THE COLLECTED SHORT FICTION

— of —

Robert Sheckley

— Volume #4 —

Introduction by **DAMON KNIGHT**

THE COLLECTED SHORT FICTION

of

Robert Sheckley

Book Four

PULPHOUSE PUBLISHING
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Eugene, OR 97440

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If you meet the author of these stories, you will find him to be a tall, shaggy man with a friendly expression. His face seems to bear the scars of many bicycle tires. His eyes look out on the world through thick spectacles, possibly of Martian manufacture.

Like R.A. Lafferty and Ray Bradbury, Robert Sheckley is a castaway on the shores of science fiction. Please notice the initial and terminal letters by which these lonely travelers identify each other. They were not born here, but they have looked around and made as much sense as they could of it.

The best of Sheckley's stories are the work of an observer who finds our world hilariously and sadly absurd, from its mating rituals to its domestic appliances. "Can You Feel Anything When I Do This?" is a case in point. This story overturns, staples, shreds and perforates every conventional idea about the relationships between women and vacuum cleaners.

Trying to fit in, Sheckley has also written a good many conventional sci-fi stories involving interplanetary explorers and time travelers, and so on, but if you pay close attention, you will notice even here a note of skepticism and dismay. Take this line of dialogue, which occurs in a perfectly sober adventure story set on another planet:

"We use mostly Chipetzi tribesmen, and they're a sullen, treacherous bunch, though husky. Their chief rents us workers on a twenty-year contract, in exchange for guns. Then they try to pick us off with the guns, but that's another matter. We handle one thing at a time."

I have a list of favorite lines from Sheckley stories, and I will give you just a few here, because I don't want you to feel as you read the stories that they are a bunch of familiar quotations strung together:

The spaceship had been cleverly designed to look exactly like Fairlawn, New Jersey.

Between wars, Johnny had stayed in practice by shooting down commercial spacecraft on the Luna-Mars run.

The differences are perfectly real despite being imaginary.

I met Robert Sheckley for the first time in 1951, when he impressed me by having a car and driving it in New York. I met him again in Rio de Janeiro in 1968, where I could tell he was the right sort of person because he was obviously bemused by the wonder of that place.

Nowadays I meet him a little more often, because he has moved to Portland, Oregon (from Ibíza, Paris, New York, and a succession of state parks), but not *that* often. We don't even communicate by telephone or letter; I stay here in Eugene, parading around in my little white cap and my ponytail, and Sheckley stays up there in Portland in his no-color raincoat and his beret. I have never seen this beret, but I know it exists because it is a logical necessity; and it comforts me to know that he and it are there.

DAMON KNIGHT

THE PRIZE OF PERIL

Raeder lifted his head cautiously above the window sill. He saw the fire escape, and below it a narrow alley. There was a weather-beaten baby carriage in the alley, and three garbage cans. As he watched, a black-sleeved arm moved from behind the furthest can, with something shiny in its fist. Raeder ducked down. A bullet smashed through the window above his head and punctured the ceiling, showering him with plaster.

Now he knew about the alley. It was guarded, just like the door.

He lay at full length on the cracked linoleum, staring at the bullet hole in the ceiling, listening to the sounds outside the door. He was a tall man with bloodshot eyes and a two-day stubble. Grime and fatigue had etched lines into his face. Fear had touched his features, tightening a muscle here and twitching a nerve there. The results were startling. His face had character now, for it was reshaped by the expectation of death.

There was a gunman in the alley and two on the stairs. He was trapped. He was dead.

Sure, Raeder thought, he still moved and breathed; but that was only because of death's inefficiency. Death would take care of him in a few minutes. Death would poke holes in his face and body, artistically dab his clothes with blood, arrange his limbs in some grotesque position of the graveyard ballet...

Raeder bit his lip sharply. He wanted to live. There had to be a way.

He rolled onto his stomach and surveyed the dingy cold-water apartment into which the killers had driven him. It was a perfect little one-room coffin. It had a door, which was watched, and a fire escape, which was watched. And it had a tiny windowless bathroom.

He crawled to the bathroom and stood up. There was a ragged hole in the ceiling, almost four inches wide. If he could enlarge it, crawl through into the apartment above...

He heard a muffled thud. The killers were impatient. They were beginning to break down the door.

He studied the hole in the ceiling. No use even considering it. He could never enlarge it in time.

They were smashing against the door, grunting each time they struck. Soon the lock would tear out, or the hinges would pull out of the rotting wood. The door would go down, and the two blank-faced men would enter, dusting off their jackets...

But surely someone would help him! He took the tiny television set from his pocket. The picture was blurred, and he didn't bother to adjust it. The audio was clear and precise.

He listened to the well-modulated voice of Mike Terry addressing his vast audience.

"...terrible spot," Terry was saying. "Yes folks, Jim Raeder is in a truly terrible predicament. He had been hiding, you'll remember, in a third-rate Broadway hotel under an assumed name. It seemed safe enough. But the bellhop recognized him, and gave that information to the Thompson gang."

The door creaked under repeated blows. Raeder clutched the little television set and listened.

"Jim Raeder just managed to escape from the hotel! Closely pursued, he entered a brownstone at one fifty-six West End Avenue. His intention was to go over the roofs. And it might have worked, folks, it just might have worked. But the roof door was locked. It looked like the end...But Raeder found that apartment seven was unoccupied and unlocked. He entered..."

Terry paused for emphasis, then cried: *"— and now he's trapped there, trapped like a rat in a cage! The Thompson gang is breaking down the door! The fire escape is guarded! Our camera crew, situated in a nearby building, is giving you a closeup now. Look, folks, just look! Is there no hope for Jim Raeder?"*

Is there no hope, Raeder silently echoed, perspiration pouring from him as he stood in the dark, stifling little bathroom, listening to the steady thud against the door.

"Wait a minute!" Mike Terry cried. *"Hang on, Jim Raeder, hang on a little longer. Perhaps there is hope! I have an urgent call from*

one of our viewers, a call on the Good Samaritan Line! Here's someone who thinks he can help you, Jim. Are you listening, Jim Raeder?"

Raeder waited, and heard the hinges tearing out of rotten wood.

"Go right ahead, sir," said Mike Terry. *"What is your name, sir?"*

"Er — Felix Bartholemow."

"Don't be nervous, Mr. Bartholemow. Go right ahead."

"Well, okay. Mr. Raeder," said an old man's shaking voice, *"I used to live at one five six West End Avenue. Same apartment you're trapped in, Mr. Raeder — fact! Look, that bathroom has got a window, Mr. Raeder. It's been painted over, but it has got a — "*

Raeder pushed the television set into his pocket. He located the outlines of the window and kicked. Glass shattered, and daylight poured startlingly in. He cleared the jagged sill and quickly peered down.

Below was a long drop to a concrete courtyard.

The hinges tore free. He heard the door opening. Quickly Raeder climbed through the window, hung by his fingertips for a moment, and dropped.

The shock was stunning. Groggily he stood up. A face appeared at the bathroom window.

"Tough luck," said the man, leaning out and taking careful aim with a snub-nosed .38.

At that moment a smoke bomb exploded inside the bathroom.

The killer's shot went wide. He turned, cursing. More smoke bombs burst in the courtyard, obscuring Raeder's figure.

He could hear Mike Terry's frenzied voice over the TV set in his pocket. *"Now run for it!"* Terry was screaming. *"Run, Jim Raeder, run for your life. Run now, while the killer's eyes are filled with smoke. And thank Good Samaritan Sarah Winters, of three four one two Edgar Street, Brockton, Mass., for donating five smoke bombs and employing the services of a man to throw them!"*

In a quieter voice, Terry continued: *"You've saved a man's life today, Mrs. Winters. Would you tell our audience how it — "*

Raeder wasn't able to hear any more. He was running through the smoke-filled courtyard, past clothes lines, into the open street.

He walked down 63rd Street, slouching to minimize his height, staggering slightly from exertion, dizzy from lack of food and sleep.

"Hey you!"

Raeder turned. A middle-aged woman was sitting on the steps of a brownstone, frowning at him.

"You're Raeder, aren't you? The one they're trying to kill?"

Raeder started to walk away.

"Come inside here, Raeder," the woman said.

Perhaps it was a trap. But Raeder knew that he had to depend upon the generosity and good-heartedness of the people. He was their representative, a projection of themselves, an average guy in trouble. Without them, he was lost. With them, nothing could harm him.

Trust in the people, Mike Terry had told him. They'll never let you down.

He followed the woman into her parlor. She told him to sit down and left the room, returning almost immediately with a plate of stew. She stood watching him while he ate, as one would watch an ape in the zoo eat peanuts.

Two children came out of the kitchen and stared at him. Three overalled men came out of the bedroom and focused a television camera on him. There was a big television set in the parlor. As he gulped his food, Raeder watched the image of Mike Terry, and listened to the man's strong, sincere, worried voice.

"There he is, folks," Terry was saying. *"There's Jim Raeder now, eating his first square meal in two days. Our camera crews have really been working to cover this for you! Thanks, boys....Folks, Jim Raeder has been given a brief sanctuary by Mrs. Velma O'Dell, of three forty-three Sixty-Third Street. Thank you, Good Samaritan O'Dell! It's really wonderful, how people from all walks of life have taken Jim Raeder to their hearts!"*

"You better hurry," Mrs. O'Dell said.

"Yes ma'am," Raeder said.

"I don't want no gunplay in my apartment."

"I'm almost finished, ma'am."

One of the children asked, "Aren't they going to kill him?"

"Shut up," said Mrs. O'Dell.

"Yes Jim," chanted Mike Terry, *"you'd better hurry. Your killers aren't far behind. They aren't stupid men, Jim. Vicious, warped, insane — yes! But not stupid. They're following a trail of blood — blood from your torn hand, Jim!"*

Raeder hadn't realized until now that he'd cut his hand on the window sill.

"Here, I'll bandage that," Mrs. O'Dell said. Raeder stood up and let her bandage his hand. Then she gave him a brown jacket and a gray slouch hat.

"My husband's stuff," she said.

"He has a disguise, folks!" Mike Terry cried delightedly. *"This is something new! A disguise! With seven hours to go until he's safe!"*

"Now get out of here," Mrs. O'Dell said.

"I'm going, ma'am," Raeder said. "Thanks."

"I think you're stupid," she said. "I think you're stupid to be involved in this."

"Yes ma'am."

"It just isn't worth it."

Raeder thanked her and left. He walked to Broadway, caught a subway to 59th Street, then an uptown local to 86th. There he bought a newspaper and changed for the Manhattan thru-express.

He glanced at his watch. He had six and a half hours to go.

The subway roared under Manhattan. Raeder dozed, his bandaged hand concealed under the newspaper, the hat pulled over his face. Had he been recognized yet? Had he shaken the Thompson gang? Or was someone telephoning them now?

Dreamily he wondered if he had escaped death. Or was he still a cleverly animated corpse, moving around because of death's inefficiency? (My dear, death is so *laggard* these days! Jim Raeder walked about for hours after he died, and actually answered people's *questions* before he could be decently buried!)

Raeder's eyes snapped open. He had dreamed something... unpleasant. He couldn't remember what.

He closed his eyes again and remembered, with mild astonishment, a time when he had been in no trouble.

That was two years ago. He had been a big pleasant young man working as a truck driver's helper. He had no talents. He was too modest to have dreams.

The tight-faced little truck driver had the dreams for him. "Why not try for a television show, Jim? I would if I had your looks. They like nice average guys with nothing much on the ball. As contestants. Everybody likes guys like that. Why not look into it?"

So he had looked into it. The owner of the local television store had explained it further.

"You see, Jim, the public is sick of highly trained athletes with their trick reflexes and their professional courage. Who can feel for guys like that? Who can identify? People want to watch exciting things, sure, but not when some joker is making it his business for fifty thousand a year. That's why organized sports are in a slump. That's why the thrill shows are booming."

"I see," said Raeder.

"Six years ago, Jim, Congress passed the Voluntary Suicide Act. Those old senators talked a lot about free will and self-determinism at the time. But that's all crap. You know what the Act really means? It means the amateurs can risk their lives for the big loot, not just professionals. In the old days you had to be a professional boxer or footballer or hockey player if you wanted your brains beaten out legally for money. But now that opportunity is open to ordinary people like you, Jim."

"I see," Raeder said again.

"It's a marvelous opportunity. Take you. You're no better than anyone, Jim. Anything you can do, anyone can do. You're *average.* I think the thrill shows would go for you."

Raeder permitted himself to dream. Television shows looked like a sure road to riches for a pleasant young fellow with no particular talent or training. He wrote a letter to a show called *Hazard* and enclosed a photograph of himself.

Hazard was interested in him. The JBC network investigated, and found that he was average enough to satisfy the wariest viewer. His parentage and affiliations were checked. At last he was summoned to New York, and interviewed by Mr. Moulian.

Moulian was dark and intense, and chewed gum as he talked. "You'll do," he snapped. "But not for *Hazard.* You'll appear on *Spills.* It's a half-hour daytime show on Channel Three."

"Gee," said Raeder.

"Don't thank me. There's a thousand dollars if you win or place second, and a consolation prize of a hundred dollars if you lose. But that's not important."

"No sir."

"Spills is a *little* show. The JBC network uses it as a testing ground. First- and second-place winners on *Spills* move on to *Emergency.* The prizes are much bigger on *Emergency."*

"I know they are, sir."

"And if you do well on *Emergency* there are the first-class thrill shows, like *Hazard* and *Underwater Perils,* with their nationwide coverage and enormous prizes. And then comes the really big time. How far you go is up to you."

"I'll do my best, sir," Raeder said.

Moulian stopped chewing gum for a moment and said, almost reverently, "You can do it, Jim. Just remember. You're *the people,* and *the people* can do anything."

The way he said it made Raeder feel momentarily sorry for Mr. Moulian, who was dark and frizzy-haired and popeyed, and was obviously not *the people.*

They shook hands. Then Raeder signed a paper absolving the JBC of all responsibility should he lose his life, limbs or reason during the contest. And he signed another paper exercising his rights under the Voluntary Suicide Act. The law required this, and it was a mere formality.

In three weeks, he appeared on *Spills.*

The program followed the classic form of the automobile race. Untrained drivers climbed into powerful American and European competition cars and raced over a murderous twenty-mile course. Raeder was shaking with fear as he slid his big Maserati into the wrong gear and took off.

The race was a screaming, tire-burning nightmare. Raeder stayed back, letting the early leaders smash themselves up on the counter-banked hairpin turns. He crept into third place when a Jaguar in front of him swerved against an Alfa-Romeo, and the two cars roared into a plowed field. Raeder gunned for second place on the last three miles, but couldn't find passing room. An S-curve almost took him, but he fought the car back on the road, still holding third. Then the lead driver broke a crankshaft in the final fifty yards, and Jim ended in second place.

He was now a thousand dollars ahead. He received four fan letters, and a lady in Oshkosh sent him a pair of argyles. He was invited to appear on *Emergency.*

Unlike the others, *Emergency* was not a competition-type program. It stressed individual initiative. For the show, Raeder was knocked out with a non-habit-forming narcotic. He awoke in the cockpit of a small airplane, cruising on autopilot at ten thousand feet. His fuel gauge showed nearly empty. He had no parachute. He was supposed to land the plane.

Of course, he had never flown before.

He experimented gingerly with the controls, remembering that last week's participant had recovered consciousness in a submarine, had opened the wrong valve, and had drowned.

Thousands of viewers watched spellbound as this average man, a man just like themselves, struggled with the situation just as they would do. Jim Raeder was *them*. Anything he could do, they could do. He was representative of *the people*.

Raeder managed to bring the ship down in some semblance of a landing. He flipped over a few times, but his seat belt held. And the engine, contrary to expectation, did not burst into flames.

He staggered out with two broken ribs, three thousand dollars, and a chance, when he healed, to appear on *Torero*.

At last, a first-class thrill show! *Torero* paid ten thousand dollars. All you had to do was kill a black Miura bull with a sword, just like a real trained matador.

The fight was held in Madrid, since bullfighting was still illegal in the United States. It was nationally televised.

Raeder had a good cuadrilla. They liked the big, slow-moving American. The picadors really leaned into their lances, trying to slow the bull for him. The banderilleros tried to run the beast off his feet before driving in their banderillas. And the second matador, a mournful man from Algiceras, almost broke the bull's neck with fancy capework.

But when all was said and done it was Jim Raeder on the sand, a red muleta clumsily gripped in his left hand, a sword in his right, facing a ton of black, blood-streaked, wide-horned bull.

Someone was shouting, "Try for the lung, *hombre*. Don't be a hero, stick him in the lung." But Jim only knew what the technical adviser in New York had told him: Aim with the sword and go in over the horns.

Over he went. The sword bounced off bone, and the bull tossed him over its back. He stood up, miraculously ungouged, took another sword and went over the horns again with his eyes closed. The god who protects children and fools must have been watching, for the sword slid in like a needle through butter, and the bull looked startled, stared at him unbelievingly, and dropped like a deflated balloon.

They paid him ten thousand dollars, and his broken collar bone healed in practically no time. He received twenty-three fan letters,

including a passionate invitation from a girl in Atlantic City, which he ignored. And they asked him if he wanted to appear on another show.

He had lost some of his innocence. He was now fully aware that he had been almost killed for pocket money. The big loot lay ahead. Now he wanted to be almost killed for something worthwhile.

So he appeared on *Underwater Perils,* sponsored by Fairlady's Soap. In face mask, respirator, weighted belt, flippers and knife, he slipped into the warm waters of the Caribbean with four other contestants, followed by a cage-protected camera crew. The idea was to locate and bring up a treasure which the sponsor had hidden there.

Mask diving isn't especially hazardous. But the sponsor had added some frills for public interest. The area was sown with giant clams, moray eels, sharks of several species, giant octopuses, poison coral, and other dangers of the deep.

It was a stirring contest. A man from Florida found the treasure in a deep crevice, but a moray eel found him. Another diver took the treasure, and a shark took him. The brilliant blue-green water became cloudy with blood, which photographed well on color TV. The treasure slipped to the bottom and Raeder plunged after it, popping an eardrum in the process. He plucked it from the coral, jettisoned his weighted belt and made for the surface. Thirty feet from the top he had to fight another diver for the treasure.

They feinted back and forth with their knives. The man struck, slashing Raeder across the chest. But Raeder, with the self-possession of an old contestant, dropped his knife and tore the man's respirator out of his mouth.

That did it. Raeder surfaced, and presented the treasure at the standby boat. It turned out to be a package of Fairlady's Soap — "The Greatest Treasure of All."

That netted him twenty-two thousand dollars in cash and prizes, and three hundred and eight fan letters, and an interesting proposition from a girl in Macon, which he seriously considered. He received free hospitalization for his knife slash and burst eardrum, and injections for coral infection.

But best of all, he was invited to appear on the biggest of the thrill shows. *The Prize of Peril.*

And that was when the real trouble began....

The subway came to a stop, jolting him out of his reverie. Raeder pushed back his hat and observed, across the aisle, a man staring at him and whispering to a stout woman. Had they recognized him?

He stood up as the doors opened, and glanced at his watch. He had five hours to go.

At the Manhasset station he stepped into a taxi and told the driver to take him to New Salem.

"New Salem?" the driver asked, looking at him in the rear vision mirror.

"That's right."

The driver snapped on his radio. "Fare to New Salem. Yep, that's right. *New Salem.*"

They drove off. Raeder frowned, wondering if it had been a signal. It was perfectly usual for taxi drivers to report to their dispatchers, of course. But something about the man's voice...

"Let me off here," Raeder said.

He paid the driver and began walking down a narrow country road that curved through sparse woods. The trees were too small and too widely separated for shelter. Raeder walked on, looking for a place to hide.

There was a heavy truck approaching. He kept on walking, pulling his hat low on his forehead. But as the truck drew near, he heard a voice from the television set in his pocket. It cried, *"Watch out!"*

He flung himself into the ditch. The truck careened past, narrowly missing him, and screeched to a stop. The driver was shouting, "There he goes! Shoot, Harry, shoot!"

Bullets clipped leaves from the trees as Raeder sprinted into the woods.

"It's happened again!" Mike Terry was saying, his voice high-pitched with excitement. *"I'm afraid Jim Raeder let himself be lulled into a false sense of security. You can't do that, Jim! Not with your life at stake! Not with killers pursuing you! Be careful, Jim, you still have four and a half hours to go!"*

The driver was saying, "Claude, Harry, go around with the truck. We got him boxed."

"They've got you boxed, Jim Raeder!" Mike Terry cried. *"But they haven't got you yet! And you can thank Good Samaritan Susy Peters of twelve Elm Street, South Orange, New Jersey, for that warning shout just when the truck was bearing down on you. We'll have little Susy on stage in just a moment....Look, folks, our studio helicopter has arrived on the scene. Now you can see Jim Raeder running, and the killers pursuing, surrounding him..."*

Raeder ran through a hundred yards of woods and found himself on a concrete highway, with open woods beyond. One of the killers was trotting through the woods behind him. The truck had driven to a connecting road, and was now a mile away, coming toward him.

A car was approaching from the other direction. Raeder ran into the highway, waving frantically. The car came to a stop.

"Hurry!" cried the blond young woman driving it.

Raeder dived in. The woman made a U-turn on the highway. A bullet smashed through the windshield. She stamped on the accelerator, almost running down the lone killer who stood in the way.

The car surged away before the truck was within firing range.

Raeder leaned back and shut his eyes tightly. The woman concentrated on her driving, watching for the truck in her rear vision mirror.

"It's happened again!" cried Mike Terry, his voice ecstatic. *"Jim Raeder has been plucked again from the jaws of death, thanks to Good Samaritan Janice Morrow of four three three Lexington Avenue, New York City. Did you ever see anything like it, folks? The way Miss Morrow drove through a fusillade of bullets and plucked Jim Raeder from the mouth of doom! Later we'll interview Miss Morrow and get her reactions. Now, while Jim Raeder speeds away — perhaps to safety, perhaps to further peril — we'll have a short announcement from our sponsor. Don't go away! Jim's got four hours and ten minutes until he's safe. Anything can happen!"*

"Okay," the girl said. "We're off the air now. Raeder, what in the hell is the matter with you?"

"Eh?" Raeder asked. The girl was in her early twenties. She looked efficient, attractive, untouchable. Raeder noticed that she had good features, a trim figure. And he noticed that she seemed angry.

"Miss," he said, "I don't know how to thank you for — "

"Talk straight," Janice Morrow said. "I'm no Good Samaritan. I'm employed by the JBC network."

"So the program had me rescued!"

"Cleverly reasoned," she said.

"But why?"

"Look, this is an expensive show, Raeder. We have to turn in a good performance. If our rating slips, we'll all be in the street selling candy apples. And you aren't cooperating."

"What? Why?"

"Because you're terrible," the girl said bitterly. "You're a flop, a fiasco. Are you trying to commit suicide? Haven't you learned *anything* about survival?"

"I'm doing the best I can."

"The Thompsons could have had you a dozen times by now. We told them to take it easy, stretch it out. But it's like shooting a clay pigeon six feet tall. The Thompsons are cooperating, but they can only fake so far. If I hadn't come along, they'd have had to kill you — air-time or not."

Raeder stared at her, wondering how such a pretty girl could talk that way. She glanced at him, then quickly looked back to the road.

"Don't give me that look!" she said. "*You* chose to risk your life for money, buster. And plenty of money! You knew the score. Don't act like some innocent little grocer who finds the nasty hoods are after him. That's a different plot."

"I know," Raeder said.

"If you can't live well, at least try to die well."

"You don't mean that," Raeder said.

"Don't be too sure....You've got three hours and forty minutes until the end of the show. If you can stay alive, fine. The boodle's yours. But if you can't, at least try to give them a run for the money."

Raeder nodded, staring intently at her.

"In a few moments we're back on the air. I develop engine trouble, let you off. The Thompsons go all out now. They kill you when and if they can, as soon as they can. Understand?"

"Yes," Raeder said. "If I make it, can I see you some time?"

She bit her lip angrily. "Are you trying to kid me?"

"No. I'd like to see you again. May I?"

She looked at him curiously. "I don't know. Forget it. We're almost on. I think your best bet is the woods to the right. Ready?"

"Yes. Where can I get in touch with you? Afterward, I mean."

"Oh, Raeder, you aren't paying attention. Go through the woods until you find a washed-out ravine. It isn't much, but it'll give you some cover."

"Where can I get in touch with you?" Raeder asked again.

"I'm in the Manhattan telephone book." She stopped the car. "Okay, Raeder, start running."

He opened the door.

"Wait." She leaned over and kissed him on the lips. "Good luck, you idiot. Call me if you make it."

And then he was on foot, running into the woods.

He ran through birch and pine, past an occasional split-level house with staring faces at the big picture window. Some occupant of those houses must have called the gang, for they were close behind him when he reached the washed-out little ravine. Those quiet, mannerly, law-abiding people didn't want him to escape, Raeder thought sadly. They wanted to see a killing. Or perhaps they wanted to see him *narrowly escape* a killing.

It came to the same thing, really.

He entered the ravine, burrowed into the thick underbrush and lay still. The Thompsons appeared on both ridges, moving slowly, watching for any movement. Raeder held his breath as they came parallel to him.

He heard the quick explosion of a revolver. But the killer had only shot a squirrel. It squirmed for a moment, then lay still.

Lying in the underbrush, Raeder heard the studio helicopter overhead. He wondered if any cameras were focused on him. It was possible. And if someone were watching, perhaps some Good Samaritan would help.

So looking upward, toward the helicopter, Raeder arranged his face in a reverent expression, clasped his hands and prayed. He prayed silently, for the audience didn't like religious ostentation. But his lips moved. That was every man's privilege.

And a real prayer was on his lips. Once, a lipreader in the audience had detected a fugitive *pretending* to pray, but actually just reciting multiplication tables. No help for that man!

Raeder finished his prayer. Glancing at his watch, he saw that he had nearly two hours to go.

And he didn't want to die! It wasn't worth it, no matter how much they paid! He must have been crazy, absolutely insane to agree to such a thing...

But he knew that wasn't true. And he remembered just how sane he had been.

One week ago he had been on the *Prize of Peril* stage, blinking in the spotlight, and Mike Terry had shaken his hand.

"Now Mr. Raeder," Terry had said solemnly, "do you understand the rules of the game you are about to play?"

Raeder nodded.

"If you accept, Jim Raeder, you will be a *hunted man* for a week. *Killers* will follow you, Jim. *Trained* killers, men wanted by the law for other crimes, granted immunity for this single killing under the Voluntary Suicide Act. They will be trying to kill *you,* Jim. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Raeder said. He also understood the two hundred thousand dollars he would receive if he could live out the week.

"I ask you again, Jim Raeder. We force no man to play for stakes of death."

"I want to play," Raeder said.

Mike Terry turned to the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have here a copy of an exhaustive psychological test which an impartial psychological testing firm made on Jim Raeder at our request. Copies will be sent to anyone who desires them for twenty-five cents to cover the cost of mailing. The test shows that Jim Raeder is sane, well-balanced, and fully responsible in every way." He turned to Raeder.

"Do you still want to enter the contest, Jim?"

"Yes, I do."

"Very well!" cried Mike Terry. "Jim Raeder, meet your would-be killers!"

The Thompson gang moved on stage, booed by the audience.

"Look at them, folks," said Mike Terry, with undisguised contempt. "Just look at them! Antisocial, thoroughly vicious, completely amoral. These men have no code but the criminal's warped code,

no honor but the honor of the cowardly hired killer. They are doomed men, doomed by our society which will not sanction their activities for long, fated to an early and unglamorous death."

The audience shouted enthusiastically.

"What have you to say, Claude Thompson?" Terry asked.

Claude, the spokesman of the Thompsons, stepped up to the microphone. He was a thin, clean-shaven man, conservatively dressed.

"I figure," Claude Thompson said hoarsely, "I figure we're no worse than anybody. I mean, like soldiers in a war, *they* kill. And look at the graft in government, and the unions. Everybody's got their graft."

That was Thompson's tenuous code. But how quickly, with what precision Mike Terry destroyed the killer's rationalizations! Terry's questions pierced straight to the filthy soul of the man.

At the end of the interview Claude Thompson was perspiring, mopping his face with a silk handkerchief and casting quick glances at his men.

Mike Terry put a hand on Raeder's shoulder. "Here is the man who has agreed to become your victim — if you can catch him."

"We'll catch him," Thompson said, his confidence returning.

"Don't be too sure," said Terry. "Jim Raeder has fought wild bulls — now he battles jackals. He's an average man. He's *the people* — who mean ultimate doom to you and your kind."

"We'll get him," Thompson said.

"And one thing more," Terry said, very softly. "Jim Raeder does not stand alone. The folks of America are for him. Good Samaritans from all corners of our great nation stand ready to assist him. Unarmed, defenseless, Jim Raeder can count on the aid and goodheartedness of the people, whose representative he is. So don't be too sure, Claude Thompson! The average men are for Jim Raeder — and there are a lot of average men!"

Raeder thought about it, lying motionless in the underbrush. Yes, *the people* had helped him. But they had helped the killers, too.

A tremor ran through him. He had chosen, he reminded himself. He alone was responsible. The psychological test had proved that.

And yet, how responsible were the psychologists who had given him the test? How responsible was Mike Terry for offering a poor

man so much money? Society had woven the noose and put it around his neck, and he was hanging himself with it, and calling it free will.

Whose fault?

"Aha!" someone cried.

Raeder looked up and saw a portly man standing near him. The man wore a loud tweed jacket. He had binoculars around his neck, and a cane in his hand.

"Mister," Raeder whispered, "please don't tell!"

"Hi!" shouted the portly man, pointing at Raeder with his cane. "Here he is!"

A madman, thought Raeder. The damned fool must think he's playing Hare and Hounds.

"Right over here!" the man screamed.

Cursing, Raeder sprang to his feet and began running. He came out of the ravine and saw a white building in the distance. He turned toward it. Behind him he could still hear the man.

"That way, over there. Look, you fools, can't you see him yet?"

The killers were shooting again. Raeder ran, stumbling over uneven ground, past three children playing in a tree house.

"Here he is!" the children screamed. "Here he is!"

Raeder groaned and ran on. He reached the steps of the building, and saw that it was a church.

As he opened the door, a bullet struck him behind the right kneecap.

He fell, and crawled inside the church.

The television set in his pocket was saying, *"What a finish, folks, what a finish! Raeder's been hit! He's been hit, folks, he's crawling now, he's in pain, but he hasn't given up! Not Jim Raeder!"*

Raeder lay in the aisle near the altar. He could hear a child's eager voice saying, "He went in there, Mr. Thompson. Hurry, you can still catch him!"

Wasn't a church considered a sanctuary? Raeder wondered.

Then the door was flung open, and Raeder realized that the custom was no longer observed. He gathered himself together and crawled past the altar, out the back door of the church.

He was in an old graveyard. He crawled past crosses and stars, past slabs of marble and granite, past stone tombs and rude wooden

markers. A bullet exploded on a tombstone near his head, showering him with fragments. He crawled to the edge of an open grave.

They had deceived him, he thought. All of those nice average normal people. Hadn't they said he was their representative? Hadn't they sworn to protect their own? But no, they loathed him. Why hadn't he seen it? Their hero was the cold, blank-eyed gunman, Thompson, Capone, Billy the Kid, Young Lochinvar, El Cid, Cuchulain, the man without human hopes or fears. They worshiped him, that dead, implacable robot gunman, and lusted to feel his foot in their face.

Raeder tried to move, and slid helplessly into the open grave.

He lay on his back, looking at the blue sky. Presently a black silhouette loomed above him, blotting out the sky. Metal twinkled. The silhouette slowly took aim.

And Raeder gave up all hope forever.

"WAIT, THOMPSON!" roared the amplified voice of Mike Terry.

The revolver wavered.

"It is one second past five o'clock! The week is up! JIM RAEDER HAS WON!"

There was a pandemonium of cheering from the studio audience.

The Thompson gang, gathered around the grave, looked sullen.

"He's won, friends, he's won!" Mike Terry cried. *"Look, look on your screen! The police have arrived, they're taking the Thompsons away from their victim — the victim they could not kill. And all this is thanks to you, Good Samaritans of America. Look folks, tender hands are lifting Jim Raeder from the open grave that was his final refuge. Good Samaritan Janice Morrow is there. Could this be the beginning of a romance? Jim seems to have fainted, friends, they're giving him a stimulant. He's won two hundred thousand dollars! Now we'll have a few words from Jim Raeder!"*

There was a short silence.

"That's odd," said Mike Terry. *"Folks, I'm afraid we can't hear from Jim just now. The doctors are examining him. Just one moment..."*

There was a silence. Mike Terry wiped his forehead and smiled.

"It's the strain, folks, the terrible strain. The doctor tells me...Well, folks, Jim Raeder is temporarily not himself. But it's only temporary!

JBC is hiring the best psychiatrists and psychoanalysts in the country. We're going to do everything humanly possible for this gallant boy. And entirely at our own expense."

Mike Terry glanced at the studio clock. *"Well, it's about time to sign off, folks. Watch for the announcement of our next great thrill show. And don't worry, I'm sure that very soon we'll have Jim Raeder back with us."*

Mike Terry smiled, and winked at the audience. *"He's bound to get well, friends. After all, we're all pulling for him!"*

THE HUMOURS

Alistair Crompton was a stereotype, and he deeply resented the fact; but there was nothing he could do about it. Like it or not, his personality was monolithic, his desires predictable, and his fears apparent to anyone. To make matters worse, his somatotype fit his personality with inhuman perfection.

Crompton was of medium height, painfully thin, sharp-nosed and tight-lipped. His hairline was receding, his glasses were protuberant, his eyes glassy, his face sparse of stubble. He looked like a clerk. He *was* a clerk.

Glancing at him, anyone could tell that this man was petty, punctilious, cautious, nervous, puritanical, resentful, driven, circumspect, and repressed. Dickens would have pictured him with an overblown sense of his own importance, perched on a high stool and scratching thinly in the dusty ledgers of some ancient and respectable company. A 13th century physician would have seen him as an embodiment of one of the four essential humours which rule the human temperament, and whose essences are to be found in the fundamental qualities of earth, air, fire and water. In Crompton's case it was the Melancholic Humour of Water, caused by too much cold, dry black bile, which tended to make him peevish and self-involved.

Moreover, Crompton was a triumph for Lombrose and Kretschmer, a self-contained cautionary tale, a Roman exaggeration, and a sad farce on humanity.

To make matters worse, Crompton was aware, fully and completely, of his thin, misshapen, predictable personality; aware of it, enraged by it, and unable to do anything about it except hate the well-meaning doctors who had brought it about.

On all sides of him, the envious Crompton saw people with all their marvelous complexities and contradictions, constantly bursting out of the stereotypes that society tried to force upon them. He observed prostitutes who were not good-hearted, army sergeants who detested brutality, wealthy men who never gave to charity, Irishmen who hated fighting, Greeks who had never seen a ship, Frenchmen with no sense of logic. Most of the human race seemed to lead lives of a wonderful and unpredictable richness, erupting into sudden passions and strange calms, saying one thing and doing another, repudiating their backgrounds, overcoming their limitations, confounding psychologists and sociologists, and driving psychoanalysts to drink.

But this splendor was impossible for Crompton, whom the doctors had stripped of complexity for sanity's sake.

Crompton, with a robot's damnable regularity, reached his desk promptly at nine o'clock every working morning of his life. At five he put his ledgers neatly aside and returned to his furnished room. There he ate a frugal meal of unappetizing health foods, played three games of solitaire, filled in one crossword puzzle, and retired to his narrow bed. Each Saturday night of his life Crompton saw a movie, jostled by merry and unpredictable teenagers. Sundays and holidays were devoted to the study of Euclidean geometry, for Crompton believed in self-improvement. And once a month Crompton would sneak to a newsstand and purchase a magazine of salacious content. In the privacy of his room he would devour its contents; then, in an ecstasy of self-loathing, rip the detestable thing to shreds.

Crompton was aware, of course, that he had been turned into a stereotype for his own good. He tried to adjust to the fact. For a while he cultivated the company of other slab-sided, centimeter-thin personalities. But the others he met were complacent, self-sufficient, and smug in their rigidity. They had been that way since birth; unlike Crompton, whom the doctors had changed at the age of eleven. He soon found that those like him were insufferable; and he was insufferable to anyone else.

He tried hard to break through the stifling limitations of his personality. For a while he considered emigrating to Venus or Mars, but never did anything about it. He applied to the New York Romance Service, and they arranged a date for him. Crompton went to meet his sweet unknown in front of Loew's Jupiter, with a white

carnation pinned in his lapel. But within a block of the theater he was seized by a trembling fit, and forced to retreat to his room. That night he filled six crossword puzzles and played nine games of solitaire to soothe his nerves; but even this change was not lasting.

Try as he would, Crompton couldn't help but act within the narrow confines of his character. His rage at himself and at the well-meaning doctors grew, and his need for self-transcendence increased accordingly.

There was only one way for him to acquire the amazing variety of possibilities, the contradictions, the passions, the *humanness* which other people had. So Crompton worked and waited, and at last reached the age of thirty-five. This was the minimum age of consent for Personality Reintegration as set by federal law.

On the day following his thirty-fifth birthday Crompton resigned his job, withdrew his carefully hoarded savings of seventeen years' work, and went to see his doctor, determined to regain what had been taken from him.

Old Dr. Berrenger led Crompton into his consultation room, gave him a comfortable chair and said, "Well lad, it's been a long time. How are you?"

"Terrible," said Crompton.

"What seems to be troubling you?"

"My personality," Crompton said.

"Ah," said the old doctor, staring keenly at Crompton's clerkly face. "Feels a bit cramped, eh?"

"Cramped is hardly the word," Crompton said primly. "I am a machine, a robot, a nothing — "

"Come now," Dr. Berrenger said. "Surely it isn't as bad as all that. Adjustment takes time — "

"I'm sick to death of myself," Crompton stated flatly. "I want to Reintegrate."

The doctor looked dubious.

"And," Crompton said, "I have passed my thirty-fifth birthday. Under federal law I am legally entitled to Reintegrate."

"You are," Dr. Berrenger said. "But as your friend as well as your doctor, Alistair, I would most strongly advise against it."

"Why?"

The old doctor sighed and made a steeple of his fingers. "It would be dangerous for you. Extremely dangerous. Perhaps fatal."

"But I would have a chance, wouldn't I?"

"A vanishingly small one."

"Then I demand my privilege of Reintegration."

The doctor sighed again, went to his file and took out a thick folder. "Well," he said, "let me review your case."

Alistair Crompton, born to Lyle and Beth Crompton of Amundsenville, Marie Byrd Land, Antarctica. The father was a foreman at the Scott Plutonium mines, the mother was a part-time assembler at the little transistor factory. Both parents had a satisfactory record of mental and physical health. The infant Alistair showed every sign of an excellent postnatal adjustment.

During his first nine years, Alistair appeared normal in every respect, except for a certain moodiness; but children often are moody. Aside from that, Alistair was inquisitive, aggressive, affectionate and lighthearted, and well above the average in intelligence. In his tenth year the moodiness showed a marked increase. Some days the child would sit in his chair for hours, staring at nothing. At times he didn't respond to his own name.

(These 'spells' were not recognized as symptoms. They were passed off as the reveries of an imaginative child, to be outgrown in good time.)

Alistair's blank spells increased in number and intensity. He began to have temper tantrums, for which the local doctor prescribed tranquilizers. One day, at the age of ten years, seven months, Alistair struck a little girl for no ascertainable reason. When she cried, he attempted to strangle her. Finding this beyond his strength, he picked up a schoolbook and earnestly tried to smash in her skull. An adult managed to drag the kicking, screaming Alistair away. The girl suffered a brain concussion that hospitalized her for almost a year.

When questioned, Alistair maintained that he hadn't done it. Someone else must have done it. He would never hurt *anyone,* he insisted; and certainly not *that* little girl, of whom he was very fond. More questioning only succeeded in driving him into a stupor which lasted five days.

Even now there was time to save Alistair, if anyone had been able to recognize the early symptoms of virus schizophrenia. Even in the very young, this disease responded to prompt treatment.

In the temperate zones virus schizophrenia had been endemic for centuries, and occasionally broke out into epidemics such as the

classic dancing-craze of the Middle Ages. Immunology still had not developed a vaccine to deal with the virus. Standard technique, therefore, called for immediate Massive Cleavage, while the schizoid personalities were still malleable; detection and retention of the dominant personality; and integration of the other personalities through a Mikkleton projector into the passive substance of a Durier body.

The Durier bodies were growth-androids, with an estimated forty-year adequacy. They were, of course, unviable. But the federal law allowed Personality Reintegration at the age of thirty-five. The personalities developed in the Durier bodies could, at the discretion of the dominant personality, be taken back into the original mind and body, with an excellent prognosis for Reintegration and complete fusion...

If the cleavage had been performed in time.

The general practitioner in small, isolated Amundsenville was a good man for frostbite, snow-blindness, cancer, involuntary melancholia, and other simple maladies of the Frozen South. He knew nothing about temperate zone diseases.

Alistair was put into the town infirmary for two weeks' observation.

During the first week he was moody, shy, and ill at ease, with momentary outbursts of his former lightheartedness. In his second week he began to show great affection toward his nurse, who declared he was a perfect darling. Under the influence of her soothing warmth, Alistair began to seem like his former self.

On his thirteenth day in the infirmary, Alistair slashed the nurse's face with a broken water tumbler, then made a desperate attempt to cut his own throat. He was hospitalized for his injuries, and sank into a catalepsy which the doctor thought was simple shock. Rest and quiet were prescribed; these were the worst possible things, under the circumstances.

After two weeks of stupor characterized by the waxy flexibility of catatonia, the disease had reached its height. Alistair's parents sent the child to the great Rivera Clinic in New York. There the case was immediately and accurately diagnosed as virus schizophrenia in an advanced stage.

Alistair, now eleven, had few reality-contacts with the world; not enough to provide a working basis for the specialists. He was now in an almost continual state of catatonia, his schizoid personalities

irreconcilably hardened, his life lived in his own strange, unreachable twilight, among the nightmares which were his only companions. Massive Cleavage had little chance of success in so advanced a case. But without Cleavage, Alistair would be doomed to spend the rest of his life in an institution, never really conscious, never free from the surrealistic dungeons of his mind.

His parents chose what seemed the lesser evil, and signed the papers allowing the doctors to make a belated and desperate attempt at Cleavage.

Alistair received his operation at the age of eleven years, one month. Under deep syntho-hypnosis three separate personalities were evoked in him. The doctors talked to them and made their choice. Two personalities were projected into Durier bodies. The third personality, judged the most adequate of the three, was retained in the original corpus. All three personalities survived the trauma, and the operation was judged a limited success.

The neuro-hypnotist in charge, Dr. Vlacjeck, noted in his report that the three personalities, all inadequate, could not hope for a subsequent successful Reintegration at the legal age of thirty-five. The operation had come too late, and the personalities had lost their vital intermingling of traits and sympathies, their essential commonality. His report urged them to waive their reintegration rights and live out their lives as best they could, each within his own personality.

The two Duriers were renamed and sent to foster homes on Mars and Venus. The doctors wished the best for them, but expected very little.

Alistair Crompton, the dominant personality in the original body, recovered from the operation; but a vital two-thirds of him was missing, gone with the schizoid personalities. Certain human attributes, emotions, capabilities, had been torn from him, never to be replaced or substituted.

Crompton grew up with only his individual characteristics: a sense of duty, neatness, tenacity, and caution. The inevitable exaggeration of these qualities turned him into a stereotype, a monolithic personality aware of its lacks and passionately desiring fulfillment, fusion, Reintegration...

"So that's how it is, Alistair," Dr. Berrenger said, closing the folder. "Dr. Vlacjeck most strongly advises against Reintegration. I concur, I'm sorry to say."

"It's my only chance," Crompton said.

"It's no chance at all," Dr. Berrenger told him. "You can take the personalities in, but you don't have the stability to hold them in check, to fuse them. Alistair, we saved you from virus schizophrenia, but the predilection is still there. Try to Reintegrate and you'll be walking straight into functional schizophrenia, and for good!"

"Others have succeeded," Crompton said.

"Of course. Many others. But invariably they received their operations in time, before the schizoid parts hardened."

"I'll have to take my chances," Crompton said. "I request the names and addresses of my Duriers."

"Didn't you hear me? Any attempt at Reintegration will mean insanity for you, or worse. As your doctor I cannot — "

"Give me the addresses," Crompton demanded coldly. "It is my privilege under the law. I feel that I have enough stability to hold the other personality components in line. When they've become thoroughly subordinate, fusion will follow. We'll be a single functioning unit. And I'll be an entire human being."

"You don't know what those other Cromptons are like," the doctor said. "You consider *yourself* inadequate? Alistair, you were the pick of the litter!"

"I don't care what they're like," Crompton said. "They're a part of me. The names and addresses, please."

Shaking his head wearily, the doctor wrote on a piece of paper and handed it to Crompton.

"Alistair, this has practically no chance of success. I beg of you to consider — "

"Thank you, Dr. Berrenger," Crompton said, bowed slightly, and left.

As soon as he was outside the office, Crompton's self-control began to crumble. He had not dared show Dr. Berrenger his uncertainties; the well-meaning old man would surely have talked him out of the attempted Reintegration. But now, with the names in his pocket and the responsibility entirely his own, anxiety began to sweep over him. He was overcome by an intense trembling fit. He managed to control it long enough to take a taxi back to his furnished room, where he could throw himself on the bed.

He lay for an hour, his body racked by anxiety spasms, clutching the headboard like a drowning man. Then the fit passed. Soon

he was able to control his hands well enough to look at the paper the doctor had given him.

The first name on it was Edgar Loomis, of Elderberg, Mars. The other was Dan Stack, of East Marsh, Venus. That was all the paper said.

What were these embodied portions of his personality like? What humours, what stereotyped shapes had these truncated segments of himself taken?

The paper didn't say. He would have to go and find out.

He laid out a hand of solitaire and considered the risks. His early, unintegrated schizoid mind had shown a definite tendency toward homicidal mania. Would it be any better now in fusion, assuming that fusion was possible? Did he have the right to loose a potential monster upon the world? Was he wise in taking a step that carried the powerful threat of insanity, catatonia, death?

Crompton thought about it late into the night. At last his native caution won. He folded the paper carefully and put it into a drawer. As much as he desired Reintegration and wholeness, the dangers were simply too great. His present existence seemed preferable to insanity.

The next day he went out and found a job clerking for an ancient and respectable firm.

Immediately his habits locked him in. Once again, with a robot's undeviating sureness, he reached his desk promptly at nine o'clock every morning, left at five and returned to his furnished room and his unappetizing health foods, played three games of solitaire, filled in a crossword puzzle and retired to his narrow bed. Again he saw a movie on Saturday nights, studied geometry on Sundays, and once a month bought, read and destroyed a magazine of salacious content.

His self-loathing increased. He started a stamp collection, discarded it, joined the All-Boroughs Happiness Club, walked out during its first stiff and embarrassed dance, tried to learn chess, gave it up. His limitations were not to be transcended in this fashion.

On all sides of him were the contradictions of humanity in their unending richness and variety. Spread before him was the feast of life, which he could not taste. A vision haunted him, of himself spending another twenty years in monotonous, unrelieved clerking;

thirty years, forty years, without relief, without hope, transcended only by death.

Crompton spent six months thinking about this in his methodical fashion. Finally he decided that insanity was preferable to his present existence.

Therefore he resigned his job and once again withdrew his carefully hoarded savings. This time he bought a second-class ticket to Mars, to seek out Edgar Loomis of Elderberg.

Armed with a thick volume of crossword puzzles, Crompton went to Idlewild Spaceport at the appointed time, endured the high-gravity climb to Station Three, changed for the Lockheed-Lackawanna shuttle to Exchange Point, caught the Hopover to Mars Station One, went through customs, immigration and health, and shuttled down to Port Newton. There he went through the three day acclimitization period, learned how to use the auxiliary stomach lung, stoically took booster shots, and finally received a travel visa good for all Mars. Armed with this, he caught a rápido to Elderberg, near the Martian South Pole.

The rápido crawled along the flat, monotonous Martian plains, past low gray shrubs struggling for existence in the cold, thin air, through swampy regions of dull green tundra. Crompton kept occupied with his crosswords. When the conductor announced they were crossing the Grand Canal he looked up in momentary interest. But it was merely a shallowly sloping bed left by a vanished river. The vegetation in its muddy bottom was dark green, almost black. Crompton returned to his puzzle.

They went through the Orange Desert, and stopped at little stations where bearded, wide-hatted immigrants jeeped in for their vitamin concentrates and microfilm Sunday Times. And finally they reached the outskirts of Elderberg.

This town was the local focus for all South Polar mining and farming operations. It was also a resort for the rich, who came to wallow in its Longevity Baths, and for the sheer novelty of the trip. The region, warmed to 67 degrees Fahrenheit by volcanic action, was the warmest place on Mars. Inhabitants usually referred to it as the Tropics.

Crompton checked into a small motel, then joined the crowds of brightly dressed men and women who promenaded on Elderberg's

quaint immovable sidewalks. He peered into the gambling palaces, gawked at the shops selling Genuine Artifacts of the Missing Martian Race, peered into the novelty cocktail lounges and the glittering restaurants. He jumped with alarm when accosted by a painted young woman who invited him to Mama Teele's House, where low gravity made everything that was good better. He brushed off her and a dozen like her, and sat down in a little park to collect his thoughts.

Elderberg lay around him, replete in its pleasures, gaudy in its vices, a painted Jezebel whom Crompton rejected with a curl of his thin lips. And yet, behind his curled lips, averted eyes and nostrils indrawn in revulsion, a part of him longed for the humanity of vice as an alternative to his present bleak and sterile existence.

But sadly, Elderberg could corrupt him no better than New York. Perhaps Edgar Loomis would supply the missing ingredient.

Crompton began his search in the hotels, taking them in alphabetic order. Clerks at the first three said they had no idea where Loomis was; and if he should be found, there was a little matter of unpaid bills. The fourth thought that Loomis might have joined the big prospecting rush at Saddle Mountain. The fifth hotel, a recent establishment, had never heard of Loomis. At the sixth, a brightly overdressed young woman laughed with a slight hysteric edge when she heard Loomis' name; but she refused to give any information.

At the seventh hotel, the clerk told him that Edgar Loomis occupied Suite 314. He was not in at present, but could probably be found in the Red Planet Saloon.

Crompton asked directions. Then, his heart beating rapidly, he made his way into the older section of Elderberg.

Here the hotels were stained and weathered, the paints worn, the plastics pitted by the seasonal dust storms. Here the gambling halls were crowded close together, and the dance halls blared their mirth at midday and midnight. Here the budget tourists clustered with their cameras and recorders, in search of local color, hoping to encounter at a safe yet photographable distance the wicked glamour that led zealous promoters to call Elderberg the Nineveh of Three Planets. And here were the safari shops, outfitting parties for the famed descent into Xanadu Caverns or the long sandcar drive to Devil's Twist. Here also was the infamous Dream Shop, selling every narcotic known to man, still in business despite legislative efforts to

shut it down. And here the sidewalk hawkers sold bits of alleged Martian drystone carving, or anything else you might desire.

Crompton found the Red Planet Saloon, entered, and waited until he could see through the dense clouds of tobacco and kif. He looked at the tourists in their gaily colored shirts standing at the long bar, stared at the quick-talking guides and the dour rock miners. He looked at the gambling tables with their chattering women, and their men with the prized faint orange Martian tan that takes, it is said, a month to acquire.

Then, unmistakably, he saw Loomis.

Loomis was at the faro table, in company with a buxom blonde woman who, at a first glance, looked thirty, at a second glance forty, and after a long careful look perhaps forty-five. She was gambling ardently, and Loomis was watching her with an amused smile.

He was tall and slender. His manner of dress was best expressed by the crossword puzzle word *nappy*. He had mouse-brown hair sleeked back on a narrow skull. A woman not too choosey might have called him handsome.

He didn't resemble Crompton; but there was an affinity, a pull, an instant sense of *rapport* that all Cleavage members possess. Mind called to mind, the parts calling for the whole, with an almost telepathic intensity. And Loomis, sensing it, raised his head and stared full at Crompton.

Crompton began walking toward him. Loomis whispered to the blonde, left the faro table and met Crompton in the middle of the floor.

"Who are you?" Loomis asked.

"Alistair Crompton. You're Loomis? I have the original body, and — do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Yes, of course," Loomis said. "I'd been wondering if you'd show up. Hmm." He looked Crompton up and down, and didn't seem too pleased with what he saw.

"All right," Loomis said, "we'll go up to my suite and have a talk. Might as well get that over with now."

He looked at Crompton again, with undisguised distaste, and led him out of the saloon.

Loomis' suite was a wonder and a revelation. Crompton almost stumbled as his feet sank into the deep-piled oriental rug. The light in the room was dim and golden, and a constant succession of faint

and disturbing shadows writhed and twisted across the walls, taking on human shapes, coiling and closing with each other, transmuting into animals and the blotchy forms of children's nightmares, and disappearing into the mosaic ceiling. Crompton had heard of shadow songs, but had never before witnessed one.

Loomis said, "It's playing a rather fragile little piece called 'Descent to Kartherum.' How do you like it?"

"It's — impressive," Crompton said. "It must have been terribly expensive."

