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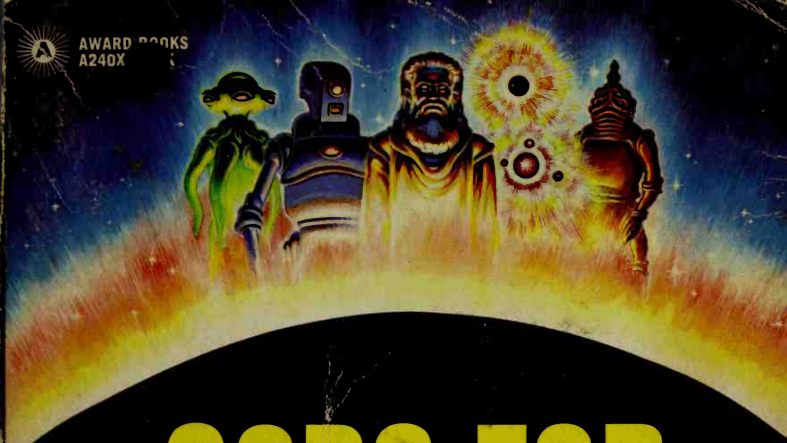

GODS FOR TOMORROW

Ten top science fiction writers advance brilliant yet terrifying predictions of tomorrow's beliefs. Here are the deities which may rule men's lives someday... as projected by:

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edited by HANS STEFAN SANTESSON

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. . . when a spaceship, carrying missionaries to a heathen race, disappears into the infinite expanse above

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GODS FOR TOMORROW

Edited by
HANS STEFAN SANTESSON

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INTRODUCTION

AFICIONADOS of graffiti, the wall newspapers of our society, would have applauded the sentiments of the anonymous citizen who, in the fall of 1966, had written this observation on a wall in a men's room of the Royal Library in Stockholm:

"God is not dead! He is only wonderfully sick!"

This can of course, be said to echo the thinking of many writers of science fiction, and even more so the thinking of the hundreds of thousands for whom they write.

By now agnosticism is very much the *in* thing in our New Rome, and a recognized trend in contemporary theology. I hasten to add, Protestant theology. We are, for instance, told by Dr. Roger L. Shinn, dean of instruction and professor of applied Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York, that "Christian faith and atheism are not always opposite," and that there is in Christianity "a strain of agnosticism that belongs to all profound faith."

"People often take belief in God for granted," observes Dr. Shinn. "I suspect that God, Who never wants to be taken for granted, rather likes the theologians who are declaring His death. They take Him with some seriousness."

We all know that these doubts are not new. Our society is the end-product of a series of denials of older values which have been with us long before the so-called industrial revolution. The dilettante agnostics of the eighteenth century like-

wise questioned organized religion's personification of the God-force. Now, when we are even more certain that we know the secrets of at least the visible universe, added impetus is given to the school of thought which is inclined to deny the possibility of that which cannot be seen or tested or felt. Or traded in.

Organized religion, here in the West, is, in other words, having to face the reality that if men and women are to be concerned at all about such abstractions, they will more readily believe in a Spirit or in a Vital Force than in a personal God. Six percent of the Catholics in England are described in a recent survey as not even knowing if there be a God at all, and twice as many nominal members of the Church of England are described as sharing their doubts.

Organized religion, here in the West, thus stands at the crossroads. Kingsley Amis (a name known to all science fiction readers), wrote a special report on Britain in the March 3, 1967, issue of the *Weekend Telegraph,* London. The report was presented as if it were written twenty-three years from now, and said in part:

> "After the gratifyingly general and rapid collapse of the Church, set off in turn by the Archbishop of Canterbury's egregiously misconceived recognition of the Pope as the head of the Christian community in 1971, religious sentiment had to find a new object. Indeed many thousands had already turned to the more optimistic and less exacting religions of India and the East."

Thus, reality has to be faced that within our days—in our time, if you wish—we have come closer to the stars, and in so doing we have lost our faith.

I am not now thinking of organized religion's identification of Caesar with God as late as a matter of months ago.

I am not now thinking of organized religion's historical identification with the Empire, as in India, Africa, Mexico, Peru, and the Baltic.

No. The reality has to be faced that organized religion, as most of us know, has in the main failed to meet the challenge of our times—the chaos in our cities, the cry for justice in

our ghettos, and the breakdown of both public and private morality in our New Rome. With this in mind, we have reason to doubt that those who will come after us will do any better, for they will be products of a still more advanced society, embodying within itself the seeds of its moral and spiritual self-destruction.

If therefore organized religion, as most of us know it, is to survive, in our time and even more so in the days to come (assuming these days *do* come), there must be a return to the spiritual values found today only in the smaller churches. And there must be a rededication to service and humility, impossible where there is an organization, impossible under an establishment.

The stories in this anthology thus have to do with the Gods—and the anti-Gods—of a variety of possible days after tomorrow. It is a matter of personal regret to me that, apart from Mr. Kingsley Amis' kind references to them—he predicted a trend toward study-holidays in the East—there seem to be only casual references in science fiction to the survival into tomorrow of either Islam or what is popularly referred to as Hinduism.

Traditionalists do not always speak for the "living Church" here in the West, just as traditionalists do not always speak for that *living* fabric and way of life which Mr. Kingsley Amis dismisses as Mohammedanism, and which more and more people are coming to see, even in our cities, as the answer to their own uncertainties. Besides the rise of Islam in the West, there has also been a contemporary socio-political renaissance of Buddhism which cannot be minimized, nor its importance denied, as is attempted from time to time by spokesmen for a harassed establishment. Faith no longer has the same meaning it did at the turn of the century . . .

The stories in this anthology will, to some degree, reflect these changes and these uncertainties. We have no reason to believe that those who will come after us will show any more understanding of the alien cultures and the even more alien mores which will in time be encountered in space.

We will no doubt come to them armed with the same weapons of righteousness our fathers affected in Africa, India, and the Americas. The habits of the race die hard.

We can only hope that, despite all this, there will at times be a meeting of the minds, and that faith (and not organized religion) *will* triumph! For unless this happens, we too may in time be one of the forgotten races . . .

MENE, MENE, TEKEL UPHARSIN (*Daniel V.25*)

—HANS STEFAN SANTESSON

Men of undoubted faith, but also of little imagination and less humility, will be sent out in time "to bring the light" of our ways to the newly discovered heathen . . . The results can be tragic. And predictable.

The Streets of Ashkelon

HARRY HARRISON

SOMEWHERE above, hidden by the eternal clouds of Wesker's World, a thunder rumbled and grew. Trader John Garth stopped when he heard it, his boots sinking slowly into the muck, and cupped his good ear to catch the sound. It swelled and waned in the thick atmosphere, growing louder.

"That noise is the same as the noise of your sky-ship," Itin said, with stolid Wesker logicality, slowly pulverizing the idea in his mind and turning over the bits one by one for closer examination. "But your ship is still sitting where you landed it. It must be, even though we cannot see it, because you are the only one who can operate it. And even if anyone else could operate it we would have heard it rising into the sky. Since we did not, and if this sound is a sky-ship sound, then it must mean . . ."

"Yes, another ship," Garth said, too absorbed in his own thoughts to wait for the laborious Weskerian chains of logic to clank their way through to the end. Of course it was another spacer, it had been only a matter of time before one appeared, and undoubtedly this one was homing on the S.S. radar reflector as he had done. His own ship would show up clearly on the newcomer's screen and they would probably set down as close to it as they could.

"You better go ahead, Itin," he said. "Use the water so you can get to the village quickly. Tell everyone to get back into the swamps, well clear of the hard ground. That ship is land-

ing on instruments and anyone underneath at touchdown is going to be cooked."

This immediate threat was clear enough to the little Wesker amphibian. Before Garth finished speaking Itin's ribbed ears had folded like a bat's wing and he slipped silently into the nearby canal. Garth squelched on through the mud, making as good time as he could over the clinging surface. He had just reached the fringes of the village clearing when the rumbling grew to a head-splitting roar and the spacer broke through the low-hanging layer of clouds above. Garth shielded his eyes from the down-reaching tongue of flame and examined the growing form of the grey-black ship with mixed feelings.

After almost a standard year on Wesker's World he had to fight down a longing for human companionship of any kind. While this buried fragment of herd-spirit chattered for the rest of the monkey tribe, his trader's mind was busily drawing a line under a column of figures and adding up the total. This could very well be another trader's ship, and if it were his monopoly of the Wesker trade was at an end. Then again, this might not be a trader at all, which was the reason he stayed in the shelter of the giant fern and loosened his gun in its holster.

The ship baked dry a hundred square metres of mud, the roaring blast died, and the landing feet crunched down through the crackling crust. Metal creaked and settled into place while the cloud of smoke and steam slowly drifted lower in the humid air.

"Garth—you native-cheating extortionist—where are you?" the ship's speaker boomed. The lines of the spacer had looked only slightly familiar, but there was no mistaking the rasping tones of that voice. Garth wore a smile when he stepped out into the open and whistled shrilly through two fingers. A directional microphone ground out of its casing on the ship's fin and turned in his direction.

"What are you doing here, Singh?" he shouted towards the mike. "Too crooked to find a planet of your own and have to come here to steal an honest trader's profits?"

"Honest!" the amplified voice roared. "This from the man who has been in more jails than cathouses—and that a

goodly number in itself, I do declare. Sorry, friend of my youth, but I cannot join you in exploiting this aboriginal pesthole. I am on course to a more fairly atmosphered world where a fortune is waiting to be made. I only stopped here since an opportunity presented to turn an honest credit by running a taxi service. I bring you friendship, the perfect companionship, a man in a different line of business who might help you in yours. I'd come out and say hello myself, except I would have to decon for biologicals. I'm cycling the passenger through the lock so I hope you won't mind helping with his luggage."

At least there would be no other trader on the planet now, that worry was gone. But Garth still wondered what sort of passenger would be taking one-way passage to an uninhabited world. And what was behind that concealed hint of merriment in Singh's voice? He walked around to the far side of the spacer where the ramp had dropped, and looked up at the man in the cargo lock who was wrestling ineffectually with a large crate. The man turned towards him and Garth saw the clerical dog-collar and knew just what it was Singh had been chuckling about.

"What are you doing here?" Garth asked; in spite of his attempt at self-control he snapped the words. If the man noticed this he ignored it, because he was still smiling and putting out his hand as he came down the ramp.

"Father Mark," he said. "Of the Missionary Society of Brothers. I'm very pleased to . . ."

"I said what are you doing here." Garth's voice was under control now, quiet and cold. He knew what had to be done, and it must be done quickly or not at all.

"That should be obvious," Father Mark said, his good nature still unruffled. "Our missionary society has raised funds to send spiritual emissaries to alien worlds for the first time. I was lucky enough . . ."

"Take your luggage and get back into the ship. You're not wanted here and have no permission to land. You'll be a liability and there is no one on Wesker to take care of you. Get back into the ship."

"I don't know who you are sir, or why you are lying to me," the priest said. He was still calm but the smile was gone.

"But I have studied galactic law and the history of this planet very well. There are no diseases or beasts here that I should have any particular fear of. It is also an open planet, and until the Space Survey changes that status I have as much right to be here as you do."

The man was of course right, but Garth couldn't let him know that. He had been bluffing, hoping the priest didn't know his rights. But he did. There was only one distasteful course left for him, and he had better do it while there was still time.

"Get back in that ship," he shouted, not hiding his anger now. With a smooth motion his gun was out of the holster and the pitted black muzzle only inches from the priest's stomach. The man's face turned white, but he did not move.

"What the hell are you doing, Garth!" Singh's shocked voice grated from the speaker. "The guy paid his fare and you have no right at all to throw him off the planet."

"I have this right," Garth said, raising his gun and sighting between the priest's eyes. "I give him thirty seconds to get back aboard the ship or I pull the trigger."

"Well I think you are either off your head or playing a joke," Singh's exasperated voice rasped down at them. "If a joke, it is in bad taste, and either way you're not getting away with it. Two can play at that game, only I can play it better."

There was the rumble of heavy bearings and the remote-controlled four-gun turret on the ship's side rotated and pointed at Garth. "Now—down gun and give Father Mark a hand with the luggage," the speaker commanded, a trace of humor back in the voice now. "As much as I would like to help, old friend, I cannot. I feel it is time you had a chance to talk to the father; after all, I have had the opportunity of speaking with him all the way from earth."

Garth jammed the gun back into the holster with an acute feeling of loss. Father Mark stepped forward, the winning smile back now and a bible taken from a pocket of his robe, in his raised hand. "My son," he said.

"I'm not your son," was all Garth could choke out as defeat welled up in him. His fist drew back as the anger rose, and the best he could do was open the fist so he struck only with the flat of his hand. Still the blow sent the priest crash-

ing to the ground and fluttered the pages of the book splattering into the thick mud.

Itin and the other Weskers had watched everything with seemingly emotionless interest, and Garth made no attempt to answer their unspoken questions. He started towards his house, but turned back when he saw they were still unmoving.

"A new man has come," he told them. "He will need help with the things he has brought. If he doesn't have any place for them, you can put them in the big warehouse until he has a place of his own."

He watched them waddle across the clearing towards the ship, then went inside and gained a certain satisfaction from slamming the door hard enough to crack one of the panes. There was an equal amount of painful pleasure in breaking out one of the remaining bottles of Irish whiskey that he had been saving for a special occasion. Well this was special enough, though not really what he had had in mind. The whiskey was good and burned away some of the bad taste in his mouth, but not all of it. If his tactics had worked, success would have justified everything. But he had failed and in addition to the pain of failure there was the acute feeling that he had made a horse's ass out of himself. Singh had blasted off without any good-byes. There was no telling what sense he had made of the whole matter, though he would surely carry some strange stories back to the traders' lodge. Well, that could be worried about the next time Garth signed in. Right now he had to go about setting things right with the missionary. Squinting out through the rain he saw the man struggling to erect a collapsible tent while the entire population of the village stood in ordered ranks and watched. Naturally none of them offered to help.

By the time the tent was up and the crates and boxes stowed inside it the rain had stopped. The level of fluid in the bottle was a good bit lower and Garth felt more like facing up to the unavoidable meeting. In truth, he was looking forward to talking to the man. This whole nasty business aside, after an entire solitary year any human companionship looked good. *Will you join me now for dinner. John Garth,*

he wrote on the back of an old invoice. But maybe the guy was too frightened to come? Which was no way to start any kind of relationship. Rummaging under the bunk, he found a box that was big enough and put his pistol inside. Itin was of course waiting outside the door when he opened it, since this was his tour as Knowledge Collector. He handed him the note and box.

"Would you take these to the new man," he said.

"Is the new man's name New Man?" Itin asked.

"No, it's not!" Garth snapped. "His name is Mark. But I'm only asking you to deliver this, not get involved in conversation."

As always when he lost his temper, the literal minded Weskers won the round. "You are not asking for conversation," Itin said slowly, "but Mark may ask for conversation. And others will ask me his name, if I do not know his na . . ." The voice cut off as Garth slammed the door. This didn't work in the long run either because next time he saw Itin—a day, a week, or even a month later—the monologue would be picked up on the very word it had ended and the thought rambled out to its last frayed end. Garth cursed under his breath and poured water over a pair of the tastier concentrates that he had left.

"Come in," he said when there was a quiet knock on the door. The priest entered and held out the box with the gun.

"Thank you for the loan, Mr. Garth, I appreciate the spirit that made you send it. I have no idea of what caused the unhappy affair when I landed, but I think it would be best forgotten if we are going to be on this planet together for any length of time."

"Drink?" Garth asked, taking the box and pointing to the bottle on the table. He poured two glasses full and handed one to the priest. "That's about what I had in mind, but I still owe you an explanation of what happened out there." He scowled into his glass for a second, then raised it to the other man. "It's a big universe and I guess we have to make out as best we can. Here's to sanity."

"God be with you," Father Mark said, and raised his glass as well.

"Not with me or with this planet," Garth said firmly. "And

that's the crux of the matter." He half-drained the glass and sighed.

"Do you say that to shock me?" the priest asked with a smile. "I assure you it doesn't."

"Not intended to shock. I meant it quite literally. I suppose I'm what you would call an atheist, so revealed religion is no concern of mine. While these natives, simple and unlettered stone-age types that they are, have managed to come this far with no superstitions or traces of deism whatsoever. I had hoped that they might continue that way."

"What are you saying?" the priest frowned. "Do you mean they have no gods, no belief in the hereafter? They must die . . . ?"

"Die they do, and to dust returneth like the rest of the animals. They have thunder, trees and water without having thunder-gods, tree sprites, or water nymphs. They have no ugly little gods, taboos, or spells to hag-ride and limit their lives. They are the only primitive people I have ever encountered that are completely free of superstition and appear to be much happier and sane because of it. I just wanted to keep them that way."

"You wanted to keep them from God—from salvation?" the priest's eyes widened and he recoiled slightly.

"No," Garth said. "I wanted to keep them from superstition until they knew more and could think about it realistically without being absorbed and perhaps destroyed by it."

"You're being insulting to the Church, sir, to equate it with superstition . . ."

"Please," Garth said, raising his hand. "No theological arguments. I don't think your society footed the bill for this trip just to attempt a conversion on me. Just accept the fact that my beliefs have been arrived at through careful thought over a period of years, and no amount of undergraduate metaphysics will change them. I'll promise not to try and convert you—if you will do the same for me."

"Agreed, Mr. Garth. As you have reminded me, my mission here is to save these souls, and that is what I must do. But why should my work disturb you so much that you try and keep me from landing? Even threaten me with your gun, and . . ." the priest broke off and looked into his glass.

"And even slug you?" Garth asked, suddenly frowning. "There was no excuse for that, and I would like to say that I'm sorry. Plain bad manners and an even worse temper. Live alone long enough and you find yourself doing that kind of thing." He brooded down at his big hands where they lay on the table, reading memories into the scars and callouses patterned there. "Let's just call it frustration, for lack of a better word. In your business you must have had a lot of chance to peep into the darker places in men's minds and you should know a bit about motives and happiness. I have had too busy a life to ever consider settling down and raising a family, and right up until recently I never missed it. Maybe leakage radiation is softening up my brain, but I had begun to think of these furry and fishy Weskers as being a little like my own children, that I was somehow responsible for them."

"We are all His children," Father Mark said quietly.

"Well, here are some of His children that can't even imagine His existence," Garth said, suddenly angry at himself for allowing gentler emotions to show through. Yet he forgot himself at once, leaning forward with the intensity of his feelings. "Can't you realize the importance of this? Live with these Weskers awhile and you will discover a simple and happy life that matches the state of grace you people are always talking about. They get *pleasure* from their lives—and cause no one pain. By circumstances they have evolved on an almost barren world, so have never had a chance to grow out of a physical Stone Age culture. But mentally they are our match—or perhaps better. They have all learned my language so I can easily explain the many things they want to know. Knowledge and the gaining of knowledge gives them real satisfaction. They tend to be exasperating at times because every new fact must be related to the structure of all other things, but the more they learn the faster this process becomes. Some day they are going to be man's equal in every way, perhaps surpass us. If—would you do me a favor?"

"Whatever I can."

"Leave them alone. Or teach them if you must—history and science, philosophy, law, anything that will help them face the realities of the greater universe they never even knew existed before. But don't confuse them with your

hatreds and pain, guilt, sin, and punishment. Who knows the harm . . ."

"You are being insulting, sir!" the priest said, jumping to his feet. The top of his grey head barely came to the massive spaceman's chin, yet he showed no fear in defending what he believed. Garth, standing now himself, was no longer the penitent. They faced each other in anger, as men have always stood, unbending in the defence of that which they think right.

"Yours is the insult," Garth shouted. "The incredible egotism to feel that your derivative little mythology, differing only slightly from the thousands of others that still burden men, can do anything but confuse their still fresh minds! Don't you realize that they believe in truth—and have never heard of such a thing as a lie. They have not been trained yet to understand that other kinds of minds can think differently from theirs. Will you spare them this . . . ?"

"I will do my duty which is His will, Mr. Garth. These are God's creatures here, and they have souls. I cannot shirk my duty, which is to bring them His word, so that they may be saved and enter into the kingdom of heaven."

When the priest opened the door the wind caught it and blew it wide. He vanished into the stormswept darkness and the door swung back and forth and a splatter of raindrops blew in. Garth's boots left muddy footprints when he closed the door, shutting out the sight of Itin sitting patiently and uncomplaining in the storm, hoping only that Garth might stop for a moment and leave with him some of the wonderful knowledge of which he had so much.

By unspoken consent that first night was never mentioned again. After a few days of loneliness, made worse because each knew of the other's proximity, they found themselves talking on carefully neutral grounds. Garth slowly packed and stowed away his stock and never admitted that his work was finished and he could leave at any time. He had a fair amount of interesting drugs and botanicals that would fetch a good price. And the Wesker Artefacts were sure to create a sensation in the sophisticated galactic market. Crafts on the planet here had been limited before his arrival, mostly pieces

of carving painfully chipped into the hard wood with fragments of stone. He had supplied tools and a stock of raw metal from his own supplies, nothing more than that. In a few months the Weskers had not only learned to work with the new materials, but had translated their own designs and forms into the most alien—but most beautiful—artefacts that he had ever seen. All he had to do was release these on the market to create a primary demand, then return for a new supply. The Weskers wanted only books and tools and knowledge in return, and through their own efforts he knew they would pull themselves into the galactic union.

This is what Garth had hoped. But a wind of change was blowing through the settlement that had grown up around his ship. No longer was he the centre of attention and focal point of the village life. He had to grin when he thought of his fall from power; yet there was very little humor in the smile. Serious and attentive Weskers still took turns of duty as Knowledge Collectors, but their recording of dry facts was in sharp contrast to the intellectual hurricane that surrounded the priest.

Where Garth had made them work for each book and machine, the priest gave freely. Garth had tried to be progressive in his supply of knowledge, treating them as bright but unlettered children. He had wanted them to walk before they could run, to master one step before going on the next.

Father Mark simply brought them the benefits of Christianity. The only physical work he required was the construction of a church, a place of worship and learning. More Weskers had appeared out of the limitless planetary swamps and within days the roof was up, supported on a framework of poles. Each morning the congregation worked a little while on the walls, then hurried inside to learn the all-promising, all-encompassing, all-important facts about the universe.

Garth never told the Weskers what he thought about their new interest, and this was mainly because they had never asked him. Pride or honor stood in the way of his grabbing a willing listener and pouring out his grievances. Perhaps it would have been different if Itin was on Collecting duty; he was the brightest of the lot; but Itin had been rotated the day

after the priest had arrived and Garth had not talked to him since.

It was a surprise then when after seventeen of the trebly-long Wesker days, he found a delegation at his doorstep when he emerged after breakfast. Itin was their spokesman, and his mouth was open slightly. Many of the other Weskers had their mouths open as well, one even appearing to be yawning, clearly revealing the double row of sharp teeth and the purple-black throat. The mouths impressed Garth as to the seriousness of the meeting: this was the one Wesker expression he had learned to recognize. An open mouth indicated some strong emotion; happiness, sadness, anger, he could never be really sure which. The Weskers were normally placid and he had never seen enough open mouths to tell what was causing them. But he was surrounded by them now.

"Will you help us, John Garth," Itin said. "We have a question."

"I'll answer any question you ask," Garth said, with more than a hint of misgiving. "What is it?"

"Is there a God?"

"What do you mean by 'God'?" Garth asked in turn. What should he tell them?

"God is our Father in heaven, who made us all and protects us. Whom we pray to for aid, and if we are saved will find a place . . ."

"That's enough," Garth said. "There is no God."

All of them had their mouths open now, even Itin, as they looked at Garth and thought about his answer. The rows of pink teeth would have been frightening if he hadn't known these creatures so well. For one instant he wondered if perhaps they had been already indoctrinated and looked upon him as a heretic, but he brushed the thought away.

"Thank you," Itin said, and they turned and left.

Though the morning was still cool, Garth noticed that he was sweating and wondered why.

The reaction was not long in coming. Itin returned that same afternoon. "Will you come to the church?" he asked. "Many of the things that we study are difficult to learn, but none as difficult as this. We need your help because we must hear you and Father Mark talk together. This is because he

says one thing is true and you say another is true and both cannot be true at the same time. We must find out what is true."

"I'll come, of course," Garth said, trying to hide the sudden feeling of elation. He had done nothing, but the Weskers had come to him anyway. There could still be grounds for hope that they might yet be free.

It was hot inside the church, and Garth was surprised at the number of Weskers who were there, more than he had seen gathered at any one time before. There were many open mouths. Father Mark sat at a table covered with books. He looked unhappy but didn't say anything when Garth came in. Garth spoke first.

"I hope you realize this is their idea—that they came to me of their own free will and asked me to come here?"

"I know that," the priest said resignedly. "At times they can be very difficult. But they are learning and want to believe, and that is what is important."

"Father Mark, Trader Garth, we need your help," Itin said. "You both know many things that we do not know. You must help us come to religion which is not an easy thing to do." Garth started to say something, then changed his mind. Itin went on. "We have read the bibles and all the books that Father Mark gave us, and one thing is clear. We have discussed this and we are all agreed. These books are very different from the ones that Trader Garth gave us. In Trader Garth's books there is the universe which we have not seen, and it goes on without God, for he is mentioned nowhere; we have searched very carefully. In Father Mark's books He is everywhere and nothing can go without Him. One of these must be right and the other must be wrong. We do not know how this can be, but after we find out which is right then perhaps we will know. If God does not exist . . ."

"Of course He exists, my children," Father Mark said in a voice of heartfelt intensity. "He is our Father in heaven who has created us all. . . ."

"Who created God?" Itin asked and the murmur ceased and everyone of the Weskers watched Father Mark intensely. He recoiled a bit under the impact of their eyes, then smiled.

"Nothing created God, since He is the Creator. He always was. . . ."

"If He always was in existence—why cannot the universe have always been in existence? Without having had a creator?" Itin broke in with a rush of words. The importance of the question was obvious. The priest answered slowly, with infinite patience.

"Would that the answers were that simple, my children. But even the scientists do not agree about the creation of the universe. While they doubt—we who have seen the light *know*. We can see the miracle of creation all about us. And how can there be a creation without a Creator? That is He, our Father, our God in Heaven. I know you have doubts; that is because you have souls and free will. Still, the answer is so simple. Have faith, that is all you need. Just believe."

"How can we believe without proof?"

"If you cannot see that this world itself is proof of His existence, then I say to you that belief needs no proof—if you have faith!"

A babble of voices arose in the room and more of the Wesker mouths were open now as they tried to force their thoughts through the tangled skein of words and separate the thread of truth.

"Can you tell us, Garth?" Itin asked, and the sound of his voice quieted the hubbub.

"I can tell you to use the scientific method which can examine all things—including myself—and give you answers that can prove the truth or falsity of any statement."

"That is what we must do," Itin said, "we had reached the same conclusion." He held a thick book before him and a ripple of nods ran across the watchers. "We have been studying the bible as Father Mark told us to do, and we have found the answer. God will make a miracle for us, thereby proving that He is watching us. And by this sign we will know Him and go to Him."

"That is the sin of false pride," Father Mark said. "God needs no miracles to prove His existence."

"But *we* need a miracle!" Itin shouted, and though he wasn't human there was need in his voice. "We have read here of many smaller miracles, loaves, fishes, wine,

snakes—many of them, for much smaller reasons. Now all He need do is make a miracle and He will bring us all to Him—the wonder of an entire new world worshipping at His throne, as you have told us, Father Mark. And you have told us how important this is. We have discussed this and find that there is only one miracle that is best for this kind of thing."

His boredom at the theological wrangling drained from Garth in an instant. He had not been really thinking or he would have realized where all this was leading. He could see the illustration in the bible where Itin held it open, and knew in advance what picture it was. He rose slowly from his chair, as if stretching, and turned to the priest behind him.

"Get ready!" he whispered. "Get out the back and get to the ship; I'll keep them busy here. I don't think they'll harm me."

"What do you mean . . . ?" Father Mark asked, blinking in surprise.

"Get out, you fool!" Garth hissed. "What miracle do you think they mean? What miracle is supposed to have converted the world to Christianity?"

"No!" Father Mark said. "It cannot be. It just cannot be . . . !"

"GET MOVING!" Garth shouted, dragging the priest from the chair and hurling him towards the rear wall. Father Mark stumbled to a halt, turned back. Garth leaped for him, but it was already too late. The amphibians were small, but there was so many of them. Garth lashed out and his fist struck Itin, hurling him back into the crowd. The others came on as he fought his way towards the priest. He beat at them but it was like struggling against waves. The furry, musky bodies washed over and engulfed him. He fought until they tied him, and he still struggled until they beat on his head until he stopped. They they pulled him outside where he could only lie in the rain and curse and watch.

Of course the Weskers were marvellous craftsmen, and everything had been constructed down to the last detail, following the illustration in the bible. There was the cross, planted firmly on the top of a small hill, the gleaming metal spikes, the hammer. Father Mark was stripped and draped in a carefully pleated loincloth. They led him out of the church.

At the sight of the cross he almost fainted. After that he held his head high and determined to die as he had lived, with faith.

Yet this was hard. It was unbearable even for Garth, who only watched. It is one thing to talk of crucifixion and look at the gentle carved bodies in the dim light of prayer. It is another to see a man naked, ropes cutting into his skin where he hangs from a bar of wood. And to see the needle-tipped spike raised and placed against the soft flesh of his palm, to see the hammer come back with the calm deliberation of an artisan's measured stroke. To hear the thick sound of metal penetrating flesh.

Then to hear the screams.

Few are born to be martyrs; Father Mark was not one of them. With the first blows, the blood ran from his lips where his clenched teeth met. Then his mouth was wide and his head strained back and the guttural horror of his screams sliced through the susurration of the falling rain. It resounded as a silent echo from the masses of watching Weskers, for whatever emotion opened their mouths was now tearing at their bodies with all its force, and row after row of gaping jaws reflected the crucified priest's agony.

Mercifully he fainted as the last nail was driven home. Blood ran from the raw wounds, mixing with the rain to drip faintly pink from his feet as the life ran out of him. At this time, somewhere at this time, sobbing and tearing at his own bonds, numbed from the blows on the head, Garth lost consciousness.

He awoke in his own warehouse and it was dark. Someone was cutting away the woven ropes they had bound him with. The rain still dripped and splashed outside.

"Itin," he said. It could be no one else.

"Yes," the alien voice whispered back. "The others are all talking in the church. Lin died after you struck his head, and Inon is very sick. There are some that say you should be crucified too, and I think that is what will happen. Or perhaps killed by stoning on the head. They have found in the bible where it says . . ."

"I know." With infinite weariness. "An eye for an eye.

You'll find lots of things like that once you start looking. It's a wonderful book." His head ached terribly.

"You must go, you can get to your ship without anyone seeing you. There has been enough killing." Itin as well spoke with a new-found weariness.

Garth experimented, pulling himself to his feet. He pressed his head to the rough wood of the wall until the nausea stopped. "He's dead." He said it as a statement, not a question.

"Yes, some time ago. Or I could not have come away to see you."

"And buried of course, or they wouldn't be thinking about starting on me next."

"And buried!" There was almost a ring of emotion in the alien's voice, an echo of the dead priest's. "He is buried and he will rise on High. It is written and that is the way it will happen. Father Mark will be so happy that it has happened like this." The voice ended in a sound like a human sob.

Garth painfully worked his way towards the door, leaning against the wall so he wouldn't fall.

"We did the right thing, didn't we?" Itin asked. There was no answer. "He will rise up, Garth, won't he rise?"

Garth was at the door and enough light came from the brightly lit church to show his torn and bloody hands clutching at the frame. Itin's face swam into sight close to his, and Garth felt the delicate, many fingered hands with the sharp nails catch at his clothes.

"He will rise, won't he, Garth?"

"No," Garth said, "he is going to stay buried right where you put him. Nothing is going to happen because he is dead and he is going to stay dead."

The rain runnelled through Itin's fur and his mouth was opened so wide that he seemed to be screaming into the night. Only with effort could he talk, squeezing out the alien thoughts in an alien language.

"Then we will not be saved? We will not become pure?"

"You were pure," Garth said, in a voice somewhere between a sob and a laugh. "That's the horrible ugly dirty part of it. You were pure. Now you are . . ."

"Murderers," Itin said, and the water ran down from his lowered head and streamed away into the darkness.

What will happen when men of God—in the fullest sense of the word—meet "out there"? Will each of them, at that moment, be true to his faith?

Balaam

ANTHONY BOUCHER

"WHAT IS a *'man?'* " Rabbi Chaim Acosta demanded, turning his back on the window and its view of pink sand and infinite pink boredom. "You and I, Mule, in our respective ways, work for the salvation of *man*—as you put it, for the brotherhood of *men* under the fatherhood of God. Very well, let us define our terms: Whom, or more precisely *what,* are we interested in saving?"

Father Aloysius Malloy shifted uncomfortably and reluctantly closed the *American Football Yearbook* which had been smuggled in on the last rocket, against all weight regulations, by one of his communicants. I honestly like Chaim, he thought, not merely (or is that the right word?) with brotherly love, nor even out of the deep gratitude I owe him, but with special individual liking; and I respect him. He's a brilliant man—too brilliant to take a dull post like this in his stride. But he *will* get off into discussions which are much too much like what one of my Jesuit professors called "disputations."

"What did you say, Chaim?" he asked.

The Rabbi's black Sephardic eyes sparkled. "You know very well what I said, Mule; and you're stalling for time. Please indulge me. Our religious duties here are not so arduous as we might wish; and since you won't play chess . . ."

". . . and you," said Father Malloy unexpectedly, "refuse to take any interest in diagraming football plays . . ."

"*Touché.* Or am I? Is it my fault that as an Israeli I fail to share the peculiar American delusion that football means something other than rugby and soccer? Whereas chess—" He looked at the priest reproachfully. "Mule," he said, "you have led me into a digression."

"It was a try. Like the time the whole Southern California line thought I had the ball for once and Leliwa walked over for the winning TD."

"What," Acosta repeated, "is *man?* Is it by definition a member of the genus *H. sapiens* inhabiting the planet Sol III?"

"The next time we tried the play," said Malloy resignedly, "Leliwa was smeared for a ten-yard loss."

The two *men* met on the sands of Mars. It was an unexpected meeting, a meeting in itself uneventful, and yet one of the turning points in the history of *men* and their universe.

The *man* from the colony base was on a routine patrol—a patrol imposed by the captain for reasons of discipline and activity-for-activity's-sake rather than from any need for protection in this uninhabited waste. He had seen, over beyond the next rise, what he would have sworn was the braking blaze of a landing rocket—if he hadn't known that the next rocket wasn't due for another week. Six and a half days, to be exact, or even more exactly, six days, eleven hours, and twenty-three minutes, Greenwich Interplanetary. He knew the time so exactly because he, along with half the garrison, Father Malloy, and those screwball Israelis, was due for rotation then. So no matter how much it looked like a rocket, it couldn't be one; but it was something happening on his patrol, for the first time since he'd come to this Godforsaken hole, and he might as well look into it and get his name on a report.

The *man* from the spaceship also knew the boredom of the empty planet. Alone of his crew, he had been there before, on the first voyage when they took the samples and set up the observation autoposts. But did that make the captain even listen to him? Hell, no; the captain knew all about the planet from the sample analyses and had no time to listen to a guy who'd really been there. So all he had got out of it was the

privilege of making the first reconnaissance. Big deal! One fast look around reconnoitering a few googols of sand grains and then back to the ship. But there was some kind of glow over that rise there. It couldn't be lights; theirs was the scout ship, none of the others had landed yet. Some kind of phosphorescent life they'd missed the first time round . . . ? Maybe now the captain would believe that the sample analyses didn't tell him everything.

The two *men* met at the top of the rise.

One *man* saw the horror of seemingly numberless limbs, of a headless torso, of a creature so alien that it walked in its glittering bare flesh in this freezing cold and needed no apparatus to supplement the all but nonexistent air.

One *man* saw the horror of an unbelievably meager four limbs, of a torso topped with an ugly lump like some unnatural growth, of a creature so alien that it smothered itself with heavy clothing in this warm climate and cut itself off from this invigorating air.

And both *men* screamed and ran.

"There is an interesting doctrine," said Rabbi Acosta, "advanced by one of your writers, C. S. Lewis . . ."

"He was an Episcopalian," said Father Malloy sharply.

"I apologize." Acosta refrained from pointing out that Anglo-Catholic would have been a more accurate term. "But I believe that many in your church have found his writings, from your point of view, doctrinally sound? He advances the doctrine of what he calls *hnaus*—intelligent beings with souls who are the children of God, whatever their physical shape or planet of origin."

"Look, Chaim," said Malloy with an effort toward patience. "Doctrine or no doctrine, there just plain aren't any such beings. Not in this solar system anyway. And if you're going to go interstellar on me, I'd just as soon read the men's microcomics."

"Interplanetary travel existed only in such literature once. But of course if you'd rather play chess . . ."

"My specialty," said the man once known to sports writers as Mule Malloy, "was running interference. Against you I need somebody to run interference *for*."

"Let us take the sixteenth psalm of David, which you call the fifteenth, having decided, for reasons known only to your God and mine, that psalms nine and ten are one. There is a phrase in there which, if you'll forgive me, I'll quote in Latin; your Saint Jerome is often more satisfactory than any English translator. *Benedicam Dominum, qui tribuit mihi intellectum.*"

"Blessed be the Lord, who schools me," murmured Malloy, in the standard Knox translation.

"But according to Saint Jerome: *I shall bless the Lord, who bestows on me*—just how should one render *intellectum?*—not merely *intellect,* but *perception, comprehension* . . . what Hamlet means when he says of *man: In apprehension how like a god!*"

Words change their meanings.

Apprehensively, one *man* reported to his captain. The captain first swore, then scoffed, then listened to the story again. Finally he said, "I'm sending a full squad back with you to the place where—maybe—you saw this thing. If it's for real, these mother-dighting bug-eyed monsters are going to curse the day they ever set a God-damned tentacle on Mars." The *man* decided it was no use trying to explain that the worst of it was it *wasn't* bug-eyed; any kind of eyes in any kind of head would have been something. And they weren't even quite tentacles either. . . .

Apprehensively too, the other *man* made his report. The captain scoffed first and then swore, including some select remarks on underhatched characters who knew all about a planet because they'd been there once. Finally he said, "We'll see if a squad of real observers can find any trace of your egg-eating limbless monsters; and if we find them, they're going to be God-damned sorry they were ever hatched." It was no use, the *man* decided, trying to explain that it wouldn't have been so bad if it *had* been limbless, like in the picture tapes; but just *four* limbs . . .

"What is a *man?*" Rabbi Acosta repeated, and Mule Malloy wondered why his subconscious synapses had not earlier produced the obvious appropriate answer.

"Man," he recited, *"is a creature composed of body and soul, and made to the image and likeness of God."*

"From that echo of childish singsong, Mule, I judge that is a correct catechism response. Surely the catechism must follow it up with some question about that likeness? Can it be a likeness in"—his hand swept up and down over his own body with a graceful gesture of contempt—*"this* body?"

"This likeness to God," Malloy went on reciting, *"is chiefly in the soul."*

"Aha!" The Sephardic sparkle was brighter than ever.

The words went on, the centers of speech following the synaptic patterns engraved in parochial school as the needle followed the grooves of an antique record. *"All creatures bear some resemblance to God inasmuch as they exist. Plants and animals resemble Him insofar as they have life . . ."*

"I can hardly deny so profound a statement."

