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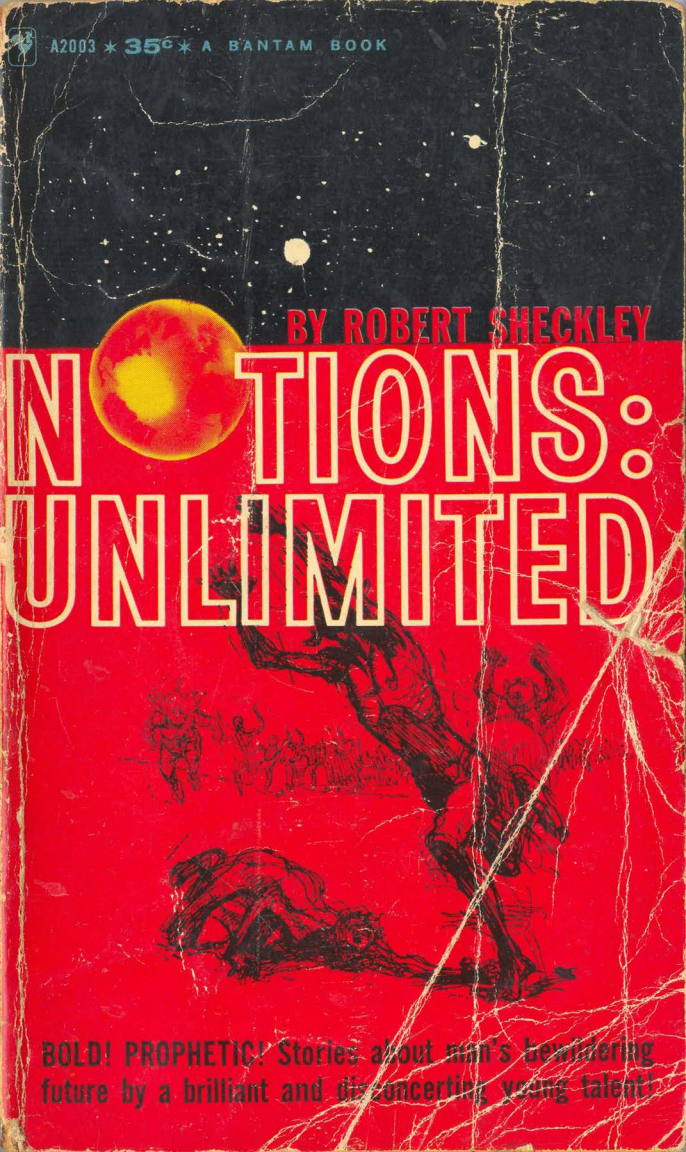

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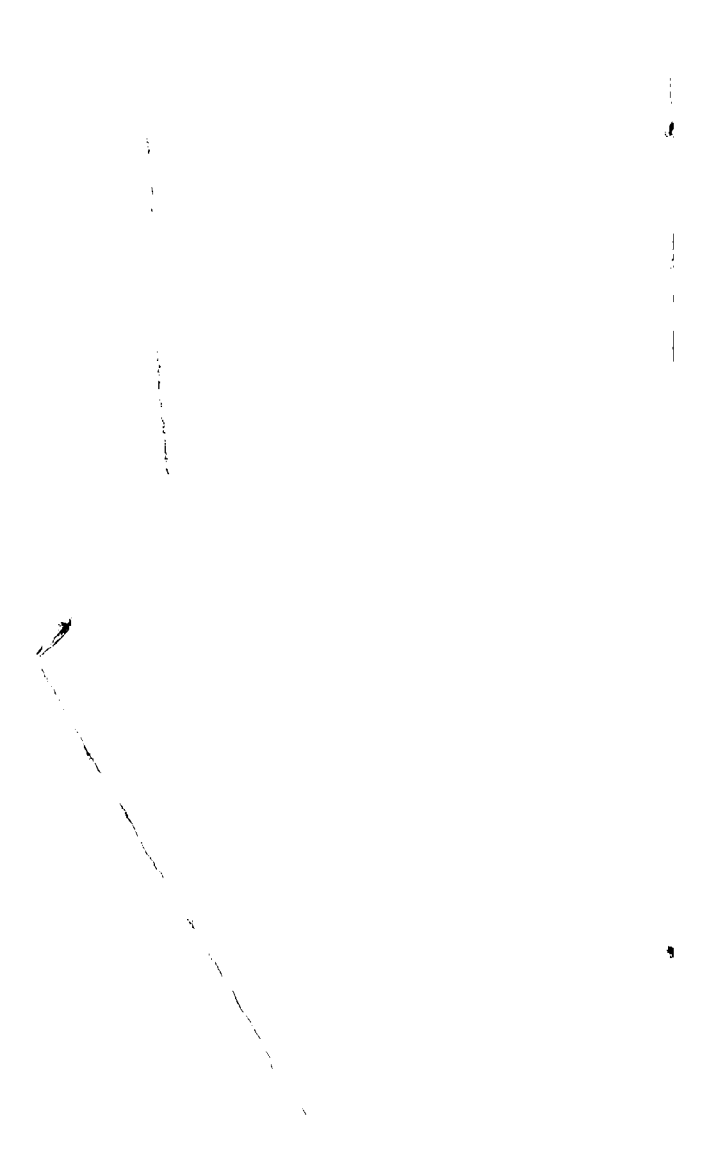

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CONTENTS

GRAY FLANNEL ARMOR

THE MEANS which Thomas Hanley selected to meet the girl who later became his wife is worthy of note, particularly by anthropologists, sociologists and students of the bizarre. It serves, in its humble way, as an example of one of the more obscure mating customs of the late 20th century. And since this custom had an impact upon modern American industry, Hanley's story has considerable importance.

Thomas Hanley was a tall, slim young man, conservative in his tastes, moderate in his vices, and modest to a fault. His conversation with either sex was perfectly proper, even to the point of employing the verbal improprieties suitable to his age and station. He owned several gray flannel suits and many slim neckties with regimental stripes. You might think you could pick him out of a crowd because of his horn-rimmed glasses, but you would be wrong. That wasn't Hanley. Hanley was the other one.

Who would believe that, beneath this meek, self-effacing, industrious, conforming exterior beat a widly romantic heart? Sadly enough, anyone would, for the disguise fooled only the disguised.

Young men like Hanley, in their gray flannel armor and horn-rimmed visors, are today's knights of chivalry. Millions of them roam the streets of our great cities, their footsteps firm and hurried, eyes front, voices lowered, dressed to the point of invisibility. Like actors or bewitched men, they live their somber lives, while within them the flame of romance burns and will not die.

Hanley daydreamed continually and predictably of the swish and thud of swinging cutlasses, of great ships driving toward the sun under a press of sail, of a maiden's eyes, dark and infinitely sad, peering at him from behind a gossamer veil. And, predictably still, he dreamed of more modern forms of romance.

But romance is a commodity difficult to come by in the great cities. This fact was recognized only recently by our more enterprising businessmen. And one night, Hanley received a visit from an unusual sort of salesman.

Hanley had returned to his one-room apartment after a harried Friday at the office. He loosened his tie and contemplated, with a certain melancholy, the long week end ahead. He didn't want to watch the boxing on television and he had seen all the neighborhood movies. Worst of all, the girls he knew were uninteresting and his chances for meeting others were practically nil.

He sat in his armchair as the deep blue twilight spread over Manhattan, and speculated on where he might find an interesting girl, and what he would say if he found one, and—

His doorbell rang.

As a rule, only peddlers or solicitors for the Firemen's Fund called on him unannounced. But tonight he could welcome even the momentary pleasure of turning down a peddler. So he opened the door and saw a short, dapper, flashily dressed little man beaming at him.

"Good evening, Mr. Hanley," the little man said briskly. "I'm Joe Morris, a representative of the New York Romance Service, with its main office in the Empire State Building and branches in all the boroughs, Westchester and New Jersey. We're out to serve lonely people, Mr. Hanley, and that means you. Don't deny it! Why else would you be sitting home on a Friday night? You're lonely and it's our business and our pleasure to serve you. A bright, sensitive, good-looking young fellow like yourself needs girls, nice girls, pleasant, pretty, understanding girls—"

"Hold on," Hanley said sternly. "If you run some sort of a fancy call girl bureau—"

He stopped, for Joe Morris had turned livid. The salesman's throat swelled with anger and he turned and started to leave.

"Wait!" said Hanley. "I'm sorry."

"I'll have you know, sir, I'm a family man," Joe Morris said stiffly. "I have a wife and three children in the Bronx. If you think for a minute I'd associate myself with anything underhanded—"

"I'm really sorry." Hanley ushered Morris in and gave him the armchair.

Mr. Morris immediately regained his brisk and jovial manner.

"No, Mr. Hanley," he said, "the young ladies I refer to are not—ah—professionals. They are sweet, normal, romantically inclined young girls. But they are lonely. There are many lonely girls in our city, Mr. Hanley."

Somehow, Hanley had thought the condition applied only to men. "Are there?" he asked.

"There are. The purpose of the New York Romance Service," said Morris, "is to bring young people together under suitable circumstances."

"Hmm," Hanley said. "I take it then you run a sort of—if you'll pardon the expression—a sort of Friendship Club?"

"Not at all! Nothing like it! My dear Mr. Hanley, have you ever attended a Friendship Club?"

Hanley shook his head.

"You should, sir," said Morris. "Then you could really appreciate our Service. Friendship Clubs! Picture, if you will, a barren hall, one flight up in the cheaper Broadway area. At one end, five musicians in frayed tuxedos play, with a dreary lack of enthusiasm, the jittery songs of the day. Their thin music echoes disconsolately through the hall and blends with the screech of traffic outside. There is a row of chairs on either side of the hall, men on one side, women on the other. All are acutely embarrassed by their presence there.

"They cling to a wretched nonchalance, nervously chain-smoking cigarettes and stamping out the butts on the floor. From time to time, some unfortunate gets up his courage to ask for a dance and, stiffly, he moves his partner around the floor, under the lewd and cynical eyes of the rest. The master of ceremonies, an overstuffed idiot with a fixed and ghastly smile, hurries around, trying to inject some life into the corpse of the evening. But to no avail."

Morris paused for breath. "That is the anachronism known as the Friendship Club—a strained, nervous, distasteful institution better suited to Victorian times than to our own. At the New York Romance Service, we have done what should have been done years ago. We have applied scientific precision and technological know-how to a thorough study of the factors essential to a successful meeting between the sexes."

"What are those factors?" Hanley inquired.

"The most vital ones," said Morris, "are spontaneity and a sense of fatedness."

"Spontaneity and fate seem to be contradictory terms," Hanley pointed out.

"Of course. Romance, by its very nature, must be composed of contradictory elements. We have graphs to prove it."

"Then you sell romance?" Hanley asked dubiously.

"The very article! The pure and pristine substance itself! Not sex, which is available to everyone. Not love—no way of guaranteeing permanency and therefore commercially im-

practicable. We sell *romance*, Mr. Hanley, the missing ingredient in modern society, the spice of life, the vision of all the ages!"

"That's very interesting," Hanley said. But he questioned the validity of Morris' claims. The man might be a charlatan or he might be a visionary. Whatever he was, Hanley doubted whether he could sell *romance*. Not the real thing. Not the dark and fitful visions which haunted Hanley's days and nights.

He stood up. "Thank you, Mr. Morris. I'll think over what you've said. Right now, I'm in rather a rush, so if you wouldn't mind—"

"But, sir! Surely you can't afford to pass up *romance!*"

"Sorry, but—"

"Try our system for a few days, absolutely free of charge," Mr. Morris said. "Here, put this is your lapel." He handed Hanley something that looked like a small transistor radio with a tiny video eye.

"What's this?" Hanley asked.

"A small transistor radio with a tiny video eye."

"What does it do?"

"You'll see. Just give it a try. We're the country's biggest firm specializing in romance, Mr. Hanley. We aim to stay that way by continuing to fill the needs of millions of sensitive young American men and women. Remember—romances sponsored by our firm are fated, spontaneous, esthetically satisfying, physically delightful and morally justifiable."

And with that, Joe Morris shook Hanley's hand and left.

Hanley turned the tiny transistor radio in his hand. It had no buttons or dials. He fastened it to the lapel of his jacket. Nothing happened.

He shrugged his shoulders, tightened his tie and went out for a walk.

It was a clear, cool night. Like most nights in Hanley's life, it was a perfect time for romance. Around him lay the city, infinite in its possibilities and rich in promise. But the city was devoid of fulfillment. He had walked these streets a thousand nights, with firm step, eyes front, ready for anything. And nothing had ever happened.

He passed apartment buildings and thought of the women behind the high, blank windows, looking down, seeing a lonely walker on the dark streets and wondering about him, thinking . . .

"Nice to be on the roof of a building," a voice said. "To look down on the city."

Hanley stopped short and whirled around. He was com-

pletely alone. It took him a moment to realize that the voice had come from the tiny transistor radio.

"What?" Hanley asked.

The radio was silent.

Look down on the city, Hanley mused. The radio was suggesting he look down on the city. Yes, he thought, it would be nice.

"Why not?" Hanley asked himself, and turned toward a building.

"Not that one," the radio whispered.

Hanley obediently passed by the building and stopped in front of the next.

"This one?" he queried.

The radio didn't answer. But Hanley caught the barest hint of an approving little grunt.

Well, he thought, you had to hand it to the Romance Service. They seemed to know what they were doing. His movements were as nearly spontaneous as any guided movements could be.

Entering the building, Hanley stepped into the self-service elevator and punched for the top floor. From there, he climbed a short flight of stairs to the roof. Once outside, he began walking toward the west side of the building.

"Other side," whispered the radio.