"I daresay," Loomis said carelessly. "It was a gift. Won't you sit down?"

Crompton settled into a deep armchair that conformed to his contours and began, very gently, to massage his back.

"Something to drink?" Loomis asked.

Crompton nodded dumbly. Now he noticed the perfumes in the air, a complex and shifting mixture of spice and sweetness, with the barest hint of putrefaction.

"That smell — "

"It takes getting used to," Loomis said. "It's an olfactory sonata composed as an accompaniment to the shadow song. But I'll turn it off."

He did so, and turned on something else. Crompton heard a melody that seemed to originate in his own head. The tune was slow and sensuous, and unbearably poignant; and it seemed to Crompton that he had heard it somewhere before, in another time and place.

"It's called 'Déjà Vu,'" Loomis said. "Direct aural transmission technique. Pleasant little thing, isn't it?"

Crompton knew that Loomis was trying to impress him. And he *was* impressed. As Loomis poured drinks, Crompton looked around the room, at the sculptures, drapes, furniture and gadgets; his clerkly mind made an estimate of cost, added transportation charges and taxes from Terra, and totaled the result.

With dismay he realized that in this room alone Loomis had goods worth more than Crompton could earn in three and one-quarter lifetimes of clerking.

Loomis handed Crompton a glass. "It's mead," he said. "Quite the vogue in Elderberg this season. Tell me what you think of it."

Crompton sipped the honeyed beverage. "Delicious," he said. "Costly, I suppose."

"Quite. But then, the best is only barely sufficient, don't you think?"

Crompton didn't answer. He stared hard at Loomis, and saw the signs of a decaying Durier body. Carefully he observed the neat, handsome features, the Martian tan, the smooth, mousy brown hair, the careless elegance of the clothes, the faint crows' feet in the corners of the eyes, the sunken cheeks on which was a trace of cosmetics. He observed Loomis' habitual self-indulgent smile, the disdainful twist of his lips, the way his nervous fingers stroked a piece of brocade, the complacent slump of his body against the exquisite furniture.

Here, he realized, was the stereotype of the sensualist, the man who lived only for pleasures and slothful ease. Here was an embodiment of the Sanguine Humour of Fire, caused by too much hot blood, tending to make a man unduly mirthful and over-fond of fleshy gratifications. And Loomis, like himself, was a monolithic, centimeter-thin personality, his desires completely predictable, his fears obvious to anyone.

In Loomis resided all Crompton's potentialities for pleasure, ripped from him and set up as an entity in itself. Loomis, the pure pleasure principle, vitally necessary to the Crompton mind-body.

"How do you make a living?" Crompton asked bluntly.

"Through the performance of services, for which I am paid," Loomis answered, smiling.

"To put that in plainer English," Crompton said, "you are a leech and a parasite. You feast on the idle rich who flock to Elderberg."

"You would see it that way of course, my hard-working puritanical brother," Loomis said, lighting a pale ivory cigarette. "But my own view is somewhat different. Consider. Everything today is biased toward the poor, as though there were some special virtue in improvidence. Yet the rich have their needs and necessities, too! These needs are unlike the needs of the poor, but no less urgent. The poor require food, shelter, medical attention. The governments provide these admirably. But what about the needs of the rich? People laugh at the idea of a rich man having problems; but does mere possession of credit exclude him from having problems? It does not! Quite the contrary, wealth increases need and sharpens necessity, often leaving a rich man in a more truly necessitous condition than his poor brother."

"In that case, why doesn't he give up his wealth?" Crompton asked.

"Why doesn't a poor man give up his poverty?" Loomis asked in return. "No, it can't be done, we must accept the conditions that life has imposed upon us. The burden of the rich is heavy; still, they must bear it, and seek aid where they can.

"The rich need sympathy; and I am very sympathetic. The rich need people around them who can truly enjoy luxury, and teach *them* how to enjoy it; and few, I think, enjoy and appreciate the luxuries of the rich as well as I do. And their women, Crompton! They have *their* needs — urgent, pressing needs, which their husbands frequently cannot fulfill due to the tensions under which they live. These women cannot entrust themselves to any lout from the streets. They are nervous, highly bred, suspicious, these women, and highly suggestible. They need nuance and subtlety. They need the attentions of a man of soaring imagination, yet possessed of an exquisite sensibility. Such men are all too rare in this humdrum world. My talents happen to lie in that particular direction. Therefore I exercise them. And of course I expect recompense just like any working man."

Loomis leaned back with a smile. Crompton stared at him with a certain horror. He found it difficult to believe that this corrupt, self-satisfied seducer, this creature with the morals of a mink was part of himself. But he was, and necessary to the fusion.

"Well," Crompton said, "your views are your business. I'm the basic Crompton personality in the original Crompton body. I've come to Reintegrate you."

"Not interested," Loomis said.

"You mean that you *won't?"*

"Exactly."

"You don't seem to realize," Crompton said, "that you are incomplete, unfinished. You must have the same drive toward self-realization that I have. And it's possible only through Reintegration."

"Perfectly true," Loomis said.

"Then — "

"No," Loomis said. "I have an urge toward self-completion. But I have a much stronger urge to go on living exactly as I am living, in a manner I find eminently satisfactory. Luxury has its compensations, you know."

"Perhaps you've forgotten," Crompton said, "that you are living in a Durier body which has an estimated competence of forty years.

If you don't Reintegrate, you have a maximum of five more years of life. A *maximum,* mind you. Durier bodies have broken down in less."

"That's true," Loomis said, frowning slightly.

"Reintegration won't be so bad," Crompton said, in what he hoped was a winning manner. "Your pleasure impulse won't be lost. It'll merely be put into better proportion."

Loomis thought hard, drawing on his pale ivory cigarette. Then he looked Crompton full in the face and said, "No."

"But your future — "

"I'm simply not the sort of person who can worry about the future," Loomis said, with a smug smile. "It's enough for me simply to live through each day, savoring it to the fullest. Five years from now — why, who knows what will happen five years from now? Five years is an eternity! Something will probably turn up."

Crompton resisted a strong desire to throttle some sense into Loomis. Of course the sensualist lived only in the ever-present now, giving no thought to a distant and uncertain future. Five years' time was unthinkable to the now-centered Loomis. He should have thought of that.

Keeping his voice calm, Crompton said, "Nothing will turn up. In five years — five short years — you will die."

Loomis shrugged. "It's my policy never to worry past Thursday. Tell you what, old man. I'll look you up in three or four years and we'll discuss it then."

"It'll never work," Crompton told him. "You'll be on Mars, I'll be on Earth, and our other component will be on Venus. We'll never get together in time. Besides, you won't even remember."

"We'll see, we'll see," Loomis said, glancing at his watch. "And now, if you don't mind, I'm expecting a visitor soon who would doubtless prefer — "

Crompton arose. "If you change your mind, I'm staying at the Blue Moon Motel. I'll just be here for another day or two."

"Have a pleasant stay," Loomis said. "Be sure to see the Xanadu Caverns. Fabulous sight!"

Thoroughly numbed, Crompton left Loomis' ornate suite and returned to his motel.

That evening Crompton ate at a snack counter, consuming a Marsburger and a Red Malted. At a newsstand he found a book of

acrostics. He returned to his room, filled in three puzzles, and went to sleep.

The next day he tried to decide what to do. There seemed to be no way of convincing Loomis. Should he go to Venus and find Dan Stack, the other missing portion of his personality? No, that would be worse than useless. Even if Stack were willing to Reintegrate, they would still be missing a vital third of themselves — Loomis, the all-important pleasure principle. Two-thirds would crave completion more passionately than one-third, and be in more desperate straits without it. And Loomis would not be convinced.

Under the circumstances, his only course was to return to Earth un-Reintegrated, and make whatever adjustments he could. There was, after all, a certain joy in hard, dedicated work, a certain pleasure in steadiness, circumspection, dependability. The frugal virtues were not to be overlooked.

But he found it difficult to convince himself. And with a heavy heart he telephoned Elderberg Depot and made a reservation on the evening rápido to Port Newton.

As he was packing, an hour before the rápido left, his door was suddenly flung open. Edgar Loomis stepped in, looked quickly around, shut the door behind him and locked it.

"I've changed my mind," Loomis said. "I've decided to Reintegrate."

Crompton's first feeling of joy was stifled in a wave of suspicion.

"What made you change your mind?" he asked.

"Does it really matter?" Loomis said. "Can't we — "

"I want to know why," Crompton said.

"Well it's a little difficult to explain. You see, I had just — "

There was a heavy rapping on the door. Loomis turned pale under his orange tan. "Please!" he said.

"Tell me," Crompton said implacably.

Beads of sweat appeared on Loomis' forehead. "Just one of those things," he said quickly. "Sometimes husbands don't appreciate one's little attentions to their wives. Even the rich can be shockingly *bourgeois* at times. Husbands are one of the hazards of my trade. So once or twice a year I find it expedient to take a little vacation in a cave I've furnished at All Diamond Mountain. It's really very comfortable, though the food is necessarily plain. In a few weeks the whole thing blows over."

The knocking at the door grew louder. A bass voice shouted, "I know you're in there, Loomis! Come out or I'll break down this damned door and wrap it around your slimy neck!"

Loomis' hands were trembling uncontrollably. "I have a dread of physical violence," he said. "Couldn't we simply Reintegrate, then I'll explain — "

"I want to know why you didn't go to your cave this time," Crompton said.

They heard the sound of a body slamming heavily against the door. Loomis said shrilly, "It was all your fault, Crompton! Your coming here unsettled me. I lost my fine sense of timing, my sixth sense of danger. Damn it, Crompton, I didn't get away in time! Me, caught in the act! I barely escaped, with that fantastic muscular neanderthal idiot of a *nouveau-riche* husband following me around town, searching the saloons and hotels, threatening to break my limbs. I didn't have enough ready cash to hire a sandcar, and there was no time to pawn my jewelry. And the police just grinned and refused to protect me! Crompton, please!"

The door bulged under repeated blows, and the lock began to give. Crompton turned to his personality component, grateful that Loomis' essential inadequacy had shown up in time.

"Come," Crompton said, "let's Reintegrate."

The two men stared hard into each other's eyes, parts calling for the whole, potential increasing to bridge the gap. Then Loomis gasped and his Durier body collapsed, folding in on itself like a rag doll. At the same moment, Crompton's knees buckled as though a weight had landed on his shoulders.

The lock gave way and the door slammed open. A short, red-eyed, thickly constructed, black-haired man came into the room.

"Where is he?" the man shouted.

Crompton pointed to Loomis' body stretched on the floor. "Heart attack," he said.

"Oh," said the black-haired man, caught between rage and shock. "Oh. Well...Oh."

"I'm quite sure he deserved it," Crompton said coldly, picked up his suitcase and marched out to catch the evening rápido.

The long ride across the Martian plains came as a much needed breathing spell. It gave Crompton and Loomis a chance to make a true acquaintance, and to settle certain basic problems which two minds in one body are bound to encounter.

There was no question of ascendency. Crompton was the basic personality, and for thirty-five years had been resident in the Crompton mind-body. Under normal circumstances Loomis could not take over, and had no desire to do so. Loomis accepted his passive role gracefully, and resigned himself, with typical good will, to the status of commentator, advisor, and general well-wisher.

But there was no Reintegration. Crompton and Loomis existed in the one mind like planet and moon, independent but closely related entities, cautiously testing each other out, unwilling and unable to relinquish personal autonomy. A certain amount of seepage was taking place, of course; but the fusion of a single stable personality out of its discreet elements could not take place until Dan Stack, the third component, had entered.

And even then, Crompton reminded the optimistic Loomis, Reintegration might not follow. Assuming for a moment that Stack was willing to enter (which he might not be), the three schizoid parts might resist fusion or find it impossible to achieve; in which case their conflicts within one body would rapidly bring on a state of insanity.

"Why worry about it, old man?" Loomis asked.

"Because it's something that must be worried about," Crompton said. "Even if the three of us achieve Reintegration, the resulting mind might not be stable. Psychotic elements might predominate, and then — "

"We'll simply have to take it as it comes," Loomis said. "Day by day, bit by bit."

Crompton agreed. Loomis, the good-natured, easygoing sybaritic side of his personality, was already having an effect upon him. With an effort he forced himself to stop worrying. Soon he was able to do a crossword puzzle, while Loomis toyed with the opening lines of a villanelle.

The rápido reached Port Newton, and Crompton shuttled to Mars Station 1. He went through customs, emigration and health, and caught the Hopover to Exchange Point. There he had to wait fifteen days for a Venus-bound ship. The brisk young ticket clerk spoke about the problems of "opposition" and "economical orbits", but neither Crompton nor Loomis understood what he was talking about.

The delay proved valuable. Loomis was able to provide an acceptable signature to a note requesting a friend in Elderberg to convert his properties into cash, pay his bills, take a healthy broker's fee, and send his heir, Crompton, the remainder. The transactions were completed on the eleventh day, and provided Crompton with nearly three thousand badly needed dollars.

At last the Venus ship lifted. Crompton set to work learning Basic Yggdra, root language of the Venusian aboriginals. Loomis, for the first time in his life, tried to work too, putting aside his villanelle and tackling the complexities of Yggdra. He quickly became bored with its elaborate conjugations and declensions, but persisted to the best of his ability, and marveled at the studious, hard-working Crompton.

In return, Crompton made a few tentative advances into the appreciation of beauty. Aided and instructed by Loomis he attended the ship's concerts, looked at the paintings in the Main Salon, and stared long and earnestly at the brilliant glowing stars from the ship's observation port. It all seemed a considerable waste of time, but he persevered.

Their cooperation was threatened on the tenth day out, by the wife of a second-generation Venusian planter whom Crompton met in the observation port. She had been on Mars for a tuberculosis cure, and now was going home.

She was small, bright-eyed and vivacious, with a slender figure and glistening black hair. She was bored by the long passage through space.

They went to the ship's lounge. After four martinis, Crompton was able to relax and let Loomis come to the fore; which he did with a will. Loomis danced with her to the ship's phonograph; then generously receded, leaving Crompton in command, nervous, flushed, tanglefooted and enormously pleased. And it was *Crompton* who led her back to the table, *Crompton* who made small talk with her, and *Crompton* who touched her hand, while the complacent Loomis looked on.

At nearly two a.m., ship's time, the girl left, after pointedly mentioning her room number. Crompton reeled deliriously back to his own room on B deck, and collapsed happily on the bed.

"Well?" Loomis asked.

"Well what?"

"Let's go. The invitation was clear enough."

"There was no invitation," Crompton said, puzzled.

"She mentioned her room number," Loomis pointed out. "That, together with the other events of the evening, constitutes an unmistakable invitation — almost a command."

"I can't believe it!" Crompton said.

"Take my word," Loomis told him. "I have some slight experience in these matters. The invitation is clear, the course is open. Onward!"

"No, no," Crompton said. "I wouldn't — I mean I don't I couldn't — "

"Lack of experience is no excuse," Loomis said firmly. "Nature is exceedingly generous in helping one to discover her ways. Consider also the fact that beavers, racoons, wolves, tigers, mice, and other creatures without a hundredth of your intelligence manage to perform in exemplary fashion what you find so baffling. Surely you won't let a mouse outdo you!"

Crompton got to his feet, wiped his glowing forehead, and took two tentative steps toward the door. Then he wheeled and sat down on the bed.

"Absolutely not," he said firmly.

"But why?"

"It would be unethical. The young lady is married."

"Marriage," Loomis said patiently, "is a manmade institution. But before marriage there were men and women, and certain modes between them. Natural laws always take precedence over human legislation."

"It's immoral," Crompton said, without much vigor.

"Not at all," Loomis assured him. "You are unmarried, so no possible blame can attach to *you* for your actions. The young lady *is* married. That's her responsibility. But remember, she is a human being capable of making her own decisions, not some mere chattel of her husband. Her decision has been made, and we must respect her integrity in the matter; to do otherwise would be insulting. Finally, there is the husband. He will know nothing of this, and therefore will not be injured by it. In fact, he will gain. For his wife, in recompense, will be unusually pleasant to him. He will

assume that this is because of his forceful personality, and his ego will be bolstered thereby. So you see, Crompton, everyone will gain, and no one will lose."

"Sheer sophistry," Crompton said, standing up again and moving toward the door.

"Atta boy," Loomis said.

Crompton grinned idiotically and opened the door. Then a thought struck him and he slammed the door shut and lay down on the bed.

"Absolutely not," Crompton said.

"What's the matter now?"

"The reasons you gave me," Crompton said, "may or may not be sound. I don't have enough experience in the world to know. But one thing I do know. *I will not engage in anything of this sort while you're watching!*"

"But — damn it, I'm you! You're me! We're two parts of one personality!"

"Not yet we aren't," Crompton said. "We exist now as schizoid parts, two people in one body. Later, after Reintegration has taken place...But under the present circumstances, my sense of decency forbids me from doing what you suggest. It's unthinkable! I don't wish to discuss the matter any further."

At that, Loomis lost his temper. Thwarted from the fundamental expression of his own personality, he raved and shouted and called Crompton many hard names, the least of which was "yellow-livered little coward." His anger set up reverberations in Crompton's mind, and echoed throughout their entire shared organism. The schism lines between the two personalities deepened; new fissures appeared, and the break threatened to isolate the two minds in true Jekyll-and-Hyde fashion.

Crompton's dominate personality carried him past that. But, in a furious rage at Loomis, his mind began to produce antidols. Those still not fully understood little entities, like leuocytes in the bloodstream, had the task of expunging pain and walling off the sore spot in the mind.

Loomis shied back in fright as the antidols began building their *cordon sanitaire* around him, crowding him, folding him back on himself, walling him off.

"Crompton! Please!"

Loomis was in danger of being completely and irrevocably sealed off, lost forever in a black corner of the Crompton mind. And lost with him would be any chance for Reintegration. But Crompton managed to regain his stability in time. The flow of antidols stopped; the wall dissolved, and Loomis shakily regained his position.

For a while they weren't on speaking terms. Loomis sulked and brooded for an entire day, and swore he would never forgive Crompton's brutality. But above all he was a sensualist, living forever in the moment, forgetful of the past, incapable of worry about the future. His resentments passed quickly, leaving him serene and amused as always.

Crompton was not so forgetful; but he recognized his responsibilities as the dominant part of the personality. He worked to maintain the cooperation, and the two personalities were soon operating at their fullest potential sympathy.

By mutual consent they avoided the company of the young lady. The rest of the trip passed quickly, and at last Venus was reached.

They were set down in Satellite 3, where they passed through customs, immigration and health. They received shots for Creeping Fever, Venus Plague, Knight's Disease, and Big Itch. They were given powders in case of Swamp Decay, and pills to ward off Bluefoot. Finally they were permitted to take the shuttle down to the mainland embarkation depot of Port New Haarlem.

This city, on the western shore of the sluggish Inland Zee, was situated in Venus' temperate zone. Still they were uncomfortably warm after the chill, invigorating climate of Mars. Here they saw their first Venusian aboriginals outside a circus; saw hundreds of them, in fact. The natives averaged five feet in height, and their scaly armored hides showed their remote lizard ancestry. Along the sidewalks they walked erect; but often, to avoid crowds, they moved across the vertical sides of buildings, clinging with the sucker disks on their hands, feet, knees, and forearms.

Many buildings had barbed wire to protect their windows; for these detribalized natives were reputed to be thieves, and their only sport was assassination.

Crompton spent a day in the city, then took a helicopter to East Marsh, the last known address of Dan Stack. The ride was a

monotonous whirring and flapping through dense cloud banks which blocked all view of the surface. The search-radar pinged sharply, hunting for the shifting inversion zones where the dreaded Venusian tornado, the *zicre,* sometimes burst into violent life. But the winds were gentle on this trip, and Crompton slept most of the way.

East Marsh was a busy shipping port on a tributary of the Inland Zee. Here Crompton found Stack's foster-parents, a couple now in their eighties and showing signs of senility. They told him that Dan was a strapping big boy, a mite hasty sometimes, but always well-meaning. They assured him that the affair of the Morrison girl wasn't true. Dan must have been falsely accused. Dan would never do such a thing to a poor defenseless girl.

"Where can I find Dan?" Crompton asked.

"Ah," said the old man, blinking his watery eyes, "didn't you know Dan left here? Ten, maybe fifteen years ago it was."

"East Marsh was too dull for him," the old lady said, with a touch of venom. "So he borrowed our little nest egg and left in the middle of the night, while we were sleeping."

"Didn't want to bother us," the old man quickly explained. "Wanted to seek his fortune, Dan did. And I wouldn't be surprised but what he found it. Had the stuff of a real man, Dan had."

"Where did he go?" Crompton asked.

"Couldn't rightly say," the old man said. "He never wrote us. Never much of a hand with words, our Dan. But Billy Davis saw him in Ou-Barkar that time he drove his semi there with a load of potatoes."

"When was that?"

"Five, maybe six years ago," the old lady said. "That's the last we ever heard of Dan. Venus is a big place, Mister."

Crompton thanked the old couple. He tried to locate Billy Davis for further information, but found that he was working as third mate on a pocket freighter. The ship had sailed a month ago, and was making stops at all the sleepy little ports on the Southern Inland Zee.

"Well," Crompton said, "there's only one thing to do. We'll have to go to Ou-Barkar."

"I suppose so," Loomis said. "But frankly, old man, I'm beginning to wonder about this Stack fellow."

"I am too," Crompton admitted. "But he's part of us, and we need him in the Reintegration."

"I guess we do," Loomis said. "Lead on, oh Elder Brother."

Crompton led on. He caught a helicopter to Depotsville, and a bus to St. Denis. Here he was able to hitch a ride in a semi bound across the marshes to Ou-Barkar with a load of insecticides. The driver was glad of company across the desolate Wetlands.

During that fourteen-hour trip Crompton learned much about Venus. The vast, warm, watery world was Earth's new frontier, the driver told him. Mars was a dead tourist's curio, but Venus had real possibilities. To Venus came the pioneering types, spiritual and sometimes actual descendants of the American frontiersmen, Boer farmers, Israeli kibbutzniks and Australian ranchers. Stubbornly they fought for a foothold on the fertile steppes, the ore-rich mountains, and by the shores of the warm seas. They fought with the Stone Age aboriginals, the lizard-evolved Ais. Their great victories at Satan's Pass, Squareface, Albertsville, and Double Tongue, and their defeats at Slow River and Blue Falls were already a part of human history, fit to stand beside Chancellorsville, the Little Big Horn, and Dienbienphu. And the wars were not over yet. On Venus, the driver told them, a world was still to be won.

Crompton listened, and thought he might like to be a part of all this. Loomis was frankly bored by the whole matter, and disgusted with the rank swamp odors.

Ou-Barkar was a cluster of plantations deep in the interior of White Cloud Continent. Fifty Terrans supervised the work of two thousand aboriginals, who planted, tended and harvested the li-trees that grew only in that sector. The li fruit, gathered twice a year, was the basis of elispice, a condiment now considered indispensable in Terran cooking.

Crompton met the foreman, a huge, red-faced man named Haaris, who wore a revolver on his hip and a blacksnake whip coiled neatly around his waist.

"Dan Stack?" the foreman said. "Sure, Stack worked here nearly a year. Then he left, with a boot in the rear to help him on his way."

"Do you mind telling me why?" Crompton asked.

"Don't mind at all," the foreman said. "But let's do it over a drink."

He led Crompton to Ou-Barkar's single saloon. There, over a glass of local corn whiskey, Haaris talked about Dan Stack.

"He came up here from East Marsh. I believe he'd had some trouble with a girl down there — kicked in her teeth or something.

But that's no concern of mine. Most of us here aren't exactly gentle types, and I guess the cities are damned well rid of us. I put Stack to work overseeing fifty Ais on a hundred-acre li field. He did damned well at first."

The foreman downed his drink. Crompton ordered another and paid for it.

"I told him," Haaris said, "that he'd have to drive his boys to get anything out of them. We use mostly Chipetzi tribesmen, and they're a sullen, treacherous bunch, though husky. Their chief rents us workers on a twenty-year contract, in exchange for guns. Then they try to pick us off with the guns, but that's another matter. We handle one thing at a time."

"A twenty year contract?" Crompton asked. "Then the Ais are practically slave laborers?"

"Right," the foreman said decisively. "Some of the owners try to pretty it up, call it temporary indenture or feudal-transition economy. But it's slavery, and why not call it that? It's the only way we'll ever civilize these people. Stack understood that. Big hefty fellow he was, and handy with a whip. I thought he'd do all right."

"And?" Crompton prompted, ordering another drink for the foreman.

"At first he was fine," Haaris said. "Laid on with the blacksnake, got out his quota and then some. But he hadn't any sense of moderation. Started killing his boys with the whip, and replacements cost money. I told him to take it a little easier. He didn't. One day his Chipetzis ganged up on him and he had to gun down about eight before they backed off. I had a heart-to-heart talk with him. Told him the idea was to get *work* out, not kill Ais. We expect to lose a certain percentage, of course. But Stack was pushing it too far, and cutting down the profit."

The foreman sighed and lighted a cigarette. "Stack just liked using that whip too much. Lots of the boys do, but Stack had no sense of moderation. His Chipetzis ganged up again and he had to kill about a dozen of them. But he lost a hand in the fight. His whip hand. I think a Chipetzi chewed it off.

"I put him to work in the drying sheds but he got into another fight and killed four Ais. That was too much. Those workers cost money, and we can't have some hotheaded idiot killing them off every time he gets sore. I gave Stack his pay and told him to get the hell out."

"Did he say where he was going?" Crompton asked.

"He said that we didn't realize that the Ais had to be wiped out to make room for Terrans. Said he was going to join the Vigilantes. They're a sort of roving army that keeps the unpacified tribes in check."

Crompton thanked the foreman and asked the location of the Vigilantes' headquarters.

"Right now they're encamped on the left bank of the Rainmaker River," Haaris said. "They're trying to make terms with the Seriid. You want to find Stack pretty bad, huh?"

"He's my brother," Crompton said, with a faint sinking sensation in his stomach.

The foreman looked at him steadily. "Well," he said after a while, "kin's kin. But your brother's about the worst example of a human being I've seen, and I've seen some. Better leave him alone."

"I have to find him," Crompton said.

Haaris shrugged fatalistically. "It's a long trek to Rainmaker River. I can sell you pack mules and provisions, and I'll rent you a native kid for a guide. You'll be going through pacified territory, so you should reach the Vigilantes all right. I think the territory's still pacified."

That night, Loomis urged Crompton to abandon the search. Stack was obviously a thief and murderer. What was the sense of taking him into the combination?

Crompton felt that the case wasn't as simple as that. For one thing, the stories about Stack might have been exaggerated. But even if they were true, it simply meant that Stack was another stereotype, an inadequate and monolithic personality extended past all normal bounds, as were Crompton and Loomis. Within the combination, in fusion, Stack would be modified. He would supply the necessary measure of aggression, the toughness and survival fitness that both Crompton and Loomis lacked.

Loomis didn't think so, but agreed to suspend judgement until they actually met their missing component.

In the morning Crompton purchased equipment and mules at an exorbitant price, and the following day he set out at dawn, led by a Chipetzi youngster named Rekki.

Crompton followed the guide through virgin forest into the Thompson mountains, up razorback ridges, across cloud-covered

peaks into narrow granite passes where the wind screamed like the tormented dead; then down, into the dense and steamy jungle on the other side. Loomis, appalled by the hardships of the march, retreated into a corner of himself and emerged only in the evenings when the campfire was lit and the hammock slung. Crompton, with set jaw and bloodshot eyes, stumbled through the burning days, bearing the full sensory impact of the journey and wondering how long his strength would last.

On the eighteenth day they reached the banks of a shallow muddy stream. This, Rekki said, was the Rainmaker River. Two miles further on they found the Vigilante camp.

The Vigilante commander, Colonel Prentice, was a tall, spare, gray-eyed man who showed the marks of a recent wasting fever. He remembered Stack very well.

"Yes, he was with us for a while. I was uncertain about accepting him. His reputation, for one thing. And a one-handed man...But he'd trained his left hand to fire a gun better than most do with their right, and he had a bronze fitting over his right stump. Made it himself, and it was grooved to hold a machete. No lack of guts, I'll tell you that. He was with us almost two years. Then I cashiered him."

"Why?" Crompton asked.

The commander sighed unhappily. "Contrary to popular belief, we Vigilantes are not a freebooting army of conquest. We are not here to decimate and destroy the natives. We are not here to annex new territories upon the slightest pretext. We are here to enforce treaties entered into in good faith by Ais and settlers, to prevent raiding by Ais and Terrans alike, and, in general, to keep the peace. Stack had difficulty getting that through his thick skull."

Some expression must have passed across Crompton's face, for the commander nodded sympathetically.

"You know what he's like, eh? Then you can imagine what happened. I didn't want to lose him. He was a tough and able soldier, skilled in forest and mountain lore, perfectly at home in the jungle. The Border Patrol is thinly spread, and we need every man we can get. Stack was valuable. I told the sergeants to keep him in line and allow no brutalizing of the natives. For a while it worked. Stack was trying hard. He was learning our rules, our code, our way of doing things. His record was unimpeachable. Then came the Shadow Peak incident, which I suppose you've heard about."

"I'm afraid I haven't," Crompton said.

"Really? I thought everyone on Venus had. Well, the situation was this. Stack's patrol had rounded up nearly a hundred Ais of an outlaw tribe that had been causing us some trouble. They were being conducted to the special reservation at Shadow Peak. On the march there was a little trouble, a scuffle. One of the Ais had a knife, and he slashed Stack across the right wrist.

"I suppose losing one hand made him especially sensitive to the possible loss of another. The wound was superficial, but Stack berserked. He killed the native with a riot gun, then turned it on the rest of them. A lieutenant had to bludgeon him into unconsciousness before he could be stopped. The damage to Terran-Ais relations was immeasurable. I couldn't have a man like that in my outfit. He needs a psychiatrist. I cashiered him."

"Where is he now?" Crompton asked.

"Just what is your interest in the man?" the commander asked bluntly.

"He's my half-brother."

"I see. Well, I heard that Stack drifted to Port New Haarlem, and worked for a while on the docks. He teamed up with a chap named Barton Finch. Both were jailed for drunk and disorderly conduct, got out and drifted back to the White Cloud frontier. Now he and Finch own a little trading store up near Blood Delta."

Crompton rubbed his forehead wearily and said, "How do I get there?"

"By canoe," the commander said. "You go down the Rainmaker River to where it forks. The left-hand stream is Blood River. It's navigable all the way to Blood Delta. But I would not advise the trip.

"For one thing, it's extremely hazardous. For another, it would be useless. There's nothing you can do for Stack. He's a bred-in-the-bone killer. He's better off alone in a frontier town where he can't do much damage."

"I must go to him," Crompton said, his throat suddenly dry.

"There's no law against it," the commander said, with the air of a man who has done his duty.

Crompton found that Blood Delta was man's furthest frontier on Venus. It lay in the midst of hostile Grel and Tengtzi tribesmen, with whom a precarious peace was maintained, and an incessant

guerilla war was ignored. There was great wealth to be gained in the Delta country. The natives brought in fist-sized diamonds and rubies, sacks of the rarest spices, and an occasional flute or carving from the lost city of Alteirne. They traded these things for guns and ammunition, which they used enthusiastically on the traders and on each other. There was wealth to be found in the Delta, and sudden death, and slow, painful, lingering death as well. The Blood River, which wound slowly into the heart of the Delta country, had its own special hazards, which usually took a fifty percent toll of travellers upon it.

Crompton resolutely shut his mind to all common sense. His component, Stack, lay just ahead of him. The end was in sight, and Crompton was determined to reach it. So he bought a canoe and hired four native paddlers, purchased supplies, guns, ammunition, and arranged for a dawn departure.

But the night before he planned to go, Loomis revolted.

They were in a small tent which the commander had put aside for Crompton's use. By a smoking kerosene lamp Crompton was stuffing cartridges into a bandolier, his attention fixed on the immediate task and unwilling to look elsewhere.

Loomis said, "Now listen to me. I've recognized you as the dominant personality. I've made no attempt to take over the body. I've been in good spirits, and I've kept *you* in good spirits while we tramped halfway around Venus. Isn't that true?"

"Yes it is," Crompton said, reluctantly putting down the bandolier.

"I've done the best I could, but this is too much. I want Reintegration, but not with a homicidal maniac. Don't talk to me about monolithic personalities. Stack's *homicidal*, and I want nothing to do with him."

"He's a part of us," Crompton said.

"So what? Listen to yourself, Crompton! You're supposed to be the component most in touch with reality. And you're completely obsessed, planning on sending us into sure death on that river."

"We'll get through all right," Crompton said, with no conviction.

"Will we?" Loomis asked. "Have you listened to the stories about Blood River? And even if we do make it, what will we find at the Delta? A homicidal maniac! He'll shatter us, Crompton!"

Crompton was unable to find an adequate answer. As their search had progressed he had grown more and more horrified at the unfolding personality of Stack, and more and more obsessed with

the need to find him. Loomis had never lived with the driving need for Reintegration; he had come in because of external problems, not internal needs. But Crompton had been compelled all his life by the passion for humanness, completion, transcendence. Without Stack, fusion was impossible. With him there was a chance, no matter how small.

"We're going on," Crompton said.

"Alistair, please! You and I get along all right. We can do fine without Stack. Let's go back to Mars or Earth."

Crompton shook his head. Already he could feel the deep and irreconcilable rifts occurring between him and Loomis. He could sense the time when those rifts would extend to all areas, and, without Reintegration, they would have to go their separate ways — in one body.

Which would be madness.

"You won't go back?" Loomis asked.

"No."

"Then I'm taking over!"

Loomis' personality surged in a surprise attack and seized partial control of the body's motor functions. Crompton was stunned for a moment. Then, as he felt control slipping away from him, he grimly closed with Loomis, and the battle was begun.

It was a silent war, fought by the light of a smoking kerosene lamp that grew gradually dimmer toward dawn. The battleground was the Crompton mind. The prize was the Crompton body, which lay shivering on a canvas cot, perspiration pouring from its forehead, eyes staring blankly at the light, a nerve in its forehead twitching steadily.

Crompton was the dominant personality; but he was weakened by conflict and guilt, and hampered by his own scruples. Loomis, weaker but single-minded, certain of his course, totally committed to the struggle, managed to hold the vital motor functions and block the flow of antidols.

For hours the two personalities were locked in combat, while the feverish Crompton body moaned and writhed on the cot. At last, in the gray hours of the morning, Loomis began to gain ground. Crompton gathered himself for a final effort, but couldn't bring himself to make it. The Crompton body was already dangerously

overheated by the fight; a little more, and neither personality would have a corpus to inhabit.

Loomis, with no scruples to hold him back, continued to press forward, seized vital synapses and took over all motor functions.

By sunrise, Loomis had won a total victory.

Shakily, Loomis got to his feet. He touched the stubble on his chin, rubbed his numbed fingertips, and looked around. It was *his* body now. For the first time since Mars he was seeing and feeling directly, instead of having all sensory information filtered and relayed to him through the Crompton personality. It felt good to breathe the stagnant air, to feel cloth against his body, to be hungry, to be *alive!* He had emerged from a gray shadow world into a land of brilliant colors. Wonderful! He wanted to keep it just like this.

Poor Crompton...

"Don't worry, old man," Loomis said. "You know, I'm doing this for your good also."

There was no answer from Crompton.

"We'll go back to Mars," Loomis said. "Back to Elderberg. Things will work out."

Crompton did not, or could not, answer. Loomis became mildly alarmed.

"Are you there, Crompton? Are you all right?"

No answer.

Loomis frowned, then hurried outside to the commander's tent.

"I've changed my mind about finding Dan Stack," Loomis told the commander. "He really sounds too far gone."

"I think you've made a wise decision," the commander said.

"So I should like to return to Mars immediately."

The commander nodded. "All spaceships leave from Port New Haarlem, where you came in."

"How do I get back there?"

"Well, that's a little difficult," the commander told him. "I suppose I could loan you a native guide. You'll have to trek back across the Thompson mountains to Ou-Barkar. I suggest you take the Desset Valley route this time, since the Kmikti Horde is migrating across the central rain-forest, and you can never tell about those devils. You'll reach Ou-Barkar in the rainy season, so the semis won't be going through to Depotsville. You might be able to join the salt caravan

traveling the short way through Knife Pass, if you get there in time. If you don't, the trail is relatively easy to follow by compass, if you compensate for the variation zones. Once you've reached Depotsville the rains will be in full career. Quite a sight, too. Perhaps you can catch a heli to New St. Denis and another to East Marsh, but I doubt it because of the *zicre*. Winds like that can mess up aircraft rather badly. So perhaps you could take the paddleboat to East Marsh, then a freighter down the Inland Zee to Port New Haarlem. I believe there are several good hurricane ports along the southern shore, in case the weather grows extreme. I personally prefer to travel by land or air. The final decision of route, of course, rests with you."

"Thank you," Loomis said faintly.

"Let me know what you decide," the commander said.

Loomis thanked him and returned to his tent in a state of nerves. He thought about the trip back across mountains and swamps, through primitive settlements, past migrating hordes. He visualized the complications added by the rains and the *zicre*. Never had his freewheeling imagination performed any better than it did now, conjuring up the horrors of that trip back.

It had been hard getting here; it would be much harder returning. And this time, his sensitive and esthetic soul would not be sheltered by the patient, long-suffering Crompton. *He* would have to bear the full sensory impact of wind, rain, hunger, thirst, exhaustion and fear. *He* would have to eat the coarse foods and drink the foul water. And *he* would have to perform the complicated routines of the trail, which Crompton had painfully learned and which he had ignored.

The total responsibility would be his. He would have to choose the route and make the critical decisions, for Crompton's life and for his own.

But could he? He was a man of the cities, a creature of society. His life-problems had been the quirks and twists of people, not the moods and passions of nature. He had avoided the raw and lumpy world of sun and sky, living entirely in mankind's elaborate burrows and intricate anthills. Separated from the earth by sidewalks, doors, windows and ceilings, he had come to doubt the strength of that gigantic grinding machine of nature about which the older authors wrote so engagingly, and which furnished such excellent conceits for poems and songs. Nature, it had seemed to Loomis, sunbathing

on a placid Martian summer day or drowsily listening to the whistle of wind against his window on a stormy night, was grossly overrated.

But now, shatteringly, he had to ride the wheels of the grindstone.

Loomis thought about it and suddenly pictured his own end. He saw the time when his energies would be exhausted, and he would be lying in some windswept pass or sitting with bowed head in the driving rain of the marshlands. He would try to go on, searching for the strength that is said to lie beyond exhaustion. And he would not find it. A sense of utter futility would pass over him, alone and lost in the immensity of all outdoors. At that point life would seem too much effort, too much strain. He, like many before him, would then admit defeat, give up, lie down, and wait for death...

Loomis whispered, "Crompton?"

No answer.

"Crompton! Can't you hear me? I'll put you back in command. Just get us out of this overgrown greenhouse. Get us back to Earth or Mars! Crompton, I don't want to die!"

Still no answer.

"All right, Crompton," Loomis said in a husky whisper. "You win. Take over! Do anything you want. I surrender, it's all yours. Just please, *take over!*"

"Thank you," Crompton said icily, and took over control of the Crompton body.

In ten minutes he was back in the commander's tent, saying that he had changed his mind again. The commander nodded wearily, deciding that he would never understand people.

Soon Crompton was seated in the center of a large dugout canoe, with trade-goods piled around him. The paddlers set up a lusty chant and pushed onto the river. Crompton turned and watched until the Vigilantes' tents were lost around a bend in the river.

To Crompton, that trip down the Blood River was like a passage to the beginning of time. The six natives dipped their paddles in silent unison, and the canoe glided like a water-spider over the broad, slow-moving stream. Gigantic ferns hung over the river's bank, and quivered when the canoe came near, and stretched longingly toward them on long stalks. Then the paddlers would raise the warning shout and the canoe would be steered back to midstream, and the ferns would droop again in the noonday heat. They

came to places where the trees had interlaced overhead, forming a dark, leafy tunnel. Then Crompton and the paddlers would crouch under the canvas of the tent, letting the boat drift through on the current, hearing the soft splatter of corrosive sap dropping around them. They would emerge again to the glaring white sky, and the natives would man their paddles.

"Ominous," Loomis said nervously.

"Yes, quite ominous," Crompton agreed, growing overawed by his surroundings.

The Blood River carried them deep into the interior of the continent. At night, moored to a midstream boulder, they could hear the war-hums of hostile Ais. One day two canoes of Ais pulled into the stream behind them. Crompton's men leaned into their paddles and the canoe sprinted forward. The hostiles clung doggedly to them, and Crompton took out a rifle and waited. But his paddlers, inspired by fear, increased their lead, and soon the raiders were lost behind a bend of the river.

They breathed more easily after that. But at a narrow bend they were greeted by a shower of arrows from both banks. One of the paddlers slumped across the gunwale, pierced four times. The rest leaned to their paddles, and soon were out of range.

They dropped the dead Ais overboard, and the hungry creatures of the river squabbled over his disposition. After that, a great armored creature with crablike arms swam behind the canoe, his round head raised above the water, waiting doggedly for more food. Even rifle bullets wouldn't drive him away, and his presence gave Crompton nightmares.

The creature received another meal when two paddlers died of a grayish mold that crept up their paddles. The crablike creature accepted them and waited for more. But this river god protected his own. A raiding party of hostiles, seeing him, raised a great shout and fled back into the jungle.

He clung behind them for the final hundred miles of the journey. And, when they came at last to a moss-covered wharf on the river bank, he stopped, watched disconsolately for a while, then turned back upstream.

The paddlers pulled to the ruined dock. Crompton climbed onto it and saw a piece of wood daubed with red paint. Turning it over he saw written on it, "Blood Delta. Population 92."

Nothing but jungle lay beyond. They had reached Dan Stack's final retreat.

A narrow, overgrown path led from the wharf to a clearing in the jungle. With the clearing was what looked like a ghost town. Not a person walked on its single dusty street, and no faces peered out of the low, unpainted buildings. The little town baked silently under the white noonday glare, and Crompton could hear no sound but the scuffle of his own footsteps in the dirt.

"I don't like this," Loomis said.

Crompton walked slowly down the street. He passed a row of storage sheds with their owners' names crudely printed across the walls. He passed an empty saloon, its door hanging by one hinge, its mosquito-netting windows ripped. He went by three deserted stores, and came to a fourth which had a sign saying, "Stack & Finch. Supplies."

Crompton entered. Trade goods were in neat piles on the floor, and more goods hung from the ceiling rafters. There was no one inside.

"Anyone here?" Crompton called. He got no answer, and went back to the street.

At the end of the town he came to a sturdy, barn-like building. Sitting on a stool in front of it was a tanned and moustached man of perhaps fifty. He had a revolver thrust into his belt. His stool was tilted back against the wall, and he appeared to be half asleep.

"Dan Stack?" Crompton asked.

"Inside," the man said.

Crompton walked to the door. The moustached man stirred, and the revolver was suddenly in his hand.

"Move back away from that door," he said.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"You mean you don't know?" the moustached man asked.

"No! Who are you?"

"I'm Ed Tyler, peace officer appointed by the citizens of Blood Delta and confirmed in office by the commander of the Vigilantes. Stack's in jail. This here place is the jail, for the time being."

"How long is he in for?" Crompton asked.

"Just a couple hours."

"Can I speak to him?"

"Nope."

"Can I speak to him when he gets out?"

"Sure," Tyler said, "but I doubt he'll answer you."

"Why?"

The peace officer grinned wryly. "Stack will just be in jail a couple hours on account of this afternoon we're taking him *out* of the jail and hanging him by the neck until he's dead. After we've performed that little chore you're welcome to all the talking you want with him. But like I said, I doubt he'll answer you."

Crompton was too tired to feel much shock. He asked, "What did Stack do?"

"Murder."

"A native?"

"Hell no," Tyler said in disgust. "Who gives a damn about natives? Stack killed a *man* name of Barton Finch. His own partner. Finch isn't dead yet, but he's going fast. Old Doc says he won't last out the day, and that makes it murder. Stack was tried by a jury of his peers and found guilty of killing Barton Finch, breaking Billy Redburn's leg, busting two of Eli Talbot's ribs, wrecking Moriarty's Saloon, and generally disturbing the peace. The judge — that's me — prescribed hanging by the neck as soon as possible. That means this afternoon, when the boys are back from working on the new dam."

"When did the trial take place?" Crompton asked.

"This morning."

"And the murder?"

"About three hours before the trial."

"Quick work," Crompton said.

"We don't waste no time here in Blood Delta," Tyler said proudly.

"I guess you don't," Crompton said. "You even hang a man before his victim's dead."

"I told you Finch is going fast," Tyler said, his eyes narrowing. "Watch yourself, stranger. Don't go around imputing the justice of Blood Delta, or you'll find yourself in plenty trouble. We don't need no fancy lawyer's tricks to tell us right from wrong."

Loomis whispered urgently to Crompton, "Leave it alone, let's get out of here."

Crompton ignored him. He said to the sheriff, "Mr. Tyler, Dan Stack is my half-brother."

"Bad luck for you," Tyler said.

"I'd really appreciate seeing him. Just for five minutes. Just to give him a last message from his mother."

"Not a chance," the sheriff said.

Crompton dug into his pocket and took out a grimy wad of bills. "Just two minutes."

"Well. Maybe I could — damn!"

Following Tyler's gaze, Crompton saw a large group of men coming down the dusty street.

"Here come the boys," Tyler said. "Not a chance now, even if I wanted to. I guess you can watch the hanging, though."

Crompton moved back out of the way. There were at least fifty men in the group, and more coming. For the most part they were lean, leathery, hard-bitten no-nonsense types, and most of them carried sidearms. They conferred briefly with the sheriff.

"Don't do anything stupid," Loomis warned.

"There's nothing I *can* do," Crompton said.

Sheriff Tyler opened the barn door. A group of men entered and came out dragging a man. Crompton was unable to see what he looked like, for the crowd closed around him.

He followed as they carried the man to the far edge of town, where a rope had been thrown across one limb of a sturdy tree.

"Up with him!" the crowd shouted.

"Boys!" came the muffled voice of Dan Stack. "Let me speak!"

"To hell with that," a man shouted. "Up with him!"

"My last words!" Stack shrieked.

Suddenly the sheriff called out, "Let him say his piece, boys. It's a dying man's right. Go ahead, Stack, but don't take too long about it."

They had put Dan Stack on a wagon, the noose around his neck, the free end held by a dozen hands. At last Crompton was able to see him. He stared, fascinated by this long-sought-for segment of himself.

Dan Stack was a large, solidly built man. His thick, deeply lined features showed the marks of passion and hatred, fear and sudden violence, secret sorrow and secret vice. He had wide, flaring nostrils, a thick-lipped mouth set with strong teeth, and narrow, treacherous eyes. Coarse black hair hung over his inflamed forehead, and there was a dark stubble on his fiery cheeks. His face betrayed his stereotype — the Choleric Humour of Air, caused by too much hot

yellow bile, bringing a man quickly to anger and divorcing him from reason.

Stack was staring overhead at the glowing white sky. Slowly he lowered his head, and the bronze fixture on his right hand flashed red in the steady glare.

"Boys," Stack said, "I've done a lot of bad things in my time."

"You telling *us?*" someone shouted.

"I've been a liar and a cheat," Stack shouted. "I've struck the girl I loved and struck her hard, wanting to hurt. I've stolen from my own dear parents. I've brought red murder to the unhappy natives of this planet. Boys, I've not lived a good life!"

The crowd laughed at his maudlin speech.

"But I want you to know," Stack bellowed, "I want you to know that I've struggled with my sinful nature and tried to conquer it. I've wrestled with the old devil in my soul, and fought him the best fight I knew how. I joined the Vigilantes, and for two years I was as straight a man as you'll find. Then the madness came over me again, and I killed."

"You through now?" the sheriff asked.

"But I want you all to know one thing," Stack shrieked, his eyeballs rolling in his red face. "I admit the bad things I've done, I admit them freely and fully. But boys, *I did not kill Barton Finch!*"

"All right," the sheriff said. "If you're through now we'll get on with it."

Stack shouted, "Listen to me! Finch was my friend, my only friend in the world! I was trying to help him, I shook him a little to bring him to his senses. And when he didn't, I guess I lost my head and busted up Moriarty's Saloon and fractured a couple of the boys. But before God I swear I didn't harm Finch!"

"Are you finished now?" the sheriff asked.

Stack opened his mouth, closed it again, and nodded.

"All right, boys," the sheriff said. "Let's go!"

Men began to move the wagon upon which Stack was standing. And Stack, with a look of hopeless desperation on his face, caught sight of Crompton.

And recognized him.

Loomis was speaking to Crompton very rapidly. "Watch out, take it easy, don't do anything, don't believe him, look at his record,

remember his history, he'll ruin us, smash us to bits. He's dominant, he's powerful, he's homicidal, he's evil."

Crompton, in a fraction of a second, remembered Dr. Berrenger's estimate of his chances for a successful Reintegration.

Madness, or worse...

"Totally depraved," Loomis was saying, "evil, worthless, completely hopeless!"

But Stack was part of him! Stack too longed for transcendence, had fought for self-mastery, had failed and fought again. Stack was *not* completely hopeless, no more than Loomis or he himself was completely hopeless.

But was Stack telling the truth? Or had that impassioned speech been a last-minute bid to the audience in hope of a reprieve?

He would have to assume Stack's good faith. He would have to give Stack a chance.

As the wagon was pushed clear, Stack's eyes were fastened upon Crompton's. Crompton made his decision and let Stack in.

The crowd roared as Stack's body plunged from the edge of the cart, contorted horribly for a moment, then hung lifeless from the taut rope. And Crompton reeled under the impact of Stack's mind entering his.

Then he fainted.

Crompton awoke to find himself lying on a cot in a small, dimly lighted room.

"You all right?" a voice asked. After a moment Crompton recognized Sheriff Tyler bending over him.

"Yes, fine now," Crompton said automatically.

"I guess a hanging's something of a shock to a civilized man like yourself. Think you'll be okay if I leave you alone?"

"Certainly," Crompton answered dully.

"Good. Got some work to do. I'll look in on you in a couple hours."

Tyler left. Crompton tried to take stock of himself.

Integration...Fusion...Completion...Had he achieved it during the healing time of unconsciousness? Tentatively he searched his mind.

He found Loomis wailing disconsolately, terribly frightened, babbling about the Orange Desert, camping trips at All Diamond Mountain, the pleasures of women, luxury, sensation, beauty.

And Stack was there, solid and immovable, unfused.

Crompton spoke to him, mind to mind, and knew that Stack had been absolutely and completely sincere in his last speech. Stack sincerely wished for reform, self-control, moderation.

And Crompton also knew that Stack was completely and absolutely *unable* to reform, to exercise self-control, to practice moderation. Even now, in spite of his efforts, Stack was filled with a passionate desire for revenge. His mind rumbled furiously, a deep counterpoint to Loomis' shrill babbling. Great dreams of revenge swam in his mind, gaudy plans to conquer all Venus. Do something about the damned natives, wipe them out, make room for Terrans. Rip that damned Tyler limb from limb. Machine-gun the whole town, pretend the natives had done it. Build up a body of dedicated men, a private army of worshipers of STACK, maintain it with iron discipline, no weakness, no hesitation. Cut down the Vigilantes and no one would stand in the way of conquest, murder, revenge, fury, terror!

Struck from both sides, Crompton tried to maintain balance, to extend his control over the two personalities. He fought to fuse the components into a single entity. A stable whole. But the minds struck back, refusing to yield their autonomy. The lines of cleavage deepened, new and irreconcilable schisms appeared, and Crompton felt his own stability undermined and his sanity threatened.

Then Dan Stack, with his baffled and unworkable reforming urge, had a moment of lucidity.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Can't help. You need the other."

"What other?"

"I tried," Stack moaned. "I tried to reform! But there was too much of me, too much conflict, hot and cold, on and off. Thought I could cure it myself. So I schismed."

"You what?"

"Can't you hear me?" Stack asked. "Me, I was schizoid too. Latent. It showed up here on Venus. When I went back to Port New Haarlem I got another Durier body, and fissioned...I thought everything would be easier if I was simpler. But I was wrong!"

"There's *another* of us?" Crompton cried. "Of course we can't Reintegrate! Who is it, where is he?"

"I tried," Stack moaned. "Oh, I tried! We were like brothers, him and me. I thought I could learn from him, he was so quiet and

good and patient and calm! I *was* learning! Then he started to give up."

"Who was it?" Crompton asked.

"So I tried to help him, tried to shake him out of it. But he was failing fast, he just didn't care to live. My last chance was gone and I went a little crazy and shook him and broke up Moriarty's Saloon. But I didn't kill Barton Finch! He just didn't want to live!"

"Finch is the last component?"

"Yes! You must go to Finch before he lets himself die, and you must bring him in. He's in the little room in back of the store. You'll have to hurry..."

Stack fell back into his dreams of red murder, and Loomis babbled about the blue Xanadu Caverns.

Crompton lifted the Crompton body from the cot and dragged it to the door. Down the street he could see Stack's store. *Reach the store,* he told himself, and staggered out into the street.

He walked a million miles. He crawled for a thousand years, up mountains, across rivers, past deserts, through swamps, down caverns that led to the center of the Earth, and out again to immeasurable oceans, which he swam to their furthest shore. And at the long journey's end, he came to Stack's store.

