you.

"Good God, man, how have you got by up to now?"

"With the mask, and the wig, and shoes and gloves," said Rasi calmly. What would Spencer think, he reflected, if he knew that his own appearance was as revolting to his visitor as the visitor's could possibly be to him? And there were so many more of Spencer's kind!

"Then why do you— And why pick this outfit? If you can put it across at all, you could be a headliner with the Biggest Show on Earth."

"That's just what I don't want. I didn't choose to be like this. The fewer people I make sick the better. But I have to do something; I've come to the end of my money. So I have to use my only asset."

Spencer was recovering; the showman was taking over. He gazed meditatively at Rasi.

"If the costume was right—" he murmured. "And with a good spiel. You can't talk—that's it. You're a—I've got it! You're a Martian captured alive from a flying saucer that crashed. How would that do?"

Rasi repressed his amusement.

"Wouldn't your—wouldn't the government be interested in that? That Air Force project that's investigating?"

"They wouldn't bother. Just the fact that you're a carny attraction would prove to them that you're a phony. That whole flying saucer business is just bushwa, anyway. O. K.?"

"O. K."

"So let's talk money. You understand this isn't any million-dollar set-up, don't you? We can't pay much. And this is just a try-out."

"When you've got the job, somewhere in the Middle West of North America, report in," the Director had said. "Then we'll give you your detailed instructions about the later sowing."

"I feel like a beginner."

"I know what you mean. But a beginner wouldn't have got this assignment; we picked you from the whole Service. This is the big one, Rasi. Time's running short; we've got to get out of here. The ships won't last much longer. They were hardly fit to take off in after the Antea disaster. And you're perfect;

you've got it all down, the language, the background, everything. With the mask, I defy any of them to guess."

"That's just it. If I'm to appear half of the time looking like a human being—"

"Like what *we* call a human being Rasi: don't forget that. They call themselves human beings too, remember."

"Well, whatever. Isn't there danger I'll be recognized before I can get things set?"

"By whom? You must realize they're a lopsided lot. They've progressed mechanically, but they're primitives psychically and socially. And like all primitives, they're a mass of conceited arrogance. There's not one in a million of them that honestly believes, deep down, they aren't alone in the universe. To them, you'll be just a freak—especially when we've taken the precaution to keep you away from the most populous centers. That's why we picked this method."

"Am I permitted to ask if that is the only reason you chose that particular sector?"

"No, not the only one. The *buad* will radiate fastest from the center of a continent. And the middle of summer is the fastest-growing season."

"But then that will leave the whole Southern Hemisphere unaffected. Shouldn't there be two of us—one in each hemisphere?"

"We think not. It will spread in both directions. By the time their summer's over, it will be spring in the southern half and the *buad* will proliferate there."

"And when I've sowed all of it, you'll recall me? Excuse me for being insistent, Director, but I've got my sex-group and our offspring to consider."

"You'll be recalled unless you get yourself killed first."

Rasi had expected to find it hard to associate with the rest of the freaks. But they differed so little from the normal population that his revulsion was lost in his general qualms. And they did not seem to shrink from him as he had anticipated—as the public shrank in horror. He found out why very soon.

Within a few days he had discovered that though freaks such as the Fat Lady (why was there never a Fat Gentleman?) or the Living Skeleton or the albino girl who first directed him to Spencer were formed by nature, and such as the Tattooed Man and the Fire Swallower were permanently modified by outside agencies, the Human Oddities included also down-right fakes, like Roseanne.

Roseanne was the Headless Girl, with nothing above her very

decollete gown but a network of tubes and pipes. She was done with mirrors. She and the albino, whose name was Ethel, roomed together. The first night, when the last show was over, Roseanne strolled over to him.

"Hi!" she called. "Welcome to the madhouse. Where you sleeping?"

That had been his chief worry. He would take willingly the lowest pay that wouldn't arouse suspicion, but he must have a place of his own where he could have privacy. He needn't have bothered. He inherited the trailer which had accommodated Goofoo. Every man in the show had served notice at the beginning of the season that he was quitting if he had to bunk with Goofoo. The place was filthy, but he could clean it out. He told Roseanne where he was.

"We've got three days here," she said, "so there's no packing to do tonight. We thought, Ethel and me, maybe you'd like to come over to our joint for a nightcap. After you've got your disguise off, of course—Ethel's cat'd have her kittens too early if she got a sight of you the way you are!"

Then he understood: they took it for granted that the mask, in which Ethel had seen him that morning, was his real face. A weight of apprehension dropped from him.

"Natch!" he said. "Be there in ten minutes."

"Not that your get-up isn't a humdinger," Roseanne added. "It would fool smarter folks than these yokels. It almost scares *me*."

"Too good for this crummy small-time carny, if you ask me," commented Ethel in her husky voice. Just being an albino wasn't enough of a show; she danced and sang torch songs too.

Before he left the trailer he activated the set implanted at the base of his brain and reported to the Director. Reception was pretty good.

He noted carefully in his memory-bank the instructions for distributing the *buad*.

A single grain of *buad* was enough. Each time the carnival left for a new pitch, Rasi deposited a grain in the lot. It should begin proliferating within a day. The effects would start a week later, long after he was miles away. It spread so fast in all directions that it was impossible to trace it to any particular focus.

The weeks went on. Rasi watched anxiously for news. By this time there should be rumors, at least. The carnival season would end in less than two months more. Finally he could wait no longer: he put in an emergency call to the Director.

"You should not have called," said the Director sternly. "We had to risk one call to get you started, but we can't take a chance on having one of their astronomers get suspicious about unaccountable disturbances."

"I'm beginning to wonder—could the *buad* be too old?"

"It's all we have left, Rasi, after Antea. It was tested and passed. It's got to work.

"Are you having any other trouble?"

"Not to speak of—I'm having some difficulty keeping away from one of the female freaks, that's all."

Rasi could feel the vibrations of the Director's amusement.

"I won't tell your family. Just watch yourself."

"Oh, I am!"

But it wasn't so easy. Roseanne hung around all the time.

"I can't bear these real freaks," she told him. "I don't mean Ethel—she's O.K. The poor kid can't help being born without any pigment in her skin. But the men—ugh! After all, I don't belong in a joint like this. I've entertained in some swell night clubs. But I had a run of bad luck—"

And so on. All of which was gratifying, since it proved she didn't suspect him. But it kept him acting a part all the time.

He got nothing useful from his call to the Director. Either the *buad* would start working soon, or it was no good. Rasi turned cold; he knew what that would mean. If only Antea hadn't gone sour! Eight generations since their own home exploded, the few thousand survivors living and breeding in their ships and hunting desperately for a place where they could live, then locating Antea, and feeling that their troubles were over. A Preparer just like him had landed there, sowed the *buad*, waited till it softened up the inhabitants; and then they had taken over. Then barely a hundred years, with the ships slowly rusting in port, and the same thing all over again—a sun about to turn into a nova, a scramble for the ships, and out into space once more: but this time with ships that wouldn't last for another eight generations.

And now here was this perfect planet—and what was wrong with the *buad?* The fate of all of them depended on him alone; the Director didn't need to tell him that. Once, when he was very young and just starting training, he had asked why they needed the *buad*—why not just move in? Or why not ask to be allowed to colonize?—there weren't so many of them that they couldn't find an island nobody else wanted.

Because, he was told patiently, so far as they knew, there was no other race exactly like themselves—no other really

human race, was the way they put it. And xenophobia seemed to be a disease as widespread as the galaxy. They couldn't conquer a planet by force, with their own ingrown pacifism—and there wouldn't be enough of them anyway. There was no hope that they would be welcomed as colonists by any alien race.

The answer was the *buad,* the wonderful plant that was all they had saved of value from their ruined far-off home. There, everyone had grown up under its influence, and the mutation had bred true. Nobody knew how long ago in the dim past the *buad*'s strange properties had been discovered. Once sowed, the tiny, shining grains spread like wildfire, and as soon as the quick-growing plant was ripe its spores filled the air with an invisible impalpable dust, harmless to breathe, but with a specific effect on the nervous system. No one who breathed *buad*-dust could ever be belligerent or aggressive or angry again: there could be no wars or fights or murders in a *buad*-planted land. It had turned the fierce inhabitants of Antea in a few months into a friendly, receptive populace, and his people, freely welcomed, had settled there amicably. It would do the same for this planet —but not if the precious grains, so carefully preserved for so many centuries, were no longer viable.

Summer was passing. There were only a few weeks left before it would be too late. All day Rasi, in his proper person, cavorted and glowered and gestured as a captive Martian. (That was ironic: the planet they called Mars had long ago been visited and found unlivable.) When the last show was over he hurried to his trailer to put on the disguise. Not to mingle with the others would have made him too conspicuous. Fortunately he had become labeled as Roseanne's boy friend, and she saw to it that other women kept hands off. More fortunately, he managed to include Ethel in most of their meetings; his training had taught him the sex mores of these people, and he knew—so different from their own customs!—he would be safe from any embarrassing moments as long as there were three of them together.

And every time the carnival moved, before he left he planted the *buad.* He remembered the report of the Preparer on Antea: within a week of his first planting, he had begun to hear rumors of its effects. Intertribal conflicts had ceased, enemies embraced, violent crime dropped to zero, even predatory animals, though not so strongly influenced, had grown less ferocious; yet the Anteans had lost none of their natural liveliness and enterprise, any more than his own people had done.

But there were no such rumors here. This race had a primi-

tive sort of communication, by sight and sound, which reported all untoward developments; it remained silent as to this. Indeed—and Rasi's heart sank—in the very town where he had planted *buad* three weeks before, a conflict had broken out between a group of workers and their employers that ended in a pitched battle and the calling of professional soldiers to intervene. That, he knew, would have been totally impossible if the *buad* grain had been good. But there was nothing more he could do. There was still one faint hope: perhaps some of the grains were still alive, even if the rest were not, and even one successful planting would be enough. All he could do was to keep on until the dwindling supply was exhausted. Precious as it was, he took to planting two or three grains instead of one at a time.

On a night in what they called August, the carnival packed to move to its next pitch. Rasi, ready and waiting for his trailer to be hitched to a truck, stepped as usual into the blackest shadow he could find, the seed pouch in his hand. He was at the edge of the lot, where a spreading tree cast a broad black shade. He walked to it softly, looking carefully around to make sure he was alone, and stooped to soften the earth beneath the tree.

There was a mere whisper of sound. He stood and listened—was it only the leaves moving in the wind? Across the lot were the lights and bustle of departure; they would get to him in a few minutes; he must hurry. He stooped again, scooped out a tiny hole, laid three grains of *buad* within it, and turned to go.

If his sight and hearing had been like theirs he would have missed it: he must indeed have missed it all the times before. Quicker than they could move, he reached down, and his hand caught a wrist and clamped on to it.

He pulled the struggling figure up and dragged the intruder away from the shadow.

It was Roseanne.

She tried to clench her fist, but he forced the fingers open so that the bits of dirt fell into his glove. Even in the darkness he could see the three shining grains of *buad.*

She stopped struggling and stood still.

"So you know," Rasi said quietly. "You know who I am and what I am doing here."

She gazed at him calmly.

"Not enough," she answered, and he noticed the different

intonation from that of the raucous Roseanne he knew. "Not just who or just what—but enough to stop you."

He *could* not grow angry; he came of a race conditioned by breathing *buad*. But his voice shook.

"You have followed me every time," he accused her, "and undone my plantings."

"Every time."

"But why? Why, when you didn't even understand?"

"Because I knew from the beginning you were alien—you were not one of us. And I knew whatever you were doing here must be for your own ends, which are not ours."

"Listen," he said desperately, "we've been friends—"

"Have we?"

"I realize now you were only keeping me under surveillance. But let me explain."

"Go on."

"My people have no home. We could find one here, if you would let us come. This plant, this plant whose seeds you have dug up and thrown away—"

"Not thrown away: destroyed."

The last hope died, that she had scattered them where some might sprout. But he went on, heavily.

"They could do no harm. All they would do would be to spread a dust of spores that makes those who breathe it kind and gentle. Is that so bad?"

"Bad enough, when it means that then this planet would be softened to welcome an alien invasion."

"But what do you care?" he cried. "We wouldn't hurt you. All we want is a quiet spot where the few thousands there are left of us could live in peace."

"This is *our* planet," Roseanne said, and her voice was hard. "We got here first."

She laughed suddenly.

"Did you honestly think I was fooled by that mask and wig and all the rest? It was so easy to deceive a cheap carny entertainer, wasn't it? It never occurred to you that I was *waiting* for you to turn up—I here and others of us in half a hundred other likely places."

"You mean you intercepted our communications—even between the ships? Who—who are you?"

She laughed again.

"Does it matter?" she mocked. "Who knows?—perhaps I'm from the F.B.I.!"

So. Their own information had been faulty, after all—this

race was far more developed than they had guessed. Developed so far as social mechanics went; psychologically they were just as primitive as he had expected. And now there would be no chance to change them by sowing the *buad*. His mission had failed. He and his people were doomed.

"Ready to roll, Rasi?"

It was Spencer's voice, from his car. Rasi looked around—the trucks and trailers were leaving the lot.

"We'll be along, Mr. Spencer," said Roseanne brightly. "See you tomorrow morning in Evartsville even if we have to take a bus to get there."

The manager smiled meanly at a private joke which Rasi understood. Whoever else was fooled, Spencer knew the Rasi on the platform of freaks was the real Rasi. If Roseanne hadn't found out yet—

"O. K., Roseanne, I can count on you," he chuckled. "Have a good time, kids. See you."

They could hear his sardonic laugh as he drove away. They were left alone on the deserted lot.

Rasi said nothing. He waited.

"I had no orders to turn you in," Roseanne said at last. "You know now it's no use your trying. We'll be here, watching. If I let you go, what will happen?"

"I'll be taken back to my ship. They'll send an autosub for me."

"What they—what we call a flying saucer?"

"I suppose so. One kind of them, anyway."

"And then what?"

"Then we'll go on searching, I suppose, till the ships or the *buad* give out. There's not much chance—and the *buad* grains are nearly all gone."

"You'll clear out of the skies here altogether?"

"Yes—there's nothing more in this system for us."

"Can you get word now to your ship? . . . Don't be foolish: we've intercepted you before."

He activated the transmitter to the Director's frequency.

Roseanne watched the autosub out of sight, till the last flicker of the revolving blue light was gone. Then, standing in the vacant carnival lot, she raised her wristwatch to her lips.

In another language, she said softly:

"Reporting. He's cleared out. The whole fleet should go very soon now; you can have them traced to make certain.

"That's the last. He was the only one of his kind, and we got rid of all the others. There are no invaders left.

"Except us, of course."

As I mention in the Introduction, a Lutheran priest, a friend of mine, once wondered aloud how we would welcome the Aliens when and if they did come . . . Zenna Henderson's story, in addition to describing a possible welcome, underlines one reality—it will be a lonely thing to be an Alien among us . . .

SUBCOMMITTEE

by

ZENNA HENDERSON

FIRST CAME the sleek black ships, falling out of the sky in patterned disorder, sowing fear as they settled like seeds on the broad landing field. After them, like bright butterflies, came the vividly colored slow ships that hovered and hesitated and came to rest scattered among the deadly dark ones.

"Beautiful!" sighed Serena, turning from the conference room window. "There should have been music to go with it."

"A funeral dirge," said Thorn. "Or a requiem. Or flutes before failure. Frankly, I'm frightened, Rena. If these conferences fail, all hell will break loose again. Imagine living another year like this past one."

"But the conference won't fail!" Serena protested. "If they're willing to consent to the conference, surely they'll be willing to work with us for peace."

"Their peace or ours?" asked Thorn, staring morosely out the window. "I'm afraid we're being entirely too naïve about this whole affair. It's been a long time since we finally were

able to say, 'Ain't gonna study war no more,' and made it stick. We've lost a lot of the cunning that used to be necessary in dealing with other people. We can't, even now, be sure this isn't a trick to get all our high command together in one place for a grand massacre."

"Oh, no!" Serena pressed close to him and his arm went around her. "They couldn't possibly violate—"

"Couldn't they?" Thorn pressed his cheek to the top of her ear. "We don't know, Rena. We just don't know. We have so little information about them. We know practically nothing about their customs—even less about their values or from what frame of reference they look upon our suggestion of suspending hostilities."

"But surely they must be sincere. They brought their families along with them. You did say those bright ships are family craft, didn't you?"

"Yes, they suggested we bring our families and they brought their families along with them, but it's nothing to give us comfort. They take them everywhere—even into battle."

"Into battle!"

"Yes. They mass the home craft off out of range during battles, but every time we disable or blast one of their fighters, one or more of the home craft spin away out of control or flare into nothingness. Apparently they're just glorified trailers, dependent on the fighters for motive power and everything else." The unhappy lines deepened in Thorn's face. "They don't know it, but even apart from their superior weapons, they practically forced us into this truce. How could we go on wiping out their war fleet when, with every black ship, those confounded posy-colored home craft fell too, like pulling petals off a flower. And each petal heavy with the lives of women and children."

Serena shivered and pressed closer to Thorn. "The conference must work. We just can't have war any more. You've got to get through to them. Surely, if we want peace and so do they—"

"We don't know what they want," said Thorn heavily. "Invaders, aggressors, strangers from hostile worlds—so completely alien to us—How can we ever hope to get together?"

They left the conference room in silence, snapping the button on the door knob before they closed it.

"Hey, lookit, Mommie! Here's a wall!" Splinter's five-year-old hands flattened themselves like grubby starfish against the greenish ripple of the ten-foot vitricrete fence that wound

through the trees and slid down the gentle curve of the hill. "Where did it come from? What's it for? How come we can't go play in the go'fish pond any more?"

Serena leaned her hand against the wall. "The people who came in the pretty ships wanted a place to walk and play, too. So the Construction Corp put the fence up for them."

"Why won't they let me play in the go'fish pond?" Splinter's brows bent ominously.

"They don't know you want to," said Serena.

"I'll tell them, then," said Splinter. He threw his head back. "Hey! Over there!" He yelled, his fists doubling and his whole body stiffening with the intensity of the shout. "Hey! I wanta play in the go'fish pond!"

Serena laughed. "Hush, Splinter. Even if they could hear you, they wouldn't understand. They're from far, far away. They don't talk the way we do."

"But maybe we could play," said Splinter wistfully.

"Yes," sighed Serena, "maybe you could play. If the fence weren't there. But you see, Splinter, we don't know what kind of—people—they are. Whether they would want to play. Whether they would be—nice."

"Well, how can we find out with that old wall there?"

"We can't, Splinter," said Serena. "Not with the fence there."

They walked on down the hill, Splinter's hand trailing along the wall.

"Maybe they're mean," he said finally. "Maybe they're so bad that the 'struction Corp had to build a cage for them—a big, big cage!" He stretched his arm as high as he could reach, up the wall. "Do you suppose they got tails?"

"Tails?" laughed Serena. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I dunno. They came from a long ways away. I'd like a tail —a long, curly one with fur on!" He swished his miniature behind energetically.

"Whatever for?" asked Serena.

"It'd come in handy," said Splinter solemnly. "For climbing and—and keeping my neck warm!"

"Why aren't there any other kids here?" he asked as they reached the bottom of the slope. "I'd like *somebody* to play with."

"Well, Splinter, it's kind of hard to explain," started Serena, sinking down on the narrow ledge shelving on the tiny dry watercourse at her feet.

"Don't esplain then," said Splinter. "Just tell me."

"Well, some Linjeni generals came in the big black ships to talk with General Worsham and some more of our generals. They brought their families with them in the fat, pretty ships. So our generals brought their families, too, but your daddy is the only one of our generals who has a little child. All the others are grown up. That's why there's no one for you to play with." I wish it were as simple as it sounds, thought Serena, suddenly weary again with the weeks of negotiation and waiting that had passed.

"Oh," said Splinter, thoughtfully. "Then there *are* kids on the other side of the wall, aren't there?"

"Yes, there must be young Linjeni," said Serena. "I guess you could call them children."

Splinter slid down to the bottom of the little watercourse and flopped down on his stomach. He pressed his cheek to the sand and peered through a tiny gap left under the fence where it crossed the stream bed. "I can't see anybody," he said, disappointed.

They started back up the hill toward their quarters, walking silently, Splinter's hand whispering along the wall.

"Mommie?" Splinter said as they neared the patio.

"Yes, Splinter?"

"That fence is to keep them in, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Serena.

"It doesn't feel like that to me," said Splinter. "It feels like it's to shut me out."

Serena suffered through the next days with Thorn. She lay wide-eyed beside him in the darkness of their bedroom, praying as he slept restlessly, struggling even in his sleep—groping for a way.

Tight-lipped, she cleared away untouched meals and brewed more coffee. Her thoughts went hopefully with him every time he started out with new hope and resolution, and her spirits flagged and fell as he brought back dead end, stalemate and growing despair. And in-between times, she tried to keep Splinter on as even a keel as possible, giving him the freedom of the Quarters Area during the long, sunlit days and playing with him as much as possible in the evenings.

One evening Serena was pinning up her hair and keeping half an eye on Splinter as he splashed in his bath. He was gathering up handsful of foaming soap bubbles and pressing them to his chin and cheeks.

"Now I hafta shave like Daddy," he hummed to himself.

"Shave, shave, shave!" He flicked the suds off with his forefinger. Then he scooped up a big double handful of bubbles and pressed them all over his face. "Now I'm Doovie. I'm all over fuzzy like Doovie. Lookit, Mommie, I'm all over—" He opened his eyes and peered through the suds to see if she was watching. Consequently, Serena spent a busy next few minutes helping him get the soap out of his eyes. When the tears had finally washed away the trouble, Serena sat toweling Splinter's relaxed little body.

"I bet Doovie'd cry too, if he got soap in his eyes," he said with a sniff. "Wouldn't he, Mommie?"

"Doovie?" said Serena, "Probably. Almost anyone would. Who's Doovie?"

She felt Splinter stiffen on her lap. His eyes wandered away from hers. "Mommie, do you think Daddy will play with me a-morrow?"

"Perhaps." She captured one of his wet feet. "Who's Doovie?"

"Can we have pink cake for dessert tonight? I think I like pink—"

"Who's Doovie?" Serena's voice was firm. Splinter examined his thumbnail critically, then peered up at Serena out of the corner of his eye.

"Doovie," he began, "Doovie's a little boy."

"Oh?" said Serena. "A play-like little boy?"

"No," Splinter whispered, hanging his head. "A real little boy. A Linjeni little boy." Serena drew an astonished breath and Splinter hurried on, his eyes intent on hers. "He's nice people, Mommie, honest! He doesn't say bad words or tell lies or talk sassy to his mother. He can run as fast as I can—faster, if I stumble. He—he—," his eyes dropped again. "I like him—" His mouth quivered.

"Where did—how could—I mean, the fence—" Serena was horrified and completely at a loss for words.

"I dug a hole," confessed Splinter. "Under the fence where the sand is. You didn't say not to! Doovie came to play. His mommie came, too. She's pretty. Her fur is pink, but Doovie's is nice and green. All over!" Splinter got excited. "All over, even where his clothes are! All but his nose and eyes and ears and the front of his hands!"

"But Splinter, how could you! You might have got hurt! They might have—" Serena hugged him tight to hide her face from him.

Splinter squirmed out of her arms. "Doovie wouldn't hurt

anyone. You know what, Mommie? He can shut his nose! Yes, he can! He can shut his nose and fold up his ears! I wish I could. It'd come in handy. But I'm bigger'n he is and I can sing and he can't. But he can whistle with his nose and when I try, I just blow mine. Doovie's nice!"

Serena's mind was churning as she helped Splinter get into his night clothes. She felt the chill of fear along her forearms and the back of her neck. What to do now? Forbid Splinter's crawling under the fence? Keep him from possible danger that might just be biding its time? What would Thorn say? Should she tell him? This might precipitate an incident that—

"Splinter, how many times have you played with Doovie?"

"How many?" Splinter's chest swelled under his clean pajamas. "Let me count," he said importantly and murmured and mumbled over his fingers for a minute. "Four times!" he proclaimed triumphantly. "One, two, three, four whole times!"

"Weren't you scared?"

"Naw!" he said, adding hastily, "Well, maybe a little bit the first time. I thought maybe they might have tails that liked to curl around people's necks. But they haven't," disappointed, "only clothes on like us with fur on under."

"Did you say you saw Doovie's mother, too?"

"Sure," said Splinter. "She was there the first day. She was the one that sent all the others away when they all crowded around me. All grownups. Not any kids excepting Doovie. They kinda pushed and wanted to touch me, but she told them to go away, and they all did 'cepting her and Doovie."

"Oh Splinter!" cried Serena, overcome by the vision of his small self surrounded by pushing, crowding Linjeni grownups who wanted to 'touch him'.

"What's the matter, Mommie?" asked Splinter.

"Nothing, dear." She wet her lips. "May I go along with you the next time you go to see Doovie? I'd like to meet his mother."

"Sure, sure!" cried Splinter. "Let's go now. Let's go now!"

"Not now," said Serena, feeling the reaction of her fear in her knees and ankles. "It's too late. Tomorrow we'll go see them. And Splinter, let's not tell Daddy yet. Let's keep it a surprise for a while."

"Okay, Mommie," said Splinter. "It's a good surprise, isn't it? You were awful surprised, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was," said Serena. "Awful surprised."

Next day Splinter squatted down and inspected the hole un-

der the fence. "It's kinda little," he said. "Maybe you'll get stuck."

Serena, her heart pounding in her throat, laughed. "That wouldn't be very dignified, would it?" she asked. "To go calling and get stuck in the door."

Splinter laughed. "It'd be funny," he said. "Maybe we better go find a really door for you."

"Oh, no," said Serena hastily. "We can make this one bigger."

"Sure," said Splinter. "I'll go get Doovie and he can help dig."

"Fine," said Serena, her throat tightening. *Afraid of a child,* she mocked herself. *Afraid of a Linjeni—aggressor—invader,* she defended.

Splinter flattened on the sand and slid under the fence. "You start digging," he called. "I'll be back!"

Serena knelt to the job, the loose sand coming away so readily that she circled her arms and dredged with them.

Then she heard Splinter scream.

For a brief second, she was paralyzed. Then he screamed again, closer, and Serena dragged the sand away in a frantic frenzy. She felt the sand scoop down the neck of her blouse and the skin scrape off her spine as she forced herself under the fence.

Then there was Splinter, catapulting out of the shrubbery, sobbing and screaming, "Doovie, Doovie's drownding! He's in the go'fish pond! All under the water! I can't get him out! Mommie, Mommie!"

Serena grabbed his hand as she shot past and towed him along, stumbling and dragging, as she ran for the goldfish pond. She leaned across the low wall and caught a glimpse, under the churning thrash of the water, of green mossy fur and staring eyes. With hardly a pause except to shove Splinter backward and start a deep breath, she plunged over into the pond. She felt the burning bite of water up her nostrils and grappled in the murky darkness for Doovie—feeling again and again the thrash of small limbs that slipped away before she could grasp them.

Then she was choking and sputtering on the edge of the pond, pushing the still-struggling Doovie up and over. Splinter grabbed him and pulled as Serena heaved herself over the edge of the pond and fell sprawling across Doovie.

Then she heard another higher, shriller scream and was shoved off Doovie viciously and Doovie was snatched up into rose pink arms. Serena pushed her lank, dripping hair out of

her eyes and met the hostile glare of the rose pink eyes of Doovie's mother.

Serena edged over to Splinter and held him close, her eyes intent on the Linjeni. The pink mother felt the green child all over anxiously and Serena noticed with an odd detachment that Splinter hadn't mentioned that Doovie's eyes matched his fur and that he had webbed feet.