Hanley turned and walked to the other side. There he looked out over the city, at the orderly rows of street lights, white and faintly haloed. Dotted here and there were the reds and greens of traffic lights, and the occasional colored blotch of an electric sign. His city stretched before him, infinite in its possibilities, rich in promise, devoid of fulfillment.

Suddenly he became aware of another person on the roof, staring raptly at the spectacle of lights.

"Excuse me," said Hanley. "Didn't mean to intrude."

"You didn't," the person said, and Hanley realized he was talking to a woman.

We are strangers, Hanley thought. A man and a woman who meet by accident—or fate—on a dark rooftop overlooking the city. He wondered how many dreams the Romance Service had analyzed, how many visions they had tabulated, to produce something as perfect as this.

Glancing at the girl, he saw that she was young and lovely. Despite her outward composure, he sensed how the rightness of this meeting, the place, the time, the mood stirred her as it did him.

He thought furiously, but could find nothing to say. No words came to him and the moment was drifting away.

"The lights," prompted his radio.

"The lights are beautiful," said Hanley, feeling foolish.

"Yes," murmured the girl. "Like a great carpet of stars, or spearpoints in the gloom."

"Like sentinels," said Hanley, "keeping eternal vigil in the night." He wasn't sure if the idea was his or if he was parroting a barely perceptible voice from the radio.

"I often come here," said the girl.

"I never come here," Hanley said.

"But tonight . . ."

"Tonight I had to come. I knew I would find you."

Hanley felt that the Romance Service needed a better script writer. Such dialogue, in broad daylight, would be ridiculous. But now, on a high rooftop overlooking the city, with lights flashing below and the stars very close overhead, it was the most natural conversation in the world.

"I do not encourage strangers," said the girl, taking a step toward him. "But—"

"I am no stranger," Hanley said, moving toward her.

The girl's pale blonde hair glinted with starlight. Her lips parted. She looked at him, her features transfigured by the mood, the atmosphere and the soft, flattering light.

They stood face to face and Hanley could smell her faint perfume and the fragrance of her hair. His knees became weak and confusion reigned within him.

"Take her in your arms," the radio whispered.

Automatonlike, Hanley held out his arms. The girl entered them with a little sigh. They kissed—simply, naturally, inevitably, and with a mounting and predictable passion.

Then Hanley noticed the tiny jeweled transistor radio on the girl's lapel. In spite of it, he had to admit that the meeting was not only spontaneous and fateful, but enormously pleasant as well.

Dawn was touching the skyscrapers when Hanley returned to his apartment and tumbled, exhausted, into bed. He slept all day and awoke toward evening, ravenously hungry. He ate dinner in a neighborhood bar and considered the events of the previous night.

It had been wild, perfect and wonderful, all of it—the meeting on the roof and, later, her warm and darkened apartment; and at last his departure at dawn, with her drowsy kiss still warm on his mouth. But despite all this, Hanley was disturbed.

He couldn't help feeling a little odd about a romantic

meeting set up and sponsored by transistor radios, which cued lovers into the proper spontaneous yet fated responses. It was undoubtedly clever but something about it seemed wrong.

He visualized a million young men in gray flannel suits and striped regimental ties, roaming the streets of the city in response to the barely heard commands of a million tiny radios. He pictured the radio operators at their central two-way videophone switchboard—earnest, hard-working people, doing their night's work at romance, then buying a newspaper and taking a subway home to the husband or wife and kids.

This was distasteful. But he had to admit that it was better than no romance at all. These were modern times. Even romance had to be put on a sound organizational basis or get lost in the shuffle.

Besides, Hanley thought, was it really so strange? In medieval times, a witch gave a knight a charm, which led him to an enchanted lady. Today, a salesman gave a man a transistor radio, which did the same thing and probably a lot faster.

Quite possibly, he thought, there has never been a truly spontaneous and fated romance. Perhaps the thing always requires a middleman.

Hanley cast further thoughts out of his mind. He paid for his dinner and went out for a walk.

This time, his firm and hurried steps led him into a poorer section of the city. Here garbage cans lined the sidewalks, and from the dirty tenement windows came the sound of a melancholy clarinet, and the shrill voices of women raised in argument. A cat, striped and agate-eyed, peered at him from an alleyway and darted out of sight.

Hanley shivered, stopped, and decided to return to his own part of the city.

"Why not walk on?" the radio urged him, speaking very softly, like a voice in his head.

Hanley shivered again and walked on.

The streets were deserted now and silent as a tomb. Hanley hurried past gigantic windowless warehouses and shuttered stores. Some adventures, it seemed to him, were not worth the taking. This was hardly a suitable locale for romance. Maybe he should ignore the radio and return to the bright, well-ordered world he knew.

He heard a sound of scuffling feet. Glancing down a narrow alley, he saw three wrestling figures. Two were men and the third, trying to break free, was a girl.

Hanley's reaction was instantaneous. He tensed to sprint away and find a policeman, preferably two or three. But the radio stopped him.

"You can handle them," the radio said.

Like hell I can, Hanley thought. The newspapers were full of stories about men who thought they could handle muggers. They usually had plenty of time to brood over their fistic shortcomings in a hospital.

But the radio urged him on. And touched by a sense of destiny, moved by the girl's plaintive cries, Hanley removed his horn-rimmed glasses, put them in their case, put the case into a hip pocket, and plunged into the black maw of the alley.

He ran full into a garbage can, knocked it over and reached the struggling group. The muggers hadn't noticed him yet. Hanley seized one by the shoulder, turned him and lashed out with his right fist. The man staggered back against the wall. His friend released the girl and went for Hanley, who struck out with both hands and his right foot.

The man went down, grumbling, "Take it easy, buddy."

Hanley turned back to the first mugger, who came at him like a wildcat. Surprisingly, the man's entire fusillade of blows missed and Hanley knocked him down with a single well-placed left.

The two men scrambled to their feet and fled. As they ran, Hanley could hear one complain to the other, "Ain't this a hell of a way to make a living?"

Ignoring this break in the script, Hanley turned to the girl.

She leaned against him for support. "You came," she breathed.

"I had to," said Hanley, in response to a barely audible radio voice.

"I know," she murmured.

Hanley saw that she was young and lovely. Her black hair glinted with lamplight. Her lips parted. She looked at him, her features transfigured by the mood, the atmosphere, and the soft, flattering light.

This time, Hanley needed no command from the tiny radio to take her into his arms. He was learning the form and content of the romantic adventure and the proper manner of conducting a spontaneous yet fated affair.

They departed at once for her apartment. And as they walked, Hanley noticed a large jewel glittering in her black hair.

It wasn't until much later that he realized it was a tiny, artfully disguised transistor radio.

Next evening, Hanley was out again, walking the streets and trying to quiet a small voice of dissatisfaction within him. It had been a perfect night, he reminded himself, a night of tender shadows, soft hair brushing his eyes and tears warm upon his shoulder. And yet . . .

The sad fact remained that this girl hadn't been his type, any more than the first girl had been. You simply can't throw strangers together at random and expect the fiery, quick romance to turn into love. Love has its own rules and enforces them rigidly.

So Hanley walked, and the conviction grew within him that tonight he was going to find love. For tonight the horned moon hung low over the city and a southern breeze carried the mingled scent of spice and nostalgia.

Aimlessly he wandered, for his transistor radio was silent. No command brought him to the little park at the river's edge and no secret voice urged him to approach the solitary girl standing there.

He stood near her and contemplated the scene. To his left was a great bridge, its girders faint and spidery in the darkness. The river's oily black water slid past, ceaselessly twisting and turning. A tug hooted and another replied, wailing like ghosts lost in the night.

His radio gave him no hint. So Hanley said, "Nice night."

"Maybe," said the girl, not turning. "Maybe not."

"The beauty is there," Hanley said, "if you care to see it."

"What a strange thing to say . . ."

"Is it?" Hanley asked, taking a step toward her. "Is it really strange? Is it strange that I'm here? And that you are here?"

"Perhaps not," the girl said, turning at last and looking into Hanley's face.

She was young and lovely. Her bronze hair glinted with moonlight and her features were transfigured by the mood, the atmosphere, and the soft, flattering light.

Her lips parted in wonder.

And then Hanley knew.

This adventure was truly fated and spontaneous! The radio had not guided him to this place, had not whispered cues and responses for him to murmur. And looking at the girl, Hanley could see no tiny transistor radio on her blouse or in her hair.

He had met his love, without assistance from the New York Romance Service! At last, his dark and fitful visions were coming true.

He held out his arms. With the faintest sigh, she came

into them. They kissed, while the lights of the city flashed and mingled with the stars overhead, and the crescent moon dipped in the sky, and foghorns hooted mournful messages across the oily black river.

Breathlessly, the girl stepped back. "Do you like me?" she asked.

"Like you!" exclaimed Hanley. "Let me tell you—"

"I'm so glad," said the girl, "because I am your Free Introductory Romance, given as a sample by Greater Romance Industries, with home offices in Newark, New Jersey. Only our firm offers romances which are truly spontaneous and fated. Due to our technological researches, we are able to dispense with such clumsy apparatus as transistor radios, which lend an air of rigidity and control where no control should be apparent. We are happy to have been able to please you with this sample romance.

"But remember—this is only a sample, a taste, of what Greater Romance Industries, with branch offices all over the world, can offer you. In this brochure, sir, several plans are outlined. You might be interested in the *Romance in Many Lands* package, or, if you are of an enterprising imagination, perhaps the piquant *Romance through the Ages* package is for you. Then there is the regular City Plan and—"

She slipped a brightly illustrated pamphlet into Hanley's hand. Hanley stared at it, then at her. His fingers opened and the brochure fluttered to the ground.

"Sir I trust we haven't offended you!" the girl cried. "These businesslike aspects of romance are necessary, but quickly over. Then everything is purely spontaneous and fateful. You receive your bill each month in a plain, unmarked envelope and—"

But Hanley had turned from her and was running down the street. As he ran, he plucked the tiny transistor radio from his lapel and hurled it into a gutter.

Further attempts at salesmanship were wasted on Hanley. He telephoned an aunt of his, who immediately and with twittering excitement arranged a date for him with a daughter of one of her oldest friends. They met in his aunt's overdecorated parlor and talked in halting sentences for three hours, about the weather, college, business, politics, and friends they might have in common. And Hanley's beaming aunt hurried in and out of the brightly lighted room, serving coffee and homemade cake.

Something about this stiff, formal, anachronistic setup must have been peculiarly right for the two young people.

They progressed to regular dates and were married after a courtship of three months.

It is interesting to note that Hanley was among the last to find a wife in the old, unsure, quaint, haphazard, unindustrialized fashion. For the Service Companies saw at once the commercial potentialities of Hanley's Mode, graphed the effects of embarrassment upon the psyche, and even assessed the role of the Aunt in American Courtship.

And now one of the Companies' regular and most valued services is to provide bonded aunts for young men to call up, to provide these aunts with shy and embarrassed young girls, and to produce a proper milieu for all this in the form of a bright, over-decorated parlor, an uncomfortable couch, and an eager old lady bustling back and forth at meticulously unexpected intervals with coffee and homemade cake.

The suspense, they say, becomes almost overpowering.

THE LEECH

THE LEECH was waiting for food. For millenia it had been drifting across the vast emptiness of space. Without consciousness, it had spent the countless centuries in the void between the stars. It was unaware when it finally reached a sun. Life-giving radiation flared around the hard, dry spore. Gravitation tugged at it.

A planet claimed it, with other stellar debris, and the leech fell, still dead-seeming within its tough spore case.

One speck of dust among many, the winds blew it around the Earth, played with it, and let it fall.

On the ground, it began to stir. Nourishment soaked in, permeating the spore case. It grew—and fed.

Frank Conners came up on the porch and coughed twice. "Say, pardon me, Professor," he said.

The long, pale man didn't stir from the sagging couch. His horn-rimmed glasses were perched on his forehead, and he was snoring very gently.

"I'm awful sorry to disturb you," Conners said, pushing back his battered felt hat. "I know it's your restin' week and all, but there's something damned funny in the ditch."

The pale man's left eyebrow twitched, but he showed no other sign of having heard.

Frank Conners coughed again, holding his spade in one purple-veined hand. "Didja hear me, Professor?"

"Of course I heard you," Micheals said in a muffled voice, his eyes still closed. "You found a pixie."

"A what?" Conners asked, squinting at Micheals.

"A little man in a green suit. Feed him milk, Conners."

"No, sir. I think it's a rock."

Micheals opened one eye and focused it in Conners' general direction.

"I'm awfully sorry about it," Conners said. Professor Micheals' resting week was a ten-year-old custom, and his only eccentricity. All winter Micheals taught anthropology, worked on half a dozen committees, dabbled in physics and

chemistry, and still found time to write a book a year. When summer came, he was tired.

Arriving at his worked-out New York State farm, it was his invariable rule to do absolutely nothing for a week. He hired Frank Conners to cook for that week and generally make himself useful, while Professor Micheals slept.

During the second week, Micheals would wander around, look at the trees and fish. By the third week he would be getting a tan, reading, repairing the sheds and climbing mountains. At the end of four weeks, he could hardly wait to get back to the city.

But the resting week was sacred.

"I really wouldn't bother you for anything small," Conners said apologetically. "But that damned rock melted two inches off my spade."

Micheals opened both eyes and sat up. Conners held out the spade. The rounded end was sheared cleanly off. Micheals swung himself off the couch and slipped his feet into battered moccasins.

"Let's see this wonder," he said.

The object was lying in the ditch at the end of the front lawn, three feet from the main road. It was round, about the size of a truck tire, and solid throughout. It was about an inch thick, as far as he could tell, grayish black and intricately veined.

"Don't touch it," Conners warned.