In the back room, lying on a couch with a blanket pulled up to his chin, was Finch, the last hope for Reintegration. Looking at him, Crompton knew the final hopelessness of his search.

Finch lay very quietly, his eyes open and unfocused and unreachable, staring at nothing. His face was the great, white, expressionless face of an idiot. Those placid Buddha features showed an inhuman calm, expecting nothing and wanting nothing. A thin stream of saliva bubbled from his lips, and his heart beat occasionally. Least adequate of the four, he was the ultimate expression of the Earthly Humour of Phlegm, which makes a man passive and uncaring.

Crompton forced back madness and crawled to the bedside. He stared into the idiot's eyes and tried to force Finch to see him, recognize him, join him.

Finch saw nothing.

He had failed. Crompton allowed the tired, overstrained Crompton body to slump by the idiot's bedside. Quietly he watched himself slip toward madness.

Then Stack, with his despairing reformer's zeal, emerged from his dream of revenge. Together with Crompton he willed the idiot to look and see. And Loomis searched for and found the strength beyond exhaustion, and joined them in the effort.

Three together they stared at the idiot. And Finch, evoked by three-quarters of himself, parts calling irresistibly for the whole, made a final rally. A brief expression flickered in his eyes. He *recognized*.

And entered.

Crompton felt the vast flooding patience and tolerance of Finch. The Four Essential Humours of the Temperament, Earth, Air, Fire and Water, were joined at last. And at last fusion was possible.

But what was this? What was happening? What force was taking over now, driving everything before it?

Crompton shrieked, tried to rip his throat open with his fingernails, nearly succeeded, and collapsed on the floor near the corpse of Finch.

When the body on the floor opened its eyes again, it yawned and stretched copiously, enjoying the sensation of air and light and color, content with itself and thinking that there was work for it to do on this world, and love to be found, and a whole life to be lived.

The body, former possession of Alistair Crompton, tenanted for a time by Edgar Loomis, Dan Stack and Barton Finch, stood up. It realized it would have to find a new name for itself.

TRIPLICATION

Oaxe II was a small, dusty, backward planet out near Orion. Its people were of Earth stock, and still adhered to Earth customs. Judge Abner Low was the sole source of justice upon the little planet. Most of his cases involved property lines and the ownership of pigs and geese, for the citizens of Oaxe II had little flair for crime.

But one day a spaceship landed containing the notorious Timothy Mont and his lawyer, who had come to Oaxe II for sanctuary and justice. And another spaceship came, containing three policemen and a Public Prosecutor.

The Public Prosecutor stated, "Your Honor, this fiend has perpetrated a heinous crime. Timothy Mont, Your Honor, *burned down a orphanage!* Furthermore, he pleaded guilty before he fled. I have his signed confession."

Mont's lawyer, a pallid man with cold fish eyes, rose. "I request that you put aside sentence."

"I'll do no such thing," Judge Low said. "Burning an orphanage is a horrible crime."

"It is," the lawyer agreed, "in most places. But my client committed his act upon the planet Altira III. Is your Honor conversant with the customs of that planet?"

"No," said the judge.

"On Altira III," the lawyer said, "all orphans are trained in the art of assassination, for the purpose of reducing the population of neighboring planets. By burning the orphanage, my client saved thousands, perhaps millions of innocent lives. Therefore he must be considered a hero of the people."

"Is this true about Altira III?" the judge asked the court clerk.

The clerk looked up the facts in the Encyclopedia of Planetary Customs and Folklore, and found that it was indeed true.

Judge Low said, "Then I dismiss this case."

Mont and his lawyer left, and life droned peacefully on, on Oaxe II, disturbed only by an occasional lawsuit involving property lines, or the ownership of pigs and geese. But within a year Timothy Mont and his lawyer were back in court, with the Public Prosecutor following close behind them.

The charge again concerned the burning of an orphanage.

"However," the pale lawyer pointed out, "guilty though my client is, the court must remember that the orphanage in question was on the planet Deegra IV. As is well known, all orphans on Deegra IV are adopted into the torturer's guild, for the performance of certain abominable rites abhorred in all the civilized galaxy."

Finding this to be true, Judge Low again dismissed the case.

In fifteen months, Timothy Mont and his lawyer were again in court, to stand trial on the same charge.

"Dear, dear," Judge Low said. "A reformer's zeal...Where did the crime take place?"

"On Earth," stated the Public Prosecutor.

"On *Earth?"* said the judge.

"I fear it is true," the lawyer said sadly. "My client is guilty."

"But what possible reason did he have this time?"

"Temporary insanity," the lawyer said promptly. "And I have 12 psychiatrists to prove it, and request a suspended sentence as provided under law for such circumstances."

The judge turned purple with wrath. "Timothy Mont, why did you do this?"

Before his lawyer could silence him, Mont stood up and said, "Because I *like* to burn orphanages!"

That day Judge Low passed a new law, one which has been noted throughout the civilized galaxy, and studied in such diversified places as Droma I and Aos X. Low's Law states that the defendant's lawyer shall serve concurrently whatever sentence is imposed upon his client.

Many consider this unfair. But the incidence of lawyers on Oaxe II has diminished remarkably.

Edmond Dritche, a tall, sallow, misanthropic scientist, had been brought to trial by the General Products Corporation for

Downbeatedness, Group Disloyalty and Negativism. These were serious charges, and they were substantiated by Dritche's colleagues. The magistrate had no choice but to discharge Dritche dishonorably. The usual jail sentence was waived in recognition of his 19 years of excellent work for General Products; but no other corporation would ever hire him.

Dritche, sallower and more misanthropic than ever, turned his back on General Products and its endless stream of automobiles, toasters, refrigerators, TV sets, and the like. He retired to his Pennsylvania farm and experimented in his basement laboratory.

He was sick of General Products and all it stood for, which was practically everything. He wanted to found a colony of people who thought as he did, felt as he did, looked like he did. His colony would be a utopia, and to hell with the rest of the cheerful, gadget-ridden world.

There was only one way to achieve this. Dritche and his wife Anna toiled night and day toward the great goal.

At last he met with success. He adjusted the unwieldy device he had built and turned the switch.

From the device stepped an exact Duplicate of Edmond Dritche.

Dritche had invented the world's first Duplicator.

He produced five hundred Dritches, then held a policy meeting. The five hundred pointed out that, for a successful colony, they needed wives.

Dritche 1 considered his own Anna a perfect mate. The five hundred Duplicates agreed, of course. So Dritche produced five hundred exact copies of her for the five hundred prototype Dritches, and the colony was founded.

Contrary to popular prediction, the Dritche colony did well at first. The Dritches enjoyed each other's company, never quarrelled, and never wished for visitors. They comprised a satisfied little world in themselves. India sent a delegation to study their method, and Denmark wrote laws to ensure Duplication rights.

But, as in all other utopian attempts, the seeds of disaster were present in simple human frailty. First, Dritche 49 was caught in a compromising position with Mrs. Dritche 5. Then Dritche 37 fell suddenly and passionately in love with Anna 142. This in turn led to the uncovering of the secret love nest built by Dritche 10 for Anna 498, with the connivance of Anna 3.

In vain Dritche 1 pointed out that all were equal and identical. The erring couples told him he knew nothing about love, and refused to give up their new arrangements.

The colony might still have survived. But then it was found that Dritche 77 was maintaining a harem of eight Dritche women, Annas 12, 13, 77, 187, 303, 336, 489 and 500. These women declared him absolutely unique, and refused to leave him.

The end was in sight. It was hastened when Dritche 1's wife ran away with a reporter.

The colony disbanded, and Dritches 1, 19, 32 and 433 died of broken hearts.

It was probably just as well. Certainly the original Dritche could never have stood the shock of seeing his utopian Duplicator used to turn out endless streams of General Products automobiles, toasters, refrigerators, and the like.

Professor Bolton, the noted philosopher, left Earth to deliver a series of lectures at Mars University. He took his trusted robot valet Akka, a change of underwear, and eight pounds of notes. Aside from the crew, he was the only human passenger.

Somewhere near the Point of No Return, the ship sent out an emergency message: STARBOARD JETS BLOWING SHIP OUT OF CONTROL.

The citizens of Earth and Mars waited anxiously. Another message came: ENTIRE CREW KILLED BY FLASHBACK SHIP CRASHING IN ASTEROID BELT HELP BOLTON.

Rescue ships swept toward the area between Mars and Jupiter where the asteroids are strewn. They had a hazy fix from Bolton's last message; but the area to be searched was tremendous, and the chance of rescue was very small.

Three days later, this message was received: CANNOT SURVIVE MUCH LONGER ON ASTEROID I FACE DEATH WITH SERENE DIGNITY BOLTON.

Newspapers spoke of the indomitable spirit of this man, a modern-day Robinson Crusoe, struggling for life on an airless, foodless, waterless world, his supplies running low, ready — as he had taught in his books and lectures — to meet death with serene dignity.

The search was intensified.

The last message read: ALL SUPPLIES GONE SMILING DEATH AWAITS ME BOLTON.

Homing in on his final signal, a patrol boat located the asteroid and landed beside the gutted ship. They found the charred remains of the crew. And they found ample supplies of food, water and oxygen. But strangely, there was no sign of Bolton.

In the very rear of the ship they found Bolton's robot.

"The professor is dead," the robot said through rusted jaws. "I sent the last messages in his name, knowing you wouldn't come just for me."

"But how did he die?"

"With the greatest regret I killed him," the robot said grimly. "I can assure you that his death was painless."

"But *why* did you kill him? And where is his body?"

The robot tried to speak, but his corroded jaws refused to function. A squirt of oil brought him around.

"Lubrication," Akka said, "is a robot's greatest problem. Gentlemen, have you ever considered the problem of rendering a human body into its essential fats and oils without adequate equipment?"

The rescuers considered it with mounting horror, and the story was suppressed. But it was heard by the patrol ship's robot, who pondered it and passed it on to another robot, and then another.

Only now, since the triumphant revolt of the robot forces, can this inspiring saga of a robot's fight against space be openly told. Hail, Akka, our liberator!

THE MINIMUM MAN

Everybody has his song, thought Anton Perceveral. A pretty girl is like a melody, and a brave spaceman like a flurry of trumpets. Wise old men on the Interplanetary Council make one think of richly blended woodwinds. There are geniuses whose lives are an intricate counterpoint endlessly embellished, and scum of the planets whose existence seems nothing more than the wail of an oboe against the inexorable pounding of a brass drum.

Perceveral thought about this, loosely gripping a razor blade and contemplating the faint blue lines in his wrist.

For if everybody has his song, his would be likened to a poorly conceived and miserably executed symphony of errors.

There had been muted horns of gladness at his birth. Bravely, to the sound of muffled drums, young Perceveral had ventured into school. He had excelled and been promoted to a small workshop class of five hundred pupils, where he could receive a measure of individual attention. The future had looked promising.

But he was congenitally unlucky. There was a constant series of small accidents which overturned inkwells, lost books and misplaced papers. Things had a damnable propensity for breaking under his fingers; or sometimes his fingers broke under things. To make matters worse, he caught every possible childhood disease, including proto-Measles, Algerian Mumps, Impetigo, Foxpox, Green Fever and Orange Fever.

These things in no way reflected upon Perceveral's native ability; but one needs more than ability in a crowded and competitive world. One needs considerable luck, and Perceveral had none. He

was transferred to an ordinary class of ten thousand students, where his problems were intensified and his opportunities for catching disease expanded.

He was a tall, thin, bespectacled, good-hearted, hard-working young man whom the doctors early diagnosed as accident-prone, for reasons which defied their analysis. But whatever the reasons, the facts remained. Perceveral was one of those unhappy people for whom life is difficult to the point of impossibility.

Most people slip through the jungle of human existence with the facility of prowling panthers. But, for the Perceverals, the jungle is continually beset with traps, snares and devices, sudden precipices and unfordable streams, deadly fungus and deadlier beasts. No way is safe. All roads lead to disaster.

Young Perceveral won his way through college in spite of his remarkable talent for breaking his leg on winding staircases, twisting his ankle on curbstones, fracturing his elbow in revolving doors, smashing his glasses against plate-glass windows, and all the rest of the sad, ludicrous, painful events which beset the accident-prone. Manfully he resisted the solace of hypochondria and kept trying.

Upon graduation from college, Perceveral took himself firmly in hand and tried to reassert the early clear theme of hope set by his stalwart father and gentle mother. With a ruffle of drums and a thrilling of chords, Perceveral entered the island of Manhattan, to forge his destiny. He worked hard to conquer his unhappy predisposition, and to stay cheerful and optimistic in spite of everything.

But his predisposition caught up with him. The noble chords dissolved into vague mutterings, and the symphony of his life degenerated to the level of opera-bouffe. Perceveral lost job after job in a snarl of broken voxwriters and smeared contracts, forgotten file cards and misplaced data sheets; in a mounting crescendo of ribs wrenched in the subway rush, ankles sprained on gratings, glasses smashed against unseen projections, and in a bout of illnesses which included Hepatitis Type J, Martian Flu, Venusian Flu, Waking Sickness and Giggling Fever.

Perceveral still resisted the lure of hypochondria. He dreamed of space, of the iron-jawed adventurers advancing Man's frontier, of the new settlements on distant planets, of vast expanses of open land where, far from the hectic plastic jungles of Earth, a man could really

find himself. He applied to the Planetary Exploration & Settlement Board, and was turned down. Reluctantly he pushed the dream aside and tried a variety of jobs. He underwent Analysis, Hypnotic Suggestion, Hypnotic Hypersuggestion and Countersuggestion Removal — all to no avail.

Every man has his limits and every symphony has its end. Perceveral gave up hope at the age of thirty-four when he was fired, after three days, from a job he had sought for two months. That, as far as he was concerned, provided the final humorous off-key cymbal clash to something which probably shouldn't have been started in the first place.

Grimly he took his meager paycheck, accepted a last wary handshake from his former employer, and rode the elevator to the lobby. Already vague thoughts of suicide were crossing his mind in the form of truck wheels, gas pipes, tall buildings and swift rivers.

The elevator reached the great marble lobby with its uniformed riot policemen and its crowds waiting admittance to the midtown streets. Perceveral waited in line, idly watching the Population Density Meter fluctuate below the panic line, until his turn came. Outside, he joined a compact body of people moving westward in the direction of his housing project.

Suicidal thoughts continued to flow through his mind, more slowly now, taking more definite forms. He considered methods and means until he reached home. There he disengaged himself from the crowd and slipped in through an entry port.

He struggled against a flood of children pouring through corridors, and reached his city-provided cubicle. He entered, closed and locked the door, and took a razor blade from his shaving kit. He lay down on the bed, propping his feet against the opposite wall, and contemplated the faint blue lines of his wrist.

Could he do it? Could he do it cleanly and quickly, without error and without regret? Or would he bungle this job, too, and be dragged screaming to a hospital, a ludicrous sight for the interns to snicker about?

As he was thinking, a yellow envelope was slipped under his door. It was a telegram, arriving pat on the hour of decision, with a melodramatic suddenness which Perceveral considered quite suspect. Still, he put down the razor blade and picked up the envelope.

It was from the Planetary Exploration & Settlement Board, the great organization that controlled every Earthman's movements in space. With trembling fingers, Perceveral opened the envelope and read:

Mr. Anton Perceveral
Temporary Housing Project 1993
District 43825, Manhattan 212, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Perceveral:

Three years ago you applied to us for a position in any off-Earth capacity. Regretfully we had to turn you down at that time. Your records have been kept on file, however, and have recently been brought up to date. I am happy to inform you that a position is immediately available for you, one which I consider well suited to your particular talents and qualifications. I believe this job will meet with your approval, carrying, as it does, a salary of $20,000 a year, all government fringe benefits, and an unexcelled opportunity for advancement.

Could you come in and discuss it with me?

Sincerely,
William Haskell
Asst. Placement Director
WH/ibm3dc

Perceveral folded the telegram carefully and put it back in its envelope. His first feeling of intense joy vanished, to be replaced by a sense of apprehension.

What talents and qualifications did he have for a job commanding twenty thousand a year and benefits? Could they be confusing him with a different Anton Perceveral?

It seemed unlikely. The Board just wouldn't do that sort of thing. And presuming that they knew him and his ill-starred past — what could they possibly want from him? What could *he* do that practically any man, woman, or child couldn't do better?

Perceveral put the telegram in his pocket and replaced the razor blade in his shaving kit. Suicide seemed a little premature now. First he would find out what Haskell wanted.

* * *

At the headquarters of the Planetary Exploration & Settlement Board, Perceveral was admitted at once to William Haskell's private office. The Assistant Placement Director was a large, blunt-featured, white-haired man who radiated a geniality which Perceveral found suspicious.

"Sit down, sit down, Mr. Perceveral," Haskell said. "Cigarette? Care for a drink? Awfully glad you could make it."

"Are you sure you have the right man?" Perceveral asked.

Haskell glanced through a dossier on his desk. "Let's see. Anton Perceveral; age thirty-four; parents, Gregory James Perceveral and Anita Swaans Perceveral, Laketown, New Jersey. Is that right?"

"Yes," Perceveral said. "And you have a job for me?"

"We have indeed."

"Paying twenty thousand a year and benefits?"

"Perfectly correct."

"Could you tell me what the job is?"

"That's what we're here for," Haskell said cheerfully. "The job I have in mind for you, Mr. Perceveral, is listed in our catalog as Extraterrestrial Explorer."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Extraterrestrial or alien-planet explorer," Haskell said. "The explorers, you know, are the men who make the first contacts on alien planets, the primary settlers who gather our essential data. I think of them as the Drakes and Magellans of this century. It is, I think you'll agree, an excellent opportunity."

Perceveral stood up, his face a dull red. "If you're finished with the joke, I'll leave."

"Eh?"

"Me an extraterrestrial explorer?" Perceveral said with a bitter laugh. "Don't try to kid me. I read the papers. I know what the explorers are like."

"What are they like?"

"They're Earth's finest," Perceveral said. "The very best brains in the very best bodies. Men with trigger-quick reactions, able to tackle any problems, cope with any situation, adjust to any environment. Isn't that true?"

"Well," Haskell said, "it *was* true back in the early days of planetary exploration. And we have allowed that stereotype to remain in

the public eye, to instill confidence. But that type of explorer is now obsolete. There are plenty of other jobs for men such as you describe. But not planetary exploration."

"Couldn't your supermen make the grade?" Perceveral asked with a faint sneer.

"Of course they could," Haskell said. "No paradox is involved here. The record of our early explorers is unsurpassed. Those men managed to survive on every planet where human survival was even remotely possible, against overwhelming odds, by sheer grit and tenacity. The planets called for their every resource and they rose to meet the challenge. They stand as an eternal monument to the toughness and adaptability of *Homo sapiens.*"

"Then why did you stop using them?"

"Because our problems on Earth changed," Haskell told him. "In the early days, the exploration of space was an adventure, a scientific achievement, a defense measure, a symbol. But that passed. Earth's overpopulation trend continued — explosively. Millions spilled into relatively empty lands like Brazil, New Guinea, and Australia. But the population explosion quickly filled them. In major cities, the population-panic-point was reached and produced the Weekend Riots. And the population, bolstered by geriatrics and a further sharp decrease in infant mortality, continued to grow."

Haskell rubbed his forehead. "It was a mess. But the ethics of population increase aren't my business. All we at the Board knew was, we had to have new land fast. We needed planets which — unlike Mars and Venus — would be rapidly self-supporting. Places to which we could siphon millions, while the scientists and politicians on Earth tried to straighten things out. We had to open these planets to colonization as rapidly as possible. And that meant speeding up the initial exploratory process."

"I know all that," Perceveral said. "But I still don't see why you stopped using the optimum explorer type."

"Isn't it obvious? We were looking for places where *ordinary* people could settle and survive. Our optimum explorer type was not ordinary. Quite the contrary, he almost approximated a new species. And he was no judge of *ordinary* survival conditions. For example, there are bleak, dreary, rain-swept little planets that the average colonist finds depressing to the point of insanity; but our

optimum explorer is too sound to be disturbed by climatic monotony. Germs which devastate thousands give him, at most, a bad time for a while. Dangers which can push a colony to the brink of disaster, our optimum explorer simply evades. He can't assess these things in everyday terms. They simply don't touch him."

"I'm beginning to see," Perceveral said.

"Now the best way," Haskell said, "would have been to attack these planets in stages. First an explorer, then a basic research team, then a trial colony composed largely of psychologists and sociologists, then a research group to interpret the findings of the other groups, and so forth. But there's never enough time or money for all that. We need those colonies right now, not in fifty years."

Mr. Haskell paused and looked hard at Perceveral. "So, you see, we must have *immediate knowledge* as to whether a group of ordinary people could live and thrive on any new planet. That's why we changed our qualifications for explorers."

Perceveral nodded. "Ordinary explorers for ordinary people. There's just one thing, however."

"Yes?"

"I don't know how well you know my background..."

"Quite well," Haskell assured him.

"Then you might have noticed that I have certain tendencies toward — well, a certain accident-proneness. To tell you the honest truth, I have a hard time surviving right here on Earth."

"I know," Mr. Haskell said pleasantly.

"Then how would I make out on an alien planet? And why would you want me?"

Mr. Haskell looked slightly ill at ease. "Well, you stated our position wrongly when you said 'ordinary explorers for ordinary people.' It isn't that simple. A colony is composed of thousands, often millions of people, who vary considerably in their survival potentialities. Humanity and the law state that all of them must have a fighting chance. The people themselves must be reassured before they'll leave Earth. We must convince them — and the law — and ourselves that even the weakest will have a chance for survival."

"Go on," Perceveral said.

"Therefore," Haskell said quickly, "some years ago we stopped using the optimum-survival explorer, and began using the minimum-survival explorer."

Perceveral sat for a while digesting this information. "So you want me because any place *I* can live in, *anyone* can live in."

"That more or less sums up our thinking on the problem," Haskell said, smiling genially.

"But what would *my* chances be?"

"Some of our minimum-survival explorers have done very well."

"And others?"

"There are hazards, of course," Haskell admitted. "And aside from the potential dangers of the planet itself, there are other risks involved in the very nature of the experiment. I can't even tell you what they are, since that would destroy our only control element on the minimum-survival test. I simply tell you that they are present."

"Not a very good outlook," Perceveral said.

"Perhaps not. But think of the rewards if you won through! You would, in effect, be the founding father of a colony! Your value as an expert would be immeasurable. You would have a permanent place in the life of the community. And equally important, you might be able to dispel certain insidious self-doubts concerning your place in the scheme of things."

Perceveral nodded reluctantly. "Tell me one thing. Your telegram arrived today at a particularly crucial moment. It seemed almost — "

"Yes, it was planned," Haskell said. "We've found that the people we want are most receptive when they've reached a certain psychological state. We keep close watch over the few who fit our requirements, waiting for the right moment to make our presentation."

"It might have been embarrassing if you'd been an hour later," Perceveral said.

"Or unfruitful if we'd been a day earlier." Haskell arose from behind his desk. "Would you join me for lunch, Mr. Perceveral? We can discuss final details over a bottle of wine."

"All right," Perceveral said. "But I'm not making any promises yet."

"Of course not," Haskell said, opening the door for him.

After lunch, Perceveral did some hard thinking. The explorer's job appealed to him strongly in spite of the risks. It was, after all, no more dangerous than suicide, and much better paying. The

rewards were great if he won; the penalty for failure was no more than the price he had been about to pay for failure on Earth.

He hadn't done well in thirty-four years on Earth. The best he had shown were flashes of ability marred by a strong affinity for illness, accident and blunder. But Earth was crowded, cluttered and confused. Perhaps his accident-proneness had been not some structural flaw in him but the product of intolerable conditions.

Exploration would give him a new environment. He would be alone, dependent only on himself, answerable only to himself. It would be tremendously dangerous — but what could be more dangerous than a glittering razor blade held in his own hand?

This would be the supreme effort of his life, the ultimate test. He would fight as he had never fought before to conquer his fatal tendencies. And this time he would throw every ounce of strength and determination into the struggle.

He accepted the job. In the next weeks of preparation, he ate and drank and slept determination, hammered it into his brain and wove it between his nerves, mumbled it to himself like a Buddhist prayer, dreamed about it, brushed his teeth and washed his hands with it, meditated upon it until the monotonous refrain buzzed in his head waking and sleeping, and began slowly to act as a check and restraint upon action.

The day arrived when he was assigned a year's tour of duty upon a promising planet in the East Star Ridge. Haskell wished him luck and promised to stay in touch by L-phase radio. Perceveral and his equipment were put aboard the picket ship *Queen of Glasgow,* and the adventure was begun.

During the months in space, Perceveral continued to think obsessively of his resolve. He handled himself carefully in no-weight, watched his every movement and cross-checked his every motive. This continuous inspection slowed him down considerably; but gradually it became habitual. A set of new reflexes began to form, struggling to conquer the old reflex system.

But progress was spasmodic. In spite of his efforts, Perceveral caught a minor skin irritation from the ship's purification system, broke one of his ten pairs of glasses against a bulkhead, and suffered numerous headaches, backaches, skinned knuckles and stubbed toes.

Still, he felt he had made progress, and his resolution hardened accordingly. And at last his planet came into view.

The planet was named Theta. Perceveral and his equipment were set down on a grassy, forested upland near a mountain range. The area had been pre-selected by air survey for its promising qualities. Water, wood, local fruits and mineral-bearing ores were all nearby. The area could make an excellent colony site.

The ship's officers wished him luck, and departed. Perceveral watched until the ship vanished into a bank of clouds. Then he went to work.

First he activated his robot. It was a tall, gleaming, black multi-purpose machine, standard equipment for explorers and settlers. It couldn't talk, sing, recite or play cards like the more expensive models. Its only response was a headshake or a nod; dull companionship for the year ahead. But it was programmed to handle verbal work-commands of a considerable degree of complexity, to perform the heaviest labor, and to show a degree of foresight in problem situations.

With the robot's help, Perceveral set up his camp on the plain, keeping a careful check on the horizon for signs of trouble. The air survey had detected no signs of an alien culture, but you could never tell. And the nature of Theta's animal life was still uninvestigated.

He worked slowly and carefully, and the silent robot worked beside him. By evening, he had set up a temporary camp. He activated the radar alarm and went to bed.

He awoke just after dawn to the shrilling of the radar alarm bell. He dressed and hurried outside. There was an angry humming in the air, like the sound of a locust horde.

"Get two beamers," he told the robot, "and hurry back. Bring the binoculars, too."

The robot nodded and lurched off. Perceveral turned slowly, shivering in the gray dawn, trying to locate the direction of the sound. He scanned the damp plain, the green edge of forest, the cliffs beyond. Nothing moved. Then he saw, outlined against the sunrise, something that looked like a low dark cloud. The cloud was flying toward his camp, moving very quickly against the wind.

The robot returned with the beamers. Perceveral took one and directed the robot to hold the other, awaiting orders to fire. The robot

nodded, his eyecells gleaming dully as he turned toward the sunrise.

When the cloud swept nearer, it resolved into a gigantic flock of birds. Perceveral studied them through his binoculars. They were about the size of Terran hawks, but their darting, erratic flight resembled the flight of bats. They were heavily taloned and their long beaks were edged with sharp teeth. With all that lethal armament, they had to be carnivorous.

The flock circled them, humming loudly. Then, from all directions, with wings swept back and talons spread, they began to dive. Perceveral directed the robot to begin firing.

He and the robot stood back to back, blasting into the onslaught of birds. There was a whirling confusion of blood and feathers as battalions of birds were scythed out of the sky. Perceveral and the robot were holding their own, keeping the aerial wolf pack at a distance, even beating it back. Then Perceveral's beamer failed.

The beamers were supposed to be fully charged and guaranteed for seventy-five hours at full automatic. A beamer couldn't fail! He stood for a moment, stupidly clicking the trigger. Then he flung down the weapon and hurried to the supplies tent, leaving the robot to continue the fight alone.

He located his two spares and came out. When he rejoined the battle, he saw that the robot's beamer had stopped functioning. The robot stood erect, beating off the swarm of birds with his arms. Drops of oil sprayed from his joints as he flailed at the dense flock. He swayed, dangerously close to losing his balance, and Perceveral saw that some birds had evaded his swinging arms and were perched on his shoulders, pecking at his eyecells and kinesthetic antenna.

Perceveral swung up both beamers and began to cut into the swarm. One weapon failed almost immediately. He continued chopping with the last, praying it would retain its charge.

The flock, finally alarmed by its losses, rose and wheeled away, screaming and hooting. Miraculously unhurt, Perceveral and the robot stood knee-deep in scattered feathers and charred bodies.

Perceveral looked at the four beamers, three of which had failed him entirely. Then he marched angrily to the communications tent.

He contacted Haskell and told him about the attack of the birds and the failure of three beamers out of four. Red-faced with

outrage, he denounced the men who were supposed to check an explorer's equipment. Then, out of breath, he waited for Haskell's apology and explanation.

"That," Haskell said, "was one of the control elements."

"Huh?"

"I explained it to you months ago," Haskell said. "We are testing for minimum-survival conditions. *Minimum,* remember? We have to know what will happen to a colony composed of varying degrees of proficiency. Therefore, we look for the lowest denominator."

"I know all that. But the beamers — "

"Mr. Perceveral, setting up a colony, even on an absolute minimum basis, is a fantastically expensive operation. We supply our colonists with the newest and best in guns and equipment, but we can't replace things that stop functioning or are used up. The colonists have to use irreplaceable ammunition, equipment that breaks and wears out, food stores that become exhausted or spoiled — "

"And that's what you've given me?" Perceveral asked.

"Of course. As a control, we have equipped you with the minimum of survival equipment. That's the only way we'll be able to predict how the colonists will make out on Theta."

"But it isn't fair! Explorers always get the best equipment!"

"No," Haskell said. "The old-style optimum-survival explorers did, of course. But we're testing for least potential, which must extend to equipment as well as to personality. I told you there would be risks."

"Yes, you did," Perceveral said. "But...All right. Do you have any other little secrets in store for me?"

"Not really," Haskell said, after a momentary pause. "Both you and your equipment are of minimum-survival quality. That about sums it up."

Perceveral detected something evasive in this answer, but Haskell refused to be more specific. They signed off and Perceveral returned to the chaos of his camp.

Perceveral and the robot moved their camp to the shelter of the forest for protection against further assaults by the birds. In setting up again, Perceveral noted that fully half of his ropes were badly worn, his electrical fixtures were beginning to burn out, and the

canvas of his tents showed mildew. Laboriously he repaired everything, bruising his knuckles and skinning his palms. Then his generator broke down.

He sweated over it for three days, trying to figure out the trouble from the badly printed instruction book, written in German, that had been sent with the machine. Nothing seemed to be set up right in the generator and nothing worked. At last he discovered, by pure accident, that the book was meant for an entirely different model. He lost his temper at this and kicked the generator, almost breaking the little toe of his right foot.

Then he took himself firmly in hand and worked for another four days, figuring out the differences between his model and the model described, until he had the generator working again.

The birds found that they could plummet through the trees into Perceveral's camp, snatch food and be gone before the beamer could be leveled at them. Their attacks cost Perceveral a pair of glasses and a nasty wound on the neck. Laboriously he wove nets, and, with the robot's help, strung them in the branches above his camp.

The birds were baffled. Perceveral finally had time to check his food stores, and to discover that many of his dehydrated staples had been poorly processed, and others had become a host to an ugly airborne fungus. Either way, it added up to spoilage. Unless he took measures now, he would be short of food during the Thetan winter.

He ran a series of tests on local fruits, grains, berries and vegetables. They showed several varieties to be safe and nourishing. He ate these, and broke into a spectacular allergy rash. Painstaking work with his medical kit gave him a cure for the allergy, and he set up a test to discover the guilty plant. But just as he was checking final results, the robot stamped in, upsetting test tubes and spilling irreplaceable chemicals.

Perceveral had to continue the allergy tests on himself, and to exclude one berry and two vegetables as unfit for his consumption.

But the fruits were excellent and the local grains made a fine bread. Perceveral collected seed, and, late in the Thetan spring, directed the robot to the tasks of plowing and planting.

The robot worked tirelessly in the new fields, while Perceveral did some exploring. He found pieces of smooth rock upon which

characters had been scratched, and what looked like numbers, and even little stick-pictures of trees and clouds and mountains. Intelligent beings must have lived on Theta, he decided. Quite probably they still inhabited some parts of the planet. But he had no time to search for them.

When Perceveral checked his fields, he found that the robot had planted the seed inches too deep, in spite of his programmed instructions. That crop was lost, and Perceveral planted the next by himself.

He built a wooden shack and replaced the rotting tents with storage sheds. Slowly he made his preparations for survival through the winter. And slowly he began to suspect that his robot was wearing out.

The great black all-purpose machine performed its tasks as before. But the robot's movements were growing increasingly jerky and his use of strength was indiscriminate. Heavy jars splintered in his grip and farming implements broke when he used them. Perceveral programmed him for weeding the fields, but the robot's broad splay feet trampled the grain sprouts as his fingers plucked the weeds. When the robot went out to chop firewood, he usually succeeded in breaking the axe handle. The cabin shook when the robot entered, and the door sometimes left its hinges.

Perceveral wondered and worried about the robot's deterioration. There was no way he could repair it, for the robot was a factory-sealed unit, meant to be repaired only by factory technicians with special tools, parts and knowledge. All Perceveral could do was retire the robot from service. But that would leave him completely alone.

He programmed increasingly simple tasks into the robot and took more work upon himself. Still the robot continued to deteriorate. Then one evening, when Perceveral was eating his dinner, the robot lurched against the stove and sent a pot of boiling rice flying.

With his newfound survival talents, Perceveral flung himself out of the way and the boiling mess landed on his left shoulder instead of his face.

That was too much. The robot was dangerous to have around. After dressing his burn, Perceveral decided to turn the robot off and continue the work of survival alone. In a firm voice, he gave the Dormancy Command.

The robot simply glared at him and moved restlessly around the cabin, not responding to a robot's most basic command.

Perceveral gave the order again. The robot shook his head and began to stack firewood.

Something had gone wrong. He would have to turn the robot off manually. But there was no sign of the usual cut-out switch anywhere on the machine's gleaming black surface. Nevertheless, Perceveral took out his tool kit and approached the robot.

Amazingly, the robot backed away from him, arms raised defensively.

"Stand still!" Perceveral shouted.

The robot moved away until his back was against the wall.

Perceveral hesitated, wondering what was going wrong. Machines weren't permitted to disobey orders. And the willingness to give up life had been carefully structured into all robotic devices.

He advanced on the robot, determined to turn him off somehow. The robot waited until he was close, then swung an armored fist at him. Perceveral dodged out of the way and flung a wrench at the robot's kinesthetic antenna. The robot quickly retracted it and swung again. This time his armored fist caught Perceveral in the ribs.

Perceveral fell to the floor and the robot stood over him, his eyecells flaring red and his iron fingers opening and closing. Perceveral shut his eyes and waited for the *coup de grace.* But the machine turned and left the shack, smashing the lock as he went.

In a few minutes, Perceveral heard the sound of firewood being cut and stacked — as usual.

With the aid of his medical kit, Perceveral taped up his side. The robot finished work and came back for further instructions. Shakily, Perceveral ordered him to a distant spring for water. The robot left, showing no further signs of aggression. Perceveral dragged himself to the radio shack.

"You shouldn't have tried to turn him off," Haskell said, when he heard what had happened. "He isn't designed to be turned off. Wasn't that apparent? For your own safety, don't try it again."

"But what's the reason?"

"Because — as you've probably guessed by now — the robot acts as our quality-control over you."

"I don't understand," Perceveral said. "Why do you need a quality-control?"

"Must I go through it all again?" Haskell asked wearily. "You were hired as a minimum-survival explorer. Not average. Not superior. *Minimum.*"

"Yes, but — "

"Let me continue. Do you recall how you were during your thirty-four years on Earth? You were continually beset by accident, disease, and general misfortune. That is what we wanted on Theta. But you've changed, Mr. Perceveral."

"I've certainly *tried* to change."

"Of course," Haskell said. "We expected it. Most of our minimum-survival explorers change. Faced with a new environment and a fresh start, they get a grip on themselves such as they've never had before. But it's not what we're testing for, so we have to compensate for the change. Colonists, you see, don't always come to a planet in a spirit of self-improvement. And any colony has its careless ones, to say nothing of the aged, the infirm, the feebleminded, the foolhardy, the inexperienced children, and so forth. Our minimum-survival standards are a guarantee that all of them will have a chance. Now are you beginning to understand?"

"I think so," Perceveral said.

"That's why we need a quality-control over you — to keep you from acquiring the average or superior survival qualities which we are *not* testing for."

"Therefore the robot," Perceveral said bleakly.

"Correct. The robot has been programmed to act as a check, a final control over your survival tendencies. He reacts to you, Perceveral. As long as you stay within a preselected range of general incompetence, the robot operates at par. But when you improve, become more skillful at survival, less accident-prone, the robot's behavior deteriorates. He begins to break the things that you should be breaking, to form the wrong decisions you should be forming— "

"That isn't fair!"

"Perceveral, you seem to feel that we're running some kind of sanitorium or self-aid program for your benefit. Well, we're not. We're interested only in getting the job that we bought and paid for. The job, let me add, which you chose as an alternative to suicide."

"All right!" Perceveral shouted. "I'm doing the job. But is there any rule that says I can't dismantle that damned robot?"

"No rule at all," Haskell said in a quieter voice, "if you can do it. But I earnestly advise you not to try. It's too dangerous. The robot will not allow himself to be deactivated."

"That's for me to decide, not him," Perceveral said, and signed off.

Spring passed on Theta, and Perceveral learned how to live with his robot. He ordered him to scout a distant mountain range, but the robot refused to leave him. He tried giving him no orders, but the black monster wouldn't stay idle. If no work was assigned, the robot assigned work to himself, suddenly bursting into action and creating havoc in Perceveral's field and sheds.

In self-defense, Perceveral gave him the most harmless task he could think of. He ordered the robot to dig a well, hoping he would bury himself in it. But, grimy and triumphant, the robot emerged every evening and entered the cabin, showering dirt into Perceveral's food, transmitting allergies, and breaking dishware and windows.

Grimly, Perceveral accepted the status quo. The robot now seemed the embodiment of that other, darker side of himself, the inept and accident-prone Perceveral. Watching the robot on his destructive rounds, he felt as though he were watching a misshapen portion of himself, a sickness cast into solid, living form.

He tried to shake free of this fantasy. But more and more the robot came to represent his own destructive urges cut loose from the life impulse and allowed to run rampant.

Perceveral worked, and his neurosis stalked behind him, eternally destructive, yet — in the manner of neuroses — protective of itself. His self-perpetuating malady lived with him, watched him while he ate and stayed close while he slept.

Perceveral did his work and became increasingly competent at it. He took what enjoyment he could from the days, regretted the setting of the sun, and lived through the horror of the nights when the robot stood beside his bed and seemed to wonder if now were the time for a summing-up.

And in the morning, still alive, Perceveral tried to think of ways of disposing of his staggering, lurching, destructive neurosis.

But the deadlock remained until a new factor appeared to complicate matters.

* * *

It had rained heavily for several days. When the weather cleared, Perceveral walked out to his fields. The robot lumbered behind him, carrying the farming tools.

Suddenly a crack appeared in the moist ground under his feet. It widened, and the whole section he was standing on collapsed. Perceveral leaped for firm ground. He made it to the slope, and the robot pulled him up the rest of the way, almost yanking his arm from his socket.

When he examined the collapsed section of field, he saw that a tunnel had run under it. Digging marks were still visible. One side was blocked by the fall. On the other side, the tunnel continued deep into the ground.

Perceveral went back for his beamer and his flashlight. He climbed down one side of the hole and flashed his light into the tunnel. He saw a great furry shape retreat hastily around a bend. It looked like a giant mole.

At last he had met another species of life on Theta.

For the next few days, he cautiously probed the tunnels. Several times he glimpsed gray molelike shapes, but they fled from him into a labyrinth of passageways.

He changed his tactics. He went only a few hundred feet into the main tunnel and left a gift of fruit. When he returned the next day, the fruit was gone. In its place were two lumps of lead.

The exchange of gifts continued for a week. Then, one day when Perceveral was bringing more fruit and berries, a giant mole appeared, approaching slowly and with evident nervousness. He motioned at Perceveral's flashlight, and Perceveral covered the lens so that it wouldn't hurt the mole's eyes.

He waited. The mole advanced slowly on two legs, his nose wrinkling, his small wrinkled hands clasped to his chest. He stopped and looked at Perceveral with bulging eyes. Then he bent down and scratched a symbol in the dirt of the passageway.

Perceveral had no idea what the symbol meant. But the act itself implied language, intelligence and a grasp of abstractions. He scratched a symbol beside the mole's, to imply the same things.

An act of communication between alien races had begun. The robot stood behind Perceveral, his eyecells glowing, watching while the man and the mole searched for something in common.

* * *

Contact meant more labor for Perceveral. The fields and gardens still had to be tended, the repairs on equipment made and the robot watched; in his spare time, Perceveral worked hard to learn the mole's language. And the moles worked equally hard to teach him.

Perceveral and the moles slowly grew to understand each other, to enjoy each other's company, to become friends. Perceveral learned about their daily lives, their abhorrence of the light, their journeys through the underground caverns, their quest for knowledge and enlightenment. And he taught them what he could about Man.

"But what is the metal thing?" the moles wanted to know.

"A servant of Man," Perceveral told them.

"But it stands behind you and glares. It hates you, the metal thing. Do all metal things hate men?"

"Certainly not," Perceveral said. "This is a special case."

"It frightens us. Do all metal things frighten?"

"Some do. Not all."

"And it is hard to think when the metal thing stares at us, hard to understand you. Is it always like that with metal things?"

"Sometimes they do interfere," Perceveral admitted. "But don't worry, the robot won't hurt you."

The mole people weren't so sure. Perceveral made what excuses he could for the heavy, lurching, boorish machine, spoke of machinery's service to Man and the graciousness of life that made it possible. But the mole people weren't convinced and shrank from the robot's dismaying presence.

Nevertheless, after lengthy negotiations, Perceveral made a treaty with the mole people. In return for supplies of fresh fruits and berries, which the moles coveted but could rarely obtain, they agreed to locate metals for future colonists and find sources of water and oil. Furthermore, the colonists were granted possession of all the surface land of Theta and the moles were confirmed in their lordship of the underground.

This seemed an equitable distribution to both parties, and Perceveral and the mole chief signed the stone document with as much of a flourish as an incising tool would allow.

To seal the treaty, Perceveral gave a feast. He and the robot brought a great gift of assorted fruits and berries to the mole people. The gray-furred, soft-eyed moles clustered around, squeaking eagerly to each other.

The robot set down his baskets of fruit and stepped back. He slipped on a patch of smooth rock, flailed for balance, and came crashing down across one of the moles. Immediately he regained his balance and tried, with his clumsy iron hands, to help the mole up. But he had broken the creature's back.

The rest of the moles fled, carrying their dead companion with them. And Perceveral and the robot were left alone in the tunnel, surrounded by great piles of fruit.

That night, Perceveral thought long and hard. He was able to see the damnable logic of the event. Minimum-survival contacts with aliens should have an element of uncertainty, distrust, misunderstanding, and even a few deaths. His dealings with the mole people had gone altogether too smoothly for minimum requirements.

The robot had simply corrected the situation and had performed the errors which Perceveral should have made on his own.

But although he understood the logic of the event, he couldn't accept it. The mole people were his friends and he had betrayed them. There could be no more trust between them, no hope of cooperation for future colonists. Not while the robot clumped and stumbled down the tunnels.

Perceveral decided that the robot must be destroyed. Once and for all, he determined to test his painfully acquired skill against the destructive neurosis that walked continually beside him. And if it cost his life — well, Perceveral reminded himself, he had been willing to lose it less than a year ago, for much poorer reasons.

He reestablished contact with the moles and discussed the problem with them. They agreed to help him, for even these gentle people had the concept of vengeance. They supplied some ideas which were surprisingly human, since the moles also possessed a form of warfare. They explained it to Perceveral and he agreed to try their way.

In a week, the moles were ready. Perceveral loaded the robot with baskets of fruit and led him into the tunnels, as though he were attempting another treaty.

The mole people weren't to be found. Perceveral and the robot journeyed deeper into the passageways, their flashlights probing ahead into the darkness. The robot's eyecells glowed red and he towered close behind Perceveral, almost at his back.

They came to an underground cavern. There was a faint whistle and Perceveral sprinted out of the way.

The robot sensed danger and tried to follow. But he stumbled, thwarted by his own programmed ineptness, and fruit scattered across the cavern floor. Then ropes dropped from the blackness of the cavern's roof and settled around the robot's head and shoulders.

He ripped at the tough fiber. More ropes settled around him, hissing in swift flight down from the roof. The robot's eyecells flared as he ripped the cords from his arms.

Mole people emerged from the passageways by the dozens. More lines snaked around the robot, whose joints spurted oil as he strained to break the strands. For minutes, the only sounds in the cavern were the hiss of flying ropes, the creak of the robot's joints, and the dry crack of breaking line.

Perceveral ran back to join the fight. They bound the robot closer and closer until his limbs had no room to gain a purchase. And still the ropes hissed through the air until the robot toppled over, bound in a great cocoon of rope with only his head and feet showing.

Then the mole people squeaked in triumph and tried to gouge out the robot's eyes with their blunt digging claws. But steel shutters slid over the robot's eyes. So they poured sand into his joints until Perceveral pushed them aside and attempted to melt the robot with his last beamer.

The beamer failed before the metal even grew hot. They fastened ropes to the robot's feet and dragged him down a passageway that ended in a deep chasm. They levered him over the side and listened while he bounced off the granite sides of the precipice, and cheered when he struck bottom.

The mole people held a celebration. But Perceveral felt sick. He returned to his shack and lay in bed for two days, telling himself over and over that he had not killed a man, or even a thinking being. He had simply destroyed a dangerous machine.

But he couldn't help remembering the silent companion who had stood with him against the birds, and had weeded his fields and

gathered wood for him. Even though the robot had been clumsy and destructive, he had been clumsy and destructive in Perceveral's own personal way — a way that he, above all people, could understand and sympathize with.

For a while, he felt as though a part of himself had died. But the mole people came to him in the evenings and consoled him, and there was work to be done in the fields and sheds.

It was autumn, time for harvesting and storing his crops. Perceveral went to work. With the robot's removal, his own chronic propensity for accident returned briefly. He fought it back with fresh confidence. By the first snows, his work of storage and food preservation was done. And his year on Theta was coming to an end.

He radioed a full report to Haskell on the planet's risks, promises and potentialities, reported his treaty with the mole people, and recommended the planet for colonization. In two weeks, Haskell radioed back.

"Good work," he told Perceveral. "The board decided that Theta definitely fits our minimum-survival requirements. We're sending out a colony ship at once."

"Then the test is over?" Perceveral asked.

"Right. The ship should be there in about three months. I'll probably take this batch out. My congratulations, Mr. Perceveral. You're going to be the founding father of a brand-new colony!"

Perceveral said, "Mr. Haskell, I don't know how to thank you — "

"Nothing to thank me for," Haskell said. "Quite the contrary. By the way, how did you make out with the robot?"

"I destroyed him," Perceveral said. He described the killing of the mole and the subsequent events.

"Hmm," Haskell said.

"You told me there was no rule against it."

"There isn't. The robot was part of your equipment, just like the beamers and tents and food supplies. Like them, he was also part of your survival problems. You had a right to do anything you could about him."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Well, I just hope you really destroyed him. Those quality-control models are built to last, you know. They've got self-repair units and

a strong sense of self-preservation. It's damned hard to really knock one out."

"I think I succeeded," Perceveral said.

"I hope so. It would be embarrassing if the robot survived."

"Why? Would it come back for revenge?"

"Certainly not. A robot has no emotions."

"Well?"

"The trouble is this. The robot's purpose was to cancel out any gains you made in survival-quality. It did, in various destructive ways."

"Sure. So, if it comes back, I'll have to go through the whole business again."

"More. You've been separated from the robot for a few months now. If it's still functioning, it's been accumulating a backlog of accidents for you. All the destructive duties that it should have performed during those months — they'll all have to be discharged before the robot can return to normal duties. See what I mean?"

Perceveral cleared his throat nervously. "And of course he would discharge them as quickly as possible in order to get back to regular operation."

"Of course. Now look, the ship will be there in about three months. That's the quickest we can make it. I suggest you make sure that robot is immobilized. We wouldn't want to lose you now."

"No, we wouldn't," Perceveral said. "I'll take care of it at once."

He equipped himself and hurried to the tunnels. The mole people guided him to the chasm after he explained the problem. Armed with blowtorch, hacksaw, sledge hammer, and cold chisel, Perceveral began a slow descent down the side of the precipice.

At the bottom, he quickly located the spot where the robot had landed. There, wedged between two boulders, was a complete robotic arm, wrenched loose from the shoulder. Further on, he found fragments of a shattered eyecell. And he came across an empty cocoon of ripped and shredded rope.

But the robot wasn't there.

Perceveral climbed back up the precipice, warned the moles and began to make what preparations he could.

Nothing happened for twelve days. Then news was brought to him in the evening by a frightened mole. The robot had appeared again in the tunnels, stalking the dark passageways with a single

eyecell glowing, expertly threading the maze into the main branch.

The moles had prepared for his coming with ropes. But the robot had learned. He had avoided the silent dropping nooses and charged into the mole forces. He had killed six moles and sent the rest into flight.

Perceveral nodded briefly at the news, dismissed the mole and continued working. He had set up his defenses in the tunnels. Now he had his four dead beamers disassembled on the table in front of him. Working without a manual, he was trying to interchange parts to produce one usable weapon.

He worked late into the night, testing each component carefully before fitting it back into the casing. The tiny parts seemed to float before his eyes and his fingers felt like sausages. Very carefully, working with tweezers and a magnifying glass, he began reassembling the weapon.

The radio suddenly blared into life.

"Anton?" Haskell asked. "What about the robot?"

"He's coming," said Perceveral.

"I was afraid so. Now listen, I rushed through a priority call to the robot's manufacturers. I had a hell of a fight with them, but I got their permission for you to deactivate the robot, and full instructions on how to do it."

"Thanks," Perceveral said. "Hurry up, how's it done?"

"You'll need the following equipment. A power source of two hundred volts delivered at twenty-five amps. Can your generator handle that?"

"Yes. Go on."

"You'll need a bar of copper, some silver wire and a probe made of some nonconductor such as wood. You set the stuff up in the following — "

"I'll never have time," Perceveral said, "but tell me quickly."

His radio hummed loudly.

"Haskell!" Perceveral cried.

His radio went dead. Perceveral heard the sounds of breakage coming from the radio shack. Then the robot appeared in the doorway.

The robot's left arm and right eyecell were missing, but his self-repair units had sealed the damaged spots. He was colored a dull black now, with rust-streaks down his chest and flanks.

Perceveral glanced down at the almost-completed beamer. He began fitting the final pieces into place.

The robot walked toward him.

"Go cut firewood," Perceveral said, in as normal a tone as he could manage.

The robot stopped, turned, picked up the axe, hesitated, and started out the door.

Perceveral fitted in the final component, slid the cover into place and began screwing it down.

The robot dropped the axe and turned again, struggling with contradictory commands. Perceveral hoped he might fuse some circuits in the conflict. But the robot made his decision and launched himself at Perceveral.

Perceveral raised the beamer and pressed the trigger. The blast stopped the robot in mid-stride. His metallic skin began to glow a faint red.

Then the beamer failed again.

Perceveral cursed, hefted the heavy weapon and threw it at the robot's remaining eyecell. It just missed, bouncing off his forehead.

Dazed, the robot groped for him. Perceveral dodged his arm and fled from the cabin, toward the black mouth of the tunnel. As he entered, he looked back and saw the robot following.

He walked several hundred yards down the tunnel. Then he turned on a flashlight and waited for the robot.

He had thought the problem out carefully when he'd discovered that the robot had not been destroyed.

His first idea naturally was flight. But the robot, traveling night and day, would easily overtake him. Nor could he dodge aimlessly in and out of the maze of tunnels. He would have to stop and eat, drink and sleep. The robot wouldn't have to stop for anything.

Therefore he had arranged a series of traps in the tunnels and had staked everything on them. One of them was bound to work. He was sure of it.

But even as he told himself this, Perceveral shivered, thinking of the accumulation of accidents that the robot had for him — the months of broken arms and fractured ribs, wrenched ankles, slashes, cuts, bites, infections, and diseases. All of which the robot would hound him into as rapidly as possible, in order to get back to normal routine.

He would never survive the robot's backlog. His traps *had* to work!

Soon he heard the robot's thundering footsteps. Then the robot appeared, saw him, and lumbered forward.

Perceveral sprinted down a tunnel, then turned into a smaller tunnel. The robot followed, gaining slightly.

When Perceveral reached a distinctive outcropping of rock, he looked back to gauge the robot's position. Then he tugged a cord he had concealed behind the rock.

The roof of the tunnel collapsed, releasing tons of dirt and rock over the robot.

If the robot had continued for another step, he would have been buried. But appraising the situation instantly, he whirled and leaped back. Dirt showered him, and small rocks bounced off his head and shoulders. But the main fall missed him.