Webbed feet! She began to laugh, almost hysterically. Oh Lordy! No wonder Doovie's mother was so alarmed.

"Can you talk to Doovie?" asked Serena of the sobbing Splinter.

"No!" wailed Splinter. "You don't have to talk to play."

"Stop crying, Splinter," said Serena. "Help me think. Doovie's mother thinks we were trying to hurt Doovie. He wouldn't drown in the water. Remember, he can close his nose and fold up his ears. How are we going to tell his mother we weren't trying to hurt him?"

"Well," Splinter scrubbed his cheeks with the back of his hand. "We could hug him—"

"That wouldn't do, Splinter," said Serena, noticing with near panic that other brightly colored figures were moving among the shrubs, drawing closer—"I'm afraid she won't let us touch him."

Briefly she toyed with the idea of turning and trying to get back to the fence, then she took a deep breath and tried to calm down.

"Let's play-like, Splinter," she said. "Let's show Doovie's mother that we thought he was drowning. You go fall in the pond and I'll pull you out. You play-like drowned and I'll—I'll cry."

"Gee, Mommie, you're crying already!" said Splinter, his face puckering.

"I'm just practicing," she said, steadying her voice. "Go on."

Splinter hesitated on the edge of the pond, shrinking away from the water that had fascinated him so many times before. Serena screamed suddenly, and Splinter, startled, lost his balance and fell in. Serena had hold of him almost before he went under water and pulled him out, cramming as much of fear and apprehension into her voice and actions as she could. "Be dead," she whispered fiercely. "Be dead all over!" And Splinter melted so completely in her arms that her moans and cries of sorrow were only partly make-believe. She bent over his still form and rocked to and fro in her grief.

A hand touched her arm and she looked up into the bright

eyes of the Linjeni. The look held for a long moment and then the Linjeni smiled, showing even, white teeth, and a pink, furry hand patted Splinter on the shoulder. His eyes flew open and he sat up. Doovie peered around from behind his mother and then he and Splinter were rolling and tumbling together, wrestling happily between the two hesitant mothers. Serena found a shaky laugh somewhere in among her alarms and Doovie's mother whistled softly with her nose.

That night, Thorn cried out in his sleep and woke Serena. She lay in the darkness, her constant prayer moving like a candle flame in her mind. She crept out of bed and checked Splinter in his shadowy room. Then she knelt and opened the bottom draw of Splinter's chest-robe. She ran her hand over the gleaming folds of the length of Linjeni material that lay there—the material the Linjeni had found to wrap her in while her clothes dried. She had given them her lacy slip in exchange. Her fingers read the raised pattern in the dark, remembering how beautiful it was in the afternoon sun. Then the sun was gone and she saw a black ship destroyed, a home craft plunging to incandescent death, and the pink and green and yellow and all the other bright furs charring and crisping and the patterned materials curling before the last flare of flame. She leaned her head on her hand and shuddered.

But then she saw the glitter of a silver ship, blackening and fusing, dripping monstrously against the emptiness of space. And heard the wail of a fatherless Splinter so vividly that she shoved the drawer in hastily and went back to look at his quiet sleeping face and to tuck him unnecessarily in.

When she came back to bed, Thorn was awake, lying on his back, his elbows winging out.

"Awake?" she asked as she sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Yes." His voice was tense as the twang of a wire. "We're getting nowhere," he said. "Both sides keep holding up neat little hoops of ideas, but no one is jumping through, either way. We want peace, but we can't seem to convey anything to them. They want something, but they haven't said what, as though to tell us would betray them irrevocably into our hands, but they won't make peace unless they can get it. Where do we go from here?"

"If they'd just go away—" Rena swung her feet up onto the bed and clasped her slender ankles with both hands.

"That's one thing we've established." Thorn's voice was bitter, "They *won't* go. They're here to stay—like it or not."

"Thorn—" Rena spoke impulsively into the shadowy silence. "Why don't we just make them welcome? Why can't we just say, 'Come on in!' They're travelers from afar. Can't we be hospitable—"

"You talk as though the afar was just the next county—or state!" Thorn tossed impatiently on the pillow.

"Don't tell me we're back to that old equation—Stranger equals Enemy," said Rena, her voice sharp with strain. "Can't we assume they're friendly? Go visit with them—talk with them casually—"

"Friendly!" Thorn shot upright from the tangled bedclothes. "Go visit! Talk!" His voice choked off. Then carefully calmly he went on. "Would you care to visit with the widows of our men who went to visit the friendly Linjeni? Whose ships dripped out of the sky without warning—"

"Theirs did, too." Rena's voice was small but stubborn. "With no more warning than we had. Who shot first? You must admit no one knows for sure."

There was a tense silence; then Thorn lay down slowly, turned his back to Serena and spoke no more.

"Now I can't ever tell," mourned Serena into her crumpled pillow. "He'd die if he knew about the hole under the fence."

In the days that followed, Serena went every afternoon with Splinter and the hole under the fence got larger and larger.

Doovie's mother, whom Splinter called Mrs. Pink, was teaching Serena to embroider the rich materials like the length they had given her. In exchange, Serena was teaching Mrs. Pink how to knit. At least, she started to teach her. She got as far as purl and knit, decrease and increase, when Mrs. Pink took the work from her, and Serena sat widemouthed at the incredible speed and accuracy of Mrs. Pink's furry fingers. She felt a little silly for having assumed that the Linjeni didn't know about knitting. And yet, the other Linjeni crowded around and felt of the knitting and exclaimed over it in their soft, fluty voices as though they'd never seen any before. The little ball of wool Serena had brought was soon used up, but Mrs. Pink brought out hanks of heavy thread such as were split and used in their embroidery, and after a glance through Serena's pattern book, settled down to knitting the shining brilliance of Linjeni thread.

Before long, smiles and gestures, laughter and whistling, were not enough. Serena sought out the available tapes—a scant handful—on Linjeni speech and learned them. They

didn't help much since the vocabulary wasn't easily applied to the matters she wanted to discuss with Mrs. Pink and the others. But the day she voiced and whistled her first Linjeni sentence to Mrs. Pink, Mrs. Pink stumbled through her first English sentence. They laughed and whistled together and settled down to pointing and naming and guessing across areas of incommunication.

Serena felt guilty by the end of the week. She and Splinter were having so much fun and Thorn was wearier and wearier at each session's end.

"They're impossible," he said bitterly, one night, crouched forward tensely on the edge of his easy chair. "We can't pin them down to anything."

"What do they want?" asked Serena. "Haven't they said yet?"

"I shouldn't talk—" Thorn sank back in his chair. "Oh what does it matter?" he asked wearily. "It'll all come to nothing anyway!"

"Oh, no, Thorn!" cried Serena. "They're reasonable human—" she broke off at Thorn's surprised look. "Aren't they?" she stammered. "Aren't they?"

"Human? They're uncommunicative, hostile aliens," he said. "We talk ourselves blue in the face and they whistle at one another and say yes or no. Just that, flatly."

"Do they understand—" began Serena.

"We have interpreters, such as they are. None too good, but all we have."

"Well, what are they asking?" asked Serena.

Thorn laughed shortly. "So far as we've been able to ascertain, they just want all our oceans and the land contiguous thereto."

"Oh, Thorn, they couldn't be that unreasonable!"

"Well I'll admit we aren't even sure that's what they mean, but they keep coming back to the subject of the oceans, except they whistle rejection when we ask them point-blank if it's the oceans they want. There's just no communication." Thorn sighed heavily. "You don't know them like we do, Rena."

"No," said Serena, miserably. "Not like you do."

She took her disquiet, Splinter, and a picnic basket down the hill to the hole next day. Mrs. Pink had shared her lunch with them the day before, and now it was Serena's turn. They sat on the grass together, Serena crowding back her unhappiness to laugh at Mrs. Pink and her first olive with the same

friendly amusement Mrs. Pink had shown when Serena had bit down on her first *pirwit* and had been afraid to swallow it and ashamed to spit it out.

Splinter and Doovie were agreeing over a thick meringued lemon pie that was supposed to be dessert.

"Leave the pie alone, Splinter," said Serena. "It's to top off on."

"We're only tasting the fluffy stuff," said Splinter, a blob of meringue on his upper lip bobbing as he spoke.

"Well, save your testing for later. Why don't you get out the eggs. I'll bet Doovie isn't familiar with them either."

Splinter rummaged in the basket, and Serena took out the huge camp salt shaker.

"Here they are, Mommie!" cried Splinter. "Lookit, Doovie, first you have to crack the shell—"

Serena began initiating Mrs. Pink into the mysteries of hard-boiled eggs and it was all very casual and matter of fact until she sprinkled the peeled egg with salt. Mrs. Pink held out her cupped hand and Serena sprinkled a little salt into it. Mrs. Pink tasted it.

She gave a low whistle of astonishment and tasted again. Then she reached tentatively for the shaker. Serena gave it to her, amused. Mrs. Pink shook more into her hand and peered through the holes in the cap of the shaker. Serena unscrewed the top and showed Mrs. Pink the salt inside it.

For a long minute Mrs. Pink stared at the white granules and then she whistled urgently, piercingly. Serena shrank back, bewildered, as every bush seemed to erupt Linjeni. They crowded around Mrs. Pink, staring into the shaker, jostling one another, whistling softly. One scurried away and brought back a tall jug of water. Mrs. Pink slowly and carefully emptied the salt from her hand into the water and then upended the shaked. She stirred the water with a branch someone snatched from a bush. After the salt was dissolved, all the Linjeni around them lined up with cupped hands. Each received—as though it were a sacrament—a handful of salt water. And they all, quickly, not to lose a drop, lifted the handful of water to their faces and inhaled, breathing deeply, deeply of the salty solution.

Mrs. Pink was last, and, as she raised her wet face from her cupped hands, the gratitude in her eyes almost made Serena cry. And the dozens of Linjeni crowded around, each eager to press a soft forefinger to Serena's cheek, a thank-you gesture Splinter was picking up already.

When the crowd melted into the shadows again, Mrs. Pink sat down, fondling the salt shaker.

"Salt," said Serena, indicating the shaker.

"Shreeprill," said Mrs. Pink.

"Shreeprill?" said Serena, her stumbling stongue robbing the word of its liquidness. Mrs. Pink nodded.

"Shreeprill good?" asked Serena, groping for an explanation for the just finished scene.

"Shreeprill good," said Mrs. Pink. "No *shreeprill,* no Linjeni baby. Doovie—Doovie—" she hesitated, groping. "One Doovie—no baby." She shook her head, unable to bridge the gap.

Serena groped after an idea she had almost caught from Mrs. Pink. She pulled up a handful of grass. "Grass," she said. She pulled another handful. "More grass. More. More." She added to the pile.

Mrs. Pink looked from the grass to Serena.

"No *more* Linjeni baby. Doovie—" She separated the grass into piles. "Baby, baby, baby—" she counted down to the last one, lingering tenderly over it. "Doovie."

"Oh," said Serena, "Doovie is the last Linjeni baby? No more?"

Mrs. Pink studied the words and then she nodded. "Yes," yes! No more. No *shreeprill,* no baby."

Serena felt a flutter of wonder. Maybe—maybe this is what the war was over. Maybe they just wanted salt. A world to them. Maybe—

"Salt, *shreeprill,"* she said. "More, more, more *shreeprill,* Linjeni go home?"

"More more more *shreeprill,* yes," said Mrs. Pink. "Go home, no. No home. Home no good. No water, no *shreeprill."*

"Oh," said Serena. Then thoughtfully, "More Linjeni? More, more, more?"

Mrs. Pink looked at Serena and in the sudden silence the realization that they were, after all, members of enemy camps flared between them. Serena tried to smile. Mrs. Pink looked over at Splinter and Doovie who were happily sampling everything in the picnic basket. Mrs. Pink relaxed, and then she said, "No more Linjeni." She gestured toward the crowded landing field. "Linjeni." She pressed her hands, palm to palm, her shoulder sagging. "No more Linjeni."

Serena sat dazed, thinking what this would mean to Earth's High Command. No more Linjeni of the terrible, devastating weapons. No more than those that had landed—no waiting

alien world ready to send reinforcements when these ships were gone. When these were gone—no more Linjeni. All that Earth had to do now was wipe out these ships, taking the heavy losses that would be inevitable, and they would win the war—and wipe out a race.

The Linjeni must have come seeking asylum—or demanding it. Neighbors who were afraid to ask—or hadn't been given time to ask. How had the war started? Who fired upon whom? Did anyone know?

Serena took uncertainty home with her, along with the empty picnic basket. *Tell, tell, tell,* whispered her feet through the grass up the hill. *Tell and the war will end.* But how? she cried out to herself. By wiping them out or giving them a home? Which? Which?

Kill, kill, kill grated her feet across the graveled patio edge. *Kill the aliens—no common ground—not human—all our hallowed dead.*

But what about *their* hallowed dead? All falling, the flaming ships—the homeseekers—the dispossessed—the childless?

Serena settled Splinter with a new puzzle and a picture book and went into the bedroom. She sat on the bed and stared at herself in the mirror.

But give them salt water and they'll increase—all our oceans, even if they said they didn't want them. Increase and increase and take the world—push us out—trespass—oppress—

But their men—our men. They've been meeting for over a week and can't agree. Of course they can't! They're afraid of betraying themselves to each other. Neither knows anything about the other, really. They aren't trying to find out anything really important. I'll bet not one of our men know the Linjeni can close their noses and fold their ears. And not one of the Linjeni knows we sprinkle their life on our food.

Serena had no idea how long she sat there, but Splinter finally found her and insisted on supper and then Serena insisted on bed for him.

She was nearly mad with indecision when Thorn finally got home.

"Well," he said, dropping wearily into his chair. "It's almost over."

"Over!" cried Serena, hope flaring, "Then you've reached—"

"Stalemate, impasse," said Thorn heavily. "Our meeting tomorrow is the last. One final 'no' from each side and it's over. Back to bloodletting."

"Oh, Thorn, no!" Serena pressed her clenched fist to her mouth. "We can't kill any more of them! It's inhuman—it's—"

"It's self-defense," Thorn's voice was sharp with exasperated displeasure. "Please, not tonight, Rena. Spare me your idealistic ideas. Heaven knows we're inexperienced enough in warlike negotiations without having to cope with suggestions that we make cute pets out of our enemies. We're in a war and we've got it to win. Let the Linjeni get a wedge in and they'll swarm the Earth like flies!"

"No, no!" whispered Serena, her own secret fears sending the tears flooding down her face. "They wouldn't! They wouldn't! Would they?"

Long after Thorn's sleeping breath whispered in the darkness beside her, she lay awake, staring at the invisible ceiling. Carefully she put the words up before her on the slate of the darkness.

Tell—the war will end.
Either we will help the Linjeni—or wipe them out.
Don't tell. The conference will break up. The war will go on.
We will have heavy losses—and wipe the Linjeni out.
Mrs. Pink trusted me.
Splinter loves Doovie. Doovie loves him.

Then the little candle flame of prayer that had so nearly burned out in her torment flared brightly again and she slept.

Next morning she sent Splinter to play with Doovie. "Play by the goldfish pond," she said. "I'll be along soon."

"Okay, Mommie," said Splinter. "Will you bring some cake?" Slyly, "Doovie isn't a-miliar with cake."

Serena laughed. "A certain little Splinter is a-miliar with cake, though! You run along, greedy!" And she boosted him out of the door with a slap on the rear.

" 'By, Mommie," he called back.

" 'By, dear. Be good."

"I will."

Serena watched until he disappeared down the slope of the hill, then she smoothed her hair and ran her tongue over her lips. She started for the bedroom, but turned suddenly and went to the front door. If she had to face even her own eyes, her resolution would waver and dissolve. She stood, hand on

knob, watching the clock inch around until an interminable fifteen minutes had passed—Splinter safely gone—then she snatched the door open and left.

Her smile took her out of the Quarters Area to the Administration Building. Her brisk assumption of authority and destination took her to the conference wing and there her courage failed her. She lurked out of sight of the guards, almost wringing her hands in indecision. Then she straightened the set of her skirt, smoothed her hair, dredged a smile up from some hidden source of strength, and tiptoed out into the hall.

She felt like a butterfly pinned to the wall by the instant unwinking attention of the guards. She gestured silence with a finger to her lips and tiptoed up to them.

"Hello, Turner. Hi, Franiveri," she whispered.

The two exchanged looks and Turner said hoarsely, "You aren't supposed to be here, ma'am. Better go."

"I know I'm not," she said, looking guilty—with no effort at all. "But Turner, I—I just want to see a Linjeni." She hurried on before Turner's open mouth could form a word. "Oh, I've seen pictures of them, but I'd like awfully to see a real one. Can't I have even one little peek?" She slipped closer to the door. "Look!" she cried softly, "It's even ajar a little already!"

"Supposed to be," rasped Turner. "Orders. But ma'am, we can't—"

"Just one peek?" she pleaded, putting her thumb in the crack of the door. "I won't make a sound."

She coaxed the door open a little farther, her hand creeping inside, fumbling for the knob, the little button.

"But ma'am, you couldn't see 'em from here anyway."

Quicker than thought, Serena jerked the door open and darted in, pushing the little button and slamming the door to with what seemed to her a thunder that vibrated through the whole building. Breathlessly, afraid to think, she sped through the anteroom and into the conference room. She came to a scared skidding stop, her hands tight on the back of a chair, every eye in the room on her. Thorn, almost unrecognizable in his armor of authority and severity, stood up abruptly.

"Serena!" he said, his voice cracking with incredulity. Then he sat down again, hastily.

Serena circled the table, refusing to meet the eyes that bored into her—blue eyes, brown eyes, black eyes, yellow eyes, green eyes, lavender eyes. She turned at the foot of the table and looked fearfully up the shining expanse.

"Gentlemen," her voice was almost inaudible. She cleared

her throat. "Gentlemen." She saw General Worsham getting ready to speak—his face harshly unfamiliar with the weight of his position. She pressed her hands to the polished table and leaned forward hastily.

"You're going to quit, aren't you? You're giving up!" The translators bent to their mikes and their lips moved to hers. "What have you been talking about all this time? Guns? Battles? Casualty lists? We'll-do-this-to-you-if-you-do-that-to-us? I don't know! . . ." she cried, shaking her head tightly, almost shuddering, ". . . I don't know what goes on at high level conference tables. All I know is that I've been teaching Mrs. Pink to knit, and how to cut a lemon pie . . ." she could see the bewildered interpreters thumbing their manuals ". . . and already I know why they're here and what they want!" Pursing her lips, she half-whistled, half-trilled in her halting Linjeni, "Doovie baby. No more Linjeni babies!"

One of the Linjeni started at Doovie's name and stood up slowly, his lavender bulk towering over the table. Serena saw the interpreters thumbing frantically again. She knew they were looking for a translation of the Linjeni "baby." Babies had no place in a military conference.

The Linjeni spoke slowly, but Serena shook her head. "I don't know enough Linjeni."

There was a whisper at her shoulder. "What do you know of Doovie?" And a pair of earphones were pushed into her hands. She adjusted them with trembling fingers. Why were they letting her talk? Why was General Worsham sitting there letting her break into the conference like this?

"I know Doovie," she said breathlessly. "I know Doovie's mother, too. Doovie plays with Splinter, my son—my little son." She twisted her fingers, dropping her head at the murmur that arose around the table. The Linjeni spoke again and the metallic murmur of the earphones gave her the translation. "What is the color of Doovie's mother?"

"Pink," said Serena.

Again the scurry for a word—pink—pink. Finally Serena turned up the hem of her skirt and displayed the hem of her slip—rose pink. The Linjeni sat down again, nodding.

"Serena," General Worsham spoke as quietly as though it were just another lounging evening in the patio. "What do you want?"

Serena's eyes wavered and then her chin lifted.

"Thorn said today would be the last day. That it was to be

'no' on both sides. That we and the Linjeni have no common meeting ground, no basis for agreement on anything."

"And you think we have?" General Worsham's voice cut gently through the stir at the naked statement of thoughts and attitudes so carefully concealed.

"I know we do. Our alikenesses outweigh our differences so far that it's just foolish to sit here all this time, shaking our differences at each other and not finding out a thing about our likenesses. We are fundamentally the same—the same—" she faltered. "Under God we are all the same." And she knew with certainty that the translators wouldn't find God's name in their books. "I think we ought to let them eat our salt and bread and make them welcome!" She half smiled and said, "The word for salt is *shreeprill.*"

There was a smothered rush of whistling from the Linjeni and the lavender Linjeni half rose from his chair but subsided.

General Worsham glanced at the Linjeni speculatively and pursed his lips. "But there are ramifications—" he began.

"Ramifications!" spat Serena. "There are no ramifications that can't resolve themselves if two peoples really know each other!"

She glanced around the table, noting with sharp relief that Thorn's face had softened.

"Come with me!" she urged. "Come and see Doovie and Splinter together—Linjeni young and ours, who haven't learned suspicion and fear and hate and prejudice yet. Declare a—a—recess or a truce or whatever is necessary and come with me. After you see the children and see Mrs. Pink knitting and we talk this matter over like members of a family—Well, if you still think you have to fight after that, then—" she spread her hands.

Her knees shook so as they started downhill that Thorn had to help her walk.

"Oh, Thorn," she whispered, almost sobbing. "I didn't think they would. I thought they'd shoot me or lock me up or—"

"We don't want war. I told you that," he murmured. "We're ready to grab at straws, even in the guise of snippy females who barge in on solemn councils and display their slips!" Then his lips tightened. "How long has this been going on?"

"For Splinter, a couple of weeks. For me, a little more than a week."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I tried—twice. You wouldn't listen. I was too scared to in-

sist. Besides, you know what your reaction would have been."

Thorn had no words until they neared the foot of the hill, then he said, "How come you know so much? What makes you think you can solve—"

Serena choked back a hysterical laugh. "I took eggs to a picnic!"

And then they were standing, looking down at the hole under the fence.

"Splinter found the way," Serena defended. "I made it bigger, but you'll have to get down—flat."

She dropped to the sand and wiggled under. She crouched on the other side, her knees against her chest, her clasped hands pressed against her mouth, and waited. There was a long minute of silence and then a creak and a grunt and Serena bit her lips as General Worsham inched under the fence, flat on the sand, catching and jerking free halfway through. But her amusement changed to admiration as she realized that even covered with dust, scrambling awkwardly to his feet and beating his rumpled clothing, he possessed dignity and strength that made her deeply thankful that he was the voice of Earth in this time of crisis.

One by one the others crawled under, the Linjeni sandwiched between the other men and Thorn bringing up the rear. Motioning silence, she led them to the thicket of bushes that screened one side of the goldfish pond.

Doovie and Splinter were leaning over the edge of the pond.

"There it is!" cried Splinter, leaning perilously and pointing. "Way down there on the bottom and it's my best marble. Would your Mommie care if you got it for me?"

Doovie peered down. "Marble go in water."

"That's what I said," cried Splinter impatiently. "And you can shut your nose . . ." he put his finger to the black, glistening button ". . . and fold your ears," he flicked them with his forefinger and watched them fold. "Gee!" he said admiringly. "I wish I could do that."

"Doovie go in water?" asked Doovie.

"Yes," nodded Splinter. "It's my good taw, and you won't even have to put on swimming trunks—you got fur."

Doovie shucked out of his brief clothing and slid down into the pond. He bobbed back up, his hand clenched.

"Gee, thanks." Splinter held out his hand and Doovie carefully turned his hand over and Splinter closed his. Then he shrieked and flung his hand out. "You mean old thing!" yelled Splinter. "Give me my marble! That was a slippy old fish!"

he leaned over, scuffling, trying to reach Doovie's other hand. There was a slither and a splash and Splinter and Doovie disappeared under the water.

Serena caught her breath and had started forward when Doovie's anxious face bobbed to the surface again. He yanked and tugged at the sputtering, coughing Splinter and tumbled him out onto the grass. Doovie squatted by Splinter, patting his back and alternately whistling dolefully through his nose and talking apologetic-sounding Linjeni.

Splinter coughed and dug his fists into his eyes.

"Golly, golly!" he said, spatting his hands against his wet jersey. "Mommie'll sure be mad. My clean clothes all wet. Where's my marble, Doovie?"

Doovie scrambled to his feet and went back to the pond. Splinter started to follow, then he cried. "Oh, Doovie, where did that poor little fish go? It'll die if it's out of the water. My guppy did."

"Fish?" asked Doovie.

"Yes," said Splinter, holding out his hand as he searched the grass with intent eyes. "The slippy little fish that wasn't my marble."

The two youngsters scrambled around in the grass until Doovie whistled and cried out triumphantly, "Fish!" and scooped it up in his hands and rushed it back to the pond.

"There," said Splinter. "Now it won't die. Looky, it's swimming away!"

Doovie slid into the pond again and retrieved the lost marble.

"Now," said Splinter. "Watch me and I'll show you how to shoot."

The bushes beyond the two absorbed boys parted and Mrs. Pink stepped out. She smiled at the children and then she saw the silent group on the other side of the clearing. Her eyes widened and she gave an astonished whistle. The two boys looked up and followed the direction of her eyes.

"Daddy!" yelled Splinter. "Did you come to play?" And he sped, arms outstretched, to Thorn, arriving only a couple of steps ahead of Doovie who was whistling excitedly and rushing to greet the tall lavender Linjeni.

Serena felt a sudden choke of laughter at how alike Thorn and the Linjeni looked, trying to greet their offspring adequately and still retain their dignity.

Mrs. Pink came hesitantly to the group to stand in the circle of Serena's arm. Splinter had swarmed up Thorn, hugged him with thoroughness and slid down again. "Hi, General Wor-

sham!" he said, extending a muddy hand in a belated remembrance of his manners. "Hey, Daddy, I'm showing Doovie how to play marbles, but you can shoot better'n I can. You come show him how."

"Well—" said Thorn, glancing uncomfortably at General Worsham.

General Worsham was watching the Linjeni as Doovie whistled and fluted over a handful of bright-colored glassies. He quirked an eyebrow at Thorn and then at the rest of the group.

"I suggest a recess," he said. "In order that we may examine new matters that have been brought to our attention."

Serena felt herself getting all hollow inside, and she turned her face away so Mrs. Pink wouldn't see her cry. But Mrs. Pink was too interested in the colorful marbles to see Serena's gathering, hopeful tears.

I had occasion recently to ask a friend what she thought the word *love* meant. The same is perhaps true in the case of the word *unnatural* when used, as here, to describe an act or acts by aliens which seem strange to our eyes and minds.

UNNATURAL ACT

by
EDWARD D. HOCH

RAIN had been falling since early morning, and Professor Alex Singer was depressed by the sight of it. The laboratory had

been in readiness for two days now, sterile and waiting, but he'd had little to do except recheck the equipment and instruct the staff of doctors and technicians.

This would be another day of waiting, he thought, but then the telephone rang. "Professor Singer?"

"Yes."

"Colonel Moses here. The first Alien Ship has just landed. We should reach the laboratory in less than an hour."

"Everything's ready," Singer told him.

Everything. After all these years of planning and preparation. He hung up the telephone and buzzed for his staff. Then he took down his journal from the shelf and wrote in a quick, firm hand: *14 October 1989—First contact with the Aliens. Their ship has landed and Colonel Moses is conducting them to the laboratory for complete physical examinations. This is an historic day!*

The radio signals from space had begun almost a year before, tentative at first but with increasing regularity. Finally, within just a few months, the language barriers were broken down and arrangements were completed for the first earth landing by beings from another world.