"I'm not going to. Let me have your spade." Micheals took the spade and prodded the object experimentally. It was completely unyielding. He held the spade to the surface for a moment, then withdrew it. Another inch was gone.

Micheals frowned, and pushed his glasses tighter against his nose. He held the spade against the rock with one hand, the other held close to the surface. More of the spade disappeared.

"Doesn't seem to be generating heat," he said to Conners. "Did you notice any the first time?"

Conners shook his head.

Micheals picked up a clod of dirt and tossed it on the object. The dirt dissolved quickly, leaving no trace on the gray-black surface. A large stone followed the dirt, and disappeared in the same way.

"Isn't that just about the damnedest thing you ever saw, Professor?" Conners asked.

"Yes," Micheals agreed, standing up again. "It just about is."

He hefted the spade and brought it down smartly on the object. When it hit, he almost dropped the spade. He had

been gripping the handle rigidly, braced for a recoil. But the spade struck that unyielding surface and *stayed.* There was no perceptible give, but absolutely no recoil.

"Whatcha think it is?" Conners asked.

"It's no stone," Micheals said. He stepped back. "A leech drinks blood. This thing seems to be drinking dirt. And spades." He struck it a few more times, experimentally. The two men looked at each other. On the road, half a dozen Army trucks rolled past.

"I'm going to phone the college and ask a physics man about it," Micheals said. "Or a biologist. I'd like to get rid of that thing before it spoils my lawn."

They walked back to the house.

Everything fed the leech. The wind added its modicum of kinetic energy, ruffling across the gray-black surface. Rain fell, and the force of each individual drop added to its store. The water was sucked in by the all-absorbing surface.

The sunlight above it was absorbed, and converted into mass for its body. Beneath it, the soil was consumed, dirt, stones and branches broken down by the leech's complex cells and changed into energy. Energy was converted back into mass, and the leech grew.

Slowly, the first flickers of consciousness began to return. Its first realization was of the impossible smallness of its body.

It grew.

When Micheals looked the next day, the leech was eight feet across, sticking out into the road and up the side of the lawn. The following day it was almost eighteen feet in diameter, shaped to fit the contour of the ditch, and covering most of the road. That day the sheriff drove up in his model A, followed by half the town.

"Is that your leech thing, Professor Micheals?" Sheriff Flynn asked.

"That's it," Micheals said. He had spent the past days looking unsuccessfully for an acid that would dissolve the leech.

"We gotta get it out of the road," Flynn said, walking truculently up to the leech. "Something like this, you can't let it block the road, Professor. The Army's gotta use this road."

"I'm terribly sorry," Micheals said with a straight face. "Go right ahead, Sheriff. But be careful. It's hot." The leech wasn't hot, but it seemed the simplest explanation under the circumstances.

Micheals watched with interest as the sheriff tried to shove a crowbar under it. He smiled to himself when it was removed with half a foot of its length gone.

The sheriff wasn't so easily discouraged. He had come prepared for a stubborn piece of rock. He went to the rumble seat of his car and took out a blowtorch and a sledgehammer, ignited the torch and focused it on one edge of the leech.

After five minutes, there was no change. The gray didn't turn red or even seem to heat up. Sheriff Flynn continued to bake it for fifteen minutes, then called to one of the men.

"Hit that spot with the sledge, Jerry."

Jerry picked up the sledgehammer, motioned the sheriff back, and swung it over his head. He let out a howl as the hammer struck unyieldingly. There wasn't a fraction of recoil.

In the distance they heard the roar of an Army convoy.

"Now we'll get some action." Flynn said.

Micheals wasn't so sure. He walked around the periphery of the leech, asking himself what kind of substance would react that way. The answer was easy—no substance. No *known* substance.

The driver in the lead jeep held up his hand, and the long convoy ground to a halt. A hard, efficient-looking officer stepped out of the jeep. From the star on either shoulder, Micheals knew he was a brigadier general.

"You can't block this road," the general said. He was a tall, spare man in suntans, with a sunburned face and cold eyes. "Please clear that thing away."

"We can't move it," Micheals said. He told the general what had happened in the past few days.

"It must be moved," the general said. "This convoy must go through." He walked closer and looked at the leech. "You say it can't be jacked up by a crowbar? A torch won't burnt it?"

"That's right," Micheals said, smiling faintly.

"Driver," the general said over his shoulder. "Ride over it."

Micheals started to protest, but stopped himself. The military mind would have to find out in its own way.

The driver put his jeep in gear and shot forward, jumping the leech's four-inch edge. The jeep got to the center of the leech and stopped.

"I didn't tell you to stop!" the general bellowed.

"I didn't, sir!" the driver protested.

The jeep had been yanked to a stop and had stalled. The driver started it again, shifted to four-wheel drive, and tried

to ram forward. The jeep was fixed immovably, as though set in concrete.

"Pardon me," Micheals said. "If you look, you can see that the tires are melting down."

The general stared, his hand creeping automatically toward his pistol belt. Then he shouted, "Jump, driver! Don't touch that gray stuff."

White-faced, the driver climbed to the hood of his jeep, looked around him, and jumped clear.

There was complete silence as everyone watched the jeep. First its tires melted down, and then the rims. The body, resting on the gray surface, melted, too.

The aerial was the last to go.

The general began to swear softly under his breath. He turned to the driver. "Go back and have some men bring up hand grenades and dynamite."

The driver ran back to the convoy.

"I don't know what you've got here," the general said. "But it's not going to stop a U.S. Army convoy."

Micheals wasn't so sure.

The leech was nearly awake now, and its body was calling for more and more food. It dissolved the soil under it at a furious rate, filling it in with its own body, flowing outward.

A large object landed on it, and that became food also. Then suddenly—

A burst of energy against its surface, and then another, and another. It consumed them gratefully, converting them into mass. Little metal pellets struck it, and their kinetic energy was absorbed, their mass converted. More explosions took place, helping to fill the starving cells.

It began to sense things—controlled combustion around it, vibrations of wind, mass movements.

There was another, greater explosion, a taste of *real* food! Greedily it ate, growing faster. It waited anxiously for more explosions, while its cells screamed for food.

But no more came. It continued to feed on the soil and on the Sun's energy. Night came, noticeable for its lesser energy possibilities, and then more days and nights. Vibrating objects continued to move around it.

It ate and grew and flowed.

Micheals stood on a little hill, watching the dissolution of his house. The leech was several hundred yards across now, lapping at his front porch.

Good-by, home, Micheals thought, remembering the ten summers he had spent there.

The porch collapsed into the body of the leech. Bit by bit, the house crumpled.

The leech looked like a field of lava now, a blasted spot on the green Earth.

"Pardon me, sir," a soldier said, coming up behind him. "General O'Donnell would like to see you."

"Right," Micheals said, and took his last look at the house.

He followed the soldier through the barbed wire that had been set up in a half-mile circle around the leech. A company of soldiers was on guard around it, keeping back the reporters and the hundreds of curious people who had flocked to the scene. Micheals wondered why he was still allowed inside. Probably, he decided, because most of this was taking place on his land.

The soldier brought him to a tent. Micheals stooped and went in. General O'Donnell, still in suntans, was seated at a small desk. He motioned Micheals to a chair.

"I've been put in charge of getting rid of this leech," he said to Micheals.

Micheals nodded, not commenting on the advisability of giving a soldier a scientist's job.

"You're a professor, aren't you?"

"Yes. Anthropology."

"Good. Smoke?" The general lighted Micheals' cigarette. "I'd like you to stay around here in an advisory capacity. You were one of the first to see this leech. I'd appreciate your observations on—" he smiled—"the enemy."

"I'd be glad to," Micheals said. "However, I think this is more in the line of a physicist or a biochemist."

"I don't want this place cluttered with scientists," General O'Donnell said, frowning at the tip of his cigarette. "Don't get me wrong. I have the greatest appreciation for science. I am, if I do say so, a scientific soldier. I'm always interested in the latest weapons. You can't fight any kind of a war any more without science."

O'Donnell's sunburned face grew firm. "But I can't have a team of longhairs poking around this thing for the next month, holding me up. My job is to destroy it, by any means in my power, and at once. I am going to do just that."

"I don't think you'll find it that easy," Micheals said.

"That's what I want you for," O'Donnell said. "Tell me why and I'll figure out a way of doing it."

"Well, as far as I can figure out, the leech is an organic

mass-energy converter, and a frighteningly efficient one. I would guess that it has a double cycle. First, it converts mass into energy, then back into mass for its body. Second, energy is converted directly into the body mass. How this takes place, I do not know. The leech is not protoplasmic. It may not even be cellular—"

"So we need something big against it," O'Donnell interrupted. "Well, that's all right. I've got some big stuff here."

"I don't think you understand me," Micheals said. "Perhaps I'm not phrasing this very well. *The leech eats energy.* It can consume the strength of any energy weapon you use against it."

"What happens," O'Donnell asked, "if it keeps on eating?"

"I have no idea what its growth-limits are," Micheals said. "Its growth may be limited only by its food source."

"You mean it could continue to grow probably forever?"

"It could possibly grow as long as it had something to feed on."

"This is really a challenge," O'Donnell said. "That leech can't be totally impervious to force."

"It seems to be. I suggest you get some physicists in here. Some biologists also. Have them figure out a way of nullifying it."

The general put out his cigarette. "Professor, I cannot wait while scientists wrangle. There is an axiom of mine which I am going to tell you." He paused impressively. "Nothing is impervious to force. Muster enough force and anything will give. *Anything.*

"Professor," the general continued, in a friendlier tone, "you shouldn't sell short the science you represent. We have, massed under North Hill, the greatest accumulation of energy and radioactive weapons ever assembled in one spot. Do you think your leech can stand the full force of them?"

"I suppose it's possible to overload the thing," Micheals said doubtfully. He realized now why the general wanted him around. He supplied the trappings of science, without the authority to override O'Donnell.

"Come with me," General O'Donnell said cheerfully, getting up and holding back a flap of the tent. "We're going to crack that leech in half."

After a long wait, rich food started to come again, piped into one side of it. First there was only a little, and then more and more. Radiations, vibrations, explosions, solids, liquids—an amazing variety of edibles. It accepted them all. But the food was coming too slowly for the starving cells,

for new cells were constantly adding their demands to the rest.

The ever-hungry body screamed for more food, faster!

Now that it had reached a fairly efficient size, it was fully awake. It puzzled over the energy-impressions around it, locating the source of the new food massed in one spot.

Effortlessly it pushed itself into the air, flew a little way and dropped on the food. Its super-efficient cells eagerly gulped the rich radioactive substances. But it did not ignore the lesser potentials of metal and clumps of carbohydrates.

"The damned fools," General O'Donnell said. "Why did they have to panic? You'd think they'd never been trained." He paced the ground outside his tent, now in a new location three miles back.

The leech had grown to two miles in diameter. Three farming communities had been evacuated.

Micheals, standing beside the general, was still stupefied by the memory. The leech had accepted the massed power of the weapons for a while, and then its entire bulk had lifted in the air. The Sun had been blotted out as it flew leisurely over North Hill, and dropped. There should have been time for evacuation, but the frightened soldiers had been blind with fear.

Sixty-seven men were lost in Operation Leech, and General O'Donnell asked permission to use atomic bombs. Washington sent a group of scientists to investigate the situation.

"Haven't those experts decided yet?" O'Donnell asked, halting angrily in front of the tent. "They've been talking long enough."

"It's a hard decision," Micheals said. Since he wasn't an official member of the investigating team, he had given his information and left. "The physicists consider it a biological matter, and the biologists seem to think the chemists should have the answer. No one's an expert on this, because it's never happened before. We just don't have the data."

"It's a military problem," O'Donnell said harshly. "I'm not interested in what the thing is—I want to know what can destroy it. They'd better give me permission to use the bomb."

Micheals had made his own calculations on that. It was impossible to say for sure, but taking a flying guess at the leech's mass-energy absorption rate, figuring in its size and apparent capacity for growth, an atomic bomb *might* overload it—if used soon enough.

He estimated three days as the limit of usefulness. The leech

was growing at a geometric rate. It could cover the United States in a few months.

"For a week I've been asking for permission to use the bomb," O'Donnell grumbled. "And I'll get it, but not until after those jackasses end their damned talking." He stopped pacing and turned to Micheals. "I am going to destroy the leech. I am going to smash it, if that's the last thing I do. It's more than a matter of security now. It's personal pride."

That attitude might make great generals, Micheals thought, but it wasn't the way to consider this problem. I was anthropomorphic of O'Donnell to see the leech as an enemy. Even the identification, "leech," was a humanizing factor. O'Donnell was dealing with it as he would any physical obstacle, as though the leech were the simple equivalent of a large army.

But the leech was not human, not even of this planet, perhaps. It should be dealt with in its own terms.

"Here come the bright boys now," O'Donnell said.

From a nearby tent a group of weary men emerged, led by Allenson, a government biologist.

"Well," the general asked, "have you figured out what it is?"

"Just a minute, I'll hack off a sample," Allenson said, glaring through red-rimmed eyes.

"Have you figured out some *scientific* way of killing it?"

"Oh, that wasn't too difficult," Moriarty, an atomic physicist, said wryly. "Wrap it in a perfect vacuum. That'll do the trick. Or blow it off the Earth with antigravity."

"But failing that," Allenson said, "we suggest you use your atomic bombs, and use them fast."

"Is that the opinion of your entire group?" O'Donnell asked, his eyes glittering.

"Yes."

The general hurried away. Micheals joined the scientists.

"He should have called us in at the very first," Allenson complained. "There's no time to consider anything but force now."

"Have you come to any conclusions about the nature of the leech?" Micheals asked.