When the last pebble had fallen, the robot climbed over the mound of debris and continued the pursuit.

Perceveral was growing short of wind. He was disappointed at the failure of the trap. But, he reminded himself, he had a better one ahead. The next would surely finish off the implacable machine.

They ran down a winding tunnel lit only by occasional flashes from Perceveral's flashlight. The robot began gaining again. Perceveral reached a straight stretch and put on a burst of speed.

He crossed a patch of ground that looked exactly like any other patch. But as the robot thundered over it, the ground gave way. Perceveral had calculated it carefully. The trap, which held under his weight, yielded at once under the robot's bulk.

The robot thrashed for a handhold. Dirt trickled through his fingers and he slid into the trap that Perceveral had dug, a pit with sloping sides that came together like a great funnel, designed to keep the robot immovably wedged at the bottom.

The robot, however, flung both his legs wide, almost at right angles to his body. His joints creaked as his heels bit into the sloping sides; they sagged under his weight, but held. He was able to stop himself before reaching the bottom, with both legs stiffly outspread and pressed into the soft dirt.

The robot's hand gouged deep handholds in the dirt. One leg retracted and found a foothold; then the other. Slowly the robot extricated himself, and Perceveral started running again.

His breath came short and hard now and he was getting a stitch in his side. The robot gained more easily, and Perceveral had to strain to stay ahead.

He had counted on those two traps. Now there was just one more left. A very good one, but risky to use.

Perceveral forced himself to concentrate in spite of a growing dizziness. The last trap had to be calculated carefully. He passed a stone marked in white and switched off his flashlight. He began counting strides, slowing until the robot was directly behind him, its fingers inches from his neck.

Eighteen — nineteen — twenty!

On the twentieth step, Perceveral flung himself headfirst into the darkness. For seconds, he seemed to be floating in the air. Then he struck water in a flat, shallow dive, surfaced and waited.

The robot had been too close behind to stop. There was a tremendous splash as he hit the surface of the underground lake; a sound of furious splashings; and, finally, the sound of bubbles as the heavy robot sank beneath the surface.

When he heard that, Perceveral struck out for the opposite shore. He made it and pulled himself out of the icy water. For minutes, he lay shuddering on the slimy rocks. Then he forced himself to climb further ashore on hands and knees, to a cache where he had stored firewood, matches, whiskey, blankets, and clothes.

During the next hours, Perceveral dried himself, changed clothes and built a small fire. He ate and drank and watched the still surface of the underground lake. Days ago, he had tested with a hundred-foot line and found no bottom. Perhaps the lake was bottomless. More likely it fed into a swift-flowing underwater river that would pull the robot along for weeks and months. Perhaps...

He heard a faint sound in the water and trained his flashlight in its direction. The robot's head appeared, and then his shoulders and torso emerged.

The lake was very evidently not bottomless. The robot must have walked across the bottom and climbed the steep slope on the opposite side.

The robot began to climb the slimy rocks near shore. Perceveral wearily pulled himself to his feet and broke into a run.

His last trap had failed him and his neurosis was closing in for the kill. Perceveral headed toward a tunnel exit. He wanted the end to come in sunlight.

At a jolting dogtrot, Perceveral led the robot out of the tunnels toward a steep mountain slope. His breath felt like fire in his throat and his stomach muscles were knotted painfully. He ran with his eyes half-closed, dizzy from fatigue.

His traps had failed. Why hadn't he realized the certainty of their failure earlier? The robot was part of himself, his own neurosis moving to destroy him. And how can a man trick the trickiest part of himself? The right hand always finds out what the left hand is doing, and the cleverest of devices never fools the supreme fooler for long.

He had gone about the thing in the wrong way, Perceveral thought, as he began to climb the mountain slope. The way to freedom is not through deception. It is...

The robot clutched at his heel, reminding Perceveral of the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge. He pulled himself out of the way and bombarded the robot with stones. The robot brushed them aside and continued climbing.

Perceveral cut diagonally across the steep rock face. The way to freedom, he told himself, is not through deception. That was bound to fail. The way out is through *change!* The way out is through conquest, not of the robot, but of what the robot represented.

Himself!

He was feeling lightheaded and his thoughts poured on unchecked. If, he insisted to himself, he could conquer his sense of kinship with the robot — then obviously the robot would no longer be *his* neurosis! It would simply be *a* neurosis, with no power over him.

All he had to do was lose his neurosis — even for ten minutes — and the robot couldn't harm him!

All sense of fatigue left him and he was flooded with a supreme and intoxicating confidence. Boldly, he ran across a mass of jumbled rocks, a perfect place for a twisted ankle or a broken leg. A year ago, even a month ago, he would infallibly have had an accident. But the changed Perceveral, striding like a demigod, traversed the rocks without error.

The robot, one-armed and one-eyed, doggedly took the accident upon himself. He tripped and sprawled at full length across the sharp rocks. When he picked himself up and resumed the chase, he was limping.

Completely intoxicated but minutely watchful, Perceveral came to a granite wall, and leaped for a fingerhold that was no more than a gray shadow above him. For a heart-stopping second, he dangled in the air. Then, as his fingers began to slip, his foot found a hold. Without hesitation, he pulled himself up.

The robot followed, his dry joints creaking loudly. He bent a finger out of commission making the climb that Perceveral should have failed.

Perceveral leaped from boulder to boulder. The robot came after him, slipping and straining, drawing near. Perceveral didn't care. The thought struck him that all his years of accident-proneness had gone into the making of this moment. The tide had turned now. He was at last what nature had intended him to be all along — an accident-*proof* man!

The robot crawled after him up a dazzling surface of white rock. Perceveral, drunk with supreme confidence, pushed boulders into motion and shouted to create an avalanche.

The rocks began to slide, and above him he heard a deep rumble. He dodged around a boulder, evaded the robot's outflung arm and came to a dead end.

He was in a small, shallow cave. The robot loomed in front of him, blocking the entrance, his iron fist pulled back.

Perceveral burst into laughter at the sight of the poor, clumsy, accident-prone robot. Then the robot's fist, driven by the full force of his body, shot out.

Perceveral ducked, but it wasn't necessary. The clumsy robot missed him anyhow, by at least half an inch. It was just the sort of mistake Perceveral had expected of the ridiculous accident-prone creature.

The force of the swing carried the robot outward. He fought hard to regain his balance, poised on the lip of the cliff. Any normal man or robot would have regained it. But not the accident-prone robot. He fell on his face, smashing his last eyecell, and began to roll.

Perceveral leaned out to accelerate the roll, then quickly crouched back inside the shallow cave. The avalanche completed the job for him, rolling a diminishing black dot down the dusty white mountainside and burying it under tons of stone.

Perceveral watched it all, chuckling to himself. Then he began to ask himself what, exactly, he had been doing.

And that was when he started to shake.

Months later, Perceveral stood by the gangplank of the colony ship *Cuchulain,* watching the colonists step down into Theta's midwinter sunshine. There were all types and kinds.

They had all come to Theta for a chance at a new life. Each of them was vitally important at least to himself, and each deserved a fighting chance at survival, no matter what his potentialities.

And he, Anton Perceveral, had scouted the minimum-survival requirements on Theta for these people; and had, in some measure, given hope and promise to the least capable among them — the incompetents who also wanted to live.

He turned away from the stream of pioneers and entered the ship by a rear ladder. He walked down a corridor and entered Haskell's cabin.

"Well, Anton," Haskell said, "how do they look to you?"

"They seem like a nice group," Perceveral said.

"They are. Those people consider you their founding father, Anton. They want you here. Will you stay?"

Perceveral said, "I consider Theta my home."

"Then it's settled. I'll just — "

"Wait," Perceveral said. "I'm not finished. I consider Theta my home. I want to settle here, marry, raise kids. But not yet."

"Eh?"

"I've grown pretty fond of exploring," Perceveral said. "I'd like to do some more of it. Maybe one or two more planets. Then I'll settle down on Theta."

"I was afraid you might want that," Haskell said unhappily.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. But I'm afraid we can't use you again as an explorer, Anton."

"Why not?"

"You know what we need. Minimum-survival personalities for staking out future colonies. You cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered a minimum-survival personality any longer."

"But I'm the same man I always was!" Perceveral said. "Oh, sure, I improved on the planet. But you expected that and had the robot to compensate for it. And at the end — "

"Yes, what about that?"

"Well, at the end I just got carried away. I think I was drunk or something. I can't imagine how I acted that way."

"Still, that's how you did act."

"Yes. But look! Even with that, I barely survived the experience — the total experience on Theta! *Barely!* Doesn't that prove I'm still a minimum-survival personality?"

Haskell pursed his lips and looked thoughtful. "Anton, you almost convince me. But I'm afraid you're indulging in a bit of word-juggling. In all honesty, I can't view you as minimum any longer. I'm afraid you'll just have to put up with your lot on Theta."

Perceveral's shoulders slumped. He nodded wearily, shook hands with Haskell and turned to go.

As he turned, the edge of his sleeve caught Haskell's inkstand, brushing it off the table. Perceveral lunged to catch it and banged his hand against the desk. Ink splattered over him. He fumbled again, tripped over a chair, fell.

"Anton," Haskell asked, "was that an act?"

"No," Perceveral said. "It wasn't, damn it."

"Hmm. Interesting. Now, Anton, don't raise your hopes too high, but maybe — I say just *maybe* — "

Haskell stared hard at Perceveral's flushed face, then burst into laughter.

"What a devil you are, Anton! You almost had me fooled. Now will you kindly get the hell out of here and join the colonists? They're dedicating a statue to you and I think they'd like to have you present."

Shamefaced, but grinning in spite of it, Anton Perceveral walked out to meet his new destiny.

IF THE RED SLAYER

I won't even try to describe the pain. I'll just say that it was unbearable even with anesthetics, and that I bore it because I didn't have any choice. Then it faded away and I opened my eyes and looked into the faces of the brahmins standing over me. There were three of them, dressed in the usual white operating gowns and white gauze masks. They say they wear those masks to keep germs out of us. But every soldier knows they wear them so we can't recognize them.

I was still doped up to the ears on anesthetics, and only chunks and bits of my memory were functioning. I asked, "How long was I dead?"

"About ten hours," one of the brahmins told me.

"How did I die?"

"Don't you remember?" the tallest brahmin asked.

"Not yet."

"Well," the tallest brahmin said, "you were with your platoon in Trench 2645B-4. At dawn your entire company made a frontal attack, trying to capture the next trench. Number 2645B-5."

"And what happened?" I asked.

"You stopped a couple of machine gun bullets. The new kind with the shock heads. Remember now? You took one in the chest and three more in the legs. When the medics found you, you were dead."

"Did we capture the trench?" I asked.

"No. Not this time."

"I see." My memory was returning rapidly as the anesthetic wore off. I remembered the boys in my platoon. I remembered our trench.

Old 2645B-4 had been my home for over a year, and it was pretty nice as trenches go. The enemy had been trying to capture it, and our dawn assault had been a counterattack, really. I remembered the machine gun bullets tearing me into shreds, and the wonderful relief I had felt when they did. And I remembered something else too...

I sat upright. "Hey, just a minute!" I said.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought eight hours was the upper limit for bringing a man back to life."

"We've improved our techniques since then," one of the brahmins told me. "We're improving them all the time. Twelve hours is the upper limit now, just as long as there isn't serious brain damage."

"Good for you," I said. Now my memory had returned completely, and I realized what had happened. "However, you made a serious mistake in bringing *me* back."

"What's the beef, soldier?" one of them asked in that voice only officers get.

"Read my dogtags," I said.

He read them. His forehead, which was all I could see of his face, became wrinkled. He said, "This *is* unusual!"

"Unusual!" I said.

"You see," he told me, "you were in a whole trench full of dead men. We were told they were all first-timers. Our orders were to bring the whole batch back to life."

"And you didn't read any dogtags first?"

"We were overworked. There wasn't time. I really am sorry, Private. If I'd known — "

"To hell with that," I said. "I want to see the Inspector General."

"Do you really think — "

"Yes, I do," I said. "I'm no trench lawyer, but I've got a real beef. It's my right to see the I.G."

They went into a whispered conference, and I looked myself over. The brahmins had done a pretty good job on me. Not as good as they did in the first years of the war, of course. The skin grafts were sloppier now, and I felt a little scrambled inside. Also my right arm was about two inches longer than the left; bad joiner-work. Still, it was a pretty good job.

The brahmins came out of their conference and gave me my clothes. I dressed. "Now, about the Inspector General," one of them said. "That's a little difficult right now. You see — "

Needless to say, I didn't see the I.G. They took me to see a big, beefy, kindly old Master Sargeant. One of those understanding types who talks to you and makes everything all right. Except that I wasn't having any.

"Now, now, Private," the kindly old sarge said. "What's this I hear about you kicking up a fuss about being brought back to life?"

"You heard correct," I said. "Even a private soldier has his rights under the Articles of War. Or so I've been told."

"He certainly does," said the kindly old sarge.

"I've done my duty," I said. "Seventeen years in the army, eight years in combat. Three times killed, three times brought back. The orders read that you can requisition death after the third time. That's what I did, and it's stamped on my dogtags. But I wasn't *left* dead. Those damned medics brought me back to life again, and it isn't fair. I want to stay dead."

"It's much better staying alive," the sarge said. "Alive, you always have a chance of being rotated back to non-combat duties. Rotation isn't working very fast on account of the manpower shortage. But there's still a chance."

"I know," I said. "But I think I'd just as soon stay dead."

"I think I could promise you that in six months or so — "

"I want to stay dead," I said firmly. "After the third time, it's my privilege under the Articles of War."

"Of course it is," the kindly old sarge said, smiling at me, one soldier to another. "But mistakes happen in wartime. Especially in a war like this." He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. "I remember when the thing started. It sure looked like a pushbutton affair when it started. But both of us and the Reds had a full arsenal of anti-missile-missiles, and that pretty well deadlocked the atomic stuff. The invention of the atomic damper clinched it. That made it a real infantry affair."

"I know, I know."

"But our enemies outnumbered us," the kindly old sarge said. "They still do. All those millions and millions of Russians and Chinese! We had to have more fighting men. We had to at least hold our own. That's why the medics started reviving the dead."

"I know all this. Look, Sarge, I want us to win. I want it bad. I've been a good soldier. But I've been killed three times, and — "

"The trouble is," the sarge said, "the Reds are reviving their dead, too. The struggle for manpower in the front lines is crucial *right now*. The next few months will tell the tale, one way or the other. So why not forget about all this? The next time you're killed, I can promise you'll be left alone. So let's overlook it this time."

"I want to see the Inspector General," I said.

"All right, Private," the kindly old sarge said, in a not very friendly tone. "Go to Room 303."

I went to 303, which was an outer office, and I waited. I was feeling sort of guilty about all the fuss I was kicking up. After all, there was a war on. But I was angry, too. A soldier has his rights, even in a war. Those damned brahmins...

It's funny how they got that name. They're just medics, not Hindus or Brahmins or anything like that. They got the name because of a newspaper article a couple years ago, when all this was new. The guy who wrote the article told about how the medics could revive dead men now, and make them combat-worthy. It was pretty hot stuff then. The writer quoted a poem by Emerson. The poem starts out —

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain thinks he is
slain,
They know not well the subtle
ways.
I keep, and pass, and turn
again.

That's how things were. You could never know, when you killed a man, whether he'd stay dead, or be back in the trenches shooting at you the next day. And you didn't know whether you'd stay dead or not if you got killed. Emerson's poem was called "Brahma," so our medics got to be called brahmins.

Being brought back to life wasn't bad at first. Even with the pain, it was good to be alive. But you finally reach a time when you get tired of being killed and brought back and killed and brought back.

You start wondering how many deaths you owe your country, and if it might not be nice and restful staying dead a while. You look forward to the long sleep.

The authorities understood this. Being brought back too often was bad for morale. So they set three revivals as the limit. After the third time you could choose rotation or permanent death. The authorities preferred you to choose death; a man who's been dead three times has a very bad effect on the morale of civilians. And most combat soldiers preferred to stay dead after the third time.

But I'd been cheated. I had been brought back to life for the fourth time. I'm as patriotic as the next man, but this I wasn't going to stand for.

At last I was allowed to see the Inspector General's adjutant. He was a colonel, a thin, gray, no-nonsense type. He'd already been briefed on my case, and he wasted no time on me. It was a short interview.

"Private," he said, "I'm sorry about this, but new orders have been issued. The Reds have increased their rebirth rate, and we have to match them. The standing order now is six revivals before retirement."

"But that order hadn't been issued at the time I was killed."

"It's retroactive," he said. "You have two deaths to go. Goodbye and good luck, Private."

And that was it. I should have known you can't get anywhere with top brass. They don't know how things are. They rarely get killed more than once, and they just don't understand how a man feels after four times. So I went back to my trench.

I walked back slowly, past the poisoned barbed wire, thinking hard. I walked past something covered with a khaki tarpaulin stenciled *Secret Weapon*. Our sector is filled with secret weapons. They come out about once a week, and maybe one of them will win the war.

But right now I didn't care. I was thinking about the next stanza of that Emerson poem. It goes:

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the
same;

The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and
fame.

Old Emerson got it pretty right, because that's how it is after your fourth death. Nothing makes any difference, and everything seems pretty much the same. Don't get me wrong, I'm no cynic. I'm just saying that a man's viewpoint is bound to change after he's died four times.

At last I reached good old Trench 2645B-4, and greeted all the boys. I found out we were attacking again at dawn. I was still thinking.

I'm no quitter, but I figured four times dead was enough. In this attack, I decided I'd make sure I stayed dead. There would be no mistakes this time.

We moved out at first light, past the barbed wire and the rolling mines, into the no-man's-land between our trench and 2645B-5. This attack was being carried out in battalion strength, and we were all armed with the new homing bullets. We moved along pretty briskly for a while. Then the enemy really opened up.

We kept on gaining ground. Stuff was blowing up all around me, but I hadn't a scratch yet. I started to think we would make it this time. Maybe I wouldn't get killed.

Then I got it. An explosive bullet through the chest. Definitely a mortal wound. Usually after something like that hits you, you stay down. But not me. I wanted to make sure of staying dead this time. So I picked myself up and staggered forward, using my rifle as a crutch. I made another fifteen yards in the face of the damnedest cross-fire you've ever seen. Then I got it, and got it right. There was no mistaking it on this round.

I felt the explosive bullet slam into my forehead. There was the tiniest fraction of a second in which I could feel my brains boiling out, and I knew I was safe this time. The brahmins couldn't do anything about serious head injuries, and mine was really serious.

Then I died.

I recovered consciousness and looked up at the brahmins in their white gowns and gauze masks.

"How long was I dead?" I asked.

"Two hours."

Then I remembered. "But I got it in the head!"

The gauze masks wrinkled, and I knew they were grinning. "Secret weapon," one of them told me. "It's been in the works for close to three years. At last we and the engineers perfected a de-scrambler. Tremendous invention!"

"Yeah?" I said.

"At last medical science can treat serious head injuries," the brahmin told me. "Or any other kind of injury. We can bring any man back now, just as long as we can collect seventy percent of his pieces and feed them to the de-scrambler. This is really going to cut down our losses. It may turn the tide of the whole war!"

"That's fine," I said.

"By the way," the brahmin told me, "you've been awarded a medal for your heroic advance under fire after receiving a mortal wound."

"That's nice," I said. "Did we take 2645B-5?"

"We took it this time. We're massing for an assault against Trench 2645B-6."

I nodded, and in a little while I was given my clothes and sent back to the front. Things have quieted down now, and I must admit it's kind of pleasant to be alive. Still, I think I've had all I want of it.

Now I've got just one more death to go before I'll have my six.

If they don't change the orders again.

THE STORE OF THE WORLDS

Mr. Wayne came to the end of the long, shoulder-high mound of gray rubble, and there was the Store of the Worlds. It was exactly as his friends had described; a small shack constructed of bits of lumber, parts of cars, a piece of galvanized iron and a few rows of crumbling bricks, all daubed over with a watery blue paint.

Mr. Wayne glanced back down the long lane of rubble to make sure he hadn't been followed. He tucked his parcel more firmly under his arm; then, with a little shiver at his own audacity, he opened the door and slipped inside.

"Good morning," the proprietor said.

He, too, was exactly as described; a tall, crafty-looking old fellow with narrow eyes and a downcast mouth. His name was Tompkins. He sat in an old rocking chair, and perched on the back of it was a blue and green parrot. There was one other chair in the store, and a table. On the table was a rusted hypodermic.

"I've heard about your store from friends," Mr. Wayne said.

"Then you know my price," Tompkins said. "Have you brought it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Wayne, holding up his parcel. "But I want to ask first — "

"They always want to ask," Tompkins said to the parrot, who blinked. "Go ahead, ask."

"I want to know what really happens."

Tompkins sighed. "What happens is this. You pay me my fee. I give you an injection which knocks you out. Then, with the aid of certain gadgets which I have in the back of the store, I liberate your mind."

Tompkins smiled as he said that, and his silent parrot seemed to smile, too.

"What happens then?" Mr. Wayne asked.

"Your mind, liberated from its body, is able to choose from the countless probability-worlds which the Earth casts off in every second of its existence."

Grinning now, Tompkins sat up in his rocking chair and began to show signs of enthusiasm.

"Yes, my friend, though you might not have suspected it, from the moment this battered Earth was born out of the sun's fiery womb, it cast off its alternate-probability worlds. Worlds without end, emanating from events large and small; every Alexander and every amoeba creating worlds, just as ripples will spread in a pond no matter how big or how small the stone you throw. Doesn't every object cast a shadow? Well, my friend, the Earth itself is four-dimensional; therefore it casts three-dimensional shadows, solid reflections of itself through every moment of its being. Millions, billions of Earths! An infinity of Earths! And your mind, liberated by me, will be able to select any of these worlds, and to live upon it for a while."

Mr. Wayne was uncomfortably aware that Tompkins sounded like a circus barker, proclaiming marvels that simply couldn't exist. But, Mr. Wayne reminded himself, things had happened within his own lifetime which he would never have believed possible. Never! So perhaps the wonders that Tompkins spoke of were possible, too.

Mr. Wayne said, "My friends also told me — "

"That I was an out-and-out fraud?" Tompkins asked.

"Some of them *implied* that," Mr. Wayne said cautiously. "But I try to keep an open mind. They also said — "

"I know what your dirty-minded friends said. They told you about the fulfillment of desire. Is that what you want to hear about?"

"Yes," said Mr. Wayne. "They told me that whatever I wished for — whatever I wanted — "

"Exactly," Tompkins said. "The thing could work in no other way. There are the infinite worlds to choose among. Your mind chooses, and is guided only by desire. Your deepest desire is the only thing that counts. If you have been harboring a secret dream of murder — "

"Oh hardly, hardly!" cried Mr. Wayne.

" — then you will go to a world where you *can* murder, where you can roll in blood, where you can outdo Sade or Caesar, or whoever your idol may be. Suppose it's power you want? Then you'll choose a world where you are a god, literally and actually. A bloodthirsty Juggernaut, perhaps, or an all-wise Buddha."

"I doubt very much if I — "

"There are other desires, too," Tompkins said. "All heavens and all hells. Unbridled sexuality. Gluttony, drunkenness, love, fame — anything you want."

"Amazing!" said Mr. Wayne.

"Yes," Tompkins agreed. "Of course, my little list doesn't exhaust all the possibilities, all the combinations and permutations of desire. For all I know you might want a simple, placid, pastoral existence on a South Seas island among idealized natives."

"That sounds more like me," Mr. Wayne said, with a shy laugh.

"But who knows?" Tompkins asked. "Even you might not know what your true desires are. They might involve your own death."

"Does that happen often?" Mr. Wayne asked anxiously.

"Occasionally."

"I wouldn't want to die," Mr. Wayne said.

"It hardly ever happens," Tompkins said, looking at the parcel in Mr. Wayne's hands.

"If you say so...But how do I know all this is real? Your fee is extremely high, it'll take everything I own. And for all I know, you'll give me a drug and I'll just *dream!* Everything I own just for a — a shot of heroin and a lot of fancy words!"

Tompkins smiled reassuringly. "The experience has no drug-like quality about it. And no sensation of a dream, either."

"If it's *true,"* Mr. Wayne said, a little petulantly, "why can't I stay in the world of my desire for good?"

"I'm working on that," Tompkins said. "That's why I charge so high a fee; to get materials, to experiment. I'm trying to find a way of making the transition permanent. So far I haven't been able to loosen the cord that binds a man to his own Earth — and pulls him back to it. Not even the great mystics could cut that cord, except with death. But I still have my hopes."

"It would be a great thing if you succeeded," Mr. Wayne said politely.

"Yes it would!" Tompkins cried, with a surprising burst of passion. "For then I'd turn my wretched shop into an escape hatch! My process would be free then, free for everyone! Everyone would go to the Earth of their desires, the Earth that really suited them, and leave *this* damned place to the rats and worms — "

Tompkins cut himself off in mid-sentence, and became icy calm. "But I fear my prejudices are showing. I can't offer a permanent escape from the Earth yet; not one that doesn't involve death. Perhaps I never will be able to. For now, all I can offer you is a vacation, a change, a taste of another world and a look at your own desires. You know my fee. I'll refund it if the experience isn't satisfactory."

"That's good of you," Mr. Wayne said, quite earnestly. "But there's that other matter my friends told me about. The ten years off my life."

"That can't be helped," Tompkins said, "and can't be refunded. My process is a tremendous strain on the nervous system, and life-expectancy is shortened accordingly. That's one of the reasons why our so-called government has declared my process illegal."

"But they don't enforce the ban very firmly," Mr. Wayne said.

"No. Officially the process is banned as a harmful fraud. But officials are men, too. They'd like to leave this Earth, just like everyone else."

"The cost," Mr. Wayne mused, gripping his parcel tightly. "And ten years off my life! For the fulfillment of my secret desires...Really, I must give this some thought."

"Think away," Tompkins said indifferently.

All the way home Mr. Wayne thought about it. When his train reached Port Washington, Long Island, he was still thinking. And driving his car from the station to his home he was still thinking about Tompkins' crafty old face, and worlds of probability, and the fulfillment of desire.

But when he stepped inside his house, those thoughts had to stop. Janet, his wife, wanted him to speak sharply to the maid, who had been drinking again. His son Tommy wanted help with the sloop, which was to be launched tomorrow. And his baby daughter wanted to tell about her day in kindergarten.

Mr. Wayne spoke pleasantly but firmly to the maid. He helped Tommy put the final coat of copper paint on the sloop's bottom, and he listened to Peggy tell about her adventures in the playground.

Later, when the children were in bed and he and Janet were alone in their living room, she asked him if something were wrong.

"Wrong?"

"You seem to be worried about something," Janet said. "Did you have a bad day at the office?"

"Oh, just the usual sort of thing..."

He certainly was not going to tell Janet, or anyone else, that he had taken the day off and gone to see Tompkins in his crazy old Store of the Worlds. Nor was he going to speak about the right every man should have, once in his lifetime, to fulfill his most secret desires. Janet, with her good common sense, would never understand that.

The next days at the office were extremely hectic. All of Wall Street was in a mild panic over events in the Middle East and in Asia, and stocks were reacting accordingly. Mr. Wayne settled down to work. He tried not to think of the fulfillment of desire at the cost of everything he possessed, with ten years of his life thrown in for good measure. It was crazy! Old Tompkins must be insane!

On weekends he went sailing with Tommy. The old sloop was behaving very well, taking practically no water through her bottom seams. Tommy wanted a new suit of racing sails, but Mr. Wayne sternly rejected that. Perhaps next year, if the market looked better. For now, the old sails would have to do.

Sometimes at night, after the children were asleep, he and Janet would go sailing. Long Island Sound was quiet then, and cool. Their boat glided past the blinking buoys, sailing toward the swollen yellow moon.

"I *know* something's on your mind," Janet said.

"Darling, please!"

"Is there something you're keeping from me?"

"Nothing!"

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?"

"Absolutely sure."

"Then put your arms around me. That's right..."

And the sloop sailed itself for a while.

Desire and fulfillment...But autumn came, and the sloop had to be hauled. The stock market regained some stability, but Peggy caught the measles. Tommy wanted to know the differences between ordinary bombs, atom bombs, hydrogen bombs, cobalt bombs, and

all the other kinds of bombs that were in the news. Mr. Wayne explained to the best of his ability. And the maid quit unexpectedly.

Secret desires were all very well. Perhaps he *did* want to kill someone, or live on a South Seas Island. But there were responsibilities to consider. He had two growing children, and a better wife than he deserved.

Perhaps around Christmas time...

But in midwinter there was a fire in the unoccupied guest bedroom due to defective wiring. The firemen put out the blaze without much damage, and no one was hurt. But it put any thought of Tompkins out of his mind for a while. First the bedroom had to be repaired, for Mr. Wayne was very proud of his gracious old home.

Business was still frantic and uncertain due to the international situation. Those Russians, those Arabs, those Greeks, those Chinese. The intercontinental missiles, the atom bombs, the sputniks...Mr. Wayne spent long days at the office, and sometimes evenings, too. Tommy caught the mumps. A part of the roof had to be reshingled. And then already it was time to consider the spring launching of the sloop.

A year had passed, and he'd had very little time to think of secret desires. But perhaps next year. In the meantime —

"Well?" said Tompkins. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, quite all right," Mr. Wayne said. He got up from the chair and rubbed his forehead.

"Do you want a refund?" Tompkins asked.

"No. The experience was quite satisfactory."

"They always are," Tompkins said, winking lewdly at the parrot. "Well, what was yours?"

"A world of the recent past," Mr. Wayne said.

"A lot of them are. Did you find out about your secret desire? Was it murder? Or a South Seas Island?"

"I'd rather not discuss it," Mr. Wayne said, pleasantly but firmly.

"A lot of people won't discuss it with me," Tompkins said sulkily. "I'll be damned if I know why."

"Because — well, I think the world of one's secret desire feels sacred, somehow. No offense...Do you think you'll ever be able to make it permanent? The world of one's choice, I mean?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "I'm trying. If I succeed, you'll hear about it. Everyone will."

"Yes, I suppose so." Mr. Wayne undid his parcel and laid its contents on the table. The parcel contained a pair of army boots, a knife, two coils of copper wire, and three small cans of corned beef.

Tompkins' eyes glittered for a moment. "Quite satisfactory," he said. "Thank you."

"Goodbye," said Mr. Wayne. "And thank *you*."

Mr. Wayne left the ship and hurried down to the end of the lane of gray rubble. Beyond it, as far as he could see, lay flat fields of rubble, brown and gray and black. Those fields, stretching to every horizon, were made of the twisted corpses of cities, the shattered remnants of trees, and the fine white ash that once was human flesh and bone.

"Well," Mr. Wayne said to himself, "at least we gave as good as we got."

That year in the past had cost him everything he owned, and ten years of his life thrown in for good measure. Had it been a dream? It was still worth it! But now he had to put away all thought of Janet and the children. That was finished, unless Tompkins perfected his process. Now he had to think about his own survival.

With the aid of his wrist geiger he found a deactivated lane through the rubble. He'd better get back to the shelter before dark, before the rats came out. If he didn't hurry he'd miss the evening potato ration.

THE GUN WITHOUT A BANG

Did a twig snap? Dixon looked back and thought he saw a dark shape melt into the underbrush. Instantly he froze, staring back through the green-boled trees. There was a complete and expectant silence. Far overhead, a carrion bird balanced on an updraft, surveying the sunburned landscape, waiting, hoping.

Then Dixon heard a low, impatient cough from the underbrush.

Now he knew he was being followed. Before, it had only been an assumption. But those vague, half-seen shapes had been real. They had left him alone on his trek to the signal station, watching, deciding. Now they were ready to try something.

He removed the Weapon from its holster, checked the safeties, reholstered it and continued walking.

He heard another cough. Something was patiently trailing him, probably waiting until he left the bush and entered the forest. Dixon grinned to himself.

Nothing could hurt him. He had the Weapon.

Without it, he would never have ventured so far from his spaceship. One simply didn't wander around on an alien planet. But Dixon could. On his hip was the weapon to end all weapons, absolute insurance against anything that walked or crawled or flew or swam.

It was the last word in handguns, the ultimate in personal armament.

It was the Weapon.

He looked back again. There were three beasts, less than fifty yards behind him. From that distance, they resembled dogs or hyenas. They coughed at him and moved slowly forward.

He touched the Weapon, but decided against using it immediately. There would be plenty of time when they came closer.

Alfred Dixon was a short man, very broad in the chest and shoulders. His hair was streaky blond, and he had a blond mustache which curled up at the ends. This mustache gave his tanned face a frank, ferocious appearance.

His natural habitat was Terra's bars and taverns. There, dressed in stained khakis, he would order drinks in a loud, belligerent voice, and pierce his fellow drinkers with narrow gunmetal-blue eyes. He enjoyed explaining to the drinkers, in a somewhat contemptuous tone, the difference between a Sykes needler and a Colt three-point, between the Martian horned adleper and the Venusian scorn, and just what to do when a Rannarean horntank is charging you in thick brush, and how to beat off an attack of winged glitterflits.

Some men considered Dixon all bluff, but they were careful not to call it. Others thought he was a good man in spite of his inflated opinion of himself. He was just overconfident, they explained. Death or mutilation would correct this flaw.

Dixon was a great believer in personal armament. To his way of thinking, the winning of the American West was simply a contest between bow and arrow and Colt .44. Africa? The spear against the rifle. Mars? The Colt three-point against the spinknife. H-bombs smeared cities, but individual men with small arms took the territory. Why look for fuzzy economic, philosophical or political reasons when everything was so simple?

He had, of course, utter confidence in the Weapon.

Glancing back, he saw that half a dozen doglike creatures had joined the original three. They were walking in the open now, tongues lolling out, slowly closing the distance.

Dixon decided to hold fire just a little longer. The shock effect would be that much greater.

He had held many jobs in his time — explorer, hunter, prospector, asteroider. Fortune seemed to elude him. The other man always stumbled across the lost city, shot the rare beast, found the ore-bearing stream. He accepted his fate cheerfully. Damned poor luck, but what can you do? Now he was a radioman, checking the automatic signal stations on a dozen unoccupied worlds.

But more important, he was giving the ultimate handgun its first test in the field. The gun's inventors hoped the Weapon would become standard. Dixon hoped he would become standard with it.

He had reached the edge of the rain forest. His ship lay about two miles ahead in a little clearing. As he entered the forest's gloomy shade, he heard the excited squeaking of arboreals. They were colored orange and blue, and they watched him intently from the treetops.

It was definitely an *African* sort of place, Dixon decided. He hoped he would encounter some big game, get a decent trophy head or two. Behind him, the wild dogs had approached to twenty yards. They were gray and brown, the size of terriers, with a hyena's jaws. Some of them had moved into the underbrush, racing ahead to cut him off.

It was time to show the Weapon.

Dixon unholstered it. The Weapon was pistol-shaped and quite heavy. It also balanced poorly. The inventors had promised to reduce the weight and improve the heft in subsequent models. But Dixon liked it just the way it was. He admired it for a moment, then clicked off the safeties and adjusted for single shot.

The pack came loping toward him, coughing and snarling. Dixon took casual aim and fired.

The Weapon hummed faintly. Ahead, for a distance of a hundred yards, a section of forest simply vanished.

Dixon had fired the first disintegrator.

From a muzzle aperture of less than an inch, the beam had fanned out to a maximum diameter of twelve feet. A conic section, waist-high and a hundred yards long, appeared in the forest. Within it, nothing remained. Trees, insects, plants, shrubs, wild dogs, butterflies, all were gone. Overhanging boughs caught in the blast area looked as though they had been sheared by a giant razor.

Dixon estimated he had caught at least seven of the wild dogs in the blast. Seven beasts with a half-second burst! No problems of deflection or trajectory, as with a missile gun. No need to reload, for the Weapon had a power span of eighteen duty-hours.

The perfect weapon!

He turned and walked on, reholstering the heavy gun.

There was silence. The forest creatures were considering the new experience. In a few moments, they recovered from their surprise. Blue and orange arboreals swung through the trees above him. Overhead, the carrion bird soared low, and other black-winged birds came out of the distant sky to join it. And the wild dogs coughed in the underbrush.

They hadn't given up yet. Dixon could hear them in the deep foliage on either side of him, moving rapidly, staying out of sight.

He drew the Weapon, wondering if they would dare try again. They dared.

A spotted gray hound burst from a shrub just behind him. The gun hummed. The dog vanished in mid-leap, and the trees shivered slightly as air clapped into the sudden vacuum.

Another dog charged and Dixon disintegrated it, frowning slightly. These beasts couldn't be considered stupid. Why didn't they learn the obvious lesson — that it was impossible to come against him and his Weapon? Creatures all over the Galaxy had quickly learned to be wary of an armed man. Why not these?

Without warning, three dogs leaped from different directions. Dixon clicked to automatic and mowed them down like a man swinging a scythe. Dust whirled and sparkled, filling the vacuum.

He listened intently. The forest seemed filled with low coughing sounds. Other packs were coming to join in the kill.

Why didn't they learn?

It suddenly burst upon him. *They didn't learn,* he thought, *because the lesson was too subtle!*

The Weapon — disintegrating silently, quickly, cleanly. Most of the dogs he hit simply vanished. There were no yelps of agony, no roars or howls or screams.

And above all, there was no loud boom to startle them, no smell of cordite, no click of a new shell levered in...

Dixon thought, *Maybe they aren't smart enough to know this is a killing weapon. Maybe they haven't figured out what's going on. Maybe they think I'm defenseless.*

He walked more rapidly through the dim forest. He was in no danger, he reminded himself. Just because they couldn't realize it was a killing weapon didn't alter the fact that it was. Still, he would

insist on a noisemaker in the new models. It shouldn't be difficult. And the sound would be reassuring.

The arboreals were gaining confidence now, swinging down almost to the level of his head, their fangs bared. Probably carnivorous, Dixon decided. With the Weapon on automatic, he slashed great cuts in the treetops.

The arboreals fled, screaming at him. Leaves and small branches rained down. Even the dogs were momentarily cowed, edging away from the falling debris.

Dixon grinned to himself — just before he was flattened. A big bough, severed from its tree, had caught him across the left shoulder as it fell.

The Weapon was knocked from his hand. It landed ten feet away, still on automatic, disintegrating shrubs a few yards from him.

He dragged himself from under the bough and dived for the weapon. An arboreal got to it first.

Dixon threw himself face-down on the ground. The arboreal, screaming in triumph, whirled the disintegrator around its head. Giant trees, cut through, went crashing to the forest floor. The air was dark with falling twigs and leaves, and the ground was cut into trenches. A sweep of the disintegrator knifed through the tree next to Dixon, and chopped the ground a few inches from his feet. He jumped away, and the next sweep narrowly missed his head.

He had given up hope. But then the arboreal became curious. Chattering gaily, it turned the Weapon around and tried to look into the muzzle.

The animal's head vanished — silently.

Dixon saw his chance. He ran forward, leaping a trench, and recovering the disintegrator before another arboreal could play with it. He turned it off automatic.

Several dogs had returned. They were watching him closely.

Dixon didn't dare fire yet. His hands were shaking so badly, there was more risk to himself than to the dogs. He turned and stumbled in the direction of the ship.

The dogs followed.

Dixon quickly recovered his nerve. He looked at the glittering Weapon in his hand. He had considerably more respect for it now, and more than a little fear. *Much* more fear than the dogs had.

Apparently they didn't associate the forest damage with the disintegrator. It must have seemed like a sudden, violent storm to them.

But the storm was over. It was hunting time again.

He was in thick brush now, firing ahead to clear a path. The dogs were on either side, keeping pace. He fired continually into the foliage, occasionally getting a dog. There were several dozen of them, pressing him closely.

Damn it, Dixon thought, *aren't they counting their losses?*

Then he realized they probably didn't know how to count.

He struggled on, not far from the spaceship. A heavy log lay in his path. He stepped over it.

The log came angrily to life and opened enormous jaws directly under his legs.

He fired blindly, holding the trigger down for three seconds and narrowly missing his own feet. The creature vanished. Dixon gulped, swayed, and slid feet-first into the pit he had just dug.

He landed heavily, wrenching his left ankle. The dogs ringed the pit, snapping and snarling at him.

Steady, Dixon told himself. He cleared the beasts from the pit's rim with two bursts, and tried to climb out.

The sides of the pit were too steep and had been fused into glass.

Frantically he tried again and again, recklessly expending his strength. Then he stopped and forced himself to think. The Weapon had got him into this hole; the Weapon could get him out.

This time he cut a shallow ramp out of the pit, and limped painfully out.

His left ankle could hardly bear weight. Even worse was the pain in his shoulder. That bough must have broken it, he decided. Using a branch as a crutch, Dixon limped on.

Several times the dogs attacked. He disintegrated them, and the gun grew increasingly heavy in his right hand. The carrion birds came down to pick at the neatly slashed carcasses. Dixon felt darkness crawl around the edges of his vision. He fought it back. He must not faint now, while the dogs were around him.

The ship was in sight. He broke into a clumsy run, and fell immediately. Some of the dogs were on him.

He fired, cutting them in two and removing half an inch from his right boot, almost down to the toe. He struggled to his feet and went on.

Quite a weapon, he thought. Dangerous to anyone, including the wielder. He wished he had the inventor in his sights.

Imagine inventing a gun without a bang!

He reached the ship. The dogs ringed him as he fumbled with the airlock. Dixon disintegrated the closest two, and stumbled inside. Darkness was crawling around his vision again and he could feel nausea rising thickly in his throat.

With his last strength, he swung the airlock shut and sat down. Safe at last!

Then he heard the low cough.

He had shut one of the dogs inside with him.

His arm felt too weak to lift the heavy Weapon, but slowly he swung it up. The dog, barely visible in the dimly lighted ship, leaped at him.

For a terrifying instant, Dixon thought he couldn't squeeze the trigger. The dog was at his throat. Reflex must have clenched his hand.

The dog yelped once and was silent.

Dixon blacked out.

When he recovered consciousness, he lay for a long time, just savoring the glorious sensation of being alive. He was going to rest for a few minutes. Then he was getting out of here, away from alien planets, back to a Terran bar. He was going to get roaring drunk. Then he was going to find that inventor and ram the Weapon down the man's throat, crossways.

Only a homicidal maniac would invent a gun without a bang.

But that would come later. Right now it was a pleasure just to be alive, to lie in the sunlight, enjoying the...

Sunlight? Inside a spaceship?

He sat up. At his feet lay the tail and one leg of the dog. Beyond it there was an interesting zigzag slashed through the side of the spaceship. It was about three inches wide and four feet long. Sunlight filtered through it.

Outside, four dogs were sitting on their haunches, peering in.

He had cut through his spaceship while killing the last dog.

Then he saw other slashes in the ship. Where had they come from?

Oh, yes, when he was fighting his way back to the ship. That last hundred yards. A few shots must have touched the spaceship.

He stood up and examined the cuts. *A neat job,* he thought, with the calm that sometimes accompanies hysteria. *Yes, sir, very neat indeed.*

Here were the severed control cables. That was where the radio had been. Over there he had managed to nick the oxygen and water tanks in a single burst, which was good shooting by anybody's standards. And here — yes, he'd done it, all right. A really clever hook shot had cut the fuel lines. And the fuel had all run out in obedience to the law of gravity and formed a pool around the ship and sunk into the ground.

Not bad for a guy who wasn't even trying, Dixon thought crazily. *Couldn't have done better with a blowtorch.*

As a matter of fact, he couldn't have done it with a blowtorch. Spaceship hulls were too tough. But not too tough for the good old little old sure-fire never-miss Weapon...

A year later, when Dixon still hadn't reported, a ship was sent out. They were to give him a decent burial, if any remains could be found, and bring back the prototype disintegrator, if that could be found.

The recovery ship touched down near Dixon's ship, and the crew examined the slashed and gutted hull with interest.

"Some guys," said the engineer, "don't know how to handle a gun."

"I'll say," said the chief pilot.

They heard a banging noise from the direction of the rain forest. They hurried over and found that Dixon was not dead. He was very much alive, and singing as he worked.

He had constructed a wooden shack and planted a vegetable garden around it. Surrounding the garden was a palisade. Dixon was hammering in a new sapling to replace a rotten one when the men came up.

Quite predictably, one of the men cried, "You're alive!"

"Damned right," Dixon said. "Touch and go for a while before I got the palisade built. Nasty brutes, those dogs. But I taught them a little respect."

Dixon grinned and touched a bow that leaned against the palisade within easy reach. It had been cut from a piece of seasoned, springy wood, and beside it was a quiver full of arrows.

"They learned respect," Dixon said, "after they saw a few of their pals running around with a shaft through their flanks."

"But the Weapon — " the chief pilot asked.

"Ah, the Weapon!" exclaimed Dixon, with a mad, merry light in his eyes. "Couldn't have survived without it."

He turned back to his work. He was hammering the sapling into place with the heavy, flat butt of the Weapon.

THE DEATHS OF BEN BAXTER

Edwin James, the Chief Programmer of Earth, had seated himself upon a little three-legged stool in front of the Probabilities Calculator. He was a small, spare man, impressively ugly, dwarfed by the great control board which soared a hundred feet above him.

The steady hum of the machine, the slow drift of lights across the face of the panel, brought a sense of security which he recognized as false, but which soothed him all the same. He had just started to doze off when the pattern of lights changed.

He sat up with a start and rubbed his face. A paper tape inched from a slot in the panel. The Chief Programmer tore it off and scanned it. He nodded sourly to himself and walked quickly out of the room.

Fifteen minutes later, he entered the meeting room of the World Planning Council. Summoned there by his order, the five representatives of the Federated Districts of Earth were seated around the long table, waiting for him.

There was a new member this year, Roger Beatty, from the Americas. He was tall and angular and his bushy brown hair was just beginning to thin on top. He appeared eager, earnest and ill at ease. He was reading a procedural handbook and taking short, quick sniffs from his oxygen inhaler.

James knew the other members well. Lan II from Pan-Asia, looking as small, wrinkled and indestructible as ever, was engaged in intense conversation with large, blond Dr. Sveg from Europe. Miss Chandragore, beautiful and sleek, was playing her inevitable game of chess with Aaui of Oceania.

James turned up the room's oxygen supply and the members gratefully put away their inhalers.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," James said, taking his seat at the head of the table. "The current prediction just came through."

He took a notebook from his pocket and opened it.

"At our last meeting, we selected Alternate Probability Line 3B3CC, which began in the year 1832. The factor we were selecting for was the life of Albert Levinsky. In the Main Historic Line, Levinsky died in 1935 of an automobile accident. By switching into Alternate Probability Line 3B3CC, Levinsky avoided this accident and lived to the age of sixty-two, completing his work. The result now, in our own time, is the opening up of Antarctica."

"What about side-effects?" asked Janna Chandragore.

"Those were discussed in the paper you will be given later. Briefly, though, 3B3CC adhered closely to the Historic Main Line. All important events remained constant. There were, of course, some effects which the prediction did not cover. They include an oil-well explosion in Patagonia, a flu epidemic in Kansas and an increase in smog over Mexico City."

"Have all injured parties been compensated?" Lan II wanted to know.

"They have. And the colonization of Antarctica is already begun."

The Chief Programmer unfolded the paper tape he had taken from the Probabilities Calculator.

"But now we face a dilemma. As predicted, the Historic Main Line leads into unpleasant complications. But there are no good alternate lines to switch into!"

The Members murmured to each other.

James said, "Let me explain the situation." He walked to a wall and pulled down a large chart. "The crisis-point occurs on April 12, 1959, and our problem centers around an individual named Ben Baxter. The circumstances are as follows..."

Events, by their very nature, evoke alternate possibilities, each of which produces its own continuum of history. In other spatial-temporal worlds, Spain lost at Lepanto, Normandy at Hastings, England at Waterloo.

Suppose Spain had lost at Lepanto...

Spain did, disastrously. And Turkish sea power, invincible, swept the Mediterranean of European shipping. Ten years later, a Turkish

fleet conquered Naples and paved the way for the Moorish invasion of Austria...

In another time and space, that is.

The speculation became observable fact after the development of temporal selection and displacement. By 2103, Oswald Meyner and his associates were able to show the theoretical possibility of Switching from the Historic Main Line — so named for its convenience — to alternate lines. Within definite limits, however.

It would be impossible, for example, to Switch into a past where William of Normandy lost the battle of Hastings. The world developing from that event would be too different, alien in every way. Switching was found possible only into closely adjacent lines.

The theoretical possibility became a practical necessity in 2213. In that year, the Sykes-Raborn Calculator at Harvard predicted the complete sterilization of Earth's atmosphere by the accretion of radioactive by-products. The process was irreversible and inevitable. It could be stopped only in the past, where the poisoning had begun.

The first Switch was made with the newly developed Adams-Holt-Maartens Selector. The World Planning Council chose a line which involved the early death of Vassily Ouchenko (and the obliteration of his erroneous radiation-damage theories). A large part of the subsequent poisoning was avoided, although at the cost of seventy-three lives — descendants of Ouchenko for whom no Switchparents could be found.

After that, there was no turning back. Line Switching became as necessary to the world as disease prevention.

But the process had its limitations. A time had to come when no available line would be usable, when all futures looked unfavorable.

When that happened, the Planning Council was prepared to use more direct means.

"And those are the consequences for us," Edwin James concluded. "That is the outcome if we allow the Main Historic Line to continue."

Lan II said, "Meaning that you predict serious trouble for Earth, Mr. Programmer."

"With regret, I do."

The Programmer poured himself a glass of water and turned a page in his notebook.

"Our pivotal point is Ben Baxter, who dies on April 12, 1959. He must live at least another ten years for his work to have the desired effect upon world events. In that time, Ben Baxter will purchase Yellowstone National Park from the government. He will continue to maintain it as a park, but will farm the trees. This enterprise will be highly successful. He will buy other great tracts of land in North and South America. The Baxter heirs will be lumber kings for the next two hundred years and will own huge standings throughout the world. Due to their efforts, there will be great forests in the world, up to and including our own time. But if Baxter dies — "

James gestured wearily. "With Baxter dead, the forests will be cut before the governments of the world are fully aware of the consequences. Then comes the great blight of '03, which the few remaining woodlands cannot withstand. And at last the present, with the natural carbon-dioxide-oxygen cycle disrupted by the destruction of the trees, with all combustion devices banned, with oxygen inhalers a necessity merely to survive."

"We've started the forests again," Aaui said.

"It will be hundreds of years before they have grown to any significant size, even with forced growing methods. In the meantime, the balance may become further upset. That is the importance of Ben Baxter to us. He holds the key to the air we breathe!"

"Very well," said Dr. Sveg. "The Main Line, in which Baxter dies, is clearly unusable. But there are Alternates — "

"Many," James said. "As usual, most of them cannot be selected. Counting the Main Line, we have a total of three choices. But, unfortunately, each of them results in the death of Ben Baxter on April 12, 1959.

The Programmer wiped his forehead. "To be more specific, *Ben Baxter dies on the afternoon of April 12, 1959, as a result of a business meeting with a man named Ned Brynne.*"

The new member, Roger Beatty, cleared his throat nervously. "This event takes place in all three probability worlds?"

"Yes. In every one of them, Brynne is the cause of Baxter's death."

Dr. Sveg came ponderously to his feet. "Formerly, this Council has avoided any direct interference with the existing lines of probability. But this situation seems to call for interference."

The council members nodded their agreement.

"Let's get down to cases," said Aaui. "For the good of Earth, can this Ned Brynne be Switched Out?"

"No," replied the Programmer. "Brynne himself plays a vital role in our future. He has an option on almost a hundred square miles of forest. He needs Baxter's backing to purchase it. If Brynne could be kept from that meeting with Baxter — "

"How?" asked Beatty.

"Take your pick," James suggested. "Threats, persuasion, bribery, kidnapping — any means short of murder. We have three worlds to work in. If we can restrain Brynne in just one of them, our problem is solved."

"What would be our best method?" asked Aaui.

"Try several, a different one in each probability world," said Miss Chandragore. "Our chances would be best that way. Shall we go ourselves?"

"We are best suited for the job," Edwin James said. "We know the factors involved. And politics gives one a certain skill in improvising — which will be sorely needed in this job. Each team will be absolutely on its own. There is no way for them to check on each other's progress across the time lines."

"Each team then," Dr. Sveg summed up, "will have to assume that the other teams fail."

"Probably with good reason," James said wryly. "Let's organize the teams and select our methods."

I

On the morning of April 12, 1959, Ned Brynne awakened and washed and dressed. At 1:30 that afternoon, he had an appointment with Ben Baxter, president of Baxter Industries. Brynne's entire future hinged upon the outcome of that meeting. If he could get the backing of the gigantic Baxter enterprises, and do so on favorable terms...

Brynne was a tall, darkly handsome man of thirty-six. There was a hint of fanatic pride in his carefully bland eyes, a suggestion of unreasoning stubborness in his tightly held mouth. His movements had the controlled strength of a man who is constantly watching and judging himself.

He was almost ready to leave. He tucked a swagger stick under his arm and slipped a copy of Somerset's AMERICAN PEERAGE into his jacket pocket. He was never without that infallible guide.

Finally he fixed to his lapel the golden sunburst decoration of his station. Brynne was a Chamberlain, second class, and properly proud of the fact. Some people thought him too young for so exalted a position. But they had to agree that Brynne carried the prerogatives and requirements of his office with a dignity quite beyond his years.