The creatures—the Aliens, as they were officially called—had been most cooperative thus far. They had even agreed to initial physical examinations, once it was explained to them that they might be carrying some virus or germ harmful to earth dwellers. Professor Singer had assembled a team of leading doctors, in a completely sterile hospital wing, to conduct the tests and examinations.

Now, as he spoke on the telephone to his first assistant, he saw out the window that the rain was beginning to let up. Soon, through the drying streets, the caravan came into view. Armed soldiers on minibikes, followed by Colonel Moses in a staff car, and then the line of sterile trucks bearing the Aliens to their meeting with the earth doctors.

Professor Alex Singer stepped out of his laboratory and went down to the entrance dock to greet them.

Forty-eight hours later, Colonel Moses sat across the desk in Professor Singer's private office. He was smoking a long black Alabama cigar, and he seemed quite pleased with himself. "Professor, you wouldn't believe the number of newspaper and magazine interviews I've given since this whole thing started. And as soon as you clear them from quarantine, I'm going on a televised press conference with their spokesmen. I feel as if I'm almost as big an attraction as they are."

Professor Singer smiled indulgently. He glanced at his watch and flipped on the intertele. "Is the report about ready?"

"Yes, sir," his secretary replied. "It should be coming through the printer now."

He reached down to take the pages as they were fed out of the machine by his desk. "Here is a full report on their physical condition. As nearly as we can determine, they carry no virus. They can breath our air and survive in this climate—though we may want to move them further south when winter comes."

"Their bodily structure is humanoid?" Colonel Moses asked.

Professor Singer frowned down at the pages. "Well—yes and no. You had a quick glimpse of them yourself when they landed. You already know some of the more obvious differences. When they removed their flight suits, we found a few others. They have no body hair of any sort, and their skin is perfectly smooth. There are no pores or openings as we know them."

Colonel Moses grunted. Such details did not concern him. "As long as they don't have any germs . . ."

Singer smiled. "They are guaranteed germ free. But there is one aspect of their bodily functions that disturbs us a bit. I don't know if you'll want to release this to the press or not."

"They seem to find out everything these days, whether we release it or not."

"Well . . ." He hesitated once again. "The truth of the matter, Colonel, is that these Aliens have one glaring abnormality, even taking into consideration the somewhat different environment of their planet."

"Abnormality? What abnormality?"

"They have no sex organs."

In the two decades since the end of the Vietnam War and the coming of a general peace to the larger nations of the world, a number of things had happened. The most important, surely, from a sociological viewpoint, was the presidential election of 1976, which put a conservative into the White House and led directly to the formation of the government-backed SSS—the Society for the Supression of Salaciousness.

Sex did not vanish overnight from the American scene. In fact, the bookstores in the large urban centers like New York and Los Angeles looked much as they always did. The main impact of the SSS had been in rural communities, and in the smaller cities of the midwest and south. There, without doubt, the people had heeded the slogans of the group and turned

away from many salacious aspects of everyday life. The effect upon national magazines, television, and even the new home teleprinters was drastic.

And thus the news of Professor Singer's discovery brought a frown to the already wrinkled features of Colonel Moses. "No sex organs? How is that possible?"

"I don't know," Singer admitted.

"They reproduce, don't they?"

"We assume so. You must realize, Colonel, that we've only had them for two days. I'm sure we'll get the answer before long. In the meantime, it might be best if this wasn't mentioned at the press conference."

Moses nodded. "We'd probably have the SSS on our necks for just discussing it."

"Exactly. Keep it quiet, and we'll have more information on it as soon as we can."

Later that afternoon, Professor Singer watched the televised press conference with great interest. He could only imagine that families in 100 million American homes, alerted by the news buzzer on their TV sets, were doing likewise.

After a brief opening statement, Colonel Moses read greetings from the President and then turned the platform over to Tre-5, the spokesman for the Aliens. Singer had found Tre-5 to be the most intelligent of the lot, and easily the best speaker in English. Some of the Aliens had an oddly distended mouth which made it difficult for them to pronounce many of the sounds that went into the formation of English words.

But Tre-5 spoke well. He spoke of their pleasure at being the first visitors to earth, and of their hopes that more would follow them. Watching the figure on the screen, Singer wondered just how well they would be accepted by earth. Already in Congress someone had suggested quotas for Aliens, and old immigration laws were in danger of revival.

He sighed and went back to his notes. That was for others to determine. His own problem with the Aliens was of a more scientific nature.

In the week that followed, the Aliens were split into two groups of about 25 each. One group journeyed to Washington for a personal greeting by the President, then on across the country on a mission of good will. Already plans were under way for some of these to visit Europe and Asia by rocket for a day, and others would be heading for Africa and South America. The remaining 25, mainly the old and very young

and infirm, had remained at the hospital, near their space ship.

Professor Singer saw them daily, and spoke with them as best he could without the presence of Tre-5 to act as an interpreter. He still puzzled over the seeming lack of sex organs, and the subject was brought up almost daily at the staff meetings in his office. But it was not until the end of the week that the situation reached a head.

"One of the Aliens is very ill," Doctor Chang reported. "We can't diagnose the trouble."

"Male or female?" Singer asked, slipping into his sterile suit. The doctors had been X-raying the Aliens all week, dividing them by sexes as best they could from internal evidence.

"We haven't gotten to this one yet, but we think female."

"Smaller than the others? Smaller than Tre-5?"

"Yes."

The problem of the Alien's illness was solved before they reached her. Somehow, unseen by the doctors and nurses, she had given birth to a baby.

"My God!" Singer exclaimed. "But how?"

"We didn't see, Professor.'

"Didn't see! But there must be some evidence!"

"There's nothing," Doctor Chang confirmed, straightening up from his examination. "The baby weighs 12½ ounces, and seems to be in good health. There's nothing to show how he—or she—was born."

"The entire thing's impossible," Singer declared. "Babies don't just appear by magic. There must be some bodily opening we've missed in our examination. After all, creatures like snakes don't appear to have sex organs unless they're examined quite closely."

"We have examined them, Professor. You have our report on the skin condition and the lack of pores. They have no sex organs—the groups designated male and female seem identical in this. Internally there are some differences, but externally . . ."

"The males are taller," Singer observed. "I can see that for myself."

"Yes. But there is nothing else. They even dress the same."

"Isn't that natural, on a space flight of such duration? American men and women space travelers wear identical suits, as do the Russians and French."

"I suppose so," Doctor Chang conceeded.

"Have you talked to them about their sexual activities? Just come right out and asked them?"

"Of course. But we've gotten nowhere. The questioning seems to embarrass them, which I suppose is only natural."

"Tre-5! He might tell us!"

"Tre-5 is on the London rocket at this very hour."

"Well, when he comes back, then." Singer was growing irritated, and he motioned Chang to leave him alone.

Presently he pushed the remote button for the television and watched the crowd scenes at an airport in Cleveland. Everyone was turning out for a look at the Aliens. And why not? It was, perhaps, the single most important event of the century.

Professor Singer watched the crowds for a long time before he turned off the set and picked up his journal.

Colonel Moses was pleased. Nothing on earth could have upset him at that moment. "The tour is going great—better than we expected! Somehow it's become an American thing, just as we'd hoped. Can you imagine what would have happened if they'd contacted the Russians first?"

Singer smiled slightly. "The Russian scientists would have had to worry about their sex organs, instead of me."

"Damn it, Professor, forget about that! The question hasn't even arisen on the tour."

"Of course not. With the SSS in control out in the hinterlands, what would you expect? They've got the people believing in the stork again."

The Colonel nodded. "Remember when SSS only stood for Selective Service System?"

"Another obscenity," Professor Singer remarked, but he was smiling.

"The reporters will get onto this sex angle, though," Colonel Moses cautioned after a moment. "Just you wait! The New York press isn't afraid of the SSS."

But the newspapers were busy reporting the success of the tour. Interviews with Tre-5 uniformly followed a pattern, with the favorite question being: what was life like back on his planet? To this he gave a variety of answers, all of which were satisfactory. Newspapers were approaching him now for exclusive stories, offering sums of money that meant nothing to the Alien leader.

New Life published detailed paintings depicting life on the Aliens' planet, and a number of companies were already producing plastic souvenirs of the event—some in the shape of the Aliens themselves. The visit was growing into a happening that

knew no bounds, with all the peoples of the world caught up in it. What had started somewhat hesitantly when the ship landed a few miles from Professor Singer's laboratory had blossomed into something fine and good and wonderful.

"They're so friendly!" Colonel Moses reported to Singer at the end of the foreign portion of the tour. "They make no enemies. Everybody loves them. And everybody loves us for contacting them."

"Not at all the way H.G. Wells imagined it would be," Singer commented.

"Anyway, Tre-5 is back from Europe. You can talk to him all you want now."

Singer nodded. "That will be Doctor Chang's project."

The time for the visit to end was fast approaching. Tre-5 spoke of getting back to his home planet, of reporting on what they'd seen and perhaps planning for a return trip the following year. Already the Aliens were busy loading samples of all sorts into their spacecraft for the three month voyage back home. Some were still out on tour, though, and nothing could be done until all fifty had returned.

It was during this period of waiting that Doctor Chang ran his final series of tests on Tre-5 and several others. He reported his findings with a triumphant burst into Singer's office early one morning.

"Professor, we have the answer!"

"What answer is that, Doctor Chang?"

"We have located their sex organs!"

Singer felt his heart begin to beat faster. "Tre-5 told you?"

"We discovered something in these latest tests, and he confirmed it! We should have realized it long ago, by the way some of them spoke."

Singer steadied himself on the edge of the desk. "You mean . . . ?"

"Their sex organs are in their mouths!"

Singer sat down, very slowly. "You're certain of this?"

"Of course, Professor! You noted yourself the unusual distending of some mouths, making speech difficult. Those, of course, were the older females, who . . ."

Professor Singer held up his hand. "Put it in writing. At once. I'll want to read it all."

"Only, Professor . . ."

"What?"

"There was a reporter from New York in the room when I

was questioning Tre-5. I don't know how much he might have understood."

"Let's hope not too much."

But the following day the story broke in one national newspaper. Though the terms used were in strict good taste, the story left no doubt in anyone's mind. It spread, carried by magazines and television in the urban centers, and by word of mouth in the rural areas.

The following day, a group of Aliens returned from Europe and were greeted at the airport by an unfriendly crowd. A woman, who seemed to be leading them, screamed something about *unnatural acts* and hurled the first stone. It hit one of the Aliens on the neck and he went down. The others seemed confused by the attack and offered no resistance. They didn't understand.

Colonel Moses arrived with his sterile trucks a few hours later. "We have to try and get them to their ship," he told Singer. "Those are my orders."

"Who was the woman that hurled the first rock?"

"They're not certain. An SSS member, of course, but does it matter now? The whole country's turning against them. The whole world!"

"You too, Colonel?"

"I was home with my wife when the orders came to get them out. She said—she heard about it, and she said . . ."

"I know," Singer sighed. "Come. We'll try and explain it to Tre-5."

"How do you explain something like this?"

"I guess maybe you don't."

The crowd—the mob—reached the space ship ten minutes before Colonel Moses' trucks. Those few Aliens who were loading gifts and clothing and souvenirs were stoned. The ship was wrecked and set afire.

When Colonel Moses arrived, there was nothing he could do. His orders did not allow him to shoot down loyal citizens to protect mere Aliens.

When it was over, when the last stone had been hurled, the last Alien pounded and trampled into the ground, he went back to the sterile laboratory of Professor Singer.

"They're all gone, aren't they?" Singer asked, not looking at him.

"The people . . . you know. What could I do?"

"Tre-5?"

"He was one of the first. He was leading them."

Professor Singer sighed. "Such a waste, such a waste. They won't come again, not this way."

Colonel Moses stood by the window, staring out at the street where a gentle rain was just beginning to fall. "Maybe it's for the best, Professor. They really were too . . . unnatural for us."

Quite a number of people are firmly convinced that private eyes are indestructible dispensers of sex and justice, and of bourbon, in satisfyingly impressive doses. But what happens when an Alien—just a friendly Alien—meets such a man?

THE NIGHT HE CRIED

by
FRITZ LEIBER

I GLANCED down my neck secretly at the two snowy hillocks, ruby peaked, that were pushing out my blouse tautly without the aid of a brassière. I decided they'd more than do. So I turned away scornfully as his vast top-down convertible cruised past my street lamp. I struck my hip and a big match against the fluted column, and lit a cigarette. I was Lili Marlene to a T—or rather to a V-neckline. (I must tell you that my com-

mand of earth-idiom and allusion is remarkable, but if you'd had my training you wouldn't wonder.)

The convertible slowed down and backed up. I smiled. I'd been certain that my magnificently formed milk glands would turn the trick. I puffed on my cigarette languorously.

"Hi, Babe!"

Right from the first I'd known it was the man I was supposed to contact. Handsome hatchet face. Six or seven feet tall. Quite a creature. Male, as they say.

I hopped into his car, vaulting over the low door before he opened it. We zoomed off through New York's purple, smelly twilight.

"What's your name, Big Male?" I asked him.

Scorning to answer, he stripped me with his eyes. But I had confidence in my milk glands. Lord knows, I'd been hours perfecting them.

"Slickie Millane, isn't it?" I prompted recklessly.

"That's possible," he conceded, poker-faced.

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" I asked him, nudging him with the leftermost of my beautifully conical milk glands.

"Look here, Babe," he told me, just a bit coldly, "I'm the one who dispenses sex and justice in this area."

I snuggled submissively under his encircling right arm, still nudging him now and again with my left milk gland. The convertible sped. The skyscrapers shrank, exfoliated, became countryside. The convertible stopped.

As the hand of his encircling arm began to explore my prize possessions, I drew away a bit, not frustratingly, and informed him, "Slickie dear, I am from Galaxy Center . . ."

"What's that—a magazine publisher?" he demanded hotly, being somewhat inflamed by my cool milk glands.

". . . and we are interested in how sex and justice are dispensed in all areas," I went on, disregarding his interruption and his somewhat juvenile fondlings. "To be bold, we suspect that you may be somewhat misled about this business of sex."

Vertical, centimeter-deep furrows creased his brow. His head poised above mine like a hawk's. "What are you talking about, Babe?" he demanded with suspicious rage, even snatching his hands away.

"Briefly, Slickie," I said, "you do not seem to feel that sex is for the production of progeny or for the mutual solace of two creatures. You seem to think—"

His rage exploded into action. He grabbed a great big gun out of the glove compartment. I sprang to my two transmuted

nether tentacles—most handsome gams if I, the artist, do say so. He jabbed the muzzle of the gun into my midriff.

"That's exactly what I mean, Slickie," I managed to say before my beautiful midriff, which I'd been at such pains to perfect, erupted into smoke and ghastly red splatter. I did a backward flipflop out of the car and lay still—a most fetching corpse with a rucked-up skirt. As the convertible snorted off triumphantly, I snagged hold of the rear bumper, briefly changing my hand back to a tentacle for better gripping. Before the pavement had abraded more than a few grams of my substance, I pulled myself up onto the bumper, where I proceeded to reconstitute my vanished midriff with material from the air, the rest of my body, and the paint on the trunk case. On this occasion the work went rapidly, with no artistic gropings, since I had the curves memorized from the first time I'd worked them out. Then I touched up my abrasions, stripped myself, whipped myself up a snazzy sliver lamé evening frock out of chromium from the bumper, and put in time creating costume jewelry out of the tail light and the rest of the chrome.

The car stopped at a bar and Slickie slid out. For a moment his proud profile was silhouetted against the smoky glow. Then he was inside. I threw away the costume jewelry and climbed over the folded top and popped down on the leather-upholstered seat, scarcely a kilogram lighter than when I'd first sat there.

The minutes dragged. To pass them, I mentally reviewed the thousand-and-some basic types of mutual affection on the million-plus planets, not forgetting the one and only basic type of love.

There was a burst of juke-box jazz. Footsteps tracked from the bar toward the convertible. I leaned back comfortably with my silver-filmed milk glands dramatically highlighted.

"Hi, Slickie," I called, making my voice sweet and soft to cushion the shock.

Nevertheless it was a considerable one. For all of ten seconds he stood there, canted forward a little, like a wooden Indian that's just been nudged from behind and is about to topple.

Then with a naive ingenuity that rather touched me, he asked huskily, "Hey, have you got a twin sister?"

"Could be," I said with a shrug that jogged my milk glands deliciously.

"Well, what are you doing in my car?"

"Waiting for you," I told him simply.

He considered that as he slowly and carefully walked around

the car and got behind the wheel, never taking his eyes off me. I nudged him in my usual manner. He jerked away.

"What are you up to?" he inquired suspiciously.

"Why are you surprised, Slickie?" I countered innocently. "I've heard this sort of thing happens to you all the time."

"What sort of thing?"

"Girls turning up in your car, your bar, your bedroom—everywhere."

"Where'd you hear it?"

"I read it in your Spike Mallet books."

"Oh," he said somewhat mollified. But then his suspicion came back. "But what are you really up to?" he demanded.

"Slickie," I assured him with complete sincerity, bugging my beautiful eyes, "I just love you."

This statement awakened in him an irritation so great that it overrode his uneasiness about me, for he cuffed me in the face—so suddenly that I almost forgot and changed it back to my top tentacle.

"I make the advances around here, Babe," he asserted harshly.

Completely under control again, I welled a tiny trickle of blood out of the left-hand corner of my gorgeous mouth. "Anything you say, Slickie, dear," I assented submissively and cuddled up against him in a prim, girlish way to which he could hardly take exception.

But I must have bothered or at least puzzled him, for he drove slowly, his dark-eaved eyes following an invisible tennis ball that bounded between me and the street ahead. Abruptly the eaves lifted and he smiled.

"Look, I just got an idea for a story," he said. "There's this girl from Galaxy Center—" and he whipped around to watch my reactions, but I didn't blink.

He continued, "I mean, she's sort of from the center of the galaxy, where everything's radioactive. Now there's this guy that's got her up in his attic." His face grew deeply thoughtful. "She's the most beautiful girl in the universe and he loves her like crazy, but she's all streaming with hard radiations and it'll kill him if he touches her."

"Yes, Slickie—and then?" I prompted after the car had dreamed its way for several blocks between high buildings.

He looked at me sharply. "That's all. Don't you get it?"

"Yes, Slickie," I assured him soothingly. My statement seemed to satisfy him, but he was still edgy.

He stopped the car in front of an apartment hotel that thrust toward the stars with a dark presumptuousness. He got

out on the street side and walked around the rear end and suddenly stopped. I followed him. He was studying the gray bumper and the patch of raw sheet metal off which I'd used the paint. He looked around at me where I stood sprayed with silver lamé in the revealing lamp light.

"Wipe your chin," he said critically.

"Why not kiss the blood off it, Slickie?" I replied with an ingenuousness I hoped would take the curse off the suggestion.

"Aw nuts," he said nervously and stalked into the foyer so swiftly he might have been trying to get away from me. However, he made no move to stop me when I followed him into the tiny place and the even tinier elevator. In the latter cubicle I maneuvered so as to give him a series of breathtaking scenic views of the Grand Tetons that rose behind the plunging silver horizon of my neckline, and he unfroze considerably. By the time he opened the door to his apartment he had got so positively cordial that he urged me across the threshold with a casual spank.

It was just as I had visualized it—the tiger skins, the gun racks, the fireplace, the open bedroom door, the bar just beside it, the adventures of Spike Mallet in handsomely tooled leather bindings, the vast divan covered with zebra skin . . .

On the last was stretched a beautiful ice-faced blonde in a filmy negligee.

This was a complication for which I wasn't prepared. I stood rooted by the door while Slickie walked swiftly past me.

The blonde slithered to her feet. There was murder in her glacial eyes. "You two-timing rat!" she grated. Her hand darted under her negligee. Slickie's snaked under the left-hand side of his jacket.

Then it hit me what was going to happen. She would bring out a small but deadly silver-plated automatic, but before she could level it, Slickie's cannon would make a red ruin of her midriff.

There I was, standing twenty feet away from both of them—and this poor girl couldn't reconstitute herself!

Swifter than thought I changed my arms back to upper dorsal tentacles and jerked back both Slickie's and girl's elbow. They turned around, considerably startled, and saw me standing twenty feet away. I'd turned my tentacles back to arms before they'd noticed them. Their astonishment increased.

But I knew I had won only a temporary respite. Unless something happened, Slickie's trigger-blissful rage would swiftly

be refocused on this foolish fragile creature. To save her, I had to divert his ire to myself.

"Get that little tramp out of here," I ordered Slickie from the corner of my mouth as I walked past him to the bar.

"Easy, Babe," he warned me.

I poured myself a liter of scotch—I had to open a second bottle to complete the measure—and downed it. I really didn't need it, but the assorted molecules were congenial building blocks and I was rather eager to get back to normal weight.

"Haven't you got that tramp out of here yet?" I demanded, eyeing him scornfully over my insouciant silver-filmed shoulder.

"Easy, Babe," he repeated, the vertical furrows creasing his brow to a depth of at least a centimeter and a half.

"That's telling her, Slickie," the blonde applauded.

"You two-timing rat!" I plagiarized, whipping up my silver skirt as if to whisk a gun from my nonexistent girdle.

His cannon coughed. Always a good sportsman, I moved an inch so that the bullet, slightly mis-aimed, took me exactly in the right eye, messily blowing off the back of my head. I winked at Slickie with my left eye and fell back through the doorway into the bedroom darkness.

I knew I had no time to spare. When a man's shot one girl he begins to lose his natural restraint. Lying on the floor, I reconstituted my eye and did a quick patch-job on the back of my head in seventeen seconds flat.

As I emerged from the bedroom, they were entering into a clinch, each holding a gun lightly against the other's back.

"Slickie," I said, pouring myself a scant half liter of scotch, "I told you about that tramp."

The ice-blonde squawked, threw up her hands as if she'd had a shot of strychnine, and ran out the door. I fancied I could feel the building tilt as she leaned on the elevator button.

I downed the scotch and advanced, shattering the paralyzed space-time that Slickie seemed to be depending on as a defense.

"Slickie," I said, "let's get down to cases. I am indeed from Galaxy Center and we very definitely don't like your attitude. We don't care what your motives are, or whether they are derived from jumbled genes, a curdled childhood, or a sick society. We simply love you and we want you to reform." I grabbed him by a shivering shoulder that was now hardly higher than my waist, and dragged him into the bedroom, snatching up the rest of the scotch on the way. I switched on the light. The bedroom was a really lush love-nest. I drained the scotch—there was about a half liter left—and faced the

cowering Slickie. "Now do to me," I told him uncompromisingly, "the thing you're always going to do to those girls, except you have to shoot them."

He frothed like an epileptic, snatched out his cannon and emptied its magazine into various parts of my torso, but since he hit only two of my five brains, I wasn't bothered. I reeled back bloodily through the blue smoke and fell into the bathroom. I felt real crazy—maybe I shouldn't have taken that last half liter. I reconstituted my torso faster even than I had my head, but my silver lamé frock was a mess. Not wanting to waste time and reluctant to use any more reconstituting energy, I stripped it off and popped into the off-the-shoulders evening dress the blonde had left lying over the edge of the bathtub. The dress wasn't a bad fit. I went back into the bedroom. Slickie was sobbing softly at the foot of the bed and gently beating his head against it.

"Slickie," I said, perhaps a shade too curtly, "about this love business—"

He sprang for the ceiling but didn't quite burst through it. Falling back, by chance on his feet, he headed for the hall. Now it wasn't in my orders from Galaxy Center that he run away and excite this world—in fact, my superiors had strictly forbidden such a happening. I had to stop Slickie. But I was a bit confused—perhaps fuddled by that last half liter. I hesitated—then he was too far away, had too big a start. To stop him, I knew I'd have to use tentacles. Swifter than thought I changed them and shot them out.

"Slickie," I cried reassuringly, dragging him to me.

Then I realized that in my excitement, instead of using my upper dorsal tentacles, I'd used the upper ventral ones I kept transmuted into my beautiful milk glands. I do suppose they looked rather strange to Slickie as they came out of the bosom of my off-the-shoulders evening dress and drew him to me.

Frightening sounds came out of him. I let him go and tried to resume my gorgeous shape, but now I was really confused (that last half liter!) and lost control of my transmutations. When I found myself turning my topmost tentacle into a milk gland I gave up completely and—except for a lung and vocal cords—resumed my normal shape. It was quite a relief. After all, I had done what Galaxy Center had intended I should. From now on, the mere sight of a brassière in a show window would be enough to give Slickie the shakes.

Still, I was bothered about the guy. As I say, he'd touched me.

I caressed him tenderly with my tentacles. Over and over again I explained that I was just a heptapus and that Galaxy Center had selected me for the job simply because my seven tentacles would transmute nicely into the seven extremities of the human female.

Over and over again I told him how I loved him.

It didn't seem to help. Slickie Millane continued to weep hysterically.

In the years since this story first appeared we have grown more conditioned to the possibility that when and if Alien Intelligences do land here, they will avoid the more populated areas and instead seek out, as if by design, people whose world is limited by the horizon they know. But what would happen if they should land in one of those backwaters where Time has *"sort of stopped"?*

THE MARTIANS AND THE COYS

by

MACK REYNOLDS

MAW COY climbed the fence down at the end of the south pasture and started up the side of the creek, carrying her bundle over her shoulder and puffing slightly at her exertion.

She forded the creek there at the place where Hank's old

coon dog Jigger was killed by the boar three years ago come next hunting season. Jumping from rock to rock across the creek made her puff harder; Maw Coy wasn't as young as she once was.

On the other side she rested a minute to light up her pipe and to look carefully about before heading up the draw. She didn't really expect to see any Martins around here, but you never knew. Besides, there might've been a revenue agent. They were getting mighty thick and mighty uppity these days. You'd think the government'd have more to do than bother honest folks trying to make an honest living.

The pipe lit, Maw swung the bundle back over her shoulder and started up the draw. Paw and the boys, she reckoned, were probably hungry as a passel of hound dogs by now. She'd have to hurry.

When she entered the far side of the clearing, she couldn't see any signs of them so she yelled, "You Paw! You Hank and Zeke!" Maw Coy liked to give the men folks warning before she came up on the still. Hank, in particular, was mighty quick on the trigger sometimes.

But there wasn't any answer. She trudged across the clearing to where the still was hidden in a cluster of pines. Nobody was there but Lem.

She let the bundle down and glowered at him. "Lem, you no-account, why didn't you answer me when I hollered?"

He grinned at her vacuously, not bothering to get up from where he sat whittling, his back to an old oak. "Huh?" he said. A thin trickle of brown ran down from the side of his mouth and through the stubble on his chin.

"I said, how come you didn't answer when I hollered?"

He said, "You called Paw and Hank and Zeke, you didn't holler for me. What you got there, Maw, huh?" His watery eyes were fixed on the bundle.

Maw Coy sighed deeply and sat down on a tree stump. "Now what you think I got there, Lem? I been a bringing your vittles to you every day since Paw and you boys started up this new still. Where's Paw and Zeke and Hank?"

Lem scratched himself with the stick he'd been whittling on. "They went off scoutin' around for the revenooers or maybe the Martins." He let his mouth fall open and peered wistfully into the woods. He added, "I wish I could shoot me a Martin, Maw. I wish I could. I sure wish I could shoot me a Martin."

The idea excited him. He brought his hulking body to its

feet and went over to pick up an ancient shotgun from where it leaned against a mash barrel.

Maw Coy was taking corn pone, some cold fried salt pork, and a quart of black-strap molasses from her bundle and arranging it on the top of an empty keg. "You mind yourself with that gun now, Lem. Mind how you shot up your foot that time."