". . . but none of these creatures is made to the image and likeness of God. Plants and animals do not have a rational soul, such as man has, by which they might know and love God."

"As do all good *hnaus.* Go on; I am not sure that our own scholars have stated it so well. Mule, you are invaluable!"

Malloy found himself catching a little of Acosta's excitement. He had known these words all his life; he had recited a moment how often even his Jesuit professors, in their profound consideration of the x^n's of theology, had ever paused to reconsider these childhood ABC's.

"How is the soul like God?" He asked himself the next catechistic question, and answered, *"The soul is like God because it is a spirit having understanding and free will and is destined . . ."*

"Reverend gentlemen!" The reverence was in the words only. The interrupting voice of Captain Dietrich Fassbänder differed little in tone from his normal address to a buck private of the Martian Legion.

Mule Malloy said, "Hi, Captain." He felt half relieved, half disappointed, as if he had been interrupted while unwrapping a present whose outlines he was just beginning to glimpse. Rabbi Acosta smiled wryly and said nothing.

"So this is how you spend your time? No Martian natives,

so you have to keep in practice trying to convert each other, is that it?"

Acosta made a light gesture which might have been polite acknowledgment of what the captain evidently considered a joke. "The Martian day is so tedious we have been driven to talking shop. Your interruption is welcome. Since you so rarely seek out our company, I take it you bring some news. Is it, God grant, that the rotation rocket is arriving a week early?"

"No, damn it," Fassbänder grunted. (He seemed to take a certain pride, Malloy had observed, in carefully not tempering his language for the ears of clergymen.) "Then I'd have a German detachment instead of your Israelis, and I'd know where I stood. I suppose it's all very advisable politically for every state in the UW to contribute a detachment in rotation; but I'd sooner either have my regular legion garrison doubled, or two German detachments regularly rotating. That time I had the pride of Pakistan here . . . Damn it, you new states haven't had time to develop a military tradition!"

"Father Malloy," the Rabbi asked gently, "are you acquainted with the sixth book of what you term the Old Testament?"

"Thought you fellows were tired of talking shop," Fassbänder objected.

"Rabbi Acosta refers to the Book of Joshua, Captain. And I'm afraid, God help us, that there isn't a state or a tribe that hasn't a tradition of war. Even your Prussian ancestors might have learned a trick or two from the campaigns of Joshua—or for that matter, from the Cattle Raid on Cooley, when the Hound of Cullen beat off the armies of Queen Maeve. And I've often thought, too, that it'd do your strategists no harm to spend a season or two at quarterback, if they had the wind. Did you know that Eisenhower played football, and against Jim Thorpe once at that? And . . ."

"But I don't imagine," Acosta interposed, "that you came here to talk shop either, Captain?"

"Yes," said Captain Fassbänder, sharply and unexpectedly. "My shop and, damn it, yours. Never thought I'd see the day when I . . ." He broke off and tried another approach. "I mean, of course, a chaplain is part of an army. You're both

army officers, technically speaking, one of the Martian Legion, one in the Israeli forces; but it's highly unusual to ask a man of the cloth to . . ."

"To praise the Lord and pass the ammunition, as the folk legend has it? There are precedents among my people, and among Father Malloy's as well, though rather different ideas are attributed to the founder of his church. What is it, Captain? Or wait, I know: We are besieged by alien invaders and Mars needs every able-bodied man to defend her sacred sands. Is that it?"

"Well . . . God damn it. . . ." Captain Fassbänder's cheeks grew purple. ". . . YES!" he exploded.

The situation was so hackneyed in 3V and microcomics that it was less a matter of explaining it than of making it seem real. Dietrich Fassbänder's powers of exposition were not great, but his sincerity was evident and in itself convincing.

"Didn't believe it myself at first," he admitted. "But he was right. Our patrol ran into a patrol of . . . of *them*. There was a skirmish; we lost two men but killed one of the things. Their small arms use explosive propulsion of metal much like ours; God knows what they might have in that ship to counter our A-warheads. But we've got to put up a fight for Mars; and that's where you come in."

The two priests looked at him wordlessly, Acosta with a faint air of puzzled withdrawal, Malloy almost as if he expected the captain to start diagraming the play on a blackboard.

"You especially, Rabbi. I'm not worried about your boys, Father. We've got a Catholic chaplain on this rotation because this bunch of legionnaires is largely Poles and Irish-Americans. They'll fight all right, and we'll expect you to say a field Mass beforehand, and that's about all. Oh, and that fool gunner Olszewski has some idea he'd like his A-cannon sprinkled with holy water; I guess you can handle that without any trouble.

"But your Israelis are a different problem, Acosta. They don't know the meaning of discipline—not what we call discipline in the legion; and Mars doesn't mean to them what it does to a legionnaire. And besides a lot of them have got a

. . . hell, guess I shouldn't call it superstition, but a kind of . . . well, reverence—awe, you might say—about you, Rabbi. They say you're a miracle-worker."

"He is," said Mule Malloy simply. "He saved my life."

He could still feel that extraordinary invisible power (a "force-field," one of the technicians later called it, as he cursed the shots that had destroyed the machine past all analysis) which had bound him helpless there in that narrow pass, too far from the dome for rescue by any patrol. It was his first week on Mars, and he had hiked too long, enjoying the easy strides of low gravity and alternately meditating on the versatility of the Creator of planets and on that Year Day long ago when he had blocked out the most famous of All-American line-backers to bring about the most impressive of Rose Bowl upsets. Sibiryakov's touchdown made the headlines; but he and Sibiryakov knew why that touchdown happened, and he felt his own inner warmth . . . and was that sinful pride or just self-recognition? And then he was held as no line had ever held him and the hours passed and no one on Mars could know where he was and when the patrol arrived they said, "The Israeli chaplain sent us." And later Chaim Acosta, laconic for the first and only time, said simply, "I knew where you were. It happens to me sometimes."

Now Acosta shrugged and his graceful hands waved deprecation. "Scientifically speaking, Captain, I believe that I have, on occasion, a certain amount of extrasensory perception and conceivably a touch of some of the other *psi* faculties. The Rhinists at Tel Aviv are quite interested in me; but my faculties too often refuse to perform on laboratory command. But 'miracle-working' is a strong word. Remind me to tell you some time the story of the guaranteed genuine miracle-working rabbi from Lwow."

"Call it miracles, call it ESP, you've got something, Acosta . . ."

"I shouldn't have mentioned Joshua," the rabbi smiled. "Surely you aren't suggesting that I try a miracle to win your battle for you?"

"Hell with that," snorted Fassbänder. "It's your men. They've got it fixed in their minds that you're a . . . a saint. No, you Jews don't have saints, do you?"

"A nice question in semantics," Chaim Acosta observed quietly.

"Well, a prophet. Whatever you people call it. And we've got to make men out of your boys. Stiffen their backbones, send 'em in there knowing they're going to win."

"Are they?" Acosta asked flatly.

"God knows. But they sure as hell won't if they don't think so. So it's up to you."

"What is?"

"They may pull a sneak attack on us, but I don't think so. Way I see it, they're as surprised and puzzled as we are; and they need time to think the situation over. We'll attack before dawn tomorrow; and to make sure your Israelis go in there with fighting spirit, you're going to curse them."

"Curse my men?"

"Potztausend Sapperment noch einmal!" Captain Fassbänder's English was flawless, but not adequate to such a situation as this. "Curse *them!* The . . . the *things,* the aliens, the invaders, whatever the *urverdammt* bloody hell you want to call them!"

He could have used far stronger language without offending either chaplain. Both had suddenly realized that he was perfectly serious.

"A formal curse, Captain?" Chaim Acosta asked. "Anathema maranatha? Perhaps Father Malloy would lend me bell, book, and candle?"

Mule Malloy looked uncomfortable. "You read about such things, Captain," he admitted. "They were done, a long time ago. . . ."

"There's nothing in your religion against it, is there, Acosta?"

"There is . . . precedent," the Rabbi confessed softly.

"Then it's an order, from your superior officer. I'll leave the mechanics up to you. You know how it's done. If you need anything . . . what kind of bell?"

"I'm afraid that was meant as a joke, Captain."

"Well, these *things* are no joke. And you'll curse them tomorrow morning before all your men."

"I shall pray," said Rabbi Chaim Acosta, "for guidance . . ." But the captain was already gone. He turned to

his fellow priest. "Mule, you'll pray for me too?" The normally agile hands hung limp at his side.

Mule Malloy nodded. He groped for his rosary as Acosta silently left the room.

Now entertain conjecture of a time when two infinitesimal forces of *men*—one half-forgotten outpost garrison, one small scouting fleet—spend the night in readying themselves against the unknown, in preparing to meet on the morrow to determine, perhaps, the course of centuries for a galaxy.

Two *men* are feeding sample range-finding problems into the computer.

"That God-damned Fassbänder," says one. "I heard him talking to our commander. 'You and your men who have never understood the meaning of discipline . . . !' "

"Prussians," the other grunts. He has an Irish face and an American accent. "Think they own the earth. When we get through here, let's dump all the Prussians into Texas and let 'em fight it out. Then we can call the state Kilkenny."

"What did you get on that last? . . . Check. Fassbänder's 'discipline' is for peace—spit-and-polish to look pretty here in our sandy pink nowhere. What's the pay-off? Fassbänder's great-grandfathers were losing two world wars while mine were creating a new nation out of nothing. Ask the Arabs if we have no discipline. Ask the British . . ."

"Ah, the British. Now *my* great-grandfather was in the IRA . . ."

Two *men* are integrating the electrodes of the wave-hurler.

"It isn't bad enough we get drafted for this expedition to nowhere; we have to have an egg-eating Nangurian in command."

"And a Tryldian scout to bring the first report. What's your reading there? . . . Check."

" 'A Tryldian to tell a lie and a Nangurian to force it into truth,' " the first quotes.

"Now, brothers," says the *man* adjusting the microvernier on the telelens, "the Goodman assures us these monsters are true. We must unite in love for each other, even Tryldians and

Nangurians, and wipe them out. The Goodman has promised us his blessing before battle . . ."

"The Goodman," says the first, "can eat the egg he was hatched from."

"The Rabbi," says a *man* checking the oxyhelms, "can take his blessing and shove it up Fassbänder. I'm no Jew in his sense. I'm a sensible, rational atheist who happens to be an Israeli."

"And I," says his companion, "am a Romanian who believes in the God of my fathers and therefore gives allegiance to His state of Israel. What is a Jew who denies the God of Moses? To call him still a Jew is to think like Fassbänder."

"They've got an edge on us," says the first. "*They* can breathe here. These oxyhelms run out in three hours. What do we do then? Rely on the Rabbi's blessing?"

"I said the God of my fathers, and yet my great-grandfather thought as you do and still fought to make Israel live anew. It was his son who, like so many others, learned that he must return to Jerusalem in spirit as well as body."

"Sure, we had the Great Revival of orthodox religion. So where did it get us? Troops that need a Rabbi's blessing before a commander's orders."

"Many men have died from orders. How many from blessings?"

"I fear that few die well who die in battle . . ." the *man* reads in Valkram's great epic of the siege of Tolnishri.

". . . for how [the *man* is reading of the eve of Agincourt in his micro-Shakespeare] *can they charitably dispose of anything when blood is their argument?"*

". . . and if these do not die well [so Valkram wrote] *how grievously must their bad deaths be charged against the Goodman who blesses them into battle . . ."*

"And why not?" Chaim Acosta flicked the question away with a wave of his long fingers.

The bleep (even Acosta was not so linguistically formal as

to call it a bubble jeep) bounced along over the sand toward the rise which overlooked the invaders' ship. Mule Malloy handled the wheel with solid efficiency and said nothing.

"I *did* pray for guidance last night," the rabbi asserted, almost as if in self-defense. "I . . . I had some strange thoughts for a while; but they make very little sense this morning. After all, I am an officer in the army. I do have a certain obligation to my superior officer and to my men. And when I became a rabbi, a teacher, I was specifically ordained to decide questions of law and ritual. Surely this case falls within that authority of mine."

Abruptly the bleep stopped.

"What's the matter, Mule?"

"Nothing . . . Wanted to rest my eyes a minute . . . Why did you become ordained, Chaim?"

"Why did you? Which of us understands all the infinite factors of heredity and environment which lead us to such a choice? Or even, if you will, to such a being chosen? Twenty years ago it seemed the only road I could possibly take; now . . . We'd better get going, Mule."

The bleep started up again.

"A curse sounds so melodramatic and medieval; but is it in essence any different from a prayer for victory, which chaplains offer up regularly? As I imagine you did in your field Mass. Certainly all of your communicants are praying for victory to the Lord of Hosts—and as Captain Fassbänder would point out, it makes them better fighting men. I will confess that even as a teacher of the law, I have no marked doctrinal confidence in the efficacy of a curse. I do not expect the spaceship of the invaders to be blasted by the forked lightning of Yahveh. But my men have an exaggerated sort of faith in me, and I owe it to them to do anything possible to strengthen their morale. Which is all the legion or any other army expects of chaplains anyway; we are no longer priests of the Lord, but boosters of morale—a type of sublimated YMCA secretary. Well, in my case, say YMHA."

The bleep stopped again.

"I never knew your eyes to be so sensitive before," Acosta observed tartly.

"I thought you might want a little time to think it over," Malloy ventured.

"I've thought it over. What else have I been telling you? Now please, Mule. Everything's all set. Fassbänder will explode completely if I don't speak my curse into this mike in two minutes."

Silently Mule Malloy started up the bleep.

"Why did I become ordained?" Acosta backtracked. "That's no question really. The question is why have I remained in a profession to which I am so little suited. I will confess to you, Mule, and to you only, that I have not the spiritual humility and patience that I might desire, I itch for something beyond the humdrum problems of a congregation or an army detachment. Sometimes I have felt that I should drop everything else and concentrate on my *psi* faculties, that they might lead me to this goal I seek without understanding. But they are too erratic. I know the law, I love the ritual, but I am not good as a rabbi, a teacher, because . . ."

For the third time the bleep stopped, and Mule Malloy said, "Because you are a saint."

And before Chaim Acosta could protest, he went on, "Or a prophet, if you want Fassbänder's distinction. There are all kinds of saints and prophets. There are the gentle, humble, patient ones like Francis of Assisi and Job and Ruth—or do you count women? And there are God's firebrands, the ones of fierce intellect and dreadful determination, who shake the history of God's elect, the saints who have reached through sin to salvation with a confident power that is the reverse of the pride of the Lucifer, cast from the same ringing metal."

"Mule . . . !" Acosta protested. "This isn't you. These aren't your words. And you didn't learn these in parochial school . . ."

Malloy seemed not to hear him. "Paul, Thomas More, Catherine of Siena, Augustine," he recited in rich cadence. "Elijah, Ezekiel, Judas Maccabaeus, Moses, David . . . You are a prophet, Chaim. Forget the rationalizing double talk of the Rhinists and recognize whence your powers come, how you were guided to save me, what the 'strange thoughts' were that you had during last night's vigil of prayer. You are a

prophet—and you are not going to curse *men,* the children of God."

Abruptly Malloy slumped forward over the wheel. There was silence in the bleep. Chaim Acosta stared at his hands as if he knew no gesture for the situation.

"Gentlemen!" Captain Fassbänder's voice was even more rasping than usual over the telecom. "Will you please get the blessed lead out and get up that rise? It's two minutes, twenty seconds, past zero!"

Automatically Acosta depressed the switch and said, "Right away, Captain."

Mule Malloy stirred and opened his eyes. "Was that Fassbänder?"

"Yes . . . But there's no hurry, Mule. I can't understand it. What made you . . . ?"

"I don't understand it, either. Never passed out like that before. Doctor used to say that head injury in the Wisconsin game might—but after thirty years . . ."

Chaim Acosta sighed. "You sound like my Mule again. But before . . ."

"Why? Did I say something? Seems to me like there was something important I wanted to say to you."

"I wonder what they'd say at Tel Aviv. Telepathic communication of subconscious minds? Externalization of thoughts that I was afraid to acknowledge consciously? Yes, you said something, Mule; and I was as astonished as Balaam when his ass spoke to him on his journey to . . . Mule!"

Acosta's eyes were blackly alight as never before, and his hands flickered eagerly. "Mule, do you remember the story of Balaam? It's in the fourth book of Moses . . ."

"Numbers? All I remember is he had a talking ass. I suppose there's a pun on *Mule?*"

"Balaam, son of Beor," said the Rabbi with quiet intensity, "was a prophet in Moab. The Israelites were invading Moab, and King Balak ordered Balaam to curse them. His ass not only spoke to him; more important, it halted and refused to budge on the journey until Balaam had listened to a message from the Lord . . .

"You were right, Mule. Whether you remember what you said or not, whether your description of me was God's truth or the telepathic projection of my own ego, you were right in one thing: These invaders are *men,* by all the standards that we debated yesterday. Moreover they are *men* suited to Mars; our patrol reported them as naked and unprotected in this cold and this atmosphere. I wonder if they have scouted this planet before and selected it as suitable; that could have been some observation device left by them that trapped you in the pass, since we've never found traces of an earlier Martian civilization.

"Mars is not for us. We cannot live here normally; our scientific researches have proved fruitless; and we maintain an inert, bored garrison only because our planetary ego cannot face facts and surrender the symbol of our 'conquest of space.' These other *men* can live here, perhaps fruitfully, to the glory of God and eventually to the good of our own world as well, as two suitably populated planets come to know each other. You were right; I cannot curse *men.*"

"GENTLEMEN!"

Deftly Acosta reached down and switched off the telecom. "You agree, Mule?"

"I . . . I . . . I guess I drive back now, Chaim?"

"Of course not. Do you think I want to face Fassbänder now? You drive on. At once. Up to the top of the rise. Or haven't you yet remembered the rest of the story of Balaam? He didn't stop at refusing to curse his fellow children of God. Not Balaam.

"He blessed them."

Mule Malloy had remembered that. He had remembered more, too. The phonograph needle had coursed through the grooves of Bible study on up to the thirty-first chapter of Numbers with its brief epilog to the story of Balaam:

So Moses ordered a muster of men sufficient to wreak the Lord's vengeance on the Madianites. . . . All the menfolk they killed, the chiefs of the tribe . . . Balaam, too, the son of Beor, they put to the sword.

He looked at the tense face of Chaim Acosta, where exultation and resignation blended as they must in a man who

knows at last the pattern of his life, and realized that Chaim's memory, too, went as far as the thirty-first chapter.

And there isn't a word in the Bible as to what became of the ass, thought Mule Malloy, and started the bleep up the rise.

Human nature is not likely to change. The words will differ but the motives will be the same. We've sent men like Revent Winton to India and, for that matter, to James Michener's Hawaii, not too many years ago. It is too much to hope that those who will come after us will have learned from our mistakes . . .

Unhuman Sacrifice

KATHERINE MacLEAN

"DAMN! He's actually doing it. Do you hear that?"

A ray of sunlight and a distant voice filtered down from the open arch in the control room above. The distant voice talked and paused, talked and paused. The words were blurred, but the tone was recognizable.

"He's outside preaching to the natives."

The two engineers were overhauling the engines but paused to look up towards the voice.

"Maybe not," said Charlie, the junior engineer. "After all, he doesn't know their language."

"He'd preach anyway," said Henderson, senior engineer and navigator. He heaved with a wrench on a tight bolt, the wrench slipped, and Henderson released some words that made Charlie shudder.

On the trip, Charlie had often dreamed apprehensively that Henderson had strangled the passenger. And once he had dreamed that he himself had strangled the passenger and Henderson, too.

When awake the engineers carefully avoided irritating words or gestures, remained cordial towards each other and the passenger no matter what the temptation to snarl, and tried to keep themselves in a tolerant good humor.

It had not been easy.

Charlie said, "How do you account for the missionary society giving him a ship of his own? A guy like that, who just

gets in your hair when he's trying to give you advice, a guy with a natural born talent for antagonizing people?"

"Easy," Henderson grunted, spinning the bolt. He was a stocky, square-built man with a brusque manner and a practised tolerance of other people's oddities. "The missionary society was trying to get rid of him. You can't get any farther away than they sent us!"

The distant voice filtered into the control room from the unseen sunlit landscape outside the ship. It sounded resonant and confident. "The poor jerk thinks it was an honor," Henderson added. He pulled out the bolt and dropped it on the padded floor with a faint thump.

"Anyhow," Charlie said, loosening bolt heads in a circle as the manual instructed, "he can't use the translator machine. It's not ready yet, not until we get the rest of their language. He won't talk to them if they can't understand."

"Won't he?" Henderson fitted his wrench to another bolt and spun it angrily. "Then, what is he doing?"

Without waiting for an answer he replied to his own question. *"Preaching,* that's what he is doing!"

It seemed hot and close in the engine room, and the sunlight from outside beckoned.

Charlie paused and wiped the back of his arm against his forehead. "Preaching won't do him any good. If they can't understand him, they won't listen."

"We didn't listen, and that didn't stop him from preaching to *us!"* Henderson snapped. "He's lucky we found a landing planet so soon, he's lucky he didn't drive us insane first. A man like that is a danger to a ship." Henderson, like Charlie, knew the stories of ships which had left with small crews, and returned with a smaller crew of one or two red-eyed maniacs and a collection of corpses. Henderson was a conservative. He preferred the regular shipping runs, the ships with a regular sized crew and a good number of passengers. Only an offer of triple pay and triple insurance indemnity had lured him from the big ships to be co-engineer on this odd three-man trip.

"Oh . . . I didn't mind being preached at," Charlie's tone was mild, but he stared upwards in the direction of the echoing voice with a certain intensity in his stance.

"Come off it, you twerp. We only have to be sweet to each other on a trip when we're cabin-bound. Don't kid old Harry, you didn't like it."

"No," said Charlie dreamily, staring upwards with a steady intensity. "Can't say that I did. He's not such a good preacher. I've met better in bars." The echoing voice from outside seemed to be developing a deeper echo. "He's got the translator going, Harry. I think we ought to stop him."

Charlie was a lanky redhead with a mild manner, about the same age as the preacher, but Henderson, who had experience, laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"I'll do it," said Henderson, and scrambled up the ladder to the control room.

The control room was a pleasant shading of greys, brightly lit by the sunlight that streamed in through the open archway. The opening to the outside was screened only by a billowing curtain of transparent sarantype plastic film, ion-coated to allow air to pass freely, but making a perfect and aseptic filter against germs and small insects. The stocky engineer hung a clear respirator box over a shoulder, brought the tube up to his mouth, and walked through the plastic film. It folded over him and wrapped him in an intimate tacky embrace, and gripped to its own surface behind him, sealing itself around him like a loose skin. Just past the arch he walked through a frame of metal like a man-sized croquet wicket and stopped while it tightened a noose around the trailing films of plastic behind him, cutting him free of the doorway curtain and sealing the break with heat.

Without waiting for the plastic to finish wrapping and tightening itself around him, the engineer went down the ramp, trailing plastic film in gossamer veils, like ghostly battle flags.

They could use this simple wrapping of thin plastic as an airsuit air lock, for the air of the new world was rich and good, and the wrapping was needed only to repel strange germs or infections. They were not even sure that there were any such germs; but the plastic was a routine precaution for ports in quarantine, and the two engineers were accustomed to wearing it. It allowed air to filter by freely, so that Henderson could feel the wind on his skin, only slightly dimin-

ished. He was wearing uniform shorts, and the wind felt cool and pleasant.

Around the spaceship stretched grassy meadow and thin forest, and beyond that in one direction lay the blue line of the sea, and in another the hazy blue-green of distant low mountains. It was so like the southern United States of Charlie's boyhood that the young engineer had wept with excitement when he first looked out of the ship. Harry Henderson did not weep, but he paused in his determined stride and looked around, and understood again how incredibly lucky they had been to find an Earth-type planet of such perfection. He was a firm believer in the hand of fate, and he wondered what fate planned for the living things of this green planet, and why it had chosen him as its agent.

Down in the green meadow, near the foot of the ramp sat the translator machine, still in its crate and on a wheeled dolly but with one side opened to expose the controls. It looked like a huge box, and it was one of the most expensive of the new inductive language analysers, brought along by their passenger in the hope and expectation of finding a planet with natives.

Triumphant in his success, the passenger, the Revent Winton, sat cross-legged on top of the crate, like a small king on a large throne. He was making a speech, using the mellow round tones of a trained elocutionist, with the transparent plastic around his face hardly muffling his voice at all.

And the natives were listening. They sat around the translator box in a wide irregular circle, and stared. They were bald, with fur in tufts about their knees and elbows. Occasionally one got up, muttering to the others, and hurried away; and occasionally one came into the area and sat down to listen.

"Do not despair," called Revent Winton, in bell-like tones. "Now that I have shown you the light, you know that you have lived in darkness and sin all your lives, but do not despair. . . ."

The translator machine was built to assimilate a vast number of words and sentences in any tongue, along with fifty or so words in direct translation, and from that construct or find a grammatical pattern and print a handbook of the native

language. Meanwhile, it would translate any word it was sure of. Henderson figured out the meaning of a few native words the day before and recorded them in, and the machine was industriously translating those few words whenever they appeared, like a deep bell, tolling the antiphony to the preacher's voice. The machine spoke in an enormous bass that was Henderson's low tones recorded through a filter and turned up to twenty times normal volume.

"I . . . LIGHT . . . YOU . . . YOU . . . LIVED . . . DARK . . . LIFE . . ."

The natives sat on the green grass and listened with an air of patient wonder.

"Revent Winton," Harry tried to attract his attention.

Winton leaned towards the attentive natives, his face softened with forgiveness. "No, say to yourselves merely—I have lived in error. Now I will learn the true path of a righteous life."

The machine in the box below him translated words into its voice of muted thunder. "SAY YOU . . . I . . . LIVED . . . I . . . PATH . . . LIFE. . . ."

The natives moved. Some got up and came closer, staring at the box, and others clustered and murmured to each other, and went away in small groups, talking.

Henderson decided not to tell the Revent what the machine had said. But this had to be stopped.

"Revent Winton!"

The preacher leaned over and looked down at him benevolently. "What is it, my son?" He was younger than the engineer, dark, intense and sure of his own righteousness.

"MY SON," said the translator machine in its voice of muted thunder. The sound rolled and echoed faintly back from the nearby woods, and the natives stared at Henderson.

Henderson muttered a bad word. The natives would think he was Winton's son! Winton did not know what it had said.

"Don't curse," Winton said patiently. "What is it, Harry?"

"Sorry," Henderson apologized, leaning his arms on the edge of the crate. "Switch off the translator, will you?"

"WILL YOU . . ." thundered the translator. The preacher switched it off.

"Yes?" he asked, leaning forward. He was wearing a con-

servative suit of knitted dark grey tights and a black shirt. Henderson felt badly dressed in his shorts and bare hairy chest.

"Revent, do you think it's the right thing to do, to preach to these people? The translator isn't finished, and we don't know anything about them yet. Anthropologists don't even make a suggestion to a native about his customs without studying the whole tribe and the way it lives for a couple of generations. I mean, you're going off half cocked. It's too soon to give them advice."

"I came to give them advice," Winton said gently. "They need my spiritual help. An anthropologist comes to observe. They don't meddle with what they observe, for meddling would change it. But I am not here to observe, I am here to help them. Why should I wait?"

Winton had a remarkable skill with syllogistic logic. He always managed to sound as if his position were logical, somehow, in spite of Henderson's conviction that he was almost always entirely wrong. Henderson often, as now, found himself unable to argue.

"How do you know they need help?" he asked uncertainly. "Maybe their way of life is all right."

"Come now," said the preacher cheerfully, swinging his hand around the expanse of green horizon. "These are just primitives, not angels. I'd be willing to guess that they eat their own kind, or torture, or have human sacrifices."

"Humanoid sacrifices," Henderson muttered.

Winton's ears were keen. "Don't quibble. You know they will have some filthy primitive custom or other. Tribes on Earth used to have orgies and sacrifices in the spring. It's spring here—the Great Planner probably intended us to find this place in time to stop them."

"Oye," said Henderson and turned away to strike his forehead with the heel of his hand. His passenger was planning to interfere with a spring fertility ceremony. If these natives held such a ceremony—and it was possible that they might—they would be convinced that the ceremony insured the fertility of the earth, or the health of the sun, or the growth of the crops, or the return of the fish. They would be convinced that without the ceremony, summer would never

return, and they would all starve. If Winton interfered, they would try to kill him.

Winton watched him, scowling at the melodrama of his gesture.

Henderson turned back to try to explain.

"Revent, I appeal to you, tampering is dangerous. Let us go back and report this planet, and let the government send a survey ship. When the scientists arrive, if they find that we have been tampering with the natives' customs without waiting for advice, they will consider it a crime. We will be notorious in scientific journals. We'll be considered responsible for any damage the natives sustain."

The preacher glared. "Do you think that I am a coward, afraid of the anger of atheists?" He again waved a hand, indicating the whole sweep of the planet's horizon around them. "Do you think we found this place by accident? The Great Planner sent me here for a purpose. I am responsible to Him, not to you, or your scientist friends. I will fulfill His purpose." He leaned forward, staring at Henderson with dark fanatical eyes. "Go weep about your reputation somewhere else."

Henderson stepped back, getting a clearer view of the passenger, feeling as if he had suddenly sprouted fangs and claws. He was still as he had appeared before, an intense, brunet young man, wearing dark tights and dark shirt, sitting cross-legged on top of a huge box, but now he looked primitive somehow, like a prehistoric naked priest on top of an altar.

"Anthropology is against this kind of thing," Henderson said.

Winton looked at him malevolently from his five foot elevation on the crate and the extra three feet of his own seated height. "You aren't an anthropologist, are you, Harry? You're an engineer?"

"That's right," Henderson admitted, hating him for the syllogism.

Winton said sweetly: "Then why don't you go back to the ship and work on the engine?"

"There will be trouble," Henderson said softly.

"I am prepared for trouble," the Revent Winton said

equally softly. He took a large old-fashioned revolver out of his carry case, and rested it on his knee.

The muzzle pointed midway between the engineer and the natives.

Henderson shrugged and went back up the ramp.

"What did he do?" Charlie was finishing his check of the fuel timers, holding a coffee cup in his free hand.

Angrily silent, Harry cut an exit slit from the plastic coating. He ripped off the gossamer films of plastic, wadded them up together and tossed them in a salvage hopper.

"He told me to mind my own business. And that's what I am going to do."

The preacher's impressive voice began to ring again from the distance outside, and, every so often, like a deep gong, the translator machine would speak a word in the native dialect.

"The translator is still going," Charlie pointed out.

"Let it. He doesn't know what it is saying." Sulkily, Henderson turned to a library shelf, and pulled out a volume: *The E.T. Planet, a manual of observation and behavior on extra-terrestrial planets, with examples.*

"What is it saying?"

"Almost nothing at all. All it translated out of a long speech the creep made was 'I life path.' "

The younger engineer lost his smile. "That was good enough for others. Winton doesn't know what the box is saying?"

"He thinks it's saying what he is saying. He's giving out with his usual line of malarky."

"We've got to stop it!" Charlie began to climb the ladder.

Henderson shrugged. "So go out and tell him the translator isn't working right. I should have told him. But if I get close to him now, I'd strangle him."

Charlie returned later, grinning. "It's O.K. The natives are scared of Winton, and they like the box; so they must think that the box is talking sense for itself, and Winton is gibbering in a strange language."

"He is. And it is," Henderson said sourly. "They are right."

"You're kind of hard on him." Charlie started searching the shelves for another copy of the manual of procedure for survey teams. "But I can see what you mean. Anyhow, I told Winton that he was making a bad impression on the natives. It stopped him. It stopped him cold. He said he would put off preaching for a week and study the natives a little. But he said we ought to fix up the translator, so that it translates what he says." Charlie turned, smiling, with a book in one hand, "That gives us time."

"Time for what?" Henderson growled without looking up from his book. "Do you think we can change Winton's mind? That bonehead believes that butting into people's lives is a sacred duty. Try talking any bonehead out of a sacred duty! He'd butt into a cannibal banquet! I hope he does. I hope they eat him!"

"Long pig," Charlie mused, temporarily diverted by the picture. "Tastes good to people, probably would taste foul to these natives, they're not the same species."

"He says he's planning to stop their spring festival. If it has sacrifices or anything he doesn't like, he says he'll stop it."

Charlie placed his fists on the table and leaned across towards Henderson, lowering his voice. "Look, we don't know even if the natives are going to have any spring festival. Maybe if we investigate we'll find out that there won't be one, or maybe we'll find out that Winton can't do them any harm. Maybe we don't have to worry. Only let's go out and investigate. We can write up reports on whatever we find, in standard form, and the journals will print them when we get back. Glory and all like that." He added, watching Henderson's expression: "Maybe, if we have to, we can break the translator."

It was the end of the season of dry. The river was small and ran in a narrow channel, and there were many fish near the surface. Spet worked rapidly, collecting fish from the fish traps, returning the empty traps to the water, salting the fish.

He was winded, but pleased with the recollection of last night's feast, and hungry in anticipation of the feast of the

evening to come. This was the season of the special meals, cooking herbs and roots and delicacies with the fish. Tonight's feast might be the last he would ever have, for a haze was thickening over the horizon, and tomorrow the rains might come.

One of the strangers came and watched him. Spet ignored him politely and salted the fish without looking at him directly. It was dangerous to ignore a stranger, but to make the formal peace gestures and agreements would be implying that the stranger was from a tribe of enemies, when he might already be a friend. Spet preferred to be polite, so he pretended not to be concerned that he was being watched.

The haze thickened in the sky, and the sunlight weakened. Spet tossed the empty trap back to its place in the river with a skillful heave of his strong short arms. If he lived through the next week, his arms would not be strong and short, they would be weak and long. He began to haul in another trap line, sneaking side glances at the stranger as he pulled.

The stranger was remarkably ugly. His features were all misfit sizes. Reddish brown all over like a dead leaf, and completely bald of hair at knees and elbows, he shone as if he were wet, covered all over with a transparent shininess, like water, but the water never dripped. He was thick and sturdy and quick moving, like a youngling, but did not work. Very strange, unlike reality, he stood quietly watching, without attacking Spet, although he could have attacked without breaking a peace gesture. So he was probably not of any enemy tribe.

It was possible that the undripping water was an illusion, meant to indicate that the stranger was really the ghost of someone who had drowned.

The stranger continued to watch. Spet braced his feet against the grass of the bank and heaved on the next trap line, wanting to show his strength. He heaved too hard, and a strand of the net gave way. The stranger waded out into the water, and pulled in the strand, so that no fish escaped.

It was the act of a friend. And yet when the net trap was safely drawn up on the bank, the brown stranger stepped back without comment or gesture, and watched exactly as be-

fore—as if his help was the routine of one kinfolk to another.

That showed that the brown one was his kin and a member of his family. But Spet had seen all of his live kinfolk, and none of them looked so strange. It followed reasonably that the brown one was a ghost, a ghost of a relative who had drowned.

Spet nodded at the ghost and transferred the fish from the trap to the woven baskets and salted them. He squatted to repair the broken strand of the net.

The brown ghost squatted beside him. It pointed at the net and made an inquiring sound.

"I am repairing the trap, Grandfather," Spet explained, using the most respectful name for the brown ghost relative.

The ghost put a hand over his own mouth, then pointed at the ground and released its mouth to make another inquiring noise.

"The ground is still dry, Grandfather," Spet said cordially, wondering what he wanted to know. He rose and flung the trap net out on its line into the river, hoping that the brown ghost would admire his strength. Figures in dreams often came to tell you something, and often they could not speak, but the way they looked and the signs they made were meant to give you a message. The brown ghost was shaped like a youngling, like Spet, as if he had drowned before his adult hanging ceremony. Perhaps this one came in daylight instead of dreams, because Spet was going to die and join the ghosts soon, before he became an adult.

The thought was frightening. The haze thickening on the horizon looked ominous.

The brown ghost repeated what Spet had said, almost in Spet's voice, blurring the words slightly. *The ground is still dry Grandfather.* He pointed at the ground and made an inquiring noise.

"Ground," said Spet thinking about death, and every song he had heard about it. Then he heard the ghost repeat the word, and saw the satisfaction of his expression, and realized that the ghost had forgotten how to talk, and wanted to be taught all over again, like a newborn.

That made courtesy suddenly a simple and pleasant game.

As Spet worked, he pointed at everything, and said the word, he described what he was doing, and sometimes he sang the childhood work songs, that described the work.

The ghost followed and helped him with the nets, and listened and pointed at things he wanted to learn. Around his waist coiled a blind silver snake that Spet had not noticed at first, and the ghost turned the head of the snake towards Spet when he sang, and sometimes the ghost talked to the snake himself, with explanatory gestures.

It was very shocking to Spet that anyone would explain things to a snake, for snakes are wise, and a blind snake is the wise one of dreams—he who knows everything. The blind snake did not need to be explained to. Spet averted his eyes and would not look at it.

The ghost and he worked together, walking up the river bank, hauling traps, salting fish, and throwing the traps back, and Spet told what he was doing, and the ghost talked down to the snake around his waist, explaining something about what they were doing.

Once the brown ghost held the blind silver snake out towards Spet, indicating with a gesture that he should speak to it.

Terrified and awed, Spet fell to his knees. "Tell me, Wisest One, if you wish to tell me, will I die in the hanging?"

He waited, but the snake lay with casual indifference in the ghost's hand, and did not move or reply.

Spet rose from his knees and backed away. "Thank you, oh Wise One."

The ghost spoke to the snake, speaking very quietly, with apologetic gestures and much explanation, then wrapped it again around his waist, and helped Spet carry the loads of salted fish, without speaking again, or pointing at anything.

It was almost sundown.

On the way back to his family hut, Spet passed the Box That Speaks. The black gibbering spirit sat on top of it and gibbered as usual, but this time the Box stopped him and spoke to him, and called him by his own name, and asked questions about his life.

Spet was carrying a heavy load of salted fish in two baskets hung on a yoke across one sturdy shoulder. He was tired. He stood in the midst of the green meadow that in other seasons had been a river, with the silver hut of the ghosts throwing a long shadow across him. His legs were tired from wading in the river, and his mind was tired from the brown ghost asking him questions all day; so he explained the thing that was uppermost in his mind, instead of discussing fishing and weather. He explained that he was going to die. The ceremony of Hanging, by which the almost-adults became adults, was going to occur at the first rain, five younglings were ready, usually most of them lived, but he thought he would die.

The box fell silent, and the ghost on top stopped gibbering, so Spet knew that it was true, for people fall silent at a truth that they do not want to say aloud.

He made a polite gesture of leave-taking to the box, and went towards his family hut, feeling very unhappy. During the feast of that evening all the small ones ate happily of fish and roots and became even fatter, and the thin adults picked at the roots and herbs. Spet was the only youngling of adult-beginning age, and he should have been eating well to grow fat and build up his strength, but instead he went outside and looked at the sky and saw that it was growing cloudy. He did not go back in to the feast again, instead he crouched against the wall of the hut and shivered without sleeping. Before his eyes rested the little flat-bottomed boats of the family, resting in the dust behind the hut for the happy days of the rain. He would never travel in those boats again.

Hanging upside down was a painful way to become an adult, but worth it, if you lived. It was going to be a very bad way to die.

Hurrying and breathless with his news, Revent Winton came upon the two engineers crouched at the river bank.

"I found out . . ." he began.

'Shhh," one said without turning.

They were staring at a small creature at the edge of the water.

Winton approached closer and crouched beside them. "I

have news that might interest you." He held his voice to a low murmur, but the triumph sounded in it like a rasp cutting through glass, a vibration that drew quick speculative glances from the engineers. They turned their attention back to the water's edge.