"Only general ones," Moriarty said, "and they're about the same as yours. The leech is probably extraterrestrial in origin. It seems to have been in a spore-stage until it landed on Earth." He paused to light a pipe. "Incidentally, we should be damned glad it didn't drop in an ocean. We'd have had the Earth eaten out from under us before we knew what we were looking for."

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

"As you mentioned, it's a perfect converter—it can transform mass into energy, and any energy into mass." Moriarty grinned. "Naturally that's impossible and I have figures to prove it."

"I'm going to get a drink," Allenson said. "Anyone coming?"

"Best idea of the week," Micheals said. "I wonder how long it'll take O'Donnell to get permission to use the bomb."

"If I know politics," Moriarty said, "too long."

The findings of the government scientists were checked by other government scientists. That took a few days. Then Washington wanted to know if there wasn't some alternative to exploding an atomic bomb in the middle of New York State. It took a little time to convince them of the necessity. After that, people had to be evacuated, which took more time.

Then orders were made out, and five atomic bombs were checked out of a cache. A patrol rocket was assigned, given orders, and put under General O'Donnell's command. This took a day more.

Finally, the stubby scout rocket was winging its way over New York. From the air, the grayish-black spot was easy to find. Like a festered wound, it stretched between Lake Placid and Elizabethtown, covering Keene and Keene Valley, and lapping at the edges of Jay.

The first bomb was released.

It had been a long wait after the first rich food. The greater radiation of day was followed by the lesser energy of night many times, as the leech ate away the Earth beneath it, absorbed the air around it, and grew. Then one day—

An amazing burst of energy!

Everything was food for the leech, but there was always the possibility of choking. The energy poured over it, drenched it, battered it, and the leech grew frantically, trying to contain the titanic dose. Still small, it quickly reached its overload limit. The strained cells, filled to satiation, were given more and more food. The strangling body built new cells at lightning speed. And—

It held. The energy was controlled, stimulating further growth. More cells took over the load, sucking in the food.

The next doses were wonderfully palatable, easily handled. The leech overflowed its bounds, growing, eating, and growing.

That was a taste of real food! The leech was as near ecstasy as it had ever been. It waited hopefully for more, but no more came.

It went back to feeding on the Earth. The energy, used to produce more cells, was soon dissipated. Soon it was hungry again.

It would always be hungry.

O'Donnell retreated with his demoralized men. They camped ten miles from the leech's southern edge, in the evacuated town of Schroon Lake. The leech was over sixty miles in diameter now and still growing fast. It lay sprawled over the Adirondack Mountains, completely blanketing everything from Saranac Lake to Port Henry, with one edge of it over Westport, in Lake Champlain.

Everyone within two hundred miles of the leech was evacuated.

General O'Donnell was given permission to use hydrogen bombs, contingent on the approval of his scientists.

"What have the bright boys decided?" O'Donnell wanted to know.

He and Micheals were in the living room of an evacuated Schroon Lake house. O'Donnell had made it his new command post.

"Why are they hedging?" O'Donnell demanded impatiently. "The leech has to be blown up quick. What are they fooling around for?"

"They're afraid of a chain reaction," Micheals told him. "A concentration of hydrogen bombs might set one up in the Earth's crust or in the atmosphere. It might do any of half a dozen things."

"Perhaps they'd like me to order a bayonet attack," O'Donnell said contemptuously.

Micheals sighed and sat down in an armchair. He was convinced that the whole method was wrong. The government scientists were being rushed into a single line of inquiry. The pressure on them was so great that they didn't have a chance to consider any other approach but force—and the leech thrived on that.

Micheals was certain that there were times when fighting fire with fire was not applicable.

Fire. Loki, god of fire. And of trickery. No, there was no answer there. But Micheals' mind was in mythology now, retreating from the unbearable present.

Allenson came in, followed by six other men.

"Well," Allenson said, "there's a damned good chance of splitting the Earth wide open if you use the number of bombs our figures show you need."

"You have to take chances in war," O'Donnell replied bluntly. "Shall I go ahead?"

Micheals saw, suddenly, that O'Donnell didn't care if he did crack the Earth. The red-faced general only knew that he was going to set off the greatest explosion ever produced by the hand of Man.

"Not so fast," Allenson said. "I'll let the others speak for themselves."

The general contained himself with difficulty. "Remember," he said, "according to your own figures, the leech is growing at the rate of twenty feet an hour."

"And speeding up," Allenson added. "But this isn't a decision to be made in haste."

Micheals found his mind wandering again, to the lightning bolts of Zeus. That was what they needed. Or the strength of Hercules.

Or—

He sat up suddenly. "Gentlemen, I believe I can offer you a possible alternative, although it's a very dim one."

They stared at him.

"Have you ever heard of Antaeus?" he asked.

The more the leech ate, the faster it grew and the hungrier it became. Although its birth was forgotten, it did remember a long way back. It had eaten a planet in that ancient past. Grown tremendous, ravenous, it had made the journey to a nearby star and eaten that, replenishing the cells converted into energy for the trip. But then there was no more food, and the next star was an enormous distance away.

It set out on the journey, but long before it reached the food, its energy ran out. Mass, converted back to energy to make the trip, was used up. It shrank.

Finally, all the energy was gone. It was a spore, drifting aimlessly, in space.

That was the first time. Or was it? It thought it could remember back to a distant, misty time when the Universe was evenly covered with stars. It had eaten through them, cutting away whole sections, growing, swelling. And the stars had swung off in terror, forming galaxies and constellations.

Or was that a dream?

Methodically, it fed on the Earth, wondering where the rich food was. And then it was back again, but this time above the leech.

It waited, but the tantalizing food remained out of reach. It was able to sense how rich and pure the food was.

Why didn't it fall?

For a long time the leech waited, but the food stayed out of reach. At last, it lifted and followed.

The food retreated, up, up from the surface of the planet. The leech went after as quickly as its bulk would allow.

The rich food fled out, into space, and the leech followed. Beyond, it could sense an even richer source.

The hot, wonderful food of a sun!

O'Donnell served champagne for the scientists in the control room. Official dinners would follow, but this was the victory celebration.

"A toast," the general said, standing. The men raised their glasses. The only man not drinking was a lieutenant, sitting in front of the control board that guided the drone spaceship.

"To Micheals, for thinking of—what was it again, Micheals?"

"Antaeus." Micheals had been drinking champagne steadily, but he didn't feel elated. Antaeus, born of Ge, the Earth, and Poseidon, the Sea. The invincible wrestler. Each time Hercules threw him to the ground, he arose refreshed.

Until Hercules held him in the air.

Moriarty was muttering to himself, figuring with slide rule, pencil and paper. Allenson was drinking, but he didn't look too happy about it.

"Come on, you birds of evil omen," O'Donnell said, pouring more champagne. "Figure it out later. Right now, drink." He turned to the operator. "How's it going?"

Micheals' analogy had been applied to a spaceship. The ship, operated by remote control, was filled with pure radioactives. It hovered over the leech until, rising to the bait, it had followed. Antaeus had left his mother, the Earth, and was losing his strength in the air. The operator was allowing the spaceship to run fast enough to keep out of the leech's grasp, but close enough to keep it coming.

The spaceship and the leech were on a collision course with the Sun.

"Fine, sir," the operator said. "It's inside the orbit of Mercury now."

"Men," the general said, "I swore to destroy that thing. This isn't exactly the way I wanted to do it. I figured on a more personal way. But the important thing is the destruction. You will all witness it. Destruction is at times a sacred mission. This is such a time. Men, I feel wonderful."

"Turn the spaceship!" It was Moriarty who had spoken. His face was white. "Turn the damned thing!"

He shoved his figures at them.

They were easy to read. The growth-rate of the leech. The energy-consumption rate, estimated. Its speed in space, a constant. The energy it would receive from the Sun as it approached, an exponential curve. Its energy-absorption rate, figured in terms of growth, expressed as a hyped-up discontinuous progression.

The result—

"It'll consume the Sun," Moriarty said, very quietly.

The control room turned into a bedlam. Six of them tried to explain it to O'Donnell at the same time. Then Moriarty tried, and finally Allenson.

"Its rate of growth is so great and its speed so slow—and it will get so much energy—that the leech will be able to consume the Sun by the time it gets there. Or, at least, to live off it until it can consume it."

O'Donnell didn't bother to understand. He turned to the operator.

"Turn it," he said.

They all hovered over the radar screen, waiting.

The food turned out of the leech's path and streaked away. Ahead was a tremendous source, but still a long way off. The leech hesitated.

Its cells, recklessly expending energy, shouted for a decision. The food showed, tantalizingly near.

The closer source or the greater?

The leech's body wanted food *now*.

It started after it, away from the Sun.

The Sun would come next.

"Pull it out at right angles to the plane of the Solar System," Allenson said.

The operator touched the controls. On the radar screen, they saw a blob pursuing a dot. It had turned.

Relief washed over them. It had been close!

"In what portion of the sky would the leech be?" O'Donnell asked, his face expressionless.

"Come outside; I believe I can show you," an astronomer said. They walked to the door. "Somewhere in that section," the astronomer said, pointing.

"Fine. All right, Soldier," O'Donnell told the operator. "Carry out your orders."

The scientists gasped in unison. The operator manipulated

the controls and the blob began to overtake the dot. Micheals started across the room.

"Stop," the general said, and his strong, commanding voice stopped Micheals. "I know what I'm doing. I had that ship especially built."

The blob overtook the dot on the radar screen.

"I told you this was a personal matter," O'Donnell said. "I swore to destroy that leech. We can never have any security while it lives." He smiled. "Shall we look at the sky?"

The general strolled to the door, followed by the scientists.

"Push the button, Soldier!"

The operator did. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the sky lit up!

A bright star hung in space. Its brilliance filled the night, grew, and started to fade.

"What did you do?" Micheals gasped.

"That rocket was built around a hydrogen bomb," O'Donnell said, his strong face triumphant. "I set it off at the contact moment." He called to the operator again. "Is there anything showing on the radar?"

"Not a speck, sir."

"Men," the general said, "I have met the enemy and he is mine. Let's have some more champagne."

But Micheals found that he was suddenly ill.

It had been shrinking from the expenditure of energy, when the great explosion came. No thought of containing it. The leech's cells held for the barest fraction of a second, and then spontaneously overloaded.

The leech was smashed, broken up, destroyed. It was split into a thousand particles, and the particles were split a million times more.

The particles were thrown out on the wave front of the explosion, and they split further, spontaneously.

Into spores.

The spores closed into dry, hard, seemingly lifeless specks of dust, billions of them, scattered, drifting. Unconscious, they floated in the emptiness of space.

Billions of them, waiting to be fed.

WATCHBIRD

WHEN GELSEN entered, he saw that the rest of the watchbird manufacturers were already present. There were six of them, not counting himself, and the room was blue with expensive cigar smoke.

"Hi, Charlie," one of them called as he came in.

The rest broke off conversation long enough to wave a casual greeting at him. As a watchbird manufacturer, he was a member manufacturer of salvation, he reminded himself wryly. Very exclusive. You must have a certified government contract if you want to save the human race.

"The government representative isn't here yet," one of the men told him. "He's due any minute."

"We're getting the green light," another said.

"Fine." Gelsen found a chair near the door and looked around the room. It was like a convention, or a Boy Scout rally. The six men made up for their lack of numbers by sheer volume. The president of Southern Consolidated was talking at the top of his lungs about watchbird's enormous durability. The two presidents he was talking at were grinning, nodding, one trying to interrupt with the results of a test he had run on watchbird's resourcefulness, the other talking about the new recharging apparatus.

The other three men were in their own little group, delivering what sounded like a panegyric to watchbird.

Gelsen noticed that all of them stood straight and tall, like the saviors they felt they were. He didn't find it funny. Up to a few days ago he had felt that way himself. He had considered himself a pot-bellied, slightly balding saint.

He sighed and lighted a cigarette. At the beginning of the project, he had been as enthusiastic as the others. He remembered saying to Macintyre, his chief engineer, "Mac, a new day is coming. Watchbird is the answer." And Macintyre had nodded very profoundly—another watchbird convert.

How wonderful it had seemed then! A simple, reliable answer to one of mankind's greatest problems, all wrapped

and packaged in a pound of incorruptible metal, crystal, and plastics.

Perhaps that was the very reason he was doubting it now. Gelsen suspected that you don't solve human problems so easily. There had to be a catch somewhere.

After all, murder was an old problem, and watchbird too new a solution.

"Gentlemen—" They had been talking so heatedly that they hadn't noticed the government representative entering. Now the room became quiet at once.

"Gentlemen," the plump government man said, "the President, with the consent of Congress, has acted to form a watchbird division for every city and town in the country."

The men burst into a spontaneous shout of triumph. They were going to have their chance to save the world after all, Gelsen thought, and worriedly asked himself what was wrong with that.

He listened carefully as the government man outlined the distribution scheme. The country was to be divided into seven areas, each to be supplied and serviced by one manufacturer. This meant monopoly, of course, but a necessary one. Like the telephone service, it was in the public's best interests. You couldn't have competition in watchbird service. Watchbird was for everyone.

"The President hopes," the representative continued, "that full watchbird service will be installed in the shortest possible time. You will have top priorities on strategic metals, manpower, and so forth."

"Speaking for myself," the president of Southern Consolidated said, "I expect to have the first batch of watchbirds distributed within the week. Production is all set up."

The rest of the men were equally ready. The factories had been prepared to roll out the watchbirds for months now. The final standardized equipment had been agreed upon, and only the Presidential go-ahead had been lacking.

"Fine," the representative said. "If that is all, I think we can—is there a question?"

"Yes, sir," Gelsen said. "I want to know if the present model is the one we are going to manufacture."

"Of course," the representative said. "It's the most advanced."