Lem didn't hear her; he was stroking the stock of the shotgun absently. "I could do it easy," he muttered. "I could shoot me a Martin easy. I sure could, Maw. I'd show Hank and Zeke, I would."

"You forget about the Martins, son," Maw Coy said softly. "Yore my simple son—there's at least one in every family, mostly more—and it ain't fittin' that you get into fights. You got a strong back, strongest in the hills, but yore too simple, Lem."

"I ain't as simple as Jim Martin, Maw," Lem protested.

"Son, they don't come no more simple than you," his mother told him gently. "And mind that gun. You know how you bent the barrel of Zeke's Winchester back double that time, absent-minded like."

He stroked the gun stock, patted it, half in anger, half in protest. His lower lip hung down in a pout. "You stop talkin' thataway, Maw," he growled, "or I'll larrup you one."

Maw Coy didn't answer. She reckoned she'd better set off into the woods and see if she could locate the rest of the men folks, so they could eat.

Lem said under his breath, "I could shoot me a Martin real easy, I could."

To the Most High, the Glorious, the Omnipotent, Omnipresent, and Omniscient, the Lord of the Seven, the Leader of the Chosen, Neo Geek XXXVIII:

In regard to: *Testing of special weapons designed to eliminate present population of the third planet with the eventual view of colonizing.*
From: *Seegeel Wan, Commander of Spacecruiser 12B44.*

Your Omnipotence:

Upon the receipt of your orders, we proceeded to the planet in question (known to its inhabitants as Earth, or Terra) first touching at its satellite (Luna) in order to pick up the observa-

tion group which has been studying the potential foe for several decals.

Commander of the observation group, Baren Darl, has enjoyed the reputation of being our most outstanding authority on Earthlings. It has been principally through his recommendations that the secret, supplementary weapons, worked upon for the past decal, were devised. Baren Darl has successfully deciphered the principal language of Earth and through listening to their radio emanations has compiled a formidable work on his findings. But of his abilities, more later.

It might be added here that Baren Darl and all his group were more than ready to proceed to Earth and begin the slaughter of its inhabitants. It seems that these investigators have for decals listened most carefully to every radio emanation possible to pick up. This has evidently led them to the edge of complete frenzy—especially those who have been assigned the morning programs, sometimes known as "soap operas" by the Earthlings.

Baren Darl inspected the newly created weapons with considerable care and proclaimed them excellent for our purposes. In particular he was impressed with the I.Q. Depressor; the deadly poison, *nark;* and the lepbonic plague carrying fleas. He was convinced that these secret weapons would give our forces that advantage we seek before launching our all-out attack upon Earth.

Acting on Darl's suggestions, we avoided the more heavily populated areas of Earth and landed our spacecruiser in a mountainous area of the planet known as Kentucky, a subdivision of the United States of America, one of the more advanced Earth nations.

Our plans did not work out as anticipated.

Keeping well in mind the need for secrecy, we made every attempt to land the spacecruiser without detection. We settled in a small valley near a stream and immediately sent out scouts to determine if there was any sign that our craft had been sighted in descent.

Evidently, the population of the vicinity was so small that our plans were successful. Our patrols reported only one small group of Earthlings in the immediate area.

Deciding to test the new weapons on this gathering, we disembarked a force of a dozen warriors, all disguised as Earthlings and with myself as commander and Baren Darl as technical advisor.

"We must keep our senses alert for Sam Spade, Superman

and the Lone Ranger," Baren Darl said nervously, peering around among the strange exotic trees and other vegetation that grows on Earth.

I was somewhat surprised at his tone and obvious unease.

"Who?" I asked. "What?"

"Three Terran warriors of amazing ability and viciousness," he told me. "I have been gathering reports of their activities from the radio for some time. They seem to have clairvoyant minds; one or the other of them almost invariably appears on the scene of violence."

I said impatiently, "Without doubt, our weapons would mean the end of these warriors."

I did not share his belief that any Earthling warriors might be our equals or superiors, but to remain on the cautious side, I immediately ordered that the Elect-no be switched on. This weapon, one of the several designed for the Earth campaign, as your Omnipotence is undoubtedly aware, is so constructed as to prevent the use of any internal combustion engine within a dozen miles of the Elect-no. In this case, no aircraft, no land-craft, utilizing internal combustion, could enter our zone.

Baren Darl seemed somewhat relieved at this precaution, but his attitude to a certain extent began to affect the rest of us. To prepare for any eventuality, I had the Fission-Suppressor activated. This, of course, automatically made it impossible for nuclear fission to take place within a hundred miles of our ship.

That measure pleased Baren Darl exceedingly in view of the fact that the Earth nations seemed to be spending practically all of their military appropriations on their so-called A-Bombs and H-Bombs. According to the radio emanations our Luna base had picked up, the Earthlings were interested in little else in a military way, except possibly bacteriological weapons, and, of course, we were prepared to deal them a strong blow along that line with our lepbonic plague spreading fleas.

At any rate, knowing that we had suppressed the use of their major weapon, the fission bomb, and had prevented transportation from entering the vicinity, we proceeded toward the clearing where the Earthlings had gathered, determined to test the I.Q. Depressor, *nark,* and the lepbonic plague fleas, for it was upon the success of these weapons that our Earth campaign depended.

We proceeded with care toward the clearing on the edge of which our scouts had detected Earthlings, and carefully approached from behind the one specimen we saw there. Evidently, the others had gone off.

Baren Darl, the only member of our little group who was familiar with the language, acted as spokesman, and we concealed for the moment at least the purpose of our "visit." The following conversation was recorded by Baren Darl himself and later translated as literally as possible into our language.

Earthling: "Huh? What's that?"

Baren Darl: "Have no fear."

Earthling: "Revenooers! Paw! Hank!"

(The meaning of the word *revenooers* was completely unknown to Baren Darl but from the Earthling's tone of voice it is to be assumed that the term is a derogatory one.)

Baren Darl: "We are not revenooers. We are friends."

Earthling: "Huh?"

Baren Darl: "We are not revenooers. We are friends."

Earthling (suspiciously): "Well, you can't have no free corn, if that's what you're looking for. Can't buy none either. Paw won't sell no raw corn. Says corn ain't fitten to drink unless it's been aged a week."

(This conversation seemed to puzzle Baren Darl and I was beginning to suspect already that his knowledge of the Earthlings was somewhat less than he had led me to believe.)

Baren Darl: "Where are the others?"

Earthling: "Huh?"

(This continual inability on the Earthling's part to understand the questions put to him by Baren Darl also caused me to wonder whether or not the decals spent on Luna in observing Earth were quite as fruitful as they might have been.)

Baren Darl: "Where are the others?"

Earthling: "Oh, you mean Maw and Paw and Hank and Zeke. They're off looking for Martins."

(Your Omnipotence is of course aware that in the language of the Earthlings our glorious planet is known as *Mars*, and we as *Martians*, or, evidently, as this Earthling pronounced it, *Martins*.)

This information was, as you can well imagine, startling, since we had supposed that our landing had been made in the most complete secrecy. What means they had utilized to discover us is unknown.

Baren Darl: "Ahhhhh. And, er . . . what made them suspect there were Martians in the vicinity?"

Earthling: "Huh?"

Baren Darl: "What made Maw and Paw and Hank and Zeke think there were Martians around?"

Earthling: "Oh."

Baren Darl: "What made them think there were Martians about?"

Earthling: "Paw says he can smell him a Martian from most twenty miles away. Paw's got a regular feelin' for Martins, like. Paw'd rather shoot him a Martin than eat fried chicken. I wish I could shoot me a Martin, I wish. Yup, I sure wish I could shoot me a Martin. I wish—"

(This sixth sense of some of the Earthlings had been unsuspected by Baren Darl in spite of his decals of investigation. Evidently, the Earthlings have an unusual ability to detect the presence of alien life forms. Also surprising was the fact that the Earthlings were evidently aware of our plans to conquer their planet and were already worked up to a pitch of patriotism which made them extremely anxious to destroy us.)

Baren Darl turned to me and explained that there were four more of the Earthlings in the woods searching for us and that undoubtedly they would soon return. He suggested that we immediately try some of our weapons upon this specimen.

The plan seemed feasible enough so I ordered one of the warriors to find a suitable liquid in which to place a portion of the poison *nark*.

Ultimate plans, as you are aware, had been to drop, by spacecraft, small containers of *nark* in the reservoirs, rivers and lakes of the Earthlings. One drop was designated to be, as your Omnipotence knows, sufficient to poison a reservoir capable of supplying the water needs of a hundred thousand Earthlings.

Although water not available, the warrior was soon able to find what was obviously a container for some type of beverage. It was nearly full of a colorless fluid.

The following conversation then took place between Baren Darl and the Earthling:

Baren Darl: "What is this?"

Earthling: "Huh? Oh, that's *white mule*. Yup, sure is."

Baren Darl (puzzled): "I thought a mule was a four legged animal of burden particularly noted for kicking."

Earthling (vaguely): "Paw's white mule's got lots of kick in it. Yup."

Upon finding it was a beverage, as we had suspected, a small quantity of *nark* was quickly inserted.

Baren Darl: "Try a drink?"

Earthling: "What say?"

Baren Darl: "Have a drink?"

Earthling: "Uhhhhh. Maybe I will, but don't tell Paw. Paw says I'm simple enough without no white mule."

(Here he took a long draught without seeming effect, although we were expecting him to fall dead at our feet. We stood there staring at him, unbelievingly.)

Earthling: "That tasted mighty good. Got more of a kick than usual. Yup, sure did. Tasted like maybe somebody put in a wallop of turpentine."

He seemed perfectly at ease. I turned to Baren Darl and snapped, "The type of poison you recommended seems less than effective."

Baren Darl was obviously shocked. "It is inconceivable," he said. "Possibly the liquid in which we dissolved the *nark* acted as an antidote."

I turned my back on him angrily. "I begin to wonder about the effect of your other weapons!"

He waved to one of the warriors who had been burdened with the I.Q. Depressor: "We'll try this immediately," he said, anxiety in his tone.

While the machine was being readied, Baren Darl explained its workings to me in some detail. Meanwhile, the Earthling continued to sip at the jug which supposedly contained sufficient poison to eliminate an average large Terran city.

"As you know," Baren Darl told me, "the mind, whether of Earthling or Martian type, is capable of being either stimulated or depressed. For hundreds of decals our race has possessed chemicals capable of such depression or stimulation. However, to my knowledge, this device is the only one yet developed which can suppress the intelligence quotient of anyone within an area of many square miles.

"The plan for utilizing it is a simple but effective one. When we confront a body of Earthling soldiery, our men need only to turn on the I.Q. Depressor to turn the enemy into brainless idiots. Their defeat would then obviously be quite simple."

"Very well," I told him stiffly, "let us proceed to try it on this Earthling."

The device seemed quite elementary in construction. Baren Darl activated it by the simple flicking of a switch. We ourselves, of course, were immune to its workings since it was tuned only to the Earth type brain.

"It is now in operation?" I asked Baren Darl.

"Definitely. Watch the Earthling."

"I am watching."

The supposed top authority on Earth and Earthlings approached the specimen and eyed him carefully. The following conversation ensued:

Baren Darl: "How do you feel?"

Earthling: "Huh?"

(Baren Darl seemed pleased at this response, and, indeed, it would seem that the subject was on the verge of idiocy.)

Baren Darl: "How do you feel?"

Earthling: "I guess I feel fine. Yup, yup. Feel fine. —How'd you feel, stranger?"

Baren Darl (scowling): "Does your head feel somewhat different? Does your mind seem more sluggish?"

Earthling: "Huh?"

Baren Darl: "Does your thinking seem weaker?"

Earthling: "Nope. Can't say it does, stranger. Fact is, it'd be purdy hard to make my thinking much weaker. Yup, sure would."

Baren Darl stared at him for a long period, unbelievingly. Obviously, the I.Q. Depressor had been worthless as far as undermining the Earthling's intelligence is concerned.

Finally this alleged authority on Earthlings and upon Earth affairs flashed a look of despair at me, and at the others of us who stood around him.

"The fleas," he blurted finally, "the lepbonic plague fleas. This weapon alone might well destroy the whole population of Earth. Bring the fleas."

I said coldly, "We shall see, Baren Darl." Then to one of the warriors, "Bring the fleas that carry this so *deadly*—so Baren Darl tells us—lepbonic plague."

The Earthling was ignoring us now and had gone back to taking an occasional drink from his jug. Our warrior approached carefully from behind him and dropped a half dozen of the supposedly deadly insects upon the Earthling.

We then stood back and watched cautiously. According to Baren Darl, the fast spreading disease should take effect almost immediately.

The Earthling sat there, the I.Q. Depressor still tuned on but obviously unable to lower his intelligence an iota. He continued to sip from the jug of white mule, which had enough *nark* in it to kill thousands. Occasionally, he scratched himself.

"I guess I'll take me a nap," he said thickly, his words slurred. He scratched himself once again, yawned deeply, and slumped against the tree, obviously in sleep.

Baren Darl looked at me triumphantly. "The reaction is somewhat different than we'd expected, but obviously the fleas have given him lepbonic plague. This weapon at least is as successful as we had—"

I peered down at the Earthling suspiciously. His clothes were disarrayed and torn. I pointed at a speck on his uncouthly hairy chest.

"And what is that?" I snapped at Baren Darl.

He bent down to see what I indicated.

"It seems to be one of the fleas," he told me.

"Then what is it doing on its back with its feet up in the air?"

"It seems indisposed."

"It seems *dead,* you numbskull!" I roared at him. "After biting this Earthling your fleas have died!"

In a high rage, I strode up and down the clearing trying to coordinate my thoughts to the point where I could make an intelligent decision on this situation. Obviously, a crisis was at hand. Using these weapons devised by our scientists, after detailed instructions on their construction by Baren Darl and his group of efficient "experts," would obviously be suicidal. They were completely worthless.

I came to a snap conclusion. Our plan must be to reveal ourselves to the Earthlings as Martians and pretend to come bearing them only good will and desire for peace and commerce. A few months on their planet, closely—but unbeknown to them—studying their life form, should give us ample opportunity to plan more effective weapons against them.

This then was my decision.

I snapped to Baren Darl. "Arouse the Earthman; tell him that we are Martians and that we seek peace with the inhabitants of Earth."

There was some difficulty in the awakening, but finally Baren Darl succeeded. The Earthling shook his head groggily and scowled at my interpreter. The following conversation ensued:

Baren Darl: "Awaken. We have a message of great importance for you."

Earthling: "Huh?"

Baren Darl: "We have a message for you."

Earthling (Rolling over on his other side): "Oh."

Baren Darl said impressively: "In the name of the Most High, the Glorious, the Omnipotent, Omnipresent, and Omniscient, the Lord of the Seven, the Leader of the Chosen, Neo Geek XXXVIII; we bring you greetings from the Martians."

Earthling: "Huh?"

Baren Darl: "We Martians offer you the friendship and the good will of a people that—"

Earthling: "Martins! Are you'uns Martins?"

Baren Darl: "That is correct. We Martians come with the greetings and—"

At this point, your Omnipotence, my account must of necessity be somewhat vague, for even after we had made good our escape back to the spacecruiser, bearing our more serious casualties with us, we were unable to agree among ourselves on just what had happened.

Baren Darl, who is now under arrest and in the darkest recess of the Spacecruiser 12B44 laden down with chains, is of the opinion that the Earthling was none other than either Superman or the Lone Ranger in disguise. He contends that both of these Earthling warriors are prone to adopt disguises in this manner, revealing themselves only at the last moment to their enemies.

Suffice to say, however, that we were all successful in making good our retreat to the spacecruiser although all of our equipment and supplies were destroyed in the melee. Upon regaining the spacecraft we blasted off hurriedly, to return to our own sacred planet.

I recommend, your Omnipotence, that the plans to subjugate the planet Earth be indefinitely postponed in view of the fact that our specially designed weapons proved worthless and in particular view of the abilities of Earthling warriors.

I further recommend that the unspeakable Baren Darl, who obviously frittered away his time during the decals spent on Luna supposedly studying the Earthlings, be sent to the Nairebis Salt Mines.

Obediently,
Seegeel Wan
Commander Spacecruiser 12B44.

Maw and Paw Coy and Hank and Zeke came back into the clearing wearily. The boys had done a lot of tramping and were hungry for their vittles, and Maw was feeling bodacious about taking off to go hunting for Martins. Paw had told her to shut up two or three times but it hadn't been much use.

Lem was sitting on an upended mash barrel loading his old shotgun and grinning vacuously. He seemed unaware of the fact that the stock of the gun was a splintered ruin.

"Guess what, Paw," he yelled. "I got me a Martin. I got me a whole passel of Martins, Paw, I sure did. Yup, I—"

Paw Coy grunted, and started poking around in the vittles Maw had brought up from the cabin.

The boys leaned their rifles up against the oak and each picked up a handy fruit jar of corn squeezins.

Hank said nastily, "Sure you got a whole passel of Martins, Lem. In yore sleep, you got a passel of Martins."

Lem said belligerently, "Don't you go a talkin' thataway, Hank, or I'll . . . I'll throw you up into the tree the way I did that time you hit me with the ax. I did so get me some Martins. I was a sittin' here when a whole passel come outen the woods. Didn't know they was Martins at first. Then—"

Maw Coy handed him a chunk of corn pone. "Now you be quiet, Lem, and eat your vittles. Sure you got yourself a Martin, Lem."

A thin trickle of brown ran down from the side of Lem's mouth. He spit on the ground before him, with an air of happy belligerence.

"I sure did, Maw. I sure got me a passel of Martins. Yup, I sure did."

When and if the Aliens do land, a million questions may of course be answered. Assuming there is time to ask these questions. . . .

QUIZ GAME

by

FRANK M. ROBINSON

"WHAT DO they look like, Dad?" Jimmy asked.

I finished spooning the gravy over the mashed potatoes and passed the plate down to him.

"They're a sort of light green," I said. "Light green, with small scales, and they're about the size of Spot."

Jimmy toyed with his vegetables for a moment. "Are they gonna conquer the world like the Martians on Captain Video?"

From the look on his face I could tell that he didn't consider the possibility a calamity.

"No, Jimmy, they're not going to conquer the Earth. They're not an aggressive race."

He made a small swimming pool out of his potatoes and solemnly floated a raft of peas on top of the gravy. "You must have been pretty excited when they landed, huh, Dad?"

"You just buckle right down to eating, young man," Dot cut in, "and let the questions go until later. Your father's had a hard day."

"You can't expect people not to ask questions about it," I said.

"What does Mr. Pelloquin think about it?" she asked. Her face grew intent. "What do *you* think?"

I helped myself to another slice of meat loaf and tried to keep the enthusiasm out of my voice. "I don't think Sam Pelloquin thinks anything at all about it," I said. "It's just another story to him. As for myself, I think we'll jump a hundred years ahead overnight."

"I bet old man Harris was surprised when the rocket crashed on his farm!"

"Jimmy," I said quietly, "what did your mother just tell you?"

His face disappeared behind a slice of bread and jam. "I forgot, Dad."

After dinner I went to the bedroom to get my brief case. I was searching the top of the bureau for my security badge when Dot came in from the kitchen, dish towel still in her hand.

"Out again?"

"Long hours, Dot, for me as well as the other professors at the university." I smiled. "I guess you can put me down as working the night shift now."

"You know I'm not complaining," she said.

I found the badge and pinned it on my suit coat, then checked the contents of my brief case.

"You have to go through a lot of red tape for Security, don't you?" She asked the question rather hesitantly.

I zipped the leather case shut and wondered what it was she was digging for.

"You know why," I said. "Since they come from a civilization a lot more advanced than our own, they must know a lot about science that we don't. Once we establish communication with them—find out their language—it's going to be one big quiz game. Naturally all the security is to see that we're the only ones who get the answers."

"I see," she said, staring absently at the towel in her hands.

"That wasn't what you wanted to know, was it?" I could almost guess what was coming now. And all it proved was that Dot was just as human as the few dozen others who had already asked me different versions of the same question.

She gave the towel a half angry flirt and lowered her voice to the conspiratorial whisper we always used when we didn't want Jimmy to hear.

"I know the background," she whispered. "There's going to be a lot of scientists asking a lot of questions. And they'll be getting the answers because those people are way ahead of us in just about everything, aren't they? They know all about science and they should know a lot about medicine, too, shouldn't they? You said they have the same basic metabolism that we have!"

I nodded and waited for her to continue.

"You know Irene has cancer," she said, taking the plunge. "Maybe they even know something about that!" Irene was Dot's sister, a case the doctors had labeled hopeless years ago.

I waited a moment before replying, hating to promise her what wasn't mine to promise.

"They probably do, Dot. I guess they'll be asked questions like that. There are some men at the University who would like to know the same thing—for personal reasons."

She kissed me good night at the door and held me for a moment. "You'll be right there to remind them," she said fiercely. "Don't forget!"

It had started to rain a little, the drops slicking the front door stoop and making small haloes around the street lamps. I fumbled in my pockets for the car keys and just for a second glanced up at the black sky.

The aliens had come from some place up there, I thought. Strange little creatures from an unknown world who probably knew all the answers to questions like Dot's—if we only knew how to ask them.

I drove along a side street to the Outer Drive, then relaxed in the seat, watching the shadowy trees and the misty street lamps slide quickly by. It had started, I thought, like any other item in what newspapermen call the "silly season," that part of the summer when the nation's press services are cluttered with reports of flying saucers, pink rains, and other unlikely events, the time of year when the Loch Ness sea monster gets its usual play.

There had been the unconfirmed story of the landing of the rocket in Indiana; an account where Sid Harris, the farmer on whose south forty the rocket had landed, was painted as pretty much of a Hoosier hick.

But the next story gave a somewhat different view of Harris. After all, you couldn't laugh off the solid evidence of seventy feet of gleaming, tubular rocket.

The government and the university arrived on the scene at just about the same time and when everything was said and done, the government had full charge of the rocket and the little men on board ended up in a special laboratory on the second floor of the Memorial Hall of Chemistry.

The creatures were friendly, they were not the forerunners of some other-world invasion a la Orson Welles, and they were highly intelligent. A press release on the latter, coupled with some remarks on the discoveries we would naturally make after we had poked around the inside of their rocket, started the next phase. It was only natural to speculate that if we could find out a lot from the rocket, how much more could we find out from the little men themselves? What if *we* knew what *they* knew!

And if we did? Well, in the books they call it Utopia or the Millennium.

The idea took hold. I liked it myself, even if I sometimes thought it was too good to be true, like Christmas Day every day from a kid's viewpoint or finding a millon dollars on a street corner from my own.

You couldn't get around it. They probably knew the answers to everything we wanted to know.

The fissioning of light elements—
Cheap atomic power—
Maybe even cures for
Cancer—
Cerebral palsy—
Heart trouble—
Or how to live to be a hundred.
All we had to do was ask.

I checked in at the Administration Building first to see if there had been any calls or late afternoon mail for me.

"There's a Mr. Pelloquin waiting to see you, Professor Fenton," the receptionist said. "From the *Press*."

He was seated in a chair in a little nook off the main reception room. He was a big, solid man, slightly balding at the

temples, with a passion for trench coats and battered hats that served almost as a trademark.

"Sorry, Sam," I said. "I didn't see you."

He brushed aside the apology, shook hands, and said: "Anything new on your little green men?"

"I'm on the night shift now," I said. "I've been away all day. Maybe you can tell me."

He waved some papers in his hand. "The usual deadly dull government releases. Interviews with people who saw 'the flash in the sky.' They don't stretch very far."

"Getting tired of it?"

He shook his head. "No. They're easy to cover and the way it looks, they're going to be good copy for a long time. Like when the quintuplets were born—I think there was a story about them every day for a couple of years."

"Bigger stories will probably come along."

"The only stories that will be any bigger," he said pointedly, "are those that you probably won't be around to read about and I won't be around to cover."

"Sam," I said suddenly, "if you were going to ask them questions, what would *you* ask?"

A gleam came into his eyes. "They elected you for the job, eh?"

"Uh huh."

He closed his eyes in thought. "If they're so far ahead of us," he said after a moment, "then they must be a lot older race than we are, granted?"

I nodded.

"Then maybe it's just possible that they learned how to live with each other. I think if I were putting the questions to them, I would give them a briefing on the history of the human race and then ask them how we could live in peace for a change."

I had underestimated Sam, I thought, a little embarrassed.

"I'll buy that," I said.

He smiled. "But there are a few little items on fissionable isotopes that will probably come first, aren't there?" He glanced at his watch. "We've just got time for a short one for your brave new world, Dr. Fenton." For a moment he looked as wistful as a big man ever can. "Maybe this time it's the sure enough real McCoy. Maybe tomorrow starts a brand-new page."

I had just picked up my hat when the phone rang on the receptionist's desk. She was out at the moment and Sam answered it. I watched his face gray.

"For you?" I asked, when he had hung up.

He shook his head. "No, for you."

"Bad news?"

"I think we better walk over to Chemistry Hall right away. That was your secretary."

I felt a knot growing in my stomach. "Did she say what was wrong?"

"Yes," Sam said slowly. "I'm afraid your specimens are sick."

The university midway was a blaze of lights, the beams picking out the soldiers in wet raincoats and the hastily erected tents, glistening in the downpour, guarding the Chemistry Building. I doubted that anything had been released yet but you could sense something was wrong. There was a new tenseness and the checks and double checks before Sam and I were allowed to go in were more thorough and time-consuming than usual.

Miss Chandler, my secretary, was waiting in my office. She fingered some papers gingerly and held them out to me. "The latest reports."

I read through them hastily, then dropped them on my desk.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Probably a pathogenic allergy of some kind, we don't know what."

"Like what wiped out the Martians in the Welles' story."

"What? Oh, yes. I suppose you could make a comparison."

"Think it will be fatal?"

I shrugged. "There's no way of knowing. Probably not. The number of people who die compared to those who get sick is always small. I know that's an analogy, of course, but I don't see why it wouldn't apply."

I was trying to be reassuring but I could see in his face that I wasn't succeeding.

"Would you like to see them? They've been declassified to that extent." He started to fumble for his camera but I stopped him. "Sorry, no cameras. The flash bulbs annoy them.

The halls were busier now than they had been when we first came in. Security guards lined the corridors while grim-looking army officers and harried technicians in laboratory smocks hurried past them."

The room where the aliens were kept was a glassed-in, reconverted laboratory with only a dim, frosted bulb for illumination. We could make out a cluster of people in front of the glassed-in enclosure and soldiers at military ease along the wall. When our eyes had adjusted to the gloom, we joined the small crowd in front of the glass.

Sam had seen the few photographs that had been released but I knew that hadn't prepared him for the real thing. The room behind the glass had a sand floor with little cots of foam rubber spotted about and, in one corner, a small pool of water. The creatures standing by the pool were small and anthropomorphic in shape, a light emerald green in color, and with the same scales that I had mentioned to Jimmy. What the photographs never showed very clearly was their finely developed hands and the intelligent cast to their vaguely human faces.

"They're not as lively as they once were," I said, keeping my voice low. "They're listless and they won't take nourishment. The water doesn't interest them as much as it did either."

He couldn't tear his eyes away. "Does anybody know where they come from?"

"As far as we can figure out, from some system in the general direction of Canopus—but how far, we don't know."

He stared through the glass a moment longer. "Nobody knows for sure just how long they'll last, do they?"

"Oh, I don't think it's too serious," I said, without conviction. "A reaction like this is almost to be expected. It could take a turn for the worst, of course, but I don't think that will happen." I wished that I could disguise my feelings better; he could probably tell from the tone of my voice that I was whistling in the dark.