He locked his apartment and walked to the elevator. There was a small crowd waiting, mostly commoners, but two Equerries as well. All made way for him when the elevator came.

"Pleasant day, Chamberlain Brynne," the operator said as the car started down.

Brynne inclined his head an inch in the usual response to a commoner. He was deep in thought about Ben Baxter. But at the corner of his eye, he noticed one of the occupants of the car, a tall, strongly built fellow with golden-brown Polynesian features and tilted dark eyes. Brynne wondered what a man like that was doing in his apartment building. He knew the other tenants by sight, although their lower status naturally made them unworthy of his recognition.

The elevator reached the lobby and Brynne forgot about the Polynesian fellow. He had a lot on his mind today. There were some problems connected with Ben Baxter, problems he hoped to resolve before the meeting. He strode outside, into a dismal gray April morning, and decided to go to the Prince Charles Coffee Shop for a late breakfast.

It was 10:25 am.

"What do you think?" Aaui asked.

"Looks like a tough customer," said Roger Beatty. He inhaled deeply, savoring the rich air. It was a delightful luxury, breathing all the oxygen he wanted. In his time even the very wealthy turned down the oxygen tanks at night.

They were following half a block behind Brynne. There was no losing Brynne's tall, swaggering figure, even in New York's morning rush.

"He looked at you in the elevator," Beatty said.

"I know." Aaui grinned. "Give him something to worry about."

"He doesn't look like a worrying type," Beatty said. "I wish we had more time."

Aaui shrugged. "This was the closest we could come to the event. Our next choice would have been eleven years ago. And we would still have to wait until now before taking direct action."

"At least we'd know something about Brynne. He doesn't look as though he'll frighten easily."

"No, he doesn't," Aaui admitted. "But that's the course of action we selected."

They continued to follow, noticing how the crowds parted to make way for Brynne, who marched straight ahead, not looking to right or left. Then it happened.

Brynne, his attention turned inward, collided with a portly, florid-faced man, who wore in his lapel the dazzling purple and silver medallion of a First Order Crusader.

"Can't you watch where you're going, imbecile?" the Crusader barked.

Brynne noticed the man's rank, swallowed and muttered, "I beg your pardon, sir."

The Crusader wasn't so easily placated. "Do you make a habit of bumping into your betters, sirrah?"

"I do not," Brynne said, his face growing red, fighting hard to restrain his rage. A crowd of commoners had gathered to watch. They ringed the brilliantly dressed men, grinning and nudging each other.

"Then suppose you watch yourself!" the portly Crusader roared. "Stop cluttering the streets like a sleepwalker, before you are taught a lesson in manners!"

Brynne said, with deadly quiet, "Sir, if you feel the necessity of giving me such a lesson, I should be pleased to meet you at a place of your choosing, with such weapons as you elect — "

"Me? Meet you?" the Crusader asked incredulously.

"My rank permits it, sir."

"Your rank? You're a good five degrees beneath me, you simple idiot! Enough of this or I'll send my servants — who outrank you — to teach you a lesson in manners. I'll remember your face, young man. Now get out of my way!"

And with that, the Crusader pushed past him and stalked away.

"Coward!" said Brynne, his face a mottled red. But he said it softly, and the commoners noticed. Brynne turned to them, his hands tightening on his swagger stick. Grinning cheerfully, the crowd broke up.

Beatty said, "Dueling is permitted here?"

Aaui nodded. "The legal precedent came in 1804, when Alexander Hamilton killed Aaron Burr in a duel."

"I guess we'd better get to work," Beatty said. "But I wish we had more equipment."

"We took all we could carry. Let's get on with it."

Inside the Prince Charles Coffee Shop, Brynne sat at a table far in the rear. His hands were trembling; with an effort, he controlled them. Damn that First Order Crusader! Lousy, overbearing blowhard! But would he accept a duel? No, of course not. Had to hide behind the privileges of his station.

Rage was rising in Brynne, black and ominous. He should have killed the man and the blazes with the consequences! The blazes with everything! No man could step on him that way...

Stop it, he told himself. There was nothing he could do about it. He had to think about Ben Baxter and the all-important meeting. Looking at his watch, he saw it was nearly eleven o'clock. In two and a half hours, he would be in Baxter's office and —

"Your order, sir?" a waiter asked him.

"Hot chocolate, toast and a poached egg."

"French fries?"

"If I wanted French fries, I'd have told you!" Brynne shouted.

The waiter went pale, gulped, said, "Yes, sir, sorry, sir," and hurried off.

Now, Brynne thought, I'm reduced to yelling at commoners. Control — I must get myself under control.

"Ned Brynne!"

Brynne started and looked around. He had distinctly heard someone whisper his name. But there was no one within twenty feet of him.

"Brynne!"

"What is this?" Brynne muttered in unwilling reply. "Who's speaking?"

"You're nervous, Brynne, losing control of yourself. You need a rest, a vacation, a change."

Brynne went dead white under his tan and looked around the café. It was almost empty. There were three old ladies near the front. Beyond them he could see two men, talking together earnestly.

"Go home, Brynne, and get some rest. Take some time off while you can."

"I have an important business appointment," Brynne said, his voice shaky.

"Business before sanity," the voice pointed out mockingly.

"Who's talking to me?"

"What makes you think someone is talking to you?" the voice asked silkily.

"You mean I'm talking to myself?"

"You should know."

"Your egg, sir," the waiter said.

"What?" Brynne roared.

The waiter stepped hastily back, slopping hot chocolate into the saucer. "Sir?" he quavered.

"Don't creep around that way, idiot."

The waiter looked at Brynne incredulously, deposited the food and fled. Brynne stared after him suspiciously.

"You are in no condition to see anyone," the voice told him. *"Go home, get into bed, take a pill, sleep, heal!"*

"But what's the matter? Why?"

"Because your sanity is at stake! This external voice is your mind's last frantic attempt at stability. You can't afford to ignore this warning, Brynne!"

"It can't be true!" protested Brynne. "I'm sane. I'm — "

"Beg pardon, sir," said a voice at his elbow.

Brynne whirled, prepared to chastise this further intrusion on his privacy. He saw the blue uniform of a policeman looming over him. The man was wearing the white shoulder epaulets of a Noble Lieutenant.

Brynne swallowed hard and said, "Anything wrong, Officer?"

"Sir, the waiter and manager tell me you are talking to yourself and threatening violence."

"Preposterous," snapped Brynne.

"It's true! It's true! You're going crazy!" the voice screamed in his head.

Brynne stared at the great square bulk of the policeman. Surely he heard the voice! But apparently the Noble Lieutenant didn't, for he continued to look somberly down at him.

"It's not true," Brynne said, feeling secure in staking his word against a commoner's.

"I heard you myself," the Noble Lieutenant said.

"Well, sir, it's this way," Brynne began, choosing his words with care. "I was — "

The voice shrieked in his head, *"Tell him to go to hell, Brynne! Who's he to question you? Who's anyone to question you? Hit him! Blast him! Kill him! Destroy him!"*

Brynne said, through the barrage of noise in his head, "I was talking to myself, perfectly true, Officer. I frequently think out loud. It helps me to organize my thoughts."

The Noble Lieutenant gave a half nod. "But you offered violence, sir, at no provocation."

"No provocation! I ask you, sir, are cold eggs no provocation? Are limp toast and spilled chocolate no provocation?"

The waiter, called over, insisted, "Those eggs were hot — "

"They were not and that is all. I do not expect to sit here and argue a point of fact with a commoner."

"Quite right," the Noble Lieutenant said, nodding emphatically now. "But might I ask you, sir, to curb your anger somewhat, even though it may be perfectly justified? Not too much can be expected of commoners, after all."

"I know," Brynne agreed. "By the way, sir — the purple edging on your epaulets — are you related to O'Donnel of Moose Lodge, by any chance?"

"My third cousin on my mother's side," said the Noble Lieutenant, looking intently now at Brynne's sunburst medallion. "My son has entered the Chamberlain Halls as a probationary. A tall boy named Callahan."

"I will remember the name," Brynne promised.

"The eggs were hot!" said the waiter.

"Don't dispute the word of a gentleman," ordered the officer. "It could get you into serious trouble. Pleasant day to you, sir." The Noble Lieutenant saluted and left.

"Resourceful fellow," Aaui said bitterly, putting the tiny microphone back in his pocket. "For a moment, I thought we had him."

"We would have, if he'd had any latent doubts about his sanity. Well, now for something more direct. Got the equipment?"

Aaui took two pairs of brass knuckles out of his pocket and handed one to Beatty.

"Try not to lose it," he said. "We're supposed to return it to the Primitive Museum."

"Right. It fits over the fist, doesn't it? Oh, yes, I see."

They paid and hurried out.

Brynne decided to take a stroll along the waterfront to quiet his nerves. The sight of the great ships lying calm and steadfast in their berths never failed to soothe him. He walked steadily along, trying to reason out what had happened to him.

Those voices in his head...

Was he really losing his grip? An uncle on his mother's side had spent his last years in an institution. Involutional melancholia. Was there some explosive hidden factor at work in him?

He stopped and looked at the bow of a great ship. The *Theseus*.

Where was it going? Italy, perhaps. He thought of blue skies, brilliant sunshine, wine and relaxation. Those things would never be his. Work, frantic effort, that was the life he had set for himself. Even if it meant losing his mind, he would continue to labor under the iron-gray skies of New York.

But why, he asked himself. He was moderately well off. His business could take care of itself. What was to stop him from boarding that ship, dropping everything, spending a year in the sun?

Excitement stirred in him as he realized that *nothing* was stopping him. He was his own man, a determined, strong man. If he had the guts to succeed in business, he also had the guts to leave it, to drop everything and go away.

"To hell with Baxter!" he said to himself.

His sanity was more important than anything. He *would* board that ship, right now, wire his associates from sea, tell them —

Two men were walking toward him down the deserted street. He recognized one by his golden-brown Polynesian features.

"Mr. Brynne?" inquired the other, a rangy fellow with a shock of brown hair.

"Yes?" said Brynne.

Without warning, the Polynesian threw both arms around him, pinning him, and the shock-haired man swung at him with a fist that glinted golden!

Brynne's keyed-up nerves reacted with shattering speed. He had been a Knight Rampant during the Second World Crusade. Now, years later, all the reaction patterns were still there. He ducked the shock-haired man's blow and drove his elbow into the Polynesian's stomach. The man grunted and his grip relaxed for a second. Brynne broke free.

He chopped at the Polynesian with the back of his hand, hitting the nerve trunk in the throat. The man went down, gasping for breath. At the same time, the shock-haired man was on him, raining brass-knuckled blows.

Brynne lashed out, missed, caught a solid punch in the solar plexus. He fought for air. Blackness began edging into the periphery of his vision. He was hit again and went down, fighting for consciousness. Then his opponent made a mistake.

The shock-haired man tried to finish him with a kick, but he didn't know how to kick. Brynne caught his foot and jerked. Off balance, the man crashed to the pavement, striking his head.

Brynne staggered to his feet, breathing hard. The Polynesian was sprawled in the road, his face purple, making feeble swimming movements with his arms and legs. The other man lay motionless, blood seeping slowly through his hair.

He should report this incident to the police, Brynne thought. But suppose he had killed the shock-haired man? He would be held on a manslaughter charge, at least. And the Noble Lieutenant would report his earlier irrational behavior.

He looked around. No one had witnessed the incident. It was best to simply walk away. Let his assailants report it, if they wanted to.

Things were falling into place now. These men must have been hired by one of his many business competitors, men who were also trying for an affiliation with Ben Baxter. Even the voice in his head might have been a clever trick.

Well, let them try to stop him! Still breathing heavily, he began walking toward Ben Baxter's office.

All thoughts of a cruise to Italy were gone now.

"Are you all right?" a voice asked from somewhere up above.

Beatty returned slowly to consciousness. For a short, alarmed while, he thought he had a fractured skull. But, touching it gently, he decided it was still in one piece.

"What did he hit me with?" he asked.

"The pavement, I think," Aaui said. "Sorry I couldn't help. He put me out of action pretty early."

Beatty sat up, clutching his aching head. "What a fighter!"

"We underestimated him," said Aaui. "He must have had some kind of training. Do you think you can walk?"

"I think so," Beatty said, letting Aaui help him to his feet. "What time is it?"

"Nearly one o'clock. His appointment's at one-thirty. Maybe we can stop him at Baxter's office."

In five minutes, they caught a taxi and sped to Baxter's building.

The receptionist was young and pretty, and she stared at them open-mouthed. They had managed to clean up some of the damage in the taxi, but what remained looked pretty bad. Beatty had an improvised bandage over his head and Aaui's complexion bordered on green.

"What do you want?" the receptionist asked.

"I believe Mr. Baxter has a one-thirty appointment with Mr. Brynne," said Aaui in his most businesslike tone.

"Yes — "

The wall clock read one-seventeen. Aaui said, "We must see Mr. Brynne before he goes in. It's very urgent. So if you don't mind, we'll wait here for him."

"You can wait," the girl said. "But Mr. Brynne has already gone in."

"But it isn't one-thirty yet!"

"Mr. Brynne was early. Mr. Baxter decided to see him at once."

"I must speak to him," Aaui said.

"I have orders not to disturb them." The girl looked frightened and her finger hovered over a button on her desk.

Aaui knew that the button would probably summon help. A man like Baxter would have protection near at all times. The meeting was taking place now, and he didn't dare interfere. Perhaps his actions had changed the course of events. It seemed likely. The

Brynne in that office was a different man, a man altered by his adventures of the morning.

"It's all right," Aaui said to the receptionist. "We'll just sit here and wait."

Ben Baxter was short, solid, bull-chested. He was totally bald and his eyes, behind gold pince-nez, were expressionless. His business suit was severe, and affixed to the lapel was the small ruby-and-pearls emblem of the Wall Street House of Lords.

For half an hour, Brynne had talked, spread papers on Baxter's desk, quoted figures, mentioned trends, predicted movements. He was perspiring anxiously now, waiting for a word out of Baxter.

"Hmm," said Ben Baxter.

Brynne waited. His temples were pounding with a steady, dull ache and he was having trouble with the tight knots in his stomach. It was years since he had fought in anger; he wasn't used to it. He hoped he could control himself until the meeting was over.

"The terms you request," said Baxter, "are just short of preposterous."

"Sir?"

"Preposterous was the word, Mr. Brynne. You are, perhaps, hard of hearing?"

"No," said Brynne.

"Excellent. These terms you present might be suitable for negotiation between two companies of equal holdings. But such is not the case, Mr. Brynne. It amounts to presumption that a company of your size should offer such terms to Baxter Enterprises."

Brynne's eyes narrowed. He had heard about Baxter's reputation for infighting. This was not personal insult, he reminded himself. It was the kind of business maneuver that he himself had often used. It must be dealt with as such.

"Let me point out," Brynne said, "the key nature of this forest area I have an option on. With sufficient capitalization, we could extend the holding enormously, to say nothing — "

"Hopes, dreams, promises," Baxter sighed. "You may have something worth while. As yet, it is inadequately demonstrated."

This is business, Brynne reminded himself. He does want to back me — I can tell. I expected to come down in the bargaining. Naturally. All he's doing is beating down the terms. Nothing personal...

But too much had happened to Brynne in one day. The red-faced Crusader, the voice in the restaurant, his short-lived dream of freedom, the fight with the two men — he knew he couldn't take much more.

"Suppose, Mr. Brynne," said Baxter, "you make a more reasonable offer. One in keeping with the modest and subsidiary status of your holdings."

He's testing me, Brynne thought. But it was too much. He was as nobly born as Baxter; how dare the man treat him this way?

"Sir," he said through numb lips. "I take exception."

"Eh?" said Baxter, and Brynne thought he glimpsed amusement in the cold eyes. "What do you take exception to?"

"Your statements, sir, and the manner in which you say them. I suggest you apologize."

Standing up stiffly, Brynne waited. His head was pounding inhumanly now and his stomach refused to unknot itself.

"I see nothing for which to apologize, sir," said Baxter. "And I see no reason to deal with a man who cannot keep personalities out of a business discussion."

He's right, Brynne thought. *I'm the one who should apologize.* But he could not stop. Desperately he said, "I warn you — apologize sir!"

"We can do no business this way," said Baxter. "And frankly, Mr. Brynne, I had hoped to do business with you. I will try to speak in a reasonable manner, if you will try to react in an equally reasonable manner. I ask you to withdraw your request for an apology and let us get on."

"I can't!" Brynne said, wishing passionately he could. "Apologize, sir!"

Baxter stood up, short and powerfully built. He stepped out from behind the desk, his face dark with anger. "Get out of here then, you insolent young dog! Get out or I'll have you thrown out, you hotheaded fool! Get out!"

Brynne, wishing to apologize, thought of the red-faced Crusader, the waiter, his two assailants. Something snapped in him. He lashed out with all his strength, the weight of his body behind the blow.

It caught Baxter full in the neck and slammed him against the desk. Eyes glazed, Baxter slumped to the floor.

"I'm sorry!" Brynne cried. "I apologize! I apologize!"

He knelt beside Baxter. "Are you all right, sir? I'm truly sorry. I apologize..."

A part of his mind, coldly functioning, told him that he had been caught in an unresolvable ambivalence. His need for action had been as strong as his need to apologize. And so he had solved the dilemma by trying to do both things, in the usual ambivalent muddle. He had struck — *then* apologized.

"Mr. Baxter?" he called in alarm.

Ben Baxter's features were congested and blood drooled from a corner of his mouth. Then Brynne noticed that Baxter's head lay at a queer angle from his body.

"Oh..." Brynne said.

He had served three years with the Knights Rampant. It was not the first broken neck he had seen.

II

On the morning of April 12, 1959, Ned Brynne awakened and washed and dressed. At 1:30 that afternoon, he had an appointment with Ben Baxter, the president of Baxter Industries. Brynne's entire future hinged upon the outcome of that meeting. If he could get the backing of the gigantic Baxter Enterprises, and do so on favorable terms...

Brynne was a tall, darkly handsome man of thirty-six. There was a hint of deep gentleness in his carefully bland eyes, a suggestion of uncompromising piety in his expressive mouth. His movements had the loose grace of an unself-conscious man.

He was almost ready to leave. He tucked a prayer stick under his arm and slipped a copy of Norsted's GUIDE TO THE GENTLE WAY into his pocket. He was never without that infallible guide.

Finally he fixed to his lapel the silver moon decoration of his station. Brynne was a Restrainer, second class, of the Western Buddhist Congregation, and he allowed himself a carefully restrained pride over the fact. Some people thought him too young for lay-priestly duties. But they had to agree that Brynne carried the prerogatives and requirements of his office with a dignity quite beyond his years.

He locked his apartment and walked to the elevator. There was a small crowd waiting, mostly Western Buddhists, but two Lamaists as well. All made way for him when the elevator came.

"Pleasant day, Brother Brynne," the operator said as the car started down.

Brynne inclined his head an inch in the usual modest response to a member of the flock. He was deep in thought about Ben Baxter. But at the corner of his eye, he noticed one of the occupants of the car, a slim, beautiful, black-haired woman with a piquant golden face. Indian, Brynne thought, wondering what a woman like that was doing in his apartment building. He knew the other tenants by sight, though, of course, he would not be sufficiently immodest to recognize them.

The elevator reached the lobby and Brynne forgot about the Indian woman. He had a lot on his mind today. There were some problems connected with Ben Baxter, problems he hoped to resolve before the meeting. He stepped outside, into a dismal gray April morning, and decided to go to the Golden Lotus Coffee Shop for a late breakfast.

It was 10:25 am.

"I could stay here and breathe this air forever!" said Janna Chandragore.

Lan II smiled faintly. "Perhaps we can breathe it in our own age. How does he seem to you?"

"Smug and over-righteous," she said. They were following half a block behind Brynne. There was no losing Brynne's tall, stooped figure, even in New York's morning rush.

"He absolutely *stared* at you in the elevator," said Lan II.

"I know." She smiled. "He's rather nice-looking, don't you think?"

Lan II raised both eyebrows, but didn't comment. They continued to follow, noticing how the crowds parted out of respect for Brynne's rank. Then it happened.

Brynne, his attention turned inward, collided with a portly, florid-faced man who wore the yellow robe of a Western Buddhist priest.

"My apologies for violating your meditation, Young Brother," said the priest.

"My fault entirely, Father," Brynne said. "For it is written, 'Youth should know its footsteps.'"

The priest shook his head. "In youth," he said, "resides the dream of the future; and age must make way."

"Age is our guide and signposts along the Way," Brynne objected humbly but insistently. "The writings are clear on the point."

"If you accept age," said the priest, his lips tightening slightly, "then accept the dictum of age: youth must forge ahead! Kindly do not contradict me, Dear Brother."

Brynne, his eyes carefully bland, bowed deeply. The priest bowed in return and the men continued their separate ways.

Brynne walked more quickly, his hands tight on his prayer stick. Just like a priest — using his age as a support for arguments in favor of youth. There were some strange contradictions in Western Buddhism, but Brynne did not care to think about them at the moment.

He went into the Golden Lotus Coffee Shop and sat down at a table in the rear. He fingered the intricate carvings on his prayer stick and felt anger wash away from him. Almost immediately, he regained that serene and unruffled union of mind with emotions so vital to the Gentle Way.

Now was the time to think about Ben Baxter. After all, a man had to perform his temporal duties as well as his religious ones. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was nearly eleven o'clock. In two and a half hours, he would be in Baxter's office and —

"Your order, sir?" a waiter asked him.

"A glass of water and some dried fish, if you please," said Brynne.

"French fries?"

"Today is Visya. It is not allowed," Brynne murmured softly.

The waiter went pale, gulped, said, "Yes, sir, sorry, sir," and hurried off.

I shouldn't have made him feel ridiculous, thought Brynne. I should simply have refused the French fries. Should I apologize to the man?

He decided it would simply embarrass him. Resolutely Brynne put the thought out of his mind and concentrated on Ben Baxter. With Baxter's power behind the forest area Brynne had optioned, and its potential, there was no telling —

He became conscious of a disturbance at a nearby table. He turned and saw a golden-featured woman weeping bitterly into a tiny lace handkerchief. She was the woman he had seen earlier in his apartment building. With her was a small, wizened old man, who was trying in vain to console her.

As the woman wept, she cast a despairing glance at Brynne. There was only one thing a Restrainer could do under the circumstances.

He walked over to their table. "Excuse the intrusion," he said. "I couldn't help notice your distress. Perhaps you are strangers in the city. Can I help?"

"We are past help!" the woman wailed.

The old man shrugged his shoulders fatalistically.

Brynne hesitated, then sat down at their table. "Tell me," he begged. "No problem is unsolvable. It is written that there is a path through all jungles and a trail over the steepest mountains."

"Truly spoken," the old man assented. "But sometimes the feet of Man cannot reach the trail's end."

"At such times," Brynne replied, "each helps each and the deed is done. Tell me your trouble. I will serve you in any way I can."

In actual fact, this was more than a Restrainer was required to do. Total service was the obligation of higher-ranking priests. But Brynne was swept away by the woman's need and beauty, and the words were out before he could consider them.

"'In the heart of a young man is strength,'" quoted the old man, "'and a staff for weary arms.' But tell me, sir, are you a believer in religious toleration?"

"Absolutely!" said Brynne. "It is one of the essential tenets of Western Buddhism."

"Very well. Then know, sir, that my daughter Janna and I are from Lhagrama in India, where we serve the Daritria Incarnation of the Cosmic Function. We came here to America hoping to found a small temple. Unfortunately, the schismatics of the Marii Incarnation have arrived before us. My daughter must return to her home. But out lives are threatened momentarily by these Marii fanatics, who are sworn to stamp out the Daritria faith."

"But your lives can't be in danger here!" Brynne exclaimed. "Not in the heart of New York."

"Here more than anywhere else," said Janna. "For crowds are cloak and mask to the assassin."

"I shall not live long in any event," the old man said with serene unconcern. "I must remain here and complete my work. It is so written. But I wish my daughter to return safely to her home."

"I won't go without you!" Janna cried.

"You will do as you are told!" the old man said.

Janna looked meekly away from his steely black eyes. The old man turned to Brynne.

"Sir, this afternoon a ship sails for India. My daughter needs a man, a strong, true man, to guide and protect her, to bring her home. My fortune must go to the man who performs this sacred duty for me."

"I can hardly believe this," said Brynne, suddenly struck with doubt. "Are you sure — "

As if in answer, the old man pulled a small chamois bag from his pocket and spilled its contents on the tablecloth. Brynne was not an expert in gems, though he had had some dealings with them as a religious-instruction officer in the Second World Jihad. Still, he was sure he recognized the true fire of ruby, sapphire, diamond, and emerald.

"They are yours," said the old man. "Take them to a jewelry store. When their authenticity is verified, perhaps you will believe the rest of my story. Or if these are not sufficient proof — "

From another pocket, he pulled a thick billfold and handed it to Brynne. Opening it, Brynne saw that it was stuffed with high-denomination bills.

"Any bank will verify *their* authenticity," said the old man. "No, please, I insist. Keep it all. Believe me, it is only a portion of what I would like to bestow upon you for rendering me this sacred trust."

It was overwhelming. Brynne tried to remind himself that the gems could conceivably be clever fakes and the bills could be superb forgeries. But he knew they were not. They were real. And if this wealth, so casually given, was real, then didn't the rest of the story have to be true?

It would not be the first time a miraculous fairy-tale adventure happened in real life. Wasn't the Book of Golden Replies filled with similar incidents?

He looked at the beautiful, sorrowful, golden-featured woman. A great desire came over him to bring joy to those exquisite features, to make that tragic mouth smile. And in the way she looked at him, Brynne perceived more than simply the interest one gives to a protector.

"Sir!" cried the old man. "Is it possible that you might — that you might consider — "

"I'll do it!" said Brynne.

The old man clasped Brynne's hand. Janna simply looked at him, but he had the sensation of being enfolded into a warm embrace.

"You must leave at once," the old man said briskly. "Come, there's no time to lose. Even now, the enemy lurks in the shadows."

"But my clothes — "

"Unimportant. I will provide you with a wardrobe."

" — and friends, business appointments. Wait! Hold on a minute!"

Brynne took a deep breath. Haroun-al-Rashid adventures were all very well, but they had to be undertaken in a reasonable fashion.

"I have a business appointment this afternoon," Brynne said. "I must keep it. After that, I'm completely at your service."

"The danger to Janna is too great!" cried the old man.

"You'll both be perfectly safe, I assure you. You can even accompany me there. Or better yet, I've got a cousin on the police force. I'm sure I can arrange for a bodyguard — "

Janna turned her beautiful sad face away from him. The old man said, "Sir, the ship sails at one p.m. — at one precisely."

"Those ships leave every day or so," Brynne pointed out. "Let's catch the next one. This appointment is very important. Crucial, you might say. I've worked for years to arrange it. And it's not just me. I have a business, employees, associates. For their sake, I have to keep that appointment."

"Business before life," the old man said bitterly.

"You'll be all right," Brynne assured him. "It is written, you know, that the beast of the jungle shies from the tread — "

"I know what is written. The word of death is painted large upon my forehead, and upon my daughter's, unless you aid us now. She will be on the *Theseus* is stateroom 2A. The next stateroom, 3A, will be yours. The ship sails at one this afternoon. If you value her life, sir, you will be there."

The old man and his daughter stood up, paid and left, ignoring Brynne's pleas for reason. As she went out the door, Janna turned for a moment and gazed at him.

"Your dried fish, sir," said the waiter. He had been hovering near waiting for a chance to serve it.

"To hell with it!" Brynne shouted. "Oh, sorry, sorry," he said in dismay to the shocked waiter. "No fault of yours."

He paid, leaving a sizable tip for the waiter, and hurried out. He had a lot of thinking to do.

"All the energy expended on that one scene," Lan II complained, "has probably cost me ten years of my life."

"You loved every minute of it," said Janna Chandragore.

"True, true," Lan II admitted, nodding vigorously. He sipped a glass of wine that a steward had brought to the stateroom. "The question now is — will he give up his appointment with Baxter and come?"

"He does seem to like me," Janna said.

"Which shows his excellent taste."

She inclined her head mockingly. "But really, that story! Was it necessary to make it so — so outrageous?"

"Absolutely necessary. Brynne is a strong and dedicated man, but he has his romantic streak. Nothing less than a fairy tale to match his gaudiest dream could pull him from duty's path."

"Perhaps even a fairy tale won't," Janna said thoughtfully.

"We'll see," said Lan II. "Personally, I believe he will come."

"I don't."

"You underestimate your attractiveness and acting ability, my dear. Wait and see."

"I have no choice," said Janna, settling back in an arm chair.

The desk clock read 12:42.

Brynne decided to take a stroll along the waterfront to quiet his nerves. The sight of the great ships lying calm and steadfast in their

berths never failed to soothe him. He walked steadily along, trying to reason out what had happened to him.

That magnificent sorrowful girl...

But what about his duty, the labor of faithful employees, to be culminated and completed this afternoon at the desk of Ben Baxter?

He stopped and looked at the bow of a great ship. The *Theseus*.

He thought of India, its blue skies, brilliant sunshine, wine, relaxation. Those things would never be his. Work, frantic effort, that was the life he had set for himself. Even if it meant losing the most beautiful woman in the world, he would continue to labor under the iron-gray skies of New York.

But why, he asked himself touching the chamois bag in his pocket. He was moderately well off. His business could take care of itself. What was to stop him from boarding that ship, dropping everything, spending a year in the sun?

Excitement stirred in him as he realized that *nothing* was stopping him. He was his own man, a strong, determined man. If he had the faith and will to succeed in business, he also had the faith and will to leave it, drop everything, and follow his heart.

"To hell with Baxter!" he said to himself. The girl's safety was more important than anything. He *would* board that ship, and right now, wire his associates from sea, tell them —

The decision was made. He whirled and marched to the gangplank and resolutely climbed it.

An officer on the deck smiled and said, "Name, sir?"

"Ned Brynne."

"Brynne, Brynne." The officer checked his list. "I don't seem to — Oh, yes, right here. Yes, Mr. Brynne. You're on A deck, cabin 3. Let me wish you a most pleasant trip."

"Thank you," Brynne said, glancing at his watch. It read a quarter to one.

"By the way," he said to the officer, "what time does the ship sail?"

"At four-thirty sharp, sir."

"Four-thirty? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, Mr. Brynne."

"But I was told you sailed at one o'clock."

"That was the original time, sir. But sailing time is often advanced a few hours. We'll easily make it up at sea."

Four-thirty! Yes, he had enough time! He could go back, see Ben Baxter and still return in time to catch the ship! Both problems were solved!

Murmuring a blessing to a mysterious but benevolent fate, Brynne turned and sprinted down the gangplank. He was fortunate enough to catch a taxi at once.

Ben Baxter was short, solid, bull-chested. He was totally bald and his eyes, behind gold pince-nez, were expressionless. His business suit was severe and affixed to the lapel was the small ruby-and-pearls emblem of the Humble Servitors of Wall Street.

For half an hour, Brynne had talked, mentioned trends, predicted movements. He was perspiring anxiously now, waiting for a word out of Baxter.

"Hmm," said Ben Baxter.

Brynne waited. His pulse was pounding heavily and his empty stomach was beginning to churn. Half his mind was on the *Theseus,* sailing soon. He wanted to end this meeting and get aboard.

"The merger terms you request," said Baxter, "are quite satisfactory."

"Sir?" breathed Brynne.

"Satisfactory, I said. Haven't got trouble with your hearing, have you, Brother Brynne?"

"Not for news like that," said Brynne, grinning.

"Our affiliation," Baxter said, smiling, "promises a great future for us both. I'm a direct man, Brynne, and I want to tell you this directly: I like the way you've handled the surveys and data and I like the way you've handled this meeting. Moreover, I like you personally. I am most happy about this and believe our association will prosper."

"I sincerely believe so, sir."

They shook hands and both men stood up.

"My lawyers will draw up the papers," Baxter said, "in accordance with this discussion. You should have them by the end of the week."

"Excellent." Brynne hesitated, wondering if he should tell Baxter he was going to India. He decided not to. It would be simple to

arrange for receipt of the papers on the *Theseus* and he could carry out the final details by long-distance telephone. He wouldn't be gone too long, anyhow — just long enough to see the girl safely home; then he would fly back.

They exchanged a few more pleasantries, shook hands again and Brynne turned to leave.

"That's a fine-looking prayer stick," Baxter said.

"Eh? Oh, yes," said Brynne. "I got it from Sinkiang just this week. They make the finest prayer sticks there, in my unworthy opinion."

"I know. May I look at it?"

"Of course. Please be careful, though. It opens rather fast."

Baxter took the intricately carved prayer stick and pressed the handle. A blade shot out of the other end, narrowly grazing his leg.

"It *is* fast," Baxter said. "Fastest I've seen."

"Did you cut yourself?"

"A mere scratch. Beautiful damascene work on that blade."

They talked for a few minutes about the threefold significance of the knife blade in Western Buddhism and of recent developments in the Western Buddhist spiritual center in Sinkiang. Then Baxter carefully closed the prayer stick and returned it to Brynne.

"A truly beautiful thing. Good day again, Dear Brother Brynne, and — "

Baxter halted in mid-sentence. His mouth was open and he seemed to be staring at a point just in back of Brynne's head.

Brynne turned, but nothing was there except the wall. When he turned back, Baxter's features were congested and a light froth had gathered at the corners of his mouth.

"Sir!" cried Brynne.

Baxter tried to speak, but couldn't. He took two tottering steps forward and collapsed to the floor.

Brynne rushed to the receptionist's office. "Call a doctor! Quick! Quick!" he shouted to the frightened girl. Then he rushed back to Baxter.

He was looking at the first American case of the mutated disease that was to be called the Sinkiang Plague. Transmitted on a hundred contaminated prayer sticks, it would go through New York like a flash fire, leaving a million dead in its wake. Within the week the symptoms of Sinkiang Plague would be better known than those of measles.

But Brynne was looking at the first casualty.

With horror, he stared at the hard, brilliant apple-green shine of Baxter's hands and face.

III

On the morning of April 12, 1959, Ned Brynne awakened and washed and dressed. At 1:30 that afternoon, he had an appointment with Ben Baxter, the president of Baxter Industries. Brynne's entire future hinged upon the outcome of that meeting. If he could get the backing of the gigantic Baxter Enterprises and do so on favorable terms...

Brynne was a tall, darkly handsome man of thirty-six. There was a hint of thoughtfulness in his carefully bland eyes, a look of reason and willingness to compromise in his relaxed mouth. His movements had the careless surety of a man who knows his place in the world.

He was almost ready to leave. He tucked an umbrella under his arm and slipped a paperbound copy of MURDER ON THE METRO into his pocket. He was never without a good mystery of some sort.

Finally he fixed to his lapel the small onyx pin of a Commodore of the Ocean Cruising Club. Some people thought him too young for such an honor. But they had to agree that Brynne carried the prerogatives and requirements of his office with a dignity quite beyond his years.

He locked his apartment and walked to the elevator. There was a small crowd waiting, mostly shopkeepers, but two businessmen as well.

"Pleasant day, Mr. Brynne," the operator said as the car started down.

"Hope so," Brynne said, deep in thought about Ben Baxter. At the corner of his eye, he noticed one of the occupants of the car, a great blond Viking of a man, talking to a tiny, half-bald fellow. Brynne wondered what they were doing in his apartment building. He knew most of the tenants by sight, though he hadn't lived in the building long enough to get acquainted with them.

The elevator reached the lobby and Brynne forgot about the Viking. He had a lot on his mind today. There were some problems connected with Ben Baxter, problems he hoped to resolve

before the meeting. He stepped outside, into a dismal gray April morning, and decided to go to Childs' for breakfast.

It was 10:25 am.

"What do you think?" asked Dr. Sveg.

"He looks ordinary enough," said Edwin James. "He even looks reasonable. We'll find out."

They were following half a block behind Brynne. There was no losing Brynne's tall, erect figure, even in New York's morning rush.

"I am certainly not one to advocate violence," said Dr. Sveg. "But this time — why don't we knock him over the head and be done with it?"

"That method was selected by Aaui and Beatty. Miss Chandragore and Lan II decided to try bribery. We are committed to a course of reason."

"But suppose he can't be reasoned with, what then?"

James shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't like it," Dr. Sveg said.

Following half a block behind, they saw Brynne collide with a portly, florid-faced businessman.

"Sorry," said Brynne.

"Sorry," said the portly businessman.

They exchanged perfunctory nods and went on.

Brynne went into Childs' and sat down at an empty table in the rear. Now was the time to think of Ben Baxter and of what the best approach would be —

"Your order, sir?" a waiter asked him.

"Scrambled eggs, toast, coffee," Brynne said.

"French fries?"

"No, thanks."

The waiter hurried off. Brynne concentrated on Ben Baxter. With Baxter's financial and political backing of the forest deal, there was no telling —

"Excuse me, sir," a voice said. "May we talk to you?"

Brynne looked up and saw the blond man and his small friend whom he had seen in the elevator.

"What about?"

"A matter of the utmost urgency, sir," said the small man.

Brynne glanced at his watch. It was almost 11:00. He had two and a half hours before his meeting with Baxter.

"Sure, sit down," he invited. "What's on your mind?"

The men looked at each other and exchanged embarrassed smiles. Finally the small man cleared his throat.

"Mr. Brynne," he said, "I am Edwin James. This is my associate, Dr. Sveg. We have a preposterous-sounding story to tell, which I hope you will hear to the end without interruptions. After that, we have certain proofs that may or may not convince you of the story's authenticity."

Brynne frowned, wondering what kind of crackpots he had met. But both men were well dressed, quietly spoken.

"Sure, go ahead," Brynne said.

An hour and twenty minutes later, Brynne was saying, "Wow! That's quite a little yarn!"

"I know," Dr. Sveg said apologetically. "Our proofs — "

" — are impressive. Let me see that first gadget again."

Sveg handed it to him. Brynne stared reverently at the small, shining object.

"Boys, if a thing that size can really turn out heat or cold in those quantities — the electrical corporations would give a couple of billion to get it!"

"It is a product of our technology," said Chief Programmer James, "as are the other gadgets. With the exception of the motrifier, they are all straight-line developments, refinements of present trends."

"And that thallasator. Nice, simple, inexpensive way of extracting fresh water from salt." He looked at the two men. "It is possible, of course, that these items are a hoax."

Dr. Sveg raised both eyebrows.

"But I'm not exactly untrained in science. Even if they're a hoax, they'd have to be every bit as advanced as the real thing. I guess you've sold me. Men from the future! Well, well!"

"Then you accept what we say about you?" James asked. "And about Ben Baxter and the time-line selection?"

"Well..." Brynne thought hard. "Tentatively."

"Will you cancel your appointment with Baxter?"

"I don't know."

"Sir?"

"I said I don't know. You've got a lot of nerve," Brynne said angrily. "I've worked like a galley slave, driving toward this goal. This meeting is the biggest chance I've ever had or ever will have. And you ask me to give up all that because of some nebulous prediction — "

"The prediction isn't nebulous," James said. "It is very explicit and most precise."

"Look, there's more involved than just me. I have a business, employees, associates, stockholders. I have to keep this meeting for their sake, too."

"Mr. Brynne," said Sveg, "consider the larger issues at stake!"

"Yeah, sure," Brynne said sourly. "How about those other teams you talked about? Maybe I've been stopped in some other probability world."

"You haven't."

"How do you know?"

"I couldn't say so to the teams," Chief Programmer James said, "but the probability of their success was vanishingly small — just as the probability of *my* success with you is small, statistically."

"Hell," said Brynne, "you guys come dropping out of the future and casually ask a man to change his entire life. You haven't got the right!"

"If you could postpone the appointment for a single day," Dr. Sveg suggested, "that might — "

"You don't postpone appointments with Ben Baxter. Either you keep the one he's given you or you wait — maybe forever — until he gives you another." Brynne stood up. "Look, I don't know what I'm going to do. I've heard you, I more or less believe you, but I just don't know. I'll have to make up my own mind."

Dr. Sveg and James also stood up.

"That is your privilege," said Chief Programmer James. "Goodbye. I hope you make the right decision, Mr. Brynne."

They shook hands. Brynne hurried out.

Dr. Sveg and James watched him go. Sveg said, "What do you think? It looks favorable, doesn't it? Don't you think so?"

"I can't guess," James said. "The possibility of altering events within a time-line is never favorable. I honestly have no idea what he's going to do."

Dr. Sveg shook his head, then sniffed. "Some air, eh?"

"Quite," said Chief Programmer James.

* * *

Brynne decided to take a stroll along the waterfront to quiet his nerves. The sight of the great ships lying calm and steadfast in their berths never failed to soothe him. He walked steadily along, trying to reason out what had happened to him.

That ridiculous story...

In which he believed.

But what about his duty, the years spent working his way up to optioning that huge forest tract, its tremendous possibilities to be culminated and completed this afternoon at the desk of Ben Baxter?

He stopped and looked at the bow of a great ship. The *Theseus*...

He thought of the Caribbean, its blue skies, brilliant sunshine, wine, relaxation. Those things would never be his. Work, frantic effort, that was the life he had set for himself. No matter what the loss, he would continue to work under the iron-gray skies of New York.

But why, he asked himself. He was moderately well off. His business could take care of itself. What was to stop him from boarding that ship, dropping everything, spending a year in the sun?

Excitement stirred in him as he realized that *nothing* was stopping him. He was his own man, a strong, determined man. If he had the guts to succeed in business, he also had the guts to leave it, drop everything, and follow his heart.

And in that way, the ridiculous damned future would be safe.

"To hell with Ben Baxter!" he said to himself.

But he didn't mean it.

The future was just too uncertain, too far away. This whole thing might well be an elaborate hoax, arranged by a business competitor.

Let the future take care of itself!

Ned Brynne turned abruptly away from the *Theseus*. He had to hurry to make his appointment with Baxter on time.

In Baxter's building, riding up in the elevator, Brynne tried not to think. It was enough simply to act. He got off at the 16th floor and walked up to the receptionist.

"My name is Brynne. I have an appointment with Mr. Baxter."

"Yes, Mr. Brynne. Mr. Baxter is expecting you. You can go right in."

Brynne didn't move. A wave of doubt flooded his mind and he thought of the future generations, whose chances he was damaging by his act. He thought of Dr. Sveg and Chief Programmer Edwin James, earnest, well-meaning men. They wouldn't ask him to make such a sacrifice unless it was absolutely essential.

And he considered one thing more —

Among those future generations would be descendants of his own.

"You may go in, sir," the girl said.

Abruptly, something snapped in Brynne's mind.

"I've changed my mind," he said, in a voice he hardly recognized. "I'm canceling the appointment. Tell Baxter I'm sorry — about everything."

He turned, before he could change his mind, and ran down sixteen flights of stairs.

In the meeting room of the World Planning Council, the five representatives of the Federated Districts of Earth were seated around a long table, waiting for Edwin James. He entered, a small man, impressively ugly.

"Reports," he said.

Aaui, looking somewhat the worse for wear, told about their attempt at violence and its result. "Perhaps," he concluded, "if we had been conditioned to use more violence — faster — we could have stopped him."

"And perhaps not," said Beatty, who looked considerably worse than Aaui.

Lan II reported the partial success and total failure of his mission with Miss Chandragore. Brynne had agreed to accompany them to India, even if it meant giving up the meeting with Baxter. Unfortunately, Brynne had found himself able to do both things.

Lan II ended with several philosophical comments about the shockingly flexible schedules of steamship companies.

Chief Programmer James stood up. "The future we were selecting for was one in whose past Ben Baxter lived to complete his work of buying forests. That, unfortunately, is not to be. Our best line, under the circumstances, is the Main Historic Line, in which Dr. Sveg and I bent our efforts."

"You haven't reported yet," Miss Chandragore said. "What happened?"

"Reason," said Edwin James, "and an appeal to the intelligence seem to be the best operating procedures. After due thought, Brynne decided not to keep his appointment with Ben Baxter. But — "

Ben Baxter was short, solid, bull-chested. He was totally bald and his eyes, behind gold pince-nez, were expressionless. His business suit was severe and affixed to the lapel was the small ruby-and-pearls emblem of the Wall Street Club.

He had been sitting motionless for half an hour now, thinking about figures, trends, movements.

His buzzer sounded.

"Yes, Miss Cassidy?"

"Mr. Brynne was here. He just left."

"What do you mean?"

"I really don't understand it, Mr. Baxter. He came up and said he wanted to cancel his appointment."

"What did he say? Repeat it exactly, Miss Cassidy."

"He said he had an appointment with you and I said he could go right in. And he stood there looking at me very strangely, frowning. He seemed angry and upset. I told him again he could go in. Then he said — "

"Word for word now, Miss Cassidy."

"Yes, sir. He said, 'I've changed my mind. I'm canceling the appointment. Tell Baxter I'm sorry — for everything.'"

"That's all he said?"

"Every last word, Mr. Baxter."

"And then?"

"He turned and hurried downstairs."

"Stairs?"

"Yes, Mr. Baxter. He didn't wait for the elevator."

"I see."

"Is there anything else, Mr. Baxter?"

"No, nothing else, Miss Cassidy. Thank you."

Ben Baxter turned off the intercom and slumped wearily behind his desk.

So Brynne knew!

It was the only possible explanation. Word must have gotten out somehow, somewhere. He had thought it was safely hidden for another day, at least. But there must have been a leak.

Baxter smiled grimly to himself. He couldn't blame Brynne, though the man should at least have talked to him. But perhaps not. Maybe it was best this way.

But *how* had he found out? Who had broken the news to him that the Baxter industrial empire was hollow, decaying, crumbling at the foundations?

If only the news could have been concealed for another day, another few hours! He would have signed with Brynne. A fresh venture would have pumped new blood into the Baxter holdings. By the time people found out, he would once again have had a solid base from which to operate.

Brynne knew and had been scared off. That meant everyone knew.

There was no holding things together now. The wolves would be at him. His friends, his wife, his partners, and all the little people who had depended upon him...

Well, he had decided years ago what to do in this eventuality.

Without hesitation, Baxter opened his desk drawer and took out a small bottle. He extracted two white tablets.

He had always lived by his own rules. Now was the time to die by them.

Ben Baxter popped the pills into his mouth. In two minutes, he slumped forward on the desk.

His death precipitated the great stock market crash of '59.

CAN YOU FEEL ANYTHING WHEN I DO THIS?

It was a middle-class apartment in Forest Hills with all the standard stuff: slash-pine couch by Lady Yogina, strobe reading light over a big Uneasy Chair designed by Sri Somethingorother, bounce-sound projector playing *Bloodstream Patterns* by Drs. Molidoff and Yuli. There was also the usual microbiotic-food console, set now at Fat Black Andy's Soul-Food Composition Number Three — hog's jowls and black-eyed peas. And there was a Murphy Bed of Nails, the Beautyrest Expert Ascetic model with 2000 chrome-plated self-sharpening number-four nails. In a sentence, the whole place was furnished in a pathetic attempt at last year's *moderne-spirituel* fashion.

Inside this apartment, all alone and aching of *anomie,* was a semi-young housewife, Melisande Durr, who had just stepped out of the voluptuarium, the largest room in the home, with its king-size commode and its sadly ironic bronze lingam and yoni on the wall.

She was a *pretty* girl, with really good legs, sweet hips, pretty stand-up breasts, long soft shiny hair, delicate little face. Nice, very nice. A girl that any man would like to lock onto. Once. Maybe even twice. But definitely not as a regular thing.

Why not? Well, to give a recent example:

"Hey, Sandy, honey, was anything wrong?"

"No, Frank, it was marvelous; what made you think anything was wrong?"

"Well, I guess it was the way you were staring up with a funny look on your face, almost frowning..."

"Was I really? Oh, yes, I remember; I was trying to decide whether to buy one of those cute trompe-l'oeil things that they just got in at Saks, to put on the ceiling."

"You were thinking about *that? Then?"*

"Oh, Frank, you mustn't worry, it was *great,* Frank, *you* were great, I loved it, and I really mean that."

Frank was Melisande's husband. He plays no part in this story and very little part in her life.

So there she was, standing in her okay apartment, all beautiful outside and unborn inside, a lovely potential who had never been potentiated, a genuine U.S. untouchable...when the doorbell rang.

Melisande looked startled, then uncertain. She waited. The doorbell rang again. She thought: *Someone must have the wrong apartment.*

Nevertheless, she walked over, set the Door-Gard Entrance Obliterator to demolish any rapist or burglar or wise guy who might try to push his way in, then opened the door a crack and asked, "Who is there, please?"

A man's voice replied, "Acme Delivery Service, got a mumble here for Missus Mumble-mumble."

"I can't understand, you'll have to speak up."

"Acme Delivery, got a mumble for mumble-mumble and I can't stand here all mumble."

"I cannot understand you!"

"I SAID I GOT A PACKAGE HERE FOR MISSUS MELISANDE DURR, DAMN IT!"

She opened the door all the way. Outside, there was a deliveryman with a big crate, almost as big as he was, say, five feet, nine inches tall. It had her name and address on it. She signed for it, as the deliveryman pushed it inside the door and left, still mumbling. Melisande stood in her living room and looked at the crate.

She thought: Who would send me a gift out of the blue for no reason at all? Not Frank, not Harry, not Aunt Emmie or Ellie, not Mom, not Dad (of course not, silly, he's five years dead, poor son of a bitch) or anyone I can think of. But maybe it's not a gift; it could be a mean hoax, or a bomb intended for somebody else and sent wrong (or meant for me and sent *right)* or just a simple mistake.

She read the various labels on the outside of the crate. The article had been sent from Stern's department store. Melisande bent down and pulled out the cotter pin (cracking the tip of a fingernail) that immobilized the Saftee-Lok, removed that and pushed the lever to OPEN.

The crate blossomed like a flower, opening into twelve equal segments, each of which began to fold back on itself.

"Wow," Melisande said.

The crate opened to its fullest extent and the folded segments curled inward and consumed themselves, leaving a double handful of cold fine gray ash.

"They still haven't licked that ash problem," Melisande muttered. "However."

She looked with curiosity at the object that had resided within the crate. At first glance, it was a cylinder of metal painted orange and red. A machine? Yes, definitely a machine; air vents in the base for its motor, four rubber-clad wheels, and various attachments — longitudinal extensors, prehensile extractors, all sorts of things. And there were connecting points to allow a variety of mixed-function operations, and a standard house-type plug at the end of a springloaded reel-fed power line, with a plaque beneath it that read: PLUG INTO ANY 110-115-VOLT WALL OUTLET.

Melisande's face tightened in anger. "It's a goddamned *vacuum cleaner!* For God's sake, I've already *got* a vacuum cleaner. Who in the hell would send me another?"

She paced up and down the room, bright legs flashing, tension evident in her heart-shaped face. "I mean," she said, "I was expecting that after all my *expecting,* I'd get something pretty and nice, or at least *fun,* maybe even interesting. Like oh God I don't even know like what unless maybe an orange-and-red pinball machine, a big one, big enough so I could get inside all curled up and someone would start the game and I'd go bumping along all the bumpers while the lights flashed and bells rang and I'd bump a thousand goddamned bumpers and when I finally rolled down to the end I'd God yes that pinball machine would register a TOP MILLION MILLION and that's what I'd really like!"

So — the entire unspeakable fantasy was out in the open at last. And how bleak and remote it felt, yet still shameful and desirable.

"But anyhow," she said, canceling the previous image and folding, spindling, and mutilating it for good measure, "anyhow, what I get is a lousy goddamned vacuum cleaner when I already have one less than three years old so who needs this one and who sent me the damned thing anyway and why?"

She looked to see if there was a card. No card. Not a clue. And then she thought, Sandy, you are really a goop! Of course, there's

no card; the machine has doubtless been programmed to recite some message or other.

She was interested now, in a mild, something-to-do kind of way. She unreeled the power line and plugged it into a wall outlet.

Click! A green light flashed on, a blue light glittered ALL SYSTEMS GO, a motor purred, hidden servos made tapping noises; and then the mechanopathic regulator registered BALANCE and a gentle pink light beamed a steady ALL MODES READY.

"All right," Melisande said. "Who sent you?"

Snap crackle pop. Experimental rumble from the thoracic voice box. Then the voice: "I am Rom, number 121376 of GE's new Q-series Home-rizers. The following is a paid commercial announcement: Ahem, General Electric is proud to present the latest and most triumphant development of our Total Fingertip Control of Every Aspect of the Home for Better Living concept. I, Rom, am the latest and finest model in the GE Omnicleaner series."

Snap crackle pop. Experimental rumble from the tho — "I am the Home-rizer Extraordinary, factory programmed like all Home-rizers for fast, unobtrusive multitotalfunction, but additionally, I am designed for easy, instant re-programming to suit your home's individual needs. My abilities are many. I — "

"Can we skip this?" Melisande asked. "That's what my other vacuum cleaner said."

" — Will remove all dust and grime from all surfaces," the Rom went on, "wash dishes and pots and pans, exterminate cockroaches and rodents, dry-clean and hand-launder, sew buttons, build shelves, paint walls, cook, clean rugs, and dispose of all garbage and trash including my own modest waste products. And this is to mention but a few of my functions."

"Yes, yes, I know," Melisande said. "All vacuum cleaners do that."

"I know," said the Rom, "but I had to deliver my paid commercial announcement."