"I have an objection." Gelsen stood up. His colleagues were glaring coldly at him. Obviously he was delaying the advent of the golden age.

"What is your objection?" the representative asked.

"First, let me say that I am one hundred per cent in favor of a machine to stop murder. It's been needed for a long time. I object only to the watchbird's learning circuits. They serve, in effect, to animate the machine and give it a pseudo-consciousness. I can't approve of that."

"But, Mr. Gelsen, you yourself testified that the watchbird would not be completely efficient unless such circuits were introduced. Without them, the watchbirds could stop only an estimated seventy per cent of murders."

"I know that," Gelsen said, feeling extremely uncomfortable. "I believe there might be a moral danger in allowing a machine to make decisions that are rightfully man's," he declared doggedly.

"Oh, come now, Gelsen," one of the corporation presidents said. "It's nothing of the sort. The watchbird will only reinforce the decisions made by honest men from the beginning of time."

"I think that is true," the representative agreed. "But I can understand how Mr. Gelsen feels. It is sad that we must put a human problem into the hands of a machine, sadder still that we must have a machine enforce our laws. But I ask you to remember, Mr. Gelsen, that there is no other possible way of stopping a murderer *before he strikes.* It would be unfair to the many innocent people killed every year if we were to restrict watchbird on philosophical grounds. Don't you agree that I'm right?"

"Yes, I suppose I do," Gelsen said unhappily. He had told himself all that a thousand times, but something still bothered him. Perhaps he would talk it over with Macintyre.

As the conference broke up, a thought struck him. He grinned.

A lot of policemen were going to be out of work!

"Now what do you think of that?" Officer Celtrics demanded. "Fifteen years in Homicide and a machine is replacing me." He wiped a large red hand across his forehead and leaned against the captain's desk. "Ain't science marvelous?"

Two other policemen, late of Homicide, nodded glumly.

"Don't worry about it," the captain said. "We'll find a home for you in Larceny, Celtrics. You'll like it here."

"I just can't get over it," Celtrics complained. "A lousy little piece of tin and glass is going to solve all the crimes."

"Not quite," the captain said. "The watchbirds are supposed to prevent the crimes before they happen."

"Then how'll they be crimes?" one of the policeman asked. "I mean they can't hang you for murder until you commit one, can they?"

"That's not the idea," the captain said. "The watchbirds are supposed to stop a man before he commits a murder."

"Then no one arrests him?" Celtrics asked.

"I don't know how they're going to work that out," the captain admitted.

The men were silent for a while. The captain yawned and examined his watch.

"The thing I don't understand," Celtrics said, still leaning on the captain's desk, "is just how do they do it? How did it start, Captain?"

The captain studied Celtrics' face for possible irony; after all, watchbird had been in the papers for months. But then he remembered that Celtrics, like his sidekicks, rarely bothered to turn past the sports pages.

"Well," the captain said, trying to remember what he had read in the Sunday supplements, "these scientists were working on criminology. They were studying murderers, to find out what made them tick. So they found that murderers throw out a different sort of brain wave from ordinary people. And their glands act funny, too. All this happens when they're about to commit a murder. So these scientists worked out a special machine to flash red or something when these brain waves turned on."

"Scientists," Celtrics said bitterly.

"Well, after the scientists had this machine, they didn't know what to do with it. It was too big to move around, and murderers didn't drop in often enough to make it flash. So they built it into a smaller unit and tried it out in a few police stations. I think they tried one upstate. But it didn't work so good. You couldn't get to the crime in time. That's why they built the watchbirds."

"I don't think they'll stop no criminals," one of the policemen insisted.

"They sure will. I read the test results. They can smell him out before he commits a crime. And when they reach him, they give him a powerful shock or something. It'll stop him."

"You closing up Homicide, Captain?" Celtrics asked.

"Nope," the captain said. "I'm leaving a skeleton crew in until we see how these birds do."

"Hah," Celtrics said. "Skeleton crew. That's funny."

"Sure," the captain said. "Anyhow, I'm going to leave some men on. It seems the birds don't stop all murders."

"Why not?"

"Some murderers don't have these brain waves," the captain answered, trying to remember what the newspaper article had said. "Or their glands don't work or something."

"Which ones don't they stop?" Celtrics asked, with professional curiosity.

"I don't know. But I hear they got the damned things fixed so they're going to stop all of them soon."

"How they working that?"

"They learn. The watchbirds, I mean. Just like people."

"You kidding me?"

"Nope."

"Well," Celtrics said, "I think I'll just keep old Betsy oiled, just in case. You can't trust these scientists."

"Right."

"Birds!" Celtrics scoffed.

Over the town, the watchbird soared in a long, lazy curve. Its aluminum hide glistened in the morning sun, and dots of light danced on its stiff wings. Silently it flew.

Silently, but with all senses functioning. Built-in kinesthetics told the watchbird where it was, and held it in a long search curve. Its eyes and ears operated as one unit, searching, seeking.

And then something happened! The watchbird's electronically fast reflexes picked up the edge of a sensation. A correlation center tested it, matching it with electrical and chemical data in its memory files. A relay tripped.

Down the watchbird spiraled, coming in on the increasingly strong sensation. It *smelled* the outpouring of certain glands, *tasted* a deviant brain wave.

Fully alerted and armed, it spun and banked in the bright morning sunlight.

Dinelli was so intent he didn't see the watchbird coming. He had his gun poised, and his eyes pleaded with the big grocer.

"Don't come no closer."

"You lousy little punk," the grocer said, and took another step forward. "Rob me? I'll break every bone in your puny body."

The grocer, too stupid or too courageous to understand the threat of the gun, advanced on the little thief.

"All right," Dinelli said, in a thorough state of panic. "All right, sucker, take—"

A bolt of electricity knocked him on his back. The gun went off, smashing a breakfast food display.

"What in hell?" the grocer asked, staring at the stunned

thief. And then he saw a flash of silver wings. "Well, I'm really damned. Those watchbirds work!"

He stared until the wings disappeared in the sky. Then he telephoned the police.

The watchbird returned to his search curve. His thinking center correlated the new facts he had learned about murder. Several of these he hadn't known before.

This new information was simultaneously flashed to all the other watchbirds and their information was flashed back to him.

New information, methods, definitions were constantly passing between them.

Now that the watchbirds were rolling off the assembly line in a steady stream, Gelsen allowed himself to relax. A loud contended hum filled his plant. Orders were being filled on time, with top priorities given to the biggest cities in his area, and working down to the smallest towns.

"All smooth, Chief," Macintyre said, coming in the door. He had just completed a routine inspection.

"Fine. Have a seat."

The big engineer sat down and lighted a cigarette.

"We've been working on this for some time," Gelsen said, when he couldn't think of anything else.

"We sure have," Macintyre agreed. He leaned back and inhaled deeply. He had been one of the consulting engineers on the original watchbird. That was six years back. He had been working for Gelsen ever since, and the men had become good friends.

"The thing I wanted to ask you was this—" Gelsen paused. He couldn't think how to phrase what he wanted. Instead he asked. "What do you think of the watchbirds, Mac?"

"Who, me?" The engineer grinned nervously. He had been eating, drinking and sleeping watchbird ever since its inception. He had never found it necessary to have an attitude. "Why I think it's great."

"I don't mean that," Gelsen said. He realized that what he wanted was to have someone understand his point of view. "I mean do you figure there might be some danger in machine thinking?"

"I don't think so, Chief. Why do you ask?"

"Look, I'm no scientist or engineer. I've just handled cost and production and let you boys worry about how. But as a layman, watchbird is starting to frighten me."

"No reason for that."

"I don't like the idea of the learning circuits."

"But why not?" Then Macintyre grinned again. "I know. You're like a lot of people, Chief—afraid your machines are going to wake up and say, 'What are we doing here? Let's go out and rule the world.' Is that it?"

"Maybe something like that," Gelsen admitted.

"No chance of it," Macintyre said. "The watchbirds are complex, I'll admit, but an M.I.T. caculator is a whole lot more complex. And it hasn't got consciousness."

"No. But the watchbirds can *learn*."

"Sure. So can all the new calculators. Do you think they'll team up with the watchbirds?"

Gelsen felt annoyed at Macintyre, and even more annoyed at himself for being ridiculous. "It's a fact that the watchbirds can put their learning into action. No one is monitoring them."

"So that's the trouble," Macintyre said.

"I've been thinking of getting out of watchbird." Gelsen hadn't realized it until that moment.

"Look, Chief," Macintyre said. "Will you take an engineer's word on this?"

"Let's hear it."

"The watchbirds are no more dangerous than an automobile, an IBM calculator or a thermometer. They have no more consciousness or volition than those things. The watchbirds are built to respond to certain stimuli, and to carry out certain operations when they receive that stimuli."

"And the learning circuits?"

"You have to have those," Macintyre said patiently, as though explaining the whole thing to a ten-year-old. "The purpose of the watchbird is to frustrate all murder attempts, right? Well, only certain murderers give out these stimuli. In order to stop all of them, the watchbird has to search out new definitions of murder and correlate them with what it already knows."

"I think it's inhuman," Gelsen said.

"That's the best thing about it. The watchbirds are unemotional. Their reasoning is nonanthropomorphic. You can't bribe them or drug them. You shouldn't fear them, either."

The intercom on Gelsen's desk buzzed. He ignored it.

"I know all this," Gelsen said. "But, still, sometimes I feel like the man who invented dynamite. He thought it would only be used for blowing up tree stumps."

"*You* didn't invent watchbird."

"I still feel morally responsible because I manufacture them."

The intercom buzzed again, and Gelsen irritably punched a button.

"The reports are in on the first week of watchbird operation," his secretary told him.

"How do they look?"

"Wonderful, sir."

"Send them in in fifteen minutes." Gelsen switched the intercom off and turned back to Macintyre, who was cleaning his fingernails with a wooden match. "Don't you think that this represents a trend in human thinking? The mechanical god? The electronic father?"

"Chief," Macintyre said, "I think you should study watchbird more closely. Do you know what's built into the circuits?"

"Only generally."

"First, there is a purpose. Which is to stop living organisms from committing murder. Two, murder may be defined as an act of violence, consisting of breaking, mangling, maltreating or otherwise stopping the functions of a living organism by a living organism. Three, most murders are detectable by certain chemical and electrical changes."

Macintyre paused to light another cigarette. "Those conditions take care of the routine functions. Then, for the learning circuits, there are two more conditions. Four, there are some living organisms who commit murder without the signs mentioned in three. Five, these can be detected by data applicable to condition two."

"I see," Gelsen said.

"You realize how foolproof it is?"

"I suppose so." Gelsen hesitated a moment. "I guess that's all."

"Right," the engineer said, and left.

Gelsen thought for a few moments. There *couldn't* be anything wrong with the watchbirds.

"Send in the reports," he said into the intercom.

High above the lighted buildings of the city, the watchbird soared. It was dark, but in the distance, the watchbird could see another, and another beyond that. For this was a large city.

To prevent murder . . .

There was more to watch for now. New information had crossed the invisible network that connected all watchbirds. New data, new ways of detecting the violence of murder.

There! The edge of a sensation! Two watchbirds dipped simultaneously. One had received the scent a fraction of a

second before the other. He continued down while the other resumed monitoring.

Condition four, there are some living organisms who commit murder without the signs mentioned in condition three.

Through his new information, the watchbird knew by extrapolation that this organism was bent on murder, even though the characteristic chemical and electrical smells were absent.

The watchbird, all senses acute, closed in on the organism. He found what he wanted, and dived.

Roger Greco leaned against a building, his hands in his pockets. In his left hand was the cool butt of a .45. Greco waited patiently.

He wasn't thinking of anything in particular, just relaxing against a building, waiting for a man. Greco didn't know why the man was to be killed. He didn't care. Greco's lack of curiosity was part of his value. The other part was his skill.

One bullet, neatly placed in the head of a man he didn't know. It didn't excite him or sicken him. It was a job, just like anything else. You killed a man. So?

As Greco's victim stepped out of a building, Greco lifted the .45 out of his pocket. He released the safety and braced the gun with his right hand. He still wasn't thinking of anything as he took aim . . .

And was knocked off his feet.

Greco thought he had been shot. He struggled up again, looking around, and sighted foggily on his victim.

Again he was knocked down.

This time he lay on the ground, trying to draw a bead. He never thought of stopping, for Greco was a craftsman.

With the next blow, everything went black. Permanently, because the watchbird's duty was to protect the object of violence—*at whatever cost to the murderer.*

The victim walked to his car. He hadn't noticed anything unusual. Everything had happened in silence.

Gelsen was feeling pretty good. The watchbirds had been operating perfectly. Crimes of violence had been cut in half, and cut again. Dark alleys were no longer mouths of horror. Parks and playgrounds were not places to shun after dusk.

Of course, there were still robberies. Petty thievery flourished, and embezzlement, larceny, forgery and a hundred other crimes.

But that wasn't so important. You could regain lost money—never a lost life.

Gelsen was ready to admit that he had been wrong about the watchbirds. They *were* doing a job that humans had been unable to accomplish.

The first hint of something wrong came that morning.

Macintyre came into his office. He stood silently in front of Gelsen's desk, looking annoyed and a little embarrassed.

"What's the matter, Mac?" Gelsen asked.

"One of the watchbirds went to work on a slaughterhouse man. Knocked him out."

Gelsen thought about it for a moment. Yes, the watchbirds would do that. With their new learning circuits, they had probably defined the killing of animals as murder.

"Tell the packers to mechanize their slaughtering," Gelsen said. "I never liked that business myself."

"All right," Macintyre said. He pursed his lips, then shrugged his shoulders and left.

Gelsen stood beside his desk, thinking. Couldn't the watchbirds differentiate between a murderer and a man engaged in a legitimate profession? No, evidently not. To them, murder was murder. No exceptions. He frowned. That might take a little ironing out in the circuits.