"How's the problem of communication going?"

"It may be a few hours, it may be a few days, but it won't be much longer before we have the key to their language. It's much simpler than trying to decipher a dead language, by the way." I paused. "You know," I mused, "I sometimes get the impression that they're trying just as desperately hard to communicate with us as we are with them."

We withdrew to an anteroom and Sam made himself comfortable on a peeling, leather upholstered couch. I kept a weather eye on the worried looking visitors to the room beyond.

"Supposing," Sam started, trying to frame what he had in mind, "just supposing that they died. Would that make their trip here a total loss as far as we're concerned? Couldn't you get something of value from going over their ship?"

I shook my head. "I doubt it, newspaper stories to the contrary. Their machinery is a thousand years too advanced for us. It would be like Galileo trying to find out what makes a modern motor generator tick. We'll have to learn to talk to them before we find out much."

"And there's a possibility you'll never get that chance, isn't there?" he asked reluctantly.

"Don't needle me for news, Sam," I said in a tired voice. "I've told you all I can. The worst it could come to would be a race between our solving the riddle of their language and the disease, or whatever it is, killing them off. It's a race I think we could win in plenty of time."

He changed the subject. "Are you the only one that's going to ask them questions?"

"I'm the only one who will talk to them initially, and it's been left to my discretion exactly what we ask them at first. However, there's a committee working on a list of potential questions. I'll probably draw the ones I ask from it."

"Did you have anything specific in mind?"

I hesitated a moment. "You understand that the exact line of questioning is classified but I can give you a general hint. There are some questions we'd like to ask about the fissioning of light elements and there are some about radioactivity and fuels and fuel consumption figures for rockets. That type of knowledge is probably elementary to them. There are a few I'd like to ask myself about crystal structure and atomic theory, but it'll be a while before I get in my innings."

"How about the social sciences?"

I gave him a thoughtful look. "I think I know what you're driving at," I said dryly. "We'd like to ask a lot about government and psychology and medicine. We're not just thinking of the next one after the H-bomb."

"I wasn't worried about it," he said quietly. "But I'm glad you told me just the same."

Miss Chandler came in with another set of reports and I skimmed through them with a sinking heart.

Dot wanted to ask the aliens about a cure for cancer.

Sam wanted a formula for peace.

My own committee, I knew, was primarily interested in the answers to questions that would take researchers years to find on their own.

But somebody was going to be left out; the potential list of questions had just grown suddenly shorter.

I looked up at Sam's questioning face and tried to keep my voice from shaking.

"The aliens are dying."

There wasn't much to do the next few hours. Sam telephoned in a few leads and then both of us spent the later hours chain-smoking in the anteroom and watching a dream slowly

crumble. The dream grew a little more tattered, a little more tenuous with every worried face that disappeared into the room beyond and came out looking even more worried. Their expressions were more accurate than the calibrations on a fever thermometer.

"Just how bad off are they?" Sam finally asked.

I ran my hand across the faint stubble on my chin. "They'll be gone by morning."

I was too tired to even feel a reaction to my own admission. The dream was almost ended. The millennium would take a millennium and utopia was still something you wrote books about. People would die of cancer and there would be wars and scientists would still spend agonizing years tracking down elementary facts.

"You know," Sam said, "when I was small, I used to ask my folks a lot of questions. And when I had stumped them, I hoped that some day I would run into somebody that knew all the answers. I think, in a way, all of us are like that. We all hope that some day we'll run into somebody who can tell us anything we want to know."

"We almost did," I said.

"It's going to be a big disappointment to everybody," he continued. "I think almost everybody was hoping for something from this. Something that would make life a little easier, a little better for them."

I knew what he meant.

"There isn't any hope of getting anything from them, huh?"

I ground my cigarette butt out against my heel and dropped the slight wad of paper on the floor. "Well, maybe, but it would be a mighty long chance. If we could crack their language within the next few hours, we still might have some time. But the odds against it are high. We have no Rosetta stone, so to speak, for their spoken language. And in any case we wouldn't pass from ignorance to complete understanding just like that." I paused. "Even if it happened, our time would be extremely limited. A lot of important questions would have to be lopped off the list."

"The ones you wanted to ask on crystal structure, I suppose."

I smiled a little weakly. "Those, and a lot of more important ones. We've already dropped questions concerning atomic fission."

He looked surprised. "You're really narrowing the list, aren't you?"

"We haven't much time," I said. "There are a lot of things

we'd like to know about, a lot of things that are quite important. Sociological questions, questions about disease, items of that nature."

"Considering how different they are," he asked, curious, "what good would it do to ask them questions about government, let's say, or something like cancer cures?"

"It's not the differences that are important," I said, "it's the similarities. They got here in a rocket, which implies a technology, which in turn implies a government of some sort. You have to extrapolate from there. Since their science is more advanced than ours, you assume it's older and that, in turn, their experience with governmental systems is older and greater than our own. As for diseases, they're oxygen breathing animals a great deal like ourselves; it's not too farfetched that there may be some diseases or organic failure common to both of us."

"I get you."

I stood up and walked over to the window that opened out on the midway. A crowd had started to gather some hours ago and the midway and the streets were black with them now.

I ran my finger around the inside of my collar, separating the damp cloth from my sweaty neck.

If it came to where I only had a chance to ask a few questions, I thought, what would they be? What would *they* ask, down there?

How to cure disease?

How to live to be a hundred?

How to be happy?

I wished I knew.

It was five in the morning when Harry Weber, city editor at the *Press*, came in. I had met him once before; a grim, efficient man whose sole interest in Armageddon would be its proper story coverage.

"You shouldn't have bothered coming," I said. "There isn't going to be anything worth writing about."

He threw his raincoat on the couch, where the water ran off and formed puddles on the leather.

"I always cover disasters," he said.

"Disasters?"

"That's what this is, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, "I guess it is."

"Are they gone?"

"No. Not yet."

"They'll be dead shortly," Sam said. "Utopia's going up in smoke."

I was tired and edgy. "So far," I said deliberately, "we've been pretty selfish about this, haven't we? Did you ever wonder what it's like for *them*, what *they're* thinking of for a change?"

Weber stared at me blankly and then Sam said: "It must be hell to die so far away from home."

We settled back into a gloomy silence and I lost myself watching the drops slowly run off Weber's raincoat. Another half hour had gone by when a lab man looked in and said: "We've broken the language, Dr. Fenton."

I didn't even look up. "Does it matter any more?"

"Dr. Crooks says the aliens are still alive, sir."

I stood up, my tiredness dropping away like a discarded shirt. We had won, I thought. Just how much remained to be seen. But we had won—at least a little.

I walked into the room where the aliens were waiting.

Sam and Weber were at the window watching the sun come up when I came back in. They didn't hear me.

"Our big worry now is how we're going to fake a story so the wind-up won't sound as bad as it is," Weber was saying. "After all, you just don't shoot Santa Claus."

"Oh, we'll find a way," Sam said brutally.

I made a noise and they turned and saw me.

Sam glanced at me soberly and said: "I can read it in your face. They died before you could even ask them their names."

"No," I said, "no, they didn't. We had time to talk to them."

My eyes were having difficulty focusing after the gloom of the next room.

"There were only two left," I continued.

Weber had his notebook out. "What did you ask them?"

"You know," I mused, "it was wonderful to be able to lean on somebody for a while. To think that there were beings who could answer all our questions." I stopped a minute and fumbled for my glasses. "And maybe that's what they were thinking, too."

"The questions?" Sam repeated.

I felt like I wanted to be quietly sick.

"We winnowed the questions out pretty well. We discarded most of the scientific questions—we'll find the answers to them eventually. The same with the sociological. What we wanted to ask was something—something fundamental."

I felt myself wandering again. "I think we made the wrong

assumption. How do you tell whether a civilization is inferior or superior? Because they had the means to get here didn't mean that the aliens considered themselves superior to us. Would another race judge superiority the same way we do?"

They couldn't see what I was driving at. "What did you ask?" Weber repeated.

I made a conscious effort to get a grip on myself. "I thought I had winnowed the questions down pretty well. Maybe somebody else would have thought of different questions, I don't know. But the questions I was going to ask actually don't matter."

Both of them caught it at the same time. "Going to?" Sam asked stupidly.

"Oh, don't you see!" I shouted. "What do you think they landed *here* for, why do you think they tried so hard to communicate with us, trying to make themselves understood? Can't you guess what happened in the short time we had before they died?

"We didn't get a chance to ask them anything? *They* asked *us!*"

*T*here will no doubt be many ways in which Man and Alien will learn at long last to communicate with one another. It is to be hoped though that this will happen, if not in our time, perhaps in our children's time, and not this late in the story of the race. . . .

DEAR DEVIL

by

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

THE FIRST Martian vessel descended upon Earth with the slow, stately fall of a grounded balloon. It did resemble a large balloon in that it was spherical and had a strange buoyancy out of keeping with its metallic construction. Beyond this superficial appearance all similarity to anything Terrestrial ceased.

There were no rockets, no crimson venturis, no external projections other than several solaradiant distorting grids which boosted the ship in any desired direction through the cosmic field. There were no observation ports. All viewing was done through a transparent band running right around the fat belly of the sphere. The bluish, nightmarish crew were assembled behind that band, surveying the world with great multi-faceted eyes.

They gazed through the band in utter silence as they examined this world which was Terra. Even if they had been capable of speech they would have said nothing. But none among them had a talkative faculty in any sonic sense. At this quiet moment none needed it.

The scene outside was one of untrammelled desolation. Scraggy blue-green grass clung to tired ground right away to the horizon scarred by ragged mountains. Dismal bushes struggled for life here and there, some with the pathetic air of striving to become trees as once their ancestors had been. To the right, a long, straight scar through the grass betrayed the sterile lumpiness of rocks at odd places. Too rugged and too narrow ever to have been a road, it suggested no more than the desiccating remnants of a long-gone wall. And over all this loomed a ghastly sky.

Captain Skhiva eyed his crew, spoke to them with his sign-talking tentacle. The alternative was contact-telepathy which required physical touch.

"It is obvious that we are out of luck. We could have done no worse had we landed on the empty satellite. However, it is safe to go out. Anyone who wishes to explore a little while may do so."

One of them gesticulated back at him. "Captain, don't you wish to be the first to step upon this world?"

"It is of no consequence. If anyone deems it an honor, he is welcome to it." He pulled the lever opening both air-lock doors. Thicker, heavier air crowded in and pressure went up a little. "Beware of over-exertion," he warned as they went out.

Poet Fander touched him, tentacles tip to tip as he sent his thoughts racing through their nerve-ends. "This confirms all that we saw as we approached. A stricken planet far gone in its death throes. What do you suppose caused it?"

"I have not the remotest idea. I would like to know. If it has been smitten by natural forces, what might they do to Mars?" His troubled mind sent its throb of worry up Fander's contacting tentacle. "A pity that this planet had not been farther out instead of closer in; we might then have observed the preceding phenomena from the surface of Mars. It is so difficult properly to view this one against the Sun."

"That applies still more to the next world, the misty one," observed Poet Fander.

"I know it. I am beginning to fear what we may find there. If it proves to be equally dead, then we are stalled until we can make the big jump outward."

"Which won't be in our lifetimes."

"I doubt it," agreed Captain Skhiva. "We might move fast with the help of friends. We shall be slow—alone." He turned to watch his crew writhing in various directions across the grim landscape. "They find it good to be on firm ground. But what

is a world without life and beauty? In a short time they will grow tired of it."

Fander said thoughtfully, "Nevertheless, I would like to see more of it. May I take out the lifeboat?"

"You are a songbird, not a pilot," reproved Captain Skhiva. "Your function is to maintain morale by entertaining us, not to roam around in a lifeboat."

"But I know how to handle it. Every one of us was trained to handle it. Let me take it that I may see more."

"Haven't we seen enough, even before we landed? What else is there to see? Cracked and distorted roads about to dissolve into nothingness. Ages-old cities, torn and broken, crumbling into dust. Shattered mountains and charred forests and craters little smaller than those upon the Moon. No sign of any superior life-form still surviving. Only the grass, the shrubs, and various animals, two or four-legged, that flee at our approach. Why do you wish to see more?"

"There is poetry even in death," said Fander.

"Even so, it remains repulsive." Skhiva gave a little shiver. "All right. Take the lifeboat. Who am I to question the weird working of the non-technical mind?"

"Thank you, Captain."

"It is nothing. See that you are back by dusk." Breaking contact, he went to the lock, curled snakishly on its outer rim and brooded, still without bothering to touch the new world. So much attempted, so much done—for so poor reward.

He was still pondering it when the lifeboat soared out of its lock. Expressionlessly, his multi-faceted eyes watched the energized grids change angle as the boat swung into a curve and floated away like a little bubble. Skhiva was sensitive to futility.

The crew came back well before darkness. A few hours were enough. Just grass and shrubs and child-trees straining to grow up. One had discovered a grassless oblong that once might have been the site of a dwelling. He brought back a small piece of its foundation, a lump of perished concrete which Skhiva put by for later analysis.

Another had found a small, brown, six-legged insect, but his nerve-ends had heard it crying when he picked it up, so hastily he had put it down and let it go free. Small, clumsily moving animals had been seen hopping in the distance, but all had dived down holes in the ground before any Martian could get near. All the crew were agreed upon one thing: the silence and solemnity of a people's passing was unendurable.

Fander beat the sinking of the Sun by half a time-unit. His bubble drifted under a great, black cloud, sank to ship-level, came in. The rain started a moment later, roaring down in frenzied torrents while they stood behind the transparent band and marvelled at so much water.

After a while, Captain Skhiva told them, "We must accept what we find. We have drawn a blank. The cause of this world's condition is a mystery to be solved by others with more time and better equipment. It is for us to abandon this graveyard and try the misty planet. We will take off early in the morning."

None commented, but Fander followed him to his room, made contact with a tentacle-touch.

"One could live here, Captain."

"I am not so sure of that." Skhiva coiled on his couch, suspending his tentacles on the various limb-rests. The blue sheen of him was reflected by the back wall. "In some places are rocks emitting alpha-sparks. They are dangerous."

"Of course, Captain. But I can sense them and avoid them."

"You?" Skhiva stared up at him.

"Yes, Captain. I wish to be left here."

"What?—in this place of appalling repulsiveness?"

"It has an all-pervading air of ugliness and despair," admitted Poet Fander. "All destruction is ugly. But by accident I have found a little beauty. It heartens me. I would like to seek its source."

"To what beauty do you refer?" Skhiva demanded.

Fander tried to explain the alien in non-alien terms.

"Draw it for me," ordered Skhiva.

Fander drew it, gave him the picture, said, "There!"

Gazing at it for a long time, Skhiva handed it back, mused awhile, then spoke along the other's nerves. "We are individuals with all the rights of individuals. As an individual, I don't think that picture sufficiently beautiful to be worth the tail-tip of a domestic *arlan*. I will admit that it is not ugly, even that it is pleasing."

"But, Captain—"

"As an individual," Skhiva went on, "you have an equal right to your opinions, strange though they may be. If you really wish to stay I cannot refuse you. I am entitled only to think you a little crazy." He eyed Fander again. "When do you hope to be picked up?"

"This year, next year, sometime, never."

"It may well be never," Skhiva reminded. "Are you prepared to face that prospect?"

"One must always be prepared to face the consequences of his own actions," Fander pointed out.

"True." Skhiva was reluctant to surrender. "But have you given the matter serious thought?"

"I am a non-technical component. I am not guided by thought."

"Then by what?"

"By my desires, emotions, instincts. By my inward feelings."

Skhiva said fervently, "The twin moons preserve us!"

"Captain, sing me a song of home and play me the tinkling harp."

"Don't be silly. I have not the ability."

"Captain, if it required no more than careful thought you would be able to do it?"

"Doubtlessly," agreed Skhiva, seeing the trap but unable to avoid it.

"There you are!" said Fander pointedly.

"I give up. I cannot argue with someone who casts aside the accepted rules of logic and invents his own. You are governed by notions that defeat me."

"It is not a matter of logic or illogic," Fander told him. "It is merely a matter of viewpoint. You see certain angles; I see others."

"For example?"

"You won't pin me down that way. I can find examples. For instance, do you remember the formula for determining the phase of a series tuned circuit?"

"Most certainly."

"I felt sure you would. You are a technician. You have registered it for all time as a matter of technical utility." He paused, staring at Skhiva. "I know that formula, too. It was mentioned to me, casually many years ago. It is of no use to me—yet I have never forgotten it."

"Why?"

"Because it holds the beauty of rhythm. It is a poem."

Skhiva sighed and said, "I don't get it."

"One upon R into omega L minus one upon omega C," recited Fander. "A perfect hexameter." He showed his amusement as the other rocked back.

After a while, Skhiva remarked, "It could be sung. One could dance to it."

"Same with this." Fander exhibited his rough sketch. "This holds beauty. Where there is beauty there once was talent—may still be talent for all we know. Where talent abides is also great-

ness. In the realms of greatness we may find powerful friends. We *need* such friends."

"You win." Skhiva made a gesture of defeat. "We leave you to your self-chosen fate in the morning."

"Thank you, Captain."

That same streak of stubborness which made Skhiva a worthy commander induced him to take one final crack at Fander shortly before departure. Summoning him to his room, he eyed the poet calculatingly.

"You are still of the same mind?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Then does it not occur to you as strange that I could be so content to abandon this planet if indeed it does hold the remnants of greatness?"

"No."

"Why not?" Skhiva stiffened slightly.

"Captain, I think you are a little afraid because you suspect what I suspect: that there was no natural disaster. They did it themselves—to themselves."

"We have no proof of it," said Skhiva uneasily.

"No, Captain." Fander posed there without desire to add more.

"*If* this is their own sad handiwork," Skhiva commented at length, "what are our chances of finding friends among people so much to be feared?"

"Poor," admitted Fander. "But that—being the product of cold thought—means little to me. I am animated by warm hopes."

"There you go again, blatantly discarding reason in favor of an idle dream. Hoping, hoping, hoping—to achieve the impossible."

Fander said, "The difficult can be done at once; the impossible takes a little longer."

"Your thoughts make my orderly mind feel lopsided. Every remark is a flat denial of something that makes sense." Skhiva transmitted the sensation of a lugubrious chuckle. "Oh, well, we live and learn." He came forward, moving closer to the other. "All your supplies are assembled outside. Nothing remains but to bid you goodby."

They embraced in the Martian manner. Leaving the lock, Poet Fander watched the big sphere shudder and glide up. It soared without sound, shrinking steadily until it was a mere dot entering a cloud. A moment later it had gone.

He remained there, looking at the cloud, for a long, long time. Then he turned his attention to the load-sled holding his supplies. Climbing into its tiny, exposed front seat, he shifted the control which energized the flotation-grids, let it rise a few feet. The higher the rise the greater the expenditure of power. He wished to conserve power; there was no knowing how long he might need it. So at low altitude and gentle pace he let the sled glide in the general direction of the thing of beauty.

Later, he found a dry cave in the hill on which his objective stood. It took him two days of careful, cautious raying to square it walls, ceiling and floor, plus half a day with a powered fan driving out silicate dust. After that, he stowed his supplies at the back, parked the sled near the front, set up a curtaining force-screen across the entrance. The hole in the hill was now home.

Slumber did not come easily that first night. He lay within the cave, a ropey, knotted thing of glowing blue with enormous, bee-like eyes, and found himself listening for harps that played sixty million miles away. His tentacle-ends twitched in involuntary search of the telepathic-contact songs that would go with the harps, and twitched in vain. Darkness grew deep and all the world a monstrous stillness held. His hearing organs craved for the eventide flip-flop of sand-frogs, but there were no frogs. He wanted the homely drone of night beetles, but none droned. Except for once when something faraway howled its heart at the Moon, there was nothing, nothing.

In the morning he washed, ate, took out the sled and explored the site of a small town. He found little to satisfy his curiosity, no more than mounds of shapeless rubble on ragged, faintly oblong foundations. It was a graveyard of long-dead domiciles, rotting, weedy, near to complete oblivion. A view from five hundred feet up gave him only one piece of information: the orderliness of outlines showed that these people had been tidy, methodical.

But tidiness is not beauty in itself. He came back to the top of his hill and sought solace with the thing that was beauty.

His explorations continued, not systematically as Skhiva would have performed them, but in accordance with his own mercurial whims. At times he saw many animals, singly or in groups, none resembling anything Martian. Some scattered at full gallop when his sled swooped over them. Some dived into groundholes, showing a brief flash of white, absurd tails. Other, four-footed, long-faced, sharp-toothed, hunted in gangs and bayed at him in concert with harsh, defiant voices.

On the seventieth day, in a deep, shadowed glade to the north, he spotted a small group of new shapes slinking along in single file. He recognized them at a glance, knew them so well that his searching eyes sent an immediate thrill of triumph into his mind. They were ragged, dirty and no more than half grown, but the thing of beauty had told him what they were.

Hugging the ground low, he swept around in a wide curve that brought him to the farther end of the glade. His sled sloped slightly into the drop as it entered the glade. He could see them better now, even the soiled pinkishness of their thin legs. They were moving away from him, with fearful caution, but the silence of his swoop gave them no warning.

The rearmost one of the stealthy file fooled him at the last moment. He was hanging over the side of the sled, tentacles outstretched in readiness to snatch the end one with the wild mop of yellow hair when, responding to some sixth sense, his intended victim threw itself flat. His grasp shot past a couple of feet short and he got a glimpse of frightened gray eyes two seconds before a dexterous side-tile of the sled enabled him to make good his loss by grabbing the less wary next in line.

This one was dark-haired, a bit bigger, and sturdier. It fought madly at his holding limbs while he gained altitude. Then suddenly, realizing the queer nature of its bonds, it writhed around and looked straight at him. The result was unexpected; it closed its eyes and went completely limp.

It was still limp when he bore it into the cave, but its heart continued to beat and its lungs to draw. Laying it carefully on the softness of his bed, he moved to the cave's entrance and waited for it to recover. Eventually it stirred, sat up, gazed confusedly at the facing wall. Its black eyes moved slowly around, taking in the surroundings. Then they saw Fander. They widened tremendously and their owner began to make high-pitched, unpleasant noises as it tried to back away through the solid wall. It screamed so much, in one rising throb after another, that Fander slithered out of the cave, right out of sight, and sat in the cold winds until the noises had died down.

A couple of hours later he made cautious reappearance to offer it food, but its reaction was so swift, hysterical and heartrending that he dropped his load and hid himself as though the fear was his own. The food remained untouched for two full days. On the third, a little of it was eaten. Fander ventured within.

Although the Martian did not go near, the boy cowered away

murmuring, "Devil! Devil!" His eyes were red, with dark discoloration beneath them.

"Devil!" thought Fander, totally unable to repeat the alien word, but wondering what it meant. He used his sign-talking tentacle in valiant effort to convey something reassuring. The attempt was wasted. The other watched its writhings half in fear, half with distaste, and showed complete lack of comprehension. He let the tentacle gently slither forward across the floor, hoping to make thought-contact. The other recoiled from it as from a striking snake.

"Patience," he reminded himself. "The impossible takes a little longer."

Periodically he showed himself with food and drink, and night-times he slept fitfully on the coarse, damp grass beneath lowering skies—while the prisoner who was his guest enjoyed the softness of the bed, the warmth of the cave, the security of the force-screen.

Time came when Fander betrayed an unpoetic shrewdness by using the other's belly to estimate the ripeness of the moment. When, on the eighth day, he noted that his food-offerings were now being taken regularly, he took a meal of his own at the edge of the cave, within plain sight, and observed that the other's appetite was not spoiled. That night he slept just within the cave, close to the force-screen, and as far from the boy as possible. The boy stayed awake late, watching him, always watching him, but gave way to slumber in the small hours.

A fresh attempt at sign-talking brought no better results than before, and the boy still refused to touch his offered tentacle. All the same, he was gaining ground slowly. His overtures still were rejected, but with less revulsion. Gradually, ever so gradually, the Martian shape was becoming familiar, almost acceptable.

The sweet savor of success was Fander's in the middle of the next day. The boy had displayed several spells of emotional sickness during which he lay on his front with shaking body and emitted low noises while his eyes watered profusely. At such times the Martian felt strangely helpless and inadequate. On this occasion, during another attack, he took advantage of the sufferer's lack of attention and slid near enough to snatch away the box by the bed.

From the box he drew his tiny electro-harp, plugged its connectors, switched it on, touched its strings with delicate affection. Slowly he began to play, singing an accompaniment deep inside himself. For he had no voice with which to sing out loud.

But the harp sang it for him. The boy ceased his quiverings, sat up, all his attention upon the dexterous play of the tentacles and the music they conjured forth. And when he judged that at last the listener's mind was captured, Fander ceased with easy, quietening strokes, gently offered him the harp. The boy registered interest and reluctance. Careful not to move nearer, not an inch nearer, Fander offered it at full tentacle length. The boy had to take four steps to get it. He took them.

That was the start. They played together, day after day and sometimes a little into the night, while almost imperceptibly the distance between them was reduced. Finally they sat together, side by side, and the boy had not yet learned to laugh but no longer did he show unease. He could now extract a simple tune from the instrument and was pleased with his own aptitude in a solemn sort of way.

One evening as darkness grew, and the things that sometimes howled at the Moon were howling again, Fander offered his tentacle-tip for the hundredth time. Always the gesture had been unmistakable even if its motive was not clear, yet always it had been rebuffed. But now, now, five fingers curled around it in shy desire to please.

With a fervent prayer that human nerves would function just like Martian ones, Fander poured his thoughts through, swiftly, lest the warm grip be loosened too soon.

"Do not fear me. I cannot help my shape any more than you can help yours. I am your friend, your father, your mother. I need you as much as you need me."

The boy let go of him, began quiet, half-stifled whimpering noises. Fander put a tentacle on his shoulder, made little patting motions that he imagined were wholly Martian. For some inexplicable reason, this made matters worse. At his wits' end what to do for the best, what action to take that might be understandable in Terrestrial terms, he gave the problem up, surrendered to his instinct, put a long, ropey limb around the boy and held him close until the noises ceased and slumber came. It was then he realized the child he had taken was much younger than he had estimated. He nursed him through the night.

Much practice was necessary to make conversation. The boy had to learn to put mental drive behind his thoughts, for it was beyond Fander's power to suck them out of him.

"What is your name?"

Fander got a picture of thin legs running rapidly.

He returned it in question form. "Speedy?"

An affirmative.

"What name do you call me?"

An unflattering montage of monsters.

"Devil?"

The picture whirled around, became confused. There was a trace of embarrassment.

"Devil will do," assured Fander. He went on. "Where are your parents?"

More confusion.

"You must have had parents. Everyone has a father and mother, haven't they? Don't you remember yours?"

Muddled ghost-pictures. Grown-ups leaving children. Grown-ups avoiding children, as if they feared them.

"What is the first thing you remember?"

"Big man walking with me. Carried me a bit. Walked again."

"What happened to him?"

"Went away. Said he was sick. Might make me sick too."

"Long ago?"

Confusion.

Fander changed his aim. "What of those other children—have they no parents either?"

"All got nobody."

"But you've got somebody now, haven't you, Speedy?"

Doubtfully. "Yes."

Fander pushed it farther. "Would you rather have me, or those other children?" He let it rest a moment before he added, "Or both?"

"Both," said Speedy with no hesitation. His fingers toyed with the harp.

"Would you like to help me look for them tomorrow and bring them here? And if they are scared of me will you help them not to be afraid?"