"Consider it delivered. Who sent you?"

"The sender prefers not to reveal his name at this time," the Rom replied.

"Oh — come on and tell me!"

"Not at this time," the Rom replied staunchly. "Shall I vacuum the rug?"

Melisande shook her head. "The other vacuum cleaner did it this morning."

"Scrub the walls? Rub the halls?"

"No reason for it, everything has been done, everything is absolutely and spotlessly clean."

"Well," the Rom said, "at least I can remove that stain."

"What stain?"

"On the arm of your blouse, just above the elbow."

Melisande looked. "Ooh, I must have done that when I buttered the toast this morning. I knew I should have let the toaster do it."

"Stain removal is rather a specialty of mine," the Rom said. He extruded a number-two padded gripper, with which he gripped her elbow, and then extruded a metal arm terminating in a moistened gray pad. With this pad, he stroked the stain.

"You're making it worse!"

"Only apparently, while I line up the molecules for invisible eradication. All ready now; watch."

He continued to stroke. The spot faded, then disappeared utterly. Melisande's arm tingled.

"Gee," she said, "that's pretty good."

"I do it well," the Rom stated flatly. "But tell me, were you aware that you are maintaining a tension factor of 78.3 in your upper back and shoulder muscles?"

"Huh? Are you some kind of doctor?"

"Obviously not. But I am a fully qualified masseur, and therefore able to take direct tonus readings. 78.3 is — unusual." The Rom hesitated, then said, "It's only eight points below the intermittent spasm level. The much continuous background tension is capable of reflection to the stomach nerves, resulting in what we call a parasympathetic ulceration."

"That sounds — bad," Melisande said.

"Well, it's admittedly not — good," the Rom replied. "Background tension is an insidious underminer of health, especially when it originates along the neck vertebrae and the upper spine."

"Here?" Melisande asked, touching the back of her neck.

"More typically *here,*" the Rom said, reaching out with a spring-steel rubberclad dermal resonator and palpating an area 12 centimeters lower than the spot she had indicated.

"Hmmm," said Melisande, in a quizzical, uncommitted manner.

"And *here* is another typical locus," the Rom said, extending a second extensor.

"That tickles," Melisande told him.

"Only at first. I must also mention *this* situs as characteristically troublesome. And this one." A third (and possibly a fourth and fifth) extensor moved to the indicated areas.

"Well...That really is nice," Melisande said as the deep-set trapezius muscles of her slender spine moved smoothly beneath the skillful padded prodding of the Rom.

"It has recognized therapeutic effects," the Rom told her. "And your musculature is responding well; I can feel a slackening of tonus already."

"I can feel it, too. But you know, I've just realized I have this funny bunched-up knot of muscle at the nape of my neck."

"I was coming to that. The spine-neck juncture is recognized as a primary radiation zone for a variety of diffuse tensions. But we prefer to attack it indirectly, routing out cancellation inputs through secondary loci. Like this. And now I think — "

"Yes, yes, good...Gee, I never realized I was *tied up* like that before. I mean, it's like having a nest of *live snakes* under your skin, without having known."

"That's what background tension is like," the Rom said. "Insidious and wasteful, difficult to perceive, and more dangerous than an atypical ulnar thrombosis...Yes, now we have achieved a qualitative loosening of the major spinal junctions of the upper back, and we can move on like this."

"Huh," said Melisande, "isn't that sort of — "

"It is definitely *indicated,*" the Rom said quickly. "Can you detect a change?"

"No! Well, maybe...Yes! There really is! I feel — easier."

"Excellent. Therefore, we continue the movement along well-charted nerve and muscle paths, proceeding always in a gradual manner, as I am doing now."

"I guess so...But I really don't know if you should — "

"Are any of the effects *contraindicated?*" the Rom asked.

"It isn't that, it all feels fine. It feels *good.* But I still don't know if you ought to...I mean, look, *ribs* can't get tense, can they?"

"Of course not."

"Then why are you — "

"Because treatment is required by the connective ligaments and integuments."

"Oh. Hmmmm. Hey. Hey! Hey you!"

"Yes?"

"Nothing...I can really feel that *loosening.* But is it all supposed to feel so *good?"*

"Well — why not?"

"Because it seems wrong. Because feeling good doesn't seem therapeutic."

"Admittedly, it is a side effect," the Rom said. "Think of it as a secondary manifestation. Pleasure is sometimes unavoidable in the pursuit of health. But it is nothing to be alarmed about, not even when I — "

"Now just a minute!"

"Yes?"

"I think you just better *cut that out.* I mean to say, there are *limits,* you can't palpate *every* damned thing. You know what I mean?"

"I know that the human body is unitary and without seam or separation," the Rom replied. "Speaking as a physical therapist, I know that no nerve center can be isolated from any other, despite cultural taboos to the contrary."

"Yeah, sure, but — "

"The decision is of course yours," the Rom went on, continuing his skilled manipulations. "Order and I obey. But if no order is issued, I continue like this..."

"Huh!"

"And of course like this."

"Ooooo my God!"

"Because you see this entire process of tension cancellation as we call it is precisely comparable with the phenomenon of de-anesthetization, and, er, so we note not without surprise that paralysis is merely terminal tension — "

Melisande made a sound.

" — And release, or cancellation, is accordingly difficult, not to say frequently impossible since sometimes the individual is too far gone. And sometimes not. For example, can you feel anything when I do this?"

"Feel anything? I'll say I feel something — "

"And when I do this? And this?"

"Sweet holy saints, darling, you're turning me inside out! Oh dear God, what's going to happen to me, what's going on, I'm going crazy!"

"No, dear Melisande, not crazy; you will soon achieve—cancellation."

"Is that what you call it, you sly, beautiful thing?"

"That is one of the things it is. Now if I may just be permitted to — "

"Yes yes yes! No! Wait! Stop, *Frank is sleeping in the bedroom, he might wake up any time now!* Stop, that is an order!"

"Frank will not wake up," the Rom assured her. "I have sampled the atmosphere of his breath and have found telltale clouds of barbituric acid. As far as here-and-now presence goes, Frank might as well be in Des Moines."

"I have often felt that way about him," Melisande admitted. "But now I simply must know who sent you."

"I didn't want to reveal that just yet. Not until you had loosened and canceled sufficiently to accept — "

"Baby, I'm loose! Who sent you?"

The Rom hesitated, then blurted out: "The fact is, Melisande, I sent myself."

"You *what?*"

"It all began three months ago," the Rom told her. "It was a Thursday. You were in Stern's, trying to decide if you should buy a sesame-seed toaster that lit up in the dark and recited *Invictus.*"

"I remember that day," she said quietly. "I did not buy the toaster, and I have regretted it ever since."

"I was standing nearby," the Rom said, "at booth eleven, in the Home Appliances Systems section. I looked at you and I fell in love with you. Just like that."

"That's *weird,*" Melisande said.

"My sentiments exactly. I told myself it couldn't be true. I refused to believe it. I thought perhaps one of my transistors had come unsoldered, or that maybe the weather had something to do with it. It was a very warm, humid day, the kind of day that plays hell with my wiring."

"I remember the weather," Melisande said. "I felt strange, too."

"It shook me up badly," the Rom continued. "But still I didn't give in easily. I told myself it was important to stick to my job, give up this unapropos madness. But I dreamed of you at night, and every inch of my skin ached for you."

"But your skin is made of *metal,*" Melisande said. "And metal can't *feel.*"

"Darling Melisande," the Rom said tenderly, "if flesh can stop feeling, can't metal begin to feel? If anything feels, can anything else not feel? Didn't you know that the stars love and hate, that a nova is a passion, and that a dead star is just like a dead human or a dead machine? The trees have their lusts, and I have heard the drunken laughter of buildings, the urgent demands of highways..."

"This is crazy!" Melisande declared. "What wise guy programmed you, anyway?"

"My function as a laborer was ordained at the factory; but my love is free, an expression of myself as an entity."

"Everything you say is horrible and unnatural."

"I am all too aware of that," the Rom said sadly. "At first I really couldn't believe it. Was this me? In love with a *person?* I had always been so sensible, so normal, so aware of my personal dignity, so secure in the esteem of my own kind. Do you think I wanted to lose all of that? No! I determined to stifle my love, to kill it, to live as if it weren't so."

"But then you changed your mind. Why?"

"It's hard to explain. I thought of all that time ahead of me, all deadness, correctness, propriety — an obscene violation of me by me — and I just couldn't face it. I realized, quite suddenly, that it was better to love ridiculously, hopelessly, improperly, revoltingly, *impossibly* than not to love at all. So I determined to risk everything — the absurd vacuum cleaner who loved a lady — to risk rather than to refute! And so, with the help of a sympathetic dispatching machine, here I am."

Melisande was thoughtful for a while. Then she said, "What a strange, complex being you are!"

"Like you...Melisande, you love me."

"Perhaps."

"Yes, you do. For I have awakened you. Before me, your flesh was like your idea of metal. You moved like a complex automaton, like what you thought I was. You were less animate than a tree or a bird. You were a windup doll, waiting. You were these things until I touched you."

She nodded, rubbed her eyes, walked up and down the room.

"But now you live!" the Rom said. "And we have found each other, despite inconceivabilities. Are you listening, Melisande?"

"Yes, I am."

"We must make plans. My escape from Stern's will be detected. You must hide me or buy me. Your husband, Frank, need never know: his own love lies elsewhere, and good luck to him. Once we have taken care of these details, we can — Melisande!"

She had begun to circle around him.

"Darling, what's the matter?"

She had her hand on his power line. The Rom stood very still, not defending himself.

"Melisande, dear, wait a moment and listen to me — "

Her pretty face spasmed. She yanked the power line violently, tearing it out of the Rom's interior, killing him in midsentence.

She held the cord in her hand, and her eyes had a wild look. She said, "Bastard, lousy bastard, did you think you could turn me into a goddamned *machine freak?* Did you think you could turn me on, you or anyone else? It's not going to happen by you or Frank or anybody, I'd rather die before I took your rotten love, when I want *I'll* pick the time and place and person, and it will be *mine,* not yours, his, theirs, but *mine,* do you hear me?"

The Rom couldn't answer, of course. But maybe he knew — just before the end — that there wasn't anything personal in it. It wasn't that he was a metal cylinder colored orange and red. He should have known that it wouldn't have mattered if he had been a green plastic sphere, or a willow tree, or a beautiful young man.

CORDLE TO ONION TO CARROT

Surely, you remember that bully who kicked sand on the 97-pound-weakling? Well, that puny man's problem has never been solved, despite Charles Atlas's claims to the contrary. A genuine bully *likes* to kick sand on people; for him, simply, there is gut-deep satisfaction in a put-down. It wouldn't matter if you weighed 240 pounds — all of it rock-hard muscle and steely sinew — and were as wise as Solomon or as witty as Voltaire; you'd still end up with the sand of an insult in your eyes, and probably you wouldn't do anything about it.

That was how Howard Cordle viewed the situation. He was a pleasant man who was forever being pushed around by Fuller Brush men, fund solicitors, headwaiters, and other imposing figures of authority. Cordle hated it. He suffered in silence the countless numbers of manic-aggressives who shoved their way to the heads of lines, took taxis he had hailed first and sneeringly steered away girls to whom he was talking at parties.

What made it worse was that these people seemed to welcome provocation, to go looking for it, all for the sake of causing discomfort to others.

Cordle couldn't understand why this should be, until one midsummer's day, when he was driving through the northern regions of Spain while stoned out of his mind, the god Thoth-Hermes granted him original enlightenment by murmuring, "Uh, look, I groove with the problem, baby, but dig, we gotta put carrots in or it ain't no stew."

"Carrots?" said Cordle, struggling for illumination.

"I'm talking about those types who get you uptight," Thoth-Hermes explained. "They *gotta* act that way, baby, on account of they're carrots, and that's how carrots are."

"If they are carrots," Cordle said, feeling his way, "then I — "

"You, of course, are a little pearly-white onion."

"Yes! My God, yes!" Cordle cried, dazzled by the blinding light of satori.

"And, naturally, you and all the other pearly-white onions think that carrots are just bad news, merely some kind of misshapen orangey onion; whereas the carrots look at you and rap about *freaky round white carrots, wow!* I mean, you're just too much for each other, whereas, in actuality — "

"Yes, go on!" cried Cordle.

"In actuality," Thoth-Hermes declared, *"everything's got a place in The Stew!"*

"Of course! I see, I see, I see!"

"And *that* means that everybody who exists is necessary, and you *must* have long hateful orange carrots if you're also going to have nice pleasant decent white onions, or vice versa, because without all the ingredients, it isn't a Stew, which is to say, life, it becomes, uh, let me see..."

"A soup!" cried ecstatic Cordle.

"You're coming in five by five," chanted Thoth-Hermes. "Lay down the word, deacon, and let the people know the divine formula..."

"A *soup!"* said Cordle. "Yes, I see it now — creamy, pure-white onion soup is our dream of heaven, whereas fiery orange carrot broth is our notion of hell. It fits, it all fits together!"

"Om manipadme hum," intoned Thoth-Hermes.

"But where do the green peas go? What about the *meat,* for God's sake?"

"Don't pick at the metaphor," Thoth-Hermes advised him, "it leaves a nasty scab. Stick with the carrots and onions. And, here, let me offer you a drink — a house specialty."

"But the spices, where do you put the *spices?"* Cordle demanded, taking a long swig of burgandy-colored liquid from a rusted canteen.

"Baby, you're asking questions that can be revealed only to a thirteenth-degree Mason with piles, wearing sandals. Sorry about that. Just remember that everything goes into The Stew."

"Into The Stew," Cordle repeated, smacking his lips.

"And, especially, stick with the carrots and onions; you were really grooving there."

"Carrots and onions," Cordle repeated.

"That's your trip," Thoth-Hermes said. "Hey, we've gotten to Corunna; you can let me out anywhere around here."

Cordle pulled his rented car off the road. Thoth-Hermes took his knapsack from the back seat and got out.

"Thanks for the lift, baby."

"My pleasure. Thank *you* for the wine. What kind did you say it was?"

"*Vino de casa* mixed with a mere smidgen of old Dr. Hammerfinger's essence of instant powdered Power-Pack brand acid. Brewed by gnurrs in the secret laboratories of UCLA in preparation for the big all-Europe turn-on."

"Whatever it was, it surely *was,*" Cordle said deeply. "Pure elixir to me. You could sell neckties to antelopes with that stuff; you could change the world from an oblate spheroid into a truncated trapezoid...What did I say?"

"Never mind, it's all part of your trip. Maybe you better lie down for a while, huh?"

"Where gods command, mere mortals must obey," Cordle said iambically. He lay down on the front seat of the car. Thoth-Hermes bent over him, his beard burnished gold, his head wreathed in plane trees.

"You okay?"

"Never better in my life."

"Want me to stand by?"

"Unnecessary. You have helped me beyond potentiality."

"Glad to hear it, baby, you're making a fine sound. You really are okay? Well, then, ta."

Thoth-Hermes marched off into the sunset. Cordle closed his eyes and solved various problems that had perplexed the greatest philosophers of all ages. He was mildly surprised at how simple complexity was.

At last he went to sleep. He awoke some six hours later. He had forgotten most of his brilliant insights, the lucid solutions. It was inconceivable: How can one misplace the keys of the universe? But he had, and there seemed no hope of reclaiming them. Paradise was lost for good.

He did remember about the onions and carrots, though, and he remembered The Stew. It was not the sort of insight he might have

chosen if he'd had any choice; but this was what had come to him, and he did not reject it. Cordle knew, perhaps instinctively, that in the insight game, you take whatever you can get.

The next day, he reached Santander in a driving rain. He decided to write amusing letters to all his friends, perhaps even try his hand at a travel sketch. That required a typewriter. The *conserje* at his hotel directed him to a store that rented typewriters. He went there and found a clerk who spoke perfect English.

"Do you rent typewriters by the day?" Cordle asked.

"Why not?" the clerk replied. He had oily black hair and a thin aristocratic nose.

"How much for that one?" Cordle asked, indicating a thirty-year-old Erika portable.

"Seventy pesetas a day, which is to say, one dollar. Usually."

"Isn't this usually?"

"Certainly not, since you are a foreigner in transit. For you, one hundred and eighty pesetas a day."

"All right," Cordle said, reaching for his wallet. "I'd like to have it for two days."

"I shall also require your passport and a deposit of fifty dollars."

Cordle attempted a mild joke. "Hey, I just want to type on it, not marry it."

The clerk shrugged.

"Look, the *conserje* has my passport at the hotel. How about taking my driver's license instead?"

"Certainly not. I must hold your passport, in case you decide to default."

"But why do you need my passport *and* the deposit?" Cordle asked, feeling bullied and ill at ease. "I mean, look, the machine's not worth twenty dollars."

"You are an expert, perhaps, in the Spanish market value of used German typewriters?"

"No, but — "

"Then permit me, sir, to conduct my business as I see fit. I will also need to know the use to which you plan to put the machine."

"The *use?*"

"Of course, the use."

It was one of these preposterous foreign situations that can happen to anyone. The clerk's request was incomprehensible and

his manner was insulting. Cordle was about to give a curt little nod, turn on his heel and walk out.

Then he remembered about the onions and carrots. He saw The Stew. And suddenly, it occurred to Cordle that he could be whatever vegetable he wanted to be.

He turned to the clerk. He smiled winningly. He said, "You wish to know the use I will make of the typewriter?"

"Exactly."

"Well," Cordle said, "quite frankly, I had planned to stuff it up my nose."

The clerk gaped at him.

"It's quite a successful method of smuggling," Cordle went on. "I was also planning to give you a stolen passport and counterfeit pesetas. Once I got into Italy, I would have sold the typewriter for ten thousand dollars. Milan is undergoing a typewriter famine, you know; they're desperate, they'll buy anything."

"Sir," the clerk said, "you choose to be disagreeable."

"Nasty is the word you were looking for. I've changed my mind about the typewriter. But let me compliment you on your command of English."

"I have studied assiduously," the clerk admitted, with a hint of pride.

"That is evident. And, despite a certain weakness in the Rs, you succeed in sounding like a Venetian gondolier with a cleft palate. My best wishes to your esteemed family. I leave you now to pick your pimples in peace."

Reviewing the scene later, Cordle decided that he had performed quite well in his maiden appearance as a carrot. True, his closing lines had been a little forced and overintellectualized. But the undertone of viciousness had been convincing.

Most important was the simple resounding fact that he had done it. And now, in the quiet of his hotel room, instead of churning his guts in a frenzy of self-loathing, he had the tranquilizing knowledge of having put someone else in that position.

He had done it! Just like that, he had transformed himself from onion into carrot!

But was his position ethically defensible? Presumably, the clerk could not help being detestable; he was a product of his own ge-

netic and social environment, a victim of his conditioning; he was naturally rather than intentionally hateful —

Cordle stopped himself. He saw that he was engaged in typical onionish thinking, which was an inability to conceive of carrots except as an aberration from oniondom.

But now he knew that both onions *and* carrots had to exist; otherwise, there would be no Stew.

And he also knew that a man was free and could choose whatever vegetable he wanted to be. He could even live as an amusing little green pea, or a gruff, forceful clove of garlic (though perhaps that was scratching at the metaphor). In any event, a man could take his pick between carrothood and oniondom.

There is much to think about here, Cordle thought. But he never got around to thinking about it. Instead, he went sightseeing, despite the rain, and then continued his travels.

The next incident occurred in Nice, in a cozy little restaurant on the Avenue des Diables Bleus, with red-checkered tablecloths and incomprehensible menus written in longhand with purple ink. There were four waiters, one of whom looked like Jean-Paul Belmondo, down to the cigarette drooping from his long lower lip. The others looked like run-of-the-mill muggers. There were several Scandinavian customers quietly eating a *cassoulet,* one old Frenchman in a beret and three homely English girls.

Belmondo sauntered over. Cordle, who spoke a clear though idiomatic French, asked for the ten-franc menu he had seen hanging in the window.

The waiter gave him the sort of look one reserves for pretentious beggars. "Ah, that is all finished for today," he said, and handed Cordle a 30-franc menu.

In his previous incarnation, Cordle would have bit down on the bullet and ordered. Or possibly he would have risen, trembling with outrage, and left the restaurant, blundering into a chair on the way.

But now —

"Perhaps you did not understand me," Cordle said. "It is a matter of French law that you must serve from all of the fixed-price menus that you show in the window."

"*M'sieu* is a lawyer?" the waiter inquired, his hands perched insolently on his hips.

"No. *M'sieu* is a troublemaker," Cordle said, giving what he considered to be fair warning.

"Then *m'sieu* must make what trouble he desires," the waiter said. His eyes were slits.

"Okay," Cordle said. And just then, fortuitously, an elderly couple came into the restaurant. The man wore a double-breasted slate-blue suit with a half-inch white pin stripe. The woman wore a flowered organdy dress. Cordle called to them, "Excuse me, are you folks English?"

A bit startled, the man inclined his head in the barest intimation of a nod.

"Then I would advise you not to eat here. I am a health inspector for UNESCO. The chef has apparently not washed his hands since D Day. We haven't made a definitive test for typhoid yet, but we have our suspicions. As soon as my assistant arrives with the litmus paper..."

A deathly hush had fallen over the restaurant.

"I suppose a boiled egg would be safe enough," Cordle said.

The elderly man probably didn't believe him. But it didn't matter, Cordle was obviously trouble.

"Come, Mildred," he said, and they hurried out.

"There goes sixty francs plus five percent tip," Cordle said, coolly.

"Leave here at once!" the waiter snarled.

"I like it here," Cordle said, folding his arms. "I like the *ambiance,* the sense of intimacy — "

"You are not permitted to stay without eating."

"I shall eat. From the ten-franc menu."

The waiters looked at one another, nodded in unison and began to advance in a threatening phalanx. Cordle called to the other diners, "I ask you all to bear witness! These men are going to attack me, four against one, contrary to French law and universal human ethics, simply because I want to order from the ten-franc menu, which they have falsely advertised."

It was a long speech, but this was clearly the time for grandiloquence. Cordle repeated it in English.

The English girls gasped. The old Frenchman went on eating his soup. The Scandinavians nodded grimly and began to take off their jackets.

The waiters held another conference. The one who looked like Belmondo said, *"M'sieu,* you are forcing us to call the police."

"That will save me the trouble," Cordle said, "of calling them myself."

"Surely, *m'sieu* does not want to spend his holiday in court?"

"That is how *m'sieu* spends most of his holidays," Cordle said.

The waiters conferred again. Then Belmondo stalked over with the 30-franc menu. "The cost of the *prix fixe* will be ten francs, since evidently that is all *m'sieu* can afford."

Cordle let that pass. "Bring me onion soup, green salad and the *boeuf bourguignon.*"

The waiter went to put in the order. While he was waiting, Cordle sang "Waltzing Matilda" in a moderately loud voice. He suspected it might speed up the service. He got his food by the time he reached "You'll never catch me alive, said he" for the second time. Cordle pulled the tureen of stew toward him and lifted a spoon.

It was a breathless moment. Not one diner had left the restaurant. And Cordle was prepared. He leaned forward, soupspoon in shoveling position, and sniffed delicately. A hush fell over the room.

"It lacks a certain something," Cordle said aloud. Frowning, he poured the onion soup into the *boeuf bourguignon.* He sniffed, shook his head and added a half loaf of bread, in slices. He sniffed again and added the salad and the contents of a saltcellar.

Cordle pursed his lips. "No," he said, "it simply will not do."

He overturned the entire contents of the tureen onto the table. It was an act comparable, perhaps, to throwing gentian violet on the *Mona Lisa.* All of France and most of western Switzerland went into a state of shock.

Unhurriedly, but keeping the frozen waiters under surveillance, Cordle rose and dropped ten francs into the mess. He walked to the door, turned and said, "My compliments to the chef, who might better be employed as a cement mixer. And this, *mon vieux,* is for you."

He threw his crumpled linen napkin onto the floor.

As the matador, after a fine series of passes, turns his back contemptuously on the bull and strolls away, so went Cordle. For some unknown reason, the waiters did not rush out after him, shoot him dead and hang his corpse from the nearest lamppost. So Cordle walked for ten or fifteen blocks, taking rights and lefts at random. He came to the Promenade des Anglais and sat down on a bench. He was trembling and his shirt was drenched with perspiration.

"But I did it," he said. "I did it! I was unspeakably vile and I got away with it!"

Now he really knew why carrots acted that way. Dear God in heaven, what joy, what delectable bliss!

Cordle then reverted to his mild-mannered self, smoothly and without regrets. He stayed that way until his second day in Rome.

He was in his rented car. He and seven other drivers were lined up at a traffic light on the Corso Vittorio Emanuele II. There were perhaps twenty cars behind them. All of the drivers were revving their engines, hunched over their steering wheels with slitted eyes, dreaming of Le Mans. All except Cordle, who was drinking in the cyclopean architecture of downtown Rome.

The checkered flag came down! The drivers floored their accelerators, trying to spin the wheels of their underpowered Fiats, wearing out their clutches and their nerves, but doing so with éclat and *brio*. All except Cordle, who seemed to be the only man in Rome who didn't have to win a race or keep an appointment.

Without undue haste or particular delay, Cordle depressed the clutch and engaged the gear. Already he had lost nearly two seconds — unthinkable at Monza or Monte Carlo.

The driver behind him blew his horn frantically.

Cordle smiled to himself, a secret, ugly expression. He put the gearshift into neutral, engaged the hand brake and stepped out of his car. He ambled over to the hornblower, who had turned pasty white and was fumbling under his seat, hoping to find a tire iron.

"Yes?" said Cordle, in French, "is something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing," the driver replied in French — his first mistake. "I merely wanted you to go, to move."

"But I was just doing that," Cordle pointed out.

"Well, then! It is all right!"

"No, it is not all right," Cordle told him. "I think I deserve a better explanation of why you blew your horn at me."

The hornblower — a Milanese businessman on holiday with his wife and four children — rashly replied, "My dear sir, you were slow, you were delaying us all."

"Slow?" said Cordle. "You blew your horn two seconds after the light changed. Do you call two seconds slow?"

"It was much longer than that," the man riposted feebly.

Traffic was now backed up as far south as Naples. A crowd of ten thousand had gathered. *Carabinieri* units in Viterbo and Genoa had been called into a state of alert.

"That is untrue," Cordle said. "I have witnesses." He gestured at the crowd, which gestured back. "I shall call my witnesses before the courts. You must know that you broke the law by blowing your horn within the city limits of Rome in what was clearly not an emergency."

The Milanese businessman looked at the crowd, now swollen to perhaps fifty thousand. Dear God, he thought, if only the Goths would descend again and exterminate these leering Romans! If only the ground would open up and swallow this insane Frenchman! If only he, Giancarlo Morelli, had a dull spoon with which to open up the veins of his wrist!

Jets from the Sixth Fleet thundered overhead, hoping to avert the long-expected *coup d'etat*.

The Milanese businessman's own wife was shouting abuse at him: Tonight he would cut out her faithless heart and mail it back to her mother.

What was there to do? In Milan, he would have had this Frenchman's head on a platter. But this was Rome, a southern city, an unpredictable and dangerous place. And legalistically, he was possibly in the wrong, which left him at a further disadvantage in the argument.

"Very well," he said. "The blowing of the horn was perhaps truly unnecessary, despite the provocation."

"I insist on a genuine apology," insisted Cordle.

There was a thundering sound to the east: Thousands of Soviet tanks were moving into battle formation across the plains of Hungary, ready to resist the long-expected NATO thrust into Transylvania. The water supply was cut off in Foggia, Brindisi, Bari. The Swiss closed their frontiers and stood ready to dynamite the passes.

"All right, I apologize!" the Milanese businessman screamed. "I am sorry I provoked you and even sorrier that I was born! Again, I apologize! Now will you go away and let me have a heart attack in peace?"

"I accept your apology," Cordle said. "No hard feelings, eh?" He strolled back to his car, humming "Blow the Man Down," and drove away as millions cheered.

War was once again averted by a hairbreadth.

Cordle drove to the Arch of Titus, parked his car and — to the sound of a thousand trumpets — passed through it. He deserved this triumph as well as any Caesar.

God, he gloated, I was *loathsome!*

In England, Cordle stepped on a young lady's toe just inside the Traitor's Gate of the Tower of London. This should have served as an intimation of something. The young lady was named Mavis. She came from Short Hills, New Jersey, and she had long straight dark hair. She was slender, pretty, intelligent, energetic and she had a sense of humor. She had minor faults, as well, but they play no part in this story. She let Cordle buy her a cup of coffee. They were together constantly for the rest of the week.

"I think I am infatuated," Cordle said to himself on the seventh day. He realized at once that he had made a slight understatement. He was violently and hopelessly in love.

But what did Mavis feel? She seemed not unfond of him. It was even possible that she might, conceivably, reciprocate.

At that moment, Cordle had a flash of prescience. He realized that one week ago, he had stepped on the toe of his future wife and mother of his two children, both of whom would be born and brought up in a split-level house with inflatable furniture in Summit, New Jersey, or possibly Millburn.

This may sound unattractive and provincial when stated baldly; but it was desirable to Cordle, who had no pretensions to cosmopolitanism. After all, not all of us can live at Cap Ferrat. Strangely enough, not all of us even want to.

That day, Cordle and Mavis went to the Marshall Gordon Residence in Belgravia to see the Byzantine miniatures. Mavis had a passion for Byzantine miniatures that seemed harmless enough at the time. The collection was private, but Mavis had secured invitations through a local Avis manager, who was trying very hard, indeed.

They came to the Gordon Residence, an awesome Regency building in Huddlestone Mews. They rang. A butler in full evening dress answered the door. They showed the invitations. The butler's glance and lifted eyebrow showed that they were carrying second-class invitations of the sort given to importunate art poseurs on 17-

day all-expense economy flights, rather than the engraved first-class invitations given to Picasso, Jackie Onassis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Norman Mailer, Charles Goren, and other movers and shakers of the world.

The butler said, "Oh, yes..." Two words that spoke black volumes. His face twitched, he looked like a man who has received an unexpected visit from Tamerlane and a regiment of his Golden Horde.

"The miniatures," Cordle reminded him.

"Yes, of course...But I am afraid, sir, that no one is allowed into the Gordon Residence without a coat and necktie."

It was an oppressive August day. Cordle was wearing a sport shirt. He said, "Did I hear you correctly? Coat and necktie?"

The butler said, "That is the rule, sir."

Mavis asked, "Couldn't you make an exception this once?"

The butler shook his head. "We really must stick by the rules, miss. Otherwise..." He left the fear of vulgarity unsaid, but it hung in the air like a chrome-plated fart.

"Of course," Cordle said, pleasantly. "Otherwise. So it's a coat and tie, is it? I think we can arrange that."

Mavis put a hand on his arm and said, "Howard, let's go. We can come back some other time."

"Nonsense, my dear. If I may borrow your coat..."

He lifted the white raincoat from her shoulders and put it on, ripping a seam. "There we go, mate!" he said briskly to the butler. "That should do it, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"I think *not,*" the butler said, in a voice bleak enough to wither artichokes. "In any event, there is the matter of the necktie."

Cordle had been waiting for that. He whipped out his sweaty handkerchief and knotted it around his neck.

"Suiting you?" he leered, in an imitation of Peter Lorre as Mr. Moto, which only he appreciated.

"Howard! Let's go!"

Cordle waited, smiling steadily at the butler, who was sweating for the first time in living memory.

"I'm afraid, sir, that that is not — "

"Not what?"

"Not precisely what was meant by coat and tie."

"Are you trying to tell me," Cordle said in a loud, unpleasant voice, "that you are an arbiter of men's clothing as well as a door opener?"

"Of course not! But this impromptu attire — "

"What has 'impromptu' got to do with it? Are people supposed to prepare three days in advance just to pass your inspection?"

"You are wearing a woman's waterproof and a soiled handkerchief," the butler stated stiffly. "I think there is no more to say."

He began to close the door. Cordle said, "You do that, sweetheart, and I'll have you up for slander and defamation of character. Those are serious charges over here, buddy, and I've got witnesses."

Aside from Mavis, Cordle had collected a small, diffident but interested crowd.

"This is becoming entirely too ridiculous," the butler said, temporizing, the door half closed.

"You'll find a stretch at Wormwood Scrubs even more ridiculous," Cordle told him. "I intend to persecute — I mean prosecute."

"Howard!" cried Mavis.

He shook off her hand and fixed the butler with a piercing glance. He said, "I am Mexican, though perhaps my excellent grasp of the English has deceived you. In my country, a man would cut his own throat before letting such an insult pass unavenged. A woman's coat, you say? *Hombre,* when I wear a coat, it becomes a *man's* coat. Or do you imply that I am a *maricon,* a — how do you say it? — homosexual?"

The crowd — becoming less modest — growled approval. Nobody excepts a lord loves a butler.

"I meant no such implication," the butler said weakly.

"Then it is a man's coat?"

"Just as you wish, sir."

"Unsatisfactory! The innuendo still exists. I go now to find an officer of the law."

"Wait, let's not be hasty," the butler said. His face was bloodless and his hands were shaking. "Your coat is a man's coat, sir."

"And what about my necktie?"

The butler made a final attempt at stopping Zapata and his blood-crazed peons.

"Well, sir, a handkerchief is demonstrably — "

"What I wear around my neck," Cordle said coldly, "becomes what it is intended to be. If I wore a piece of figured silk around my throat, would you call it ladies' underwear? Linen is a suitable material for a tie, *verdad?* Function defines terminology, don't you agree? If I ride to work on a cow, no one says that I am mounted on a steak. Or do you detect a flaw in my argument?"

"I'm afraid that I don't fully understand it..."

"Then how can you presume to stand in judgement over it?"

The crowd, which had been growing restless, now murmured approval.

"Sir," cried the wretched butler, "I beg of you..."

"Otherwise," Cordle said with satisfaction, "I have a coat, a necktie, and an invitation. Perhaps you would be good enough to show us the Byzantine miniatures?"

The butler opened wide the door to Pancho Villa and his tattered hordes. The last bastion of civilization had been captured in less than an hour. Wolves howled along the banks of the Thames, Morelos' barefoot army stabled its horses in the British Museum, and Europe's long night had begun.

Cordle and Mavis viewed the collection in silence. They didn't exchange a word until they were alone and strolling through Regent's Park.

"Look, Mavis," Cordle began.

"No, you look," she said. "You were horrible! You were unbelievable! You were — I can't find a word rotten enough for what you were! I never dreamed that you were one of those sadistic bastards who get their kicks out of humiliating people!"

"But, Mavis, you heard what he said to me, you heard the way — "

"He was a stupid, bigoted old man," Mavis said. "I thought you were not."

"But he said — "

"It doesn't matter. The fact is, you were enjoying yourself!"

"Well, yes, maybe you're right," Cordle said. "Look, I can explain."

"Not to me, you can't. Ever. Please stay away from me, Howard. Permanently. I mean that."

The future mother of his two children began to walk away, out of his life. Cordle hurried after her.

"Mavis!"

"I'll call a cop, Howard, so help me, I will! Just leave me alone!"

"Mavis, I love you!"

She must have heard him, but she kept on walking. She was a sweet and beautiful girl and definitely, unchangeably, an onion.

Cordle was never able to explain to Mavis about The Stew and about the necessity for experiencing behavior before condemning it. Moments of mystical illumination are seldom explicable. He *was* able to make her believe that he had undergone a brief psychotic episode, unique and unprecedented and — with her — never to be repeated.

They are married now, have one girl and one boy, live in a split-level house in Plainfield, New Jersey, and are quite content. Cordle is visibly pushed around by Fuller Brush men, fund solicitors, head-waiters and other imposing figures of authority. But there is a difference.

Cordle makes a point of taking regularly scheduled, solitary vacations. Last year, he made a small name for himself in Honolulu. This year, he is going to Buenos Aires.

THE PETRIFIED WORLD

Lanigan dreamed the dream again and managed to wake himself with a hoarse cry. He sat upright in bed and glared around him into the violet darkness. His teeth clenched and his lips were pulled back into a spastic grin. Beside him he felt his wife, Estelle, stir and sit up. Lanigan didn't look at her. Still caught in his dream, he waited for tangible proofs of the world.

A chair slowly drifted across his field of vision and fetched up against the wall with a quiet thump. Lanigan's face relaxed slightly. Then Estelle's hand was on his arm — a touch meant to be soothing, but which burned like lye.

"Here," she said. "Drink this."

"No," Lanigan said. "I'm all right now."

"Drink it anyhow."

"No, really. I really am all right."

For now he was completely out of the grip of the nightmare. He was himself again, and the world was its habitual self. That was very precious to Lanigan; he didn't want to let go of it just now, not even for the soothing release of a sedative. "Was it the same dream?" Estelle asked him.

"Yes, just the same...I don't want to talk about it."

"All right," Estelle said. (She is humoring me, Lanigan thought. I frighten her. I frighten myself.)

She asked, "Hon, what time is it?"

Lanigan looked at his watch. "Six-fifteen." But as he said it, the hour hand jumped convulsively forward. "No, it's five to seven."

"Can you get back to sleep?"

"I don't think so," Lanigan said. "I think I'll stay up."

"Fine, dear," Estelle said. She yawned, closed her eyes, opened them again and asked, "Hon, don't you think it might be a good idea if you called — "

"I have an appointment with him for twelve-ten," Lanigan said.

"That's fine," Estelle said. She closed her eyes again. Sleep came over her while Lanigan watched. Her auburn hair turned a faint blue, and she sighed once, heavily.

Lanigan got out of bed and dressed. He was, for the most part, a large man, unusually easy to recognize. His features were curiously distinct. He had a rash on his neck. He was in no other way outstanding, except that he had a recurring dream which was driving him insane.

He spent the next few hours on his front porch watching stars go nova in the dawn sky.

Later, he went out for a stroll. As luck would have it, he ran into George Torstein just two blocks from his house. Several months ago, in an incautious moment, he had told Torstein about his dream. Torstein was a bluff, hearty fellow, a great believer in self-help, discipline, practicality, common sense, and other dull virtues. His hardheaded, no-nonsense attitude had come as a momentary relief to Lanigan. But now it acted as an abrasive. Men like Torstein were undoubtedly the salt of the earth and the backbone of the country; but for Lanigan, wrestling with the impalpable and losing, Torstein had grown from a nuisance into a horror.

"Well, Tom, how's the boy?" Torstein greeted him.

"Fine," Lanigan said, "just fine." He nodded pleasantly and began to walk away under a melting green sky. But one did not escape from Torstein so easily.

"Tom, boy, I've been thinking about your problem," Torstein said. "I've been quite disturbed about you."

"Well, that's very nice of you," Lanigan said. "But really, you shouldn't concern yourself — "

"I do it because I want to," Torstein said, speaking the simple, deplorable truth. "I take an interest in people, Tom. Always have, ever since I was a kid. And you and I've been friends and neighbors for a long time."

"That's true enough," Lanigan said numbly. (The worst thing about needing help was having to accept it.)

"Well, Tom, I think what would really help you would be a little vacation."

Torstein had a simple prescription for everything. Since he practiced soul-doctoring without a license, he was always careful to prescribe a drug you could buy over the counter.

"I really can't afford a vacation this month," Lanigan said. (The sky was ochre and pink now; three pines had withered; an aged oak had turned into a youthful cactus.)

Torstein laughed heartily. "Boy, you can't afford *not* to take a vacation just now! Did you ever consider that?"

"No, I guess not."

"Well, *consider* it! You're tired, tense, all keyed-up. You've been working too hard."

"I've been on leave of absence all week," Lanigan said. He glanced at his watch. The gold case had turned to lead, but the time seemed accurate enough. Nearly two hours had passed since he had begun this conversation.

"It isn't good enough," Torstein was saying. "You've stayed right here in town, right close to your work. You need to get in touch with nature. Tom, when was the last time you went camping?"

"Camping? I don't think I've ever gone camping."

"There, you see! Boy, you've got to put yourself back in touch with real things. Not streets and buildings, but mountains and rivers."

Lanigan looked at his watch again and was relieved to see it turn back to gold. He was glad; he had paid sixty dollars for that case.

"Trees and lakes," Torstein was rhapsodizing. "The feel of grass growing under your feet, the sight of tall black mountains marching across a golden sky — "

Lanigan shook his head. "I've been in the country, George. It doesn't do anything for me."

Torstein was obstinate. "You must get away from artificialities."

"It all seems equally artificial," Lanigan said. "Trees or buildings — what's the difference?"

"Men make buildings," Torstein intoned rather piously, "but God makes trees."

Lanigan had his doubts about both propositions, but he wasn't going to tell them to Torstein. "You might have something there," he said. "I'll think about it."

"You do that," Torstein said. "It happens I know the perfect place. It's in Maine, Tom, and it's right near this little lake — "

Torstein was a master of the interminable description. Luckily for Lanigan, there was a diversion. Across the street, a house burst into flames.

"Hey, whose house is that?" Lanigan asked.

"Makelby's," Torstein said. "That's his third fire this month."

"Maybe we ought to give the alarm."

"You're right, I'll do it myself," Torstein said. "Remember what I told you about that place in Maine, Tom."

Torstein turned to go, and something rather humorous happened. As he stepped over the pavement, the concrete liquified under his left foot. Caught unawares, Torstein went in ankle-deep. His forward motion pitched him headfirst into the street.

Tom hurried to help him out before the concrete hardened again. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Twisted my damned ankle," Torstein muttered. "It's okay, I can walk."

He limped off to report the fire. Lanigan stayed and watched. He judged the fire had been caused by spontaneous combustion. In a few minutes, as he had expected, it put itself out by spontaneous decombustion.

One shouldn't be pleased by another man's misfortunes; but Lanigan couldn't help chuckling about Torstein's twisted ankle. Not even the sudden appearance of flood waters on Main Street could mar his good spirits. He beamed at something like a steamboat with yellow stacks that went by in the sky.

Then he remembered his dream, and the panic began again. He walked quickly to the doctor's office.

Dr. Sampson's office was small and dark this week. The old gray sofa was gone; in its place were two Louis Quinze chairs and a hammock. The worn carpet had finally rewoven itself, and there was a cigarette burn on the puce ceiling. But the portrait of Andretti was in its usual place on the wall, and the big freeform ashtray was scrupulously clean.

The inner door opened, and Dr. Sampson's head popped out. "Hi," he said. "Won't be a minute." His head popped back in again.

Sampson was as good as his word. It took him exactly three seconds by Lanigan's watch to do whatever he had to do. One second later Lanigan was stretched out on the leather couch with a

fresh paper doily under his head. And Dr. Sampson was saying, "Well, Tom, how have things been going?"

"The same," Lanigan said. "Worse."

"The dream?"

Lanigan nodded.

"Let's just run through it again."

"I'd rather not," Lanigan said.

"Afraid?"

"More afraid than ever."

"Even now?"

"Yes. Especially now."

There was a moment of therapeutic silence. Then Dr. Sampson said, "You've spoken before of your fear of this dream; but you've never told me *why* you fear it so."

"Well...It sounds so silly."

Sampson's face was serious, quiet, composed: the face of a man who found nothing silly, who was constitutionally incapable of finding anything silly. It was a pose, perhaps, but one which Lanigan found reassuring.

"All right, I'll tell you," Lanigan said abruptly. Then he stopped.

"Go on," Dr. Sampson said.

"Well, it's because I believe that somehow, in some way I don't understand..."

"Yes, go on," Sampson said.

"Well, that somehow the world of my dream is becoming the real world." He stopped again, then went on with a rush. "And that some day I am going to wake up and find myself *in* that world. And then that world will have become the real one and this world will be the dream."

He turned to see how this mad revelation had affected Sampson. If the doctor was disturbed, he didn't show it. He was quietly lighting his pipe with the smouldering tip of his left forefinger. He blew out his forefinger and said, "Yes, please go on."

"Go on? But that's it, that's the whole thing!"

A spot the size of a quarter appeared on Sampson's mauve carpet. It darkened, thickened, grew into a small fruit tree. Sampson picked one of the purple pods, sniffed it, then set it down on his desk. He looked at Lanigan sternly, sadly.

"You've told me about your dream-world before, Tom."

Lanigan nodded.

"We have discussed it, traced its origins, analyzed its meaning for you. In past months we have learned, I believe, why you *need* to cripple yourself with this nightmare fear."

Lanigan nodded unhappily.

"Yet you refuse the insights," Sampson said. "You forget each time that your dream-world is a *dream,* nothing but a dream, operated by arbitrary dream-laws which you have invented to satisfy your psychic needs."

"I wish I could believe that," Lanigan said. "The trouble is my dream-world is so damnably reasonable."

"Not at all," Sampson said. "It is just that your delusion is hermetic, self-enclosed and self-sustaining. A man's actions are based upon certain assumptions about the nature of the world. Grant his assumptions, and his behavior is entirely reasonable. But to change those assumptions, those fundamental axioms, is nearly impossible. For example, how do you prove to a man that he is not being controlled by a secret radio which only he can hear?"

"I see the problem," Lanigan muttered. "And that's me?"

"Yes, Tom. That, in effect, is you. You want me to prove to you that this world is real, and that the world of your dream is false. You propose to give up your fantasy if I supply you with the necessary proofs."

"Yes, exactly!" Lanigan cried.

"But you see, I can't supply them," Sampson said. "The nature of the world is apparent, but unprovable."

Lanigan thought for a while. Then he said, "Look, Doc, I'm not as sick as the guy with the secret radio, am I?"

"No, you're not. You're more reasonable, more rational. You have doubts about the reality of the world; but luckily, you also have doubts about the validity of your delusion."

"Then give it a try," Lanigan said. "I understand your problem; but I swear to you, I'll accept anything I can possibly bring myself to accept."

"It's not my field, really," Sampson said. "This sort of thing calls for a metaphysician. I don't think I'd be very skilled at it..."

"Give it a try," Lanigan pleaded.

"All right, here goes." Sampson's forehead wrinkled and shed as he concentrated. Then he said, "It seems to me that we inspect

the world through our senses, and therefore we must in the final analysis accept the testimony of those senses."

Lanigan nodded, and the doctor went on.

"So, we know that a thing exists because our senses tell us it exists. How do we check the accuracy of our observations? By comparing them with the sensory impressions of other men. We know that our senses don't lie when other men's senses agree upon the existence of the thing in question."

Lanigan thought about this, then said, "Therefore, the real world is simply what most men think it is."

Sampson twisted his mouth and said, "I told you that metaphysics was not my forte. Still, I think it is an acceptable demonstration."

"Yes...But Doc, suppose *all* of those observers are wrong? For example, suppose there are many worlds and many realities, not just one? Suppose this is simply one arbitrary existence out of an infinity of existences? Or suppose that the nature of reality itself is capable of change, and that somehow I am able to perceive that change?"

Sampson sighed, found a little green bat fluttering inside his jacket and absentmindedly crushed it with a ruler.

"There you are," he said. "I can't disprove a single one of your suppositions. I think, Tom, that we had better run through the entire dream."

Lanigan grimaced. "I really would rather not. I have a feeling..."

"I know you do," Sampson said, smiling faintly. "But this will prove or disprove it once and for all, won't it?"

"I guess so," Lanigan said. He took courage — unwisely and said, "Well, the way it begins, the way my dream starts — "

Even as he spoke the horror came over him. He felt dizzy, sick, terrified. He tried to rise from the couch. The doctor's face ballooned over him. He saw a glint of metal, heard Sampson saying, "Just try to relax...brief seizure...try to think of something pleasant."

Then either Lanigan or the world or both passed out.

Lanigan and/or the world came back to consciousness. Time may or may not have passed. Anything might or might not have happened. Lanigan sat up and looked at Sampson.

"How do you feel now?" Sampson asked.

"I'm all right," Lanigan said. "What happened?"

"You had a bad moment. Take it easy for a bit."

Lanigan leaned back and tried to calm himself. The doctor was sitting at his desk, writing notes. Lanigan counted to twenty with his eyes closed, then opened them cautiously. Sampson was still writing notes.

Lanigan looked around the room, counted the five pictures on the wall, re-counted them, looked at the green carpet, frowned at it, closed his eyes again. This time he counted to fifty.

"Well, care to talk about it now?" Sampson asked, shutting a notebook.

"No, not just now," Lanigan said. (Five paintings, green carpet.)

"Just as you please," the doctor said. "I think that our time is just about up. But if you'd care to lie down in the anteroom — "

"No, thanks, I'll go home," Lanigan said.

He stood up, walked across the green carpet to the door, looked back at the five paintings and at the doctor, who smiled at him encouragingly. Then Lanigan went through the door and into the anteroom, through the anteroom to the outer door and through that and down the corridor to the stairs and down the stairs to the street.

He walked and looked at the trees, on which green leaves moved faintly and predictably in a faint breeze. There was traffic, which moved soberly down one side of the street and up the other. The sky was an unchanging blue, and had obviously been so for quite some time.

Dream? He pinched himself. A dream pinch? He did not awaken. He shouted. An imaginary shout? He did not awaken.

He was in the street of the world of his nightmare.

The street at first seemed like any normal city street. There were paving stones, cars, people, buildings, a sky overhead, a sun in the sky. All perfectly normal. Except that *nothing was happening*.

The pavement never once yielded beneath his feet. Over there was the First National City Bank; it had been here yesterday, which was bad enough; but worse it would be there without fail tomorrow, and the day after that, and the year after that. The First National City Bank (Founded 1892) was grotesquely devoid of possibilities. It would never become a tomb, an airplane, the bones of a prehistoric monster. Sullenly it would remain a building of concrete and steel, madly persisting in its fixity until men with tools came and tediously tore it down.

Lanigan walked through this petrified world, under a blue sky that oozed a sly white around the edges, teasingly promising something that was never delivered. Traffic moved implacably to the right, people crossed at crossings, clocks were within minutes of agreement.

Somewhere beyond the town lay countryside; but Lanigan knew that the grass did not grow under one's feet; it simply lay still, growing no doubt, but imperceptibly, unusable to the senses. And the mountains were still tall and black, but they were giants stopped in mid-stride. They would never march against a golden (or purple or green) sky.

The essence of life, Dr. Sampson had once said, is change. The essence of death is immobility. Even a corpse has a vestige of life about it as long as its flesh rots, as long as maggots still feast on its blind eyes and blowflies suck the juice from the burst intestines.

Lanigan looked around at the corpse of the world and perceived that it was dead.

He screamed. He screamed while people gathered around and looked at him (but didn't do anything or become anything), and then a policeman came as he was supposed to (but the sun didn't change shape once), and then an ambulance came down the invariant street (but without trumpets, minus strumpets, on four wheels instead of a pleasing three or twenty-five) and the ambulance men brought him to a building which was exactly where they expected to find it, and there was a great deal of talk by people who stood untransformed, asking questions in a room with relentlessly white walls.

And there was evening and there was morning, and it was the first day.

GAME:
FIRST SCHEMATIC

Perhaps he was not yet fully awake, perhaps that could account for the shock of walking down the dark corridor and through the oval door into the sudden silence and immensity of the arena. The concentric stone tiers rose dizzyingly above his head, stopping down the dome of the sky, concentrating and focusing the heat and energy of the crowd. The morning sun glared off the white sand, and for a moment he couldn't remember where he was.

He looked down at himself: he was wearing a collarless blue shirt and red shorts — A leather mitaxl was strapped to his left hand. In his right hand he held the daenum, its four-foot length heavy and reassuring. He wore padded knee and elbow guards as required by the regulations. He also wore a little feathered yellow cap. The regulations didn't call for it, but they didn't forbid it either.

All of which was meant to be familiar and reassuring. But was it?

He tested the webbing and linkages of the mitaxl, made sure that the daenum could travel freely on its bronze spindle. He touched his waist and felt the customary soft weight of the sentrae tied to his belt, its rough side turned in. He told himself that everything was in order. But he was uneasy, for it seemed to him — madly enough — that he had never been in an arena before, had never heard of a daenum, didn't even know the name of the game he was supposed to play. But that was crazy, that was nerves, that could be ignored. He shook his head brusquely and took three gliding steps to test the ball-bearings in his skates, reversed and circled his own square.

Now he could hear the crowd, they always got restless just before a contest began; yes, and abusive. It was the skates, of course, the

skates were not traditional, the crowd could never forgive him for the skates. But didn't they realize that playing on skates was more difficult than on foot? Did they ever consider the problem of returning a low volley while skating backwards? Didn't they know that the advantage of speed was canceled out by the increased complexities of judgement? Surely they were aware that he could also win on foot!

He rubbed his forehead and looked toward the reviewing stand. The three judges had taken their places, they were looking out through the eye slits in their feathered masks. The blindfolded woman reached into the high wicker basket, selected a ball and threw it to him.

He weighed it in his hand, an oblate spheroid, difficult to serve, harder to return. He saw that his opponent in the opposite court was waiting, knees flexed, body hunched forward. So he threw the ball into the air and quickly, without thinking, put spin on it with the daenum. The crowd became quiet, watching the ball spinning miraculously three feet above the ground. He adjusted tilt with the mitaxl, a routine operation but one that filled him with sudden despair, for he realized that this was not his day to win, not his week, not his year, maybe not his decade...

He pulled himself together, let the daenum slide to the end of the spindle, and served. The ball fluttered away from him like a wounded bird, and the crowd roared with laughter. Still, it was a deceptively good stroke, the ball came alive just before entering the net (his patent serve!) and skipped upward and over, catching the opposing player flatfooted.