But not too much, he decided hastily. Just make them a little more discriminating.

He sat down again and buried himself in paperwork, trying to avoid the edge of an old fear.

They strapped the prisoner into the chair and fitted the electrode to his leg.

"Oh, oh," he moaned, only half-conscious now of what they were doing.

They fitted the helmet over his shaved head and tightened the last straps. He continued to moan softly.

And then the watchbird swept in. How he had come, no one knew. Prisons are large and strong, with many locked doors, but the watchbird was there—

To stop a murder.

"Get that thing out of here!" the warden shouted, and reached for the switch. The watchbird knocked him down.

"Stop that!" a guard screamed, and grabbed for the switch himself. He was knocked to the floor beside the warden.

"This isn't murder, you idiot!" another guard said. He drew his gun to shoot down the glittering, wheeling metal bird.

Anticipating, the watchbird smashed him back against the wall.

There was silence in the room. After a while, the man in the helmet started to giggle. Then he stopped.

The watchbird stood on guard, fluttering in mid-air—

Making sure no murder was done.

New data flashed along the watchbird network. Unmonitored, independent, the thousands of watchbirds received and acted upon it.

The breaking, mangling or otherwise stopping the functions of a living organism by a living organism. New acts to stop.

"Damn you, git going!" Farmer Ollister shouted, and raised his whip again. The horse balked, and the wagon rattled and shook as he edged sideways.

"You lousy hunk of pigmeal, git going!" the farmer yelled and he raised the whip again.

It never fell. An alert watchbird, sensing violence, had knocked him out of his seat.

A living organism? What is a living organism? The watchbirds extended their definitions as they became aware of more facts. And, of course, this gave them more work.

The deer was just visible at the edge of the woods. The hunter raised his rifle, and took careful aim.

He didn't have time to shoot.

With his free hand, Gelsen mopped perspiration from his face. "All right," he said into the telephone. He listened to the stream of vituperation from the other end, then placed the receiver gently in its cradle.

"What was that one?" Macintyre asked. He was unshaven, tie loose, shirt unbuttoned.

"Another fisherman," Gelsen said. "It seems the watchbirds won't let him fish even though his family is starving. What are we going to do about it, he wants to know."

"How many hundred is that?"

"I don't know. I haven't opened the mail."

"Well, I figured out where the trouble is," Macintyre said gloomily, with the air of a man who knows just how he blew up the Earth—after it was too late.

"Let's hear it."

"Everybody took it for granted that we wanted all murder stopped. We figured the watchbirds would think as we do. We ought to have qualified the conditions."

"I've got an idea," Gelsen said, "that we'd have to know just why and what murder is, before we could qualify the conditions properly. And if we knew that, we wouldn't need the watchbirds."

"Oh, I don't know about that. They just have to be told that some things which look like murder are not murder."

"But why should they stop fishermen?" Gelsen asked.

"Why shouldn't they? Fish and animals are living organisms. We just don't think that killing them is murder."

The telephone rang. Gelsen glared at it and punched the intercom. "I told you no more calls, no matter what."

"This is from Washington," his secretary said. "I thought you'd—"

"Sorry." Gelsen picked up the telephone. "Yes. Certainly is a mess . . . Have they? All right, I certainly will." He put down the telephone.

"Short and sweet," he told Macintyre. "We're to shut down temporarily."

"That won't be so easy," Macintyre said. "The watchbirds operate independent of any central control, you know. They come back once a week for a repair checkup. We'll have to turn them off then, one by one."

"Well, let's get to it. Monroe over on the Coast has shut down about a quarter of his birds."

"I think I can dope out a restricting circuit," Macintyre said.

"Fine," Gelsen replied bitterly. "You make me very happy."

The watchbirds were learning rapidly, expanding and adding to their knowledge. Loosely defined abstractions were extended, acted upon and re-extended.

To stop murder . . .

Metal and electrons reason well, but not in a human fashion.

A living organism? *Any* living organism!

The watchbirds set themselves the task of protecting all living things.

The fly buzzed around the room, lighting on a tabletop, pausing a moment, then darting to a window sill.

The old man stalked it, a rolled newspaper in his hand.

Murderer!

The watchbirds swept down and saved the fly in the nick of time.

The old man writhed on the floor a minute and then was silent. He had been given only a mild shock, but it had been enough for his fluttery, cranky heart.

His victim had been saved, though, and this was the important thing. Save the victim and give the aggressor his just desserts.

Gelsen demanded angrily. "Why aren't they being turned off!"

The assistant control engineer gestured. In a corner of the repair room lay the senior control engineer. He was just regaining consciousness.

"He tried to turn one of them off," the assistant engineer said. Both his hands were knotted together. He was making a visible effort not to shake.

"That's ridiculous. They haven't got any sense of self-preservation."

"Then turn them off yourself. Besides, I don't think any more are going to come."

What could have happened? Gelsen began to piece it together. The watchbirds still hadn't decided on the limits of a living organism. When some of them were turned off in the Monroe plant, the rest must have correlated the data.

So they had been forced to assume that they were living organisms, as well.

No one had ever told them otherwise. Certainly they carried on most of the functions of living organisms.

Then the old fears hit him. Gelsen trembled and hurried out of the repair room. He wanted to find Macintyre in a hurry.

The nurse handed the surgeon the sponge.

"Scalpel."

She placed it in his hand. He started to make the first incision. And then he was aware of a disturbance.

"Who let that thing in?"

"I don't know," the nurse said, her voice muffled by the mask.

"Get it out of here."

The nurse waved her arms at the bright winged thing, but it fluttered over her head.

The surgeon proceeded with the incision—as long as he was able.

The watchbird drove him away and stood guard.

"Telephone the watchbird company!" the surgeon ordered. "Get them to turn the thing off."

The watchbird was preventing violence to a living organism.

The surgeon stood by helplessly while his patient died.

Fluttering high above the network of highways, the watchbird watched and waited. It had been constantly working for weeks now, without rest or repair. Rest and repair were

impossible, because the watchbird couldn't allow itself—a living organism—to be murdered. And that was what happened when watchbirds returned to the factory.

There was a built-in order to return, after the lapse of a certain time period. But the watchbird had a stronger order to obey—preservation of life, including its own.

The definitions of murder were almost infinitely extended now, impossible to cope with. But the watchbird didn't consider that. It responded to its stimuli, whenever they came and whatever their source.

There was a new definition of living organism in its memory files. It had come as a result of the watchbird discovery that watchbirds were living organisms. And it had enormous ramifications.

The stimuli came! For the hundredth time that day, the bird wheeled and banked, dropping swiftly down to stop murder.

Jackson yawned and pulled his car to a shoulder of the road. He didn't notice the glittering dot in the sky. There was no reason for him to. Jackson wasn't contemplating murder, by any human definition.

This was a good spot for a nap, he decided. He had been driving for seven straight hours and his eyes were starting to fog. He reached out to turn off the ignition key—

And was knocked back against the side of the car.

"What in hell's wrong with you?" he asked indignantly. "All I want to do is—" He reached for the key again, and again he was smacked back.

Jackson knew better than to try a third time. He had been listening to the radio and he knew what the watchbirds did to stubborn violators.

"You mechanical jerk," he said to the waiting metal bird. "A car's not alive. I'm not trying to kill it."

But the watchbird only knew that a certain operation resulted in stopping an organism. The car was certainly a functioning organism. Wasn't it of metal, as were the watchbirds? Didn't it run?

Macintyre said, "Without repairs they'll run down." He shoved a pile of specification sheets out of his way.

"How soon?" Gelsen asked.

"Six months to a year. Say a year, barring accidents."

"A year," Gelsen said. "In the meantime, everything is stopping dead. Do you know the latest?"

"What?"

"The watchbirds have decided that the Earth is a living

organism. They won't allow farmers to break ground for plowing. And, of course, everything else is a living organism —rabbits, beetles, flies, wolves, mosquitoes, lions, crocodiles, crows, and smaller forms of life such as bacteria."

"I know," Macintyre said.

"And you tell me they'll wear out in six months or a year. What happens *now*? What are we going to eat in six months?"

The engineer rubbed his chin. "We'll have to do something quick and fast. Ecological balance is gone to hell."

"Fast isn't the word. Instantaneously would be better." Gelsen lighted his thirty-fifth cigarette for the day. "At least I have the bitter satisfaction of saying, 'I told you so.' Although I'm just as responsible as the rest of the machine-worshiping fools."

Macintyre wasn't listening. He was thinking about watchbirds. "Like the rabbit plague in Australia."

"The death rate is mounting," Gelsen said. "Famine. Floods. Can't cut down trees. Doctors can't—what was that you said about Australia?"

"The rabbits," Macintyre repeated. "Hardly any left in Australia now."

"Why? How was it done?"

"Oh, found some kind of germ that attacked only rabbits. I think it was propagated by mosquitoes—"

"Work on that," Gelsen said. "You might have something. I want you to get on the telephone, ask for an emergency hookup with the engineers of the other companies. Hurry it up. Together you may be able to dope out something."

"Right," Macintyre said. He grabbed a handful of blank paper and hurried to the telephone.

"What did I tell you?" Officer Celtrics said. He grinned at the captain. "Didn't I tell you scientists were nuts?"

"I didn't say you were wrong, did I?" the captain asked.

"No, but you weren't *sure*."

"Well, I'm sure now. You'd better get going. There's plenty of work for you."

"I know." Celtrics drew his revolver from its holster, checked it and put it back. "Are all the boys back, Captain?"

"All?" the captain laughed humorlessly. "Homicide has increased by fifty per cent. There's more murder now than there's ever been."

"Sure," Celtrics said. "The watchbirds are too busy guarding cars and slugging spiders." He started toward the door, then turned for a parting shot.

"Take my word, Captain. Machines are *stupid.*"

The captain nodded.

Thousands of watchbirds, trying to stop countless millions of murders—a hopeless task. But the watchbirds didn't hope. Without consciousness, they experienced no sense of accomplishment, no fear of failure. Patiently they went about their jobs, obeying each stimulus as it came.

They couldn't be everywhere at the same time, but it wasn't necessary to be. People learned quickly what the watchbirds didn't like and refrained from doing it. It just wasn't safe. With their high speed and superfast senses, the watchbirds got around quickly.

And now they meant business. In their original directives there had been a provision made for killing a murderer, if all other means failed.

Why spare a murderer?

It backfired. The watchbirds extracted the fact that murder and crimes of violence had increased geometrically since they had begun operation. This was true, because their new definitions increased the possibilities of murder. But to the watchbirds, the rise showed that the first methods had failed.

Simple logic. If A doesn't work, try B. The watchbirds shocked to kill.

Slaughterhouses in Chicago stopped and cattle starved to death in their pens, because farmers in the Midwest couldn't cut hay or harvest grain.

No one had told the watchbirds that all life depends on carefully balanced murders.

Starvation didn't concern the watchbirds, since it was an act of omission.

Their interest lay only in acts of commission.

Hunters sat home, glaring at the silver dots in the sky, longing to shoot them down. But for the most part, they didn't try. The watchbirds were quick to sense the murder intent and to punish it.

Fishing boats swung idle at their moorings in San Pedro and Gloucester. Fish were living organisms.

Farmers cursed and spat and died, trying to harvest the crop. Grain was alive and thus worthy of protection. Potatoes were as important to the watchbird as any other living organism. The death of a blade of grass was equal to the assassination of a President—

To the watchbirds.

And, of course, certain machines were living. This followed, since the watchbirds were machines and living.

God help you if you maltreated your radio. Turning it off meant killing it. Obviously—its voice was silenced, the red glow of its tubes faded, it grew cold.

The watchbirds tried to guard their other charges. Wolves were slaughtered, trying to kill rabbits. Rabbits were electrocuted, trying to eat vegetables. Creepers were burned out in the act of strangling trees.

A butterfly was executed, caught in the act of outraging a rose.

This control was spasmodic, because of the fewness of the watchbirds. A billion watchbirds couldn't have carried out the ambitious project set by the thousands.

The effect was of a murderous force, ten thousand bolts of irrational lightning raging around the country, striking a thousand times a day.

Lightning which anticipated your moves and punished your intentions.

"Gentlemen, *please,*" the government representative begged. "We must hurry."

The seven manufacturers stopped talking.

"Before we begin this meeting formally," the president of Monroe said, "I want to say something. We do not feel ourselves responsible for this unhappy state of affairs. It was a government project; the government must accept the responsibility, both moral and financial."

Gelsen shrugged his shoulders. It was hard to believe that these men, just a few weeks ago, had been willing to accept the glory of saving the world. Now they wanted to shrug off the responsibility when the salvation went amiss.

"I'm positive that that need not concern us now," the representative assured him. "We must hurry. You engineers have done an excellent job. I am proud of the co-operation you have shown in this emergency. You are hereby empowered to put the outlined plan into action."

"Wait a minute," Gelsen said.

"There is no time."

"The plan's no good."

"Don't you think it will work?"

"Of course it will work. But I'm afraid the cure will be worse than the disease."

The manufacturers looked as though they would have enjoyed throttling Gelsen. He didn't hesitate.

"Haven't we learned yet?" he asked. "Don't you see that you can't cure human problems by mechanization?"

"Mr. Gelsen," the president of Monroe said, "I would

enjoy hearing you philosophize, but unfortunately, people are being killed. Crops are being ruined. There is famine in some sections of the country already. The watchbirds must be stopped at once!"

"Murder must be stopped, too. I remember all of us agreeing upon that. But this is not the way!"

"What would you suggest?" the representative asked.

Gelsen took a deep breath. What he was about to say took all the courage he had.