"Tell us when this is over. Wait."

The young preacher looked at what they were staring at, and saw a little four-legged creature with large eyes and bright pointed teeth struggling feebly in the rising water. The younger engineer, Charlie, was taking pictures of it.

"It's feet are stuck," Winton whispered. "Why don't you help it?"

"It's rooting itself," Henderson murmured back. "We're afraid that loud noises might make it stop."

"Rooting itself?" Winton was confused.

"The animal has two life stages, like a barnacle. You know, a barnacle is a little fish that swims around before it settles down to being just kind of a lump of rock. This one has a rooted stage that's coming on it now. When the water gets up to its neck it rolls up underwater and sticks its front legs out and starts acting like a kind of seaweed. Its hind feet are growing roots. This is the third one we've watched."

Winton looked at the struggling little creature. The water was rising towards its neck. The large bright eyes and small bared teeth looked frightened and uncomprehending. Winton shuddered.

"Horrible," he murmured. "Does it know what is happening?"

Henderson shrugged, "At least it knows the water is rising, and it knows it must not run away. It has to stand there and dig its feet in." He looked at Winton's expression and looked away. "Instinct comes as a powerful urge to do something. You can't fight instinct. Usually it's a pleasure to give in. It's not so bad."

Revent Paul Winton had always been afraid of drowning. He risked another glance at the little creature that was going to turn into a seaweed. The water had almost reached its neck, and it held its head high and panted rapidly with a thin whimpering sound.

"Horrible." Winton turned his back to it and pulled Hen-

derson farther up the bank away from the river. "Mr. Henderson, I just found out something."

He was very serious, but now he had trouble phrasing what he had to say. Henderson urged him, "Well, go on."

"I found it out from a native. The translator is working better today."

"Charlie and I just recorded about four hundred words and phrases into it by distance pickup. We've been interviewing natives all day." Henderson's face suddenly grew cold and angry. "By the way, I thought you said that you weren't going to use the translator until it is ready."

"I was just checking it." Winton actually seemed apologetic. "I didn't say anything, just asked questions."

"All right," Henderson nodded grudgingly. "Sorry I complained. What happened? You're all upset, man!"

Winton evaded his eyes and turned away, he seemed to be looking at the river, with its banks of bushes and trees. Then he turned and looked in the direction of the inland hills, his expression vague. "Beautiful green country. It looks so peaceful. God is lavish with beauty. It shows His goodness. When we think that God is cruel, it is only because we do not understand. God is not really cruel."

"All right, so God is not really cruel," Henderson repeated cruelly. "So what's new?"

Winton winced and pulled his attention back to Henderson.

"Henderson, you've noticed that there are two kinds of natives, tall, thin ones that are slow, and quick, sturdy, short ones that do all the hard work. The sturdy ones we see in all ages, from child size up. Right?"

"I noticed."

"What did you think it meant?"

"Charlie and I talked about it." Henderson was puzzled. "Just a guess, but we think that the tall ones are aristocrats. They probably own the short ones, and the short ones do all the work."

Thick clouds were piled up over the far hills, accounting for the slow rise in the river level.

"The short ones are the children of the tall thin ones. The

tall thin ones are the adults. The adults are all sick, that is why the children do all the work."

"What . . ." Henderson began, but Winton overrode his voice, continuing passionately, his eyes staring ahead at the hills.

"They are sick because of something they do to themselves. The young ones, strong and healthy, when they are ready to become adults they . . . they are hung upside down. For days, Henderson, maybe for more than a week, the translator would not translate how long. Some of them die. Most of them . . . most of them are stretched, and become long and thin." He stopped, and started again with an effort. "The native boy could not tell me why they do this, or how it started. It has been going on for so long that they cannot remember."

Abruptly, and, to Henderson, shockingly, the preacher dropped to his knees and put his hands together. He tilted his head back with shut eyes and burst into prayer.

"Oh Lord, I do not know why You waited so long to help them to the true light, but I thank You that You sent me to stop this horrible thing."

Quickly he stood up and brushed his knees. "You'll help me, won't you?" he asked Henderson.

"How do we know it's true?" Henderson scowled. "It doesn't seem reasonable."

"Not reasonable?" Winton recovered his poise in sudden anger. "Come now Harry, you've been talking as if you knew some anthropology. Surely you remember the puberty ceremonies. Natives often have initiation ceremonies for the young males. It's to test their manhood. They torture the boys, and the ones who can take it without whimpering are considered to be men, and graduated. Filthy cruelty! The authorities have always made them stop."

"No one around here has any authority to order anyone else to stop," Harry grunted. He was shaken by Winton's description of the puberty ceremony, and managed to be sarcastic only from a deep conviction that Winton had been always wrong, and therefore would continue to be wrong. It was not safe to agree with the man. It would mean being wrong along with Winton.

"No authority? What of God?"

"Well, what *of* God?" Henderson asked nastily. "If He is everywhere. He was here before you arrived here. And He never did anything to stop them. You've only known them a week. How long has God known them?"

"You don't understand." The dark-haired young man spoke with total conviction, standing taller, pride straightening his spine. "It was more than mere luck that we found this planet. It is my destiny to stop these people from their ceremony. God sent me."

Henderson was extremely angry, in a white-faced way. He had taken the preacher's air of superiority in the close confine of a spaceship for two months, and listened patiently to his preaching without letting himself be angry, for the sake of peace in the spaceship. But now he was out in the free air again, and he had had his fill of arrogance, and wanted no more.

"Is that so?" he asked nastily. "Well, I'm on this expedition, too. How do you know that God did not send *me,* to stop *you?"*

Charlie finished taking pictures of the little animal under water as it changed, and came back up the bank, refolding the underwater lens. He was in time to see Winton slap the chief engineer in the face, spit out some profanity that would have started him on an hour of moral lecture, if he had heard either of them emit such words. He saw Winton turn and run, not as if he were running away, but as if he were running to do something, in sudden impatience.

Ten minutes later Henderson had finished explaining what was bothering the preacher. They lay on the bank lazily looking down into the water, putting half attention into locating some other interesting life form, and enjoying the reflection of sunset in the ripples.

"I wish I could chew grass," Henderson said. "It would make it just like watching a river when I was a kid. But the plastic stuff on my face keeps me from putting anything into my mouth."

"The leaves would probably be poisonous anyhow," Charlie brushed a hand through the pretty green of the grass. It

was wiry and tough with thin round blades, like marsh grass. "This isn't really grass. This isn't really Earth, you know."

"I know, I wish I could forget it. I wonder what that creep, Winton, is doing now." Henderson rolled on his back and looked lazily at the sky. "I've got one up on him now. I got him to act like a creep right out in the open. He won't be giving me that superior, fatherly bilge. He might even call me Henderson now instead of Harry."

"Don't ask too much," Charlie clipped a piece of leaf from a weed and absently tried to put it into his mouth. It was stopped by the transparent plastic film that protected him from local germs and filtered the air he breathed.

He flicked the leaf away, "How did that creep get to be a missionary? Nothing wrong with him, except he can't get on with people. Doesn't help in his line of work to be like that."

"Easy, like I said," said Henderson, staring into the darkening pink and purple of the sky. "They encouraged him to be a missionary so he would go far far away. Don't ever tell him. He thinks that he was chosen for his eloquence." Henderson rolled back on to his stomach and looked at the river. It was a chilly purple now, with silver ripples. "More clouds over the mountains. And those little clouds overhead might thicken up and rain. If the river keeps rising, there might be a flood. We might have to move the ship."

"Winton said that the native mentioned a flood." Charlie got up lazily and stretched. "Getting dark out here anyhow. We'll have to find out more about that interview."

They went in search of the preacher.

What he told them was disturbing, and vague.

"That was Spet," Henderson said. "That was the one I was learning words from all afternoon. And he told you he was going to die?"

Winton was earnest and pale. He sat crouched over the chart table as if his resolution to act had frightened him. "Yes. He said he was going to die. He said that they were going to hang him upside down in a tree as soon as the next rain starts. Because he is old enough."

"But he said that other young males live through it?

Maybe he's wrong about dying. Maybe it's not as tough as it sounds."

"He said that many die," Winton said tonelessly. His hands lay motionless on the table. He was moved to a sudden flare of anger. "Oh those stupid savages. Cruel, cruel!" He turned his head to Henderson, looking up at him without the usual patronizing expression. "You'll fix the translator so that it translates me exactly, won't you? I don't want to shoot them to stop them from doing it. I'll just stop them by explaining that God doesn't want them to do this thing. They will have to understand me."

He turned his head to Charlie, standing beside him. "The savages call me Enaxip. What does that mean? Do they think I'm a god?"

"It means Big Box," Henderson cut in roughly. "They still think that the box is talking. I see them watch the box when they answer, they don't watch you. I don't know what they think you are."

That night it did not rain. Winton allowed himself to fall asleep near dawn.

To Spet also it made a difference that it did not rain.

The next day he fished in the river as he always had.

The river was swollen and ran high and swiftly between its banks and fishing was not easy at first, but the brown ghost returned, bringing another one like himself, and they both helped Spet with pulling in the fish traps. The new ghost also wanted to be told how to talk, like a small one, and they all had considerable amusement as the two ghosts acted out ordinary things that often happened, and Spet told them the right words and songs to explain what they were doing.

One of them taught him a word in ghost language, and he knew that he was right to learn, because he would soon be a ghost.

When Spet carried the fish back along the path to his family hut that evening, he passed the Box That Talks. It spoke to him again, and again asked him questions.

The spirit covered with black that usually gibbered on top of the box was not there. Nothing was on top of the box, but the brown ghost who had just been helping him fish stood be-

side the box and spoke to it softly each time it asked Spet a question. The box spoke softly back to the ghost after Spet answered, discussing his answers, as if they had a problem concerning him.

Spet answered the questions politely, although some of them were difficult questions, asking reasons for things he had never thought needed a reason, and some were questions it was not polite to ask. He did not know why they discussed him, but it was their business and they would tell him if they chose.

When he left them, the brown ghost made a gesture of respect and mutual aid in work, and Spet returned, warmed and pleased by the respect of the ghost-relative.

He did not remember to be afraid until he was almost home.

It began to rain.

Charlie came up the ramp and into the spaceship, and found Henderson pacing up and down, his thick shoulders hunched, his fists clenched, and his face wrinkled with worry.

"Hi." Charlie did not expect an answer. He kicked the lever that tightened the noose on the curtain plastic behind him, watched the hot wire cut him loose from the curtain and seal the curtain in the same motion. He stood carefully folding and smoothing his new wrapping of plastic around himself, to make sure that the coating he had worn outside was completely coated by the new wrapping. All outside dust and germs had to be trapped between the two layers of sterile germproof plastic.

He stood mildly smoothing and adjusting the wrappings, watching Henderson pace with only the very dimmest flicker of interest showing deep in his eyes. He could withdraw his attention so that a man working beside him could feel completely unwatched and as if he had the privacy of a cloak of invisibility. Charlie was well mannered and courteous, and this was part of his courtesy.

"How're things?" he asked casually, slitting open his plastic cocoon and stepping out.

Henderson stopped pacing and took a cigar from a box on

the table with savage impatience in his motions. "Very bad," he said. "Winton was right."

"Eh?" Charlie wadded up the plastic and tossed it into the disposal hopper.

"The natives, they actually do it." Henderson clenched the cigar between his teeth and lit it with savage jerky motions. "I asked Spet. No mistake in the translator this time. He said, yes, they hang the young men upside down in trees after the first spring rain. And yes, it hurt, and yes sometimes one died, and no he didn't know why they had to do this or what it was for. Ha!" Henderson threw the cigar away and began to pace again, snarling.

"Oh yes, the translator was working fine! Generations of torturing their boys with this thing, and the adults can't remember how it started, or why, and they go on doing it anyway. . . ."

Charlie leaned back against the chart table, following his pacing with his eyes. "Maybe," he said mildly, "there's some good reason for the custom."

"A good reason to hang upside down for a week? Name one!"

Charlie did not answer.

"I just came from the native village," he said conversationally as though changing the subject. "Winton has started. He's got the translator box right in the centre of their village now, and he's sitting on top of it telling them that God is watching them, and stuff like that. I tried to reason with him, and he just pointed a gun at me. He said he'd stop the hanging ceremony even if he had to kill both of us and half the natives to do it."

"So let him try to stop them, just by talking." Henderson, who had stopped to listen, began to pace again, glowering at the floor. "That flapping mouth! Talking won't do it. Talking by itself never does anything. I'm going to do it the easy way. I'm going to kidnap Spet, and keep them from getting him.

"Charlie, tribes only do things at the right season, what they call the right season. We'll turn Spet loose after the week is up, and they won't lay a hand on him. They'll just wait until next year. Meanwhile they'll be seeing that the trees aren't angry at them or any of that malarky. When they

see that Spet got away with it, they'll have a chance to see a young male who's becoming a healthy adult without being all stretched out and physically wrecked.

"And maybe next year, Spet will decide to get lost by himself. Maybe after looking at how Spet looks compared with an adult who was hanged, some of the kids due for hanging next year would duck into the forest and get lost when it's due."

"It's a good dream," Charlie said, lounging, following Henderson's pacing with his eyes. "I won't remind you that we swore off dreaming. But I'm with you in this, man. How do we find Spet?"

Henderson sat down, smiling. "We'll see him at the stream tomorrow. We don't need to do anything until it starts raining."

Charlie started rummaging in the tool locker. "Got to get a couple of flashlights. We have to move fast. Have to find Spet in a hurry. It's already raining, been raining almost an hour."

Darkness and rain, and it was very strange being upside down. Not formal and ceremonial, like a story-song about it, but real, like hauling nets and thatching huts, and eating with his brothers. The world seemed to be upside down. The tree trunk was beside him, strong and solid, and the ground was above him like a roof being held up by the tree, and the sky was below his feet and very far away . . . and looking down at the clouds swirling in the depth of the sky he was afraid of falling into it. The sky was a lake, and he would fall through it like a stone falling through water. If one fell into the sky, one would fall and fall for a long time, it looked so very deep.

Rain fell upwards out of the sky and hit him under the chin. His ankles and wrists were tightly bound, but did not hurt, for the elders had used a soft rope of many strands tied in a way that would not stop circulation. His arms were at his sides, his wrists bound to the same strand that pulled at his ankles, and the pull on his arms was like standing upright, carrying a small weight of something. He was in a standing position, but upside down. It was oddly comfortable. The eld-

ers had many generations of experience to guide them, and they had chosen a tall tree with a high branch that was above the flood. They had seemed wise and certain, and he had felt confidence in them as they had bound and hung him up with great gentleness, speaking quietly to each other.

Then they had left him, towing their little flat-boats across the forest floor that was now a roof above his head, walking tall and stork-like across the dim lit glistening ground, which looked so strangely like a rough, wet ceiling supported by the trunks of trees.

The steady rain drummed against the twigs and small spring leaves, splashing in the deepening trickles of water that ran along the ground. Spet knew that somewhere the river was overflowing its banks and spreading into the forest and across meadows to meet and deepen the rain water. In the village the street would be muddy, and the children would be shouting, trying already to pole the boats in the street, wild with impatience for the rising of the river, to see again the cold swift flow of water and watch the huts of the town sag and flow downwards, dissolve and vanish beneath the smooth surface.

For a month in the time of floods everyone would live in boats. His tribe would paddle and pole up the coast, meeting other tribes, trading baskets and fishhooks, salt fish for salt meat, and swapping the old stories and songs with new variations brought from far places. Last time they had been lucky enough to come upon a large animal caught in the flood, swimming and helpless to resist the hunters. The men of the enemy tribe had traded skin for half the roast meat on a raft, and sang a long story song that no one had heard before. That was the best feast of all.

Then the horde of small boats would come home to the lakes that were draining meadows and forest, and take down the sick and dying young men who had been hanging in the trees, and tend and feed them and call them "elder." They would then travel again for food, to fight through storms to salt the meat of drowned animals and hunt the deep sea fish caught in the dwindling lakes.

When the rains had stopped and the land began to dry, they would return to the damp and drying land to sing and

work and build a village of the smooth fresh clay left by the flood.

But Spet would not see those good times again. He hung in his tree upside down with the rain beating coolly against his skin. It was growing too dark to see more than the dim light of the sky. He shut his eyes, and behind his shut eyes were pictures and memories, and then dreams.

Here he is. How do we get him down. Did you bring a knife. How do we get up to him. It's slippery. I can't climb this thing. Wait, I'll give you a boost.

A flash of light, too steady for lightning, lasting a full second. Spet awoke fully, staring into the darkness, looking for the light which now was gone, listening to the mingled voices in the strange language.

"Don't use the flashlight, it will frighten him."

"Going to try to explain to him what we're doing?"

"No, not right away. He'll come along. Spet's a pal of mine already."

"Man, do these trees have roots. As big as the branches!"

"Like mangroves."

"You're always claiming the South has everything. What are mangroves?"

"Florida swamp trees. They root straight into deep water. Give a hand here."

"Keeps raining like this and they're going to need their roots. How high can we climb just on the roots anyhow?"

"Think you're kidding? Why else would they have roots like this? This territory must be underwater usually, deep water. This flat land must be delta country. We're just in the dry season."

"What do you mean delta country? I'm a city boy, define your terms."

"I mean, we're at the mouth of one of those big wandering rivers like the Mississippi or the Yellow River that doesn't know where it's going to run next, and splits up into a lot of little rivers at the coast, and moves its channel every spring. I noticed that grass around the ship looked like salt water grass. Should have thought about it."

A dark figure appeared beside Spet and climbed past him

towards the branch where the rope was tied. The next voice was distant. *"You trying to tell me we landed the ship in a riverbed? Why didn't you say something when we were landing?"*

'Didn't think of it, then." That voice was loud and close.

"It's a fine time to think of it now. I left the ship wide open. You up there yet?"

"Uh huh. I'm loosening the rope. Going to lower him slow. Catch him and keep him from landing on his head, will you?"

"Ready. Lower away."

The voices stopped and the world began to spin, and the bole of the tree began to move past Spet's face.

Suddenly a pair of wet arms gripped him, and the voice of the brown ghost called, *"Got him."*

Immediately the rope ceased to pull at Spet's ankles, and he fell against the brown ghost head-first and they both tumbled against the slippery high roots and slid down from one thick root to another until they stopped at the muddy ground. The ghost barked a few short words and began to untie the complex knots from Spet's ankles and wrists.

It was strange sitting on the wet ground with its coating of last year's leaves. Even right-side up the forest looked strange, and Spet knew that this was because of death, and he began to sing his death song.

The brown ghost helped him to his feet, and said clearly in ordinary words, "Come on, boy, you can sing when we get there."

His friend dropped down from a low branch to the higher roots of the tree, slipped and fell on the ground beside them.

In Spet's language the standing one said to the other, "No time for resting, Charlie, let's go."

It was very dark now, and the drips from the forest branches poured more heavily, beating against the skin.

The ghost on the ground barked a few of the same words the relative-ghost had made when he had fallen, and got up.

The two started off through the forest, beckoning Spet to follow. He wondered if he were a ghost already. Perhaps the ghosts had taken him to be a ghost without waiting for him

to die. That was nice of them, and a favor, possibly because they were kinfolk. He followed them.

The rain had lightened, and become the steady, light falling spray that it would be for the next several days. Walking was difficult, for the floor of the forest was slippery with wet leaves, and the mud underneath was growing soft again, remembering the time it had been part of the water of the river, remembering that the river had left it there only a year ago. The ghosts with him made sputtering words in ghost talk, sometimes tripped and floundered and fell, helped each other up and urged him on.

The forest smelled of the good sweet odors of damp earth and growing green leaves. The water and mud were cooling against his hurting feet, and Spet unaccountably wanted to linger in the forest, and sit, and perhaps sleep.

The floods were coming, and the ghosts had no boats with them.

"Come on, Spet. We go to big boat. Come on, Spet."

Why did they stumble and flounder through the forest without a boat? And why were they afraid? Could ghosts drown? These ghosts, with their perpetually wet appearance—if they had drowned once, would they be forced to relive the drowning, and be caught in the floods every year? A bad thing that happened once, had to happen again and again in dreams. And your spirit self in the dream lived it each time as something new. There is no memory in the dream country. These ghosts were dream people, even though they chose to be in the awake world. They were probably bound by the laws of the dream world.

They would have to re-enact their drowning. Their boat was far away, and they were running towards the watercourse where the worst wave of the flood would come.

Spet understood suddenly that they wanted him to drown. He could not become a ghost, like these friendly brown ghosts, and live in their world, without first dying.

He remembered his first thoughts of them, that they carried the illusion of water over them because they had once drowned. They wanted him to be like them. They were trying to lure him through waters where he would stumble and drown as they had.

Naturally as they urged him on their gestures were nervous

and guilty. It is not easy to urge a friend onwards to his death. But to be shaped like a young one, merry, brown, and covered with water, obviously he had to be drowned as they were drowned, young and merry, before the hanging had made a sad adult of him.

He would not let them know that he had guessed their intention. Running with them towards the place where the flood would be worst, he tried to remember at what verse he had stopped singing his death song, and began again from that verse, singing to stop the fear-thoughts. The rain beat coolly against his face and chest as he ran.

Each man in his own panic, they burst from the forest into the clearing. The engineers saw with a wave of relief that the spaceship was still there, a pale shaft upright in the midst of water. Where the meadow had been was a long narrow lake, reflecting the faint light of the sky, freckled with drifting spatters of rain.

"How do we get to it?" Charlie turned to them.

"How high is the water? Is the ramp covered?" Henderson asked practically, squinting through the rain.

"Ramp looks the same. I see grass sticking up in the water. It's not deep."

Charlie took a careful step and then another out into the silvery surface. Spongy grass met his feet under the surface, and the water lapped above his ankles, but no higher.

"It's shallow."

They started out towards the ship. It took courage to put their feet down into a surface that suggested unseen depth. The shallow current of water tugged at their ankles, and grew deeper and stronger.

"Henderson, wait!"

The three stopped and turned at the call. The path to the village was close, curving away from the forest towards the distant river bank, a silvery road of water among dark bushes. A dark figure came stumbling along the path, surrounded by the silvery shine of the rising water. Ripples spread from his ankles as he ran.

He came to the edge where the bushes stopped and the meadow began, saw the lake-appearance of it, and stopped. The others were already thirty feet away.

"Henderson! Charlie!"

"Walk, it's not deep yet. Hurry up." Charlie gestured urgently for him to follow them. They were still thirty feet out, standing in the smooth silver of the rising water. It was almost to their knees.

Winton did not move. He looked across the shining shallow expanse of water, and his voice rose shrilly. "It's a lake, we need boats."

"It's shallow," Charlie called. The rain beat down on the water, specking it in small vanishing pockmarks. The two engineers hesitated, looking back at Winton, sensing something wrong.

Winton's voice was low, but the harshness of desperation made it clear as if he had screamed.

"Please. I can't swim—"

"Go get him," Henderson told Charlie. "He's got a phobia. I'll herd Spet to the ship, and then head back to help you."

Charlie was already splashing in long strides back to the immobile figure of the preacher. He started to shout when he got within earshot.

"Why didn't you say so, man? We almost left you behind!" He crouched down before the motionless fear-dazed figure. "Get on, man. You're getting taxi service."

"What?" asked Winton in a small distant voice. The water lapped higher.

"Get on my back," Charlie snapped impatiently. "You're getting transportation."

"The houses dissolved, and they went off in boats and left me alone. They said that I was an evil spirit. I think they did the hangings anyway, even though I told them it was wrong." Winton's voice was vague, but he climbed on Charlie's back. "The *houses* dissolved."

"Speak up, stop mumbling," muttered Charlie.

The spaceship stood upright ahead in the center of the shallow silver lake that had been a meadow. Its doors were open, and the bottom of the ramp was covered by water. Water tugged against Charlie's lower legs as he ran, and the rain beat against their faces and shoulders in a cool drumming.

It would have been pleasant, except that the fear of drown-

ing was growing even in Charlie, and the silver of the shallow new lake seemed to threaten an unseen depth ahead.

"There seems to be a current," Winton said with an attempt at casual remarks. "Funny, this water looks natural here, as if the place were a river, and those trees look like the banks."

Charlie said nothing. Winton was right, but it would not be wise to tell a man with phobia about drowning that they were trying to walk across the bed of a river while the water returned to its channel.

"Why are you running?" asked the man he carried.

"To catch up with Henderson."

Once they were inside the spaceship with the door shut they could ignore the water level outside. Once inside, they would not have to tell Winton anything about how it was outside. A spaceship made a good submarine.

The water level was almost to Charlie's knees and he ran now in a difficult lurching fashion. Winton pulled up his feet nervously to keep them from touching the water. The plastic which they wore was semi-permeable to water and both of them were soaked.

"Who is that up ahead with Henderson?"

"Spet, the native boy."

"How did you persuade him to stay away from the ceremony?"

"We found him hanging and cut him down."

"Oh," Winton was silent a moment trying to absorb the fact that the engineers had succeeded in rescuing someone. "It's a different approach. I talked, but they wouldn't listen." He spoke apologetically, hanging on to Charlie's shoulders, his voice jolting and stopping as Charlie tripped over a concealed tuft of grass or small bush under the water. "They didn't even answer—or look at me. When the water got deep they went off in little boats and didn't leave a boat for me." Charlie tripped again and staggered to one knee. They both briefly floundered waist deep in the water, and then Charlie was up again, still with a grip on his passenger's legs, so that Winton was firmly on his back.

When he spoke again Winton's tone was casual, but his voice was hysterically high in pitch. "I asked them for a boat, but they wouldn't look at me."

Charlie did not answer. He respected Winton's attempt to conceal his terror. The touch of water can be a horrifying thing to a man with a phobia of drowning. He could think of nothing to distract Winton's attention from his danger, but he hoped desperately that the man would not notice that the water had deepened. It is not possible to run in water over knee height. There was no way to hurry, now. The rain had closed in in veiling curtains, but he thought he saw the small figures of Henderson and the native in the distance reach the ramp which led to the spaceship.

If the flood hit them all now, Henderson and Spet could get inside, but how would he himself get this man with a phobia against water off his back and into the water to swim? He could visualize the bony arms tightening around his throat in an hysterical stranglehold. If a drowning man gets a clutch on you, you are supposed to knock him out and tow him. But how could he get this non-swimming type off his back and out where he could be hit?

If Winton could not brace himself to walk in water up to his ankles, he was not going to let go and try to swim in water up to his neck. He'd flip, for sure! Charlie found no logical escape from the picture. The pressure of the strong bony arms around his throat and shoulders and the quick irregular breathing of the man he was carrying made him feel trapped.

The water rose another inch or so, and the drag of it against his legs became heavier. The current was pulling sidewise.

"You're going slowly." Winton's voice had the harsh rasp of fear.

"No hurry." With difficulty, Charlie found breath to speak in a normal tone. "Almost there."

The curtain of rain lifted for a moment and he saw the spaceship, dark against the sky, and the ramp leading to its open door. The ramp was very shrunken, half covered by the rising water. It seemed a long way ahead.

As he watched, a light came on.

In the archway of the spaceship, Henderson flipped a switch and the lights went on.

Spet was startled. Sunlight suddenly came from the interior of the hut and shone against the falling rain in a great beam. Rain glittered through the beam in falling drops like sparks of white fire. It was very unlike anything real, but in dreams sunlight could be in one place and rain another at the same time, and no one in the dream country was surprised. And these were people who usually lived in the dream country, so apparently they had the power to do it in the real world also.

Nevertheless, Spet was afraid, for the sunlight did not look right as it was, coming out in a great widening beam across the rippling rain-pocked water. Sunlight did not mix well with rain.

"Sunlight," Spet said apologetically to his relative-ghost.

The brown ghost nodded and led him down the slope of the ramp through the strange sparkling sunlight, with the ramp strange and hard underfoot.

"Don't go inside until I return," the ghost said, mouthing the words with difficulty. The ghost placed his hands around the railing of the ramp. "You hang on here and wait for me," said the brown ghost of someone in his family, and waded down into the water.

Spet followed him down into the comfortable water until his sore feet were off the end of the ramp and in the cooling soft mud, and then he gripped the rail obediently and waited. The water lapped at his waist like an embrace, and the wind sang a death song for him.

The bright glare of the strange sunlight on dancing water was beautiful, but it began to hurt his eyes. He closed them, and then heard a sound other than the wind. Two sounds.

One sound he recognized as the first flood crest crashing through the trees to the north, approaching them, and he knew he must hurry and drown before it arrived, because it was rough and hurtful.

The other sound was the strange voice of the black spirit which usually gibbered on top of the Box That Talks. Spet opened his eyes, and saw that the gibbering spirit was riding on the shoulders of the brown ghost, as he and his friend, the other brown ghost, moved through the waist-deep water towards Spet and the ramp.

The black spirit gibbered at him as they passed, and Spet

felt a dim anger, wondering if it would bring bad luck to him with its chants, for its intentions could not be the same as the friendly ghosts.

"Spet, come up the ramp with us. It's dry inside. Don't look like that, there's nothing to be afraid of now, we'll go inside and shut the door, it will keep the water away, it won't get in . . . Come along, Spet."

The black spirit suddenly leaped down on the ramp with a strange scream. *"Aaaaiiii . . . He's turning into a seaweed. Quick, get him out of the water! Help!"*

The spirit with the black skin and white face possibly wanted him for his own dark spirit world. He was coming down the ramp at Spet, screaming. He was too late though, Spet knew that he was safe for the dim land of the drowned with the friendly ghosts who had come for him. He felt his feet sending roots down into the mud, moving and rooting downward, and a wild joy came over him, and he knew that this was the right thing for him, much more right and natural than it would have been to become a tall sad adult.

He had been feeling a need for air, panting and drawing the cold air into his lungs. Just as the clawed hands of the dark spirit caught hold of his neck, Spet had enough air, and he leaned over into the dark and friendly water, away from the painful beauty of the bright lights and moving forms. The water closed around him, and the sound of voices was lost.

He could still feel the grip of the spirit's bony arms around his neck, pulling upwards, but he had seen the brown ghosts running towards them, and they would stop it from doing him any harm . . . so he dismissed the fear from his mind, and bent deeper into the dark, and plunged his hands with spread fingers deep into the mud, and gripped his ankles, as if he had always known just how to do this thing. His hands locked and became unable to unfold. They would never unfold again.

He felt the soft surge that was the first flood wave arriving and passing above him, and ignored it, and, with a mixture of terror and the certainty of doing right, he opened his mouth and took a deep breath of cold water.

All thought stopped. As the water rushed into his lungs, the rooted sea creature that was the forgotten adult stage of Spet's species began its thoughtless pseudo-plant existence,

forgetting everything that had ever happened to it. Its shape changed.

The first wave of the flood did not quite reach up to the edge of the ship's entrance. It caught the two engineers as they dragged a screaming third human up the ramp towards the entrance, but it did not quite reach into the ship, and when it passed the three humans were still there. One of them struck the screaming one, and they carried him in.

Winton was hysterical for some time, but Henderson seemed quite normal. He worked well and rationally in compiling a good short survey report to carry to the planetary survey agency, and when the waters dried around the spaceship he directed the clearing of mud from the jets and the overhaul of the firing chambers without a sign of warp in his logic.

He did not want to speak to any native, and went into the ship when they appeared.

Winton was still slightly delirious when they took off from the planet, but, once in space, he calmed down and made a good recovery. He just did not talk about it. Henderson still seemed quite normal, and Charlie carefully did not tell Winton that Henderson kept a large bush in a glass enclosure in the engine room.

Ever since that time Henderson has been considered a little peculiar. He is a good enough risk for the big liners, for they have other engineers on board to take over if he ever cracks.

He has no trouble getting jobs, but wherever he goes he brings with him an oversized potted plant and puts it in the engine room and babies it with water and fertilizer. His fellow officers never kid him about it, for it is not a safe subject.

When Henderson is alone, or thinks he is alone, he talks to the potted bush. His tone is coaxing. But the bush never answers.

Charlie runs into him occasionally when their ships happen to dock at the same space port around the same planet. They share a drink and enjoy a few jokes together, but Charlie takes care not to get signed on to the same ship as Henderson. The sight of Henderson and his potted bush together make him nervous.

It's the wrong bush, but he'll never tell Henderson that.

In our time, we may see survey teams follow on the heels of the first landings, exploring the worlds suddenly so close to us, studying their resources, attempting to understand their peoples, their intelligence. As here . . .

The Shrine of Temptation

JUDITH MERRIL

THE NAME his own people called him was Lallayall. That was, of course, just his calling-name, and because it meant almost the same thing to us, we called him Lucky.

This was no transgression of courtesy, or culture-arrogance on our part. His true name, after the fashion of his people, was already long, and growing, a descriptive catalogue useful only for records and ritual occasions. A calling-name may be anything derived from the whole, so long as it suits, and the called one will answer it. Lucky was delighted to have a new nickname from us, in our language.

He was, when we came to the island, just eight years old—as we reckon. His people count differently; to them, he was halfway through his Third Decade; in five more seasons, he would undergo the Apprenticeship Rites that would end his First Age. Either way, he was just past the midpoint between babyhood and puberty. Like most of his own race—and all others but us on the island—he was brown-skinned and dark-eyed, black-haired. Like most of his age, he was eager, questioning, rational, mystical, obedient, rebellious, clumsy and courteous, graceful and quick; like too few of them, he was generally happy and always healthy, serenely certain of parental love, highly intelligent and well-informed.

Certain of these things, and all of them to a degree, were the products of Shrine Island culture. Lucky lived in a world

he accepted as having been designed primarily for his own benefit and, largely, it had. Among the island children, there were no fears, hungers, troubles or questions that could not be voiced—and none within the limits of the island's capacity—that would not be answered to the best extent of the child's understanding. All children were swift and bright; but among them, Lucky was especially blessed. Thus, his name.

He was the first in his age group to find his apprenticeship. When we came, he already knew what he wanted. Until a short time before that, he had spent his days, like the others, wandering from hunters to planners to makers to teachers to planters to singers, spreading his wonders and askings impartially. The others still wandered, multiply curious, questioning weavers and fishers and carpenters, healers and painters and crafters of food. It would be three or four seasons before, one by one, they singled out the preferred occupations to which they'd be bound in training at First Rites.

But Lucky already knew what he wanted. Before we came, he went, day after day, to the Shrine or the House of Shrinemen, squatting patiently in the courtyard, waiting for the chance to carry sand (for stone scrubbing) or water or polishing cloths or firewood for a Shrineman, listening in silence to such talk as was carried on in his presence, storing up questions to ask them, *hallall,* when the time should be ripe. Part of each day he sat at the feet of the Figures, self-hypnotized by gleaming amber and blue, spinning out glorious fantasies of the Rebirth.

(His own fascination with the Shrine and Shrinemen, and the weight of mystery he gave to some words and phrases—which I have tried to translate with capitals and occasional sonorous phrases in this account—led us later to a misunderstanding of some proportion. But, *hallall* . . .)

His persistence was already recognized in the village. The other children first, then his mothers and fathers, had noticed his absence from forest, fields, and shops. Then the Shrinemen began teasing him with familiar fondness at evening gatherings and restday games, so that everyone started to realize what he had chosen. And if it was something of a shock to parents and teachers, the boy did not know it.

Perhaps because we settled as close to the Shrine as we dared (just over the edge of a hill with a clear view of the courtyard between the Shrine and the House of Shrinemen), perhaps out of the same fascination with the unknown that had drawn him to the Shrine—Lucky was our first and most frequent visitor, and became, either in his own person or as interpreter, our chief source of information about both the Shrine and the islanders. He did not, at first, realize that our preoccupation with the Shrine was as great as his own; we did not share his confident artlessness in questioning-asking. I do not know just how he explained us to himself at first, or whether he even tried to. Perhaps he just waited to learn what he wanted to know—*hallall.*

It was not passive waiting, anyhow. The first day, after his first attempt to speak with us, he sat in what must have been stunned bemusement for several hours, pondering the incredible fact of a second language. (We saw the squatting inward-turned boy as "a stolid impassive indigene." I blush to admit that the phrase is from my own notebook.) Then, having fully accepted that the phenomenon was not—obviously—impossible, but only previously unknown, it was he who approached us with the second overture.

We were just setting up the hand bellows for blowing foam into the camp wallforms. Lucky walked over, watched, walked away, and came back with a round stone, flattened on one side, just right to prop up the foot that kept slipping.

He held it out. We all stopped and stared. George Lazslo was quickest. He reached out and took the stone, smiling.

"Thank you," George said.

The boy touched the stone. "Sannacue?" His small brown face seemed to turn gold with the joy of his smile. "Mertz," he said, tapping the stone. "Mertz—sannacue?"

Henry started to correct him, but Jenny and I both realized at the same time that it was better to let the error ride, and not confuse the issue. (Starting as a joke, we all got to where we found *sannacue* as naural a word as *stone.*)

The principle was established, and it was astonishing to us how rapidly he learned. Jenny was our linguist, and predictably proved quicker than the rest of us in learning the island

language, but when they sat exchanging names and phrases, it was she, far more often than he, who had to be told twice. Once he heard it, and was sure he understood, he simply did not know how to forget. (For her fascinating account of the process, see pp. 324-359, in "Language in the Isolated Culture," Dr. Jennifer R. Boxill, S&S, 1985).

As soon as the bare minimum of mutual language was effective, Lucky (again) initiated the next step in cultural exchange. He had been showing up at the camp just after breakfast each morning; this day he came an hour earlier, with a basket of woven reeds on his arm. It was my day for KP, and I was opening a can of bacon when he came up and touched my arm, showing me the basket. "Try my food?" he said.

The basket was filled with fresh steamed fish, still hot, each on its own new-baked half-loaf of native meal bread. At the bottom, five small pots of blue clay—the same stuff the Guardian Figure was moulded in—held a savoury vegetable sauce to be poured over fish and bread.

It was very good, but that seemed, at the time, irrelevant. The greatest significance of the gift was learning that our self-appointed guide and mascot was, it seemed, fully accredited in his friendship by the—so far—invisible parents and elders of the village.

I should say, "parents *or* elders," because we were uncertain. When we asked if he'd prepared the food himself, he laughed uproariously and then said, with ostentatious patience, "*Mothers* cook food." Whether he meant mothers as a class (and in this case *his* mother), or several women of the class, mother, we did not know.

Both assumptions were wrong, as it happened. He meant *his mothers.*

It took us most of six months to reach a level of communication at which mistakes of this sort could be cleared up. And from that time on, it seemed as though most of our discussions consisted of substituting closer approximations for old misconceptions. The more we learned, the more complex was what we had to learn. As for Lucky's wrong assumptions about us, they took even longer for him to recognize, and

more time yet for *us* to realize he'd had them. We had been on the island the best part of a year before we gained any comprehension of the extent to which our presence had affected the boy himself. And through all that time, we so carefully leaned over backwards to avoid showing special interest in the Shrine, that we had never learned of Lucky's particular infatuation with it!

All through our second season on the island (by their time reckoning), we were pumping a steady flow of information out of the boy. We learned the basic economy and social structure of the island; how to reckon seasons, and count age and status. He explained the system of education and apprenticeship, the courtship and marriage customs. When he did not know answers to what we asked, he would say, *"Hallall; hallall* you will know." And next day, or next week, or even next season, he would come back with the answer. Most answers, that is. Sometimes the second answer too was, *"hallall."* But then, he would add, *"Hallall, I* shall know, and then you too."