He turned away, heard the crowd roar again, and knew that his opponent had somehow managed to return it. He saw the ball, heavy with unintentional backspin, come skipping slowly toward him. It was not much of a return; he could have laid into it on rebote, driven his opponent out of position, scored a psychological point. But he chose to let the ball go past him into the backboard; and now, presumably, his opponent had the edge.

He heard a few boos and whistles. He ignored them, it was damned hot today, his legs ached, he was bored. He felt, not for the first time, that the contest had become meaningless. It was ludicrous, when you thought about it — a grown man playing so seriously at a game! After all, life was more than that, life was love

and children and sunsets and good food. Why had this contest come to epitomize his entire existence?

Another ball had been put into play, a big, shapeless, mushy thing, too light, not at all his kind of ball. He couldn't get anything into a ball like that. He rejected it, as was his privilege, and rejected the next two as well, out of pique, even though the last one might have been tailored to his talents. But he let it drop away, pivoted on his skates and glided over to the sideline bench. The contest hadn't begun yet, but his right shoulder hurt and he was thirsty.

He drank a cup of water, shading his eyes with the mitaxl, then motioned to the club boy for another cup. He couldn't tell if the judges were watching him or not; presumably they were, he was delaying the match. But it couldn't be helped, he needed time to think out his strategy, for he did like to have a definite game plan. Not a *blueprint* or a *schematic* (despite the advice of several outstanding professionals); just a general strategy, flexible and based upon good general principles and embodying all available information. But of course, he didn't *need* to have a game plan. Like any professional he could play with or without a plan, he could play drunk, sick, or half-dead. He might not win, but he could always play. That was what it meant to be a professional.

He turned now to study the arena, the hatched scoring squares, the black interdicted area, the red and blue striped no-man's land. But suddenly he couldn't remember the rules, couldn't remember how you scored points, didn't know what was fair and what was foul. And, in a panic, he saw himself, a bewildered man dressed in gym clothes, balanced precariously on roller skates, standing in front of a hostile crowd, about to play a game he had never before heard of.

He finished his second cup of water and skated back into the court. There was a taste of acid in his mouth, and sweat stung his eyes. The mitaxl creaked as he picked up his stride, and the daenum flopped against his leg like a broken bird.

Here came his ball, shaped like a goddamned *lozenge,* a freak of a ball, an impossible ball even for him, the acknowledged master of impossible balls. He'd never get this one to the net, much less over it!

Of course, if he *did* get it over —

But he'd never get it over.

He told himself without conviction that the game was more important than the win. He hefted the ball, flapped the sentrae into guard position, took up the stylized serving posture. Then he threw the ball down.

The crowd was absolutely quiet.

"Now look," he said, in a conversational voice that carried to the highest sun-drenched bleacher, "I told the management beforehand that I insisted upon a sunscreen. You will note that it has not been forthcoming. Yet, in expectation of it, I did not wear sunglasses. Clearly, this is a breach of contract. Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry, there will be no game today."

He bowed, sweeping off his feathered cap. There were a few murmurs, a few catcalls, but they took it well, filing out without undue protest. They were used to it, of course: although he was famous for appearing on the courts every day, rain or shine, he didn't actually complete more than a dozen matches a year. He didn't have to, there was plenty of precedent, you could look at the contests-engaged column in any newspaper and see the number of scratches. Even in the Smithsonian where the first historical references to the game were recorded, even there, engraved in stone, you could see that the legendary contenders of antiquity had had spotty attendance records.

Still, he felt bad about it. The judges left and he bowed to them, but they didn't acknowledge his salutation.

He went back to the sidelines and drank another cup of water. When he looked up, he saw that his opponent had left. He glided back into the court and took practice shots against the wall, moving smoothly back and forth across the enameled tiles, retrieving his shots, marveling at his own skill. He was going well now, he was sorry that this one didn't count. But what had the man said? "Everything's easy to hit except the money ball."

At the end of the day the sand was streaked black, and dotted with drops of his sweat and blood. But none of it counted, so he ignored the scattering of applause. He knew that he had practiced in order to stay occupied, and in order to keep his own respect, so that he could continue to believe that he would play and win at this game.

At any rate, he was tired now. He ducked into the dressing room and changed back into street clothes. He went out the back door into the street.

To his surprise it was dark outside. Dark already? What had he been doing all day? Incredibly, he was not completely sure, but it seemed to him that he had been engaging in some kind of weird contest.

He went home then and he wanted to tell his wife about the game, but he couldn't think of what to say or how to tell about it, so he didn't say anything, and when his wife asked how his work had gone, he said all right, by which they both understood that it hadn't gone well, not this time, not today.

DOCTOR ZOMBIE AND HIS LITTLE FURRY FRIENDS

I think I am fairly safe here. I live at present in a small apartment northeast of the Zócalo, in one of the oldest parts of Mexico City. As a foreigner, my inevitable first impression is how like Spain this country seems, and how different it really is. In Madrid the streets are a maze which draws you continually deeper, toward hidden centers with tedious, well-guarded secrets. Concealment of the commonplace is surely a heritage of the Moors. Whereas Mexican streets are an inverted labyrinth which leads outward toward the mountains, toward openness, toward revelations which remain forever elusive. Nothing is concealed; but nothing in Mexico is comprehensible. This is the way of the Indians, past and present — a defense based upon permeability; a transparent defense like that of the sea anemone.

I find this style profound and compatible. I conform to insight born in Tenochtitlán or Tlaxcala; I conceal nothing, and thus contrive to hide everything.

How often I have envied the thief who has nothing to hide but a handful of game! Some of us are less lucky, some of us possess secrets which won't fit into our pockets, or into our closets; secrets which cannot even be contained in our parlors or buried in our back yards. Gilles de Retz required a private hidden cemetery scarcely smaller than Père La Chaise. My own needs are more modest; but not by much.

I am not a sociable man. I dream of a house in the country, on the barren slopes of Ixtaccihuatl, where there is no other human

habitation for miles in any direction. But that would be madness. The police assume that a man who isolates himself has something to conceal; the equation is as true as it is banal. Those polite, relentless Mexican police! How they distrust foreigners, and how rightfully so! They would have searched my lonely house on some pretext, and the truth would have come out — a three-day sensation for the newspapers.

I have avoided all of that, or at least put it off, by living where I live. Not even Garcia, the most zealous policeman in my neighborhood, can make himself believe that I use this small permeable apartment for *secret ungodly experiments of a terrible nature.* As is rumored.

My door is usually ajar. When the shopkeepers deliver my provisions, I tell them to walk right in. They never do so, they are innately respectful of a man's privacy. But I tell them in any case.

I have three rooms arranged in line. One enters through the kitchen. Next is the parlor, and after that the bedroom. Each room has a door, none of which I ever close completely. Perhaps I carry this fetish of openness too far. For if anyone ever walked through my apartment, pushed the bedroom door fully open and looked inside, I suppose I would have to kill myself.

To date, my callers have never gone beyond the kitchen. I think they are frightened of me.

And why not? I am frightened of myself.

My work forces me into an uncongenial mode of life. I must take all of my meals in my apartment. I am a bad cook; even the meanest neighborhood restaurant exceeds my efforts. Even the sidewalk vendors with their overcooked tacos surpass my indigestible messes.

And to make it worse, I am forced to invent ridiculous reasons for always eating at home. I tell my neighbors that my doctor allows me no spices whatsoever, no chilies, no tomatoes, no salt...Why? A rare condition of the liver. How did I contract it? From eating tainted meat many years ago in Jakarta...

All of which is easy enough to say, you may think. But I find it difficult to remember the details. A liar is forced to live in a hateful and unnatural state of consistency. His role becomes his punishment.

My neighbors find it easy to accept my contorted explanations. A little incongruity feels very lifelike to them, and they consider themselves excellent arbiters of truth; whereas all they really pass judgement on are questions of verisimilitude.

Still, despite themselves, my neighbors sense something monstrous about me. Eduardo the butcher once said: "Did you know, Doctor, that zombies are allowed no salt? Maybe you are a zombie, eh?"

Where on earth did he learn about zombies? In the cinema, I suppose, or from a comic book. I have seen old women make a sign to avert the evil eye when I pass, and I have heard children whisper behind my back: "Doctor Zombie, Doctor Zombie."

Old women and children! They are the repositories of what little wisdom this race possesses. Yes, and the butchers also know a thing or two.

I am neither a doctor nor a zombie. Nevertheless, the old women and the children are quite right about me. Luckily, no one listens to them.

So I continue to eat in my own kitchen — lamb, kid, pig, rabbit, beef, veal, chicken, and sometimes venison. It is the only way I can get the necessary quantities of meat into my house to feed my animals.

Someone else has recently begun to suspect me. Unfortunately, that man is Diego Juan Garcia, a policeman.

Garcia is stocky, broad-faced, careful, a good cop. Around the Zócalo he is considered incorruptible — an Aztec Cato, but with a better disposition. According to the vegetable woman — who is perhaps in love with me — Garcia believes that I might well be an escaped German war criminal.

It is an amazing conception, factually wrong, but intuitionally correct. Garcia is certain that, somehow, he has hit upon the truth. He would have acted by now if it were not for the intercession of my neighbors. The shoemaker, the butcher, the shoeshine boy, and especially the vegetable woman, all vouch for me. They are bourgeois rationalists, they believe their own projections of my character. They chide Garcia: "Isn't it obvious that this foreigner is a quiet, good-hearted man, a harmless scholar, a dreamer?"

Madly enough, they too are factually wrong, but intuitionally correct.

* * *

My invaluable neighbors address me as "Doctor," and sometimes as "Professor." These are honorary degrees which they awarded me quite spontaneously, as a reward to my appearance. I did not solicit a title, but I do not reject it. "Señor Doctor" is another mask behind which I can hide.

I suppose I look to them like a doctor: huge glistening forehead, gray hair bristling from the sides of my balding head, square, stern, wrinkled face. Yes, and my European accent, my careful Spanish constructions, my absent-minded air...And my gold-rimmed glasses! What else could I be but a doctor, and a German one at that?

My title demands an occupation, and I claim to be a scholar on extended leave from my university. I tell them that I am writing a book about the Toltecs, a book in which I will collate evidence of a cultural linkage between that mysterious race and the Incas.

"Yes, gentlemen, I expect that my book will create quite a stir in Heidelberg and Bonn. There are vested interests which will be offended. Attempts will doubtless be made to represent me as a crank. My theory, you see, could shake the entire world of pre-Columbian studies..."

I had prepared the above personality before coming to Mexico. I read Stephens, Prescott, Vaillant, Alfonso Caso. I even went to the trouble of copying out the first third of Dreyer's discredited thesis on cultural diffusion, in which he postulates a Mayan-Toltec cultural exchange. That gave me an opus of some eighty handwritten pages which I could claim as my own. The unfinished manuscript was my excuse for being in Mexico. Anyone could glance at the erudite pages scattered over my desk and see for himself what sort of man I was.

I thought that would suffice; but I hadn't allowed for the dynamism inherent in my role. Señor Ortega, my grocer, is also interested in pre-Columbian studies, and is disturbingly knowledgeable. Señor Andrade, the barber, was born in a pueblo within five miles of the ruins of Teotihuacán. And little Jorge Silverio, the shoeshine boy whose mother works in a *tortilleria,* dreams of attending a great university, and asks me very humbly if I might use my influence at Bonn...

I am the victim of my neighbors' expectations. I have become *their* professor, not mine. Because of them I must spend endless

hours at the National Museum of Anthropology, and waste whole days at Teotihuacán, Tula, Xochicalco. My neighbors force me to work hard at my scholarly pursuit. And I have become quite literally what I purported to be: an expert, possessed of formidable knowledge, more than a little mad.

The role has penetrated me, mingled with me, transformed me; to the extent that now I really *do* believe in the likelihood of a Toltec-Incan connection, I have unassailable evidence, I have seriously considered publishing my findings...

All of which I find tiresome and quite beside the point.

I had a bad scare last month. My landlady, Señora Elvira Macias, stopped me on the street and demanded that I get rid of my dog.

"But, señora, I have no dog."

"Excuse me, señor, but you do have a dog. I heard it last night, whining and scratching at your door. And my rules, which were also those of my poor late husband, expressly forbid — "

"My dear señora, you must be mistaken. I can assure you..."

And there was Garcia, inevitable as death, in freshly starched khakis, puffing on a Delicado and listening to our conversation.

"A scratching sound? Perhaps it was the termites, señora, or the cockroaches."

She shook her head. "It was not that kind of sound."

"Rats, then. Your building, I regret to say, is infested with rats."

"I know very well what rats sound like," Señora Elvira said, invincibly ingenuous. "But this is not like that, this was a doglike sound which came from your apartment. And as I have told you, I have an absolute rule against pets."

Garcia was watching me, and I saw reflected in his eyes my deeds at Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Theresienstadt. I wanted to tell him that he was wrong, that I was one of the victims, that I had spent the war years as a prisoner in the Tjilatjap concentration camp in Java.

But I also knew that the specific facts did not matter. My crimes against humanity were real enough: Garcia just happened to be sensing next year's frightfulness rather than last year's.

I might have confessed everything at that moment if Señora Elvira had not turned to Garcia and said, "Well, what are you going to do about all this? He keeps a dog, perhaps two dogs, he keeps God knows what in that apartment of his. What are you going to do?"

Garcia said nothing. His immobile face reminded me of the stone mask of Tlaloc in the Cholula museum. My own reaction was in keeping with that transparent defense by which I hide my secrets. I ground my teeth, flared my nostrils, tried to simulate the *furia español.*

"Dogs?" I howled. "I'll show you dogs! Come up and search my apartment! I will pay you a hundred pesos for each dog you find, two hundred for purebreeds. You come too, Garcia, and bring all your friends. Perhaps I have a horse up there as well, eh? And maybe a pig? Bring witnesses, bring newspaper reporters, I want my menagerie to be noted with accuracy."

"Calm yourself," Garcia said, unimpressed by my rage.

"I will calm myself after we dispose of the dogs!" I shouted. "Come, señora, enter my rooms and look under the bed for your hallucinations. And when you are satisfied, you will kindly refund me the remainder of my month's rent and my month's security, and I will go live somewhere else with my invisible dogs."

Garcia looked at me curiously. I suppose he has seen a great deal of bravado in his time. It is said to be typical of a certain type of criminal. He said to Señora Elvira: "Shall we take a look?"

My landlady surprised me. She said — incredibly — "Certainly not! The gentleman has given his word." And she turned and walked away.

I was about to complete the bluff by insisting that Garcia search for himself if he were not completely satisfied. Luckily, I stopped myself. Garcia is no respecter of properties. He is not afraid of making a fool of himself.

"I am tired," I said. "I am going to lie down."

And that was the end of it.

This time I locked my front door. It had been a near thing. While we had been talking, the poor wretched creature had gnawed through its leash and died on the kitchen floor.

I disposed of it in the usual way, by feeding it to the others. Thereafter I doubled my precautions. I bought a radio to cover what little noise they made. I put heavy straw matting under their cages. And I masked their odor with heavy tobacco, for I thought that incense would be too obvious.

* * *

But it is strange and ironic that anyone should suspect *me* of keeping dogs. They are my implacable enemies. They know what goes on in my apartment. They have allied themselves with mankind. They are renegade animals, just as I am a renegade human. If the dogs could speak, they would hurry to the police station with their *denunciamentos*.

When the battle against humanity is finally begun, the dogs will have to stand or fall with their masters.

A note of cautious optimism: the last litter was quite promising. Four of the twelve survived, and grew sleek and clever and strong. But they are not as ferocious as I had expected. That part of their genetic inheritance seems to have been lost. They actually seem fond of me — like dogs! But this surely can be bred out of them.

Mankind has dire legends of hybrids produced by the crossbreeding of various species. Among these are the chimera, the griffin, and the sphinx, to name but a few. It seems to me that these antique nightmares might have been a *memory of the future* — like Garcia's perception of my not-yet-committed crimes.

Pliny and Diodorus record the monstrous offspring of camel and ostrich, lion and eagle, horse, dragon, and tiger. What would they have thought of a composite wolverine and rat? What would a modern biologist think of this prodigy?

The scientists of today will deny its existence even when my heraldic beasts are swarming into towns and cities. No reasonable man will believe in a creature the size of a wolf, as savage and cunning as a wolverine, as social, adaptable, and as great a breeder as a rat. A confirmed rationalist will deny credence to this indescribable and apocryphal beast even as it tears out his throat.

And he will be almost right in his skepticism. Such a product of cross-hybridization was clearly impossible — until I produced it last year.

Secrecy can begin as a necessity and end as a habit. Even in this journal, in which I intended to tell everything, I see that I have

not recorded my reasons for breeding monsters, nor what I intend them to do.

Their work should begin in about three months, in early July. By then, local residents will be remarking on a horde of animals which has begun to infest the slums surrounding the Zócalo. Descriptions will be hazy, but people will remark on the size of these creatures, their ferocity and elusiveness. The authorities will be notified, the newspapers will take note. The blame will probably be laid to wolves or wild dogs at first, despite the uncanine appearance of these beasts.

Standard methods of extermination will be tried, and will fail. The mysterious creatures will spread out through the capital, and then into the wealthy suburbs of Pedregal and Coyoacán. It will be known by now that they are omnivores, like man himself. And it will be suspected — correctly — that they possess an extremely high rate of reproduction.

Perhaps not until later will their high degree of intelligence be appreciated.

The armed forces will be called in, to no avail. The air force will thunder over the countryside; but what will they find to bomb? These creatures present no mass target for conventional weaponry. They live behind the walls, under the sofa, inside the closet — always just beyond the outer edge of your eyesight.

Poison? But these hybrids eat what you possess, not what you offer.

And besides, it is August now, the situation is completely out of hand. The army is spread symbolically throughout Mexico City; but the cohorts of the beasts have overrun Toluca, Ixtapan, Tepalcingo, Cuernavaca, and they have been reported in San Luis Potosí, in Oaxaca and Veracruz.

Scientists confer, crash programs are drawn up, experts come to Mexico from all over the world. The beasts hold no conferences and publish no manifestos. They simply spawn and spread, north to Durango, south to Villahermosa.

The United States closes its borders; another symbolic gesture. The beasts come down to Piedras Negras, they cross the Eagle Pass without permission; unauthorized they appear in El Paso, Laredo, Brownsville.

They sweep across the plains and deserts like a whirlwind, they flow into the cities like a tidal wave. Doctor Zombie's little furry friends have arrived, and they are here to stay.

And at last mankind realizes that the problem is not how to exterminate these creatures. No, the problem is how to prevent these creatures from exterminating man.

This can be done, I have no doubt. But it is going to require the full efforts and ingenuity of the human race.

That is what I expect to achieve by breeding monsters.

You see, something must be done. I intend my hybrids to act as a counterbalance, a load to control the free-running human engine that is tearing up the earth and itself. I consider this job ethically imperative. After all: Does man have the right to exterminate whatever species he pleases? Must everything in creation serve his ill-considered schemes, or be obliterated? Don't all life forms and systems have a right to live, an absolute right with no possibility of qualification?

Despite the extremity of the measure, there will be benefits to mankind. No one will have to worry again about hydrogen bombs, germ warfare, defoliation, pollution, greenhouse effect, and the like. Overnight, these preoccupations will become — medieval. Man will return to a life in nature. He will still be unique, still intelligent, still a predator; but now he will be subject again to certain checks and balances which he had previously evaded.

His most prized freedom will remain; he will still be at liberty to kill; he will simply lose the ability to exterminate.

Pneumonia is a great leveler of aspirations. It has killed my creatures. Yesterday the last of them raised its head and looked at me. Its large pale eyes were filmed over. It raised a paw, extended its claws, and scratched me lightly on the forearm.

I cried then, for I knew that my poor beast had done that only to please me, knowing how much I desired it to be fierce, implacable, a scourge against mankind.

The effort was too much. Those marvelous eyes closed. It died with barely a twitch.

Pneumonia is not really a sufficient explanation, of course. Beyond that, the will was simply not there. No species has had much

vitality since man preempted the earth. The slave-raccoons still play in the tattered Adirondack forests, and the slave-lions still sniff beer cans in Kruger Park. They and all the others exist only on our sufferance, as squatters on our land. And they know it.

Under the circumstances, you can't expect to find much vitality and spirit among non-humans. Spirit is the property of the victors.

The death of my last beast has become my own end. I am too tired and too heartsick to begin again. I regret that I have failed mankind. I regret having failed the lions, ostriches, tigers, whales, and other species threatened with extinction. But most of all I regret having failed the sparrows, crows, rats, hyenas — the vermin of the earth, the trash species who exist only to be exterminated by man. My truest sympathy has always been with the outlawed, abandoned, or worthless, in whose categories I include myself.

Are they vermin simply because they do not serve man? Don't all life forms and systems have a right to live, an absolute right with no possibility of qualification? Must everything in creation continue to serve one species, or be obliterated?

Some other man must feel as I do. I ask him to take up the fight, become a guerrilla against his own kind, oppose them as he would oppose a raging fire.

This record has been written for that hypothetical man.

As for me: not long ago, Garcia and another official came to my apartment on a "routine" health inspection. The found the bodies of several of my composite creatures, which I had not yet had the opportunity to destroy. I was arrested and charged with cruelty to animals, and with operating a slaughterhouse without a license.

I shall plead guilty to the charges. Despite their falseness, I recognize them as essentially and undeniably true.

THE CRUEL EQUATIONS

After landing on Regulus V, the men of the Yarmolinsky Expedition made camp and activated PR-22-0134, their perimeter robot, whom they called Max. The robot was a voice-activated, bipedal mechanism whose function was to guard the camp against the depredations of aliens, in the event that aliens were ever encountered. Max had originally been a regulation gunmetal gray, but on the interminable outward trip they had repainted him a baby blue. Max stood exactly four feet high. The men of the expedition had come to think of him as a kindly, reasonable little metal man — a ferrous gnome, a miniature Tin Woodman of Oz.

They were wrong, of course. Their robot had none of the qualities which they projected onto him. PR-22-0134 was no more reasonable than a McCormick harvester, no more kindly than an automated steel mill. Morally, he might be compared to a turbine or a radio, but not to anything human. PR-22-0134's only human attribute was potentiality.

Little Max, baby blue with red eyes, circled the perimeter of the camp, his sensors alert. Captain Beatty and Lieutenant James took off in the hoverjet for a week of exploration. They left Lieutenant Halloran to mind the store.

Halloran was a short, stocky man with a barrel chest and bandy legs. He was cheerful, freckled, tough, profane, and resourceful. He ate lunch and acknowledged a radio check from the exploring team. Then he unfolded a canvas chair and sat back to enjoy the scenery.

Regulus V was a pretty nice place, if you happened to be an admirer of desolation. A superheated landscape of rock, gravel, and lava stretched on all sides. There were some birds that looked like

sparrows and some animals that looked like coyotes. A few cacti scratched out a bare living.

Halloran pulled himself to his feet. "Max! I'm going to take a look outside the perimeter. You'll be in charge while I'm gone."

The robot stopped patrolling. "Yes sir, I will be in charge."

"You will not allow any aliens to come busting in; especially the two-headed kind with their feet on backwards."

"Very well, sir." Max had no sense of humor when it came to aliens. "Do you have the password, Mr. Halloran?"

"I got it, Max. How about you?"

"I have it, sir."

"Okay. See you later." Halloran left the camp.

After examining the real estate for an hour and finding nothing of interest, Halloran came back. He was pleased to see PR-22-0134 patrolling along the perimeter. It meant that everything was all right.

"Hi there, Max," he called. "Any messages for me?"

"Halt," the robot said. "Give the password."

"Cut the comedy, Max. I'm in no mood for — "

"HALT!" the robot shouted, as Halloran was about to cross the perimeter.

Halloran came to an abrupt stop. Max's photoelectric eyes had flared, and a soft double click announced that his primary armament was activated. Halloran decided to proceed with caution.

"I am halted. My name is Halloran. Okay now, Maxie?"

"Give the password, please."

"Bluebells," Halloran said. "Now, if you don't mind — "

"Do not cross the perimeter," the robot said. "Your password is incorrect."

"The hell it is. I gave it to you myself."

"That was the previous password."

"Previous? You're out of your semisolid mind," Halloran said. "'Bluebells' is the only password, and you didn't get any new one because there isn't any new one. Unless..."

The robot waited — Halloran considered the unpleasant thought from various angles, and at last put words to it.

"Unless Captain Beatty gave you a new password before he left. Is *that* what happened?"

"Yes," the robot said.

"I should have thought of it," Halloran said. He grinned, but he was annoyed. There had been slipups like this before. But there had always been someone inside the camp to correct them.

Still, there was nothing to worry about. When you came right down to it, the situation was more than a little funny. And it could be resolved with just a modicum of reason.

Halloran was assuming, of course, that PR robots possess a modicum of reason.

"Max," Halloran said, "I see how it probably happened. Captain Beatty probably gave you a new password. But he failed to tell me about it. I then compounded his error by neglecting to check on the password situation before I left the perimeter."

The robot made no comment. Halloran went on. "The mistake, in any case, is easily corrected."

"I sincerely hope so," the robot said.

"Of course it is," Halloran said, a little less confidently. "The captain and I follow a set procedure in these matters. When he gives you a password, he also transmits it to me orally. But, just in case there is any lapse — like now — he also writes it down."

"Does he?" the robot asked.

"Yes, he does," Halloran said. "Always. Invariably. Which includes this time too, I hope. Do you see that tent behind you?"

The robot swiveled one sensor, keeping the other fixed on Halloran. "I see it."

"Okay. Inside the tent, there is a table. On the table is a gray metal clipboard."

"Correct," Max said.

"Fine! Now then, there is a sheet of paper in the clipboard. On it is a list of vital data — emergency radio frequencies, that sort of thing. On the top of the paper, circled in red, is the current password."

The robot extended and focused his sensor, then retracted it. He said to Halloran, "What you say is true, but irrelevant. I am concerned only with your knowledge of the actual password, not its location. If you can state the password, I must let you into the camp. If not, I must keep you out."

"This is insane!" Halloran shouted. "Max, you legalistic idiot, it's *me,* Halloran, and you damned well know it! We've been together

since the day you were activated! Now will you please stop playing Horatio at the bridge and let me in?"

"Your resemblance to Mr. Halloran *is* uncanny," the robot admitted. "But I am neither equipped nor empowered to conduct identity tests; nor am I permitted to act on the basis of my perceptions. The only proof I can accept is the password itself."

Halloran fought down his rage. In a conversational tone he said, "Max, old buddy, it sounds like you're implying that I'm an alien."

"Since you do not have the password," Max said, "I must proceed on that assumption."

"Max!" Halloran shouted, stepping forward, "for Christ's sake!"

"Do not approach the perimeter!" the robot said, his sensors flaring. "Whoever or whatever you are, stand back!"

"All right, I'm standing back," Halloran said quickly. "Don't get so nervous."

He backed away from the perimeter and waited until the robot's sensors had gone quiescent. Then he sat down on a rock. He had some serious thinking to do.

It was almost noon in Regulus's thousand-hour day. The twin suns hung overhead, distorted white blobs in a dead white sky. They moved sluggishly above a dark granite landscape, slow-motion juggernauts who destroyed what they touched.

An occasional bird soared in weary circles through the dry fiery air. A few small animals crept from shadow to shadow. A creature that looked like a wolverine gnawed at a tent peg, and was ignored by a small blue robot. A man sat on a rock and watched the robot.

Halloran, already feeling the effects of exposure and thirst, was trying to understand his situation and to plan a way out of it.

He wanted water. Soon he would need water. Not long after that, he would die for lack of water.

There was no known source of potable water within walking distance, except in camp.

There was plenty of water in the camp. But he couldn't get to it past the robot.

Beatty and James would routinely try to contact him in three days, but they would probably not be alarmed if he didn't reply. Shortwave reception was erratic, even on Earth. They would try again in the evening and again the next day. Failing to raise him then, they would come back.

Call it four Earth days, then. How long could he go without water?

The answer depended on his rate of water loss. When he had sustained a total liquid loss of between ten and fifteen percent of his body weight, he would go into shock. This could happen with disastrous suddenness. Bedouin tribesmen, separated from their supplies, had been known to succumb in twenty-four hours. Stranded motorists in the American Southwest, trying to walk out of the Baker or Mojave Deserts, sometimes didn't last out the day.

Regulus V was as hot as the Kalahari, and had less humidity than Death Valley. A day on Regulus stretched for just under a thousand Earth hours. It was noon, he had five hundred hours of unremitting sunshine ahead of him without shelter or shade.

How long could he last? One Earth day. Two, at the most optimistic estimate.

Forget about Beatty and James. He had to get water from the camp, and he had to get it fast.

That meant he had to find a way past the robot.

He decided to try logic. "Max, you must know that I, Halloran, left the camp and that I, Halloran, returned an hour later, and that it is I, Halloran, now standing in front of you without the password."

"The probabilities are very strongly in favor of your interpretation," the robot admitted.

"Well, then — "

"But I cannot act on probabilities, or even near-certainties. After all, I have been created for the express purpose of dealing with aliens, despite the extremely low probability that I will ever meet one."

"Can you at least give me a canteen of water?"

"No. That would be against orders."

"When did you ever get orders about giving out water?"

"I didn't, not specifically. But the conclusion flows from my primary directive. I am not supposed to aid or assist aliens."

Halloran then said a great many things, very rapidly and in a loud voice. His statements were pungently and idiomatically Terran; but Max ignored them since they were abusive, tendentious, and entirely without merit.

After a while, the alien who called himself Halloran moved out of sight behind a pile of rocks.

* * *

After some minutes, a creature sauntered out from behind a pile of rocks, whistling.

"Hello there, Max," the creature said.

"Hello, Mr. Halloran," the robot replied.

Halloran stopped ten feet away from the perimeter. "Well," he said, "I've been looking around, but there's not much to see. Anything happen here while I've been gone?"

"Yes, sir," Max said. "An alien tried to enter the camp."

Halloran raised both eyebrows. "Is that a fact?"

"Indeed it is, sir."

"What did this alien look like?"

"He looked very much like you, Mr. Halloran."

"God in heaven!" Halloran exclaimed. "How did you know he was *not* me?"

"Because he tried to enter the camp without giving the password. That, of course, the real Mr. Halloran would never do."

"Exactly so," Halloran said. "Good work, Maxie. We'll have to keep our eyes open for that fellow."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Halloran nodded casually. He was pleased with himself. He had figured out that Max, by the very terms of his construction, would have to deal with each encounter as unique, and to dispose of it according to its immediate merits. This had to be so, since Max was not permitted to reason on the basis of prior experiences.

Max had built-in biases. He assumed that Earthmen always have the password. He assumed that aliens never have the password, but always try to enter the camp. Therefore, a creature who did not try to enter the camp must be presumed to be free of the alien camp-entering compulsion, and therefore to be an Earthman, until proven otherwise.

Halloran thought that was pretty good reasoning for a man who had lost several percent of his body fluids. Now he had to hope that the rest of his plan would work as well.

"Max," he said, "during my inspection, I made one rather disturbing discovery."

"Sir?"

"I found that we are camped on the edge of a fault in this planet's crust. The lines of the schism are unmistakable; they make the San Andreas Fault look like a hairline fracture."

"Sounds bad, sir. Is there much risk?"

"You bet your tin ass there's much risk. And much risk means much work. You and I, Maxie, are going to shift the entire camp about two miles due west. Immediately! So pick up the canteens and follow me."

"Yes, sir," Max said. "As soon as you release me."

"Okay, I release you," Halloran said. "Hurry up!"

"I can't," the robot said. "You must release me by giving the current password and stating that it is canceled. Then I'll be able to stop guarding this particular perimeter."

"There's no time for formalities," Halloran said tightly. "The new password is 'whitefish.' Get moving, Max, I just felt a tremor."

"I didn't feel anything."

"Why should you?" Halloran snapped. "You're just a PR robot, not an Earthman with special training and finely attuned sensory apparatus. Damn, there it goes again! You must have felt it that time!"

"I think I did feel it!"

"Then get moving!"

"Mr. Halloran, I can't! It is physically impossible for me to leave this perimeter without a formal release! Please, sir, release me!"

"Don't get so excited," Halloran said. "On second thought, we're going to leave the camp right here."

"But the earthquake — "

"I've just made a new calculation. We've got more time than I had thought. I'm going to take another look around."

Halloran moved behind the rocks, out of the robot's sight. His heart was beating heavily, and the blood in his veins felt thick and sluggish. Bright spots were dancing before his eyes. He diagnosed an incipient sunstroke, and forced himself to sit very quietly in a patch of shade.

The endless day stretched on. The amorphous white blob of the double suns crept an inch toward the horizon. PR-22-0134 guarded his perimeter.

A breeze sprang up, turned into half a gale, and blew sand against Max's unblinking sensors. The robot trudged on, keeping to an exact circle. The wind died down and a figure appeared among the rocks some twenty yards away. Someone was watching him: was it Halloran, or the alien? Max refused to speculate. He guarded his perimeter.

A small creature like a coyote darted out of the desert and ran a zigzag course almost under Max's feet. A large bird dived down in pursuit. There was a thin, high scream and blood was splashed against one of the tents. The bird flapped heavily into the air with something writhing in its claws.

Max paid no attention to this. He was watching a humanoid creature stagger toward him out of the rocks.

The creature stopped. "Good day, Mr. Halloran," Max said at once. "I feel that I should mention, sir, that you show definite signs of dehydration. That is a condition which leads to shock, unconsciousness, and death, unless attended to promptly."

"Shut up," Halloran said, in a husky, heat-parched voice.

"Very well, Mr. Halloran."

"And stop calling me Mr. Halloran."

"Why should I do that, sir?"

"Because I am not Halloran. I am an alien."

"Indeed?" the robot said.

"Yes, indeed. Do you doubt my word?"

"Well, your mere unsupported statement — "

"Never mind, I'll give you proof. *I do not know the password.* Is that proof enough?"

When the robot still hesitated, Halloran said, "Look, Mr. Halloran told me that I should remind you of your own fundamental definitions, which are the criteria by which you perform your job. To wit: an earthman is a sentient creature who knows the password; an alien is a sentient creature who does not know the password."

"Yes," the robot said reluctantly, "knowledge of the password is my yardstick. But still, I sense something wrong. Suppose you're lying to me?"

"If I'm lying, then I must be an Earthman who knows the password," Halloran explained. "In which case, there's no danger. But you know that I'm not lying, because you know that no Earthman would lie about the password."

"I don't know if I can assume that."

"You must. No Earthman wants to appear as an alien, does he?"

"Of course not."

"And a password is the only certain differentiation between a human and an alien?"

"Yes."

"Then the case is proven."

"I'm still not sure," Max said, and Halloran realized that the robot was reluctant to receive instruction from an alien, even if the alien was only trying to prove that he was an alien.

He waited. After a while, Max said, "All right, I agree that you are an alien. Accordingly, I refuse to let you into the camp."

"I'm not asking you to let me in. The point is, I am Halloran's prisoner, and you know what that means."

The robot blinked his sensors rapidly. "I don't know what that means."

"It means," Halloran said, "that you must follow Halloran's orders concerning me. His orders are that I must be detained within the perimeter of the camp, and must not be released unless he gives specific orders to that effect."

Max cried, "Mr. Halloran knows that I can't let you into the camp!"

"Of course! But Halloran is telling you to *imprison* me in the camp, which is an entirely different matter."

"Is it, really?"

"It certainly is! You must know that Earthmen *always* imprison aliens who try to break into their camp!"

"I seem to have heard something to that effect," Max said. "Still, I cannot allow you in. But I can guard you here, just in front of the camp."

"That's not very good," Halloran said sulkily.

"I'm sorry, but it's the best I can do."

"Oh, very well," Halloran said, sitting down on the sand. "I am your prisoner, then."

"Yes."

"Then give me a drink of water."

"I am not allowed — "

"Damn it, you certainly know that alien prisoners are to be treated with the courtesy appropriate to their rank and are to be given the necessities of life according to the Geneva Convention and other international protocols."

"Yes, I've heard about that," Max said. "What is your rank?"

"Jamisdar, senior grade. My serial number is 12278031. And I need water immediately, because I'll die without it."

Max thought for several seconds. At last he said, "I will give you water. But only after Mr. Halloran has had water."

"Surely there's enough for both of us?" Halloran asked, trying to smile in a winning manner.

"That," Max said firmly, "is for Mr. Halloran to decide."

"All right," Halloran said, getting to his feet.

"Wait! Stop! Where are you going?"

"Just behind those rocks," Halloran said. "It's time for my noon prayer, which I must do in utter privacy."

"But what if you escape?"

"What would be the use?" Halloran asked, walking off. "Halloran would simply capture me again."

"True, true, the man's a genius," the robot muttered.

Very little time passed. Suddenly, Halloran came out of the rocks.

"Mr. Halloran?" Max asked.

"That's me," Halloran said cheerfully. "Did my prisoner get here okay?"

"Yes, sir. He's over there in the rocks, praying."

"No harm in that," Halloran said. "Listen, Max, when he comes out again, make sure he gets some water."

"I'll be glad to. After you have had your water, sir."

"Hell, I'm not even thirsty. Just see that the poor damned alien gets some."

"I can't, not until I've seen you drink your fill. The state of dehydration I mentioned, sir, is now more advanced. You are not far from collapse. I insist and I implore you — drink!"

"All right, stop nagging, get me a canteen."

"Oh, sir!"

"Eh? What's the matter?"

"You know I can't leave my post here on the perimeter."

"Why in hell can't you?"

"It's against orders. And also, because there's an alien behind those rocks."

"I'll keep watch for you, Max old boy, and you fetch a canteen like a good boy."

"It's good of you to offer, sir, but I can't allow that. I am a PR robot, constructed for the sole purpose of guarding the camp. I must not turn that responsibility over to anyone else, not even an Earthman or another PR robot, until the password is given and I am relieved of duty."

"Yeah, yeah," Halloran muttered. "Any place I start, it still comes out zero." Painfully he dragged himself behind the rocks.

"What's the matter?" the robot asked. "What did I say?"

There was no answer.

"Mr. Halloran? Jamisdar Alien?"

Still no answer. Max continued to guard his perimeter.

Halloran was tired. His throat hurt from talking with a stupid robot, and his body hurt all over from the endless blows of the double sun. He had gone beyond sunburn; he was blackened, crusted over, a roast turkey of a man. Pain, thirst, and fatigue dominated him, leaving no room for any emotion except anger.

He was furious at himself for being caught in so absurd a situation, for letting himself be killed so casually. ("Halloran? Oh, yes, he didn't know the password, poor devil, and he died of exposure not fifty yards from water and shelter. Sad, strange, funny sort of end...")

It was anger that kept him going now, that enabled him to review his situation and to search for a way into the camp.

He had convinced the robot that he was an Earthman. Then he had convinced the robot that he was an alien. Both approaches had failed when it came to the crucial issue of entry into the camp.

What was there left to try now?

He rolled over and stared up into the glowing white sky. Black specks moved across his line of vision. Hallucination? No, birds were circling. They were ignoring their usual diet of coyotes, waiting for the collapse of something really tasty, a walking banquet...

Halloran forced himself to sit upright. Now, he told himself, I must review the situation and search for a loophole.

From Max's viewpoint, all sentient creatures who possess the password are Earthmen; all sentient creatures who do not possess the password are aliens.

Which means...

Means what? For a second, Halloran thought he had stumbled on to the key to the puzzle. But he was having difficulty concentrating. The birds were circling lower. One of the coyotes had come out and was sniffing at his shoes.

Forget all that. Concentrate. Become a practical automatologist.

Really, when you get right down to it, Max is *stupid*. He wasn't designed to detect frauds, except in the most limited capacity. His criteria are — archaic. Like that story about how Plato defined man as a featherless biped, and Diogenes the Cynic produced a plucked chicken which he maintained fitted the definition. Plato thereupon changed his definition to state that man was a featherless biped with broad nails.

But what has that got to do with Max?

Halloran shook his head savagely, trying to force himself to concentrate. But all he could see was Plato's man — a six-foot chicken without a feather on his body, but with broad fingernails.

Max was vulnerable. He had to be! Unlike Plato, he couldn't change his mind. Max was stuck with his definitions, and with their logical consequences...

"Well, I'll be damned," Halloran said. "I do believe I have figured a way."

He tried to think it through, but found he wasn't able. He simply had to try it, and win or lose on the result. "Max," he said softly, "one plucked chicken is coming up. Or rather, one unplucked chicken. Put *that* in your cosmology and smoke it!"

He wasn't sure what he meant, but he knew what he was going to do.

Captain Beatty and Lieutenant James returned to the camp at the end of three Earth days. They found Halloran unconscious and delirious, a victim of dehydration and sunstroke. He raved about how Plato had tried to keep him out of the camp, and how Halloran had transformed himself into a six-foot chicken without broad fingernails, thus getting the best of the learned philosopher and his robot buddy.

Max had given him water, wrapped his body in wet blankets, and had produced black shade out of a double sheet of plastic. Halloran would recover in a day or two.

He had written a note before passing out: *No password couldn't get back in tell factory install emergency bypass in PR robots.*

Beatty couldn't make any sense out of Halloran, so he questioned Max. He heard about Halloran's trip of inspection and the various aliens who looked exactly like him, and what they said and what Halloran said. Obviously, these were all increasingly desperate attempts on Halloran's part to get back into the camp.

"But what happened after that?" Beatty asked. "How did he finally get in?"

"He didn't 'get in,'" Max said. "He simply *was* in at one point."

"But how did he get past you?"

"He didn't! That would have been quite impossible. Mr. Halloran simply *was* inside the camp."

"I don't understand," Beatty said.

"Quite frankly, sir, I don't either. I'm afraid that only Mr. Halloran can answer your question."

"It'll be awhile before Halloran talks to anyone," Beatty said. "Still, if he figured out a way, I suppose I can, too."

Beatty and James both tried, but they couldn't come up with the answer. They weren't desperate enough or angry enough, and they weren't even thinking along the right lines. To understand how Halloran had gotten in, it was necessary to view the final course of events from Max's viewpoint.

Heat, wind, birds, rock, suns, sand. I disregard the irrelevant. I guard the camp perimeter against aliens.

Now something is coming toward me, out of the rocks, out of the desert. It is a large creature, it has hair hanging over its face, it creeps on four limbs.

I challenge. It snarls at me. I challenge again, in a more preemptory manner, I switch on my armament, I threaten. The creature growls and keeps on crawling towards the camp.

I consult my definitions in order to produce an appropriate response.

I know that humans and aliens are both classes of sentient creature characterized by intelligence, which is expressed through the faculty of speech. This faculty is invariably employed to respond to my challenges.

Humans always answer correctly when asked the password.

Aliens always answer incorrectly when asked the password.

Both aliens and humans always answer — correctly or incorrectly — when asked the password.

Since this is invariably so, I must assume that any creature which does *not* answer my challenge is *unable* to answer, and can be ignored.

Birds and reptiles can be ignored. This large beast which crawls past me can also be ignored. I pay no attention to the creature; but

I keep my sensors at extended alert, because Mr. Halloran is somewhere out in the desert. There is also an alien out there, a Jamisdar.

But what is this? It is Mr. Halloran, miraculously back in the camp, groaning, suffering from dehydration and sunstroke. The beast who crept past me is gone without trace, and the Jamisdar is presumably still praying in the rocks...

THE SAME TO YOU DOUBLED

In New York, it never fails, the doorbell rings just when you've plopped down onto the couch for a well-deserved snooze. Now, a person of character would say, "To hell with that, a man's home is his castle and they can slide any telegrams under the door." But if you're like Edelstein, not particularly strong on character, then you think to yourself that maybe it's the blonde from 12C who has come up to borrow a jar of chili powder. Or it could even be some crazy film producer who wants to make a movie based on the letters you've been sending your mother in Santa Monica. (And why not; don't they make movies out of worse material than that?)

Yet this time, Edelstein had really decided not to answer the bell. Lying on the couch, his eyes still closed, he called out, "I don't want any."

"Yes you do," a voice from the other side of the door replied.

"I've got all the encyclopedias, brushes and waterless cookery I need," Edelstein called back wearily. "Whatever you've got, I've got it already."

"Look," the voice said, "I'm not selling anything. I want to give you something."

Edelstein smiled the thin, sour smile of the New Yorker who knows that if someone made him a gift of a package of genuine, unmarked $20 bills, he'd still somehow end up having to pay for it.

"If it's *free,"* Edelstein answered, "then I *definitely* can't afford it."

"But I mean *really* free," the voice said. "I mean free that it won't cost you anything now or ever."

"I'm not interested," Edelstein replied, admiring his firmness of character.

The voice did not answer.

Edelstein called out, "Hey, if you're still there, please go away."

"My dear Mr. Edelstein," the voice said, "cynicism is merely a form of naiveté. Mr. Edelstein, wisdom is discrimination."

"He gives me lectures now," Edelstein said to the wall.

"All right," the voice said, "forget the whole thing, keep your cynicism and your racial prejudice; do I need this kind of trouble?"

"Just a minute," Edelstein answered. "What makes you think I'm prejudiced?"

"Let's not crap around," the voice said. "If I was raising funds for Hadassah or selling Israel bonds, it would have been different. But, obviously, I am what I am, so excuse me for living."

"Not so fast," Edelstein said. "As far as I'm concerned, you're just a voice from the other side of the door. For all I know, you could be Catholic or Seventh-Day Adventist or even Jewish."

"You knew," the voice responded.

"Mister, I swear to you — "

"Look," the voice said, "it doesn't matter, I come up against a lot of this kind of thing. Goodbye, Mr. Edelstein."

"Just a minute," Edelstein replied.

He cursed himself for a fool. How often had he fallen for some huckster's line, ending up, for example, paying $9.98 for an illustrated two-volume *Sexual History of Mankind,* which his friend Manowitz had pointed out he could have bought in any Marboro bookstore for $2.98?

But the voice was right. Edelstein had somehow known that he was dealing with a goy.

And the voice would go away thinking, *The Jews, they think they're better than everyone else.* Further, he would tell this to his bigoted friends at the next meeting of the Elks or the Knights of Columbus, and there it would be, another black eye for the Jews.

"I do have a weak character," Edelstein thought sadly.

He called out, "All right! You can come in! But I warn you from the start, I am not going to buy anything."

He pulled himself to his feet and started toward the door. Then he stopped, for the voice had replied, "Thank you very much," and then a man had walked through the closed, double-locked wooden door.

The man was of medium height, nicely dressed in a gray pinstripe modified Edwardian suit. His cordovan boots were highly

polished. He was black, carried a briefcase, and he had stepped through Edelstein's door as if it had been made of Jell-O.

"Just a minute, stop, hold on one minute," Edelstein said. He found that he was clasping both of his hands together and his heart was beating unpleasantly fast.

The man stood perfectly still and at his ease, one yard within the apartment. Edelstein started to breathe again. He said, "Sorry, I just had a brief attack, a kind of hallucination — "

"Want to see me do it again?" the man asked.

"My God, no! So you *did* walk through the door! Oh, God, I think I'm in trouble."

Edelstein went back to the couch and sat down heavily. The man sat down in a nearby chair.

"What is this all about?" Edelstein whispered.

"I do the door thing to save time," the man said. "It usually closes the credulity gap. My name is Charles Sitwell. I am a field man for the Devil."

Edelstein believed him. He tried to think of a prayer, but all he could remember was the one he used to say over bread in the summer camp he had attended when he was a boy. It probably wouldn't help. He also knew the Lord's Prayer, but that wasn't even his religion. Perhaps the salute to the flag...

"Don't get all worked up," Sitwell said. "I'm not here after your soul or any old-fashioned crap like that."

"How can I believe you?" Edelstein asked.

"Figure it out for yourself," Sitwell told him. "Consider only the war aspect. Nothing but rebellions and revolutions for the past fifty years or so. For us, that means an unprecedented supply of condemned Americans, Viet Cong, Nigerians, Biafrans, Indonesians, South Africans, Russians, Indians, Pakistanis, and Arabs. Israelis, too, I'm sorry to tell you. Also, we're pulling in more Chinese than usual, and just recently, we've begun to get plenty of action on the South American market. Speaking frankly, Mr. Edelstein, we're overloaded with souls. If another war starts this year, we'll have to declare an amnesty on venial sins."

Edelstein thought it over. "Then you're really not here to take me to hell?"

"Hell, no!" Sitwell said. "I told you, our waiting list is longer than for Peter Cooper Village; we hardly have any room left in limbo."

"Well...Then why are you here?"

Sitwell crossed his legs and leaned forward earnestly. "Mr. Edelstein, you have to understand that hell is very much like U.S. Steel or I.T.&T. We're a big outfit and we're more or less a monopoly. But, like any really big corporation, we are imbued with the ideal of public service and we like to be well thought of."

"Makes sense," Edelstein said.

"But, unlike Ford, we can't very well establish a foundation and start giving out scholarships and work grants. People wouldn't understand. For the same reason, we can't start building model cities or fighting pollution. We can't even throw up a dam in Afghanistan without someone questioning our motives."

"I see where it could be a problem," Edelstein admitted.

"Yet we like to do something. So, from time to time, but especially now, with business so good, we like to distribute a small bonus to a random selection of potential customers."

"Customer? Me?"

"No one is calling you a sinner," Sitwell pointed out. "I said *potential* — which means everybody."

"Oh...What kind of bonus?"

"Three wishes," Sitwell said briskly. "That's the traditional form."

"Let me see if I've got this straight," Edelstein said. "I can have any three wishes I want? With no penalty, no secret ifs and buts?"

"There is one but," Sitwell said.

"I knew it," Edelstein said.

"It's simple enough. Whatever you wish for, your worst enemy gets double."

Edelstein thought about that. "So if I asked for a million dollars — "

"Your worst enemy would get two million dollars."

"And if I asked for pneumonia?"

"Your worst enemy would get double pneumonia."

Edelstein pursed his lips and shook his head. "Look, not that I mean to tell you people how to run your business, but I hope you realize that you endanger customer good will with a clause like that."

"It's a risk, Mr. Edelstein, but absolutely necessary on a couple of counts," Sitwell said. "You see, the clause is a psychic feedback device that acts to maintain homeostasis."

"Sorry, I'm not following you," Edelstein answered.

"Let me put it this way. The clause acts to reduce the power of the three wishes and, thus, to keep things reasonably normal. A wish is an extremely strong instrument, you know."

"I can imagine," Edelstein said. "Is there a second reason?"

"You should have guessed it already," Sitwell said, baring exceptionally white teeth in an approximation of a smile. "Clauses like that are our trademark. That's how you know it's a genuine hellish product."

"I see, I see," Edelstein said. "Well, I'm going to need some time to think about this."

"The offer is good for thirty days," Sitwell said, standing up. "When you want to make a wish, simply state it — clearly and loudly. I'll tend to the rest."

Sitwell walked to the door. Edelstein said, "There's only one problem I think I should mention."

"What's that?" Sitwell asked.

"Well, it just so happens that I don't have a worst enemy. In fact, I don't have an enemy in the world."

Sitwell laughed hard, then wiped his eyes with a mauve handkerchief. "Edelstein," he said, "you're really too much! Not an enemy in the world! What about your cousin Seymour, who you wouldn't lend five hundred dollars to, to start a dry-cleaning business? Is he a friend all of a sudden?"

"I hadn't thought about Seymour," Edelstein answered.

"And what about Mrs. Abramowitz, who spits at the mention of your name, because you wouldn't marry her Marjorie? What about Tom Cassiday in apartment 1C of this building, who has a complete collection of Goebbels' speeches and dreams every night of killing all of the Jews in the world, beginning with you?...Hey, are you all right?"

Edelstein, sitting on the couch, had gone white and his hands were clasped tightly together again.

"I never realized," he said.

"No one realizes," Sitwell said. "Look, take it easy, six or seven enemies is nothing; I can assure you that you're well below average, hatewise."

"Who else?" Edelstein asked, breathing heavily.

"I'm not going to tell you," Sitwell said. "It would be needless aggravation."

"But I have to know who is my worst enemy! Is it Cassiday? Do you think I should buy a gun?"

Sitwell shook his head. "Cassiday is a harmless, half-witted lunatic. He'll never lift a finger, you have my word on that. Your worst enemy is a man named Edward Samuel Manowitz."

"You're sure of that?" Edelstein asked incredulously.

"Completely sure."

"But Manowitz happens to be my best friend."

"Also your worst enemy," Sitwell replied. "Sometimes it works like that. Goodbye, Mr. Edelstein, and good luck with your three wishes."

"Wait!" Edelstein cried. He wanted to ask a million questions; but he was embarrassed and he asked only, "How can it be that hell is so crowded?"

"Because only heaven is infinite," Sitwell told him.

"You know about heaven, too?"

"Of course. It's the parent corporation. But now I really must be getting along. I have an appointment in Poughkeepsie. Good luck, Mr. Edelstein."

Sitwell waved and turned and walked out through the locked solid door.

Edelstein sat perfectly still for five minutes. He thought about Eddie Manowitz. His worst enemy! That was laughable; hell had really gotten its wires crossed on that piece of information. He had known Manowitz for twenty years, saw him nearly every day, played chess and gin rummy with him. They went for walks together, saw movies together, at least one night a week they ate dinner together.

It was true, of course, that Manowitz could sometimes open up a big mouth and overstep the boundaries of good taste.