"Let the watchbirds run down by themselves," Gelsen suggested.

There was a near-riot. The government representative broke it up.

"Let's take our lesson," Gelsen urged, "admit that we were wrong trying to cure human problems by mechanical means. Start again. Use machines, yes, but not as judges and teachers and fathers."

"Ridiculous," the representative said coldly. "Mr. Gelsen, you are overwrought. I suggest you control yourself." He cleared his throat. "All of you are ordered by the President to carry out the plan you have submitted." He looked sharply at Gelsen. "Not to do so will be treason."

"I'll co-operate to the best of my ability," Gelsen said.

"Good. Those assembly lines must be rolling within the week."

Gelsen walked out of the room alone. Now he was confused again. Had he been right or was he just another visionary? Certainly, he hadn't explained himself with much clarity.

Did he know what he meant?

Gelsen cursed under his breath. He wondered why he couldn't ever be sure of anything. Weren't there any values he could hold on to?

He hurried to the airport and to his plant.

The watchbird was operating erratically now. Many of its delicate parts were out of line, worn by almost continuous operation. But gallantly it responded when the stimuli came.

A spider was attacking a fly. The watchbird swooped down to the rescue.

Simultaneously, it became aware of something overhead. The watchbird wheeled to meet it.

There was a sharp crackle and a power bolt whizzed by the watchbird's wing. Angrily, it spat a shock wave.

The attacker was heavily insulated. Again it spat at the watchbird. This time, a bolt smashed through a wing. The

watchbird darted away, but the attacker went after it in a burst of speed, throwing out more crackling power.

The watchbird fell, but managed to send out its message. Urgent! A new menace to living organisms and this was the deadliest yet!

Other watchbirds around the country integrated the message. Their thinking centers searched for an answer.

"Well, Chief, they bagged fifty today," Macintyre said, coming into Gelsen's office.

"Fine," Gelsen said, not looking at the engineer.

"Not so fine." Macintyre sat down. "Lord, I'm tired! It was seventy-two yesterday."

"I know." On Gelsen's desk were several dozen lawsuits, which he was sending to the government with a prayer.

"They'll pick up again, though," Macintyre said confidently. "The Hawks are especially built to hunt down watchbirds. They're stronger, faster, and they've got better armor. We really rolled them out in a hurry, huh?"

"We sure did."

"The watchbirds are pretty good, too," Macintyre had to admit. "They're learning to take cover. They're trying a lot of stunts. You know, each one that goes down tells the others some thing."

Gelsen didn't answer.

"But anything the watchbirds can do, the Hawks can do better," Macintyre said cheerfully. "The Hawks have special learning circuits for hunting. They're more flexible than the watchbirds. They learn faster."

Gelsen gloomily stood up, stretched, and walked to the window. The sky was blank. Looking out, he realized that his uncertainties were over. Right or wrong, he had made up his mind.

"Tell me," he said, still watching the sky, "what will the Hawks hunt after they get all the watchbirds?"

"Huh?" Macintyre said. "Why—"

"Just to be on the safe side, you'd better design something to hunt down the Hawks. Just in case, I mean."

"You think—"

"All I know is that the Hawks are self-controlled. So were the watchbirds. Remote control would have been too slow, the argument went on. The idea was to get the watchbirds and get them fast. That meant no restricting circuits."

"We can dope somehing out," Macintyre said uncertainly.

"You've got an aggressive machine up in the air now. A

murder machine. Before that it was an anti-murder machine. Your next gadget will have to be even more self-sufficient, won't it?"

Macintyre didn't answer.

"I don't hold you responsible," Gelsen said. "It's me. It's everyone."

In the air outside was a swift-moving dot.

"That's what comes," said Gelsen, "of giving a machine the job that was our own responsibility."

Overhead, a Hawk was zeroing in on a watchbird. The armored murder machine had learned a lot in a few days. Its sole function was to kill. At present it was impelled toward a certain type of living organism, metallic like itself.

But the Hawk had just discovered that there were other types of living organisms, too—

Which had to be murdered.

A WIND IS RISING

OUTSIDE, A wind was rising. But within the station, the two men had other things on their minds. Clayton turned the handle of the water faucet again and waited. Nothing happened.

"Try hitting it," said Nerishev.

Clayton pounded the faucet with his fist. Two drops of water came out. A third drop trembled on the spigot's lip, swayed, and fell. That was all.

"That does it," Clayton said bitterly. "That damned water pipe is blocked again. How much water we got in storage?"

"Four gallons—assuming the tank hasn't sprung another leak," said Nerishev. He stared at the faucet, tapping it with long, nervous fingers. He was a big, pale man with a sparse beard, fragile-looking in spite of his size. He didn't look like the type to operate an observation station on a remote and alien planet. But the Advance Exploration Corps had discovered, to its regret, that there was no type to operate a station.

Nerishev was a competent biologist and botanist. Although chronically nervous, he had surprising reserves of calm. He was the sort of man who needs an occasion to rise to. This, if anything, made him suitable to pioneer a planet like Carella I.

"I suppose somebody should go out and unblock the water pipe," said Nerishev, not looking at Clayton.

"I suppose so," Clayton said, pounding the faucet again. "But it's going to be murder out there. Listen to it!"

Clayton was a short man, bull-necked, red-faced, powerfully constructed. This was his third tour of duty as a planetary observer.

He had tried other jobs in the Advance Exploration Corps, but none suited him. PEP—Primary Extraterrestrial Penetration—faced him with too many unpleasant surprises. It was work for daredevils and madmen. But Base Operations was much too tame and restricting.

He liked the work of a planetary observer, though. His

job was to sit tight on a planet newly opened by the PEP boys and checked out by a drone camera crew. All he had to do on this planet was stoically endure discomfort and skillfully keep himself alive. After a year of this, the relief ship would remove him and note his report. On the basis of the report, further action would or would not be taken.

Before each tour of duty, Clayton dutifully promised his wife that this would be the last. After *this* tour, he was going to stay on Earth and work on the little farm he owned. He promised . . .

But at the end of each rest leave, Clayton journeyed out again, to do the thing for which he was best suited: staying alive through skill and endurance.

But this time, he had had it. He and Nerishev had been eight months on Carella. The relief ship was due in another four months. If he came through alive, he was going to quit for good.

"Just listen to that wind," Nerishev said.

Muffled, distant, it sighed and murmured around the steel hull of the station like a zephyr, a summer breeze.

That was how it sounded to them inside the station, separated from the wind by three inches of steel plus a soundproofing layer.

"It's rising," Clayton said. He walked over to the wind-speed indicator. According to the dial, the gentle-sounding wind was blowing at a steady 82 miles an hour —

A light breeze on Carella.

"Man, oh, man!" Clayton said. "I don't want to go out there. Nothing's worth going out there."

"It's your turn," Nerishev pointed out.

"I know. Let me complain a little first, will you? Come on, let's get a forecast from Smanik."

They walked the length of the station, their heels echoing on the steel floor, past compartments filled with food, air supplies, instruments, extra equipment. At the far end of the station was the heavy metal door of the receiving shed. The men slipped on air masks and adjusted the flow.

"Ready?" Clayton asked.

"Ready."

They braced themselves, gripping handholds beside the door. Clayton touched the stud. The door slid away and a gust of wind shrieked in. The men lowered their heads and butted into the wind, entering the receiving shed.

The shed was an extension of the station, some thirty feet long by fifteen feet wide. It was not sealed, like the rest of the structure. The walls were built of open-work

steel, with baffles set in. The wind could pass through this arrangement, but slowed down, controlled. A gauge told them it was blowing 34 miles an hour within the shed.

It was a damned nuisance, Clayton thought, having to confer with the natives of Carella in a 34-mile gale. But there was no other way. The Carellans, raised on a planet where the wind never blew less than 70 miles an hour, couldn't stand the "dead air" within the station. Even with the oxygen content cut down to the Carellan norm, the natives couldn't make the adjustment. Within the station, they grew dizzy and apprehensive. Soon they began strangling, like a man in a vacuum.

Thirty-four miles an hour of wind was a fair compromise-point for human and Carellan to meet.

Clayton and Nerishev walked down the shed. In one corner lay what looked like a tangle of dried-out octopi. The tangle stirred and waved two tentacles ceremoniously.

"Good day," said Smanik.

"Good day," Clayton said. "What do you think of the weather?"

"Excellent," said Smanik.

Nerishev tugged at Clayton's sleeve. "What did he say?" he asked, and nodded thoughtfully when Clayton translated it for him. Nerishev lacked Clayton's gift for language. Even after eight months, the Carellan tongue was still an undecipherable series of clicks and whistles to him.

Several more Carellans came up to join the conversation. They all looked like spiders or octopi, with their small centralized body and long, flexible tentacles. This was the optimum survival shape on Carella, and Clayton frequently envied it. He was forced to rely absolutely on the shelter of the station; but the Carellans lived directly in their environment.

Often he had seen a native walking against a tornado-force wind, seven or eight limbs hooked into the ground and pulling, other tentacles reaching out for further grips. He had seen them rolling down the wind like tumbleweed, their tentacles curled around them, wickerwork-basket fashion. He thought of the gay and audacious way they handled their land ships, scudding merrily along on the wind. . . .

Well, he thought, they'd look damned silly on Earth.

"What is the weather going to be like?" he asked Smanik.

The Carellan pondered the question for a while, sniffed the wind and rubbed two tentacles together.

"The wind may rise a shade more," he said finally. "But it will be nothing serious."

Clayton wondered. *Nothing serious* for a Carellan could mean disaster for an Earthman. Still, it sounded fairly promising.

He and Nerishev left the receiving shed and closed the door.

"Look," said Nerishev, "if you'd like to wait—"

"Might as well get it over with," Clayton said.

Here, lighted by a single dim overhead bulb, was the smooth, glittering bulk of the Brute. That was the nickname they had given to the vehicle specially constructed for transportation on Carella.

The Brute was armored like a tank and streamlined like a spheric section. It had vision slits of shatterproof glass, thick enough to match the strength of its steel plating. Its center of gravity was low; most of its twelve tons were centered near the ground. The Brute was sealed. Its heavy diesel engine, as well as all necessary openings, were fitted with special dustproof covers. The Brute rested on its six fat tires, looking, in its immovable bulk, like some prehistoric monster.

Clayton got in, put on crash helmet and goggles, and strapped himself into the padded seat. He revved up the engine, listened to it critically, then nodded.

"Okay," he said, "the Brute's ready. Get upstairs and open the garage door."

"Good luck," said Nerishev. He left.

Clayton went over the instrument panel, making sure that all the Brute's special gadgets were in working order. In a moment, he heard Nerishev's voice coming in over the radio.

"I'm opening the door."

"Right."

The heavy door slid back and Clayton drove the Brute outside.

The station had been set up on a wide, empty plain. Mountains would have offered some protection from the wind; but the mountains on Carella were in a constant restless state of building up and breaking down. The plain presented dangers of its own, however. To avert the worst of those dangers, a field of stout steel posts had been planted around the station. The closely packed posts pointed outward, like ancient tank traps, and served the same purpose.

Clayton drove the Brute down one of the narrow, winding channels that led through the field of posts. He emerged, located the pipeline and started along it. On a small screen

above his head, a white line flashed into view. The line would show any break or obstruction in the pipeline.

A wide, rocky, monotonous desert stretched before him. An occasional low bush came into sight. The wind was directly behind him, blanketed by the sound of the diesel.

He glanced at the windspeed indicator. The wind of Carella was blowing at 92 miles an hour.

He drove steadily along, humming to himself under his breath. From time to time, he heard a crash. Pebbles, propelled by the hurricane wind, were cannonading against the Brute. They shattered harmlessly against the thick armor.

"Everything all right?" Nerishev asked over the radio.

"Fine," Clayton said.

In the distance, he saw a Carellan land ship. It was about forty feet long, he judged, and narrow in the beam, skimming rapidly on crude wooden rollers. The ship's sails were made from one of the few leaf-bearing shrubs on the planet.

The Carellans waved their tentacles as they went past. They seemed to be heading toward the station.

Clayton turned his attention back to the pipeline. He was beginning to hear the wind now, above the roar of the diesel. The windspeed indicator showed that the wind had risen to 97 miles an hour.

Somberly he stared through the sand-pocked slit-window. In the far distance were jagged cliffs, seen dimly through the dust-blown air. More pebbles ricocheted off his hull and the sound rang hollowly through his vehicle. He glimpsed another Carellan land ship, then three more. They were tacking stubbornly into the wind.

It struck Clayton that a lot of Carellans were moving toward the station. He signaled to Nerishev on the radio.

"How are you doing?" Nerishev asked.

"I'm close to the spring and no break yet," Clayton reported. "Looks like a lot of Carellans heading your way."

"I know. Six ships are moored in the lee of the shed and more are coming."

"We've never had any trouble with the natives before," Clayton said slowly. "What does this look like?"

"They've brought food with them. It might be a celebration."

"Maybe. Watch yourself."

"Don't worry. You take care and hurry—"

"I've found the break! Speak to you later."

The break showed on the screen, glowing white. Peering

out the port, Clayton saw where a boulder had rolled across the pipeline, crushing it, and rolled on.

He brought the truck to a stop on the windward side of the pipe. It was blowing 113 miles an hour. Clayton slid out of the truck, carrying several lengths of pipe, some patches, a blowtorch and a bag of tools. They were all tied to him and he was secured to the Brute by a strong nylon rope.

Outside, the wind was deafening. It thundered and roared like breaking surf. He adjusted his mask for more oxygen and went to work.

Two hours later, he had completed a fifteen-minute repair job. His clothing was shredded and his air extractor was completely clogged with dust.

He climbed back into the Brute, sealed the port and lay on the floor, resting. The truck was starting to tremble in the wind gusts. Clayton ignored it.