"Sure!" said Speedy, licking his lips and sticking his chest out.

"Then," said Fander, "perhaps you would like to go for a walk today? You've been too long in this cave. Will you come for a walk with me?"

"Y'betcha!"

Side by side they went for a short walk, one trotting rapidly along, the other slithering. The child's spirit perked up with this trip in the open; it was as if the sight of the sky and the feel of the grass made him realize at last that he was not exactly a prisoner. His formerly solemn features became animated, he made exclamations that Fander could not understand, and once he laughed at nothing for the sheer joy of it. On two occasions

he grabbed a tentacle-tip in order to tell Fander something, performing the action as if it were in every way as natural as his own speech.

They got out the load-sled in the morning. Fander took the front seat and the controls; Speedy squatted behind him with hands gripping his harness-belt. With a shallow soar, they headed for the glade. Many small, white-tailed animals bolted down holes as they passed over.

"Good for dinner," remarked Speedy, touching him and speaking through the touch.

Fander felt sickened. Meat-eaters! It was not until a queer feeling of shame and apology came back at him that he knew the other had felt his revulsion. He wished he'd been swift to blanket that reaction before the boy could sense it, but he could not be blamed for the effect of so bald a statement taking him so completely unaware. However, it had produced another step forward in their mutual relationship—Speedy desired his good opinion.

Within fifteen minutes they struck lucky. At a point half a mile south of the glade Speedy let out a shrill yell and pointed downward. A small, golden-haired figure was standing there on a slight rise, staring fascinatedly upward at the phenomenon in the sky. A second tiny shape, with red but equally long hair, was at the bottom of the slope gazing in similar wonderment. Both came to their senses and turned to flee as the sled tilted toward them.

Ignoring the yelps of excitement close behind him, and the pulls upon his belt, Fander swooped, got first one, then the other. This left him with only one limb to right the sled and gain height. If the victims had fought he would have had his work cut out to make it. They did not fight. They shrieked as he snatched them and then relaxed with closed eyes.

The sled climbed, glided a mile at five hundred feet. Fander's attention was divided between his limp prizes, the controls and the horizon when suddenly a thunderous rattling sounded on the metal base of the sled, the entire framework shuddered, and a strip of metal flew from its leading edge and things made whining sounds toward the clouds.

"Old Graypate," bawled Speedy, jigging around but keeping away from the rim. "He's shooting at us."

The spoken words meant nothing to the Martian and he could not spare a limb for the contact the other had forgotten to make. Grimly righting the sled, he gave it full power. Whatever damage

it had suffered had not affected its efficiency; it shot forward at a pace that set the red and golden hair of the captives streaming in the wind. Perforce his landing by the cave was clumsy. The sled bumped down and lurched across forty yards of grass.

First things first. Taking the quiet pair into the cave, he made them comfortable on the bed, came out and examined the sled. There were half a dozen deep dents in its flat underside, two bright furrows angling across one rim. He made contact with Speedy.

"What were you trying to tell me?"

"Old Graypate shot at us."

The mind-picture burst upon him vividly and with electrifying effect: a vision of a tall, white-haired, stern-faced old man with a tubular weapon propped upon his shoulder while it spat fire upward. A white-haired old man! An adult!

His grip was tight on the other's arm. "What is this oldster to you?"

"Nothing much. He lives near us in the shelters."

Picture of a long, dusty concrete burrow, badly damaged, its ceiling marked with the scars of a lighting system which had rotted away to nothing. The old man living hermit-like at one end; the children at the other. The old man was sour, taciturn, kept the children at a distance, spoke to them seldom but was quick to respond when they were menaced. He had guns. Once he had killed many wild dogs that had eaten two children.

"People left us near shelters because Old Graypate was there, and had guns," informed Speedy.

"But why does he keep away from children? Doesn't he like children?"

"Don't know." He mused a moment. "Once told us that old people could get very sick and make young ones sick—and then we'd all die. Maybe he's afraid of making us die." Speedy wasn't very sure about it.

So there was some much-feared disease around, something contagious, to which adults were peculiarly susceptible. Without hesitation they abandoned their young at the first onslaught, hoping that at least the children would live. Sacrifice after sacrifice that the remnants of the race might survive. Heartbreak after heartbreak as elders chose death alone rather than death together.

Yet Graypate himself was depicted as very old. Was this an exaggeration of the child-mind?

"I must meet Graypate."

"He will shoot," declared Speedy positively. "He knows by

now that you took me. He saw you take the other. He will wait for you and shoot."

"We will find some way to avoid that."

"How?"

"When these two have become my friends, just as you have become my friend, I will take all three of you back to the shelters. You can find Graypate for me and tell him that I am not as ugly as I look."

"I don't think you're ugly," denied Speedy.

The picture Fander got along with that gave him the weirdest sensation of pleasure. It was of a vague, shadowy but distorted body with a clear human face.

The new prisoners were female. Fander knew it without being told because they were daintier than Speedy and had the warm, sweet smell of females. That meant complications. Maybe they were mere children, and maybe they lived together in the shelter, but he was permitting none of that while they were in his charge. Fander might be outlandish by other standards but he had a certain primness. Forthwith he cut another and smaller cave for Speedy and himself.

Neither of the girls saw him for two days. Keeping well out of their sight, he let Speedy take them food, talk to them, prepare them for the shape of the thing to come. On the third day he presented himself for inspection at a distance. Despite forewarnings they went sheet-white, clung together, but uttered no distressing sounds. He played his harp a little while, withdrew, came back in the evening and played for them again.

Encouraged by Speedy's constant and self-assured flow of propaganda, one of them grasped a tenacle-tip next day. What came along the nerves was not a picture so much as an ache, a desire, a childish yearning. Fander backed out of the cave, found wood, spent the whole night using the sleepy Speedy as a model and fashioned the wood into a tiny, jointed semblance of a human being. He was no sculptor, but he possessed a natural delicacy of touch, and the poet in him ran through his limbs and expressed itself in the model. Making a thorough job of it, he clothed it in Terrestrial fashion, colored its face, fixed upon its features the pleasure-grimace which humans call a smile.

He gave her the doll the moment she awakened in the morning. She took it eagerly, hungrily, with wide, glad eyes. Hugging it to her unformed bosom, she crooned over it—and he knew that the strange emptiness within her was gone.

Though Speedy was openly contemptuous of this manifest

waste of effort, Fander set to and made a second mannikin. It did not take quite as long. Practice on the first had made him swifter, more dexterous. He was able to present it to the other child by mid-afternoon. Her acceptance was made with shy grace, she held the doll close as if it meant more than the whole of her sorry world. In her thrilled concentration upon the gift, she did not notice his nearness, his closeness, and when he offered a tentacle, she took it.

He said, simply, "I love you."

Her mind was too untrained to drive a response, but her great eyes warmed.

Fander sat on the grounded sled at a point a mile east of the glade and watched the three children walk hand in hand toward the hidden shelters. Speedy was the obvious leader, hurrying them onward, bossing them with the noisy assurance of one who has been around and considers himself sophisticated. In spite of this, the girls paused at intervals to turn and wave to the ropey, bee-eyed thing they'd left behind. And Fander dutifully waved back, always using his signal-tentacle because it had not occurred to him that any tentacle would serve.

They sank from sight behind a rise of ground. He remained on the sled, his multi-faceted gaze going over his surroundings or studying the angry sky now threatening rain. The ground was a dull, dead gray-green all the way to the horizon. There was no relief from that drab color, not one shining patch of white, gold or crimson such as dotted the meadows of Mars. There was only the eternal gray-green and his own brilliant blueness.

Before long a sharp-faced, four-footed thing revealed itself in the grass, raised its head and howled at him. The sound was an eerily urgent wail that ran across the grasses and moaned into the distance. It brought others of its kind, two, ten, twenty. Their defiance increased with their numbers until there was a large band of them edging toward him with lips drawn back, teeth exposed. Then there came a sudden and undetectable flock-command which caused them to cease their slinking and spring forward like one, slavering as they came. They did it with the hungry, red-eyed frenzy of animals motivated by something akin to madness.

Repulsive though it was, the sight of creatures craving for meat—even strange blue meat—did not bother Fander. He slipped a control a notch, the flotation grids radiated, the sled soared twenty feet. So calm and easy an escape so casually per-

formed infuriated the wild dog pack beyond all measure. Arriving beneath the sled, they made futile springs upward, fell back upon one another, bit and slashed each other, leaped again and again. The pandemonium they set up was a compound of snarls, yelps, barks and growls, the ferocious expressions of extreme hate. They exuded a pungent odor of dry hair and animal sweat.

Reclining on the sled in a maddening pose of disdain, Fander let the insane ones rave below. They raced around in tight circles shrieking insults at him and biting each other. This went on for some time and ended with a spurt of ultra-rapid cracks from the direction of the glade. Eight dogs fell dead. Two flopped and struggled to crawl away. Ten yelped in agony, made off on three legs. The unharmed ones flashed away to some place where they could make a meal of the escaping limpers. Fander lowered the sled.

Speedy stood on the rise with Graypate. The latter restored his weapon to the crook of his arm, rubbed his chin thoughtfully, ambled forward.

Stopping five yards from the Martian, the old Earthman again massaged his chin whiskers, then said, "It sure is the darnedest thing, just the darnedest thing!"

"No use talking *at* him," advised Speedy. "You've got to touch him, like I told you."

"I know, I know." Graypate betrayed a slight impatience. "All in good time. I'll touch him when I'm ready." He stood there, gazing at Fander with eyes that were very pale and very sharp. "Oh, well, here goes." He offered a hand.

Fander placed a tentacle-end in it.

"Jeepers, he's cold," commented Graypate, closing his grip. "Colder than a snake."

"He isn't a snake," Speedy contradicted fiercely.

"Ease up, ease up—I didn't say he is." Graypate seemed fond of repetitive phrases.

"He doesn't feel like one, either," persisted Speedy, who had never felt a snake and did not wish to.

Fander boosted a thought through. "I come from the fourth planet. Do you know what that means?"

"I ain't ignorant," snapped Graypate aloud.

"No need to reply vocally. I receive your thoughts exactly as you receive mine. Your responses are much stronger than the boy's and I can understand you easily."

"Humph!" said Graypate to the world at large.

"I have been anxious to find an adult because the children can tell me little. I would like to ask questions. Do you feel inclined to answer questions?"

"It depends," answered Graypate, becoming leery.

"Never mind. Answer them if you wish. My only desire is to help you."

"Why?" asked Graypate, searching around for a percentage.

"We need intelligent friends."

"Why?"

"Our numbers are small, our resources poor. In visiting this world and the misty one we've come near to the limit of our ability. But with assistance we could go farther. I think that if we could help you a time might come when you could help us."

Graypate pondered it cautiously, forgetting that the inward workings of his mind were wide-open to the other. Chronic suspicion was the keynote of his thoughts, suspicion based on life experiences and recent history. But inward thoughts ran both ways, and his own mind detected the clear sincerity in Fander's.

So he said, "Fair enough. Say more."

"What caused all this?" inquired Fander, waving a limb at the world.

"War," said Graypate. "The last war we'll ever have. The entire place went nuts."

"How did that come about?"

"You've got me there." Graypate gave the problem grave consideration. "I reckon it wasn't just any one thing; it was a multitude of things sort of piling themselves up."

"Such as?"

"Differences in people. Some were colored differently in their bodies, others in their ideas, and they couldn't get along. Some bred faster than others, wanted more room, more food. There wasn't any more room or more food. The world was full and nobody could shove in except by pushing another out. My old man told me plenty before he died, and he always maintained that if folk had had the hoss-sense to keep their numbers down there might not—"

"Your old man?" interjected Fander. "Your father? Didn't all this occur in your own lifetime?"

"It did not. I saw none of it. I am the son of the son of a survivor."

"Let's go back to the cave," put in Speedy, bored with this silent contact-talk. "I want to show him our harp."

They took no notice, and Fander went on, "Do you think there might be a lot of others still living?"

"Who knows?" Graypate was moody about it. "There isn't any way of telling how many are wandering around the other side of the globe, maybe still killing each other, or starving to death, or dying of the sickness."

"What sickness is this?"

"I couldn't tell what it is called." Graypate scratched his head confusedly. "My old man told me a few times, but I've long forgotten. Knowing the name wouldn't do me any good, see? He said his father told him that it was part of the war, it got invented and was spread deliberately—and it's still with us."

"What are its symptoms?"

"You go hot and dizzy. You get black swellings in the armpits. In forty-eight hours you're dead. Old ones get it first. The kids then catch it unless you make away from them mighty fast."

"It is nothing familiar to me," said Fander, unable to recognize cultured bubonic. "In any case, I'm not a medical expert." He eyed Graypate. "But you seem to have avoided it."

"Sheer luck," opined Graypate. "Or maybe I can't get it. There was a story going around during the war that some folk might develop immunity to it, durned if I know why. Could be that I'm immune, but I don't count on it."

"So you keep your distance from these children?"

"Sure." He glanced at Speedy. "I shouldn't really have come along with this kid. He's got a lousy chance as it is without me increasing the odds."

"That is thoughtful of you," Fander put over softly. "Especially seeing that you must be lonely."

Graypate bristled and his thought-flow became aggressive. "I ain't grieving for company. I can look after myself, like I have done since my old man went away to curl up by himself. I'm on my own feet. So's every other guy."

"I believe that," said Fander. "You must pardon me—I'm a stranger here myself. I judge you by my own feelings. Now and again I get pretty lonely."

"How come?" demanded Graypate, staring at him. "You ain't telling me they dumped you and left you, on your own?"

"They did."

"Man!" exclaimed Graypate fervently.

Man! It was a picture resembling Speedy's conception, a vision elusive in form but firm and human in face. The oldster

was reacting to what he considered a predicament rather than a choice, and the reaction came on a wave of sympathy.

Fander struck promptly and hard. "You see how I'm fixed. The companionship of wild animals is nothing to me. I need someone intelligent enough to like my music and forget my looks, someone intelligent enough to—"

"I ain't so sure we're that smart," Graypate chipped in. He let his gaze swing morbidly around the landscape. "Not when I see this graveyard and think of how it looked in granpop's days."

"Every flower blooms from the dust of a hundred dead ones," answered Fander.

"What are flowers?"

It shocked the Martian. He had projected a mind-picture of a trumpet lily, crimson and shining, and Graypate's brain had juggled it around, uncertain whether it were fish, flesh or fowl.

"Vegetable growths, like these." Fander plucked half a dozen blades of blue-green grass. "But more colorful, and sweet-scented." He transmitted the brilliant vision of a mile-square field of trumpet lilies, red and glowing.

"Glory be! said Graypate. "We've nothing like those."

"Not here," agreed Fander. "Not here." He gestured toward the horizon. "Elsewhere may be plenty. If we got together we could learn things from each other. We could pool our ideas, our efforts, and search for flowers far away—also for more people."

"Folk just won't get together in large bunches. They stick to each other in family groups until the plague breaks them up. Then they abandon the kids. The bigger the crowd, the bigger the risk of someone contaminating the lot." He leaned on his gun, staring at the other, his thought-forms shaping themselves in dull solemnity. "When a guy gets hit he goes away and takes it on his own. The end is a personal contract between him and his God, with no witnesses. Death's a pretty private affair these days."

"What, after all these years? Don't you think that by this time the disease may have run its course and exhausted itself?"

"Nobody knows—and nobody's gambling on it."

"I would gamble," said Fander.

"You ain't like us. You mightn't be able to catch it."

"Or I might get it worse, and die more painfully."

"Mebbe," admitted Graypate, doubtfully. "Anyway, you're looking at it from a different angle. You've been dumped on your ownsome. What've you got to lose?"

"My life," said Fander.

Graypate rocked back on his heels, then said, "Yes, sir, that is a gamble. A guy can't bet any heavier than that." He rubbed his chin whiskers as before. "All right, all right, I'll take you up on that. You come right here and live with us." His grip tightened on his gun, his knuckles showing white. "On this understanding: the moment you feel sick you get out fast, and for keeps. If you don't, I'll bump you and drag you away myself, even if that makes me get it too. The kids come first, see?"

The shelters were far roomier than the cave. There were eighteen children living in them, all skinny with their prolonged diet of roots, edible herbs and an occasional rabbit. The youngest and most sensitive of them ceased to be terrified of Fander after ten days. Within four months his slithering shape of blue ropeyness had become a normal adjunct of their small, limited world.

Six of the youngsters were males older than Speedy, one of them much older but not yet adult. He beguiled them with his harp, teaching them to play, and now and again giving them ten-minute rides on the load-shed as a special treat. He made dolls for the girls, and queer, cone-shaped little houses for the dolls, and fan-backed chairs of woven grass for the houses. None of these toys were truly Martian in design, and none were Terrestrial. They represented a pathetic compromise within his imagination; the Martian notion of what Terrestrial models might have looked like had there been any in existence.

But surreptitiously, without seeming to give any less attention to the younger ones, he directed his main efforts upon the six older boys and Speedy. To his mind, these were the hope of the world—and of Mars. At no time did he bother to ponder that the non-technical brain is not without its virtues, or that there are times and circumstances when it is worth dropping the short view of what is practicable for the sake of the long view of what is remotely possible. So as best he could he concentrated upon the elder seven, educating them through the dragging months, stimulating their minds, encouraging their curiosity, and continually impressing upon them the idea that fear of disease can become a folk-separating dogma unless they conquered it within their souls.

He taught them that death is death, a natural process to be accepted philosophically and met with dignity—and there were times when he suspected that he was teaching them nothing, he was merely reminding them, for deep within their growing minds was the ancestral strain of Terrestrialism which had mulled its

way to the same conclusions ten or twenty thousands of years before. Still, he was helping to remove this disease-block from the path of the stream, and was driving child-logic more rapidly toward adult outlook. In that respect he was satisfied. He could do little more.

In time, they organized group concerts, humming or making singing noises to the accompaniment of the harp, now and again improvising lines to suit Fander's tunes, arguing out the respective merits of chosen words until by process of elimination they had a complete song. As songs grew to a repertoire and singing grew more adept, more polished, Old Graypate displayed interest, came to one performance, then another, until by custom he had established his own place as a one-man audience.

One day the eldest boy, who was named Redhead, came to Fander and grasped a tentacle-tip. "Devil, may I operate your food-machine?"

"You mean you would like me to show you how to work it?"

"No, Devil, I know how to work it." The boy gazed self-assuredly into the other's great bee-eyes.

"Then how is it operated?"

"You fill its container with the tenderest blades of grass, being careful not to include roots. You are equally careful not to turn a switch before the container is full and its door completely closed. You then turn the red switch for a count of two hundred eighty, reverse the container, turn the green switch for a count of forty-seven. You then close both switches, empty the container's warm pulp into the end molds and apply the press until the biscuits are firm and dry."

"How have you discovered all this?"

"I have watched you make biscuits for us many times. This morning, while you were busy, I tried it myself." He extended a hand. It held a biscuit. Taking it from him, Fander examined it. Firm, crisp, well-shaped. He tasted it. Perfect.

Redhead became the first mechanic to operate and service a Martian lifeboat's emergency premasticator. Seven years later, long after the machine had ceased to function, he managed to repower it, weakly but effectively, with dust that gave forth alpha sparks. In another five years he had improved it, speeded it up. In twenty years he had duplicated it and had all the know-how needed to turn out premasticators on a large scale. Fander could not have equalled this performance for, as a non-technician, he'd no better notion than the average Terrestrial of the principles upon which the machine worked, neither did he know

what was meant by radiant digestion or protein enrichment. He could do little more than urge Redhead along and leave the rest to whatever inherent genius the boy possessed—which was plenty.

In similar manner, Speedy and two youths named Blacky and Bigears took the load-sled out of his charge. On rare occasions, as a great privilege, Fander had permitted them to take up the sled for one-hour trips, alone. This time they were gone from dawn to dusk. Graypate mooched around, gun under arm, another smaller one stuck in his belt, going frequently to the top of a rise and scanning the skies in all directions. The delinquents swooped in at sunset, bringing with them a strange boy.

Fander summoned them to him. They held hands so that his touch would give him simultaneous contact with all three.

"I am a little worried. The sled has only so much power. When it is all gone there will be no more."

They eyed each other aghast.

"Unfortunately, I have neither the knowledge nor the ability to energize the sled once its power is exhausted. I lack the wisdown of the friends who left me here—and that is my shame." He paused, watching them dolefully, then went on, "All I do know is that its power does not leak away. If not used much, the reserves will remain for many years." Another pause before he added, "And in a few years you will be men."

Blacky said, "But, Devil, when we are men we'll be much heavier and the sled will use so much more power."

"How do you know that?" Fander put in sharply.

"More weight, more power to sustain it," opined Blacky with the air of one whose logic is incontrovertible. "It doesn't need thinking out. *It's obvious.*"

Very slowly and softly, Fander told him, "You'll do. May the twin moons shine upon you someday, for I know you'll do."

"Do what, Devil?"

"Build a thousand sleds like this one, or better—and explore the whole world."

From that time onward they confined their trips strictly to one hour, making them less frequently than of yore, spending more time poking and prying around the sled's innards.

Grayplate changed character with the slow reluctance of the aged. Leastways, as two years then three rolled past, he came gradually out of his shell, was less taciturn, more willing to mix with those swiftly growing up to his own height. Without fully realizing what he was doing he joined forces with Fander, gave

the children the remnants of Earthly wisdom passed down from his father's father. He taught the boys how to use the guns of which he had as many as eleven, some maintained mostly as a source of spares for others. He took them shell-hunting; digging deep beneath rotting foundations into stale, half-filled cellars in search of ammunition not too far corroded for use.

"Guns ain't no use without shells, and shells don't last forever,"

Neither do buried shells. They found not one.

Of his own wisdom Graypate stubbornly withheld but a single item until the day when Speedy and Redhead and Blacky chivvied it out of him. Then, like a father facing the hangman, he gave them the truth about babies. He made no comparative mention of bees because there were no bees, nor of flowers because there were no flowers. One cannot analogize the non-existent. Nevertheless he managed to explain the matter more or less to their satisfaction, after which he mopped his forehead and went to Fander.

"These youngsters are getting too nosey for my comfort. They've been asking me how kids come along."

"Did you tell them?"

"I sure did." He sat down, staring at the Martian, his pale gray eyes bothered. "I don't mind giving in to the boys when I can't beat 'em off any longer, but I'm durned if I'm going to tell the girls."

Fander said, "I have been asked about this many a time before. I could not tell much because I was by no means certain whether you breed precisely as we breed. But I told them how *we* breed."

"The girls too?"

"Of course."

"Jeepers!" Grayplate mopped his forehead again. "How did they take it?"

"Just as if I'd told them why the sky is blue or why water is wet."

"Must've been something in the way you put it to them," opined Graypate.

"I told them it was poetry between persons."

Throughout the course of history, Martian, Venusian, or Terrestrial, some years are more noteworthy than others. The twelfth one after Fander's marooning was outstanding for its series of events each of which was pitifully insignificant by

cosmic standards but loomed enormously in this small community life.

To start with, on the basis of Redhead's improvement to the premasticator, the older seven—now bearded men—contrived to repower the exhausted sled and again took to the air for the first time in forty months. Experiments showed that the Martian load-carrier was now slower, could bear less weight, but had far longer range. They used it to visit the ruins of distant cities in search of metallic junk suitable for the building of more sleds, and by early summer they had constructed another, larger than the original, clumsy to the verge of dangerousness, but still a sled.

On several occasions they failed to find metal but did find people, odd families surviving in under-surface shelters, clinging grimly to life and passed-down scraps of knowledge. Since all these new contacts were strictly human to human, with no weirdly tentacled shape to scare off the parties of the second part, and since many were finding fear of plague more to be endured than their terrible loneliness, many families returned with the explorers, settled in the shelters, accepted Fander, added their surviving skills to the community's riches.

Thus local population grew to seventy adults and four hundred children. They compounded with their plague-fear by spreading through the shelters, digging through half-wrecked and formerly unused expanses, and moving apart to form twenty or thirty lesser communities each one of which could be isolated should death reappear.

Growing morale born of added strength and confidence in numbers soon resulted in four more sleds, still clumsy but slightly less dangerous to manage. There also appeared the first rock house above ground, standing four-square and solidly under the gray skies, a defiant witness that mankind still considered itself a cut above the rats and rabbits. The community presented the house to Blacky and Sweetvoice, who has announced their desire to associate. An adult who claimed to know the conventional routine spoke solemn words over the happy couple before many witnesses, while Fander attended the groom as best Martian.

Toward summer's end Speedy returned from a solo sled-trip of many days, brought with him one old man, one boy and four girls, all of strange, outlandish countenance. They were yellow in complexion, had dark hair, black, almond-shaped eyes, and spoke a language that none could understand. Until these newcomers had picked up the local speech, Fander had to act

as interpreter, for his mind-pictures and theirs were independent of vocal sounds. The four girls were quiet, modest and very beautiful. Within a month Speedy had married one of them whose name was a gentle clucking sound which meant Precious Jewel Ling.

After this wedding, Fander sought Graypate, placed a tentacle-tip in his right hand. "There were differences between the man and the girl, distinctive features wider apart than any we know upon Mars. Are these some of the differences which caused your war?"

"I dunno. I've never seen one of these yellow folk before. They must live mighty far off." He rubbed his chin to help his thoughts along. "I only know what my old man told me and his old man told him. There were too many folk of too many different sorts."

"They can't be all that different if they can fall in love."

"Mebbe not," agreed Graypate.

"Supposing most of the people still in this world could assemble here, breed together, and have less different children; the children bred others still less different. Wouldn't they eventually become all much the same—just Earth-people?"

"Mebbe so."

"All speaking the same language, sharing the same culture? If they spread out slowly from a central source, always in contact by sled, continually sharing the same knowledge, same progress, would there be any room for new differences to arise?"

"I dunno," said Graypate evasively. "I'm not so young as I used to be and I can't dream as far ahead as I used to do."

"It doesn't matter so long as the young ones can dream it." Fander mused a moment. "If you're beginning to think yourself a back number you're in good company. Things are getting somewhat out of hand as far as I'm concerned. The onlooker sees the most of the game and perhaps that's why I'm more sensitive than you to a certain peculiar feeling."

"To what feeling?" inquired Graypate, eyeing him.

"That Terra is on the move once more. There are now many people where there were few. A house is up and more are to follow. They talk of six more. After the six they will talk of sixty, then six hundred, then six thousand. Some are planning to haul up sunken conduits and use them to pipe water from the northward lake. Sleds are being built. Premasticators will soon be built, and force-screens likewise. Children are being taught. Less and less is being heard of your plague and so far no more have died of it. I feel a dynamic surge of energy

and ambition and genius which may grow with appalling rapidity until it becomes a mighty flood. I feel that I, too, am a back number."

"Bunk!" said Graypate. He spat on the ground. "If you dream often enough you're bound to have a bad one once in a while."

"Perhaps it is because so many of my tasks have been taken over and done better than I was doing them. I have failed to seek new tasks. Were I a technician I'd have discovered a dozen by now. Reckon this is as good a time as any to turn to a job with which you can help me."

"What is that?"

"A long, long time ago I made a poem. It was for the beautiful thing that first impelled me to stay here. I do not know exactly what its maker had in mind, nor whether my eyes see it as he wished it to be seen, but I have made a poem to express what I feel when I look upon his work."

"Humph!" said Graypate, not very interested.

"There is an outcrop of solid rock beneath its base which I can shave smooth and use as a plinth on which to inscribe my words. I would like to put them down twice: in the script of Mars and the script of Earth." Fander hesitated a moment, then went on. "Perhaps this is presumptuous of me, but it is many years since I wrote for all to read—and my chance may never come again."