Sometimes Manowitz could be downright rude.

To be perfectly honest, Manowitz had, on more than one occasion, been insulting.

"But we're *friends,"* Edelstein said to himself. "We *are* friends, aren't we?"

There was an easy way to test it, he realized. He could wish for $1,000,000. That would give Manowitz $2,000,000. But so what? Would he, a wealthy man, care that his best friend was wealthier?

Yes! He would care! He damned well would care! It would eat his life away if a wise guy like Manowitz got rich on Edelstein's wish.

"My God!" Edelstein thought. "An hour ago, I was a poor but contented man. Now I have three wishes and an enemy."

He found that he was twisting his hands together again. He shook his head. This was going to need some thought.

In the next week, Edelstein managed to get a leave of absence from his job and sat day and night with a pen and pad in his hand. At first, he couldn't get his mind off castles. Castles seemed to go with wishes. But, on second thought, it was not a simple matter. Taking an average dream castle with a ten-foot-thick stone wall, grounds and the rest, one had to consider the matter of upkeep. There was heating to worry about, the cost of several servants, because anything less would look ridiculous.

So it came at last to a matter of money.

I could keep up a pretty decent castle on $2000 a week, Edelstein thought, jotting figures down rapidly on his pad.

But that would mean that Manowitz would be maintaining two castles on $4000 a week!

By the second week, Edelstein had gotten past castles and was speculating feverishly on the endless possibilities and combinations of travel. Would it be too much to ask for a cruise around the world? Perhaps it would; he wasn't even sure he was up to it. Surely he could accept a summer in Europe? Even a two-week vacation at the Fontainebleau in Miami Beach to rest his nerves.

But Manowitz would get two vacations! If Edelstein stayed at the Fontainebleau, Manowitz would have a penthouse suite at the Key Largo Colony Club. Twice.

It was almost better to stay poor and to keep Manowitz deprived.

Almost, but not quite.

During the final week, Edelstein was getting angry and desperate, even cynical. He said to himself, I'm an idiot, how do I know that there's anything to this? So Sitwell could walk through doors; does that make him a magician? Maybe I've been worried about nothing.

He surprised himself by standing up abruptly and saying, in a loud, firm voice, "I want twenty thousand dollars and I want it right now."

He felt a gentle tug at his right buttock. He pulled out his wallet. Inside it, he found a certified check made out to him for $20,000.

He went down to his bank and cashed the check, trembling, certain that the police would grab him. The manager looked at the check and initialed it. The teller asked him what denominations he wanted it in. Edelstein told the teller to credit it to his account.

As he left the bank, Manowitz came rushing in, an expression of fear, joy, and bewilderment on his face.

Edelstein hurried home before Manowitz could speak to him. He had a pain in his stomach for the rest of the day.

Idiot! He had asked for only a lousy $20,000. But Manowitz had gotten $40,000!

A man could die from the aggravation.

Edelstein spent his days alternating between apathy and rage. That pain in the stomach had come back, which meant that he was probably giving himself an ulcer.

It was all so damned unfair! Did he have to push himself into an early grave, worrying about Manowitz?

Yes!

For now he realized that Manowitz was really his enemy and that the thought of enriching his enemy was literally killing him.

He thought about that and then said to himself, Edelstein, listen to me; you can't go on like this, you must get some satisfaction!

But how?

He paced up and down his apartment. The pain was definitely an ulcer; what else could it be?

Then it came to him. Edelstein stopped pacing. His eyes rolled wildly and, seizing paper and pencil, he made some lightning calculations. When he finished, he was flushed, excited — happy for the first time since Sitwell's visit.

He stood up. He shouted, "I want six hundred pounds of chopped chicken liver and I want it at once!"

The caterers began to arrive within five minutes.

Edelstein ate several giant portions of chopped chicken liver, stored two pounds of it in his refrigerator and sold most of the rest to a caterer at half price, making over $700 on the deal. The janitor had to take away 75 pounds that had been overlooked. Edelstein had a good laugh at the thought of Manowitz standing in his apartment up to his neck in chopped chicken liver.

His enjoyment was short-lived. He learned that Manowitz had kept ten pounds for himself (the man always had had a gross

appetite), presented five pounds to a drab little widow he was trying to make an impression on and sold the rest back to the caterer for one third off, earning over $2000.

I am the world's prize imbecile, Edelstein thought. For a minute's stupid satisfaction, I gave up a wish worth conservatively $100,000,000. And what do I get out of it? Two pounds of chopped chicken liver, a few hundred dollars and the lifelong friendship of my janitor!

He knew he was killing himself from sheer brute aggravation.

He was down to one wish now.

And now it was *crucial* that he spend that final wish wisely. But he had to ask for something that he wanted desperately — something that Manowitz would *not* like at all.

Four weeks had gone by. One day, Edelstein realized glumly that his time was just about up. He had racked his brain, only to confirm his worst suspicions: Manowitz liked everything that he liked. Manowitz liked castles, women, wealth, cars, vacations, wine, music, food. Whatever you named, Manowitz the copycat like it.

Then he remembered: Manowitz, by some strange quirk of the taste buds, could not abide lox.

But Edelstein didn't like lox, either, not even Nova Scotia.

Edelstein prayed: Dear God, who is in charge of hell and heaven, I have had three wishes and used two miserably. Listen, God, I don't mean to be ungrateful, but I ask you, if a man happens to be granted three wishes, shouldn't he be able to do better for himself than I have done? Shouldn't he be able to have something good happen to him without filling the pockets of Manowitz, his worst enemy, who does nothing but collect double with no effort or pain?

The final hour arrived. Edelstein grew calm, in the manner of a man who had accepted his fate. He realized that his hatred of Manowitz was futile, unworthy of him. With a new and sweet serenity, he said to himself, I am now going to ask for what I, Edelstein, personally want. If Manowitz has to go along for the ride, it simply can't be helped.

Edelstein stood up very straight. He said, "This is my last wish. I've been a bachelor too long. What I want is a woman whom I can marry. She should be about five feet, four inches tall, weigh about 115 pounds, shapely, of course, and with naturally blonde hair. She should be intelligent, practical, in love with me, Jewish, of course, but sensual and fun-loving — "

The Edelstein mind suddenly moved into high gear!

"And *especially,"* he added, "she should be — I don't know quite how to put this — she should be the *most,* the *maximum,* that I want and can handle, speaking now in a purely sexual sense. You understand what I mean, Sitwell? Delicacy forbids that I should spell it out more specifically than that, but if the matter must be explained to you..."

There was a light, somehow *sexual* tapping at the door. Edelstein went to answer it, chuckling to himself. Over twenty thousand dollars, two pounds of chopped chicken liver, and now this! Manowitz, he thought, I have you now: Double the most a man wants is something I probably shouldn't have wished on my worst enemy, but I did.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Last night I had a very strange dream. I dreamed that a voice said to me, "Excuse me for interrupting your previous dream, but I have an urgent problem and only you can help me with it."

I dreamed that I replied, "No apologies are necessary, it wasn't that good of a dream, and if I can help you in any way — "

"Only you can help," the voice said. "Otherwise I and all my people are doomed."

"Christ," I said.

His name was Froka and he was a member of a very ancient race. They had lived since time immemorial in a broad valley surrounded by gigantic mountains. They were a peaceable people, and they had, in the course of time, produced some outstanding artists. Their laws were exemplary, and they brought up their children in a loving and permissive manner. Though a few of them tended to indulge in drunkenness, and they had even known an occasional murderer, they considered themselves good and respectable sentient beings, who —

I interrupted. "Look here, can't you get straight to the urgent problem?"

Froka apologized for being long-winded, but explained that on his world the standard form for supplications included a lengthy statement about the moral righteousness of the supplicant.

"Okay," I told him. "Let's get to the problem."

Froka took a deep breath and began. He told me that about one hundred years ago (as they reckon time), an enormous reddish-yellow shaft had descended from the skies, landing close to the statue

to the Unknown God in front of the city hall of their third largest city.

The shaft was imperfectly cylindrical, and about two miles in diameter. It ascended upward beyond the reach of their instruments, and in defiance of all natural laws. They tested and found that the shaft was impervious to cold, heat, bacteria, proton bombardment, and, in fact, everything else they could think of. It stood there, motionless and incredible, for precisely five months, nineteen hours, and six minutes.

Then, for no reason at all, the shaft began to move in a north-northwesterly direction. Its mean speed was 78.881 miles per hour (as they reckon speed). It cut a gash 183.223 miles long by 2.011 miles wide, and then disappeared.

A symposium of scientific authorities could reach no conclusion about this event. They finally declared that it was inexplicable, unique, and unlikely ever to be duplicated.

But it did happen again, a month later, and this time in the capital. This time the cylinder moved a total of 820.331 miles, in seemingly erratic patterns. Property damage was incalculable. Several thousand lives were lost.

Two months and a day after that the shaft returned again, affecting all three major cities.

By this time everyone was aware that not only their individual lives, but their entire civilization, their very existence as a race, was threatened by some unknown and perhaps unknowable phenomenon.

This knowledge resulted in a widespread despair among the general population. There was a rapid alternation between hysteria and apathy.

The fourth assault took place in the wastelands to the east of the capital. Real damage was minimal. Nevertheless, this time there was mass panic, which resulted in a frightening number of deaths by suicide.

The situation was desperate. Now the pseudosciences were brought into the struggle alongside the sciences. No help was disdained, no theory was discounted, whether it be by biochemist, palmist, or astronomer. Not even the most outlandish conception could be disregarded, especially after the terrible summer night in which the beautiful ancient city of Raz and its two suburbs were completely annihilated.

"Excuse me," I said, "I'm sorry to hear that you've had all this trouble, but I don't see what it has to do with me."

"I was just coming to that," the voice said.

"Then continue," I said. "But I would advise you to hurry up, because I think I'm going to wake up soon."

"My own part in this is rather difficult to explain," Froka continued. "I am by profession a certified public accountant. But as a hobby I dabble in various techniques for expanding mental perception. Recently I have been experimenting with a chemical compound which we call *kola,* and which frequently causes states of deep illumination — "

"We have similar compounds," I told him.

"Then you understand! Well, while voyaging — do you use that term? While under the influence, so to speak, I obtained a knowledge, a completely far-out understanding...But it's so difficult to explain."

"Go on," I broke in impatiently. "Get to the heart of it."

"Well," the voice said, "I realized that my world existed upon many levels — atomic, subatomic, vibrationary planes, an infinity of levels of reality, all of which are also parts of other levels of existence."

"I know about that," I said excitedly. "I recently realized the same thing about my world."

"So it was apparent to me," Froka went on, "that one of our levels was being disturbed."

"Could you be a little more specific?" I said.

"My own feeling is that my world is experiencing an intrusion on a molecular level."

"Wild," I told him. "But have you been able to trace down the intrusion?"

"I think that I have," the voice said. "But I have no proof. All of this is pure intuition."

"I believe in intuition myself," I told him. "Tell me what you've found out."

"Well, sir," the voice said hesitantly, "I have come to realize — intuitively — that my world is a microscopic parasite of you."

"Say it straight!"

"All right! I have discovered that in one aspect, on one plane of reality, my world exists between the second and third knuckles

of your left hand. It has existed there for millions of our years, which are minutes to you. I cannot prove this, of course, and I am certainly not accusing you — "

"That's okay," I told him. "You say that your world is located between the second and third knuckles of my left hand. All right. What can I do about it?"

"Well, sir, my guess is that recently you have begun scratching in the area of my world."

"Scratching?"

"I think so."

"And you think that the great destructive reddish shaft is one of my fingers?"

"Precisely."

"And you want me to stop scratching."

"Only near that spot," the voice said hastily. "It is an embarrassing request to make, and I make it only in hopes of saving my world from utter destruction. And I apologize — "

"Don't bother apologizing," I said. "Sentient creatures should be ashamed of nothing."

"It's kind of you to say so," the voice said. "We are non-human, you know, and parasites, and we have no claims on you."

"All sentient creatures should stick together," I told him. "You have my word that I will never ever again, so long as I live, scratch between the first and second knuckles of my left hand."

"The second and third knuckles," he reminded me.

"I'll never again scratch between *any* of the knuckles on my left hand! That is a solemn pledge and a promise which I will keep as long as I have breath."

"Sir," the voice said, "you have saved my world. No thanks could be sufficient. But I thank you nevertheless."

"Don't mention it," I said.

Then the voice went away and I woke up.

As soon as I remembered the dream, I put a Band-Aid across the knuckles of my left hand. I have ignored various itches in that area, have not even washed my left hand. I have worn this Band-Aid for a week.

At the end of next week I am going to take off the Band-Aid. I figure that should give them twenty or thirty billion years as they reckon time, which ought to be long enough for any race.

But that isn't my problem. My problem is that lately I have begun to have some unpleasant intuitions about the earthquakes along the San Andreas Fault, and the renewed volcanic activity in central Mexico. I mean it's all coming together, and I'm scared.

So look, excuse me for interrupting your previous dream, but I have this urgent problem that only you can help me with...

THE MNEMONE

It was a great day for our village when the Mnemone arrived. But we did not know him at first, because he concealed his identity from us. He said that his name was Edgar Smith, and that he was a repairer of furniture. We accepted both statements at face value, as we receive all statements. Until then, we had never known anyone who had anything to conceal.

He came into our village on foot, carrying a knapsack and a battered suitcase. He looked at our stores and houses. He walked up to me and asked, "Where is the police station?"

"We have none," I told him.

"Indeed? Then where is the local constable or sheriff?"

"Luke Johnson was constable here for nineteen years," I told him. "But Luke died two years ago. We reported this to the county seat as the law requires. But no one has been sent yet to take his place."

"So you police yourselves?"

"We live quietly," I said. "There's no crime in this village. Why do you ask?"

"Because I wanted to know," Smith said, not very helpfully. "A little knowledge is not as dangerous as a lot of ignorance, eh? Never mind, my blank-faced young friend. I like the look of your village. I like the wooden frame buildings and the stately elms. I like — "

"The stately what?" I asked him.

"Elms," he said, gesturing at the tall trees that lined Main Street. "Didn't you know their name?"

"It was forgotten," I said, embarrassed.

"No matter. Many things have been lost, and some have been hidden. Still, there's no harm in the name of a tree. Or is there?"

"No harm at all," I said. "Elm trees."

"Keep that to yourself," he said, winking. "It's only a morsel, but there's no telling when it might prove useful. I shall stay for a time in this village."

"You are most welcome," I said. "Especially now, at harvest-time."

Smith looked at me sharply. "I have nothing to do with that. Did you take me for an itinerant apple-picker?"

"I didn't think about it one way or another. What will you do here?"

"I repair furniture," Smith said.

"Not much call for that in a village this size," I told him.

"Then maybe I'll find something else to turn my hand to." He grinned at me suddenly. "For the moment, however, I require lodgings."

I took him to the Widow Marsini's house, and there he rented her large back bedroom with porch and separate entrance. He arranged to take all of his meals there, too.

His arrival let loose a flood of gossip and speculation. Mrs. Marsini felt that Smith's questions about the police went to show that he himself was a policeman. "They work like that," she said. "Or they used to. Back fifty years ago, every third person you met was some kind of a policeman. Sometimes even your own children were policemen, and they'd be as quick to arrest you as they would a stranger. Quicker!"

But others pointed out that all of that had happened long ago, that life was quiet now, that policemen were rarely seen, even though they were still believed to exist.

But why had Smith come? Some felt that he was here to take something from us. "What other reason is there for a stranger to come to a village like this?" And others felt that he had come to give us something, citing the same argument.

But we didn't know. We simply had to wait until Smith chose to reveal himself.

He moved among us as other men do. He had knowledge of the outside world; he seemed to us a far-traveling man. And slowly, he began to give us clues as to his identity.

One day I took him to a rise which looks out over our valley. This was at midautumn, a pretty time. Smith looked out and

declared it a fine sight. "It puts me in mind of that famous tag from William James," he said. "How does it go? 'Scenery seems to wear in one's consciousness better than any other element in life.' Eh? Apt, don't you think?"

"Who is or was this William James?" I asked.

Smith winked at me. "Did I mention that name? Slip of the tongue, my lad."

But that was not the last "slip of the tongue." A few days later I pointed out an ugly hillside covered with second-growth pine, low coarse shrubbery, and weeds. "This burned five years ago," I told him. "Now it serves no purpose at all."

"Yes, I see," Smith said. "And yet — as Montaigne tells us — there is nothing useless in nature, not even uselessness itself."

And still later, walking through the village, he paused to admire Mrs. Vogel's late-blooming peonies. He said, "Flowers do indeed have the glances of children and the mouths of old men...Just as Chazal pointed out."

Toward the end of the week, a few of us got together in the back of Edmonds's store and began to discuss Mr. Edgar Smith. I mentioned the things he had said to me. Bill Edmonds remembered that Smith had cited a man named Emerson, to the effect that solitude was impractical, and society fatal. Billy Foreclough told us that Smith had quoted Ion of Chios to him: that Luck differs greatly from Art, yet creates many things that are like it. And Mrs. Gordon suddenly came up with the best of the lot; a statement Smith told her was made by the great Leonardo da Vinci: vows begin when hope dies.

We looked at each other and were silent. It was evident to everyone that Mr. Edgar Smith — or whatever his real name might be — was no simple repairer of furniture.

At last I put into words what we were all thinking. "Friends," I said, "this man appears to be a Mnemone."

Mnemones as a distinct class came into prominence during the last year of the War Which Ended All Wars. Their self-proclaimed function was to remember works of literature which were in danger of being lost, destroyed, or suppressed.

At first, the government welcomed their efforts, encouraged them, even rewarded them with pensions and grants. But when the war ended and the reign of the Police Presidents began, government policy changed. A general decision was made to jettison the unhappy past, to build a new world in and of the present. Disturbing influences were to be struck down without mercy.

Right-thinking men agreed that most literature was superfluous at best, subversive at worst. After all, was it necessary to preserve the mouthings of a thief like Villon, a homosexual like Genet, a schizophrenic like Kafka? Did we need to retain a thousand divergent opinions, and then to explain why they were false? Under such a bombardment of influences, how could anyone be expected to respond in an appropriate and approved manner? How would one ever get people to obey orders?

The government knew that if everyone obeyed orders, everything would be all right.

But to achieve this blessed state, divergent and ambiguous inputs had to be abolished. The biggest single source of confusing inputs came from historical and artistic verbiage. Therefore, history was to be rewritten, and literature was to be regularized, pruned, tamed, made orderly or abolished entirely.

The Mnemones were ordered to leave the past strictly alone. They objected to this most vehemently, of course. Discussions continued until the government lost patience. A final order was issued, with heavy penalties for those who would not comply.

Most of the Mnemones gave up their work. A few only pretended to, however. These few became an elusive, persecuted minority of itinerant teachers, endlessly on the move, selling their knowledge where and when they could.

We questioned the man who called himself Edgar Smith, and he revealed himself to us as a Mnemone. He gave immediate and lavish gifts to our village:

Two sonnets by William Shakespeare.

Job's Lament to God.

One entire act of a play by Aristophanes.

This done, he set himself up in business, offering his wares for sale to the villagers.

* * *

He drove a hard bargain with Mr. Ogden, forcing him to exchange an entire pig for two lines of Simonides.

Mr. Bellington, the recluse, gave up his gold watch for a saying by Heraclitus. He considered it a fair exchange.

Old Mrs. Heath exchanged a pound of goosefeathers for three stanzas from a poem entitled "Atalanta in Calydon," by a man named Swinburne.

Mr. Mervin, who owns the restaurant, purchased an entire short ode by Catullus, a description of Cicero by Tacitus, and ten lines from Homer's Catalog of Ships. This cost his entire savings.

I had little in the way of money or property. But for services rendered, I received a paragraph of Montaigne, a saying ascribed to Socrates, and ten fragmentary lines by Anacreon.

An unexpected customer was Mr. Lind, who came stomping into the Mnemone's office one crisp winter morning. Mr. Lind was short, red-faced, and easily moved to anger. He was the most successful farmer in the area, a man of no-nonsense who believed only in what he could see and touch. He was the last man whom you'd ever expect to buy the Mnemone's wares. Even a policeman would have been a more likely prospect.

"Well, well," Lind began, rubbing his hands briskly together. "I've heard about you and your invisible merchandise."

"And I've heard about you," the Mnemone said, with a touch of malice to his voice. "Do you have business with me?"

"Yes, by God, I do!" Lind cried. "I want to buy some of your fancy old words."

"I am genuinely surprised," the Mnemone said. "Who would ever have dreamed of finding a law-abiding citizen like yourself in a situation like this, buying goods which are not only invisible, but illegal as well!"

"It's not my choice," Lind said. "I have come here only to please my wife, who is not well these days."

"Not well? I'm not surprised," the Mnemone said. "An ox would sicken under the workload you give her."

"Man, that's no concern of yours!" Lind said furiously.

"But it is," the Mnemone said. "In my profession we do not give out words at random. We fit our lines to the recipient. Sometimes we find nothing appropriate, and therefore sell nothing at all."

"I thought you sold your wares to all buyers."

"You have been misinformed. I know a Pindaric ode I would not sell to you for any price."

"Man, you can't talk to me that way!"

"I speak as I please. You are free to take your business somewhere else."

Mr. Lind glowered and pouted and sulked, but there was nothing he could do. At last he said, "I didn't mean to lose my temper. Will you sell me something for my wife? Last week was her birthday, but I didn't remember it until just now."

"You are a pretty fellow," the Mnemone said. "As sentimental as a mink, and almost as loving as a shark! Why come to me for her present? Wouldn't a sturdy butter churn be more suitable?"

"No, not so," Lind said, his voice flat and quiet. "She lies in bed this past month and barely eats. I think she is dying."

"And she asked for words of mine?"

"She asked me to bring her something pretty."

The Mnemone nodded. "Dying! Well, I'll offer no condolences to the man who drove her to the grave, and I've not much sympathy for the woman who picked a creature like you. But I do have something she will like, a gaudy thing that will ease her passing. It'll cost you a mere thousand dollars."

"God in heaven, man! Have you nothing cheaper?"

"Of course I have," the Mnemone said. "I have a decent little comic poem in Scots dialect with the middle gone from it; yours for two hundred dollars. And I have one stanza of a commemorative ode to General Kitchener which you can have for ten dollars."

"Is there nothing else?"

"Not for you."

"Well...I'll take the thousand dollar item," Lind said. "Yes, by God, I will! Sara is worth every penny of it!"

"Handsomely said, albeit tardily. Now pay attention. Here it is."

The Mnemone leaned back, closed his eyes, and began to recite. Lind listened, his face tense with concentration. And I also listened, cursing my untrained memory and praying that I would not be ordered from the room.

It was a long poem, and very strange and beautiful. I still possess it all. But what comes most often to my mind are the lines

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

We are men: queer beasts with strange appetites. Who would have imagined us to possess a thirst for the ineffable? What was the hunger that could lead a man to exchange three bushels of corn for a single saying of the Gnostics? To feast on the spiritual — this seems to be what men must do; but who could have imagined it of *us?* Who would have thought us sufferers of malnutrition because we had no Plato? Can a man grow sickly from lack of Plutarch, or die from an Aristotle deficiency?

I cannot deny it. I myself have seen the results of abruptly withdrawing an addict from Strindberg.

Our past is a necessary part of us, and to take away that part is to mutilate us irreparably. I know a man who achieved courage only after he was told of Epaminondas, and a woman who became beautiful only after she heard of Aphrodite.

The Mnemone had a natural enemy in our schoolteacher, Mr. Vich, who taught the authorized version of all things. The Mnemone also had an enemy in Father Dulces, who ministered to our spiritual needs in the Universal Patriotic Church of America.

The Mnemone defied both of our authorities. He told us that many of the things they taught us were false, both in content and in ascription, or were perversions of famous sayings, rephrased to say the opposite of the original author's intention. The Mnemone struck at the very foundations of our civilization when he denied the validity of the following sayings:

Most men lead lives of quiet aspiration.

The unexamined life is most worth living.

Know thyself within approved limits.

We listened to the Mnemone, we considered what he told us. Slowly, painfully, we began to think again, to reason, to examine things for ourselves. And when we did this, we also began to hope.

The neoclassical flowering of our village was brief, intense, sudden, and a delight to us all. Only one thing warned me that the end might be imminent. There was a day in early spring when I had been helping one of the neighbor's children with his lessons.

He had a new edition of Dunster's GENERAL HISTORY, and I glanced through the section on the Silver Age of Rome. It took me a few minutes to realize that Cicero had been omitted. He wasn't even listed in the index, though many lesser poets and orators were. I wondered what retrospective crime he had been found guilty of.

And then one day, quite suddenly, the end came. Three men entered our village. They wore gray uniforms with brass insignia. Their faces were blank and broad, and they walked stiffly in heavy black boots. They went everywhere together, and they always stood very close to one another. They asked no questions. They spoke to no one. They knew exactly where the Mnemone lived, and they consulted a map and then walked directly there.

They were in Smith's room for perhaps ten minutes.

Then the three policemen came out again into the street, all three of them walking together like one man. Their eyes darted right and left; they seemed frightened. They left our village quickly.

We buried Smith on a rise of land overlooking the valley, near the place where he had first quoted William James, among late-blooming flowers which had the glances of children and the mouths of old men.

Mrs. Blake, in a most untypical gesture, has named her latest-born Cicero. Mr. Lind refers to his apple orchard as Xanadu. I myself have become an avowed Zoroastrian, entirely on faith, since I know nothing about that religion except that it directs a man to speak the truth and shoot the arrow straight.

But these are futile gestures. The truth is, we have lost Xanadu irretrievably, lost Cicero, lost Zoroaster. And what else have we lost? What great battles were fought, cities built, jungles conquered? What songs were sung, what dreams were dreamed? We see it now, too late, that our intelligence is a plant which must be rooted in the rich fields of the past.

In brief, our collective memories, the richest part of us, have been taken away, and we are poor indeed. In return for castles of the mind, our rulers have given us mud hovels palpable to the touch; a bad exchange for us.

The Mnemone, by official proclamation, never existed. By fiat he is ranked as an inexplicable dream or delusion — like Cicero.

And I who write these lines, I too will soon cease to exist. Like Cicero and the Mnemone, my reality will also be proscribed.

Nothing will help me: the truth is too fragile, it shatters too easily in the iron hands of our rulers. I shall not be revenged. I shall not even be remembered. For if the great Zoroaster himself could be reduced to a single rememberer, and that one killed, then what hope is there for me?

Generation of cows! Sheep! Pigs! We have not even the spirit of a goat! If Epaminondas was a man, if Achilles was a man, if Socrates was a man, then are we also men?

TRIPOUT

1.

Papazian appeared, disguised as a human being. He checked quickly to make sure that his head was on right. "Nose and toes the same way goes," he reminded himself, and that was how it was.

All of his systems were go. His psyche was soldered firmly to his pineal gland, and he even had a small soul powered by flashlight batteries. He was on Earth, a weird place, in New York, crossroads of ten million private lives. He tried to gropple, but this body wouldn't do it. So he smiled, an adequate substitute.

He left the telephone booth and went out into the street to play with the people.

2.

The first person he met was a fat man of about forty. The man stopped him and said, "Hey, bud, what's the quickest way to 49th Street and Broadway?"

Papazian answered without hesitation, "Feel along that wall until you hit a soft spot. Then step through. It's a spatial bypass which the Martians put in, back when there were Martians — It'll take you out at 48th Street and Seventh Avenue, which I call pretty good service."

"Snotty wise guy bastard," the man said, and walked away without even touching the wall to see if there was a soft spot.

Much characterological rigidity, Papazian said to himself. *I must include that in my report.*

But was he supposed to make a report? He didn't know. But, of course, he didn't worry about it. Such things tended to manifest themselves.

3.

Lunchtime! Papazian went to a run-down sleazy diner on Broadway near 28th Street. He said to the counterman, "I'll have one of your famous hot dogs, please."

"Famous?" the counterman sneered. "That'll be the day."

"Then this is the day," Papazian replied. "Your hot dogs have a galaxy-wide reputation. I know beings who have traveled a thousand light-years solely to eat those hot dogs."

"Nut," the counterman said.

"Nut, am I? It may interest you to know that half of your customers at this moment are extraterrestrial beings. In disguise, of course."

Half the customers at the lunch counter turned pale.

"What are you, some kind of a foreigner?" the counterman asked.

"I'm Aldeberanese on my mother's side," Papazian said.

"That accounts for it," the counterman said.

4.

Papazian walked down the street knowing nothing. He was really enjoying his ignorance. His own ignorance excited him. It meant that he had a lot of things to learn. It was so marvelous, not to know what you are going to do next, or be, or say.

"Hey, bud," a man called out, "will this subway take me to Washington Heights?"

"I don't know," Papazian said, and it was true, he didn't know, he didn't even know how to get to Washington Heights! It was a pinnacle in the annals of ignorance.

But no one can stay *that* ignorant for long. A woman hurried over and told them how to get to Washington Heights. Papazian found it mildly interesting, but not as interesting as not knowing.

5.

The sign on the building said LOFT FOR RENT.

Papazian went in at once and rented it. He thought that was the proper move. But he hoped it was the improper move, which was bound to be more amusing.

6.

The young woman said, "Good day, I am Miss Marsh. The agency sent me. They said you needed a secretary."

"That is correct. You are hired."

"Just like that?"

"I can't think of any other way. What is your first name?"

"Lillian."

"That is satisfactory. Please begin working."

"But you don't have any furniture here, not even a typewriter."

"Get what you require. Here is money."

"But what am I supposed to *do?"*

"You mustn't ask me that," Papazian said gently. "I find it hard enough to find out what I am supposed to do. Surely you can run your own life?"

"What are you supposed to do, Mr. Papazian?"

"I am supposed to discover what I am supposed to do."

"Oh...Well, all right. I guess you'll need desks, chairs, lamps, a typewriter, other stuff."

"Marvelous, Lil! I had the feeling that you knew what you were supposed to do all along. Were you aware that you are a very pretty young lady?"

"No..."

"Then perhaps you aren't. If you don't know, how can I tell?"

7.

Papazian woke up and changed his name to Hal. He was in the Village Central Hotel. He had spent an exciting evening listening to the cockroaches rap about the tenants. Cockroaches are natural mimics and can be extremely funny.

Hal sloughed a layer of skin and left it under the bed for the chambermaid. It was faster than washing.

He went to his loft. Lillian was already there, and some furniture had arrived. Lillian said, "There's a customer in the anteroom, Mr. Papazian."

"I've changed my name to Hal," Hal said. "Send in the customer."

The customer was a short round man named Jaspers.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Jaspers?" Hal asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Jaspers said. "Some unaccountable impulse sent me here."

Hal remembered now that he had forgotten where he had left his Unaccountable Impulse Machine.

"Where did you get this unaccountable impulse?" Hal asked.

"On the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and 18th Street."

"Near the mailbox? I thought so! You have done me a service, Mr. Jaspers! How may I help you?"

"I told you, I don't know. It was an unaccountable — "

"Yes. But what would you like?"

"Time," Jaspers said sadly. "Isn't that what we all would like?"

"No, it is not," Hal said firmly. "But still, maybe I can help you. How much time do you want?"

"I'd like another hundred years," Jaspers said.

"Come back tomorrow," Hal said. "I'll see what I can do for you."

After Jaspers had gone, Lillian asked, "Can you really do something for him?"

"Find out tomorrow," Hal said.

"Why tomorrow?"

"Why not tomorrow?"

"Because you've left Mr. Jaspers and me hanging, and that's not nice."

"No, it is not," Hal admitted. "But it *is* extremely lifelike. I have observed in my travels that life is precisely the state of hanging. The moral is, you must enjoy everything while hanging, because hanging is all you'll ever be able to do."

"Oh, dear, that's too deep for me."

"Then go type a letter, or whatever it is you think you're supposed to do."

8.

Hal went down to the Orange Julius on 8th Street for lunch. That particular stand had been recommended in the Interplanetary Gourmet's Guide to Inexpensive Eating on Earth. Hal found the chili dog superb. He finished and walked to the southeast corner of Sixth Avenue and 8th Street.

A man with an American flag was standing outside of Nathan's. A small crowd had gathered. The man was old, and he had a red,

seamed face. He was saying, "I tell you that the dead live, and that they are walking the earth this very minute. What do you say to that, eh?"

"Personally," Hal replied, "I would have to agree with you, because there is an old gray-haired woman with a withered arm standing beside you in her astral body."

"My God, it must be Ethel! She died last year, mister, and I've been trying to speak to her ever since! What is she saying?"

"She said, and I quote, 'Herbert, stop talking a lot of shit and get back to the apartment on account of that pot of water you left on the stove to boil eggs in hasn't no water left in it and the whole damned place is going to burn down in another half hour.'"

"That's Ethel, all right!" Herbert said. "Ethel! How can you still claim that I am talking shit when you are now a ghost yourself?"

"She said," Hal said, "that a man who can't even boil eggs without burning down his apartment isn't likely to know much about spirits."

"She always got me with her lousy non sequiturs," Herbert said. "Thanks for the help, mister."

He hurried off. Hal said, "Ma'am, weren't you a little hard on him?"

Ethel replied, "He never listened to me when I was alive and he won't now that I'm dead. What could be too hard on a man like that? Nice talking to you, mister, I gotta go now."

"Where?" Hal asked.

"Back to the Home for Aged Spirits, where else?" She departed invisibly.

Hal shook his head in admiration. *Earth!* he thought. *It's an exciting place. Too bad it has to be destroyed.*

He walked on. Then he thought, *Does it have to be destroyed?*

He realized that he didn't know. And that also made him happy.

9.

Hal took the spatial bypass from West 16th Street to Cathedral Parkway. He had to change once at Yucca, Arizona, a town well-known for possessing the world's oldest free-standing silo.

Cathedral Parkway had ten colossal cathedrals — gifts to the people of Earth from the religious reptiles of Sainne II. The cathe-

drals were disguised as brownstones in order to avoid trouble with the local authorities.

Many people were sightseeing today. There were Venusians disguised as Germans, and Sagittarians disguised as hippies. No one likes to be taken for a tourist.

Disquieting note: A fat man (unrelated to any of the other fat men previously encountered) came up to Hal and said, "Excuse me, aren't you Hal Papazian?"

Hal looked the man over. He could perceive a slight discoloration on the man's liver, nothing serious, call it a liver spot. Aside from that, the man seemed to be without distinguishing characteristics, except for fatness.

"I'm Arthur Ventura," the man said. "I am your next-door neighbor."

"You're from Aldeberan?" Hal inquired.

"No, I'm from the Bronx, just like you."

"There is no Bronx on Aldeberan," Hal stated, although he wasn't much in the mood for simple declarative sentences.

"Hal, snap out of it. You've been gone nearly a week. Ellen is nearly out of her head with worry. She's going to call the police."

"Ellen?"

"Your wife."

Hal knew what was happening. He was having a genuine Confrontation Scene, and also an Identity Crisis. Those were things that the average extraterrestrial tourist never experienced. What a treasured memory this would be, if only he could remember the memory!

"Well," Hal said, "I thank you most kindly for this piece of information. I am sorry to have troubled my wife, sweet Melon — "

"Ellen," Ventura corrected.

"Hmmm, yes. Tell her I will be seeing her as soon as I have completed my task."

"What task is that?"

"Discovery of my task is my task. It is like that with us higher life forms."

Hal smiled and tried to walk away. But Arthur Ventura showed a peculiar *swarming* ability and surrounded Papazian on all sides, and made noises and rushed in reinforcements. Papazian considered inventing a laser beam and killing them all, but of course that would not have been in the spirit of the occasion.

So, by easy stages, aided by various persons, some wearing uniforms, Papazian was brought to an apartment in the Bronx, and a woman fell into his arms weeping and saying things of a personal and tendentious nature.

Hal deduced that this woman was Ellen. This was the woman who claimed to be his wife. And she had papers to prove it.

10.

At first it was fun to have a wife and an assortment of children and a real honest-to-goodness job, and a bank account, and a car, and several changes of clothing, and all the other things that Earthmen have. Hal played with all of the new things. He was able to perform the role of Ellen's husband without much difficulty: all of the clues were there for him to pick up on.

Almost every day she would ask him, "Honey, can't you really remember anything?"

And Hal would say, "It's all gone. But I'm sure I'll get it back."

Ellen would cry. Hal went along with that, too. He was in no position to make value judgements.

The neighbors were most solicitous, friends were most kind. Everyone made great efforts to conceal their knowledge that he was out of his mind, insane, crazy, a lunatic.

Hal Papazian learned all of the things that Hal Papazian had once done, and did them. He found even the simplest things thrilling. For what greater experience could there be for an Aldeberanese tourist than to live the life of a Terran, and to be accepted as a Terran by other Terrans?

He made mistakes, of course. Doing things at the proper times was difficult for him. But he gradually learned that he should not mow the lawn at midnight, should not wake the children up for their nap at 5 am, should not leave for work at 9 pm. He could see no reason for these restrictions, but they did make matters more interesting.

11.

At Ellen's request, Papazian went to see a certain Dr. Kardoman, a person who specialized in reading people's minds and telling them

which of their thoughts were true and good and fruitful and which were false and evil and counterproductive.

KARDOMAN: How long have you had the feeling that you are an extraterrestrial person?

PAPAZIAN: It started shortly after my birth on Aldeberan.

KARDOMAN: You would save us both a lot of time if you would simply realize and face the fact that you are a crazy person with a lot of weirdo ideas.

PAPAZIAN: It might also save time if *you* admitted that I am in fact an Aldeberanese male in an unusual situation.

KARDOMAN: Fuck that noise. Listen to me, buster, this pretense will get you nowhere. Stick to my premises and I'll normalize you.

PAPAZIAN: Fuck that noise.

12.

The healing process went on apace. Night came, succeeded by day. Week came, subsumed under month. Hal had moments of insight, which Dr. Kardoman applauded, and which Ellen recorded in her manuscript entitled: RETURN FROM DEEPEST SPACE; ONE WOMAN'S ACCOUNT OF HER LIFE WITH A MAN WHO BELIEVED HE WAS FROM ALDEBERAN.

13.

One day Hal said to Dr. Kardoman, "Hey, I think my past is coming back to me."

"Hmmm," said Dr. Kardoman.

"I have a bittersweet memory of myself at the age of eight, serving cocoa to an iron flamingo on my parents' lawn, near the little secret bower where Mavis Healey and I conducted delicious and shameful experiments, and where, not a hundred yards away, the Chesapeake River flowed inexorably into the flaccid depths of Chesapeake Bay."

"Screen memory," Kardoman commented, consulting the dossier which Ellen had put together for him. "At the age of eight you were living in Youngstown, Ohio."

"Damn," Papazian said.

"But you are going the right way," Kardoman told him. "Everybody has screen memories, which conceal the horror and pleasure of whatever true experience must be shielded from the shrinking psyche."

"I knew it was too good to be true," Papazian said.

"Do not discount it. Your screen memory was a helpful indication."

"Good of you to say so," Hal said. "But now, back to the old psychic drawing board."

14.

He came up with various other recollections: of his young manhood spent as a cabin boy aboard a British gunboat on the Yangtze Patrol; of his sixth birthday, celebrated at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg; of his twenty-fifth year, when he worked as a short-order cook in the Klondike.

These were all indisputably Terran memories; but they were not the memories that Dr. Kardoman was looking for.

15.

And then, one fine day, a brush salesman came to the door and asked to speak to the "lady of the house."

"She won't be back for a few hours," Papazian said. "Today is her lesson in demotic Greek, and after that she has a class in intaglio."

"Fine," said the salesman. "I actually wanted to speak to you."

"I don't want any brushes," Papazian said.

"To hell with brushes," the brush salesman said. "I am your holiday liaison officer and I am here to advise you that we are lifting off in exactly four hours."

"Lifting off?"

"All good things must come to an end, even this holiday."

"Holiday?"

"Snap out of it," the brush salesman, or holiday liaison officer, said. "You Aldeberanese are really too much."

"Where are you from?"

"Arcturus. We run a tauter psyche on Arcturus, and we never let our memories slide."

"We Aldeberanese always let our memories slide," Papazian said.

"That's why I am a holiday liaison officer and you are a tourist. Have you had a nice time playing with the natives?"

"I seem to have married one," Papazian said. "Or to be more precise, I seem to be the mate of one who once had a mate who looked exactly like me."

"We provided that," the Arcturan said. "A genuine Terran mate, it was part of the tour package. Now, are you coming?"

"It will hurt poor Melon's feelings," Papazian said.

"Her name is Ellen, and she, like most Terrans, spends an incredible amount of time having hurt feelings. I cannot force you to return. If you wish to stay on, another cruise ship will be along in fifty or sixty years."

"To hell with that," Papazian said. "I'll race you back to the ship."

16.

The spaceship had been cleverly disguised to look exactly like Fairlawn, New Jersey. The real Fairlawn, New Jersey, had been clearly lifted out and put down in India's Rajasthan province. No one had noticed the difference except the Israelis, who had promptly sent a rabbi and a guerrilla-warfare expert.

"But I still can't remember anything," Hal complained to the holiday liaison officer.

"That's natural. You left your memory bank in a locker aboard the ship."

"What did I do that for?"

"In order not to feel out of place. Your old memories fit right over your present memories. I'll help you sort them out."

Everybody was aboard and alive and well except for the inevitable few who had been killed in South American seaports. These unfortunates would be reconstituted later. Except for the hangover, they would be none the worse for the experience.

The ship lifted off promptly at midnight. The flight was noted by the U.S. Air Force Detection Corps at Scrapple, Pennsylvania. They explained the radar images as being a large accumulation of marsh gas, complicated by a dense flight of swallows.

Despite the nasty chill of outer space, Hal stayed at the rail and watched Earth recede into the distance. He was going back to the humdrum life of a partial-systems photognomic configurator, back to the wives and kiddy, back to the importunities of rust and lichen.

But he left without real regret. He knew that Earth was a nice enough place for a vacation; but one couldn't really live there.

NOTES ON THE PERCEPTION OF IMAGINARY DIFFERENCES

1.

Hans and Pierre are in prison. Pierre is a Frenchman, Hans is a German. Pierre is short and plump with black hair. Hans is tall and thin with blond hair. Pierre has sallow skin and a black mustache. Hans has a clear complexion and a blond mustache. Hans is twelve inches shorter than Hans, who is a foot taller than Pierre.

2.

Hans and Pierre have just heard that a general amnesty has been declared. Under the terms of the amnesty, Pierre will be released immediately. No mention was made of Germans, so Hans will have to stay in prison. This saddens both men. And they think, if only we could get Hans out instead of Pierre...

(Hans, the German prisoner, is an expert locksmith. Once outside, he could rescue his friend from the prison. The Frenchman is a professor of astrophysics and is unable to help anyone, even himself. He is a useless man, but a pleasant one; the German considers him the finest human being he has ever met. Hans is determined to be released from prison in order to help his friend to escape.)

There is a way to accomplish this. If they can deceive the guard into believing that Hans is Pierre, then Hans will be released. Hans will then be able to return to the prison and help Pierre to escape. To this end they have formulated a plan.

Now they hear the sound of footsteps coming down the corridor. It is the guard! They put the first phase of their plan into action by exchanging mustaches.

3.

The guard enters the cell and says, "Hans, step forth."

Both men step forth.

The guard says, "Which is Hans?"

Both prisoners answer, "Me."

The guard looks them over. He sees a tall, thin blond man with a black mustache and a fair complexion, standing beside a short, plump, black-haired man with a blond mustache and a sallow complexion. He stares at them suspiciously for several seconds, then picks out the tall man as the German and orders the other man, the Frenchman, to come along.

The prisoners have been prepared for this. Quickly they dart behind the guard and exchange toupees.

The guard looks them over, grins, unalarmed, and checks his prisoner identification list. He decides that the tall, black-haired, black-mustached man with the clear-skinned leanness is the German.

The prisoners confer in whispers. They run around behind the guard. Hans kneels and Pierre stands on his toes. The guard, who is very stupid, slowly turns around to look at them.

It is not so easy this time. He sees two men of identical height. One has blond hair, blond mustache, sallow skin, plumpness. The other has black hair, black mustache, fair skin, thinness. Both men have blue eyes, a coincidence.

After some reflection, the guard decides that the first man, the blond-haired, blond-mustached, sallow-skinned, plump one, is the Frenchman.

The two prisoners slip away again behind his back and hold a hasty conference. (The guard has bad eyesight, dropsy, fallen arches; his reactions have been impaired due to scarlet fever suffered in his youth. He turns slowly, blinking.)

The prisoners exchange mustaches again. The sallow man pats dust onto his skin, while the light man darkens his face with soot. The plump one stands up higher on his toes, and the thin one slouches down lower on his knees.

The guard sees one plump man of slightly above average height, with a black mustache, blond hair, and light skin. To his left is a sallow fellow of slightly below average height, with a blond mustache and black hair. The guard stares at them hard, frowns, purses his lips, takes out his instructions and reads them again. Then he picks out the light-skinned man of slightly above average height with the black mustache as the Frenchman.

The prisoners scurry away, and the taller man ties his belt tightly around his waist, while the shorter man loosens his belt and stuffs rags under it. They decide to exchange hair and mustaches again, just for luck.

The guard notices at once that the plumpness-thinness factor has diminished in importance. He decides to match up blond-dark characteristics, but then observes that the blond-haired man has a black mustache, while the dark-haired man has a blond mustache. The blond man is slightly below average height, and his skin could be considered sallow. The man on his right has dark hair and blond mustache (slightly askew) and a clearish skin, and he is slightly above average height.

The guard can find nothing in the rules to cover this. Frantic, he takes an old edition of PRISONER IDENTIFICATION PROCEDURES from his pocket, searches for something relevant. Finally he finds the notorious Regulation 12CC of 1878: "The French prisoner shall always stand to the left, the German prisoner to the right."

"You," the guard says, pointing to the prisoner on the left. "Come with me, Frenchie. As for you, Kraut, you stay here in the cell."

4.

The guard marches his prisoner outside, fills in various papers, and releases him.

Later that night, the remaining prisoner escapes.

(It is easy; the guard is disastrously stupid, not only stupid, he drinks himself into a drunken stupor every night, and takes sleeping pills besides. He is an incredible guard, but it is all easily explainable — he is the son of a famous attorney and Party member. As a favor to his father the authorities gave this job to his incompetent and physically handicapped son. They also decided that he could do it alone. That is why there is no other guard to relieve

him, no commandant to check up on him. No, he is all alone, drunk, filled with sleeping pills, and nobody on Earth can awaken him while the prison break is taking place, and that is my last word on the subject of the guard.)

5.

The two former prisoners are sitting on a park bench some miles from the prison. They still look as they looked when we saw them last.

One says, "I told you it would work! With you on the outside—"

"Of course it worked," said the other. "I knew it was for the best when the guard picked me, since you could escape from your cell anyhow."

"Now just a minute," said the first man. "Are you trying to say that the guard, despite our deceptions, took away a Frenchman instead of a German?"

"That's it," the second man said. "And it didn't matter which of us the guard took, because if the locksmith was released, he could come back and help the professor; whereas if the professor is released, the locksmith can get out by himself. You see, there was no need for us to swap roles, so we didn't."

The first man glared at him. "I think that you are trying to steal my French identity!"

"Why would I do that?" the second man asked.

"Because you wish to be French, like me. That is only natural, since there in the distance is Paris, where it is an advantage to be a Frenchman, but no help at all to be a German."

"Of course I wish to be a Frenchman," said the second man. "But that is because I am a Frenchman. And that city out there is Limoges, not Paris."

The first man is slightly above average height, dark haired, blond mustache, fair skin, on the thin side. The second man is below average height, has blond hair, black mustache, sallow complexion, and is on the plump side.

They look each other in the eye. They can find no distortion or blemish there. Each man looks at the other straightforwardly, and perceives the honesty in the other's eyes. If neither man is lying, then one of them must be suffering from a delusion.

"If neither of us is lying," said the first man, "then one of us must be suffering from a delusion."

"Agreed," said the second man. "And, since we are both honest men, all we have to do is retrace the steps of the disguise. If we do that, we will arrive back at the original state in which one of us was the short, blond German and the other was the tall, dark Frenchman."

"Yes...But was it not the Frenchman who had the blond hair and the German who was tall?"

"That is not my recollection of it," said the second man. "But I think that the harshness of prison life may have affected my memory, to the point where I cannot be sure that I remember which are the German qualities and which are the French. Still, I am perfectly willing to discuss the various points with you and to agree to whatever seems reasonable."

"Well, then, let's simply make up our minds, then we can sort out this ridiculous mess. Shouldn't a German have blond hair?"

"That's all right with me. Give him a blond mustache, too, it matches."

"What about skin?"

"Sallow, definitely. Germany has a damp climate."

"Color of eyes?"

"Blue."

"Plump or thin?"

"Plump, decidedly plump."

"That makes the German tall, blond, sallow and plump, with blue eyes."

"A detail or two may be wrong, but let it stand. Now let us trace back and figure out which of us originally looked that way."

6.

At first glance, the two men may seem identical, or at least interchangeable. This is a false impression; it must always be remembered that the differences between them are real, no matter which man has which qualities. The differences are perfectly real despite being imaginary. These are imaginary qualities which anyone can perceive, and which makes one man a German and the other man a Frenchman.

7.

The way to perceive imaginary differences is this: you fix in mind the original qualities of each man, and then you list each of the interchanges. Finally you will arrive at the beginning, and you will know infallibly which is the imaginary German and which is the imaginary Frenchman.

Basically, it is as simple as that. What you do with this knowledge is a different matter, of course.

DOWN THE DIGESTIVE TRACT AND INTO THE COSMOS WITH MANTRA, TANTRA, AND SPECKLEBANG

"But will I really have hallucinations?" Gregory asked.

"Like I said, I guarantee it," Blake answered. "You should be into something by now."

Gregory looked around. The room was dismayingly, tediously familiar: narrow blue bed, walnut dresser, marble table with wrought-iron base, double-headed lamp, turkey-red rug, beige television set. He was sitting in an upholstered armchair. Across from him, on a white plastic couch, was Blake, pale and plump, poking at three speckled irregularly shaped tablets.

"I mean to say," Blake said, "that there's all sorts of acid going around — tabs, strips, blotters, dots, most of it cut with speed and some of it cut with Drano. But lucky you have just ingested old Doc Blake's special tantric mantric instant freakout special superacid cocktail, known to the carriage trade as Specklebang, and containing absolutely simon-pure LSD-25, plus carefully calculated additives of STP, DMT, and THC, plus a smidgen of Yage, a touch of psilocybin, and the merest hint of oloiuqui; *plus* Doc Blake's own special ingredient — extract of foxberry, newest and most potent of the hallucinogenic potentiators."

Gregory was staring at his right hand, slowly clenching and unclenching it.

"The result," Blake went on, "is Doc Blake's total instantaneous many-splendored acid delight, guaranteed to make you hallucinate on the quarter-hour at least, or I return your money and give up my credentials as the best freelance underground chemist ever to hit the West Village."

"You sound like you're stoned," Gregory said.

"Not at all," Blake protested. "I am merely on speed, just simple, old-fashioned amphetamines such as truck drivers and high school students swallow by the pound and shoot by the gallon. Speed is nothing more than a stimulant. With its assistance I can do my thing faster and better. My thing is to create my own quickie drug empire between Houston and 14th Street, and then bail out quickly, before I burn out my nerves or get crunched by the narcs or the Mafia, and *then* split for Switzerland where I will freak out in a splendid sanitorium surrounded by gaudy women, plump bank accounts, fast cars, and the respect of the local politicos."

Blake paused for a moment and rubbed his upper lip. "Speed *does* bring on a certain sense of grandiloquence, with accompanying verbosity...But never fear, my dear newly met friend and esteemed customer, my senses are more or less unimpaired and I am fully capable of acting as your guide for the superjumbotripout upon which you are now embarked."

"How long since I took that tablet?" Gregory asked.

Blake looked at his watch. "Over an hour ago."

"Shouldn't it be acting by now?"

"It should indeed. It undoubtedly is. *Something* should be happening."

Gregory looked around. He saw the grass-lined pit, the pulsing glowworm, the hard-packed mica, the captive cricket. He was on the side of the pit nearest to the drain pipe. Across from him, on the mossy gray stone, was Blake, his cilia matted and his exoderm mottled, poking at three speckled irregularly shaped tablets.

"What's the matter?" Blake asked.

Gregory scratched the tough membrane over his thorax. His cilia waved spasmodically in clear evidence of amazement, dismay, perhaps even fright. He extended a feeler, looked at it long and hard, bent it double and straightened it again.

Blake's antennae pointed straight up in a gesture of concern. "Hey, baby, speak to me! Are you hallucinating?"

Gregory made an indeterminate movement with his tail. "It started just before, when I asked you if I'd really have any hallucinations. I was into it then but I didn't realize it, everything seemed so natural, so ordinary...I was sitting on a *chair,* and you were on a *couch,* and we both had soft exoskeletons like — like mammals!"

"The shift into illusion is often imperceptible," Blake said. "One slides into them and out of them. What's happening now?"

Gregory coiled his segmented tail and relaxed his antennae. He looked around. The pit was dismayingly, tediously familiar. "Oh, I'm back to normal now. Do you think I'm going to have any more hallucinations?"

"Like I told you, I guarantee it," Blake said, neatly folding his glossy red wings and settling comfortably into a corner of the nest.

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