We worried, occasionally, about what was happening to Lucky in his own village—whether his contact with us singled him out for better or worse. What we never imagined was the delight of his parents (He had nine at the time; Dr. Henry Cogswell's article in *Anthropological Review,* II, 1983, pp. 19-26, gives a brief comprehensive analysis of island family relationships) and teachers and the older people in general at the effect we had on him.

In the pursuit of the knowledge we asked, Lucky had gone back to learn himself all the things he had scorned to observe before we came: Now, he watched weavers and planters and netters of fish, masons and flutists and arrow-makers, with a concentrated attention that he had reserved before only for matters concerning the Shrine. The older people watched, and were pleased. They had always thought well of the boy. He was marked as lucky from birth. When it had seemed clear he would be a Shrineman, they had been not disappointed so much as surprised. It did not seem quite suitable for one so lavishly endowed. Now he was learning, as they had expected, all matters of concern to the people. If it were

what he wished, he would of course be a Shrineman; but they began speaking of him now as a future Firstman.

The pinky strangers ("Pinkies" was what they called us) whose advent was otherwise inexplicable and perhaps a bit disturbing, had perhaps been sent to train a leader among the people, as the people themselves had not known how to do—

So they reasoned; at the least, they decided, we *were* causing Lucky to learn what they had hoped he would, whether that was our purpose in coming or not. At the very least, it was indirectly due to us that they had made sure of his extraordinary capacities, which had been indicated as probable by various features of his birth and growth, but had never before been fully displayed. (The eidetic memory was as impressive to them as to us; and his intelligence was high, even in that high-average society. Chapter X of Dr. G. M. Lazslo's, "Environment and Intelligence," S&S, 1987, deals with our findings on the island, for those who are interested).

Two of his fathers came to thank us.

It was the first visit we had from anyone but Lucky. Out of simple courtesy, no adult would have come into our camp without some such cause. Out of simple caution, we might never have entered their village without that prior visit. It was our opening contact with the group as a whole.

The fathers were overjoyed to discover that Jennie spoke their language with some proficiency. That made it possible to dismiss Lucky, and thank us without requiring him to translate praise of himself or of his friends. We told them in return how much we admired and relied on the boy—and how very pleased we were to learn that our influence had helped him adjust to his own world, and not put him out of tune with it.

That is what we meant to say, but Jennie did not know any word in their language for "adjust" or "maladjusted". She tried "out of season", and got only smiling puzzlement. She made a long speech full of metaphor and analogy, and finally one of them said, *"Oklall?"*

Oklall, Lucky had told us, was the opposite of *hallall.* They seemed to think we had been concerned about Lucky yesterday, but not tomorrow. We let well enough alone at that

point, and offered food instead of conversation. Lucky rejoined us, and took obvious pride in piloting his father's way through the strange meal. When they left, we had our invitation to visit the village—paradoxical, when we thought of it, since what had occasioned the thanks-paying was our previous inability to go in person.

If the fathers had the same thought, it would not have worried them. If we understood as we thought we did, what *hallall* meant, we would have known they'd see no cause to worry. They had seen his potential, displayed clearly, and were naturally content to let Lallayall's nature take its own course. *Hallall,* he would learn all he needed to know. *Hadall,* he would grow to his proper adult place. If he needed help or encouragement, they would provide it. The expectations they had begun to have before his preoccupation with the Shrine, expectations based on his birth and early growth, now seemed once again probable. Perhaps, as time grew closer for a Rebirth, it was necessary for a future Firstman to know more of the Shrine than was usual. His unlikely interest in Shrinemen might then mean only that he would be Firstman at the time of a Rebirth. Lallayall—Lucky—indeed! He was well-called.

As for us, we were too busy and excited with our new observing privileges, and more than that, with the news of Lucky's special concern with the Shrine, to think of the oddity of that *tomorrow-yesterday,* misunderstanding. We assumed, from his father's manner of mentioning it, that the Shrine was not taboo in discussion. It seemed we might also hope, eventually, to be allowed to examine it in person: if a child could spend his time there freely, when his parents disapproved, it was not unreasonable to hope that visitors might be invited.

One other assumption, based on our experience of Lucky's learning powers, proved unfounded: there was almost nothing he was able to tell us about the Shrine or Shrinemen, except just such visual descriptions as we now dared to hope might be redundant. He described the Figures, the blue Guardian on the Window of Light, and the amber Lifegiver on the scroll pedestal. He painted a vivid word picture of the

reptiloid grace of the Lifegiver, the menacing power of the Guardian. About the Shrinemen and their lives he knew many minute details—but none of significance. They ate thus, slept so, conversed in the courtyard; they were celibate, wore brown robes with a design patterned on the Window of Light; they had daily rituals to say; they performed certain calculations. *Hallall,* they would officiate at the Recurrence, the Rebirth.

From the Oldest Men in the village, of whom there were three, in their Seventh Age, we learned more—if what we learned was fact. They could all recall, in young childhood, seeing the Life of the Shrine then extant. There had been no Recurrence since then, nor had it occurred in their lives, but before they were born.

In twenty-five decades, they said, the Life would Recur. It was soon, soon . . .

And saying so, they glanced significantly at Lucky. *Hallall,* a Rebirth . . .

That word again—*hallall.* In the village and fields, we heard it incessantly. It was the only no-answer a child ever got. No question was forbidden for young ones to ask—but some were not answered in First Age, and some not in Second. *Hallall,* they were told, *hallall,* ye shall know.

"When do we plant firstseed?" a child might ask.

"In the day following the third full moon of Seedfall," he would be told.

"Which seed is firstseed?"

And he would be shown.

"What comes of it?" "When do we harvest it?" "How is it stored?" "Who plants it?" "Who knows the full moon?"

All these would be answered and fully, readily. The people would lay down their work, if need be, to go with a questioning child and show him the answer.

But—"Why does it grow?" "How does the Firstman know which round moon is the *full* moon?" or "Why do people seed themselves all year round, but fawns and fish only in Green-growth Season?"

Then the answer was always, *"Hallall,"* given with a glad smile for the child who was thinking ahead of his years. First

age children were to learn only what could be seen, touched, smelled, or heard. *Why* and *wherefore* were for Second Agers, the adolescent apprentices. So—

"*Hallall,* little one . . ."

It was listening to the teaching of children that we finally came round to understand what the word meant. We had thought it was "tomorrow"—or "later," vaguely. Then for a while we thought it just an evasion, a sort of "I don't know either; perhaps some day we'll both find out." But what it meant, precisely, was, "In the fullness of time."

The distinction is not nearly as much in the words as in the kind of thinking that must lie behind them. Shrine Islanders, for instance, fear death less than any society known—and this with no trace of belief in discrete immortality. In the fullness of time one is born, grows and learns, loves, weds, and begets, rears children, teaches the younger ones, acquires status, grows feeble and dies. If death comes, then one's time is full.

From the answers that were and were not given youngsters in Lucky's Age Group, we also came to understand how we must have troubled him with our determined questioning about the Shrinemen. Here, too, we had progressed through a series of dead-wrong assumptions. Because Lucky told us of books and calculations, of ideographs on the Shrine (which he could reproduce flawlessly, but with no comprehension); because he had never seen books in the village, or never spoke of them; because he, the brightest of his Age group, went daily to the House of Shrinemen, we first took for granted the Shrinemen were priestly scholars, perhaps the guardians of an ancient culture, their role symbolized by the red-maced blue Guardian Figure protecting the "Lifegiver"—a goddess, clearly, but perhaps of wisdom rather than fertility. The reptilian appearance suggested this strongly. Henry got very enthusiastic about the correlation of snakes and divinely protected knowledge. "Rebirth" could imply a predictable renaissance—and that suggested the ugly thought that the secrecy of the Shrinemen's rites and formulae was that of an unplanned bureaucracy perpetuating itself by with-

holding the knowledge it had been set up to protect and disseminate . . .

When we understood what *hallall* meant, we had to revise this unhappy picture, for much of what Lucky did not know was not secret at all—just *hallall* at his age. By that time, also, we had heard from the three Oldest Men such mutually confirming details of the appearance and function of the Life of the Shrine, that the whole notion of a usurping bureaucracy became absurd. "Rebirth" was no symbol, but a literal incarnation of new wisdom, presented at intervals of roughly—by our time—eighty years. The incarnation took the form of a froglike creature at least roughly resembling the statue and relief Figures at the Shrine (The Old Men recalled an identical appearance, except for color, which was grey—but they were old and remembering a strongly suggestible childhood).

So the Shrinemen became shamans, half-ignorant, half-wise witch-doctors applying without understanding some ancient formulae designed to release increments of knowledge slowly to a population reverted—for what strange intriguing reasons?—to barbarism. The near-idyllic society we saw was the planned result of this programme; and the quiet patience of the *hallall* philosophy made sense now; *hallall,* all would be known. We need only wait; *hallall* . . .

But for witch-doctors, the Shrinemen were poor showmen. Neither did they do healing (any more than they governed; both of these were functions of all *other* people who lived into the Second Decade of the Sixth Age). The shaman theory began to fall apart the night George found out the man next to him at a haybringing dance was a "shaman" off duty for the party; the putative witch-doctor invited us all, very casually, to visit him at the Shrine. There had never been any taboo; no one suspected we might be interested.

We found the Shrinemen, as we had first assumed they would be, educated and cultured, in the bookish sense, far above the level of the other islanders. They were intelligent men devoted to a faith, or more, to a duty. When Rebirth occurred, it was necessary that they be on hand, trained in the formulae of sacrifice. Without their precise weights and

measures and chants, the Life of the Shrine would be monstrous and harmful.

The Oldest Men, we suggested, were saying it was near *hallall* the Recurrence . . ?

The Shrinemen nodded. They brought out a register, a long papyrus-like scroll. One fourth of its length was filled with ideographs—like those on the Shrine itself, tantalizingly like, but unlike, three different ancient languages Jenny *did* know . . .

On this scroll, they said, was the listing of dates and persons connected with Shrine Life. The first entry, in barely legible, long-faded ink, went back—they said—almost 350 decades, nearly 1200 years, as we reckon. One of them spread the scroll on a lectern, and began intoning with such singsong regularity it was evident he was reciting by rote, and not actually reading.

Yet there was an air of authenticity about their list; whether it was in the scroll or not, whether they could read the symbols or not, we somehow believed that the time intervals—ranging from nineteen to thirty decades between Recurrences—were legitimate history.

The question was—history of *what?*

The answer, of course, was—*hallall.*

If our supplies lasted until the Recurrence, we'd know what it was. Not *why,* or *wherefore,* but *how* and *what, when* and *who.* To the Life of the Shrine, it seemed, we were all as First Agers . . .

Thus we arrived at our last misconception regarding the Shrinemen. They were—obviously—an especially nonvirulent academic breed of priest, serving their temple with civilized pleasant lives devoted to learning, discussion, and ritual. *Hallall,* what they re-memorized every day would be of not just use, but great need . . .

Happily, we understood Lucky by that time at least better than we did the Shrine; as a result, we did not plague him with our latest errors—and plaguing they would have been, to say the least. Religion, as we know it, had no words in the Shrine Island language. *Sin, priest, faith, morals,* were not only, in complexity, subjects suitable only for adults—they

were concepts unknown to the people. We did not intend to introduce them.

Since it would have been Lucky to whom we expressed these thoughts first, it is doubly fortunate we did not do so, for Lucky *was* lucky. From the time of his birth on, it was the outstanding trait of his young life.

In the calendar of the Shrine Islanders, there are three seasons to mark the year's circuit: first is Greengrowth, when the soil is renewed, when the creatures of forest and river renew life, a time of thriving for all young things. Then comes Ripening, when fawns, fish, and fruit come to full size and plumpness. Last, there is Seedfall, when pods and clouds burst to shower the land with the next season's new life, when bucks rage in combat throughout the forest, and such spawning fish as survived the nets of the Season of Ripening spawn by the thousands far up the river.

The calendar of events, of people's lives, is composed of these seasons, in sets of ten. Each Decade of Seasons has separate significance in the course of a lifetime. Three Decades make up an Age of Life.

It is auspicious among the people to have Greengrowth for the ruling season of one's First Age. Lucky, born lucky in Greengrowth, would come to his First Rites, dividing childhood from apprenticeship, innocence from approaching courtship, just as the seasons changed from Greengrowth to the appropriate Ripening. Three decades later, his Full Manhood Rites would coincide with the change of the natural world from Ripening to Seedfall.

Such children were known to be fortunate in their growing, somehow in tune with the world more than others. In Lucky's case, each sign at every stage of development had confirmed the extraordinary augury of his birth on the first morning of a Greengrowth season. And it was for the same reason that his early interest in the Shrine had so startled his elders; a child of his sort was seldom attracted by abstraction or mental mystery; certainly, the children of Greengrowth were too much in tune with the soil to make likely celibates.

There is a certain innocence, when you think of it, implicit in the idea of luck. A truly *lucky* person has, always, a cer-

tain natural and glorious naïveté—a sort of superior unconsciousness, which can do for some people, in their acts and impulses, precisely what the well-trained, reflex reactions of a star athlete do for his body. The special ability to seize the right moment with the right hand is as vulnerable to conscious thought as the act of high-jumping would be to a man who tried to think each muscle separately into action.

So it is well that we did not force on Lucky the exercise of the metaphysical part of his mind that his keen intelligence could never have refused, once offered.

We had been almost five full seasons on the island, when the second ship came. Lucky, of course, with his rare instinct, was walking in the woods when it landed, not half a mile from where it came down.

Three people emerged—three more Pinkies! Rejoicing, the boy ran to greet them, one thought predominant in his young mind: here at last was the making of a Pinkie family! Seven is the minimum number of adults in an island household. We had never attempted to explain our marriage customs to him; frankly, living on the island we had come to feel a little ashamed of confessing our one-to-one possessiveness. We had simply allowed them to keep their first misimpression that we did not have children because we were too few in number for a proper household.

With these thoughts in mind, he ran forward and greeted the strangers in clear pure English, offering to guide them immediately to our camp.

They seem to have managed a rapid recover, when one considers the shock this must have provided. Politely, they excused themselves, and announced they had come, not to join us (whom they had never heard of, of course) but to pay their respects to the famous Shrine.

Lucky led them there. On the way, they talked pleasantly with him, pleasantly but wrongly. They did not sound like Pinkies—not like the Pinkies he knew. Vaguely, he sensed something *oklall*—unripe, green, out of place and time. Gradually, his answers to the oversweet probings of the female among them became less clear, so that by the time she asked the two crucial questions, he was almost incoherent.

They did not find out how many Pinkies were on the island nor how many others spoke English. If they had known there were only four of us, unarmed academics, and only Lucky besides ourselves who would ever know how to tell the world outside what happened, they would surely have been less precipitate. As it was, they were on edge.

He took them directly to the Shrine Window. This in itself was odd; it was bad etiquette; he should have presented them first to the Shrinemen. But he was already acting under the impulse of that strange quality of luckiness that ruled his lfe.

Then he found himself staring at Lifegiver, terribly torn and uncertain, not knowing why he had done such a thing, or why he had spoken to them softly, in false friendship. The amber figure glowed in double light: sunlight cascading from the unroofed courtyard, and the golden glow from inside the Window.

He—I believe it was he—said later that he did what he did just because she was beautiful: a simple act of adoration. I suppose he was confused, aware of a responsibility too large for his young shoulders, and seeking guidance of some sort. That at least is more rational than the notion that he acted then out of the pure unconsciousness of his special—lucky—nature. I know, because I watched it happen, that he moved forward in an almost trancelike manner.

(Everything from the moment of the meeting in the forest up to this point I know only from having been told. What occurred in the courtyard I saw for myself. It was almost time for the Shrinemen's evening ritual, and Henry and I were on the hilltop, with binoculars, watching.)

This is what happened:—

Lallayall stepped forward and fell to his knees before the statue of the Lifegiver. He reached up, and his lanky arms were just long enough to wrap around her smooth stone legs. He gazed up at her, and then bent his head, resting it against the carvings at the top of the scroll pedestal.

At the instant of contact, the mace fell from the hands of the Blue Guardian.

The two men were fast. One jumped for the mace, one for Lucky. While the second one held the boy still, the first stud-

ied the rod and the Figure, and then reached out with the red mace and seemed to be twisting it against something on the Window. (After much discussion and examination, we came to the conclusion that it was the Guardian's eye he was twisting. The open end of the rod is exactly the shape and size of the opal eye of the Guardian.)

We did not see the Window open. It opened inwards, and our angle of vision was wrong. But we knew what was happening from the oddly expressive way the three intruders stood and stared, at the Window and at each other—questioning, triumphant, frightened, uncertain. We also saw the Shrinemen coming, a split second before the woman did. We saw her point and heard her cry faintly from down below.

The other turned to look, and all three lost their irresolution. They moved as one, taking Lucky with them. All four vanished (from our angle of view) inside the Shrine.

The Shrinemen came to a full stop in front of the Window. Had it closed again? I looked at Henry for the first time, and found him turning to look at me; it suddenly occurred to us that we ought to be doing something to help.

"You stay," he said. "I'll get the others, go on down. Keep watching."

It was the sensible way to do it. We were both torn between having to see it all and the need to help. This way we did both.

I nodded, and put the glasses back to my eyes. Incredibly, the Shrinemen were arranging themselves in their evening ritual position, as calmly as though it were any sundown; they formed their semicircle in front of the Window, and brought forth the shining silver-tipped quills that were their badge of office, held them up like dart-throwers, as they always did, and began their sundown chant!

Perhaps the Window had not closed before. If it had, it opened again. My first thought was that the Guardian Figure had fallen. But it was not a Figure. It was alive.

It was blue and glistening, and it sprang down to the ground, crouched, alert, so clearly menacing in its intentions it was not necessary to see the face to understand the inher-

ent malice. It had barely touched ground when a quill—a *dart,* rather—from the first Shrineman in the semicircle caught it in the face. (The eye, I have always assumed—the same left eye that must be the key to the Shrine?)

By that time, another had leaped out—and the next dart brought it down. It went so almost-casually, so rhythmically, so soundlessly, and with such economy of motion on both sides that it seemed unreal. There were ten of the blue things altogether; at the sixth, I took my eyes from the glasses, blinked, shook my head, and looked back, unbelieving. I saw the same thing.

But remember—I did not have that moment of doubt.

Without any break in the rhythm, the eleventh figure came out of the Shrine. It was not blue, or crouching or perilous; it was brown-gold of skin, and leaped like a dancer, and as it landed the Shrinemen who still held their darts posed, dropped them, and the whole semicircle burst into a chant of tremendous, overwhelming joy and welcoming.

They faltered just once—when, still in the same timing, the twelfth creature came forth, a twin to the first gold-brown incarnation of the Lifegiver. For perhaps two beats of the song there was obvious confusion; then it rang out again, louder and more joyous.

But those who had dropped unused darts retrieved them.

They finished the song, the two Lives of the Shrine standing inside their circle, apart from the heap of lifeless blue bodies. Then—the Window must have closed meantime; they clearly knew the Rebirth was completed—four of them walked to the two shining creatures, bowed to them (in the islanders' bow of courtesy—not one of reverence), and led them into the House. The others approached the dead entities, picked them up, and carried them off, around the House, out of sight.

My stage was empty. I waited till dark, but saw no more. Not till I started down to the camp did I even wonder what had become of Henry and the others, who should have had time to arrive at the scene before the chant began. I found out when they joined me a few minutes after I got back to

camp: the gates of the Shrine courtyard had been closed and barred; they had knocked and called out and waited—also till dark—without answer. They had heard the chant of rejoicing; they had seen nothing.

I told them what I had seen. I told it hesitantly; I did not completely believe my own memory. When, next day, and the days after that, all our questions and probings produced only mildly startled or baffled replies from villagers and Shrinemen alike, we decided I had been the victim of some extraordinarily powerful hypnotic illusion.

We felt fairly sure of what part of it Henry and I had seen together; and this was further supported by the presence of a strange ship in the forest, with no passengers—and by Lucky's disappearance.

We left the island a few weeks later. Our supplies might have lasted another month, but we all felt restless, and we missed Lucky, both personally and in our work. We knew there were answers we could not get from anyone, about what happened. But we saw no likelihood of getting them by staying longer. And we had to report the strange ship.

We agreed that as far as we knew—as far as four so-called scientists could claim to know anything—four people had entered the Shrine; a watcher on the hilltop (Henry's article so describes me) experienced an extraordinarily vivid hallucination or hypnotic illusion afterwards, during the ritual chant.

For the others, that agreement was sufficient. *They* hadn't had the "hallucination."

I went back. And of course, we had left too soon. Our questions had been, naturally, *oklall.* The Life of the Shrine is never revealed until the next Rites . . .

This time it was a tremendous revelation; never before had twin Lives occurred.

I stayed two full seasons on the Island, that second trip. This time, I lived in a special visitor's capacity, with Lallayall's family. I learned to speak their language much better, and I spent many hours in talk with the Shrinemen and with the Lives.

The Lives told me about Lucky's meeting with the strange

Pinkies; they told me how he felt when he fell on his knees before the Lifegiver; they told me they were reborn of him in the Shrine.

They told me how it felt, but could not tell me how or why it happened. They did not know. We all speculated—the Lives, the Shrinemen, and I—on what the Shrine itself might be, and what sort of force could produce ten glistening blue demons from three evil humans, and two golden angels from one lucky boy.

With all the speculation, and all I was told, I came back with not one shred of scientific evidence that anything of the sort happened. For all I know, the Lives may still be an hypnotic illusion produced by the Shrinemen; they may be some sort of periodic mutation. They may be Lucky Reborn.

They do not know any more than I, how the Shrine came to be there, or what happened inside a chamber which they describe only as "filled with great light".

I tried approaching the Lifegiver, as Lucky had. The Shrinemen gave full permission, clearly amused. Nothing happened, though I tried it often, with minute variations of head and hand positions.

I may have missed the exact pressure points; I may have had the wrong attitude. I believe, myself, that I simply do not have the kind of unconsciousness Lucky had.

My own tendency, also, is to believe that the Shrine is a sort of outpost of some other planet—but why this should feel any more "scientific" to me than the Shrinemen's belief in an ancient lost magic, I don't know.

The Shrinemen, by the way, are still worried over some things. The weight of the entering bodies was never ascertained, they point out. If there was unused mass left inside the Shrine, they cannot say what may come forth the next time a pure innocent embraces goodness for its own sake.

This is a story of life in a mining town. It could have happened years ago, out West. And it could happen the day after tomorrow, for we have no reason to believe that human nature—and needs—will ever change . . .

The Army Comes to Venus

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

IN THICK, cloying mist the ship moaned like a tormented ghost of monstrous size. It descended slowly, warily, feeling with invisible electronic fingers for a place in which to sit.

Those below stood gazing up into the fog, not sensing the probing ray, seeing nothing. A bunch of hard-bitten, bearded men in oiled slickers down which moisture trickled in thin streams.

After a little while the fog appeared to solidify into an enormous wet cylinder with a steaming end. The ship came down, touched, settled. A sluggish wave of damp earth hunched itself on either side of the curved hull.

Airlocks opened, duralumin gangways slid forth. The bearded ones clustered closer, avid for new faces. A shock-haired, red-whiskered man was the first to emerge, staggering under the weight of numerous bags and packs, carefully feeling his way down the metal steps.

Somebody at the back of the waiting audience let go a yell of welcome. "Old Firelip, as I live and breathe!"

Pausing halfway down the gangway, the newcomer screwed up rheumy eyes as he sought to identify the shouter. "Duckass, no less! What made the parole board let *you* out?"

Listeners grinned, immediately accepting the new arrival as one of themselves. He had the two best qualifications, namely, a ready tongue and a friend in the attending mob.

A fat man came next, waddling down and letting his bags

go bump-bump-bump from step to step as he dragged them behind. He wore three chins and an expression of moony amiability.

"Lookie, lookie, lookie, here comes Cookie," invited a brawny roughneck.

The others chuckled. The fat man stopped, studied the other, spoke in high-pitched but undisturbed tones. "You must have second sight, chum. A cook is just what I am."

"Then my belly says you're two years overdue. The few gals we've got here can do everything but cook."

"Everything?" asked the fat man with pointed interest.

"You try 'em sometime."

"Maybe I will." He lumbered the rest of the way down, his kit still bumping. Anything breakable in his bags was having a run of hard luck.

A dozen nondescripts followed, all heavily burdened with everything, but the farmhouse roof. Pioneers bearing their tiny personal worlds on their backs.

Several ship's officers and a few of the crew came out for a gossip, a sniff of moist air, a stamp around on real, solid ground. After them followed a string of people who looked like nobody in particular and wanted to stay that way. A few had the air of still trying to thwart the systematic circulation of police photographs.

"Where's the molar mauler?" bawled an onlooker with a lopsided face.

"Me," responded a white-haired ancient, trying to lug four boxes at once.

Gumboil grabbed two of them. "Good thing you've come, Pop. You've got a customer right now. One more day and I'd be off my nut."

They moved toward the nearby shanty town. The rest of the crowd remained to watch the ship; they were bored by frontier solitude and thankful for a petty event.

A person who oozed officialdom showed himself at the air-lock, stared out with cold authority. Characteristically, they bristled at the sight of him. He went inside and did not reappear. It wasn't six months since they had pulled a would-be tax collector to pieces.

Several sluggards emerged, one dragging a pack resembling

a tightly wrapped haystack. Half a dozen witnesses helped get it down amid a shower of wisecracks concerning weak bladders and portable comfort stations. The owner registered acute embarrassment.

Two girls came from the airlock, suddenly silencing the wits. They were full-lipped, full-busted, had brilliant eyes and emphatic hips. Both were bottle-blondes. A distinct sigh of gratification ran through the audience. The girls put on knowing smirks, revealed white teeth. They tripped down the gangway with dainty steps and beckoning backsides. Four of the crew toted their bags, surrendered them to eager helpers.

"Annie's place?"

The girls nodded, giggled, weighed up the hungry clientele. Two barrel-chested men indulged in an acrimonious shoving match for the right to carry a bag on which both had laid hands simultaneously. They solved the problem by bearing it between them, giving alternate tugs to tear it from each other at every tenth step.

Came a pause while the cargo-hatch opened, a long-armed crane swung out, began to lower boxes and crates. A few of the crowd shifted position to get a better view of the unloading.

Another girl appeared, accompanied by a ship's officer. She was vastly different from her bosomy predecessors: small, slender, oval-faced and cool. Her black hair was natural, her equally black eyes not glassy, her expression slightly wistful instead of hard and brassy. Carefully the officer helped her down the steps, shook hands with her at the bottom.

"G'wan, kiss her, you dummy," advised a hoarse voice.

"Sailors don't care," commented another.

"Love 'em and leave 'em," added a third.

For a moment the officer looked as if he would like to make something of it. He hesitated, glowered at the ribald crowd to their immense satisfaction. Then he whispered anxiously to the girl, apparently questioning the wisdom of her remaining alone on this world. She smiled at him, shook her head.

"Not tonight, Cuthbert," jeered one onlooking tough.

"You've had your share," urged another. "Don't be greedy."

"Give real men a chance," suggested somebody else.

Several chortled at that sally, their tones loud and coarse. One smacked his lips in exaggerated anticipation. The officer lingered awhile, reluctant to go, but finally mounted the gangway and went into the ship. His expression was worried.

Left to herself, the girl surveyed the hairy mob with calm self-possession. They returned the compliment, taking in her slender legs, narrow hips, dark hair. They undressed her with their eyes and liked what they saw.

"You doing anything tonight, Honey-babe?" inquired a bear disguised as a man.

"You wait your turn, Bulstrode," ordered a scar-faced neighbor. He spat on thick, calloused fingers, combed his hair and straightened an invisible tie. "This one is for gentlemen only." He leered with undisguised appetite at the subject of his remarks. "Isn't that so, Luscious?"

"All men are gentlemen." She looked at Bulstrode with a kind of dark-eyed innocence. "When they wish to be."

Bulstrode's optics dulled and his huge fingers twitched while he digested this. It took him quite a time. When he spoke again it was with an apologetic rumble.

"I was only kidding, Ma'am. I sort of thought—"

"She isn't interested, you hairy ape," interjected Scarface. "So don't waste breath advertising your ignorance." He rubbed his bristly chin and gave another pull to the non-existent tie. "Can I carry your stuff to Annie's place, Lovebird?"

Shuffling slowly around on big, cumbersome feet, Bulstrode faced him and growled, "What makes you think she's heading for Annie's? Why, you slit-cheeked, ragged-eared louse!" Extending a spade-sized hand he spread it across the other's unhandsome features, curled his fingers and squeezed.

The victim gurgled convulsively behind the horny palm, made frantic pulls at the thick wrist, finally kicked him good and hard on the shin. It sounded like kicking a tree. Taking no notice, Bulstrode began to twist the face leftward, bending him sidewise.

"Stop that," ordered the girl.

Still holding on, Bulstrode turned a surprised face over a massive shoulder. "Hey?"

"Stop it," she repeated. "You wouldn't behave that way in your own home."

Bulstrode removed his grip and started examining his hand as if he had never seen it before. His opponent made snuffling noises, voiced a lurid oath and let go a haymaker. The angry fist caught the big man smack on the chin, rattling his teeth but not knocking him down.

Sweeping a columnar arm around in the manner of one brushing away a persistent fly, Bulstrode pleaded, "Look, lady, just you go take a nice, quiet walk while I slaughter this jerk."

"Don't be silly." Her dark eyes reproved the pair of them. "You're like a couple of overgrown children. You don't even know what you're squabbling about—do you?"

They stared at her dully, not answering.

"Do you?" she insisted.

A tall, gray-haired individual spoke from the front rank of the vastly entertained audience. "You're not on the home planet now. This is Venus and don't you forget it. Terra never comes nearer than thirty million miles."

"Home is as near as your memory says it is," she contradicted.

"You may be right. But some of us haven't got so darned much worth remembering." He paused, finished without bitterness, "That's why we're here."

"Speak for yourself, Marsden," chipped in a squat, swarthy man standing behind him. "I'm here to make money and make it fast."

"I'm here because I love the sunshine," yelled a satirical voice from the rear.

Some laughed, some didn't. All glanced upward at the fog which permitted visibility to no more than two hundred feet. Once in a while it lifted to two thousand. Often it descended in a thick, cloying mass to ground level. Moisture condensed on their slickers and ran down in tiny rivulets. The girl's black hair sparkled with diamonds of wetness.

"If you're not going to Annie's," continued Marsden, "you'll have to find someplace else." A contemptuous sweep

of his hand indicated her choice of six or seven hundred wooden shacks. "Take a look at what's on offer."

"No place for a girl like you," informed Bulstrode, trying to ingratiate himself and eyeing her like an elephant hoping for a cracker.

"Thank you, but I knew what to expect. I was well-primed in advance." She smiled at them. "So I brought my own home with me."

Turning away, she tripped light-footed toward the ship's tail-end where cargo was piling up as the long-armed crane swung to and fro. Presently those on the ship dropped a ramp and rolled down it a small aluminum trailer with two wheels amidships.

"Oh, ye gods!" griped a snaggle-toothed onlooker, openly disappointed. "I'm the only guy on the planet with a pneumatic mattress. And what's it to her?"

"If they're going to start transporting them homes and all," complained another, "it'll be the beginning of the end. Before you know it, this town will become too big for its boots."

"Which town?" asked a third, gazing around and pretending to see nothing.

Marsden saw her at her door three days later. Leaning on one of the hardwood posts that somebody had driven in to mark the limits of her property, he let his calculating gaze rest on the trailer, decided that what hung behind the facing window were the first lace curtains he'd seen in many years.

"Getting settled down?"

"Yes, thank you. I've been very busy. Unpacking and sorting things out takes quite a time."

"I suppose so. Has nobody helped you?"

"I didn't need any help."

"You may want plenty before you're through." He tilted his hat backward, went on, "Anyone bothered you yet?"

"Dear me, no. Why should they?"

"This is a man's town."

Looking as if she hadn't the vaguest notion of what he meant, she said, "Then why don't they give it a name?"

"A name? What's the use of a name? It isn't enough of a dump to deserve one. Besides, it's the only settlement on

Venus. There isn't any other—yet. Anyway, names cause arguments and arguments start fights."

"If they'll quarrel over the mere question of what to call this town it's evident that they haven't enough to do."

"When they're in the mood to let off steam they'll fight over anything. What else do you expect on the frontier?"

She did not answer.

"And they've plenty to keep them busy," he continued with a touch of harshness. "They're gnawing into a mountain of white granite that contains thirty pounds of niobium to the ton. It's mighty useful for high tensile and stainless steels. Also they're building a narrow-gauge railroad eastward to a deposit of pitchblende that makes a Geiger-counter chatter like a machine gun." He rubbed his lips with a thick and slightly dirty forefinger. "Yes, they work hard, swear hard, drink hard and fight hard."

"There are other things as much worth fighting for."

"Such as what?"

"This town, for instance."

"A cluster of tumbledown shanties. A haphazard array of smelly cabins. You call it a town?"

"It will be a real one some day."

"I can imagine." Marsden displayed a knowing grin. "Exactly as the boys would like it. Complete with city hall, police stations and a high-walled jail." He spat in the dirt to show what he thought of this prospect. "A good many of them came here to get away from all that. Do you know that at least forty per cent of them have served prison sentences?"

"I don't see that it matters much."

"Don't you?" He was slightly surprised. "Why not?"

"Men who are really evil prefer to take things easy."

"Meaning—?"

"Those who've seen fit to come this far must have done so to make a fresh start with a clean sheet. They'd be stupid to make a mess of their lives a second time."

"Some people are made that way," he informed.

"And some make them that way," she retorted.

"Oh, God, a reformer." He showed disgust. "What's your name?"

"Miranda Dean."

"Well, it could be worse."

"What d'you mean?"

"It could be Dolly Doberhorst."

"Who on earth is *she?*"

"An obese charmer round at Annie's." He studied her figure. "Some fellows like 'em fat. And some don't."

"Really?" She seemed quite unconscious of his meaning or of the trace of appetite in his eyes. "I'd better carry on with more chores else they'll never be done. Pardon me, won't you?"

"Sure."

He watched her enter the trailer but did not continue on his way. He remained leaning on the post, picking his teeth with a thin stalk of grass and thinking that she'd be very much to his taste without her clothes. Yes, she'd be clean and wholesome, not painted and gross like the others. For a short while he continued to exercise his masculine privilege of pondering delightful possibilities until suddenly he became aware of a huge bulk looming at his side.

Bulstrode followed his gaze and challenged, "What's the idea, staring at her place like that? You thinking of busting in?"

"You wouldn't dream of it, of course?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"Don't give me that. Females are females. She's merely playing hard to get. And you're a liar, anyway."

"That's enough for me," said Bulstrode, speaking low in his chest. "Take off that coat so I can start mauling your meat."

"You'd better not get tough with me, Muscle-bound." Marsden protruded a pocket significantly. "Because."

"There now, you've got a gun. Isn't that nice?" Bulstrode shuffled around to face him. "Like to know something?"

"What?"

"I just don't give a damn."

With that he thrust out a hairy paw, arrested it halfway as Miranda Dean reappeared and came toward them. Lowering the paw, he tried to hide it in the manner of a kid caught fooling with a prohibited slingshot. Marsden relaxed, took his hand from his pocket.

Reaching them, she said brightly, "I thought you boys might appreciate these." Smiling at each in turn, she bestowed a couple of little black books and returned to her trailer.

Taking one look at what he'd got, Marsden groaned, "Holy Moses, a prayer-book."

"With hymns," confirmed Bulstrode on a note of complete incredulity.

"A religious nut," said Marsden. "I know she'd have a flaw somewhere. Nobody's perfect."

"Hymns," repeated Bulstrode with the air of one whose idol has revealed feet of clay. His beefy features registered confusion.

"What a laugh," Marsden went on. "When Annie hears about this she'll roll all over the floor."

"It's no business of Annie's," asserted Bulstrode, feeling belligerent for no reason that he could understand.

Jerking an indicative thumb toward the trailer, Marsden opined, "It's going to be. Sooner or later she will make it Annie's business. I know that kind of crackpot. I've met 'em before. They can't leave well enough alone. Stick their noses into everyone's affairs. They think it's their ordained mission in life to improve everything and everybody."

"Maybe some of us could do with it," Bulstrode suggested.

"Speak for yourself," advised Marsden scornfully. "A shave, a haircut and a bath and you'd rise almost to subhuman level." His tones hardened. "But this is a free world. Why should you wash or shave if you don't want to?"

"It's honest dirt," said Bulstrode, giving him a retaliatory stare. "Soap and water can take it off—which is more than it could do for your mind."

"Suffering saints, that holy tome must be working on you already. Throw it away before it takes hold."

He set the example by tossing his own book into a bank of tall weeds. Bulstrode promptly retrieved it.

"If we don't want them we ought to give them back to her. She may have paid good money for them."

"All right," said Marsden with malicious anticipation. "You go tell her to put them where the monkey put the nuts. I'll stay here and watch the fun."

"I'll keep them." Bulstrode crammed them into a hind pocket. "I'll hand them back to her some time when I'm passing."

Marsden smiled to himself as he let the other amble away. Then he favored the trailer with another speculative stare before he departed in the opposite direction.

The ship lifted in the late afternoon of the third day, groaned high in the dank, everlasting fog and was gone toward the mother planet that no man on Venus could see. A sister ship was due in about six weeks' time and another two months afterward. In the intervals between such visits those who remained were a primitive community vastly marooned beneath perpetual cloud.

Miranda went out for her first sight-seeing stroll that same evening. It was pleasant enough because the vaporous blanket came no lower with the night, the air was rich with oxygen which clung to the lower levels although absent from the upper strata. All around were strong plant-odors and the area held comforting warmth.

Here and there amid the sprawl of shacks gleamed many lights served by a small generating-station astride a rushing stream three miles away. Quite a blaze of illumination came from one building midway along the straggling and badly rutted main street.

She walked slowly into this slovenly town whose citizens thought it unworthy even of naming. She noted the rickety fence around somebody's clapboard, one-room hovel and, nearby, the pathetic remnants of a tiny garden soon started and as soon abandoned. One Earth-rose still battled for life amid an unruly mob of Venusian growths intent upon strangling the stranger from afar.

To her right a larger, three-roomed erection had a dilapidated shop-front with a wire screen in lieu of precious glass, a few rusting hammers, saws, chisels, pliers and other oddments exhibited behind. In the middle of this display stood a crudely lettered sign reading: *Haircut $1.00. Beard Trim 40¢*. What she had seen of the inhabitants made her wonder whether this sign had ever attracted a customer.

Farther along she came to the extraordinarily well-lit building from which came the noise of fifty or more raucous voices and occasional bursts of song. By local standards it was a large edifice, built mainly of peeled logs and noteworthy for having windows of real glass. Somebody must have paid a fancy price to import those transparent sheets.

Over the door hung a big board bearing neat, precise letters from which condensation dripped steadily.

ANNIE'S PLACE
Anna M. Jones, Prop.

A burly, rubber-booted man trudged along the street, paused outside the door, examined Miranda curiously. He was a complete stranger to her and she to him.

"What's wrong, Sweetie? Annie gone bad on you?"

She eyed him in calm silence.

"Not deaf, are you?"

"No," she said.

"Then why don't you answer a civil question?"

"I didn't consider it civil."

"So that's the way it is, eh?" He gave a thin scowl. "One of those finicky tarts. Like to pick and choose." He shrugged broad, damp shoulders. "You'll come to your senses eventually."

"So will you."

"You'll change before you're through with this life."

"Don't we all?" she offered sweetly.

"Not the way we want," he countered.

"The way God wants," she said.

"Jumping Joseph, don't give me *that* stuff!"