Graypate said, "I get the idea. You want me to put down your notions in our writing so you can copy it."

"Yes."

"Give me your stylus and pad." Taking them, Graypate squatted on a rock, lowering himself stiffly, for he was feeling the weight of his years. Resting the pad on his knees, he held the writing instrument in his right hand while his left continued to grasp a tentacle-tip. "Go ahead."

He started drawing thick, laborious marks as Fander's mind-pictures came through, enlarging the letters and keeping them well separated. When he had finished he handed the pad over.

"Asymmetrical," decided Fander, staring at the queer letters and wishing for the first time that he had taken up the study of Earth-writing. "Cannot you make this part balance with that, and this with this?"

"It's what you said."

"It is your own translation of what I said. I would like it better balanced. Do you mind if we try again?"

They tried again. They made fourteen attempts before

Fander was satisfied with the perfunctory appearance of letters and words he could not understand.

Taking the paper, he found his ray-gun, went to the base-rock of the beautiful thing and sheared the whole front to a flat, even surface. Adjusting his beam to cut a V-shaped channel one inch deep, he inscribed his poem on the rock in long, unpunctuated lines of neat Martian curlicues. With less confidence and much greater care, he repeated the verse in Earth's awkward, angular hieroglyphics. The task took him quite a time and there were fifty people watching him when he finished. They said nothing. In utter silence they looked at the poem and at the beautiful thing, and were still standing there brooding solemnly when he went away.

One by one the rest of the community visited the site next day, going and coming with the air of pilgrims attending an ancient shrine. All stood there a long time, returned without comment. Nobody praised Fander's work, nobody damned it, nobody reproached him for alienizing something wholly Earth's. The only effect—too subtle to be noteworthy—was a greater and still growing grimness and determination that boosted the already swelling Earth-dynamic.

In that respect, Fander wrought better than he knew.

A plague-scare came in the fourteenth year. Two sleds had brought back families from afar and within a week of their arrival the children sickened, became spotted.

Metal gongs sounded the alarm, all work ceased, the affected section was cut off and guarded, the majority prepared to flee. It was a threatening reversal of all the things for which many had toiled so long: a destructive scattering of the tender roots of new civilization.

Fander found Graypate, Speedy and Blacky, armed to the teeth, facing a drawn-faced and restless crowd.

"There's most of a hundred folk in that isolated part," Graypate was telling them. "They ain't all got it. Maybe they won't get it. If they don't, it ain't so likely you'll go down either. We ought to wait and see. Stick around a bit."

"Listen who's talking," invited a voice in the crowd. "If you weren't immune you'd have been planted thirty-forty years ago."

"Same goes for near everybody," snapped Graypate. He glared around, his gun under one arm, his pale blue eyes bellicose. "I ain't much use at speechifying, so I'm just saying flatly that nobody goes before we know whether this really is the plague."

He hefted his weapon in one hand, held it forward. "Anyone fancy himself at beating a bullet?"

The heckler in the audience muscled his way to the front. He was a swarthy man of muscular build, and his dark eyes looked belligerently into Graypate's. "While there's life there's hope. If we beat it we live to come back, when it's safe to come back, if ever—and you know it. So I'm calling your bluff, see?" Squaring his shoulders, he began to walk off.

Graypate's gun already was halfway up when he felt the touch of Fander's tentacle on his arm. He lowered the weapon, called after the escapee.

"I'm going into that cut-off section and the Devil is going with me. We're running into things, not away from them. I never did like running away." Several of the audience fidgeted, murmured approval. He went ont, "We'll see for ourselves just what's wrong. We mightn't be able to put it right, but we'll find out what's the matter."

The walker paused, turned, eyed him, eyed Fander, and said, "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"You'll get it yourself—and a heck of a lot of use you'll be dead and stinking."

"What, and me immune?" cracked Graypate grinning.

"The Devil will get it," hedged the other.

Graypate was about to retort, "What do *you* care?" but altered it slightly in response to Fander's contacting thoughts. He said, more softly, "Do you *care?*"

It caught the other off-balance. He fumbled embarrassedly within his own mind, avoided looking at the Martian, said lamely, "I don't see reason for any guy to take risks."

"He's taking them because *he* cares," Graypate gave back. "And I'm taking them because I'm too old and useless to give a darn."

With that, he stepped down, marched stubbornly toward the isolated section, Fander slithering by his side, tentacle in hand. The one who wished to flee stayed put, staring after them. The crowd shuffled uneasily, seemed in two minds whether to accept the situation and stick around, or whether to rush Graypate and Fander and drag them away. Speedy and Blacky made to follow the pair but were ordered off.

No adult sickened; nobody died. Children in the affected sector went one after another through the same routine of liverishness, high temperature and spots until the epidemic of measles had died out. Not until a month after the last

case had been cured by something within its own constitution did Graypate and Fander emerge.

The innocuous course and eventual disappearance of this suspected plague gave the pendulum of confidence a push, swinging it farther. Morale boosted itself almost to the verge of arrogance. More sleds appeared, more mechanics serviced them, more pilots rode them. More people flowed in; more oddments of past knowledge came with them.

Humanity was off to a flying start with the salvaged seeds of past wisdom and the urge to do. The tormented ones of Earth were not primitive savages, but surviving organisms of a greatness nine-tenths destroyed but still remembered, each contributing his mite of know-how to restore at least some of those things which had been boiled away in atomic fires.

When, in the twentieth year, Redhead duplicated the pre-masticator, there were eight thousand stone houses standing around the hill. A community hall seventy times the size of a house, with a great green dome of copper, reared itself upon the eastward fringe. A dam held the lake to the north. A hospital was going up in the west. The nuances and energies and talents of fifty races had built this town and were still building it. Among them were ten Polynesians and four Icelanders and one lean, dusky child who was the last of the Seminoles.

Farms spread wide. One thousand head of Indian corn rescued from a sheltered valley in the Andes had grown to ten thousand acres. Water buffaloes and goats had been brought from afar to serve in lieu of the horses and sheep that would never be seen again—and no man knew why one species survived while another did not. The horses had died; the water buffaloes lived. The canines hunted in ferocious packs; the felines had departed from existence. The small herbs, some tubers and a few seedy things could be rescued and cultivated for hungry bellies; but there were no flowers for the hungry mind. Humanity carried on, making do with what was available. No more than that could be done.

Fander was a back-number. He had nothing left for which to live but his songs and the affection of the others. In everything but his harp and his songs the Terrans were way ahead of him. He could do no more than give of his own affection in return for theirs and wait with the patience of one whose work is done.

At the end of that year they buried Graypate. He died in his sleep, passing with the undramatic casualness of one who ain't

much use at speechifying. They put him to rest on a knoll behind the community hall, and Fander played his mourning song, and Precious Jewel, who was Speedy's wife, planted the grave with sweet herbs.

In the spring of the following year Fander summoned Speedy and Blacky and Redhead. He was coiled on a couch, blue and shivering. They held hands so that his touch would speak to them simultaneously.

"I am about to undergo my *amafa*."

He had great difficulty in putting it over in understandable thought-forms, for this was something beyond their Earthly experience.

"It is an unavoidable change of age during which my kind must sleep undisturbed." They reacted as if the casual reference to his kind was a strange and startling revelation, a new aspect previously unthought-of. He continued, "I must be left alone until this hibernation has run its natural course."

"For how long, Devil?" asked Speedy, with anxiety.

"It may stretch from four of your months to a full year, or—"

"Or what?" Speedy did not wait for a reassuring reply. His agile mind was swift to sense the spice of danger lying far back in the Martian's thoughts. "Or it may never end?"

"It may never," admitted Fander, reluctantly. He shivered again, drew his tentacles around himself. The brilliance of his blueness was fading visibly. "The possibility is small, but it is there."

Speedy's eyes widened and his breath was taken in a short gasp. His mind was striving to readjust itself and accept the appalling idea that Fander might not be a fixture, permanent, established for all time. Blacky and Redhead were equally aghast.

"We Martians do not last for ever," Fander pointed out, gently. "All are mortal, here and there. He who survives his *amafa* has many happy years to follow, but some do not survive. It is a trial that must be faced as everything from beginning to end must be faced."

"But—"

"Our numbers are not large," Fander went on. "We breed slowly and some of us die halfway through the normal span. By cosmic standards we are a weak and foolish people much in need of the support of the clever and the strong. You are clever and strong. Whenever my people visit you again, or any

other still stranger people come, always remember that you are clever and strong."

"We are strong," echoed Speedy, dreamily. His gaze swung around to take in the thousands of roofs, the copper dome, the thing of beauty on the hill. "We are strong."

A prolonged shudder went through the ropey, bee-eyed creature on the couch.

"I do not wish to be left here, an idle sleeper in the midst of life, posing like a bad example to the young. I would rather rest within the little cave where first we made friends and grew to know and understand each other. Wall it up and fix a door for me. Forbid anyone to touch me or let the light of day fall upon me until such time as I emerge of my own accord." Fander stirred sluggishly, his limbs uncoiling with noticeable lack of sinuousness. "I regret I must ask you to carry me there. Please forgive me; I have left it a little late and cannot . . . cannot . . . make it by myself."

Their faces were pictures of alarm, their minds bells of sorrow. Running for poles, they made a stretcher, edged him onto it, bore him to the cave. A long procession was following by the time they reached it. As they settled him comfortably and began to wall up the entrance, the crowd watched in the same solemn silence with which they had looked upon his verse.

He was already a tightly rolled ball of dull blueness, with filmed eyes, when they fitted the door and closed it, leaving him to darkness and slumber. Next day a tiny, brown-skinned man with eight children, all hugging dolls, came to the door. While the youngsters stared huge-eyed at the door, he fixed upon it a two-word name in metal letters, taking great pains over his self-imposed task and making a neat job of it.

The Martian vessel came from the stratosphere with the slow, stately fall of a grounding balloon. Behind the transparent band its bluish, nightmarish crew were assembled and looking with great, multi-faceted eyes at the upper surface of the clouds. The scene resembled a pink-tinged snowfield beneath which the planet still remained concealed.

Captain Rdina could feel this as a tense, exciting moment even though his vessel had not the honor to be the first with such an approach. One Captain Skhiva, now long retired, had done it many years before. Nevertheless, this second venture retained its own exploratory thrill.

Someone stationed a third of the way around the vessel's belly came writhing at top pace toward him as their drop

brought them near to the pinkish clouds. The oncomer's signalling tentacle was jiggling at a seldom used rate.

"Captain, we have just seen an object swoop across the horizon."

"What sort of an object?"

"It looked like a gigantic load-sled."

"I couldn't have been."

"No, Captain, of course not—but that is exactly what it appeared to be."

"Where is it now?" demanded Rdina, gazing toward the side from which the other had come.

"It dived into the mists below."

"You must have been mistaken. Long-standing anticipation can encourage the strangest delusions." He stopped a moment as the observation band became shrouded in the vapor of a cloud. Musingly, he watched the gray wall of fog slide upward as his vessel continued its descent. "That old report says definitely that there is nothing but desolation and wild animals. There is no intelligent life except some fool of a minor poet whom Skhiva left behind, and twelve to one he's dead by now. The animals may have eaten him."

"Eaten him? Eaten *meat?*" exclaimed the other, thoroughly revolted.

"Anything is possible," assured Rdina, pleased with the extreme to which his imagination could be stretched. "Except a load-sled. That was plain silly."

At which point he had no choice but to let the subject drop for the simple and compelling reason that the ship came out of the base of the cloud, and the sled in question was floating alongside. It could be seen in complete detail, and even their own instruments were responding to the powerful output of its numerous flotation-grids.

The twenty Martians aboard the sphere sat staring bee-eyed at this enormous thing which was half the size of their own vessel, and the forty humans on the sled stared back with equal intentness. Ship and sled continued to descend side by side, while both crews studied each other with dumb fascination which persisted until simultaneously they touched ground.

It was not until he felt the slight jolt of landing that Captain Rdina recovered sufficiently to look elsewhere. He saw the houses, the green-domed building, the thing of beauty poised upon its hill, the many hundreds of Earth-people streaming out of their town and toward his vessel.

None of these queer, two-legged life-forms, he noted, be-

trayed slightest sign of revulsion or fear. They galloped to the tryst with a bumptious self-confidence which would still be evident any place the other side of the cosmos.

It shook him a little, and he kept saying to himself, again and again, "They're not scared—why should you be? They're not scared—why should you be?"

He went out personally to meet the first of them, suppressing hils own apprehensions and ignoring the fact that many of them bore weapons. The leading Earthman, a big-built, spade-bearded two-legger, grasped his tentacle as to the manner born.

There came a picture of swiftly moving limbs. "My name is Speedy."

The ship emptied itself within ten minutes. No Martian would stay inside who was free to smell new air. Their first visit, in a slithering bunch, was to the thing of beauty. Rdina stood quietly looking at it, his crew clustered in a half-circle around him, the Earth-folk a silent audience behind.

It was a great rock statue of a female of Earth. She was broad-shouldered, full-bosomed, wide-hipped, and wore voluminous skirts that came right down to her heavy-soled shoes. Her back was a little bent, her head a little bowed, and her face was hidden in her hands, deep in her toil-worn hands. Rdina tried in vain to gain some glimpse of the tired features behind those hiding hands. He looked at her a long while before his eyes lowered to read the script beneath, ignoring the Earth-lettering, running easily over the flowing Martian curlicues:

Weep, my country, for your sons asleep,
The ashes of your homes, your tottering towers.
Weep, my country, O, my country, weep!
For birds that cannot sing, for vanished flowers,
The end of everything,
The silenced hours.
Weep! my country.

There was no signature. Rdina mulled it through many minutes while the others remained passive. Then he turned to Speedy, pointed to the Martian script.

"Who wrote this?"

"One of your people. He is dead."

"Ah!" said Rdina. "That songbird of Skhiva's. I have forgotten his name. I doubt whether many remember it. He was only a very small poet. How did he die?"

"He ordered us to enclose him for some long and urgent sleep he must have, and—"

"The *amafa*," put in Rdina, comprehendingly. "And then?"

"We did as he asked. He warned us that he might never come out." Speedy gazed at the sky unconscious that Rdina was picking up his sorrowful thoughts. "He has been there nearly two years and has not emerged." The eyes came down to Rdina. "I don't know whether you can understand me, but he was one of us."

"I think I understand." Rdina was thoughtful. He asked, "How long is this period you call nearly two years?"

They managed to work it out between them, translating it from Terran to Martian time-terms.

"It is long," pronounced Rdina. "Much longer than the usual *amafa*, but not unique. Occasionally, for no known reason, someone takes even longer. Besides, Earth is Earth and Mars is Mars." He became swift, energetic as he called to one of his crew. "Physician Traith, we have a prolonged *amafa* case. Get your oils and essences and come with me." When the other had returned, he said to Speedy, "Take us to where he sleeps."

Reaching the door to the walled-up cave, Rdina paused to look at the names fixed upon it in neat but incomprehensible letters. They read: DEAR DEVIL.

"What do those mean?" asked Physician Traith, pointing.

"Do not disturb," guessed Rdina carelessly. Pushing open the door, he let the other enter first, closed it behind him to keep all others outside.

They appeared an hour later. The total population of the city had congregated outside the cave to see the Martians. Rdina wondered why they had not permitted his crew to satisfy their natural curiosity, since it was unlikely that they would be more interested in other things—such as the fate of one small poet. Ten thousand eyes were upon them as they came into the sunlight and fastened the cave's door. Rdina made contact with Speedy, gave him the news.

Stretching himself in the light as if reaching toward the sun, Speedy shouted in a voice of tremendous gladness which all could hear.

"He will be out again within twenty days."

At that, a mild form of madness seemed to overcome the two-leggers. They made pleasure-grimaces, piercing mouth-noises and some went so far as to beat each other.

Twenty Martians felt like joining Fander that same night. The Martian constitution is peculiarly susceptible to emotion.

*T*his is not a story about alien invaders, either gentle or less gentle, but it is a story about an alien con man and the problems he creates for hardworking law enforcement officers in a satisfactorily distant future.

PARTY OF THE TWO PARTS

by

WILLIAM TENN

GALACTOGRAM FROM STELLAR SERGEANT O-DIK-VEH, COMMANDER OF OUTLYING PATROL OFFICE 1001625, TO HEADQUARTERS DESK SERGEANT HOY-VEH-CHALT, GALACTIC PATROL HEADQUARTERS ON VEGA XXI—(PLEASE NOTE: THIS IS TO BE TRANSMITTED AS A PERSONAL, NOT OFFICIAL, MESSAGE AND AS SUCH WILL BE CHARGED USUAL HYPERSPACE RATES)

MY DEAR HOY:

I am deeply sorry to trouble you again, but, Hoy, am I in a jam! Once more, it's not something that I did wrong, but something I didn't do right—what the Old One is sure to wheeze is "a patent dereliction of obvious duty." And since I'm positive

he'll be just as confused as I, once the prisoners I'm sending on by slow light-transport arrive (when he reads the official report that I drew up and am transmitting with them, I can see him dropping an even dozen of his jaws), I can only hope that this advance message will give you enough time to consult the best legal minds in Vegan Headquarters and get some sort of solution worked out.

If there's any kind of solution available by the time he reads my report, the Old One won't be nearly as angry at my dumping the problem on his lap. But I have an uneasy, persistent fear that Headquarters is going to get as snarled up in this one as my own office. If it does, the Old One is likely to remember what happened in Outlying Patrol Office 1001625 the last time—and then, Hoy, you will be short one spore-cousin.

It's a dirty business all around, a real dirty business. I use the phrase advisedly. In the sense of *obscene*, if you follow me.

As you've no doubt suspected by now, most of the trouble has to do with that damp and irritating third planet of Sol, the one that many of its inhabitants call Earth. Those damned chittering bipeds cause me more sleeplessness than any other species in my sector. Sufficiently advanced technologically to be almost at Stage 15—self-developed interplanetary travel—they are still centuries away from the usually concurrent Stage 15A—friendly contact by the galactic civilization.

They are, therefore, still in Secretly Supervised Status, which means that I have to maintain a staff of about two hundred agents on their planet, all encased in clumsy and uncomfortable protoplasmic disguises, to prevent them from blowing their silly selves up before the arrival of their spiritual millennium.

On top of everything, their solar system only has nine planets, which means that my permanent headquarters office can't get any further away from Sol than the planet they call Pluto, a world whose winters are bearable, but whose summers are unspeakably hot. I tell you, Hoy, the life of a stellar sergeant isn't all *gloor* and *skubbets*, no matter what Rear Echelon says.

In all honesty, though, I should admit that the difficulty did not originate on Sol III this time. Ever since their unexpected and uncalled-for development of nuclear fission, which as you know, cost me a promotion, I've doubled the number of undercover operatives on the planet and given them stern warning to report the slightest technological spurt immediately. I doubt that these humans could invent so much as an elementary time-machine now, without my knowing of it well in advance.

No, this time it all started on Rugh VI, the world known

to those who live on it as Gtet. If you consult your atlas, Hoy, you'll find Rugh is a fair-sized yellow dwarf star on the outskirts of the Galaxy, and Gtet an extremely insignificant planet which has only recently achieved the status of Stage 19—primary interstellar citizenship.

The Gtetans are a modified ameboid race who manufacture a fair brand of *ashkebac*, which they export to their neighbors on Rugh IX and XII. They are a highly individualistic people and still experience many frictions living in a centralized society. Despite several centuries of advanced civilization, most Gtetans look upon the Law as a delightful problem in circumvention rather than as a way of life.

An ideal combination with my bipeds of Earth, eh?

It seems that a certain L'payr was one of the worst troublemakers on Gtet. He had committed almost every crime and broken almost every law. On a planet where fully one-fourth of the population is regularly undergoing penal rehabilitation, L'payr was still considered something quite special. A current Gtetan saying, I understand, puts it, "You're like L'payr, fellow—you don't know *when* to stop!"

Nonetheless, L'payr had reached the point where it was highly important that he did stop. He had been arrested and convicted for a total of 2,342 felonies, just one short of the 2,343 felonies which, on Gtet, make one a habitual criminal and, therefore, subject to life imprisonment. He made a valiant effort to retire from public life and devote himself to contemplation and good works but it was too late. Almost against his will, as he insisted to me under examination in my office, he found his mind turning to foul deeds left undone, illegalities as yet unperpetrated.

And so one day, quite casually—hardly noticing, as it were—he committed another major crime. But this one was so ineffably ugly, involving an offense against the moral code as well as civil legislation, that the entire community turned against L'payr.

He was caught selling pornography to juvenile Gtetans.

The indulgence that a celebrity may enjoy turned to wrath and utter contempt. Even the Gtetan Protective Association of Two Thousand Time Losers refused to raise funds for his bail. As his trial approached, it became obvious to L'payr that he was in for it. His only hope lay in flight.

He pulled the most spectacular coup of his career—he broke out of the hermetically sealed vault in which he was being guarded around the clock (how he did this, he consistently refused to tell me up to the time of his lamented demise or what-

ever you want to call it) and escaped to the spaceport near the prison. There, he managed to steal aboard the pride of the Gtetan merchant fleet, a newly developed interstellar ship equipped with two-throttle hyperspace drive.

This ship was empty, waiting for a crew to take it out on its maiden run.

Somehow, in the few hours at his disposal before his escape was known, L'payr figured out the controls of the craft and managed to lift it off Gtet and into hyperspace. He had no idea at this time that, since the ship was an experimental model, it was equipped with a transmitting device that kept the spaceport informed of its location.

Thus, though they lacked the facilities to pursue him, the Gtetan police always knew exactly where he was. A few hundred ameboid vigilantes did start after him in old-fashioned, normal-drive ships, but after a month or so of long and fatiguing interstellar travel at one-hundredth his speed, they gave up and returned home.

For his hideout, L'payr wanted a primitive and unimportant corner of the Galaxy. The region around Sol was ideal. He materialized out of hyperspace about halfway between the third and fourth planets. But he did it very clumsily (after all, Hoy, the best minds of his race are just beginning to understand the two-throttle drive) and lost all of his fuel in the process. He barely managed to reach Earth and come down.

The landing was effected at night and with all drives closed, so that no one on the planet saw it. Because living conditions on Earth are so different from Gtet, L'payr knew that his mobility would be very limited. His one hope was to get help from the inhabitants. He had to pick a spot where possible contacts would be at a maximum and yet accidental discovery of his ship would be at minimum. He chose an empty lot in the suburbs of Chicago and quickly dug his ship in.

Meanwhile, the Gtetan police communicated with me as the local commanding officer of the Galactic Patrol. They told me where L'payr had hidden and demanded extradition. I pointed out that, as yet, I lacked jurisdiction, since no crime of an *interstellar* nature had been committed. The stealing of the ship had been done on his home planet—it had not occurred in deep space. If, however, he broke any galactic law while he was on Earth, committed any breach of the peace, no matter how slight . . .

"How about that?" the Gtetan police asked me over the inter-

stellar radio. "Earth is on Secretly Supervised Status, as we understand it. It is illegal to expose it to superior civilizations. Isn't L'payr landing there in a two-throttle hyperspace-drive ship enough of a misdemeanor to entitle you to pick him up?"

"Not by itself," I replied. "The ship would have to be seen and understood for what it was by a resident of the planet. From what we here can tell, no such observation was made. And so long as he stays in hiding, doesn't tell any human about us and refrains from adding to the technological momentum of Earth, L'payr's galactic citizenship has to be respected. I have no legal basis for an arrest."

Well, the Gtetans grumbled about what were they paying the star tax for, anyway, but they saw my point. They warned me, though, about L'payr—sooner or later his criminal impulses would assert themselves. He was in an impossible position, they insisted. In order to get the fuel necessary to leave Earth before his supplies ran out, he'd have to commit some felony or other —and as soon as he did so and was arrested, they wanted their extradition request honored.

"The filthy, evil-minded old pervert," I heard the police chief mutter as he clicked off.

I don't have to tell you how I felt, Hoy. A brilliant, imaginative ameboid criminal at large on a planet as volatile culturally as Earth! I notified all our agents in North America to be on the alert and settled back to wait it out with prayerfully knotted tentacles.

L'payr had listened to most of this conversation over his own ship's receiver. Naturally, the first thing he did was to remove the directional device which had enabled the Gtetan police to locate him. Then, as soon as it was dark again, he managed, with what must have been enormous difficulty, to transport himself and his little ship to another area of the city. He did this, too, without being observed.

He made his base in a slum tenement neighborhood that had been condemned to make way for a new housing project and therefore was practically untenanted. Then he settled back to consider his problem.

Because, Hoy, he had a problem.

He didn't want to get in any trouble with the Patrol, but if he didn't get his pseudopods on a substantial amount of fuel very soon, he'd be a dead ameboid. Not only did he need the fuel to get off Earth, but the converters—which, on this rather primitive Gtetan vessel, changed waste matter back into usable

air and food—would be stopping very soon if they weren't stoked up, too.

His time was limited, his resources almost non-existent. The spacesuits with which the ship was furnished, while cleverly enough constructed and able to satisfy the peculiar requirements of an entity of constantly fluctuating format, had not been designed for so primitive a planet as Earth. They would not operate too effectively for long periods away from the ship.

He knew that my OP office had been apprised of his landing and that we were just waiting for some infraction of even the most obscure minor law. Then we'd pounce—and, after the usual diplomatic formalities, he'd be on his way back to Gtet, for a nine-throttle Patrol ship could catch him easily. It was obvious that he couldn't do as he had originally planned—make a fast raid on some human supply center and collect whatever stuff he needed.

His hope was to make a trade. He'd have to find a human with whom he could deal and offer something that, to this particular human in any case, was worth the quantity of fuel L'payr's ship needed to take him to a less policed corner of the Cosmos. But almost everything on the ship was essential to its functioning. And L'payr had to make his trade without (1) giving away the existence and nature of the galactic civilization, or (2) providing the inhabitants of Earth with any technological stimulus.

L'payr later said that he thought about the problem until his nucleus was a mass of corrugations. He went over the ship, stem to stern, again and again, but everything a human might consider acceptable was either too useful or too revealing. And then, just as he was about to give up, he found it.

The materials he needed were those with which he had committed his last crime!

According to Gtetan law, you see, Hoy, all evidence pertaining to a given felony is retained by the accused until the time of his trial. There are very complicated reasons for this, among them the Gtetan juridical concept that every prisoner is *known* to be guilty until he manages, with the aid of lies, loopholes and brilliant legalisms, to convince a hard-boiled and cynical jury of his peers that they should, in spite of their knowledge to the contrary, declare him innocent. Since the burden of the proof rests with the prisoner, the evidence does likewise. And L'payr, examining this evidence, decided that he was in business.

What he needed now was a customer. Not only someone who

wanted to buy what he had to sell, but a customer who had available the fuel he needed. And in the neighborhood which was now his base of operations, customers of this sort were rare.

Being Stage 19, the Gtetans are capable of the more primitive forms of telepathy—only at extremely short ranges, of course, and for relatively brief periods of time. So, aware that my secret agents had already begun to look for him and that, when they found him, his freedom of action would be ever more circumscribed, L'payr desperately began to comb through the minds of any terrestrials within three blocks of his hideout.

Days went by. He scuttled from mind to mind like an insect looking for a hole in a collector's jar. He was forced to shut the ship's converter down to one-half operation, then to one-third. Since this cut his supply of food correspondingly, he began to hunger. For lack of activity, his contractile vacuole dwindled to the size of pinpoint. Even his endoplasm lost the turgidity of the healthy ameboid and became dangerously thin and transparent.