With a loud sniff of contempt he went inside. The noise from the place boosted and sank as the door opened and shut. A waft of air puffed forth loaded with strong tobacco, strong booze and sweat.

Under one of the windows lay an empty crate. Mounting it, Miranda raised herself on tiptoe and glanced inside. Not for long. Just for a brief moment but somewhat in the manner of a general studying the field of battle. It sufficed to

show the expected scene of tables, chairs, bottles and eight or nine blowsy women. And even a piano.

Thirty million miles. Every pound, every ounce had to be hauled a minimum of thirty million miles and often much more. So they didn't have this and they didn't have that—but they did have brewing facilities and a piano.

Well, she couldn't blame them for it. All work and no play adds up to a miserable existence. This was a man's world and men needed an outlet. Annie was supplying the demand. Annie was giving them light and laughter plus girls to whom nothing was too hot or too heavy.

But sooner or later men would discover that they had other needs, if not today then tomorrow or the day after, or next month, or next year. It would be for Miranda rather than for Annie to supply those.

This was a world in the earliest pangs of birth. Astrophysics was the skilled midwife but the fidgeting father was Ordinary Humanity. The world was destined to grow up no matter how reluctant to escape its easy-going, irresponsible childhood.

And it would grow up, become big and civilized, truly a world in its own right. The test of civilization is its capacity for satisfying individual needs, all needs, sober or sodden, sensible or crazy, the need for darkness or light, noise or silence, joy or tears, heaven or hell, salvation or damnation. The adult world would have room for opposites of everything—including Annie and her ilk.

Hurriedly returning to her trailer, Miranda extracted something from its small case, returned to Annie's place nursing the object in her hands. Except for the tinkling of its piano, the building was silent as she neared. Then suddenly a chorus of hoarse, powerful voices roared into catchy song that shook the door and rattled the windows.

Anna Maria, Anna Maria, Anna
Maria Jones,
She's the queen of the tambourine,
the banjo and the bones;
Rootitoot she plays the flute in a
fascinating manner,

Pinkety-pong she runs along the
keys of the grand pianner,
Rumpety-tum she bangs the drum
with very superior tones,
Anna Maria, Anna Maria, Anna
Maria Jones!

They howled the last three words at the very tops of their voices and followed with much hammering upon tables and stamping of feet. Then came an anticipatory quietness as they awaited a response from the subject of their song.

Outside the door Miranda promptly snatched this noiseless pause, stretched her little concertina, made it emit a drone of opening chords, and commenced to sing in a high, sweet voice. The tune was fully as catchy, in fact it had a definite boogey beat, but the words were different—something about Hallelujah, Christ the King.

Within the building a chair got knocked over, a glass was smashed. There sounded a mutter of many voices and several coarse oaths. A crimson-faced, tousle-haired man jerked open the door and stared at Miranda.

"Jeez!" he said, blinking. "Jeez!"

Several more joined this dumbfounded onlooker, pressing around him or peering over his shoulders. They were too petrified with amazement to think up suitable remarks. Eventually they parted to make way for one of Annie's girls, a startlingly overdeveloped female with hennaed hair and a revealing frock.

Crinkling heavily pencilled eyebrows at the singer, the newcomer said in hard, brittle tones, "Beat it, you fool!"

"Haw-haw!" chortled the tousle-haired man, willing to extract the most from this diversion. "What's the matter, Ivy? You afraid of competition?"

"From that?" Ivy let go a snort of disgust. "Don't talk crazy."

"Oh, I don't know," he said, slyly baiting her. "Annie could use a young and slender one, just for a pleasant change."

"Not a blasted hymn-howler, she couldn't," contradicted

Ivy with much positiveness. "And neither could you. Get wise to yourself. You're no scented Adonis."

"Off your knees, Slade," advised one of the others, trying to add fuel to the flames. "Ivy's got you down and she's counting you out."

"Wouldn't be the first time," grinned Slade, giving Ivy a you-know-what-I-mean look.

"Shut up," snapped Ivy irritably. She glared at Miranda. "Are you going to quit yawping or not?"

Miranda sang on, apparently oblivious to everything.

Exhibiting a fat fist ornamented with six rings in which zircons did duty as diamonds, Ivy rasped, "Shuffle off before I hammer you in the teeth. I'm not telling you again."

Adding a couple more decibels to the volume, Miranda poured her hymn through the open door.

Ivy's ample bosom heaved, her face flushed, her eyes glinted. "All right, Misery, you've asked for it. If the fellows won't close your sanctimonious trap, I will!"

So saying she stepped forward, intent on mayhem. Slade grabbed at her and got her arm, his badly gnawed fingers sinking into the puffy flesh.

"Now, now, Ivy, take it easy."

"Let go of me," ordered Ivy in dangerous tones.

Miranda continued blithely to sing. For good measure she laid it in the groove with a couple of hot licks on the concertina.

"Take your paw off my arm, you smelly tramp," bawled Ivy, crimson with fury.

"Be a lady," suggested Slade, hanging on to her. "Just for once."

That did it. Ivy's rage switched its aim forthwith.

"What d'you mean, just for once?" Swinging her free arm she walloped him over the ear. The blow was intended to knock his head off but he had seen it coming and rocked with it.

"Haw, haw, haw!" laughed a bearded onlooker, holding his belly.

"Come take the keys to the Kingdom," trilled Miranda. *"Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"*

Still employing her unhampered arm, Ivy now smacked the

bearded laugher clean in the whiskers. He sat down suddenly and hard, still chortling fit to choke. Several more cackled with him. Ivy hauled furiously against Slade's grip and voiced vitriolic imprecations.

"Ivy!" called a sharp, authoritative voice from somewhere inside.

"Look, Annie," hollered Ivy, "there's a dizzy dame out here and—"

"What's it to me?" inquired the voice acidly. "For the love of Moses come in and shut that door—the fresh air is killing us."

Loud guffaws greeted that sally. Ivy forced herself to simmer down sufficiently to obey, throwing Miranda a look of sudden death before she went inside. The others followed, openly regretting this swift end to the fun. The door closed with a contemptuous bang.

Miranda finished her singing and commenced addressing a speech to thin air. After four minutes of this an old frontiersman came creakily along the street, paused to look her over, stopped to listen. A bit later he removed his hat and held it in one hand. He was a scrawny specimen with clear blue eyes set in a face resembling an aged and badly wrinkled apple. For reasons best known to himself he did not consider it at all strange that a young woman should take time off to preach to a non-existent congregation.

In fact when she reached the end he wheezed an underbreath, "Amen!" watched her tuck the concertina under one arm and head homeward. After she had gone he remained hat in hand for quite a time before he planted it on his head and mooched ruminatively on his way.

From that time onward Miranda's singing became a regular evening performance. Sometimes she took her stand at one end of the potholed main street, sometimes at the other, and every now and again it was squarely in front of Annie's place.

Gradually the oldster made it a habit to provide her with a one-man audience, standing not too near, not too far off, watching her with bright blue eyes and never uttering a word other than the final "Amen!" It wasn't inborn piety coming

out in later years, it wasn't sympathy with the spirit of rebellion, it wasn't his way of protesting against things that are as distinct from things that ought to be. It was nothing more than the urge to cheer on a little dog fighting a big one.

Passers-by treated Miranda in three different ways. Some stared blankly ahead and refused to acknowledge her existence. Some threw her the brief, pitying glance one bestows on a village imbecile. The majority grinned and made her the target of coarse witticisms, always malicious and often cruel, opining loudly that religious mania is the natural result of chronic virginity. She never changed color, never winced, never permitted a barb to sink in.

Once in a while the latter type had a go at heckling her speeches, taunting her with unseemly parodies, filling in her pauses with bawdy wisecracks or giving her the mock-support of mock-piety. Her one loyal listener resented these tactics but held his peace and remained content to pose nearby, hat in hand.

There came a night when a burly, blue-jowled drunk dreamed up the ultimate insult. He stood on the boardwalk swaying and blearing all through the sermon, wiping glazed, out-of-focus eyes with the back of a hairy hand and belching loudly whenever she ended a sentence. Then when she had finished he turned to the oldster and ostentatiously tossed a coin into his hat. With a violent burp and an airy wave of his hand he staggered into Annie's place followed by three or four appreciative witnesses.

Gazing angrily into his hat, his blue eyes burning, the old frontiersman said, "See that? The boozy bum flung us a nickel. What'll I do with it?"

"Give it to me." Miranda extended an eager palm.

He passed it over like one in a dream. "Mean to say you'll actually take money from a no-good sot?"

"I would accept it from the Devil himself." She stuck the coin in a pocket. "We can use it for God's work."

"*We?*" He misunderstood her use of the plural, thought it over, eventually mumbled, "Maybe you're right. Money is money no matter how you get it." Then he had another long think, screwing up his wizened features while he wrestled with a personal problem. Reaching a decision, he moved

across, stood beside her shoulder to shoulder and held out his hat invitingly.

"Would you care to sing with me?" she asked, squeezing an opening chord.

"No, Ma'am. I've got a hell of a voice. Just let me be as I am."

"All right." She closed her eyes, opened her mouth and jazzed up a fast one about marching, marching until we come to the Golden Gates.

Ten minutes later a hurrying, self-conscious man reacted to the offer of the extended hat, threw a dime into it, cast a scared glance around and beat it from the scene of the crime.

She had been on Venus exactly eight weeks. Another ship had come and gone. By now the community glumly accepted that it had a harmless lunatic in its midst.

Digging the little plot outside her trailer early one day, she paused to rest, rubbed the blistered palm of her right hand, glanced up and found a plump, frowsy-looking girl surveying her speculatively.

"Good morning," greeted Miranda, smiling.

"Morning," responded the other shortly and after some hesitation.

"It's nice to meet another woman," Miranda went on. "There are so few of us and so many men around."

"Don't I know it!" gave back the plump girl with subtle meaning. She looked warily up and down the street, eyed the trailer, seemed undecided whether or not to linger.

"Would you care to come inside?" Miranda invited. "There's coffee and cakes and I'm starving for a gossip and—"

"I'm Dolly," chipped in the other, saying it with the air of begging pardon for a skunk in her purse.

"How nice. My name is Miranda." Dumping the spade, she went to the trailer, opened its door.

"I work at Annie's," announced Dolly, making no move.

"That must be very interesting. I'd love you to tell me all about it."

Registering a fat scowl, Dolly demanded, "Are you making fun of me?"

"Good gracious, no."

"They make plenty of you."

"I'm used to it."

"I'm not," said Dolly. She had another uneasy look up and down the street, added, "Hell of a place."

"If you'd care to come in, please do."

"I guess I will." She advanced as if breasting an invisible tide. "I've gone past caring, see?" Entering, she flopped onto a pneumatic seat, studied her surroundings with frank curiosity. "Nice little joint you've got here."

"Thank you. I'm so glad you like it." Pumping her kerosene stove, Miranda lit it and adjusted the flame.

"Damnsight better than my flea-trap. Everyone says you're cracked. H'm! It sure looks like it. This holy biz must pay off."

"It does."

"So I see," said Dolly with a touch of malice. Her eyes narrowed. "Where's the catch?"

Miranda turned to look at her, coffee percolator in hand. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Nobody makes a bad cent without surrendering their heart's blood for it one way or another," informed Dolly. "You have got to give in order to receive. What's your sacrifice?"

"Nothing much. Only my life, such as it is." Capping the percolator, Miranda placed it on the stove, asked with deceptively casual interest, "What do *you* give?"

"Shut up!" snapped Dolly savagely. She rocked to and fro, nursing a cheap and clumsy purse on her lap and staring down at her big knees. She did this for quite a time. Then without warning she said harshly, "I'm damn sick of it!" and burst into tears.

Taking no notice, Miranda continued to busy herself with various tasks in the tiny kitchen and left her visitor to howl it out. Dolly shook and sobbed, blindly feeling for a handkerchief. Finally she stood up, tear-stained and full of embarrassment.

"I'd better be going."

"Oh, not now, surely. The coffee is just about ready."

"I've made a prize fool of myself."

"Nonsense. A woman is entitled to a good cry once in a while." Taking little cakes from a cupboard, Miranda arranged them on a flowered plate. "Makes one feel lots better sometimes."

"How the blazes do you know?" Dolly sat down again, dabbed the corners of her eyes, stared at the cakes. "Bet you've never bawled bloody murder."

"I did the day my father died."

"Oh." She swallowed hard, examined thick, unmanicured fingers, said after a long pause, "I don't remember my old man."

"How sad." Miranda poured the coffee.

"And not so much of my mother either," continued Dolly morbidly reminiscent. "I ran away from her when I was fifteen. She didn't think I was cut out to be a great actress. But I knew better, see?"

"Yes, I see."

"So I pranced around in the chorus line of a crummy road-show and that's as far as I got. The years rolled on, I couldn't keep my hips down and slowly but surely I was shoved toward the breadline by younger kids as daft as I had been. So . . . so . . . a girl has to do *something,* hasn't she?"

"Most certainly," agreed Miranda. "Will you try one of these cakes. I made them myself last night."

"Thanks." Dolly took a large bite, choked with emotion, blew her nose and said, "I went the way of all flesh, if you know what I mean. I got pawed around and kicked about something awful. But at least I ate. Thank God my mother never knew about it—she'd have died of shame."

Miranda, wisely, offered no comment.

"I finished up here with Annie. Sort of wanted to get away from everything over there." Dolly used her piece of cake to point more or less Earthward. "Now I'd go back on the next ship if there was anything for me to make it worth the going. But there isn't. Not for me. I picked this lousy, Godforsaken dump and I'm stuck with it for keeps."

"Well, there is plenty for a woman to do here," opined Miranda, sipping her coffee.

"You're dead right there is—and I'm fed up doing it. What else is there?"

"This town will want hundreds of things as time rolls on. It can't grow without them."

"Such as what?" Dolly persisted sceptically.

"Just for a start, a little laundry might be a good idea."

"A laundry?" Dolly was reluctant to believe her ears. "The few girls do their own washing. The men don't wash at all. Who the blazes wants a laundry?"

"The men," said Miranda. "Obviously."

"Who'd operate it?" challenged Dolly, changing her angle of attack.

"We two."

She dropped her piece of cake, fumbled around for it, retrieved it and stared wide-eyed at Miranda. "Mean to say you really think I'd get busy scrubbing clothes for a living?" She gave an unconvincing sniff. "I wouldn't sink so low."

"I would."

"Then why don't you?"

"I intend to." Miranda indicated a couple of large packing cases looming outside the window. "One plastic tent and one fully automatic washing-machine. All I need is power. They're fixing me up with an electricity supply tomorrow."

"You've got a nerve," said Dolly. "Christ, you've got a nerve!"

"Haven't *you?*"

Standing up, Dolly prowled restlessly around the small space, gazed a couple of times at the packing cases, scowled and muttered to herself, mooched to and fro. After a while she said, "Don't tempt me."

"Why not?"

"Annie would sling me out on my neck. Either I work for her or I don't. Besides, I'd have no place to sleep."

"This is a two-berth trailer."

"So what?" Dolly let her hands flap around as if she didn't know what to do with them. "You don't need a haybag like me."

"Everybody is needed by someone," said Miranda gently. "Everybody."

"You're only saying that."

"It's the truth, all the same. Don't you believe me?"

"I'd like to. It isn't easy."

"It should be," Miranda mused. "I've never found any difficulty in believing the things I want to believe."

Ignoring that remark, Dolly again ambled round and round the tiny floor-space. "By God!" she said. "By God!"

"Besides," added Miranda for good measure, "we'd be helped quite a piece."

"Oh, yes? By whom?"

"By God."

Dolly flinched and snapped back, "We'll be on the skids with anyone less than God Almighty."

"All that's required of us is courage. One can still have that when one has nothing else."

"You're the kind of loony yap who can talk your way into anything and talk your way out of it again," observed Dolly. She reached a reluctant decision, shrugged plump shoulders. "Looks like you are touched in the head and you've made me that way too. Anyway, you've got company. If you can get away with it why shouldn't I?"

"Like another coffee?" Miranda reached for the cup.

They were having a hopeless struggle with the tent next morning when Bulstrode came along, joined the fray, pitted his brute strength against unruly folds of plastic. Between the three of them they erected it, pegged its stays, fixed it good and tight.

"Anything more?" inquired Bulstrode, brushing his hands.

"I hardly like to trouble you," said Miranda, her gaze straying toward the other crate.

"Think nothing of it," he assured, secretly surprised to find himself enjoying this spell of gallantry. It lent him a special air of proprietorship. Breaking the crate open, he dragged the machine into the tent, looked it over, asked, "What's the use of this gadget with nothing to drive it?"

"We're having power laid on this afternoon and water tonight," Miranda explained. "Tomorrow, you'll see, this will be the M and D Laundry."

"The whatta?"

"The Miranda and Dolly Laundry."

"I've been wondering what you were doing here," said

Bulstrode, giving Dolly an incredulous once-over. "Don't tell me *you're* in this?"

"Any objections, Hamface?" demanded Dolly aggressively.

"No business of mine," he said, backing away fast.

"Thank you so much," put in Miranda. "We could never have coped without your help."

"It was a pleasure." He glowered around in search of witnesses, truculently ready to prove his hardness to any who might accuse him of becoming soft. There were none in sight. He lumbered away and they heard him growl underbreath as he went, "A laundry—holy mackerel!"

Staring after the burly figure, Dolly said wonderingly, "What made that muscle-bound bum pitch in?"

"We needed him," said Miranda.

Dolly stewed it over, responded quietly, "I'm beginning to think you've got something."

"Do you feel it strongly enough to come out with me this evening?"

"Out with you?" She showed puzzlement swiftly followed by uneasiness. "Singing in the street?"

"Yes."

"Nothing doing." Dolly waved agitated hands. "Don't ask me *that!* I've given Annie the brushoff and come in with you on this crazy stunt but don't ask me *that!*"

"What's wrong with it?"

"There's nothing *wrong,* I suppose," admitted Dolly, her alarm increasing by leaps and bounds. "It's not the sort of thing I care to do."

"Afraid they'll laugh at you?"

"And how! They'll bellow until their buttons fly off."

"They don't do that to me," Miranda mentioned.

"That's because . . . because—"

"Because what?"

"You've been around quite a time. They know you're off your head and they're tired of making the most of it. A joke wears thin when it's used again and again and again. They've come to the point of accepting you as you are."

"That's true, Dolly. It always happens if you are suffi-

ciently determined, if you stick it out long enough. And it can happen to you too."

"I'm in no mood to try." Her voice went up a couple of notes. "I've been the plaything of boozy apes too long to make myself the target of their cheap sneers now. Don't shove me further than I want to go. Enough is enough."

"All right. You don't mind me leaving you by yourself for a couple of hours?"

"Mind? Why should I? Nothing can happen to me that hasn't happened fifty times. Besides, I'm not a kid. You go do your holy serenading. I'll tidy the place and have supper ready for when you come back."

"Thank you. It will be nice to return to someone." Miranda smiled at her, added, "I'm glad to have you with me. I'm really glad."

"Oh, cut it out," said Dolly, deeply embarrassed.

And so that evening one remained in the trailer and absorbed the long-forgotten atmosphere of a home while the other took the concertina into town.

The wrinkled oldster was waiting as now he invariably did. By this time Miranda had learned his name: James Hanford. But that was all she knew of him.

"Good evening, Jimmy," she greeted.

"Good evening, Miss Dean," he responded solemnly.

Then he stood beside her at the curb and held out his tattered hat while she began to sing. The collection amounted to one quarter, one nickel and one worthless brass slug.

There sounded an imperative knock at the trailer door in the midafternoon of next day. Answering, Miranda found a tall, stately woman waiting outside. The visitor appeared to be in her late fifties, with white, regal-looking hair and intelligent but arrogant features.

"Good afternoon," said Miranda, a trifle primly.

"That depends on what one makes of it," answered the other in sharp, cynical tones. She subjected Miranda to a careful examination with dark gray eyes that had seen more than enough. "May I come in?"

"Please do."

"Thank you." Entering, the visitor glanced around with

begrudging approval, announced, "Doubtless you have heard of me. I am Annie." Her cultured voice held sour humor as she added, "Once known as Anytime Annie. But that was long ago."

"How interesting," said Miranda. "Do sit down."

"I prefer to stand." Again she had a look over the trailer. "H'm! Quite domesticated. Where is Dolly?"

"Outside. Working in the tent."

"So she really is here?" said Annie, in the manner of one confirming a ridiculous rumor. "Why has she left me?"

"She's ambitious."

"A clever answer," Annie conceded. "I admire you for it. You must be smarter than they say."

"Thank you so much."

"In which direction do her ambitions lie?"

"We've started a laundry."

"A laundry?" Annie's well-plucked eyebrows lifted a fraction. "Do you think you're a couple of Chinks?"

"I presume you mean Chinese?"

"That's right."

"Do we look like Chinese?"

"Dolly is and always has been far too stupid to know what's good for her," went on Annie, evading the point.

"But you are *so* much wiser?"

"I ought to be, my dear. Much as I hate to admit it, I am old enough to be her mother. I have been around for quite a spell. One learns a lot of things through the passing years."

"I should hope so," Miranda gave back fervently. "It must be terrible to learn them all too late."

Annie winced, recovered. "You have a quick tongue." She waved a hand to indicate the surroundings. "I think *you* could do better for yourself than *this.*"

"I'm quite happy."

"Of course you are. You have youth on your side. The days of disillusionment have yet to come. But they will, they will!"

"I doubt it," observed Miranda. "My line of business is vastly different from yours. I find it rather satisfying."

"Clothes scrubbing and hymn howling," scoffed Annie, displaying a wealth of contempt. "Any incurable cretin could do

either." She brushed the subject aside. "But I have not come here to waste time on profitless argument. All I want is a word with Dolly."

"Very well." Sliding the window to one side, Miranda called toward the tent, "Dolly! Dolly!"

In short time Dolly arrived, scowled at the sight of who was waiting for her, demanded, "What do you want?"

"You!" informed Annie succinctly. "It's plenty hard enough to drag girls all the way here without them going temperamental on me afterwards. So collect your clothes and your scattered wits and come back where you belong."

"You can go to hell," said Dolly.

"Someday I shall—according to those peculiarly well-informed." Annie threw a brief, sardonic smile toward Miranda. "But that time is not yet. Meanwhile, you will continue to work for me."

"I'm not your slave. Why should I?"

"Because I picked you out of the gutter and that's where you're heading right now."

"That is a statement of opinion rather than of fact," Miranda put in.

"I'll thank you to keep out of this," Annie retorted. "You have meddled enough." She returned attention to Dolly. "Well, are you going to see reason or not?"

"I don't want to go back."

"You will, in your own good time. And then I won't take you. Not at any price. You could starve to death on my doorstep and I wouldn't bother to toss you a crumb. So it's now or never." She studied the other calculatingly. "Opportunity is knocking for the last time. You can return to me or stay here and rot."

"I'm staying."

"Very well. Someday you'll regret it. When the time comes you need not bring your troubles to me." Turning to the door, she spoke to Miranda with exaggerated courtesy. "Thank you for having me."

"You're most welcome," said Miranda. *"Anytime."*

"So kind of you," responded Annie, refusing to twitch. Outside, she added, "I know your kind. I've met them before. You'll keep on and keep on squalling until you've got all the

dopes solidly behind you." Her smile was a warning. "But you'll never get *me*."

With that she departed. Miranda went indoors, sat down, stared at the subdued Dolly.

"What a strange person. I didn't expect her to be like that."

"Like what?" asked Dolly, little interested.

"She seems slightly aristocratic."

"Pah!" said Dolly. "A vaudeville artist busted on the boards. A theatrical floppo. She rose higher than I did, fell farther and landed harder. Still flaunts the grand manner. Still thinks she's really somebody. It's one of the things I hate about her—always acting so clever, so superior."

"One must learn not to hate."

"Why?"

"Because people are as life has made them."

"You can't alter people," declared Dolly flatly.

"But you can change life," said Miranda. "Why, you have just changed yours."

At the end of another six months the laundry was functioning regularly, at a modest profit, and had a small but steadily growing list of customers who were discovering that a clean shirt goes well with a shave and haircut.

The tent had been replaced by a peeled log cabin built by Bulstrode and a dozen cronies who'd concealed their inward pleasure beneath a stream of blasphemy. The aged Jimmy had appointed himself general handyman and Bulstrode had developed the habit of keeping an eye on things by calling in from time to time.

Most importantly of all, the community had now accepted the situation as one unalterable either by opposition or by pointed criticism. Indeed, it was impossible to think up an adequate reason for opposing. In everyone's eyes Dolly had become established as a genuine laundress while it was understood by one and all that Jimmy had some sort of stake in the business and that the bearlike Bulstrode was its unofficial protector.

The days of ridicule and venom had drifted by like fragments of an evil dream. The subject was exhausted of cruel

humor and there was nothing derogatory left to be said. Sheer persistence had converted the formerly odd into a present-day convention; all that once had been resented was now taken for granted and recognized as an integral part of the Venusian scene.

Sheer persistence.

Subconsciously sensing this change in social atmosphere, Dolly found that it required no redoubtable effort of will to go out with Miranda one evening. Taking a tambourine from its box in the trailer, she was satisfied at first merely to beat time with the singing but after four nights her courage suddenly welled up. She joined in with a bellowing but not unpleasant contralto and the town accepted without comment that now two voices were crying in the Venusian wilderness. Jimmy still remained silent, content to hold the hat and lend the moral support of his presence.

But they were three. A daft virgin, an aged washout and an erstwhile whore.

More ships had solidified out of the everlasting mist and dissolved back into it, the last bringing a couple of families complete with children. Swiftly erected shacks lengthened the main street by half a mile and there was half-hearted, perfunctory talk of throwing up a ramshackle school for the moppets. The nameless town was growing slowly but surely—creeping toward its destiny of a someday city.

One morning Miranda left the laundry in the others' care, picked her way across four miles of rubble-strewn ground and reached the niobium extraction plant. It was a big, dirty place where hammer-mills set up a deafening clatter and grinders roared without cease; a place full of big-chested men smeared with mud formed of granite-dust and moisture. Finding the office, she handed in her card.

Somebody conducted her to an inner room where a wide-shouldered man with dark hair and fuzzy mustache stood behind his desk, the card in hand. A second man, red-haired and lean-faced, posed nearby and studied the visitor with frank curiosity.

"Please be seated," said the mustached one, indicating a

chair. "My name is Langtree." He motioned toward his companion. "And this is Mr. McLeish."

"So glad to know you," responded Miranda.

Waiting for her to sit, Langtree resumed his own chair, had another look at the card. "Now what can we do for you . . . er . . . Lieutenant?"

McLeish gave a slight start of surprise, bent over to examine the card for himself.

"I understand that this company registers title to land," said Miranda.

"In that respect we are functioning on behalf of the Terran Government," Langtree told her. "It is a temporary expedient. Copies of claims are shipped to Earth and are not effective until approved and recorded there. We have no real legislative status of our own. We are merely deputed to act until such time as this planet can support a few bureaucrats."

"All the same, you can assign unclaimed land?"

"Providing that it has no known mineral deposits," he conceded. "Do you have something in mind?"

"Yes, Mr. Langtree. There's a nice, large vacant lot right in the middle of the main street. I can't imagine why nobody has taken it. But if it hasn't been claimed, I want it."

He gave a rueful smile. "That particular piece of estate has been reserved for this company's headquarters whenever we can get around to some real, solid building."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Don't let it worry you. Recently we have changed our minds and it's most unlikely that we'll use that plot."

"Why not?" Her oval face became hopeful.

"Originally we supposed that the town would remain centered exactly where it is right now and that we had grabbed ourselves a good, dominating position. But now it is obvious that things aren't going to work out that way. Geologists have discovered rich supplies of pitchblende in the east, a railroad will be constructed in that direction and the town's natural tendency will be to spread along the tracks." He pondered a moment, said, "You realize what that means?"

"No—what does it mean?"

"If this place ever becomes big—which I think it will—and if it has a slummy area—which unfortunately is very prob-

able—the plot you want will be smack among the shacks and garbage dumps. It will be in a district anything but salubrious."

"So much the better."

He frowned at that, went on, "Moreover it is directly opposite Annie's dump where all the rowdies tend to congregate."

"So much the better," she repeated.

"Have you ever lived in a big city?" put in McLeish.

"Yes."

"In parts that are . . . well . . . not nice?"

"Nowhere else."

"And did you *like* it?" he persisted.

"Of course. It was very convenient for me because my work lay right outside my door."

"Oh!" He subsided in defeat.

Langtree harumphed, pulled at his mustache, asked, "For what purpose do you require this land, Lieutenant?"

"For a place of worship—eventually."

"That is what I thought." He played the mustache again. "You put me in a poor position to refuse."

"Do you *want* to refuse?" she inquired, open-eyed.

"Not exactly." He sought around for means of expressing himself, continued, "Naturally we approve your plan. In fact we support it most heartily. But we deplore the timing."

"Why?"

"You've managed to establish yourself in a small and tough community. So far you've got by. But don't let that fool you. It's going to be lots tougher before it becomes easier."

"You really think so?"

"I'm certain of it. Since the first ship made its landfall we've had eighteen murders and forty or more attempted ones. Not to mention plenty of lesser crimes. That's nothing, nothing at all. The real labor pains are yet to come."

He paused for comment from her but got none.

"Immediately the railroad is completed we'll have four shiploads of roughnecks here to operate the mines. Only yesterday we received prospectors' reports of large deposits of silver and osmiridium in the north and those will entice plenty

more hard characters." Studying her thoughtfully, he assured, "You haven't seen anything yet."

"Neither has this town," she gave back, smiling.

"I don't doubt that. And I don't doubt that you intend to show it plenty. But I'd feel a lot happier if you'd put the brake on your ambitions until at least we've reached the dignity of having a small police force."

"Wouldn't it be much more satisfactory never to need one?" she asked.

Throwing up both hands in mock despair, Langtree said, "I should know better than to argue with the opposite sex."

"Then may I have this piece of land?" She leaned forward, her expression eager.

"You're hamstrung, manacled, pinned down and counted out," opined McLeish, grinning at Langtree. "You might as well quit."

"I surrender." Langtree heaved a sigh of resignation. "Go fetch the papers."

When they had been brought he read carefully through them, filled them in triplicate, showed her where to sign, gave her one copy. She departed, grateful and bright-eyed. Langtree flopped back in his seat and gazed absently at the wall.

After a while, he said, "I guess it was inevitable. It had to come sooner or later."

"Think so?"

"Yes. Ever noticed how big cities are boosted out of the dirt?"

"Sure," said McLeish. "They're raised by a horde of steel-erectors, bricklayers, masons and hod-carriers bossed by fellows who wander around consulting blueprints."

"*And* by the long sustained pressure of a thousand and one determined groups," declared Langtree with emphasis. "The Quakers forced Philadelphia out of the earth. The Mormons raised Salt Lake City from the desert. Earth is spattered with New Jerusalems built by pernickety dissenters and various gangs of one-track-minders. Stands to sense the same things will happen wherever humanity is located."

"Maybe you're right," McLeish admitted.

"I remember that when they concocted that new rocket-

fuel they said that space was ours. It wasn't. They had to spend years designing combustion-chambers able to contain the pressures. So now we're squirted across the heavens by a blast that is somewhat terrific. And still it isn't enough. Now we must settle, explcit and build under psychological thrusts that can't and won't be contained."

"So it seems."

"It's only a matter of time before some fellow with a bee in his bonnet will try to prevent all building within a particular square mile of land because he thinks it ought to be reserved for a city park. He'll get like-minders behind him. They'll bellow and bawl and agitate until the area is officially protected and finally becomes a park. Another mob will compel all booze saloons to behave in a civilized manner. Another gang will push and shove and play merry hell until we've a hospital and a maternity home long before we can really afford either. Sustained pressure—it gets there in the end."

"It isn't easy to brush it aside," remarked McLeish.

"It's well-nigh impossible," Langtree asserted. "The pushful groups provide a development-factor that objective scientists rarely take into account. They can bring about the cumulative effect of a very large bomb, but slowly." He thought some more, added reminiscently, "When I was a kid a creeper thrust a thin tendril through a minute crack in the garden wall. My old man wanted to cut it but Mom wouldn't let him. Sixteen years later that wall was busted. You'd have thought a heavy howitzer had scored a direct hit on it. My old man had to pay fifty dollars for new brickwork."

"That girl is different," said McLeish. "She's a human being. She'd have to push until she'd grown old."

"Man, I've seen them do that too." Langtree threw an inquiring glance at the other. "Would *you?*"

"Not on your life!"

"She would. And it won't surprise me if she does."

"It's a shame," decided McLeish for no logical reason. "But perhaps it's a good thing for this or any other world."

"This or any other world *needs* a few good things," said Langtree.

The vacant lot still remained a vacant lot at the end of another year. Some fine day when enough money, hands and material were available it would hold a stone-built, glass-windowed flophouse that would also be a house of God. At times it seemed as if such a culmination was an impossibly long way off, that the temporarily homeless would have no place to sleep, the spiritually hungry no place to pray. But the lot was held in stubborn possession because everything comes to those who wait.

At the laundry there were now three washing-machines and Jimmy had become an energetic, full-time worker therein. Bulstrode was a frequent visitor with the frequency increasing as the weeks went by. Once or twice the big man had been frightened and horrified by a secret desire to turn the street parading trio into a quartet. He had stepped upon it firmly, crushing it down.

His strength was also his weakness in that he doubted his ability to counter a crude insult with anything less than a broken nose. And from occasional remarks let slip by Miranda he'd gathered that nose-busting was out, most definitely out. That made it awfully hard on a powerful man with furry arms. It meant that he would have to answer blood-heating jibes with a forgiving smile when it would be less trouble and infinitely more satisfying to break a neck.

Such was the situation when the sixteenth ship came out of the eternal mist beyond which gleamed a host of stars including a great green one called Terra. The ship unloaded a little aluminum trailer the exact copy of Miranda's. An elderly couple, gray-haired and wise-eyed, arrived with it, positioned it next door, had a few small crates dumped alongside.

A sedate celebration was held in the log laundry that afternoon. The newcomers greeted Miranda in the manner of old-time friends, were introduced as Major and Captain Bennett. Miranda handed around pie, coffee and cakes, her face flushed and eyes alight with the pleasure of meeting.

In due time Bulstrode wandered outside, stood gazing at the crates and whistling idly to himself. Soon Major Bennett joined him.

"More washing contraptions?" Bulstrode asked.

"Dear me, no. Three should be sufficient for a while." He

examined the nearest boxes. "These are musical instruments."

"Huh?" Bulstrode's heavy face livened with sudden interest. "Want them emptied out?"

"There's no hurry. I'm sure we can manage."

"I'm doing nothing. And I like busting crates open."

"Then we may as well deal with them," said Major Bennett. "The job has to be done sometime." Finding a case-lever, he started prying up slats with the slow carefulness of the aged.

Scorning this method, Bulstrode hooked big, hard finger-tips under the lid of another, bulged his arms and drew it up with nails squeaking. He peeped inside.

"Suffering cats!" he whispered.

"What's the matter?"

"A drum." He voiced it in low, reverent tones like one uttering a holy name. Sliding trembling hands into the crate, he fondled the contents. "As I live and breathe, a big bass drum!"

"Surely there is nothing remarkable about that?" said Bennett, mystified.

With a faraway look in his eyes, Bulstrode told him, "For more than ten years I carried the big bass drum in the home-town band."

"You did?"

"Yes, tiger-skin and all. It was a darned fine band."

Lowering his arms into the crate, Bulstrode gently drew forth the drum. He made another dip, brought out a pair of fat-knobbed sticks also a broad leather sling complete with chest and belly hooks. He tightened the drum's vellum. Then slowly, like one in a dream, he donned the sling, fastened the drum upon his huge chest, looped the sticks on his wrists.

For about half a minute he posed like a statue dreaming wistfully of days long gone by. Something took possession of him. Fire leaped into his eyes. He twirled the drumsticks into thin discs of light, spun them sidewise, above, inward, outward and across, flashing them hither and thither while flicking the taut vellum with expert beat.

Boom. Boom. Bop-bop-boom went the big bass drum.

Drawn by the sound the others came out of the laundry

and watched fascinated while the drumsticks whirled and the great drum sounded. Finally, he stopped.

"Jeez!" he said, flush-faced.

Without comment Major Bennett extracted a silver cornet from its case and handed it to his wife. Next he produced a trombone, fitted it together, checked its slide action with a tentative toot. He eyed Bulstrode shrewdly.

"By hokey!" said that individual. "It takes me back years." He looked around in a semi-daze, noticed Miranda socketing together a pole bearing a large flag. "Years!" he said.

Still watching him, Bennett offered no remark. He had the manner of an experienced cook who knows exactly when the joint will be done to perfection.

"This town could use a good band," asserted Bulstrode, eyeing the trombone and licking his lips.

"We have nobody to play the flute, the oboe and the tuba," said Bennett quietly. "Nobody to beat the drum. Someday we'll find them among those able to kneel and pray, able to fight for the things they believe to be right."

Unhooking the drum and discarding the sling, Bulstrode carefully placed them on the ground. Then he stared at his feet, fidgeted about, transferred the stare to the sky.

"Reckon I'd better be going," he announced. Starting to back away, he met Miranda's eyes and found his feet strangely frozen to the earth.

"Goodbye!" encouraged Dolly in a tone he did not like.

A slight perspiration broke out on his forehead. His thick lips worked around but no words came forth. He was in psychic agony, like a man paralyzed by sheer need to flee.

Putting down the trombone, Major Bennett took him by the arm, led him into the trailer and out of the others' sight.

"Let us speak to God," he said and sank upon his knees.

After considerable hesitation, Bulstrode made sure the door was shut and windows obscured before kneeling beside him. Putting an arm across his shoulders, Bennett held him while they spoke to God because that is the fashion of their kind. Other pressure-groups, other rigmaroles. This was theirs: to say what they wished to say side by side, shoulder to shoulder, before their Supreme Commander.

When they came out, soldiers both, Miranda had opened

another box containing hats but no uniforms. Peaked caps and poke bonnets ornamented with red-lettered ribbons. Self-consciously fitting on a cap, Bulstrode strove to divert attention from himself by loudly admiring Dolly in her new bonnet.

"My, you look good in that," he enthused.

"Don't you pick on me," she snapped.

"But I mean it. You look kind of . . . uh . . . nice."

"I'm as fat as a hog and I know it."

"Plumpish," he corrected. "Just the way you ought to be."

"Nuts," she said. "A hat's a hat and makes no difference to what's under it."

"There is a difference. You're not the same person."

"Oh, go take a walk you big, clumsy lug!" With that, Dolly produced a handkerchief and started to snivel.

"Jeepers," said Bulstrode, aghast. "I didn't mean to—"

Miranda pulled gently at his sleeve and explained. "A woman often weeps when she's happy."

"That so?" He crinkled bushy eyebrows at her, mildly dumbfounded. "Mean to say she's enjoying herself?"

Dolly sobbed louder to confirm it.

"Good grief!" said Bulstrode, quite unconscious of the pun. He studied Dolly in frank amazement until eventually she composed herself, wiped her eyes and gave him an embarrassed smile.

Now he refitted the sling and took up the drum in the manner of one claiming his own after countless years. He hooked it onto his chest, stood holding it in proud possession. He twirled the sticks, again delighting in the feel of them.

"Christ Jesus," he said without blasphemy, "this town is going to take an awful licking!" A thought struck him and he looked hopefully at Miranda. "How soon are we going to give it to them hot and strong?"

She didn't answer. She seemed to be waiting for something. All of them stood there in caps and poke bonnets watching him and waiting for something. Momentarily it puzzled him, that and the electric suspense in the air. For whom or what were they waiting? Was there any good reason to wait at all?

It entered his mind that the big drum takes the lead and sets the pace.

Always.

Involuntarily his fingers tightened around the sticks, his leg muscles stiffened in readiness, his chest swelled, his eyes flamed and what was within him burst forth as a triumphant shout.

"Now!"

It galvanized them into activity. Human pressure was on the boost. Old Jimmy donned the pole-sling, braced the flag in his grip. The others closed the trailers, collected their instruments, formed in two ranks of three each.

For a few seconds they stood to attention like troops on parade. The pale, fog-ridden Venusian light sparkled on cornet and concertina, trombone and tambourine, while the big drum hung poised and the great flag flew above them fast and free.

Then Bulstrode swung a stick and struck one loud, imperative note.

Boom!

In exact step both ranks started off upon the left foot and advanced with military precision upon the waiting town.

Glory! Glory!

The Salvation Army was marching into battle for the Lord.

What happened after that final, terrible moment when Pentecost I was "lifting off toward heaven"?

Apostle to Alpha

BETTY T. BALKE

SKY PILOT MUM,
BUT HE LANDS OK

—Headline in *New York Daily News,*
November 20, 1979

LANDING ON ALPHA PRESUMED; CAPSULE COMES BACK EMPTY; POPE TELEGRAPHS REGRETS; ISRAEL IS SORRY; REDS GLOAT

—Headline in *Louisville Courier-Journal,*
same day

Memo from the Rev. John W. Wilberly, D.D
Director of Project Salvation
Chairman of the Committee of Twelve
Headquarters, New York Nov. 20, 1979

Dear Brothers on the Committee of Twelve:

Mr. Oates has made a safe landing, which should move us all to rejoicing. For he is bringing Our Lord's message to a planet where there *may* be creatures who can understand it. Let us all continue to pray for the welfare of our first Space Apostle, and for the success of Project Salvation, the combined effort of 95,000,000 American Christians. Please relay my message to your District Directors, and thence to all the Faithful.

The Rev. Martin L. Helmes, D.D.
11 Hawthorne Circle
Philadelphia, Pa.

Nov. 21, 1979

Dear Marty,

You got my cheery memo, I guess. But between us, that Oates makes me nervous. He was supposed to give us a complete report after he landed—but not one word. Only the empty shell, containing—I tell you, Marty, but keep it to yourself—his robe, collar, and other vestments. Can our man have gone native?

Worriedly,
Jack

The Rev. John Wilberly
21 LaGuardia Place
New York City, N.Y.

Nov. 24, 1979

Dear Jack,

Am answering your note at home. While you read this, I wish you would sit in that study of yours, light your pipe, and do a bit of thinking back. . . .

Ever since the Encephalographic Institute charted those first brain waves from Alpha five years ago, we've been in what Gwen calls a "tizzy." To your everlasting credit, you were the very first clergyman to suggest that these creatures must hear the Gospel, no matter what it cost in time, energy, and money. The Government's Space Agency was good enough to listen, and to send fourteen separate exploratory missions around Alpha before assuring us that a man could probably land there safely.

But *whose* man? We still had no chosen missionary for the job, and of course every denomination wanted to send *its* man. I don't think I ever realized—*really* realized—how diverse we are until those sessions began. But somehow we chose 120 men as finalists. Then we had to start narrowing the field.

The Space Agency had *its* requirements: the Apostle had to be a qualified airplane pilot with perfect vision, in A-1

physical condition. (*That* requirement would have excluded St. Paul himself, and it immediately eliminated half the finalists). Remember how that steely-eyed flying TV evangelist (you know who I mean) screamed when he was disqualified because he wears contact lenses? And how Henry Dodderson Morkle, author of *Jolly Jesus* and *Christ as Chum,* was found to have chronic sinusitis?

And then there was DX-706, which, by its own electronic methods, confirmed our choice of Fred J. Oates. Once Oates was selected, and all objections put down—including that so-called "Christ" from Minneapolis who camped outside Headquarters office eating sardines and claiming *he* could get to Alpha *without* a space ship—think of the denominational hurdles we still had to get over. For one thing, Oates had to be baptized again—all the way *under* the water, to please 30 million churchmen who hold no brief for "sprinkling." Remember when the Salvation Army waived its musical requirements after Oates satisfied them that he played a passable clarinet? Oates also promised, at least on Alpha, to give up dancing and card-playing, for the sake of those who disapproved of both.

At last it was settled. Then the wonderful blast-off on All Saints' Day from the Space Agency base at Mars Hill, Nevada. I still thrill thinking about it—6,000 children singing Luther's hymn—the terrible moment when the countdown reached zero—and finally—finally—Pentecost I lifting off the pad toward Heaven. Surely none of us will ever forget that moment, Jack!

And now we know Oates is safe. What if he *did* send back his clothes? Just file them away, and say nothing about it.

Warmly,
Marty

Memo from the Rev. John W. Wilberly, D.D.
Director of Project Salvation

Dear Brothers:

In this, my second weekly report to you from Space by way of Mr. Oates, let me assure you that he is busily engaged

in his ministry to the Alphans. So busily, in fact, that he has time for only the briefest of responses to our questions. Let us continue unceasing in prayer for him and his Mission, which is also ours.

Nov. 26, 1979

Dear Dr. Wilberly,

Please excuse my delay in answering your long letter, but the twins have had the mumps. Also, I have been bothered by people calling me on the telephone and dropping in at the house. Most of them have been very kind, but a few have wasted my time with idiot questions. I am six weeks behind in my ironing.

As for your chief questions, sir; no, Fred does not consider himself anything special. If Fred imagined himself another St. Paul, as you seem to be inferring, wouldn't he be writing long letters back to Earth every week? Isn't it the very absence of letters that has you worried?

When you send your next rocket to Fred, may I include a box of cookies? Also, the children have made Fred a picture book about the Spring Olympics, and we would like to send that, too, if we may.

Faithfully,
Elizabeth Oates

Nov. 27, 1979

Dear Marty,

Look at this letter from Mrs. Oates, which I enclose! All I did was ask her a few tactful (or so I thought) questions about her husband, and this is what came back! She is a little too outspoken, I fear. Mrs. Oates has been interviewed by the press and magazines, and she is projecting an image most people do not expect from one in her position. Dr. Watson, who is taking Oates' place in Oates' church, sent me a clipping from the *Sunday Clarion-Dispatch,* in which Mrs. Oates told the Women's Page Editor that she is, and I quote, a

"true believer in perfume and pretty clothes." She also added that although she was not there at the time, she felt sure Mary and Martha both took a quick glance in the mirror before greeting the risen Lazarus!

Of course, Mrs. Oates *is* a handsome woman, and charming, but she seems utterly unconcerned about her public image. Can't somebody *speak* to her?

Worriedly,
Jack

Nov. 29, 1979

Dr. Martin L. Helmes
Project Salvation Vice-Chairman
Philadelphia, Pa.

Dear Dr. Helmes:

I went to call on Mrs. Oates at your suggestion. I kept trying to bring up the subject of her opinions in the newspapers, but Mrs. Oates kept asking me my opinions about such things as Vatican Council III and my boyhood in Maine—and I'm afraid I never got around to the purpose of my visit, even though Mrs. Oates and I talked for about two hours.

Somehow Mrs. Oates called up my wife, and the next thing I knew, both of our families were driving out to Oak Park for an afternoon at the zoo. Afterward, we all had dinner at Mrs. Oates's house. My wife says Mrs. Oates is a superlative cook, mother, and woman. My wife says Mrs. Oates is worth, begging your pardon, sir, a dozen of the "sackcloth" type.

Obviously, I am not the man for this disciplinary job. May I have your permission to call in a troubleshooter from my own denomination's Legion of Christian Women? I refer to Mrs. Nadine Withers, widow of our former Middle States Director, Cornelius Withers, D.D., who departed this life five years ago while fighting valiantly to keep his churches from fleeing out of the suburbs and into the city of Detroit. Mrs.

Withers is given to no nonsense, and I am sure she will be able to deal effectively with Mrs. Oates. If anyone can.

Your Servant in the Lord,
John Knox Watson, Pastor
Trinity Church, Edgemore

Shiloh Seminary
Nov. 30, 1979

Dear Dr. Wilberly,

It was a pleasure to hear from you. We here at Shiloh sometimes feel withdrawn from the world. A long, urgent telegram like yours brings the world back with a bang. Yes, I remember Fred Oates very well. No, he was not weak in anything, unless it might be Rhetoric. Not much of an orator, I suppose. If one man on Alpha has to set up parishes and run them as an administrator, a better man than Oates might have been selected.

Fred Oates is the equivalent of the "humble parish priest," if I could describe him in a few words. He is a warm, likable, lively young man, who takes delight in his work. He is highly adaptable, gifted with a sense of humor, and possessed of the energy of ten men. By the way, I've never met such a lovely girl as his wife, Liz. I married them and baptized all five of their children.

Faithfully,
Clark Henderson, Dean

10 Mercury Lane
Chicago, Illinois
Dec. 3, 1979

John W. Wilberly, D.D.
Director, Project Salvation
New York, N.Y.

Dear Dr. Wilberly:

In answer to your telephone query, and for the record: no, there was not an error in the work of DX-706. Our machines never err. DX-706 came up with the name of Fred J. Oates after we fed it the cards of 11,000 clergymen in precisely 30.2 seconds, just about the time it took Jesus to choose Peter.

I have never been able to understand why you Project Salvation gentlemen did not let it go at that, instead of spending four more months of conference, only to confirm DX-706's initial decision. Why, if your founder had worked in the same way, it would have taken him four years, one month, and eighteen days to choose his twelve disciples, and his work never would have gotten off the ground, so to speak.

Perhaps I shouldn't say this, gentlemen, but even if your Mr. Oates should cause you some unease (which is, I somehow sense, the reason for your query of yesterday) I must remind you that those twelve others often disappointed your founder. And if he nonetheless kept his confidence in them, perhaps you should do the same with Mr. Oates.

Very truly yours,
Nathan Siegel, President,
Spacetronics, Inc.

Columbus, Ohio
Dec. 5, 1979

Dear Dr. Helmes:

You asked for a full report on Mrs. Withers' visit with Mrs. Oates. Well, after her two-day stay down there, Mrs. Withers returned as what she herself calls "a new woman." This doubtless refers to her appearance: Mrs. Withers has had, she says, a "restyling and permanent," at Mrs. Oates's suggestion, and I will have to admit she looks twenty years younger.

Mrs. Oates apparently took Mrs. Withers shopping and persuaded her to buy some new dresses in what Mrs. Withers describes as "flattering pastels." She also introduced Mrs. Withers to a member of their church, a retired physician and

widower, who is, I suppose, the sender of the yellow roses that keep coming here to the office and upsetting our routine.

I have remonstrated with Mrs. Withers to no avail; she merely smiles at me. She will tell me nothing about Mrs. Oates except that she is, and I quote, "a darling."

I am afraid this is all I have to report.

Sincerely,
Edward Sykes, Executive Secretary
Legion of Christian Women

Dec. 5, 1979

Dear Dr. Wilberly,

In answer to your last letter, no, Fred did not have any private reservations about this trip. I did, and I still do, but these are things that have to do with being left alone to take care of a house and five children. I have found that such notions are shared by many wives of ministers, but we keep them to ourselves.

I wish, sir, you would not allow any more photographers and reporters over here. They ask terribly personal questions, and they keep me from my work. Yesterday one photographer asked the children and me to pose as if we were all praying for Daddy. Imagine!

Faithfully,
Elizabeth Oates

Memo from the Rev. John W. Wilberly, D.D.
Director of Project Salvation

Dear Brothers:

In this, my third report to you, I relay the information from our Space Apostle that all is well. We are standing ready to ship Bibles to him, but he has asked us to wait, preferring, we can only assume, to offer the Word verbally. Let us continue unceasing in prayer, comforted by the fact that

256,000 Holy Bibles lie in readiness in a warehouse at East McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

New York City
Dec. 6, 1979

Dear Marty,

Hold Bibles, he says!

After our ten months of rewriting and rendering into symbols—twenty-four experts on ancient languages agreeing on a text—a work that made the King James Version look, as one popular tabloid put it, "like a Sunday School picnic." Not to mention the problems with the cover. And think of all those children whose pennies paid for the publishing!

And now, Oates says—hold Bibles! Marty, Marty, I'm beginning to have grave misgivings.

Nervously,
Jack

Philadelphia
Dec. 7, 1979

Dear Jack,

Well, I'll admit *that's* a poser, his rejection of those Bibles.

Maybe Oates would be more persuasive with, say, rifles or thumbscrews? You know yourself, even though we don't like to think about it, that a handful of fanatics with torches have, from the beginning, badly singed our banner. *Compel them to come in,* was all they had to hear, that sort.

Let's be careful—very careful—from here on. If Oates doesn't *want* Bibles, let us have faith enough to believe he doesn't *need* Bibles. If it's the money that's bothering you, forget it. My own Missions Board can use them in a spring campaign to the Pacific islands.

Let us withhold judgment and wait. And also pray.

Always,
Marty

The Rev. John W. Wilberey
Director, Project Salvation
Headquarters, New York

Baltimore, Md.
Dec. 7, 1979

Dear Dr. Wilberly:

Exhaustive tests on August 27, 1924, 1979, prove Frederick Jansen Oates sound of mind and wholly normal, *in the commonly accepted meaning of that word. No phobias, anxieties, abnormal fears, hallucinations—beyond, of course, that crazy notion of his that creatures—even creatures he has never seen —are worth saving.*

Very truly yours,
Harrison Bowman, M.D.
Fellow, American College of Psychiatrists

Memo from the Rev. John W. Wilberly, D.D.
Director of Project Salvation

Dear Brothers:

The weekly word from Mr. Oates assures us he is well. Owing to the extreme demands upon his time and energy as the one lone Apostle to countless souls, he has made his letters to us very brief. So we must content ourselves to wait, patiently and prayerfully, for the answers to our innumerable questions, spoken and unspoken.

Dec. 12, 1979

Dear Marty,

Well, *this* week's surprise is that Oates has blasted back bread and wine—and *that* the most controversial of *all* our discussions! You remember how firm the Lutherans and Episcopalians were; the Methodists searched their corporate soul; the Presbyterians held dozens of conferences; and some groups couldn't understand what the fuss was all about in the first place.

That problem, and the questions it raised, must have been

as agonizing as any of the historical conferences on transubstantiation. But finally, after four painful months, we reached accord. And now—Fred Oates sends the very symbols of accord right back in our teeth. Why, Marty, it's positively *unholy!*

Concernedly,
Jack

Philadelphia
Dec. 13, 1979

Dear Jack,

Unsettling, I grant you.

Maybe he's been *forced* to do it. You don't suppose our man Oates has run across an established order of priests, do you? And is stepping on their toes? You know how vengeful a threatened priest can be—present company excepted, of course—I was thinking in particular of the priests in Our Lord's time.

Or, even worse, that a jealous priesthood for poor Oates to stumble into would be—God forbid—a messianic tradition. In this latter event, Oates will be either worshiped or crucified, with the historical odds leaning rather heavily toward the latter.

If, however, the Alphans fall down and worship Oates, I wonder how Oates—a fine lad, but mortal, after all—will take it? Such an effect has never been wrought on Earth by a bearer of God's word, from the Word Incarnate down to the very present. And, furthermore, the closer they were to Him, the more it seems they have had to suffer, and the less people have listened.

I see I'm preaching; please excuse it. I'm worried about Oates, too; and when I'm worried, I'm afraid I tend to preach.

Hopefully,
Marty

Memo from the Rev. John W. Wilberly, D.D.
Director of Project Salvation

Dear Brothers:

With joy your Committee reports that Mr. Oates tells us his mission is finished, and he is coming home to Earth. We have asked him to remain on Alpha through Christmas, and perhaps he will. Let our own observance of this season be especially warmed by the thought of those unseen brethren, the Alphans, for whom—thanks to 95,000,000 American Christians—this will be the very first Christmas.

Joyfully,
Your Chairman

Dec. 18, 1979

Dear Marty,

This week's return capsule had nothing in it but four rolls of overexposed photographic negatives. The label on the tin they were packed in said, "Alphans at Work and Play"; but when we took them from their ray-proof container and developed them, we had only 124 squares of light. Why, my eleven-year-old son did better last summer at Shady Pines with his box camera. And Oates was supposed to be a first-class amateur photographer!

Hurriedly,
Jack

Dec. 19, 1979

Dear Jack,

Maybe there was too much light. From those Alphans, I mean.

Now *there's* an interesting possibility. We may be thinking altogether in the wrong terms, about everything Oates has done.

Why don't you drive down for lunch on Saturday? We'll kick this thing around.

Warmly,
Marty

New York
Dec. 23, 1979

Dear Marty,

Enjoyed the day with you in Philly immensely—like old times. But my head is still spinning with those old ideas of ours—hadn't thought of them since you were a freshman and I a sophomore at dear old Ephesus Seminary.

What, *indeed,* if God had used other modes of salvation at other times for other people? Just because He chose to visit *us* from a stable to a cross doesn't mean He would use the same means elsewhere. You're quite right, Marty, our imagination *is* too Earthbound. We impose our own limited imagination upon God Himself.

So, of course, there's no need for Oates to stay for Christmas. The star in the East, Mary and Joseph—none of this may mean anything to the Alphans. And, to carry the thinking a little further, maybe God chose to come to us as a Man because *we* are men. And Oates has never said the Alphans were *men,* has he?

Faithfully,
Jack

Memo from the Rev. John W. Wilberly, D.D.
Director of Project Salvation

Dear Brothers:

Mrs. Oates has landed safely, brought to the Pentecost I Space Center, and he reports that his mission was a success. The Alphans are the Lord's; let all Christian men rejoice!

Unfortunately, Mr. Oates's scientific data, which was to follow in a second rocket, has been lost somewhere in space,

with its wealth of geologic samples and other information.

However, let us thank God, in whose Name we sent him, for Mr. Oates's safe return.

Pentecost, Iowa
Dec. 28, 1979

Marty:

Read this and then destroy it.

The Alphans are—well, unfallen.

They live in perfect harmony, have never fallen from grace, never touched the apple.

The Alphans are not men, as we suspected, but BIRDS. "Giant, gentle, glorious birds," to use Oates's very words.

Their land is a miners' paradise—gold, silver, gems—wealth unimaginable. But of all this the Alphans are innocently, happily unaware.

Oates says they are intelligent creatures, but he doesn't know whether, evolutionally, they are ahead of us, or behind us. But *spiritually* they are certainly our superiors.

Against even the mildest human, these Alphans would be, Oates says, utterly defenseless. Marty, you *know* it would not be mild ones who would go there, once the news of all that gold was reported in the world press.

I am enclosing a feather, which an Alphan gave Oates—from his own back—as a token of friendship. Notice how it glows.

Oates is secluded here at Pentecost I with Mrs. Oates and the children. I don't know how long I can hold NASA and the newspapers.

Urgently,
Jack

OATES LANDS SAFELY IN ATLANTIC AFTER FIVE WEEKS ON ALPHA; DATA LOST; ASTROCLERIC JOINED BY HIS FAMILY; PRESS EXCLUDED

—Headline in *New York Times*,
December 30, 1979

PROJECT SALVATION A FLOP, WILBERLY AND HELMES REPORT; EMPTY-HANDED OATES SUBPOENAED BY CONGRESS; NASA IRATE

—Headline in *Times*,
December 31, 1979

Jan. 2, 1980

Dear Marty,

The testimony of our man Oates was wonderful—the mission a failure, no data to turn in, the Alphans "illiterate." Oates appeared a fool—for Christ's sake, a fool. I've never been prouder of anyone.

Have just burned all my Project Salvation papers; trust you've done the same.

Oates told me he had so altered the NASA Screenad equipment (the one that circles Alpha and the other planets) that no brain waves will come through to Earth, not for years.

I think this experience has so thoroughly discouraged everyone that no further attempts of the kind will be made for several generations. So millions of God's gentlest, unfallen creatures have been protected from *us*.

Oates's hearing before his own Church Board is next week. The outcome is certain; yet not one of us can speak to defend him. It is an ancient script; only the names are changed.

Warmly,
Jack

OATES RESIGNS SPACE PROJECT; REJECTS MOVIE OFFERS; ASKS FOR ASSIGNMENT AS MISSIONARY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

—Headline in *New York Times*,
January 4, 1980

SKY PILOT'S WINGS CLIPPED

—Headline in *New York Daily News*,
same day

This was truly the age of the megalopolis, the first century of "true civilization," a glorious age. Man had developed machines to do his thinking, and machines to do his praying. God was glorified by automation. And the churches were empty . . .

God of the Playback

STEPHEN DENTINGER

THE OFFICES of Automated Prayers Ltd. occupied the entire 107th floor of the World Trade Tower. From his desk, Arthur Maize could look out through the tinted glass walls at the city that stretched as far as the eye could see. It was truly the age of the megalopolis, and he would have been born in no other. He was a man of the twenty-first century, the first century of true civilization.

Sometimes, like this day, when he would have to greet visiting religious leaders and explain the intricate operations of Automated Prayers Ltd., he might wish for a simpler, more primitive mode of existence. But that was only a passing mood. The speech he gave the visitors was always the same, the sales pitch never varied. It was almost like one of the company's own taped products.

The desk buzzer sounded and his secretary's voice came on. "Mr. Maize, the . . . the delegation from upper Amazon is here."

"Fine. Send them in."

He had expected perhaps a half dozen middle-aged men in dark business suits—typical ministers of the modern world. Instead, only two men entered his office. One, a stocky little Irish priest with ruddy complexion and a thinning halo of white hair around the fringes of his head; the other, an oddly-

dressed man of somewhat younger appearance, who seemed ill at ease.

"I am Father O'Toole," the priest said, beaming as he extended his hand. "I do want to thank you for your invitation. This is the closest to heaven Hugo and I have ever gotten." The good Father beamed at the view through the tinted glass wall of the office.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Arthur Maize said, also extending his hand. "Somehow I'd expected there'd be more of you."

"No, no. Only Hugo and me." As if suddenly remembering the man at his side, the priest turned to perform the introductions. "This is Hugo Dowd. He is my chief liaison with the more primitive up-river tribes."

"Glatameetya," Hugo Dowd mumbled. He shifted his feet and glanced down at his hands, still seemingly uneasy.

"Primitive tribes!" Maize asked, turning back to the little priest. "But, surely, Father O'Toole, the Amazon is civilized now!"

"Not all of it, not up-river, not by a long shot. We still carry on a missionary existence there, much as we did fifty years ago."

"Amazing!" Arthur Maize said. "Today, there are modern cities the size of Chicago even in central Africa. And the aborigines of Australia have also taken a long step toward civilization! I don't know as I realized things were still so primitive in your area."

The priest smiled slightly. "They are still so primitive, as you say, because they wish to be so. The world is not all shuttle ships to the moon and 120-story buildings."

"But this is the twenty-first century! Men do not live in jungle caves!"

"Not caves, Mr. Maize. Strongly built huts with mud-thatched roofs to turn away the tropical rains. We have not yet learned to control the weather either."

"If they have no electricity, I suppose we would have to supply you with battery-operated models," Maize mused. "Fortunately, we have a new lifetime alkaline battery that should serve perfectly."

Father O'Toole smiled. "Hugo and I did not necessarily

come to buy. We are in New York for a week to purchase certain equipment for the home base—and, in my case, to report to the superior of my order. We accepted your very kind invitation on an informative basis only."

"And such it is! But certainly when you see what we have to offer, you won't go back to your jungle without a full line."

"And just what are Automated Prayers, Mr. Maize?" the little priest asked.

"Ah!" Maize rubbed his hands together and motioned them both to be seated. Now he was in his element, demonstrating the company's product. He knew he could not debate the civilizations of this complex world, but when it came to selling the goods, he could best this balding cleric any day of the week. "This is our most popular home model—the 957. It can be attached to a religious painting or a blessed candle."

Maize held the tiny box in his hand and pressed the contact button gently. The reel of tape began to turn silently, and a somber, solemn voice repeated, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." The prayer came at five-second intervals, droning on endlessly. Maize let it play for a full two minutes before he flipped it off.

"Is that all?" Father O'Toole asked, a puzzled frown on his brow.

"My dear Father, we have more than 2000 different models. For the home, especially a non-Christian home, we have one that repeats the single word 'God.' We even have a Buddhist model that repeats the phrase *'Namu Amida Butsu,'* which means something like 'Praises to the Buddha.' For churches and temples, we have everything from simple hymns to complete hour-long Masses and other services. We have a magna-stereo unit that can exactly duplicate the sounds of the giant organ at Manhattan Cathedral."

"But to what purpose?" the priest asked.

"Surely, you are familiar with the prayer wheels of old Tibet. And, even in the West, there have been a number of books advocating something similar. There was *The Way Of A Pilgrim,* and something by that man Salinger, sixty years ago."

"But . . . but this prayer is on tape!" the priest insisted. "It is mere mechanics!"

"No more so than the Tibetan prayer wheels. You have been away from the world a long time, Father O'Toole. In our fast-paced existence, there is little time for formal prayer. With our devices, even the busiest man can feel he is doing something to worship his own particular Supreme Being. Our Automated Prayer machines can be left playing day and night in the home or even at the office. They can be used in smaller churches where the minister or priest cannot always be present to conduct services personally. And best of all, they can be used to instill in our young the importance of constant prayer."

Arthur Maize next led the two men to the windowless recording studios, then to the control rooms, and finally to the sales offices on the floor below. "As you can see, it is a vast operation, geared to the times, to the needs of today's religious man. We have a plant on Long Island for turning out duplicate tapes in quantity, but a great deal of our work is done right here. We have an advisory council of leading churchmen to guide us and, on occasion, we have even received grants from the government to aid us."

Father O'Toole was indeed impressed with the physical facilities of Automated Prayers Ltd. But he was deeply troubled, too. "My poor natives would not understand this. For all these years, I have stood before them in their villages, around their campfires—and, occasionally, in their rudimentary cities—preaching faith in the Lord, with myself as a representative of the Lord. I am vain enough, Mr. Maize, to believe that no automated device can replace me in caring for these people."

Arthur Maize blinked his eyes and stood firm. He'd met ones like this priest before, but not in a good many years. "If you will take the time to think about it for a moment, Father, you will be aware of the positive advantages in our system."

"I am interested only in souls," the priest replied. "And I do not think souls can be saved by a little black box playing endless prayers like some demented juke box."

Arthur Maize threw up his hands in mock resignation and

turned to the tall, silent figure of Hugo Dowd. "What's your opinion of all this, Mr. Dowd?"

"I . . . don't know."

"Well, the very least you can do is take one of my units back to the Amazon with you, on a trial basis. After all, we sold 500 of them in Africa last year. Do you want to seem more backward than you actually are?"

Father O'Toole smiled. "The Mass is said in the language of the people. The hymns are in the native tongue. I doubt if even your extensive library is prepared to solve this problem."

Arthur Maize spent the next thirty minutes going through the inventory, feeding code numbers into the blinking mouth of a chrome-plated computer and then cursing silently at the negative responses that appeared after each question. Finally, he admitted, "You're correct. We have nothing in stock on the peculiar tongues of the upper Amazon. Our machines simply refuse to accept the fact that an uncivilized corner of the world still remains. You know, there have even been small cities on Antarctica for the past decade."

"I know," Father O'Toole said. "I think now we must be going."

"Wait! Surely you could assist us in preparing the correct tape!"

The little priest smiled. "I have neither the time nor the inclination. Such devices would never be used among my people."

"But surely you owe it to those people to leave us some record of their liturgy, even if it is never used. The upper Amazon is the only gap in our files!"

Father O'Toole shook his head. "I must return to my mission in a few days, and I have much to do. There is no way I can help."

Arthur Maize frowned for a moment, then recovered himself. "But Hugo can stay here! Surely, he knows the liturgy. Surely, he knows the language. And, surely, you could spare him for ten days or two weeks."

Hugo Dowd shifted uneasily. "I've never been in such a big city. I'm not too comfortable here."

"You would be paid well," Maize insisted. "And you would be doing your people a great service."

Hugo Dowd looked to the priest for help. "Father?"

"It is up to you, Hugo. We could spare you, if you wanted to remain here for a time. But, I repeat, Mr. Maize, we would not be purchasing any of your devices."

"Could I send you one on a trial basis when it is ready? No obligation, of course."

The priest shrugged his shoulders. "Do what you will. I must leave now."

Hugo Dowd hesitated, then said, "I will be back tomorrow to work with you, Mr. Maize, as long as Father O'Toole has no objections."

"Fine, fine. I feel we are on the verge of something great—a real breakthrough to the last outpost of darkness." Maize walked over to a great, glowing globe, spinning it until the South American land mass came into view. "Prayer will bring civilization with it, Father. You wait and see!"

Father O'Toole departed New York three days later; Hugo Dowd stayed on, working with Maize and his assistants in the great offices on the 107th floor. Once the priest left, Arthur Maize detected an almost immediate change in Hugo. Maize commented on this one day while they worked.

"You know, Hugo, you are a much better fellow on your own, without the good Father. That first day you came here, you barely talked and, when you did, I sometimes had trouble understanding your words.

"I . . . Father O'Toole helped me a lot. I hope he's right in letting me stay here alone."

"Why wouldn't he be? Besides, you're hardly alone." Arthur Maize grinned. "Tonight's Wednesday, and I don't go home on Wednesdays. I'll introduce you to some friends of mine. Fellow like you should get to know a few girls in New York."

Hugo Dowd had taken to wandering the streets of the city with Maize, stopping in churches and temples where the Automated Prayer equipment was functioning. What he saw of the city, everything he saw, continued to amaze him—and to frighten him just a bit. If there were no pythons here to drop

from low-hanging branches, there were other dangers as sudden and as deadly.

That Wednesday night Arthur Maize took Hugo to a party in the Old Village section. There were several girls present, hardly out of their teens; afterward, Hugo had to wait in the street while Maize finished his business with them upstairs. "You should have stayed," Arthur Maize told Hugo when he finally emerged.

"I hate this city," Hugo said, as they strolled uptown.

"Hate it? The city is beauty, the beauty of God's creatures."

"The jungle is the true beauty of God's creatures. The jungle is as it all was created. You have no religion here. Father O'Toole was right!"

"No religion! Then who do you suppose buys our models? Atheists?"

"I don't know. I don't know who buys them. I only know the churches you've shown me have all been empty."

"They don't need to be filled anymore, Hugo. The prayers go on anyway. God is glorified by automation."

"Yes," Hugo Dowd said, and did not talk anymore.

They continued to work together, with Hugo transcribing the portions of the Amazon worship ceremony that Maize wished to record. During the day, the two men generally worked in a roomful of white-coated technicians, but at night there were generally just the two of them to listen to the playbacks of their daily recordings. Often, in these after-hours sessions, a section would be improved or rerecorded. Gradually, the Mass of the upper Amazon was taking shape.

But for Hugo, the days and nights were filled with terror and frustration. Once he sought out a church that did not use Arthur Maize's electronic prayer services, and knelt with the tiny congregation for a time. But when he returned to the street, to the constant bustle of people in motion, the old terror was on him again. He went back to his hotel room, took the double-edged hunting knife from his suitcase, and attached it to his belt. He was beginning to feel that this place, too, was a jungle.

"We'll be finishing it up tonight," Arthur Maize told him finally. "Let's have a last run-through before the tape goes down to Father O'Toole."

"He will never use it."

Maize smiled. "The Lord works in strange ways." He hurried to get out the splice master.

Hugo watched him as he worked, then said at last, "Do you really believe in God? *Could* you really believe in Him and carry on this . . . business?"

Arthur Maize smiled. "Are you thinking of the *God is dead* sort of thing? It was quite an important movement for a few years in the '60s, until people like me came along. You see, with automatic prayers, it doesn't really matter, does it? You can have it both ways, without any lost time." He switched on the main speaker and the opening prayers of the Amazon Mass filled the studio.

"Lost time," Hugo Dowd repeated.

"In the twenty-first century, time is the most important commodity."

"And the machines do our thinking and say our prayers and maybe someday . . ."

"All to give us more time," Arthur Maize agreed. "Time." His finger was on the recording switch, in the event they needed to cut in on the tape.

The voice on the tape was intoning the *Gloria,* and Hugo said, "Time for what?"

Arthur Maize blinked. "For what?"

And because there was no answer, Hugo Dowd's hand came up from his belt, fast, so that Arthur Maize never really saw the knife.

Hugo Dowd never returned to the jungle mission of Father O'Toole, and after a time the little priest ceased to await him. He went on about his work with the natives, much as he had always done, and when the packaged tape finally arrived from Automated Prayers Ltd., he played it more out of curiosity than anything else.

It was an accurate rendering of the native service, except for one thing. There was a high-pitched scream that marred the sound track just at the *Gloria.* If he'd been paying for the tape, Father O'Toole would have returned it as defective. As it was, he only put it at the bottom of his desk and forgot about it.

And now, come to a world whose God is truly sick—a world that has forgotten the old ways—a world on the brink of destruction.

Robot Son

ROBERT F. YOUNG

LATHEHAND approached the tek temple warily. It stood on a russet hillside, a row of golden maples curtaining its brusque facade. Above it the sky showed brisk and blue and clear.

He shivered. The morning was relatively mild, but the memory of the chill night and the frosty dawn was still with him, and even the warmly rising sun could not drive the memory away.

He moved forward slowly, keeping behind a stand of garnet-leaved sumacs. The frost on the grass had transmuted to dew, and the dew seeped through his thin sandals and numbed his feet. He felt the fear deep inside him, marveled that a tek temple should have inspired it. He should have felt reverent, not afraid. Tek temples symbolized good, not evil—

Or had, until the Tekgod had murdered summer: set the leaves of the trees on fire and drenched the world in daytime rain, coated the dawn grass with transient silver, filmed familiar ponds and puddles with brittle ice, transformed balmy zephyrs into bitter winds that raised tiny lumps on your skin and made you see your breath. And certainly, if the Tekgod was capable of turning against his children overnight, his teks and tekresses were also capable, and their temples could no longer be considered as sanctuaries.

But, as representatives of the Tek Kingdom, they had the

information Lathehand wanted—the why and wherefore of the Tekgod's action, and the location of the Temple of Heaven. Moreover, their temples were well-stocked with food, and Lathehand hadn't eaten for days.

The stand of sumacs patterned the course of a small brook that wound down the hillside. Halfway down the slope, the brook made a wide curve that brought it quite close to the east corner of the temple. When he came opposite the corner, Lathehand dropped to his hands and knees and began working his way through the slender, elf-like trees. He kept his eyes on the ground, carefully avoided twigs and fallen leaves. The sound, as well as the sight of him, could provoke the attendant tek into ill-considered action, and Lathehand had no intention of dying just yet. He had faced death too many times these past few weeks, and he had developed a passion for staying alive.

The sumacs closest to the brook were more riotous than the outlying ones. They formed a garnet curtain through which it was impossible to see. Lathehand parted the curtain carefully—and found himself looking straight into the cold gray eyes of a gold-robed tekress.

She was sitting calmly on the opposite bank, her legs folded beneath her robe. Sunlight limned her fair, full face, glittered on the U-235 symbol that adorned her skin-tight cowl. A paralyzer pistol lay on her lap, its muzzle pointing, almost casually, directly at his forehead.

For a long time Lathehand did not move. The tekress regarded him steadily, her slender fingers stroking the pistol as though it were a lovable pet instead of a deadly instrument capable of turning the human body into a malfunctioning hulk of unfeeling flesh. Presently: "You wished to see me?" she asked.

He nodded. Numbly. "Yes, Your Virginity," he said.

"You chose a rather circuitous way of going about it."

"I was afraid, Your Virginity."

"Why should you be afraid of a tekress?"

The pistol still pointed at his forehead, but her fingers had ceased their stroking motion, lay quietly on her lap. Some of Lathehand's courage returned and he edged his body partway

through the curtain of leaves. "Why should a tekress be afraid of me?"

Color touched her cheeks, lending them an evanescent softness; but it had no effect on her austere, watchful eyes. "In times of crisis, certain men react in certain ways," she said. "They plunder, they pillage . . . they rape."

For a moment Lathehand was speechless. Then: "You—you thought—"

"I watched you for almost an hour. You advanced—unorthodoxly—for a man bent on a religio-technoligical errand. Should I have thought differently?"

"But Your Virginity! A *tekress!* I did not, would not, dream!"

She looked at him intently. He had never seen eyes as gray and as deep as hers were. Presently she stood up, slipped the pistol into her robe. "No, I guess you wouldn't," she said. There was an odd note in her voice. "But you didn't answer my question," she resumed. "Why should you be afraid of a tekress?"

He got to his feet and waded through the brook. She watched him carefully. Lathehand was not a large man, but his shoulders were wide, his limbs muscular. His hair was dark and disheveled, his young face hard and thin. He climbed up on the bank and halted several feet from her. "Because I'm afraid of the Tekgod," he said.

"I see."

"Why did he destroy summer?"

"I do not know."

He swayed slightly, giddy from hunger and the new knowledge that tekresses, as well as ordinary humans, could be something less than omniscient. "But you *must* know!"

She shook her head. "But I don't." Then: "You look hungry. Are you?"

"Yes, Your Virginity."

"Come with me."

Inside the temple, she led the way through the huge subganglion chapel to the living quarters in the rear. Lathehand stared at the towering banks of gleaming controls rising straight up to the lofty dome through which the morning sun-

light filtered in nacreous splendor. The chapel was typical rather than unique: there were thousands of others just like it, situated at key points all over the world, each linked to the master ganglion in the Temple of Heaven; but it had been so long since he'd visited one he'd forgotten how awe-inspiring the works of the Tekgod could be. Then he promptly forgot again when he stepped into the automatic kitchen and saw the long row of gleaming food dispensers.

The tekress dialed a vacuumized breakfast unit and set it before him. He devoured the bacon and eggs hungrily, washed them down with the hot coffee. When she asked, "Still hungry?" he nodded, and she dialed sweet rolls and jelly, and more coffee. He leaned back finally, gave a long sigh. "That's the first food I've had since my flyabout crashed three days ago," he said.

"You should have known it's unwise to fly in unpredictable weather. Why did you leave your mechtown?"

"Because I was frightened, I suppose."

"If you'd really been frightened you'd have cowered in your mechanized habitat like the others. You were curious, not frightened . . . That's encouraging."

"Why is it encouraging?"

"That's a secret thought," she said, "arising from a personal attitude toward the *Zeitgeist*. I'm afraid you wouldn't understand . . . What do you plan to do now?"

He looked at her for a long time. He weighed the softness of her cheeks against the austerity of her eyes, tried to balance the fullness of her lower lip with the firm line of her chin. Finally: "That depends on you, Your Virginity."

Surprise widened her eyes. He saw her reach instinctively into her robe. "Explain yourself," she said, and her voice was so cold he could almost see her frosted words.

"I want you to take me to the Temple of Heaven."

The surprise in her eyes intensified, turned into disbelief. "And what do you expect to find there?"

"The Tekgod, for one thing. The way back to summer, for another."

"You're being quite presumptuous for a mere mortal."

"Am I, Your Virginity? I got up one morning and the grass was silvered with frozen dew. I'd never seen frozen dew

before, and for a while I couldn't understand what it was. I went outside and it was cold. *Cold.* Before that moment, the word as applied to air had no meaning for me. Suddenly it had overwhelming meaning.