And then one night, when he had about determined to take his chances and steal the fuel he needed, his thoughts ricocheted off the brain of a passerby, came back unbelievingly, examined further and were ecstatically convinced. A human who not only could supply his needs, but also, and more important, might be in the market for Gtetan pornography!

In other words, Mr. Osborne Blatch.

This elderly teacher of adolescent terrestrials insisted throughout all my interrogations that, to the best of his knowledge, no mental force was used upon him. It seems that he lived in a new apartment house on the other side of the torn-down tenement area and customarily walked in a wide arc around the rubble because of the large number of inferior and belligerent human types which infested the district. On this particular night, a teachers' meeting at his high school having detained him, he was late for supper and decided, as he had once or twice before, to take a short cut. He claims that the decision to take a short cut was his own.

Osborne Blatch says that he was striding along jauntily, making believe his umbrella was a malacca cane, when he seemed to hear a voice. He says that, even at first hearing, he used the word "seemed" to himself because, while the voice definitely had inflection and tone, it was somehow completely devoid of volume.

The voice said, "Hey, bud! C'mere!"

He turned around curiously and surveyed the rubble to his right. All that was left of the building that had once been there was the lower half of the front entrance. Since everything

else around it was completely flat, he saw no place where a man could be standing.

But as he looked, he heard the voice again. It sounded greasily conspiratorial and slightly impatient. "C'mere, bud. *C'mere!*"

"What—er—what *is* it, sir?" he asked in a cautiously well-bred way, moving closer and peering in the direction of the voice. The bright street light behind him, he said, improved his courage as did the solid quality of the very heavy old-fashioned umbrella he was carrying.

"C'mere. I got somp'n to show you. C'mon!"

Stepping carefully over loose brick and ancient garbage, Mr. Blatch came to a small hollow at one side of the ruined entrance. And filling it was L'payr or, as he seemed at first glance to the human, a small, splashy puddle of purple liquid.

I ought to point out now, Hoy—and the affidavits I'm sending along will substantiate it—that at no time did Mr. Blatch recognize the viscous garment for a spacesuit, nor did he ever see the Gtetan ship which L'payr had hidden in the rubble behind him in its completely tenuous hyperspatial state.

Though the man, having a good imagination and a resilient mind, immediately realized that the creature before him must be extraterrestrial, he lacked overt technological evidence to this effect, as well as to the nature and existence of our specific galactic civilization. Thus, here at least, there was no punishable violation of Interstellar Statute 2,607,193, Amendments 126 through 509.

"What do you have to show me?" Mr. Blatch asked courteously, staring down at the purple puddle. "And where, may I ask, are you from? Mars? Venus?"

"Listen, bud, y'know what's good for ya, y'don't ast such questions. Look, I got somep'n for ya. Hot stuff. *Real* hot!"

Mr. Blatch's mind, no longer fearful of having its owner assaulted and robbed by the neighborhood tough it had originally visualized, spun off to a revelant memory, years old, of a trip abroad. There had been that alley in Paris and the ratty little Frenchman in a torn sweater . . .

"What would that be?" he asked.

A pause now, while L'payr absorbed new impressions.

"Ah-h-h," said the voice from the puddle. "I 'ave somezing to show M'sieu zat M'sieu weel like vairry much. If M'sieu weel come a little closair?"

M'sieu, we are to understand, came a leetle closair. Then the puddle heaved up in the middle, reaching out a pseudopod that

held flat, square objects, and telepathed hoarsely, " 'Ere, M'sieu. Feelthy peekshures."

Although taken more than a little aback, Blatch merely raised both eyebrows interrogatively and said, "Ah? Well, well!"

He shifted the umbrella to his left hand and, taking the pictures as they were given to him, one at a time, examined each a few steps away from L'payr, where the light of the street lamp was stronger.

When all the evidence arrives, you will be able to see for yourself, Hoy, what they were like. Cheap prints, calculated to excite the grossest ameboid passions. The Gtetans, as you may have heard, reproduce by simple asexual fission, but only in the presence of saline solution—sodium chloride is comparatively rare on their world.

The first photograph showed a naked ameba, fat and replete with food vacuoles, splashing lazily and formlessly at the bottom of a metal tank in the completely relaxed state that precedes reproducing.

The second was like the first, except that a trickle of salt water had begun down one side of the tank and a few pseudopods had lifted toward it inquiringly. To leave nothing to the imagination, a sketch of the sodium chloride molecule had been superimposed on the upper right corner of the photograph.

In the third picture, the Gtetan was ecstatically awash in the saline solution, its body distended to maximum, dozen of pseudopods thrust out, throbbing. Most of the chromatin had become concentrated in chromosomes about the equator of the nucleus. To an ameba, this was easily the most exciting photograph in the collection.

The fourth showed the nucleus becoming indented between the two sets of sibling chromosomes—while, in the fifth, with the division completed and the two nuclei at opposite ends of the reproducing individual, the entire cytoplasmic body had begun to undergo constriction about its middle. In the sixth, the two resultant Gtetans were emerging with passion-satisfied languor from the tank of salt water.

As a measure of L'payr's depravity, let me pass on to you what the Gtetan police told me. Not only was he peddling the stuff to ameboid minors, but they believed that he had taken the photographs himself and that the model had been his own brother —or should I say sister? His own one and only sibling, possibly? This case has many, many confusing aspects.

Blatch returned the last picture to L'payr and said, "Yes, I am interested in buying the group. How much?"

The Gtetan named his price in terms of the requisite compounds available in the chemistry laboratory of the high school where Blatch taught. He explained exactly how he wanted them to be prepared and warned Blatch to tell nobody of L'payr's existence.

"Uzzerwise, when M'sieu gets 'ere tomorrow night, ze peekshures weel be gone, I weel be gone—and M'sieu weel have nozzing to show for his trouble. *Comprenez?*"

Osborne Blatch seems to have had very little trouble in obtaining and preparing the stuff for which L'payr had bargained. He said that, by the standards of his community, it was a minute quantity and extremely inexpensive. Also, as he had scrupulously always done in the past when using school supplies for his own experiments, he reimbursed the laboratory out of his own pocket. But he does admit that the photographs were only a small part of what he hoped to get out of the ameboid. He expected, once a sound business arrangement had been established, to find out from what part of the Solar System the visitor had come, what his world was like and similar matters of understandable interest to a creature whose civilization is in the late phases of Secretly Supervised Status.

Once the exchange had been effected, however L'payr tricked him. The Gtetan told Blatch to return on the *next* night when, his time being more free, they could discuss the state of the Universe at leisure. And, of course, as soon as the Earthman had left with the photographs, L'payr jammed the fuel into his converters, made the necessary sub-nuclear rearrangements in its atomic structure and, with the hyperspace-drive once more operating under full power, took off like a *rilg* out of *Gowkuldady*.

As far as we can determine, Blatch received the deception philosophically. After all, he still had the pictures.

When my OP office was informed that L'payr had left Earth in the direction of the Hercules Cluster M13, without leaving any discernible ripple in terrestrial law or technology behind him, we all relaxed gratefully. The case was removed from TOP PRIORITY—FULL ATTENTION BY ALL PERSONNEL rating and placed in the PENDING LATENT EFFECTS category.

As is usual, I dropped the matter myself and gave full charge of the follow-up to my regent and representative on Earth, Stellar Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh. A tracer beam was put on L'payr's rapidly receding ship and I was free to devote my attention

once more to my basic problem—delaying the development of interplanetary travel until the various human societies had matured to the requisite higher level.

Thus, six Earth months later, when the case broke wide open, Pah-Chi-Luh handled it himself and didn't bother me until the complications became overwhelming. I know this doesn't absolve me—I have ultimate responsibility for everything that transpires in my Outlying Patrol District. But between relatives, Hoy, I am mentioning these facts to show that I was not completely clumsy in the situation and that a little help from you and the rest of the family, when the case reaches the Old One in Galactic Headquarters, would not merely be charity for a one-headed oafish cousin.

As a matter of fact, I and most of my office were involved in a very complex problem. A Moslem mystic, living in Saudi Arabia, had attempted to heal the ancient schism that exists in his religion between the Shiite and Sunnite sects, by communing with the departed spirits of Mohammed's son-in-law, Ali, the patron of the first group, and Abu Bekr, the Prophet's father-in-law and founder of the Sunnite dynasty. The object of the mediumistic excursion was to effect some sort of arbitration agreement in Paradise between the two feuding ghosts that would determine who should rightfully have been Mohammed's successor and the first caliph of Mecca.

Nothing is simple on Earth. In the course of this laudable probe of the hereafter, the earnest young mystic accidentally achieved telepathic contact with a Stage 9 civilization of disembodied intellects on Ganymede, the largest satellite of the planet Jupiter. Well, you can imagine! Tremendous uproar on Ganymede and in Saudi Arabia, pilgrims in both places flocking to see the individuals on either end of the telepathic connection, peculiar and magnificent miracles being wrought daily. A mess!

And my office feverishly working overtime to keep the whole affair simple and religious, trying to prevent it from splashing over into awareness of the more rational beings in each community! It's an axiom of Outlying Patrol Offices that nothing will stimulate space travel among backward peoples faster than definite knowledge of the existence of intelligent celestial neighbors. Frankly, if Pah-Chi-Luh had come to me right then, blathering of Gtetan pornography in human high-school textbooks, I'd probably have bitten his heads off.

He'd discovered the textbooks in the course of routine duties as an investigator for a United States Congressional Committee —his disguised status for the last decade or so, and one which

had proved particularly valuable in the various delaying actions we had been surreptitiously fighting on the continent of North America. There was this newly published biology book, written for use in the secondary schools, which had received extremely favorable comment from outstanding scholars in the universities. Naturally, the committee ordered a copy of the text and suggested that its investigator look through it.

Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh turned a few pages and found himself staring at the very pornographic pictures he'd heard about at the briefing session six months before—published, available to everyone on Earth, and especially to minors! He told me afterward, brokenly, that in that instant all he saw was a brazen repetition of L'payr's ugly crime on his home planet.

He blasted out a Galaxy-wide alarm for the Gtetan.

L'payr had begun life anew as an *ashkebac* craftsman on a small, out-of-the-way, mildly civilized world. Living carefully within the law, he had prospered and, at the time of his arrest, had become sufficiently conventional—and incidentally, fat—to think of raising a respectable family. Not much—just two of them. If things continued to go well, he might consider multiple fission in the future.

He was indignant when he was arrested and carried off to the detention cell on Pluto, pending the arrival of an extradition party from Gtet.

"By what right do you disturb a peace-loving artisan in the quiet pursuit of his trade?" he challenged. "I demand immediate unconditional release, a full apology and restitution for loss of income as well as the embarrassment caused to my person and ego. Your superiors will hear of this! False arrest of a galactic citizen can be a very serious matter!"

"No doubt," Stellar Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh retorted, still quite equable, you see. "But the public dissemination of recognized pornography is even more serious. As a crime, we consider it on a level with—"

"*What* pornography?"

My assistant said he stared at L'payr for a long time through the transparent cell wall, marveling at the creature's effrontery. All the same, he began to feel a certain disquiet. He had never before encountered such complete self-assurance in the face of a perfect structure of criminal evidence.

"You know very well what pornography. Here—examine it for yourself. This is only one copy out of 20,000 distributed all over the United States of North America for the specific use of

human adolescents." He dematerialized the biology text and passed it through the wall.

L'payr glanced at the pictures. "Bad reproduction," he commented. "Those humans still have a long way to go in many respects. However, they do display a pleasing technical precocity. But why show this to me? Surely you don't think *I* have anything to do with it?"

Pah-Chi-Luh says the Gtetan seemed intensely puzzled, yet gently patient, as if he were trying to unravel the hysterical gibberings of an idiot child.

"Do you *deny* it?"

"What in the Universe is there to deny? Let me see." He turned to the title page. "This seems to be *A First Book in Biology* by one Osborne Blatch and one Nicodemus P. Smith. You haven't mistaken me for either Blatch or Smith, have you? My name is L'payr, not Osborne L'payr, nor even Nicodemus P. L'payr. Just plain, old, everyday, simple L'payr. No more, no less. I come from Gtet, which is the sixth planet of—"

"I am fully aware of Gtet's astrographic location," Pah-Chi-Luh informed him coldly. "Also, that you were on Earth six of their months ago. And that, at the time, you completed a transaction with this Osborne Blatch, whereby you got the fuel you needed to leave the planet, while Blatch obtained the set of pictures that were later used as illustrations in that textbook. Our undercover organization on Earth functions very efficiently, as you can see. We have labeled the book Exhibit A."

"An ingenious designation," said the Gtetan admiringly. "Exhibit A! With so much to choose from, you picked the one that sounds just right. My compliments." He was, you will understand, Hoy, in his element—he was dealing with a police official on an abstruse legal point. L'payr's entire brilliant criminal past on a law-despising world had prepared him for this moment. Pah-Chi-Luh's mental orientation, however, had for a long time now been chiefly in the direction of espionage and *sub rosa* cultural manipulation. He was totally unprepared for the orgy of judicial quibbles that was about to envelop him. In all fairness to him, let me admit that I might not have done any better under those circumstances and neither, for that matter, might you—nor the Old One himself!

L'payr pointed out, "All I did was to sell a set of artistic studies to one Osborne Blatch. What *he* did with it afterward surely does not concern me. If I sell a weapon of approved technological backwardness to an Earthman—a flint fist-axe, say, or a cauldron for pouring boiling oil upon the stormers of

walled cities—and he uses the weapon to dispatch one of his fellow primitives, am I culpable? Not the way I read the existing statutes of the Galactic Federation, my friend. Now suppose you reimburse me for my time and trouble and put me on a fast ship bound for my place of business."

Around and around they went. Dozens of times, Pah-Chi-Luh, going frantically through the Pluto Headquarters law library, would come up with a nasty little wrinkle of an ordinance, only to have L'payr point out that the latest interpretation of the Supreme Council put him wholly in the clear. I can myself vouch for the fact that the Gtetans seem to enjoy total recall of all judicial history.

"But you *do* admit selling pornography yourself to the Earthman Osborne Blatch?" the stellar corporal bellowed at last.

"Pornography, pornography," L'payr mused. "That would be defined as cheaply exciting lewdness, falsely titillating obscenity. Correct?"

"Of course!"

"Well, Corporal, let me ask you a question. You saw those pictures. Did you find them exciting or titillating?"

"Certainly not. But I don't happen to be a Gtetan ameboid."

"Neither," L'payr countered quietly, "is Osborne Blatch."

I do think Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh might have found some sensible way out of the dilemma if the extradition party had not just then arrived from Gtet on the special Patrol ship which had been sent for. He now found himself confronted with six more magnificently argumentative ameboids, numbering among them some of the trickiest legal minds on the home planet. The police of Rugh VI had had many intricate dealings with L'payr in the Gtetan courts. Hence, they took no chances and sent their best representatives.

Outnumbered L'payr may have been, but remember, Hoy, he had prepared for just these eventualities ever since leaving Earth. And just to stimulate his devious intellect to maximum performance, there was the fact that *his* was the only life at stake. Once let his fellow ameboids get their pseudopods on him again, and he was a gone protozoan.

Between L'payr and the Gtetan extradition party, Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh began to find out how unhappy a policeman's lot can become. Back and forth he went, from the prisoner to the laywers, stumbling through quagmires of opinion, falling into chasms of complexity.

The extradition group was determined not to return to their planet empty-pseudopoded. In order to succeed, they had to

make the current arrest stick, which would give them the right —as previously injured parties—to assert their prior claim to the punishment of L'payr. For his part, L'payr was equally determined to invalidate the arrest by the Patrol, since then he would not only have placed our outfit in an uncomfortable position, but, no longer extraditable, would be entitled to its protection from his fellow citizens.

A weary, bleary and excessively hoarse Pah-Chi-Luh finally dragged himself to the extradition party on spindly tentacles and informed them that, after much careful consideration, he had come to the conclusion that L'payr was innocent of any crime during his stay on Earth.

"Nonsense," he was told by the spokesman. "A crime was committed. Arrant and unquestioned pornography was sold and circulated on that planet. A crime *has* to have been committed."

Pah-Chi-Luh went back to L'payr and asked, miserably, how about it? Didn't it seem, he almost pleaded, that all the necessary ingredients of a crime were present? *Some* kind of crime?

"True," L'payr said thoughtfully. "They have a point. Some kind of crime *may* have been committed—but not by me. Osborne Blatch, now . . ."

Stellar Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh completely lost his heads.

He sent a message to Earth, ordering Osborne Blatch to be picked up.

Fortunately for all of us, up to and including the Old One, Pah-Chi-Luh did not go so far as to have Blatch arrested. The Earthman was merely held as a material witness. When I think what the false arrest of a creature from a Secretly Supervised world could lead to, especially in a case of this sort, Hoy, my blood almost turns liquid.

But Pah-Chi-Luh *did* commit the further blunder of incarcerating Osborne Blatch in a cell adjoining L'payr's. Everything, you will observe, was working out to the ameboid's satisfaction—including my young assistant.

By the time Pah-Chi-Luh got around to Blatch's first interrogation, the Earthman had already been briefed by his neighbor. Not that the briefing was displayed overmuch—as yet.

"Pornography?" he repeated in answer to the first question. "*What* pornography? Mr. Smith and I had been working on an elementary biology text for some time and we were hoping to use new illustrations throughout. We wanted larger, clear pictures of the sort that would be instantly comprehensible to youngsters—and we were particularly interested in getting away from the blurry drawings that have been used and re-used in

all textbooks, almost from the time of Leeuwenhoek. Mr. L'payr's series on the cycle of ameboid reproduction was a godsend. In a sense, they *made* the first section of the book."

"You don't deny, however," Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh inquired remorselessly, "that, at the time of the purchase, you knew those pictures were pornographic? And that, despite this knowledge, you went ahead and used them for the delectation of juveniles of your race?"

"Edification," the elderly human schoolteacher corrected him. "*Edification,* not delectation. I assure you that not a single student who studied the photographs in question—which, by the way, appeared textually as drawings—received any premature erotic stimulation thereby. I will admit that, at the time of purchase, I did receive a distinct impression from the gentleman in the next cell that he and his kind considered the illustrations rather racy—"

"Well, then?"

"But that was his problem, not mine. After all, if I buy an artifact from an extraterrestrial creature—a flint fist-axe, say, or a cauldron for pouring boiling oil upon the stormers of walled cities—and I use them both in completely peaceful and useful pursuits—the former to grub onions out of the ground and the latter to cook the onions in a kind of soup—have I done anything wrong?

"As a matter of fact, the textbook in question received fine reviews and outstanding commendations from educational and scientific authorities all over the nation. Would you like to hear some of them? I believe I may have a review or two in my pocket. Let me see. Yes, just by chance, I seem to have a handful of clippings in this suit. Well, well! I didn't know there were quite so many. That is what the *Southern Prairie States Secondary School Gazette* has to say—'A substantial and noteworthy achievement. It will live long in the annals of elementary science pedagoguery. The authors may well feel . . .'"

It was then that Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh sent out a despairing call for me.

Fortunately, I was free to give the matter my full attention, the Saudi Arabia-Ganymede affair being completely past the danger point. Had I been tied up . . .

After experimenting with all kinds of distractions, including secret agents disguised as dancing girls, we had finally managed to embroil the young mystic in a tremendous theological dispute on the exact nature and moral consequences of the miracles he was wreaking. Outstanding Mohammedan religious leaders of the

region had lined up on one side or the other and turned the air blue with quotations from the Koran and later Sunnite books. The mystic was drawn in and became so involved in the argument that he stopped thinking about his original objectives and irreparably broke the mental connection with Ganymede.

For a while, this left a continuing problem on that satellite—it looked as if the civilization of disembodied intellects might eventually come to some approximation of the real truth. Luckily for us, the entire business had been viewed there also as a religious phenomenon and, once telepathic contact was lost, the intellect who had been communicating with the human, and had achieved much prestige thereby, was thoroughly discredited. It was generally believed that he had willfully and deliberately faked the entire thing, for the purpose of creating skepticism among the more spiritual members of his race. An ecclesiastical court ordered the unfortunate telepath to be embodied alive.

It was therefore, with a warm feeling of a job well done that I returned to my headquarters on Pluto in response to Pah-Chi-Luh's summons.

Needless to say, this feeling quickly changed to the most overpowering dismay. After getting the background from the overwrought corporal, I interviewed the Gtetan extradition force. They had been in touch with their home office and were threatening a major galactic scandal if the Patrol's arrest of L'payr was not upheld and L'payr remanded to their custody.

"Are the most sacred and intimate details of our sex life to be shamelessly flaunted from one end of the Universe to the other?" I was asked angrily. "Pornography is pornography—a crime is a crime. The intent was there—the overt act was there. We demand our prisoner."

"How can you have pornography without titillation?" L'payr wanted to know. "If a Chumblostian sells a Gtetan a quantity of *krrgllwss*—which they use as food and we use as building material—does the shipment have to be paid for under the nutritive or structural tariffs? The structural tariffs obtain, as you well know, Sergeant. I demand immediate release!"

But the most unpleasant surprise of all awaited me with Blatch. The terrestrial was sitting in his cell, sucking the curved handle of his umbrella.

"Under the code governing the treatment of all races on Secretly Supervised Status," he began as soon as he saw me, "and I refer not only to the Rigellian-Sagittarian Convention, but to the statutes of the third cosmic cycle and the Supreme Council decisions in the cases of Khwomo vs. Khwomo and

Farziplok vs. Antares XII, I demand return to my accustomed habitat on Earth, the payment of damages according to the schedule developed by the Nobri Commission in the latest Vivadin controversy. I also demand satisfaction in terms of—"

"You seem to have acquired a good deal of knowledge of interstellar law," I commented slowly.

"Oh, I have, Sergeant—I have. Mr. L'payr was most helpful in acquainting me with my rights. It seems that I am entitled to all sorts of recompenses—or, at least, that I can claim entitlement. You have a very interesting galactic culture, Sergeant. Many, many people on Earth would be fascinated to learn about it. But I am quite prepared to spare you the embarrassment which such publicity would cause you. I am certain that two reasonable individuals like ourselves can come to terms."

When I charged L'payr with violating galactic secrecy, he spread his cytoplasm in an elaborate ameboid shrug.

"*I told him nothing on Earth,* Sergeant. Whatever information this terrestrial has received—and I will admit that it would have been damaging and highly illegal—was entirely in the jurisdiction of *your* headquarters office. Besides, having been wrongfully accused of an ugly and unthinkable crime, I surely had the right to prepare my defense by discussing the matter with the only witness to the deed. I might go further and point out that since Mr. Blatch and myself are in a sense co-defendants, there could be no valid objection to a pooling of our legal knowledge."

Back in my office, I brought Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh up to date.

"It's like a morass," he complained. "The more you struggle to get out, the deeper you fall in it! And this terrestrial! The Plutonian natives who've been guarding him have been driven almost crazy. He asks questions about everything—what's this, what's that, how does it work. Or it's not hot enough for him, the air doesn't smell right, his food is uninteresting. His throat has developed an odd tickle, he wants a gargle, he needs a—"

"Give him everything he wants, but within reason," I said. "If this creature dies on us, you and I will be lucky to draw no more than a punishment tour in the Black Hole in Cygnus. But as for the rest of it—look here, Corporal, I find myself in agreement with the extradition party from Gtet. A crime *has* to have been committed."

Stellar Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh stared at me. "You—you mean . . ."

"I mean that if a crime was committed, L'payr has been legally arrested and can therefore be taken back to Gtet. We will then hear no more from him ever and we will also be rid

of that bunch of pseudopod-clacking Gtetan shysters. That will leave us with only one problem—Osborne Blatch. Once L'payr is gone and we have this terrestrial to ourselves, I think we can handle him—one way or another. But first and foremost, Corporal Pah-Chi-Luh, a crime—*some crime*—has to have been committed by L'payr during his sojourn on Earth. Set up your bed in the law library."

Shortly afterward, Pah-Chi-Luh left for Earth.

Now please, Hoy, no moralistic comments! You know as well as I do that this sort of thing has been done before, here and there, in Outlying Patrol Offices. I don't like it any more than you, but I was faced with a major emergency. Besides, there was no doubt but that this L'payr, ameboid master criminal, had had punishment deferred far too long. In fact, one might say that morally I was completely and absolutely in the right.

Pah-Chi-Luh returned to Earth, as I've said, this time disguised as an editorial assistant. He got a job in the publishing house that had brought out the biology textbook. The original photographs were still in the files of that establishment. By picking his man carefully and making a good many mind-stimulating comments, the stellar corporal finally inspired one of the technical editors to examine the photographs and have the material on which they were printed analyzed.

The material was *fahrtuch,* a synthetic textile much in use on Gtet and not due to be developed by humanity for at least three centuries.

In no time at all, almost every woman in America was wearing lingerie made of *fahrtuch,* the novelty fabric of the year. And since L'payr was ultimately responsible for this illegal technological spurt, we at last had him where we wanted him!

He was very sporting about it, Hoy.

"The end of a long road for me, Sergeant. I congratulate you. Crime does not pay. Lawbreakers always lose. Law-enforcers always win."

I went off to prepare the extradition forms, without a care in the Galaxy. There was Blatch, of course, but he was a mere human. And by this time, having gotten involved in all kinds of questionable dealings myself, I was determined to make quick work of him. After all, one might as well get blasted for a *skreek* as a *launt!*

But when I returned to escort the Gtetan to his fellow-ameboids, I almost fell through the surface of Pluto. Where there had been one L'payr, there were now two! Smaller L'payrs, of course—half the size of the original, to be exact—but L'payrs unmistakable.

In the interval, he had reproduced!

How? That gargle the Earthman had demanded, Hoy. It had been L'payr's idea all along, his last bit of insurance. Once the Earthman had received the gargle, he had smuggled it to L'payr, who had hidden it in his cell, intending to use it as a last resort.

That gargle. Hoy, was *salt water!*

So there I was. The Gtetans informed me that their laws covered such possibilities, but much help *their* laws were to me.

"A crime has been committed, pornography has been sold," the spokesman reiterated. "We demand our prisoner. Both of him!"

"Pursuant to Galactic Statutes 6,009,371 through 6,106,514," Osborne Blatch insisted, "I demand immediate release, restitution to the extent of two billion Galactic Megawhars, a complete and written—"

And.

"It's probably true that our ancestor, L'payr, committed all sorts of indiscretions," lisped the two young ameboids in the cell next to Osborne Blatch, "but what does that have to do with us? L'payr paid for his crimes by dying in childbirth. We are very young and very, very innocent. Surely the big old Galaxy doesn't believe in punishing little children for the sins of their parents!"

What would *you* have done?

I shipped the whole mess off to Patrol Headquarters—the Gtetan extradition party and their mess of judicial citations, Osborne Blatch and his umbrella, the biology textbook, the original bundle of pornographic pictures, and last but not at all least, two—count 'em two—dewy young ameboids. Call them L'payr sub-one and L'payr sub-two. Do anything you like with them when they get there, but please don't tell me what it is!

And if you can figure out a solution with the aid of some of the more ancient and wiser heads at headquarters, and figure it out before the Old One ruptures a gloccistomorph, Pah-Chi-Luh and I will be pathetically, eternally grateful.

If not—well, we're standing by here at Outlying Patrol Office 1001625 with bags packed. There's a lot to be said for the Black Hole in Cygnus.

Personally, Hoy, I'd say that the whole trouble is caused by creatures who insist on odd and colorful methods of continuing their race, instead of doing it sanely and decently by means of spore-pod explosion!

THE END

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