"The morning after that I got up and the sky was overcast and rain was falling. Falling furiously *in the daytime*, not softly in the night the way sane rain should, but *in the daytime*. I could not believe it till I went out and felt the rain on my face, and then I had to believe.

"There came a night not long after when the sky brightened blindingly at intervals, and the brightness was followed by deafening, demoralizing rumbles. More rain fell. The next day I noticed something else. The color of the leaves was changing. To red, to gold, to brown—to a thousand intermediate hues. And not only that, the leaves were detaching themselves, one by one, and drifting slowly to the ground . . . No, Your Virginity, I don't think I'm being presumptuous in wanting to find the Tekgod, in demanding an explanation. I think he *owes* me—and the rest of mankind—an explanation."

"I think he does, too," the tekress said unexpectedly.

"Will you take me to him, then?"

She lowered her eyes to her hands. They lay pale and immobile on the table. The long, sensitive fingers were tightly interlaced, and the fingertips were white. Presently: "Perhaps you are presuming a quality in me which I do not possess," she said.

"I'm presuming nothing. I'm merely asking a favor."

"The quality I had in mind was courage."

He stared at her. Her eyes were still lowered, still preoccupied with her hands. Finally: "You have a flyabout, don't you, Your Virginity?"

"Yes."

"Then let me borrow it and tell me the way I should go."

There was a silence. Then there was the whispering sound of her robe as she stood up, finally the sound of her voice, "I'll take you," she said.

Haze hovered over the land, and through the haze the gold and red and russet of the new season showed, in the unpre-

meditated patterns of woodlands, in the haphazard outlines of fields and meadows. Now and then the sapphire loveliness of a lake drifted by beneath them, and once they glimpsed the serpentine ribbon of a river.

The tekress's flyabout was a one-man affair, and they were forced to lie close together on the horizontal pilot-bed. But, despite the severe limitation of space, the tekress still managed to maintain an inch's distance between their prone bodies. Lathehand was grateful for that: he was not used to consorting with tekresses, and sharing a bed with one, even when the term was figuratively applied, embarrassed him as much as it indubitably embarrassed her.

But an inch was very little, after all, and it could not begin to dispel the sense of intimacy which the situation imposed. Lathehand found himself glancing at her more and more often, marveling again and again at her symmetrical profile, at the soft swell of her throat. He kept thinking of a statue he had seen once—a sensitive impression of a nude woman that somehow abnegated the very sex it seemed to shout.

Presently she raised her eyes from the floor viewer, intercepted one of his glances. He noticed her long dark lashes, the way the golden hue of her skin-tight cowl intensified the milk-whiteness of her complexion. He wondered curiously what her hair was like: whether it matched the midnight darkness of her eyebrows, whether it was straight or curly, whether it was dull or bright.

Her gray eyes, probing coldly into his, disconcerted him, and he looked away. He culled his mind for something to say that would take the edge off his embarrassment. A question would be best. Tekresses were accustomed to answering questions, and he had any number of them to ask. "How could anyone destroy summer?" he said presently. "Even a Tekgod?"

"Strictly speaking, he didn't destroy summer. He simply deactivated the Meteorological Modifier and summer departed of its own accord, for the simple reason that the season wasn't summer at all—at least not in a meteorological sense, but fall instead."

"I don't understand, Your Virginity."

"You could hardly be expected to . . . The pre-tek period

was deleted from the public mentors' tapes generations ago, and today only teks and tekresses are taught that there was a period in human history—a lengthy one—when men, instead of machines, worked, followed by another period when machines worked but had to be operated by men. Most of our present surnames are derived from the chief occupations of this machine-operation age, though our given names date back to a much more remote age . . . Anyway, weather control followed soon after the birth of automation and was integrated into the early Tekchurch as a matter of course. It seems fantastic, even to me, that there could have been a time when man had to accept the weather for what it was, had to endure its various and unpredictable moods; a time when months like January and June were associated, in the northern temperate zone, with the words 'cold' and 'warm'; a time when there were four seasons, instead of only one—summer, autumn, winter, spring—"

"What season is this?" Lathehand asked.

"Autumn. The past phase of autumn, in fact. Winter is near."

"Is winter worse?"

"Much worse."

"Then why did the Tekgod deliberately bring about its return?"

She dropped her eyes. "I told you before: I do not know."

"But you suspect."

"Perhaps."

"Then tell me. I have a right to know."

"A tekress is forbidden to discuss religio-technological matters with anyone who is not a member of the hierarchy," she said with sudden hauteur. "I've said too much already."

"I'm sorry, Your Virginity."

She acknowledged his apology with a brusque nod, and the conversation ended. When she returned her gaze to the floor viewer, he followed her eyes, saw that the flyabout was passing over the ruins of an ancient city. Steel, over a period of 5,000 years, was as ephemeral as wood over 500; beams and girders that had once supported and held together fabulous tons of brick and mortar were now no more than occasional discolorations on crumbled masonry, and even the masonry

itself had half-vanished beneath trees and vines and lichen. Lathehand had always wondered who had built the cities; now, in the light of his new knowledge, he understood that they were products of the pre-tek period. Man had built them, not machines. The concept was staggering, and he put it out of his mind.

Beyond the city, the terrain changed from a gentle drift of fields and valleys to a sequence of hills. The flyabout had been traveling north all day, and the higher hills were covered with a strange white substance. In the distance, mountains showed, and here the whiteness was more pronounced, extending sometimes halfway down the slopes. Snow, Lathehand thought wonderingly. Snow . . .

One of the hills caught his eye, not because it was covered with snow but because it was covered with something else. People. The tekress noticed too, and dropped the flyabout in a wide spiral.

As the distance diminished, details stood out with corrective clarity: only the slopes of the hill were covered with people; the hilltop itself was reserved for a single figure—a man in an incongruous white robe. His arms were raised, and he appeared to be addressing the multitude with passionate earnestness.

Lathehand heard the tekress gasp beside him, heard her voice: "It *can't* be! Even a paranoid old man wouldn't be so deluded as to think that—" Abruptly she bit her lip, and he felt the sudden pressure against his thighs and chest as she threw the flyabout into swift ascent.

At that moment the white-robed man saw them. He raised his arm till his fingers pointed directly at the flyabout's prow. Blue light leaped from his fingertips, and the craft began to flounder and lose altitude. The tekress worked the controls desperately, but the ground rose up relentlessly, giddily, overwhelmingly. Then, at the last minute, the flyabout righted itself and settled serenely into the grassy hollow at the foot of the hill.

The tekress's face was white. As white, Lathehand guessed, as his own face probably was. It was some time before either

of them spoke. Then: "We'd better get out of sight," Lathehand said. "He might blast us again."

The tekress shook her head. "I don't think he'll harm us."

"Then why did he knock us out of the sky? *How* did he knock us out of the sky simply by pointing at us?"

"I imagine he needed a miracle and was reluctant to deface the immediate countryside. We provided him with a convenient means for performing one."

Lathehand threw open the coping, climbed angrily out of the pilot-bed. "I don't know what's going on," he said, "but I do know he almost killed us, and without any provocation at all! I don't intend to let him get away with it."

The tekress had climbed out after him. She touched his arm. "He's gotten away with it already," she said. "Look."

Lathehand turned toward the hill. The men, women, and children covering the slopes were kneeling, their heads were bowed. The white-robed man stood imperially above them, arms folded, eyes uplifted to the sky. He was speaking, and his impassioned, vibrant voice rolled over the land:

"Is there one among you who doubts my identity now?" he demanded. When no one answered, he went on: "Once again I say unto you: My father is angry. In your pursuit of selfish pleasures, you have neglected him. You have taken his divine favors for granted and have given nothing in return. You have *lost* him, and now you must find him again—through trial and tribulation, through suffering and hardship; through me!"

The speech—or sermon—was over. The white-robed man started down the hillside, his audience making a path for him, falling in behind him when he reached the base. He headed straight for the fallen flyabout. When he reached it, he halted and folded his arms across his chest. He regarded Lathehand and the tekress with dark, almost luminescent eyes.

He was quite tall, and his bronzed face was strikingly handsome—the brow wide and high, the nose almost geometrically straight, the chin firmly molded. Lustrous chestnut hair tumbled in waves to his white-robed shoulders in chromatic harmony with his short wavy beard. His robe seemed to absorb the pale sunlight, reprocess it, and then release it in soft shimmering waves.

"Follow me," he said abruptly, and turned and strode away. The people trailed after him like mindless sheep.

The words had been spoken in a tone that contained no hint of command. Yet Lathehand felt compelled to fall into line, to follow unquestioningly wherever the white-robed man might lead him. He glanced at the tekress, curious as to her reaction, saw that she had re-entered the flyabout and was systematically trying the controls.

Presently she climbed back out. "It's completely dead," she said. "We can never make it to the Temple of Heaven on foot."

"We can try," Lathehand said. "We've plenty of food . . . How far away are we now?"

"About two hundred miles."

Lathehand glanced at the sky. The sun was low in the west, disappearing rapidly into a brooding cloud bank. He lowered his eyes. The hills rolled bleakly away in all directions. Trees, standing in groups in the valleys and alone on the hills, looked dead, and some of them—the tropical ones scattered incongrously among the endemic oaks, maples, elms, and poplars—really were dead.

A wind was drifting down from the north. He felt its cold breath against his face. He returned his eyes to the tekress. "What do you think, Your Virginity?"

"I think we'd better 'follow him'—for tonight, anyway. We can leave our supplies in the flyabout . . . Perhaps we can start out tomorrow."

Lathehand nodded. Then: "Who is he?" he asked.

"According to him, he's the Tekgod's son."

"Is he really?"

The tekress sighed. "In a way, he is," she said . . . "Come, we'd better hurry."

There was a valley sleeping among the hills, a long deep valley scattered with trees, mottled with meadows, bisected by a brook. Poplars, their leaves yellowed by the first frosts, grew along the brook looking like huge stalks of goldenrod in the afternoon light: tall flowers with sturdy stems and pale, impromptu petals.

There was a settlement in the valley, and they started down

the slope. The uniform dwellings were gray in the deepening shadows, their windows warm with light. People moved along the narrow, geometric streets toward a central square where the white-robed man was breaking bread.

Lathehand stared disbelievingly when they reached the square. There was but a single loaf of bread, but the white-robed man broke and broke, and the loaf never diminished. Not only that, the bread was rich and filling: Lathehand had been hungry, but his hunger vanished with the first mouthful.

He regarded the white-robed man with new respect, a respect colored with awe. Abruptly he heard the tekress's voice beside him: "Look at them! The gullible fools! All of them have duplicators in their own houses and yet they are so influenced by a change of setting, by an unprecedented situation, that they interpret a technological commonplace as a miracle." She glanced at Lathehand contemptuously. "And you're no different!"

"But *he* has no duplicator," Lathehand said.

"Not ostensibly. But there's probably one hidden in his robe."

"Why should he want to hide it?"

"Because miracles create awe. Technological gadgets do not. The Tekgod, even in his dotage, is aware of that."

"Your Virginity, that's blasphemy!"

She paled slightly. "Perhaps it is," she said. "But I'm glad I said it . . . Here comes your savior now."

The white-robed man had finished breaking bread and was approaching them. "Follow me," he said again, when he came opposite them, and Lathehand took the tekress's arm and they fell in behind him.

He did not pause till he reached the outskirts of the settlement. Then he turned suddenly and confronted the tekress. "You doubt me, don't you?" he said.

The white oval of her face stood out starkly in the darkness. But her eyes were clear and unafraid, her voice calm. "Yes," she said, "I do."

"I am the son of God," the white-robed man said. "I am the divine Repairman come out of the wilderness to reanimate your souls and to lead you back into my father's grace." He faced an empty plot of ground, raised his arm. "Let there

be shelter!" he said, and a dwelling grew out of the earth. "Let there be light within!" Yellow radiance poured forth from doors and windows. "Let there be suitable furnishings!" Chairs and tables and couches took shape. "Let there be heat!" Steam condensed on the windowpanes. He turned to the tekress. "You still doubt me?"

She was shaken. Lathehand, who was shaken himself, saw the slight twitching of her lower lip, the trembling of the hand she raised to her throat. But she said: "I'm quite familiar with matter transmission."

"Machineless matter transmission?"

"You have a machine hidden somewhere."

A pause. Then: "You will have all winter to look for it!" Abruptly the Repairman's voice rose, took on a shrill quality. "What are you doing in the company of a common male?" he demanded. "Why did you disregard my father's decree and leave your temple?" When she did not answer, he went on: "If you had evinced a vestige of the simple faith you see in the eyes of the people around you, in the eyes of your companion, I would have created you a dwelling fit for a tekress despite your wanton behavior, despite your dereliction of duty. Now I will create you nothing. If your companion sees fit to take you into this, *his* dwelling, he may do so; but you will not enter it as a tekress—you will enter it as an ordinary woman!"

The tekress stood straight and still. Her white face seemed choked by the tightness of her cowl. "You haven't the authority to deprive me of my rank," she said.

"I have the authority invested in me by my father who is the one God and the only God and upon whose side I shall sit in the Temple of Heaven when the ravages of winter have brought his children back to an awareness of his omnipotence!" the Repairman shouted, and, seizing the tekress's cowl in steel-strong fingers, he tore it from her head and ripped it to shreds.

He turned and strode away.

Scarlet usurped the whiteness of the tekress's face. It was as though the Repairman had torn her robe from her, instead of her cowl, and left her standing naked in the street. Her

hair, a breathless mass of midnight, tumbled darkly to her shoulders, and she tried futilely to cover it with her arms as she ran sobbing into the newly-created dwelling.

Lathehand did not move. He wanted to move; he wanted desperately to run after the Repairman and beat him with his fists. But he couldn't. His awe of the son of God outweighed his anger.

He didn't know how long he stood there, listening to the tekress's sobs, but his limbs were stiff from the cold and the sky was pulsing with stars when he finally threw off his inertia and entered the hut—

For it was little more than that: neat, white, uniformly heated, divided into two main rooms—but a hut withal. The tekress was huddled in a corner of the front room. Her sobs had ceased, but her head was buried in her arms and her hands still tried unsuccessfully to hide her hair.

Lathehand closed the door quietly. He took a deep breath, slowly expelled it. Then: "I know next to nothing about the tek hierarchy, Your Virginity," he said, "and I would be the last to disagree with any of the rules and regulations by which it operates. But it seems to me that honest beauty is a rare thing in any of our lives, and that when we come across it we should not turn our eyes away from it, nor hide it, nor suffocate it . . . nor, above all, be ashamed of it, no matter what tradition says, no matter what convention dictates."

She did not answer him. She would not even look at him. Her arms were white and rigid against her temples, her hands pressed tightly upon her head.

"Your hair is beautiful, Your Virginity . . ."

Silence stepped into the room and sat softly between them. He saw her arms relax, drop slowly to her sides. He saw the artificial light touch her hair, disintegrate into a million microcosmic stars. Her eyes lifted to his. Once there had been ice in their deep grayness. He saw the last particles of it melt away.

She stood up, smoothed her golden robe. She did not speak. Lathehand stepped across the floor, opened the door to the back room, and stepped inside. It was identical, both in decor and appointments, to the front room. The Repairman, he thought wryly, was as sex-conscious as the Tekgod.

He turned to the front room, shoved the couch against the wall opposite the connecting door. The tekress had not moved. "I'll sleep here, he said, not looking at her.

"Yes."

"He said you were no longer a tekress," Lathehand went on. "His saying it doesn't make it so. To me you are still a tekress—and therefore inviolable . . ."

"Yes," she said again. He was perplexed by the tone of her voice. It should have connotated relief, but it did not. "The tradition you mentioned a moment ago," she said. "I—I wonder if you know *why* tekresses cover their hair."

"No, Your Virginity."

"I—I'd almost forgotten myself." She lowered her eyes to her hands. "It began millennia ago, when machines had women operators. A lathe or a drill press could be quite dangerous if the operator's hair became entangled in it, and because of this it became customary for women operators to wear head-coverings. The custom was discontinued when fashion brought about bobs and bangs and feather cuts; then, much later, when complete automation revolutionized our way of life and our way of thinking, it was revived and integrated into the early Tekchurch. It has endured ever since, though most of us have forgotten its origin . . ." Abruptly she raised her eyes. "You realize, probably, that the only reason I'm telling you all this is to make myself feel better."

"I suspected you might be," Lathehand said. "*Do* you feel better?"

"A little."

He looked at her. She was standing in the doorway that connected the two rooms. Now that it was no longer surmounted by a cowl, her robe was suggestive of a golden dress. Her hair lay like jet silk on the golden swell of her shoulder. Her eyes were wide and luminous, the corneas pinkened from crying. Her lower lip contrasted more sharply than ever with the strong line of her chin.

"Tomorrow we'll try to get out of here," Lathehand said. "If you want to."

"Do *you* want to?"

"Yes."

"Then I do, too." She turned and stepped into her room. "Good night," she said.

"Good night, Your Virginity."

She closed the door. Softly . . .

The world was white, and particles of whiteness sifted steadily down from the sky. Lathehand was frightened at first when he looked through the window, and when he opened the door and the dawn-cold struck him, he was shocked. Then, when he realized what the whiteness meant, he was bitterly disappointed.

He closed the door and stepped back into the room. "Snow," he heard the tekress say, behind him.

"Yes," he said. He had not heard her enter the room, and he turned and faced her. He noticed instantly that her hair was different. Last night it had been tumultously beautiful; now it was beautiful in a different way. It was smooth now, almost glossy, and fell to her shoulders in orderly waves. "I'm afraid we can't leave today, after all," he said.

"No."

"But the snow can't last forever. We'll leave as soon as it's gone."

"Whenever you say."

He felt uncomfortable, why he did not know, and he was relieved when a knock sounded on the door. Opening it, he saw a tall bearded man standing in the snow. "The Repairman's breaking bread in the square," the bearded man said. "Better hurry or you'll miss out."

Lathehand turned to the tekress. "I'll get a double ration," he said.

"All right."

In the street, the bearded man said: "I'm Pressman."

"Lathehand . . . Thanks for stopping by."

"No trouble."

They walked in silence for a while. Then: "What are they like without their clothes on?" Pressman asked suddenly. "Not worth a second look, I'll bet!"

Lathehand came to a dead stop. The question was in poor taste, but it was a perfectly natural one. He had heard many jokes about teks and tekresses in his day, and he had laughed

as heartily as anyone else. A normal person could hardly be expected to take chastity vows seriously. And yet, instead of the mild annoyance which the question should have evoked, he experienced an immense, overwhelming anger, and for an insane second he debated on whether he should kill Pressman by strangling him, by beating him, or by breaking his neck.

Pressman shrank away, his face ashen. "In Tek's name, what's the matter with you?" he gasped.

"Get out of my sight," Lathehand said. "Don't ever come near me again!"

Pressman almost ran down the street, disappeared around a corner. Lathehand followed slowly. The snow stung his face, cooling his rage, but his hands were still trembling when he reached the square.

The square was a busy place for so early in the morning. Men, women, and an occasional child waited in a long line at the end of which the Repairman stood barefooted in the snow, breaking bread from his inexhaustible loaf. The sight of their warm clothing made Lathehand conscious of his thin leisure slacks and blouse, and he felt the wind more keenly. He also felt curious eyes upon him as he took his place in line.

When it came his turn, he asked for two portions, and the Repairman obligingly broke them off and handed them to him. Lathehand tried to hate the man, but looking into those dark, deep and emotionless eyes, he could summon nothing but wonderment . . . awe. Deliberately he recalled the scene of the night before, and this time hate did stir in him. But somehow it would not rise till he was walking away with the bread in his hands, and then it was too late.

"Wait," the Repairman said.

Lathehand turned.

"You have no warm clothing."

He saw the garments in the Repairman's arms, garments that had not been there a moment ago. He accepted them, was about to utter his thanks, when he saw that there was clothing for one person only. "But the tekress," he said. "She needs clothing, too."

"I know of no tekress in this community."

Lathehand swallowed. He knew what he had to say. "The woman in my hut," he said, hating himself.

Immediately more clothing appeared in the Repairman's arms. Lathehand accepted it before he saw how cheap and coarse it was, and when he tried to return it, the Repairman looked over his head as though he were not there. He almost threw it on the ground, but didn't. Clearly, coarse clothing was better than none at all, and equally clearly, coarse clothing was all the tekress was going to get.

She made no comment when he handed it to her. She merely carried it into her room, then returned and ate bread with him. "Why is it so filling?" Lathehand asked when they had finished. "I've never tasted bread like it."

"It isn't bread: it's a condensed dinner camouflaged as bread . . . After all, we wouldn't be of much comfort to the Tekgod's ego if he let us waste away through malnutrition."

"You mean the Repairman's ego, don't you, Your Virginity?"

She looked at him quickly, glanced away. "Yes, of course. The Repairman's ego . . . Please don't call me that."

"Why not?"

"Even tekresses have names."

"You've never told me yours."

She hesitated a moment, then: "Mary . . . Mary Machine. I—I don't know your name, either."

"Joseph Lathehand."

A silence settled around them, a strange silence permeated with a quality that Lathehand could not at first identify. The room, with its simple furnishings, seemed to bask in a warm light: the chairs, the table, the couch—a far cry, all of them, from the mechanized appointments he was used to; appointments that anticipated your every wish, that entertained you, that worked for you, that adored you . . . But, certainly, simple appointments were better than none, and there was a refreshing honesty, a certain dignity, about a chair that did not follow you around like a dog, a table that refused to devise new delicacies to delight you, a couch that would not make up reassuring dreams to tranquilize your sleep. Suddenly Lathehand knew what the quality was—

It was peace.

The snow fell for three days and three nights. Morning, noon, and evening, Lathehand went to the square for bread. At night he went to the square to hear the Repairman speak. Attending the sermons was not mandatory, but despite the weather, everyone in the settlement turned out. Everyone except Mary Machine.

The Repairman spoke of many things, but he spoke primarily of mankind's indifference to the Tekgod. This indifference he said, stemmed from the average person's reluctance to accept the Tekgod as a real god, to relegate him instead to the position of a sort of supreme tek. This, the Repairman insisted, was sheer apostasy. The Tekgod was a *divine* being, and right now he was an *angry* divine being. The weather was a reflection of his wrath, and the only way to modify it and to bring about the return of summer was to come to him through his son and to accept him as a divine being.

Lathehand was bewildered. "I've never questioned the Tekgod's divinity," he told Mary Machine. "I don't think anyone else has. Why should he accuse us of a lack of faith?"

"Paranoia," Mary Machine said.

He was shocked. "But he can't be insane! He's *God!*"

"God or not, he has the symptoms of paranoia. And not only that, he's betraying another facet of mental instability: he wants us to fear him."

"But why should he want us to fear him?"

"For one thing, he's in his dotage. For another, he's apparently been reading history and has discovered that there were gods before him, gods who did not need to rely on technology for their divinity. Unquestionably, he's been reading about a certain god in particular, a god who—

"But there's only one God," Lathehand objected. "There's never been another!"

"There have been many. The world is much older than you think."

Lathehand stood up, distraught. "You're a tekress. How can you say such things!"

"I say them because they're true. As true as the Repairman is false."

"But he's the son of God! You believe that, don't you?"

"With qualifications."

"Then why do you say he's false?"

She dropped her eyes to her intertwined fingers. "I—I don't know," she said presently.

Anger touched him. "You're lying!" he said impulsively. Then: "Forgive me, Your Virginity."

"There's no need to forgive you. I *was* lying."

"Why?"

"We may be here for some time. I want to preserve your peace of mind."

"The minute it stops snowing, we're leaving," he said. "So whatever you have to tell me, you can tell me now."

She shook her head. It occurred to him suddenly that even tekresses weren't above stubbornness. "After we leave, I'll tell you," she said. "Not before."

He had to let it go at that.

On the fourth day, the snow ceased falling. When he awoke, Lathehand blinked his eyes at the unexpected brightness of the room. He became aware of a vague tightness in his chest as he hurried over to the window and looked out at the immaculate new world, and there was a strange instability about the floor. Presently he realized that it wasn't the floor that was unstable, but himself.

Other changes in his physical *status quo* manifested themselves as he dressed. There was a dragging ache in the small of his back; his limbs were heavy; despite the fact that the room was cool, he was sweating. But in his haste to get started, he paid no attention.

When he finished dressing, he knocked on Mary Machine's door. She was already up and dressed. "Pack as many blankets as you can," he told her. "I'll get our supplies from the flyabout."

"All right."

He started for the door. Abruptly the room spun, and he staggered. Nausea rose in him. He saw Mary Machine's white face swimming in the gray, swirling mist that reality had become, felt her arm around his waist. He marveled at her strength at she half-carried him back to the couch, and suddenly he knew the coolness of her hand on his white-hot forehead. He heard her voice:

"You're not going anywhere today," she said.

It was an old, old word, so old that it had nearly vanished from the language; so old that only a tekress who had read too many ancient books would remember it at all—

Influenza.

The virus wouldn't have hit him so hard, Mary Machine told him—much later, when his delirium was behind him—, if he had been living in the pre-tek age. But centuries of summer had undermined man's immunity to his oldest enemy, and the mild but elusive virus that had been capable of causing a three or four days' illness five thousand years ago was now an omnipotent entity capable of keeping a healthy person flat on his back for weeks.

For a long time Lathehand thought he was going to die. For a long time he wanted to die. His dreams were cesspools of fears and repressions whose existence he had forgotten. His waking moments were little better. What made them endurable at all was the reassuring softness of a voice he could never quite place, and the reassuring presence of a white face, framed in midnight darkness, that was the same, and yet not quite the same, as a face he had known in a far happier reality.

At the beginning of the second week, he began to feel better. Mary Machine read to him then—not out of books, for there were none, but out of her mind. She had an eidetic memory, and he would watch, sometimes, while she closed her eyes and searched for a phrase or a line mentally photographed years ago, and invariably be startled at the unexpected freshness her voice would give to an archaic turn or twist of thought.

The books she read to him were commensurate with his recovery. In the beginning, there was one called *Ivanhoe*—a romantic fantasy which he found difficult to understand because it was based on a set of values for which his own thought-world could provide no criteria. Much later there was one called *The Brothers Karamazov,* another fantasy which he found difficult to understand for the same reason.

Finally, there was one called *30 Pieces of Chrome,* and this one he had no difficulty in understanding because it had been written during the early years of the Tekchurch. But, while

he could understand it, he could not accept it, for it was a blazing indictment against the Tekchurch and against mankind. From its impassioned prose arose the startling accusation that man, after a few half-hearted and much publicized efforts to reach the planets, had turned his back on the stars and converted his science into "a contemptible lapdog dedicated to the gratification of its master's every whim." The end result was the glorification of universal automation and the apotheosis of the supreme tek who, from a strategically located ganglion, held electronic jurisdiction over every subganglion in the world, and through them controlled the operation and maintenance of the vast system of subterranean machines and reactors that supplied energy to everything from a household mentor to the Meteorological Modifier itself. The over-all result was spiritual decadence, the increasing reluctance of married people to accept the responsibilities of parenthood and the consequent falling off of the birthrate, an unrestrained indulgence in the physical pleasures of the moment because of the Tekchurch's failure to come up with new concepts of "heaven" and "hell", and the popular identification of the latter concept with boredom. The author, Mary Machine said, had been tried by the tek tribunal for heresy, found guilty, and given the radiation chamber.

After *30 Pieces of Chrome,* Lathehand's recovery was rapid. Soon he was able to walk around the room, and not long afterwards he was able to spare Mary Machine the humiliation of going to the square for bread. On his first visit, he was surprised at the smallness of the crowd, and then it dawned on him that the virus had not singled him out in particular, but had spread throughout the whole country.

When he got back to the hut, Mary Machine was missing. A note on the table said: *I'm at the Diemakers. Their child is ill.* Up till now, she had had nothing to do with their neighbors—a logical reaction in view of the fact that their neighbors would have nothing to do with her. Apparently the Diemakers had suffered a change in attitude, or, more probably, had adopted their attitude to fit their situation.

Curious, he went out into the street and inquired his way to their hut. The wind had shifted to the south and the snow was swiftly turning into slush and dirty water. John Die-

maker opened the door. There were dark pouches beneath his eyes. "Come in," he said.

Lathehand stepped inside. A little girl lay on a couch in the far corner of the front room and Mary Machine was kneeling over her. The girl's mother stood to one side, crying.

"We thought she might be able to help," Diemaker said.

"Can't the Repairman do anything?"

Diemaker shook his head. "He was here. But all he did was look at her and turn away. I—I didn't know what to do—till I thought of the tekress."

The little girl's moon-face was flushed, her breathing labored. Mary Machine's hand rested on the small forehead and she was speaking in a low, almost inaudible voice. Looking down at her, Lathehand caught her face in profile, and it was as though he were seeing her for the first time. Her face had intrigued him before because of its contradictions: the contrast between the full lower lip and the determined line of the chin; the clash between the austere gray eyes and the soft full cheeks. Now a new quality had appeared—a quality that eliminated the incongruities completely and brought every feature together into a supremely balanced composite that came very close to beauty. Perhaps as close to beauty as it was possible to come.

Lathehand couldn't identify the quality. It was too tenuous for him to put his finger on. But, watching her, he remembered suddenly the strange face he had seen during the delirious phases of his illness, and he realized that this wasn't the first time he had seen the new version of Mary Machine; that it had been her face floating in the mists of his nightmares, calming them and turning them into bearable dreams.

As he watched, standing there in the hot close room, he became aware of a difference in the background sound. The wind still moaned around the eaves, the mother's crying continued uninterruptedly, and the father kept clearing his throat at intermittent intervals as though about to voice a question he was afraid to ask; but beneath all those various sounds, the sound of the child's breathing had changed. It was even now, and quieter, and looking closer, Lathehand saw that the small moon-face was no longer flushed, that sweat no longer glistened on the little brow. The mother noticed the change

then, and her sobs died away, and when Mary Machine stood up, she knelt at her feet and pressed the hem of the tekress's robe to her lips.

Two patches of red appeared in Mary Machine's cheeks. She pulled her robe away, raised the woman to her feet. "I think she'll be all right now," she said, and turned and left the hut. Lathehand followed.

In their own hut, he said: "I brought our bread. Are you hungry?"

She nodded. They ate silently, facing each other across the table. After a while: "The snow's melting fast," Lathehand said. "Maybe we can leave tomorrow."

"If you wish," she said.

"It's not what I wish that counts."

"Then nothing counts."

"I don't understand, Mary Machine."

"A woman can be many things: she is never one thing only. It's unfair to assume that the first person you thought her to be is the only person she is capable of being . . . You still don't understand."

"No," he said. Then: "Would you rather stay?"

She looked around the room, and he got the impression that for her the walls were no longer there, that she was seeing the whole settlement, perhaps the whole world. Presently: "Many of them are sick now," she said. "Many more of them will be sick tomorrow. And tomorrow and tomorrow. Is it right to leave them?"

"They're the Repairman's responsibility, not yours."

"It would be more appropriate if you said they're the Tekgod's responsibility, not mine. It would also be equally untrue."

"But what do you owe them? For weeks they've ignored you. For weeks they've made up obscene little stories about our relationship. Yes, it's true," he went on, when a blush darkened her neck and cheeks. "It's true and you know it's true!"

She spoke with difficulty. "Whatever they've said arose from the same frustrations and fears that have always

afflicted human beings and probably always will. I have no right to condemn them for it."

"Then you'd rather stay?"

"Only if you do."

He sighed. "All right then. We'll stay."

For a moment he thought he saw a smile soften the corners of her mouth, but he couldn't be sure. He had never seen her smile before, nor heard her laugh—

It occurred to him suddenly that Mary Machine was a very unhappy woman.

The snow melted far faster than it had fallen, and the settlement became a quagmire of muddy streets. Then, one morning, the Repairman raised his arm and said: "Let there be flagstone walks among the houses and a flagstone pavement upon the square!" The problem was solved.

The influenza problem, however, was not solved. The epidemic grew worse, seemed to thrive on the warmer weather. More and more men, women, and children took to their beds, and when word of Mary Machine's curing the Diemaker girl got around, more and more people sought her out.

She was hardly ever home. Morning, noon, and night there was always someone who needed her, and she never refused them. Lathehand could not understand what powers of healing she possessed, but whatever those powers were, her patients invariably recovered. And it wasn't always a matter of touching their foreheads and murmuring a few words, either—though sometimes this simple treatment effected an immediate turn for the better. In the majority of cases she spent hours, sometimes days, at a single bedside.

Once, when she was employing the first method on an afflicted woman, the Repairman entered the hut. Lathehand, who was kneeling beside her, imploring her to go home and rest, saw him slip into the room and stand unobtrusively in the background. The dark, luminous eyes glittered oddly in the artificial light as they followed her every movement, and the expressionless face took on the hue of yellowed parchment. Several days later, Lathehand learned that he had used the same technique on another patient. The patient had died.

With the thaw, the ranks of the Repairman's followers

swelled. The snow and the cold had convinced even the most skeptical that the change in the weather was going to continue unless they did something about it, and even the most stubborn that freezing in heatless houses would profit them nothing. Word of the Repairman's coming had somehow got around, and every day people poured into the settlement, beseeching him for bread and shelter. He did not refuse them, and the settlement overflowed till it covered half the valley floor.

Some of the incoming people had already been exposed to the virus; others were half-dead from it. And still they came, eager to see the Repairman's miracles, hopeful that he would restore the weather to its normal *status quo*. But while they came to witness the Repairman's miracles, they stayed to witness the miracle of Mary Machine healing the sick.

She was a familiar figure on the streets, tall, hurrying, immaculate, and strangely beautiful, in the coarse gray clothes the Repairman had given her. A white kerchief covered the top of her head, but her hair spilled down in riotous darkness to her shoulders for everyone to see. People, when they met her, bowed and stepped aside. Some of them even made the sign of the atom on their breasts.

The Repairman, on the other hand, passed almost unnoticed among his flock. His nightly sermons were attended by mere handfuls of the faithful, and sometimes even they did not stay to hear him through. At first he gave no evidence that he resented the wane in his popularity. He continued to break bread in the square, morning, noon, and night. He walked the streets in the dignified manner that befitted the son of the Tekgod. Every so often, he performed a miracle or two. Finally he went so far as to move a mountain, but the performance faded into insignificance when, several hours later, Mary Machine performed the simple miracle of saving another human life. That night he failed to show up in the square with his inexhaustible loaf of bread and, later on, he failed to show up to deliver his equally inexhaustible sermon.

He didn't show up the next morning, either, or the next noon. That night, when he finally did show up—minus his bread but bursting with his sermon—he had a capacity crowd.

Lathehand stood with Mary Machine on the outskirts of the crowd. She had insisted on coming despite the fact that she had not slept for nearly two days. Fatigue had devastated the fullness of her cheeks, thinned her lips. Her eyelids were much too heavy, her eyes far too bright. By accident, his hand touched hers in the darkness and he was startled by the hotness of her skin.

"Mary," he said, "you're sick."

"No."

Suddenly she swayed, half-fell against his shoulder; but when he tried to lead her back to the hut, she resisted with surprising strength. "I'm all right!" she said, and the anger in her voice made him step back. Presently he realized that he was still holding her hand, and he dropped it hastily. The brightness of her eyes seemed more pronounced than ever: they seemed almost to glisten in the starlight.

The Repairman's sermon was brief and to the point: "Once again you have failed my father," he cried, "and once again my father is angry! There is nothing he cannot do for his children, nothing he would not do for them. But when they forsake him for a faithless tekress with the powers of a witch, his wrath is great. His discontinuance of your daily bread is merely the first manifestation of his displeasure. There are many more to come—unless you repent; unless you reject the false tekress and return to me, and through me, return to *him!*"

At first there was silence, then the scraping sound of feet on flagstones. People glanced covertly at Mary Machine, glanced quickly away. A murmur arose, gained in volume as it spread throughout the crowd. Abruptly someone shouted: "And if we do, will *you* heal our sick?"

The Repairman's face retained its undeviating impassivity, but the shrillness of his voice betrayed his fury. "Is that your answer?"

"Yes," someone else shouted. "What good is bread to the dead!"

"Then die!" The Repairman raised his arm. "Fall on them!" he shouted to the distant mountains. "Cover them!" he screamed to the surrounding hills.

The ground began to tremble. There was a rumbling in the distance.

"Wait!" Mary Machine cried.

The Repairman lowered his arm. Instantly the ground steadied and the rumbling faded away. She started through the crowd toward the center of the square. "Can't you see he's insane!" she cried, when Lathehand tried to stop her.

"Then use your paralyzer pistol on him!"

She shook her head, freed her arm from his grasp. "It wouldn't do any good," she said.

He watched helplessly while she walked through the lane the people made for her. When she reached the Repairman she stopped and bowed her head. "What must I do?" she asked.

As usual, the Repairman's face provided no index to his mood; but again his voice betrayed him, this time not by shrillness, but by a pervasive purring note. *"Luke: Seven, thirty-eight,"* he said.

Without a word, Mary Machine turned, left the square, and started down the street to her hut. When Lathehand fell in beside her, she waved him back. "Trust me," she said, "and please don't interfere."

Minutes later she returned, bearing a basin of water. She set it at the Repairman's feet and knelt before it. Slowly, meticulously, she washed each foot and dried it with her hair. Lathehand watched numbly, forced himself to go on standing where he was. A gibbous moon showed above the lip of the valley and its silver rain glistened, almost glittered in her dark luxuriant tresses. Presently he saw her stand up, her head still bowed. Suddenly he saw her fall . . . and he was running, then, forcing his way through the speechless spectators to her side.

He picked her up and carried her out of the square. Behind them the Repairman began breaking bread.

The southwind breathed its last breath and gave up the ghost, and the west wind came riding over the land like a furious Brünnhilde on a savage white charger. Snow fell again, not softly as the first snow had, but in slanted fury, in white and swirling gusts, spuming down from the hills and collect-

ing in the valleys. The days were bitter with cold, and the nights haunted by the Valkyrie-voice of the blizzard.

Mary Machine made an ideal victim for the virus. Her lack of sleep and her overexertion had weakened her more than Lathehand had suspected, and he was dismayed at the rapidity with which she succumbed. Worst of all, while she could heal others, she could not heal herself, and there was no other Mary Machine available to come round and cure her by the sheer force of unselfish devotion. True, several of their neighbors did drop by and self-consciously offer their help; but their lowered eyes betrayed their insincerity. Lathehand turned them away.

Gradually he understood the reason behind their change of attitude. The Repairman had played his hand shrewdly, and even though Mary Machine had given the people back their bread by her act of humility, the nature of the act itself had destroyed their respect for her. And this, coupled with the falling off of the influenza epidemic—strangely coincident with the drop in temperature—had restored the Repairman to his former position.

Day after day, night after night, Lathehand sat by her bed. For a long time she was delirious, and during this phase she seemed obsessed by a coming event which she referred to as the "transfiguration." He humored her, though he hadn't the remotest notion of what the term meant. As nearly as he could understand from her vague ramblings, the "transfiguration" was a change which was supposed to occur in the Repairman's physical make-up at a prearranged date and in accordance with the historical episode upon which the Tek-god was basing the analogous "ministry" of his son.

Once she said: "We never should have let him stay in office for so long. We should have known that senility was inevitable, and we should have known that when he reverted to childishness, he would mindlock himself in his ganglion tower and make some childish gesture calculated to attract attention to himself. And most of all, we should have known that a childish gesture on the part of a man with illimitable power could result in the destruction of the world."

On another occasion, she said: "I sometimes think that in clothing mere maintenance men and women in the robes of

priests and nuns and in forcing them to forego their sexual need, we have only succeeded in stultifying the idea we tried so desperately to sanctify."

On still another: "The events that fashion ideologies sometimes reoccur, and the ideologies themselves follow soon after. Basically, history is a panorama of repetition."

And once, in the middle of a dark and lonely night, she shocked him by crying out: *"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine! . . . I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys . . . The voice of my beloved! Behold, he cometh, leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. My beloved is like a roe or a young hart . . . I was asleep, but my heart waked: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, 'Your hair is beautiful, Your Virginity . . .'"*

Lathehand lacked an eidetic memory, and even if he had had one, there would have been no books in his mind. He had never seen one.

But, in common with mankind, he had certain experiences which he had never forgotten, and when Mary Machine's eyes cleared again, he told her of his life in the mechtown that had been his birthplace: of his mentors and their stereotyped lessons, of the vague shapes of the two pleasure-seeking people whom he had been taught to regard as his parents; of stalking deer in the animation gardens and bringing them down with his deactivator rifle, and then activating them again and watching them run brainlessly away; of his various exploits in his flyabout and of his various exploits (expurgated) with women . . . and as he talked, the conviction grew in him that he had no right to talk at all, that in all his insipid life he hadn't done a solitary thing worth recounting to someone else. But if Mary Machine was ever bored, she gave no sign; in fact, there were times when he could have sworn that she was absorbed in his every word.

Presently he realized that she was getting better. Her forehead seemed almost cool now, when he touched it, and there were vestiges of color in her cheeks. But she was strangely nervous, and her nervousness did not dissipate even after she was strong enough to walk. She questioned him again and

again about the Repairman's activities, and insisted that he attend the nightly sermons in the square.

He complied. Once again the Repairman was talking to a capacity audience, and his voice, vibrant with a sort of hysterical expectation, rose above the winter wind in strident overtones: "Soon you will see my father in me, see me resplendent in his shining glory, transfigured from a mere mortal to a true son of God! And then the wrath of my father will rise to its glorious zenith, and the hills will come tumbling down, the mountains will tremble, the skies will darken and rain will fall, and the rivers will rise and cover the earth. Only those of you who believe in me shall survive!"

With each sermon, the hysteria in his voice built up more and more. At last the date for the great event was revealed: it was to transpire on the morrow. Everyone, men, women, and children, were to be ready at dawn to accompany him into the hills. Those who failed to do so were to perish in the coming flood.

Mary Machine was still weak, but she insisted on going. Dawn broke gray and lowering. The wind was still from the north, harsh and piercing. Lathehand took her arm, and they blended with the forming crowd—with the Diemakers and the Oilers and Welders, with the Shearmans and the Toolmakers and the Melters—and flowed with it, in the Repairman's wake, out of the valley and into the hills.

The Repairman chose the highest hill of all. He ascended it slowly, and with vast dignity. When he reached the summit, he turned and faced the people covering the slopes. Then he raised his eyes to the heavens and spread his arms wide.

The minutes tiptoed past on tiny, soundless feet. The crowd was silent, its multiple faces white. Mary Machine's face was whitest of all, and Lathehand saw that she was trembling. "I had to do it," he heard her murmur. "A mad god is worse than no god at all."

Someone in the crowd gasped, and Lathehand raised his eyes to the hilltop. A change was taking place in the Repairman. He had begun to glow as though an eternal brightness, hitherto repressed, were seeping outward through his skin, through his robes. The glow increased, became a radiant,

pulsing red, turned slowly to yellow. Someone screamed. A man standing some distance from Lathehand, fainted. The yellow radiance brightened relentlessly to white. It became apparent, then, that something was wrong. The Repairman began beating his body with his hands, as though the brightness were unbearable. Suddenly his robes flashed into flame, disintegrated. The Repairman, naked, was definitely not a man. His skin started to flake, turned to ashes and drifted to the ground. The white radiance turned to blue. The Repairman's face blackened, peeled away; metal mesh glittered where it had been. A single agonized scream rushed from the lipless mouth, briefly rode the winter wind. There was a blinding puff of smoke, and abruptly the Repairman was gone.

Lathehand felt Mary Machine sway against him and he caught her in his arms. "Take me to the top of the hill," she whispered.

He led her through the shocked crowd. She was crying. On the hilltop, they paused beside the small mound of smoking ashes and blackened metal parts. She took a deep breath, waited a moment, then turned and faced the multitude. She straightened her shoulders. Her rich voice warmed the clear cold air:

"Go home to your mechtowns. The Tekgod is dead . . . *For, lo, the winter is past, and the rain is over and gone—*"

And suddenly the winter wind became a summer breeze, the sky brightened to blue, and the sun broke through the last absconding clouds.

"When I was a little girl," Mary Machine said, "I wanted a doll. My mentors told me that wanting to play with dolls was an atavistic yearning, and they refused my request. So I made one."

They had opened the windows of the hut and the warm wind blew through the room. Outside in the street, happy people were passing in the sunshine.

"It was quite an unusual doll," she went on, when Lathehand made no comment. "So unusual that, when my mentors called it to the local tek's attention, it was interpreted as my call, and I was immediately enrolled—confined would be a

more accurate term—in the nearest tek convent. Naturally, the first thing they did was to take the doll away from me. But before they took it away, I had a great deal of fun with it.

"It could walk, talk, see, and hear, but in addition to that, it was a sort of a mechanical projection of my self-image. Wherever it went, I went too; whatever it saw and heard, I saw and heard too; whenever it spoke, it spoke with my voice. I was so closely allied to it electronically that I could actually feel its pain, and if someone had destroyed it while it was activated, I would have been destroyed along with it.

"Wanting to play with dolls is not a yearning confined to little girls only. Old men in their second childhood can experience it too . . . The Tekgod's 'doll' was a much more complex mechanism than mine was: it contained an inbuilt matter disintegrator, an inbuilt matter duplicator, and an inbuilt transmitter with a receiving radius of at least sixty feet. But essentially it was the same as mine: if you destroyed it, you destroyed its creator also." She dropped her eyes abruptly to the table where her white fingers lay tightly interlocked. "I didn't want to do it, but someone had to, and I was the only one with the opportunity."

"But you didn't destroy the Repairman. It destroyed itself."

She shook her head. "I knew that the Tekgod would, sooner or later, try to prove the Repairman's godhead beyond any doubt, and since he was following the pattern of an ancient episode, there was little doubt but that he'd employ a technological version of the 'transfiguration' contained in that episode. So when I washed the Repairman's feet in the square, I shorted one of the 'transfiguration circuits' in its heel. It was a simple operation and occasioned no pain, but even if it had, the Tekgod was so engrossed in his own self-idealization that he probably wouldn't have noticed. When he finally did realize that I'd spotted his subterfuge, it was too late: the 'transfiguration' was already taking place. And of course, when he died, his mind-lock on the ganglion door collapsed, and the Temple of Heaven teks were able to enter and reactivate the Meteorological Modifier.

"He'd shown signs of mental instability before, and we've been afraid for years that something like this might happen.

Yet we were reluctant to take him out of office because such an act would have been unprecedented. Traditionally, Tekgods serve till they die, and then the Tek Council elects a new one from their ranks. So all of us waited instead of acting, and when you finally shamed me into action, it was too late. The Tekgod's paranoia had already become critical, and his 'doll' was on the rampage . . . And yet, for all his madness, he tried to give the world what it needs the most—a new Christ."

"A *Christ?*"

She nodded. "But of course, he failed. He couldn't endow his 'doll' with qualities he himself lacked. The Repairman was a hollow Christ, a Christ without compassion, without altruism, without maturity."

Epilogue

It is one year later. The new Tekgod, alarmed at the continued decline in the birthrate, has decreed that all citizens return to their native mechtowns so that an accurate census can be taken. Joseph and Mary Lathehand have returned to the town of Joseph's birth.

They have landed their flyabout on the outskirts and have entered the town in search of a place to sleep. Mary is great with child. But the town is crowded with travelers and all of the stopovers are full, and the best they can do is a stable which the owner has converted into a makeshift apartment.

During the night, Mary cries out. Towards morning, a child is born, and a resplendent supernova rises in the east . . .

How long will it take man to return to the caves—remembering only dimly the days and years of greatness before the cities died, and fearing any message from this past when evil ruled the land?

That Evening Sun Go Down

ARTHUR SELLINGS

AGAINST ALL the blue of that rotate I hivelong, sick for three sun, not this moty yellow but so bright soulshadow of one. Where red, where green? Not soulshadow now even, but fable told of world never seen. *Yingen yingen* away in time and space and I most deep ordained here.

Hurry through hive seeking soulbalm my puny. He squat in corner, gaggle around by three of *We*. Making joynoise. I sicken to hear *We* try that nomeaning noise. Puny for balm, make *We* aloft, good. Joynoise for puny. For *We* unright, against order. Against racepride. For *We* lucklack all that tackle of muscle thread, of nervefinger link to bray. Have I not open one rotate that wild puny, to match with inmost soulscan of me? Of nature great pain in me. Greater pain to wildpuny and lastloss of punysoul. But proof. Tape in store, even *shruhn* to Hiveworld as metalfact for all time not yet born.

One of gaggle lift head. I see it is Wenonumber who one rotate couple against law with puny and is yet under ban so his mind be open and his wrongthink smothered at first spark. Yet what here? Not his think smothered but open, moving mind of other two? *We* become, one revolve after one, dismind, I think.

Jagged mind in me. I open and roar. Three fall away. Before rank of me flee.

Puny look up. In hand of him motehive. Mind of me all jagged now. Puny free within city law. To have motehive counter no law but I know this thing to mock.

Sadsweet this poor puny, all puny. Lose their world to us most easy. So mock is balm to puny and this motehive is mock. Rotate or one or many, such mock no jag to my mind. Mock is mirror to greatness. *We* talk of hive because hive our race beginning. As sea creature of puny we know by open and match. We fly not now, fur away, mindtouch only in couple, command, ban, lastloss. All race evolve, but *We* keep soulegg, race memory, therefore Hivename. No racelink to these moty. Dismindly jagged now I kicksunder hive and moty fly away.

Puny look up at me black. And in mesoul too all black. Againstself black now, ingrief for puny. I groan, Sing to me puny. I reach out to caress.

Yet more black he sing. Painsong, that one note *We* shiver at. Rotate or one, painsong touch balmtackle, two meet like great holy oneinmany of universe. But this rotate I feel only pain.

I take from belt high pink sugar precious from Hiveworld and uphold. Puny sing painsong on. I, againstself black more, beat him once about head. He scatter. I pass on.

Then faint behind me note and note. I hate to see that evening sun go down. My pet puny song. I even know word after word of. Little true mean I know, but notesoundwordsound great balm. Pain as in all onemany, but small pain. Small pain great balm. Small pain make great balm—holy high of onemany in balmworld.

Go back to puny. Puny from fold of bodyweave take stringstick and pluck. Plucksing slow, singpluck sad. Ooze from universe walls great balm. Bathe me bathe me. Lift up soul, fly fly *yingen yingen* to most inheart of all, to first soulegg.

Sugar I shower and puny stop. On I cry and puny sing on. Puny look up, joypain on face. For am I sing too, thus puny joypain for I lack tackle. But I balm. Puny joypain only goodmock. My voice round punyword clumsy. But all balm.

Then holy onemany onemost be. And balm end as all balm for all creature howso they couple or call. Slow sad of afterbalm. Thank I say and pass on.

Voice of command.

To leader I.

Leader great sad.

Afterbalm I question.

Balmblack.

I afterbalm I say.

She rise from cradle. Balmblack afterbalm all one in lastloss. She stand, look out over green world. She *vahn.*

Yearn from Hiveworld I question.

Hiveworld yes. Thoughtban. This world think. Conquer now how many revolve? To what end? All loosing. Raceloss, *yingen* from Hive.

I know not only in me this selfblack. Wenumberone mose ingrief. Selfblack over puny? I offer.

Haynn! Leadermind jagged. What puny to *We, We* to puny? If puny fade in last raceloss . . . *We* jagged? Tell me.

We all jagged, I say. Pain in our inheart. Lackfaith. Soulshred.

Then we make lastloss of all. Then peace in our heart and no more pain for punyrace. No more pain in Most Inheart of all.

And She most jagged now. She——

"And there the record ends," said Rolf.

The face of the accused one moved in the light of the judgment flame.

"*This* you bring against me? This tortured translation of some script that Rolf has found among the ruins!"

"This is no translation. I read from the very script."

"It's a grotesque tongue. Clumsy and——"

An angry murmur rose from the gathered tribe.

Rolf smiled thinly and pityingly.

"I do not speak to condemn you. I am a scholar, interested only in the truth. It is obvious that this is the true tongue. It speaks of the Hiveworld and of the way of things then upon Earth. It speaks strong. It is we, descendants of the Great Ones, who speak a grotesque and debased tongue."

The white-haired Queen spoke now, addressing herself to the accused.

"Our faith is founded on truth and divine order. How other could it be than as Rolf has spoken?"

The accused struggled to find words. Then he stammered, "I have not had time to reason out this new-found fragment, but I say that it is part of a record made by one of that race that conquered us——"

The crowd roared in anger now. The Queen raised her hand for silence.

"No, let him speak. However painful his words may be. We know that he has murmured among us before, but he must be allowed to speak out now in defense of himself." She turned back to the accused. "Unless, that is, you elect to keep your silence from this time, accepting the proof of this script."

"The script is no proof. Only in pictures would be proof."

"You know that the Great Ones never made images. Wherefore to this day the making of images is unlawful. Do you not see how false your words are? If your heresy were true, then the script would be in some strange tongue. How do you explain this?"

"How can I explain something written many centuries ago? We speak the tongues of beast and bird to ensnare them. Perhaps it was a fancy of the writer. Who can tell? If there is proof in this script, then it is proof of what I say. Are there not words in it which the writer could not translate, words not in our tongue?"

"But Rolf has explained that. We have lost the words as the true Tongue has become corrupt on our lips."

"Then the joynoise that this record speaks of? The noise that was alien to the writer, what was that but the sound of laughter?"

The Queen looked sadly upon him. "And who laughs among us? Except crazy ones?"

And the answering roar of the crowd held no laughter in it.

The accused raised his voice above the clamour.

"Then we're all crazy. Don't you see! If you condemn me you are giving them the final victory. The victory even they no longer held precious, as the script shows. They were losing the will to survive. As we are by maintaining that we are

their descendants. We're not. We are the Puny of this script, the true natives of——"

There were great cries of "Kill him! Kill him!" and a shrill voice rose above the clamour: "He seeks to take away our faith!"

The accused one's voice became a scream.

"I seek not to take it away but to restore it. Ours has been a false faith, nurtured in broken pride. I tell you, we are *Man*. Once we were great upon this Earth. We have a world to remake, to make great again. If we think only——"

His words were drowned utterly in the storm of anger about him. The Queen stood up, both arms raised. When the clamour died the accused too had fallen silent, his head bowed in resignation.

The Queen spoke.

"This is no time for anger, my brothers, only for pity. Take this crazed creature away and hurl him from the cliff. Then return speedily for the ceremony of purification."

The man was dragged away. Soon, from beyond the woods, came a last cry, dying into silence.

The men returned.

"Very well," said the Queen. "Let us speak the first verses of the Holy Text:

"In the beginning was wilderness, inhabited only by creatures of evil. Then came the Great Ones from beyond the stars who multiplied upon the face of the earth and put to flight the creatures of evil and built great cities.

"But, though the creatures of evil were overcome, yet their evil lived on, and after many a year calamity fell upon the Great Ones. Their cities fell into ruin and the Great Ones withered. We, lost souls, are their remnant.

"Yet in the Hiveworld the Great Ones still abide. Keep our hearts pure against the day of Their Coming. For surely they have not forgotten us, their lost children."

A sound, half-whisper half-wailing, rose from the crowd.

"Now let us lift our eyes to the stars, to the Hiveworld, and stand in silent communion and prayer."

After a long silence, terminated by a stomping of the Queen's staff, they dispersed back to their caves, their hearts eased by the purging of heresy from their midst.

Only one man was troubled, remembering an old man, a kin of his mother. *He* had sung that song, a slow sad song. *I hate to see that evening sun go down. I hate to see. . . .*

The man's lips moved as he remembered the tune. Strange that it should survive if it had been the song of a lesser race that had died.

Unless——

But he thrust the thought from his mind as he reached his cave. He took one last look at the stars and murmured piously, "Keep our hearts pure against the day of Their Coming," before passing into the darkness beyond.

We have no way of knowing what the world will be like the day after tomorrow. We like to think that we may in time reach the stars, and perhaps we will. And then again it may be like this, with one man of faith left to bring us back into the light . . .

The Wolfram Hunters

EDWARD D. HOCH

NOW IN the ninth decade after the Bomb, when the war which had ravaged the earth was almost forgotten, there lived in the upper valley of the Rio Grande a tribe of Indians that had once—in more glorious days—been Apaches. It was not a large tribe, and in the little village called Del Norte there were perhaps no more than two hundred souls.

One of these was the child Running, who passed his days playing and climbing among the foothills much as children everywhere had done in the old days. If there was any difference between Running and these children of the past, it was only that he was alive. Very early in life, certainly before he was seven, Running learned of the old man who lived up on the mountains, a cave-dwelling ogre who easily became the subject of parental threat and childhood legend. "I'll send you to the man on the mountain," parents would say when trying to scare obedience into their offspring. "Be good or the man on the mountain will get you!"

But after he'd passed a certain threshold of age—was it seven or eight or nine?—he realized in a burst of enlightenment that there was nothing to fear from this cave-dwelling creature. The older boys initiated him into the terrors of the cave one stormy night in summer, by the simple expedient of dragging him to its mouth and hurling him inside. The cave in which Running found himself was low and

narrow at its entrance, but it soon broadened out into a sort of room where a boy or even a man could stand and walk upright without discomfort.

And the man he found there was far from the horrible bearded ancient he'd come to imagine in his dreams. He was rather a tall and not unhandsome Indian of perhaps forty years, a man who came to greet Running with a smile and an outstretched hand. "You are brave to come here on such a stormy night," he said, and when Running took an uncertain step backward, he added quickly, "Don't be afraid. I am only a man like the others in the valley."

Running summoned all his courage and asked, "Who are you? Why do you live here alone?"

"My name is Legion," he said quietly. "Father Legion. I am a priest, and that is the reason why I must live here, away from other men."

"A priest?" He had heard them mentioned, vaguely, as something that had vanished with the cities and the airplanes and the sea and the rest of it. Vanished with the bursting of the Bombs. "I didn't know there were any left," he told the man.

"I believe I am the only one. At least I am the only one at Del Norte, little friend. But tell me, what is your name?"

"Running."

"Running? I like that name. It is a good name, swift and powerful. What do you know of the far world, little Running? What do you know of the past?"

"Only what they tell me in the councils," Running said, a bit uncertainly. "I am still too young to be initiated into all the mysteries."

The priest smiled at Running as a father would, and said, "Let me tell you about our people, and about the great war that killed so many. Let me tell you why we alone have survived, and how the unfortunate ignorance of a few is perhaps dooming us all to eventual oblivion."

The words, some of them, were strange to the ears of Running, accustomed as he was only to the half-grunted monosyllables of the tribe. But the voice of the priest was gentle, and there was meaning to what he said. Running did not learn it all on the first visit, or the second, but during the

months that followed he came again and again to the cave in the hills, and gradually the story of their civilization took shape in his ear and mind and memory.

"Nearly a hundred years ago," Father Legion told him, "men lived in big cities, and flew planes through the air and even ventured as far as the moon you see in the heavens. There were good men and bad men, and sometimes it was difficult to tell which was which. Anyway, presently there came a great war, and rockets fell from the skies all over the world. These rockets, and their Bombs, released something called radiation. It killed people, all people, sometimes at once and sometimes weeks or months later. And here in America everyone died . . . everyone but the Indians."

"But why did we alone live?" Running asked. *Why,* the eternal question.

"We don't exactly know that answer," Father Legion explained, "but of course it must have had something to do with the pigment in our skin. It acted as a natural barrier to the radiation that killed the white man. The other races of the world—the Negro, the Oriental—were not so fortunate. They died too, and only the brown men—that odd mixture of all the races—remained. I suppose in a way it was destined by some greater Power, for now the country which had been our God-given homeland was returned to us."

"But why don't we go to live in the cities?" Running asked one day during their conversation.

"Because, little one, the cities are mostly in ruins. And where buildings remain, the radiation may still be too high even for the Indian to survive. We do not have the intricate measuring devices necessary to be certain of safety. We know only that we have been safe for three generations here at Del Norte, and so we remain here."

"But what about you? Why do you live up here?"

"After the Bomb, a great many people gave up any consolation that religion might have offered them. In those final days of blind fury, churches were burned and priests were slaughtered in the streets, and truly it seemed to the survivors as if the end of the world had finally come to pass. But as I said, the Indians survived. Rather than being thankful to God for the survival, they reflected the sins of the white man. The

few Indian priests were not killed, but they were driven into the hills." He paused a moment, as if seeing it all once more on some giant screen before his eyes. "And so we have lived out our years in places like this, worshipping God and searching out others—boys like yourself—to take our place when the time comes."

"I don't want to," Running said quickly, suddenly feeling a bolt of fear through his young body. "I don't want to be like you and live in this cave all my life!"

"Come, come. I'm not asking you to, am I? A boy like you was born to run and play and enjoy life too much to be content up here. I am only telling you a story, because this is something all of you should know.

"Why don't you come down and tell the others, then?" Running asked, playing absently with a stone that was smooth and cool to his touch.

"Because they will not have me. They let me live, probably because their superstitious natures kept them from killing me—or those who came before me. They let me live, if only to serve as a frightening example to bad children. And instead of rebuilding a lost civilization, they spend their days in search of wolfram."

Running knew of the quest for the precious metal, a quest which was carried out only by the warriors of the tribe. Each day they went off into the hills, never wandering too far from the valley, but searching, ever searching for the dark stones of their strange destiny. "Why do they search?" Running asked.

"Because wolfram is the source of the metal tungsten, and in their half-memories of the world as it was, they connect it with electricity and electric lights."

"Electric lights?"

Father Legion nodded. "Once whole cities glowed with light, my son, and it was the light of a million candles. But the light had to be generated. There is no magic in the metal wolfram that will bring it back." And he shook his head sadly, adding half to himself, "Such a long way to fall in only ninety years."

Finally, the annual feast of Easter drew near, and Running was as busy as the others with the preparations for it. The

tribal leader, Volyon, was everywhere at once, instructing, ordering, planning. The year's precious gathering of wolfram had to be collected and treated for the ceremonies. And most important of all the prisoners must be anointed and prepared for execution. It was this last part of the annual ceremonies which drew from Father Legion the greatest condemnation, and Running had never seen him as angry as the afternoon they talked of it.

"A blasphemous, profane thing!" the priest told him. "To crucify these men in the manner of Christ!"

"They are criminals," Running argued, because he could see nothing wrong in the annual custom which never failed to provide a few days' excitement.

"Some of them are murderers," Father Legion admitted. "But more are simply poor men who drank too much or had the wrong friends. To keep them penned up during the whole year and then to put them to death at Easter time—and such a death!"

"Our leader Volyon says it is a religious death," Running replied, but for the first time he wondered if a doubt had crossed his mind. For the few years he could remember well, the annual observance had been the high point of the year. But he had to admit cruelty in the proceedings. Any member of the village of two-hundred-odd who committed a crime during the year was arrested, tried by a council of elders, and imprisoned. Thus a man might spend up to a year in jail before the fatal day of his execution arrived. And the horrible penalty of crucifixion was meted out for a variety of offences ranging from murder and rape to the stealing of wolfram and sleeping on guard duty.

"It is a perversion of religion," Father Legion insisted, and he told Running the story of the Christ, as it had been told by so many through the centuries.

And when he'd finished, Running asked, "You learned all this from the priest ahead of you?"

"And the priest ahead of him," Father Legion said with a little nod. And then, almost to himself, he added, "I suppose. I am a bishop really, or perhaps even the Pope, if I am truly the last one left." Then, louder, "How old are you, my son?"

"Nearly ten, I think."

"And you have been coming here since last summer, listening to me talk. Surely a boy your age would rather run and play with the others."

"No, no," Running said, barely believing the words himself. "I would rather be here with you."

And so that evening again Running returned to the settlement in the valley, by the shores of the river, and as before he spoke to no one about his meeting with the priest in the cave, or about the strange and wonderful things he was learning there. His mother and sisters were busy with the Easter preparations, and his father was up in the hills with the wolfram hunters.

On the following day, Running saw that the terrible rite about which Father Legion had spoken was beginning its annual re-enactment on the hill, before his eyes. The prisoners—there were nine of them—were brought before the tribal leader, Volyon. Very carefully he read the sentences, which all of them knew so well already. One man, Crow, was a murderer, and he accepted the death sentence with eyes downcast at the dusty earth. Another, Raincloud, who had stolen another man's allotment of wolfram, cried out to his brothers and relatives as he was led to one of the nine wooden crosses. His mother tried to break through the line of guards, but they held her back.

The rest was a nightmare, clouding the mind of Running, terrifying him as it never had before. Towards the end, when the last of the nine was being lashed to his cross, Running looked away, back toward the little line of frame houses. But even in this vista there was no escaping the sight or sound of it. He saw that final cross reflected in a broken windowpane, saw it distorted by the cracked glass into a shattered image of life, and death. He closed his eyes tightly as the last of the nine screamed out his fright in the face of death, then stopped suddenly in mid-scream as the ceremonial arrows found his naked chest.

Afterward, when the nine condemned men had become simply nine punctured corpses hanging from their crosses on the hilltop, Volyon left the warrior Samely on guard and led the others back down to the village. Still the relatives of the executed men cried and screamed, for the idea of death is

difficult to accept, even with many months to prepare for it. These families knew now that their loved ones were dead with bodies fated to hang up there for many days until the sun and the buzzards had done their work, until the lesson had been well learned by those who remained.

But even in a village as small as this, Running knew there would be more men to die next Easter. And perhaps a woman too. There had been a woman last year. He had never known her crime for sure, but the others had spoken of it in whispers. This night he hid in a remote corner of the house and took no part in the rites as he had that previous year. This night he covered his ears against the sounds of Volyon's prayers and the singing of the warrior Mancoat. He heard his father return to the house once for more of the grain spirits they drank on such occasions, but still he did not stir. The hour grew late, and dark and presently quiet. And Running slept.

In the morning the village woke slowly to the cares of a new day. There were more ceremonies, including the offering of the wolfram to Volyon, and his own symbolic offering in turn to heaven, but for Running there was still the memory of the men on the hill. He ran up early to see them, praying perhaps that they would be still alive, or at least finally buried. But the nine crosses still stood in the morning sun, and when he came too close Samely chased him away with a wave of his spear.

Running remembered stories of guns that fired bullets, and for many years after the Bomb the Indians had continued to use such weapons. Now, though, the bullets were gone, used up, and the tribe had reverted to the bow and arrow and the spear. Running had seen a rifle once, dust-covered in his uncle's house, but he had been afraid to touch it.

He played on the hill for a time with the other boys, and they wrestled around, showing off for the guards who took time out from their duties to watch. No one even remembered now what the valley was guarded against, whether the unknown enemy of long ago had been dying white men, or other Indians, or even Mexicans up from the south. The enemy had never come, whoever he was, though someone like Father Legion would have claimed he was already there.

Towards noon Running noticed a disturbance in the village, and as he drew nearer he heard the voice of Mancoat's wife pleading with Volyon. "I have looked everywhere," she said. "My husband has disappeared."

She was a pretty woman named Airing, very popular with the men of the village, and even Running was aware of the care Mancoat always took in watching over her. Now Volyon placed a comforting arm around her shoulders, and said, "I am sure he will turn up, little one. He was with me last night, and his voice was raised to the heavens in song."

"But where *is* he?"

"Perhaps he has gone in search of more wolfram."

But Airing shook her head. "You need not tell me that, Volyon. You well know that no one goes after wolfram during the holidays."

"Anyway, come with me," he said. "We will ask the guards."

Running watched them go off, and then ran down to the house to tell his mother and father and sisters of this strange development. No one had ever disappeared from the village before. Where was there to disappear?

By nightfall the village was in an uproar. Volyon personally had led a search of all the houses when the guards had reported no one leaving the area, but no trace of the missing man had been found. Running was standing nearby when he heard one of the ancient warriors, Treetop, say to Volyon, "What about the priest's cave? That has not been searched."

Volyon nodded and raised his spear high in the air, motioning for the search group to follow. They made their way along the hillside until at last they reached the half-hidden little cave, and Running followed in the darkness unnoticed.

Father Legion had heard their approach, and now he appeared in the entrance, holding high his torch. The flickering flamelight played on the faces of those who had gathered around him. "What is it you want?" he asked coldly.

Treetop started to speak, but Volyon signalled him to silence. "Oh, priest, we come in search of Mancoat who has disappeared. His wife Airing is greatly worried."

Father Legion stared hard at Volyon. "You may search my home if you wish," he said.

While the others searched, old Treetop drew close and said, "I remember you as a boy. I will always remember you as a boy."

The priest nodded. "This is something I have to do," he said. "You wouldn't understand."

"Neither would your mother," the old warrior said, turning away.

They searched the cave carefully, but found no evidence that Mancoat had been there. Finally, discouraged, they filed back down the hillside. But Running remained with the priest for a time, and asked him, "Who is Treetop, Father Legion? He knows you from long ago."

"He was very close to me at one time," the priest answered. "He was my father."

And after a time Running followed the others down the hill, because there didn't seem to be any more to say.

In the morning, he was surprised to see Father Legion coming down the hill to the village accompanied by one of the stately guards. He had never seen the priest in the village before and he feared what this might mean. But Father Legion went directly to the house of Volyon, which was the largest in the valley. When Running saw that the tribal leader was not at home, he ran quickly to the side of the priest, feeling the stones sharp and smooth beneath his hardened feet.

"Father Legion, I think he still searches for the missing Mancoat."

"Thank you, Running," the priest said, brushing the hair on the boy's head with a kindly hand. "I came to see him about that matter."

"You saw the men they executed, Father Legion?"

The priest glanced up at the far hill, where nine crosses still stood outlined in the first rays of morning-light. "Yes," he said quietly. "I saw them."

From somewhere Mancoat's wife Airing appeared, still close to tears. There seemed no way to comfort her, short of finding her missing husband. "Where is Volyon?" she asked.

"I seek him myself," the priest told her.

"I . . . I fear that Mancoat is dead. I have this awful feel-

ing that someone has murdered him. The men of the village, they look at me so oddly. It is a look one reserves for widows."

"Who looked at you that way?"

"Many people. One was the brother of Raincloud, who hangs up there." She motioned towards the hill without looking. "Could someone have killed Mancoat and thrown him into the river?"

Their eyes sought the water at her words, but the stream ran shallow for the springtime. "No," Father Legion said softly, "but perhaps . . ."

At that moment, Volyon came, followed closely by old Treetop and some others. "The priest!" Volyon exclaimed, startled. Treetop looked away.

"I have come to talk of many things," Father Legion said.

Volyon nodded. "We can talk here, on my porch. The sun is good today."

"Have you found Mancoat?" his wife asked.

"No . . . not yet."

"He's dead! I know he's dead!"

Volyon motioned to old Treetop, who placed a gnarled hand of comfort on the girl. Father Legion took the opportunity to motion Running to one side. "Young Running, could you do me a great favour?"

"Anything, Father Legion."

"You see that man pausing for bath water from the river?"

"Karlong, brother of the dead Raincloud."

"Correct. Follow him for me, and report to me where he goes."

"But . . ."

"No questions now, little one. Be quick!"

Then he turned back to Volyon and the others, and Running had to hurry on to his mission. The tall Karlong, a great beast of a man, had already rounded the corner of a house with his burden of bath water, but oddly enough he seemed headed away from the village proper. Running tried to follow in a casual manner, skipping as if in play through occasional sections of tall grass. But the big man was on his guard. He looked back constantly, frowning once when he caught sight of Running.

Soon, though, he reached his destination, a section of flatland hidden from the view of the village. It was a desolate area where Running had only rarely ventured, even in play. Here even the trees seemed dead, for this was the village's burial ground.

And as Karlong poured his carefully carried water upon the grass in one particular area, Running suddenly realized the truth—what better place to hide a body than in a burial ground? Karlong had killed Mancoat and hidden his body here, and now he was watering the grass upon the grave.

Then Karlong saw him.

He turned to run, but the big man was fast in pursuit. He could almost feel the hot breath of doom on his back as he ran higher, even higher up the hill. If only he could reach one of the guard positions before Karlong caught him. If only . . .

He had not been named Running for nothing. His feet were swift and his legs worked hard, reminding him of the pictures of pistons he'd seen once in a book at Volyon's great library. Karlong still followed, panting, but now the gap between them had widened and Running knew he would not be caught. Over the next hill and he would be safe for sure. He topped it and saw Samely standing guard near the nine crosses with their burdens. He paused for breath and looked behind him. Karlong had given up the chase and was heading back towards the village.

"What are you doing, boy?" Samely called out to him.

"Only playing." Running stooped and gathered a few pebbles in his hand, and went hopping off down the hill, in pretended search for some unlucky rabbit or gopher.

Back at Volyon's house, he saw that Father Legion was still conferring with their leader. The two sat close together, like old friends, but even Running could see that their conversation was anything but friendly. He crept closer to listen.

"You want us to backtrack, return to the white man's way of life?" Volyon was saying. "He lived in his great cities while the Indian nearly starved on reservations. He treated us like cattle, something to be herded here and there, to be settled in one spot until the government needed the land for a new highway or a power project, then shunted off once more

to some new and more crowded life elsewhere. You want us to build towards that sort of life again?"

"But with an Indian civilization, how could it happen?" Father Legion asked, his voice still calm.

"With an Indian civilization we would only find someone else to dominate. Perhaps we would find some lost group of Mexicans whom we could force from their land."

Father Legion stirred in his chair. "You are a wise man, Volyon. Wiser than I had thought. You realize that the sins you mention are the sins of civilization rather than the sins of the white man alone."

Volyon's temper cooled. "We both know much of the past, Father Legion. You were wise even as a child, and I can understand in a way your decision to join Father Blaming up on the hill. He was a good man too. I am sorry he is dead."

"You could at least give me a chance to live down here again, back among your people and mine."

"As a priest?"

"Of course."

"It would only end in bloodshed."

"I don't think so."

"What could you give them that they don't already have? Besides your white man's civilization?"

". . . A knowledge of God."

"And what would that do for them?"

"It might prevent things like this," Father Legion said, gesturing towards the distant hill.

"Do you want to prevent that? Do you want those men running loose to rob and kill again?"

"Is this sort of punishment any determent? To leave them hanging there until their bodies rot in the sun, or are eaten by the buzzards?"

"You ask if it is a deterring factor and I answer you. Last Easter there were eleven bodies hanging there, and the year before that there were fifteen."

"Can we afford the loss of such a percentage of our population?" Father Legion asked.

Volyon shrugged. "Crime must be punished. By my methods, not by yours."

"The man who vanished—Mancoat—has not been found? Suppose I locate him for you."

"We have searched the entire village and the hills. As you well know. If we could not find him, how will you be able to?"

"*If* I find him," the priest persisted, "would you agree to let me live in peace in the village? And instruct the people?"

Volyon was silent for a long time. He seemed to be staring off towards the distant hills, considering his answer. "Very well," he said finally. "If you find Mancoat, you can return to the village in peace. But I warn you that the people will never listen."

"All I ask is a chance to speak to them. The civilization I spoke of will not come overnight, but a start must be made."

"You really think it will be better this time? Better than before the Bomb?"

Father Legion looked down at the rough wooden floor. "It has to be, or God wouldn't have saved the few of us. He's given us another chance, you see."

Volyon sighed. "Very well." He got to his feet and looked up at the sky, studying the changing, gathering clouds. "Now where is the missing Mancoat? His wife is anxious."

The priest's eyes clouded. "I can only offer the solace of prayer to Airing. Her husband is dead. Murdered."

"Murdered!"

And Father Legion reached over the porch to grasp at Running. "Come out, little one. I see you lurking there."

"I . . . I only just got back, Father Legion."

"And where did the mighty Karlong lead you?"

"Karlong!" Volyon gasped out. "Did he . . . ?"

"Where, little one?"

"To the graveyard. He was watering a freshly turned plot of earth."

"The graveyard!" Volyon gasped. "Come, quickly!"

They followed him, already caught up in the sense of nameless haste, now nearly running over the vague grass-lands, splashing through wandering streams that drifted lazily towards the growing river. Others were coming, sensing the excitement, and Running saw Airing and old Treetop in the

lead. Soon the graveyard appeared before them, calm and peaceful in the springtime sun.

"Karlong!" the leader shouted. "Come out of there, Karlong!"

The big man rose slowly from behind a tombstone, holding a short spear ready in his hand. "Keep back," he said softly.

And Father Legion stepped around Volyon, walking deliberately into the range of the spear. "Put it down, Karlong," he said. "We know everything."

"Keep back!"

"We know about the body in that fresh grave. Put down your spear."

The big man moved, but not as fast as the priest. Father Legion hurled himself through the distance between them, carrying Karlong backwards over a tombstone. In a moment the others were upon him. They pulled him gasping, weaponless, to his feet, and Voylon faced him with all the splendour of a chieftain. "Dog!" he spat out through curled lips. "You have murdered a fellow human being!"

But now Father Legion broke through, brushing the grass from his body. "No, no," he insisted, "you don't understand. None of you understand. He didn't murder Mancoat. His only crime was in burying his brother, and who among you can call that a crime?"

"His brother!"

Father Legion nodded. "The body in the grave is that of Raincloud, whom you executed two days ago."

"But that is impossible," old Treetop said, still clutching the young girl in his arms. "Raincloud still hangs on his cross upon the hill."

"Does he?" the priest questioned. "Let us go up and see. But you might keep Airing here. It will not be a pleasant sight for her."

They mounted the hillside in silence, each man with his own thoughts, and they made their way uncertainly to the second cross in the line of nine. Upon it, his face twisted in a final grimace of pain, hung the missing Mancoat.

Father Legion looked up at him once, then turned away sadly as others cut down the body. "But who would do such a thing?" Volyon asked.

The priest closed his eyes against the glare of the sun. "Sleeping on guard duty is punishable by the death penalty," he said. "When Samely awoke that first night and saw that the second cross was empty, he had to do something. I imagine Mancoat happened by about that time, and Samely killed him. Killed him and hung his body in the place of Raincloud."

"There he goes!" someone shouted, and they turned as one man to see the guard Samely running down the hill. They were after him in an instant, and the hunters who went daily for the wolfram in the hills now ran him quickly to earth, and their knives flashed in a vengeance that would not need another Easter's judgment.

Father Legion put a damp hand to his forehead. "God grant that he be the last one to die here by violence."

"How did you know, Father Legion?" Volyon asked, and Running moved closer to hear the priest's answer.

"I am not a detective, or even a wise man. After Raincloud's brother removed him from the cross, Samely needed only another body to fill the space. None of you, he knew, would look closely at nine corpses rotting in the sun. And by burial time, who could tell the difference? But last night I did look closely at those nine corpses. I mounted the hill to say the prayer for the dead under each man, and I saw Mancoat hanging there. I also saw Samely dozing under a tree."

Volyon cleared his throat. "There will be no more such executions, Father Legion. I have at least learned that lesson. And, I think, no more guards to risk death by sleeping on duty."

"That will be a start," the priest said. And he turned to Running. "Come, my son, we have a world to win. . . ."

THE END

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