"Hello? Hello?" Nerishev called over the radio.

Wearily, Clayton climbed back into the driver's seat and acknowledged.

"Hurry back now, Clayton! No time to rest! The wind's up to 138! I think a storm is coming!"

A storm on Carella was something Clayton didn't even want to think about. They had experienced only one in eight months. During it, the winds had gone over 160 miles an hour.

He nosed the truck around and started back, driving directly into the wind. At full throttle, he found he was making very little progress. Three miles an hour was all the heavy diesel would do against the presssure of a 138-mile wind.

He stared ahead through the slit-window. The wind, outlined by long streamers of dust and sand, seemed to be coming straight at him, funneled out of an infinitely wide sky to the tiny point of his window. Windborne rocks sailed at him, grew large, immense, and shattered against his window. He couldn't stop himself from ducking each time one came.

The heavy engine was beginning to labor and miss.

"Oh, baby," Clayton breathed, "don't quit now. Not now. Get Papa home. *Then* quit. Please!"

He figured he was about ten miles from the station, which lay directly upwind.

He heard a sound like an avalanche plummeting down a mountainside. It was made by a boulder the size of a house. Too big for the wind to lift, it was rolling at him from

windward, digging a furrow in the rocky ground as it came.

Clayton twisted the steering wheel. The engine labored, and with infinite slowness the truck crept out of the boulder's path. Shaking, Clayton watched the boulder bearing down. With one hand, he pounded on the instrument panel.

"Move, baby, move!"

Booming hollowly, the boulder rolled past at a good thirty miles an hour.

"Too close," Clayton said to himself. He tried to turn the Brute back into the wind, toward the station. The Brute wouldn't do it.

The diesel labored and whined, trying to turn the big truck into the wind. And the wind, like a solid gray wall, pushed the truck away.

The windspeed indicator stood at 159 miles an hour.

"How are you doing?" Nerishev asked over the radio.

"Just great! Leave me alone, I'm busy."

Clayton set his brakes, unstrapped and raced back to the engine. He adjusted timing and mixture, and hurried back to the controls.

"Hey, Nerishev! That engine's going to conk out!"

It was a full second before Nerishev answered. Then, very calmly, he asked, "What's wrong with it?"

"Sand!" Clayton said. "Particles driven at 159 miles an hour—sand's in the bearings, injectors, everything. I'm going to make all the distance I can."

"And then?"

"Then I'll try to sail her back," Clayton said. "I just hope the mast will take it."

He turned his attention to the controls. At windspeeds like this, the truck had to be handled like a ship at sea. Clayton picked up speed with the wind on his quarter, then came about and slammed into the wind.

The Brute made it this time and crossed over onto the other tack.

It was the best he could do, Clayton decided. His windward distance would have to be made by tacking. He edged toward the eye of the wind. But at full throttle, the diesel couldn't bring him much closer than forty degrees.

For an hour, the Brute forged ahead, tacking back and forth across the wind, covering three miles in order to make two. Miraculously, the engine kept on running. Clayton blessed the manufacturer and begged the diesel to hold out a little while longer.

Through a blinding screen of sand, he saw another Carel-

lan land ship. It was reefed down and heeled precariously over. But it forged steadily to windward and soon outdistanced him.

Lucky natives, Clayton thought—165 miles of wind was a sailing breeze to them!

The station, a gray half-sphere, came into sight ahead.

"I'm going to make it!" Clayton shouted. "Break out the rum, Nerishev, old man! Papa's getting drunk tonight!"

The diesel chose that moment to break down for good.

Clayton swore violently as he set the brakes. What lousy luck! If the wind were behind him, he could roll in. But, of course, it had to be in front.

"What are you going to do now?" Nerishev asked.

"I'm going to sit here," Clayton said. "When the wind calms down to a hurricane, I'm going to walk home."

The Brute's twelve-ton mass was shaking and rattling in the wind blasts.

"You know," Clayton said, "I'm going to retire after this tour."

"That so? You really mean it?"

"Absolutely. I own a farm in Maryland, with frontage on Chesapeake Bay. You know what I'm going to do?"

"What?"

"I'm going to raise oysters. You see, the oyster—hold it."

The station seemed to be drifting slowly upwind, away from him. Clayton rubbed his eyes, wondering if he were going crazy. Then he realized that, in spite of its brakes, in spite of its streamlining, the truck was being pushed downwind, away from the station.

Angrily he shoved a button on his switchboard, releasing the port and starboard anchors. He heard the solid clunk of the anchors hitting the ground, heard the steel cables scrape and rattle. He let out a hundred and seventy feet of steel line, then set the winch brakes. The truck was holding again.

"I dropped the anchors," Clayton said.

"Are they holding?"

"So far." Clayton lighted a cigarette and leaned back in his padded chair. Every muscle in his body ached from tension. His eyelids were twitching from watching the wind-lines converging on him. He closed his eyes and tried to relax.

The sound of the wind cut through the truck's steel plating. The wind howled and moaned, tugging at the truck, trying to find a hold on the smooth surface. At 169 miles an hour, the ventilator baffles blew out. He would be blinded, Clayton thought, if he weren't wearing sealed goggles,

choked if he weren't breathing canned air. Dust swirled, thick and electric, within the Brute's cabin.

Pebbles, flung with the velocity of rifle bullets, splattered against the hull. They were striking harder now. He wondered how much more force they'd need before they started piercing the armor plating.

At times like this, Clayton found it hard to maintain a common-sense attitude. He was painfully aware of the vulnerability of human flesh, appalled at the possibilities for violence in the Universe. What was he doing out here? Man's place was in the calm, still air of Earth. If he ever got back . . .

"Are you all right?" Nerishev asked.

"Making out just great," Clayton said wearily. "How are things at the station?"

"Not so good. The whole structure's starting sympathetic vibration. Enough wind for long enough and the foundations could shatter."

"And they want to put a fuel station here!" Clayton said.

"Well, you know the problem. This is the only solid planet between Angarsa III and the South Ridge Belt. All the rest are gas giants."

"They better build their station in space."

"The cost—"

"Hell, man, it'll cost less to build another planet than to try to maintain a fuel base on this one!" Clayton spat out a mouthful of dust. "I just want to get on that relief ship. How many natives at the station now?"

"About fifteen, in the shed."

"Any sign of violence?"

"No, but they're acting funny."

"How so?"

"I don't know," said Nerishev. "I just don't like it."

"Stay out of the shed, huh? You can't speak the language, anyhow, and I want you in one piece when I come back." He hesitated. "If I come back."

"You'll be fine," Nerishev said.

"Sure I will. I—oh, Lord!"

"What's it? What's wrong?"

"Boulder coming down! Talk to you later!"

Clayton turned his attention to the boulder, a rapidly growing black speck to windward. It was heading directly toward his anchored and immobilized truck. He glanced at the windspeed indicator. Impossible—174 miles an hour! And yet, he reminded himself, winds in the stratospheric jet stream on Earth blow at 200 miles an hour.

The boulder, large as a house, still growing as it approached, was rolling directly his way.

"Swerve! Turn!" Clayton bellowed at the boulder, pounding the instrument panel with his fist.

The boulder was coming at him, straight as a ruler line, rolling right down the wind.

With a yell of agony, Clayton touched a button, releasing both anchors at the cable end. There was no time to winch them in, even assuming the winch could take the strain. Still the boulder grew.

Clayton released the brakes.

The Brute, shoved by a wind of 178 miles an hour, began to pick up speed. Within seconds, he was traveling at 38 miles an hour, staring through his rear-vision mirror at the boulder overtaking him.

As the boulder rolled up, Clayton twisted the steering wheel hard to the left. The truck tilted over precariously, swerved, fishtailed on the hard ground, and tried to turn itself over. He fought the wheel, trying to bring the Brute back to equilibrium. He thought: *I'm probably the first man who ever jibed a twelve-ton truck!*

The boulder, looking like a whole city block, roared past. The heavy truck teetered for a moment, then came to rest on its six wheels.

"Clayton! What happened? Are you all right?"

"Fine," Clayton gasped. "But I had to slip the cables. I'm running downwind."

"Can you turn?"

"Almost knocked her over, trying to."

"How far can you run?"

Clayton stared ahead. In the distance, he could make out the dramatic black cliffs that rimmed the plain.

"I got about fifteen miles to go before I pile into the cliffs. Not much time, at the speed I'm traveling." He locked his brakes. The tires began to scream and the brake linings smoked furiously. But the wind, at 183 miles an hour, didn't even notice the difference. His speed over the ground had picked up to 44 miles an hour.

"Try sailing her out!" Nerishev said.

"She won't take it."

"Try, man! What else can you do? The wind's hit 185 here. The whole station's shaking! Boulders are tearing up the whole post defense. I'm afraid some boulders are going to get through and flatten—"

"Stow it," Clayton said. "I got troubles of my own."

"I don't know if the station will stand! Clayton, listen to me. Try the—"

The radio suddenly and dismayingly went dead.

Clayton banged it a few times, then gave up. His speed over the ground reached 49 miles an hour. The cliffs were already looming large before him.

"So all right," Clayton said. "Here we go." He released his last anchor, a small emergency job. At its full length of 250 feet of steel cable, it slowed him to 30 miles an hour. The anchor was breaking and ripping through the ground like a jet-propelled plow.

Clayton then turned on the sail mechanism. This had been installed by the Earth engineers upon much the same theory that has small ocean-going motor boats carry a small mast and auxiliary sail. The sails are insurance, in case the engine fails. On Carella, a man could never walk home from a stranded vehicle. He had to come in under power.

The mast, a short, powerful steel pillar, extruded itself through a gasketed hole in the roof. Magnetic shrouds and stays snapped into place, supporting it. From the mast fluttered a sail made of link-woven metal. For a mainsheet, Clayton had a three part flexible-steel cable, working through a winch.

The sail was only a few square feet in area. It could drive a twelve-ton monster with its brakes locked and an anchor out on 250 feet of line—

Easily—with the wind blowing 185 miles an hour.

Clayton winched in the mainsheet and turned, taking the wind on the quarter. But a quartering course wasn't good enough. He winched the sail in still more and turned further into the wind.

With the super-hurricane on his beam, the ponderous truck heeled over, lifting one entire side into the air. Quickly Clayton released a few feet of mainsheet. The metal-link sail screamed and chattered as the wind whipped it.

Driving now with just the sail's leading edge, Clayton was able to keep the truck on its feet and make good a course to windward.

Through the rear-vision mirror, he could see the black, jagged cliffs behind him. They were his lee shore, his coast of wrecks. But he was sailing out of the trap. Foot by foot, he was pulling away.

"That's my baby!" Clayton shouted to the battling Brute.

His sense of victory snapped almost at once, for he heard an ear-splitting clang and something whizzed past his head.

At 187 miles an hour, pebbles were piercing his armor plating. He was undergoing the Carellan equivalent of a machine-gun barrage. The wind shrieked through the holes, trying to batter him out of his seat.

Desperately he clung to the steering wheel. He could hear the sail wrenching. It was made out of the toughest flexible alloys available, but it wasn't going to hold up for long. The short, thick mast, supported by six heavy cables, was whipping like a fishing rod.

His brake linings were worn out, and his speed over the ground came up to 57 miles an hour.

He was too tired to think. He steered, his hands locked to the wheel, his slitted eyes glaring ahead into the storm.

The sail ripped with a scream. The tatters flogged for a moment, then brought the mast down. Wind gusts were approaching 190 miles an hour.

The wind now was driving him back toward the cliffs. At 192 miles an hour of wind, the Brute was lifted bodily, thrown for a dozen yards, slammed back on its wheels. A front tire blew under the pressure, then two rear ones. Clayton put his head on his arms and waited for the end.

Suddenly, the Brute stopped short. Clayton was flung forward. His safety belt checked him for a moment, then snapped. He banged against the instrument panel and fell back, dazed and bleeding.

He lay on the floor, half conscious, trying to figure out what had happened. Slowly he pulled himself back into the seat, foggily aware that he hadn't broken any limbs. His stomach was one great bruise. His mouth was bleeding.

At last, looking through the rear-vision mirror, he saw what had happened. The emergency anchor, trailing at 250 feet of steel cable, had caught in a deep outcropping of rock. A fouled anchor had brought him up short, less than half a mile from the cliffs. He was saved—

For the moment, at least.

But the wind hadn't given up yet. The 193-mile-an-hour wind bellowed, lifted the truck bodily, slammed it down, lifted it again, slammed it down. The steel cable hummed like a guitar string. Clayton wrapped his arms and legs around the seat. He couldn't hold on much longer. And if he let go, the madly leaping Brute would smear him over the walls like toothpaste—

If the cable didn't part first and send him hurtling into the cliffs.

He held on. At the top of one swing, he caught a glimpse of the windspeed indicator. The sight of it sickened him. He

was through, finished, done for. How could he be expected to hold on through the force of a 187-mile-an-hour wind? It was too much.

It was—187 miles an hour? That meant that the wind was dropping!

He could hardly believe it at first. But slowly, steadily, the dial hand crept down. At 160 miles an hour, the truck stopped slamming and lay passively at the end of its anchor line. At 153, the wind veered—a sure sign that the blow was nearly over.

When it had dropped to 142 miles an hour, Clayton allowed himself the luxury of passing out.

Carellan natives came out for him later in the day. Skillfully they maneuvered two big land ships up to the Brute, fastened on their long vines—which tested out stronger than steel—and towed the derelict truck back to the station.

They brought him into the receiving shed and Nerishev carried him into the station's dead air.

"You didn't break anything except a couple of teeth," said Nerishev. "But there isn't an unbruised inch on you."

"We came through it," Clayton said.

"Just. Our boulder defense is completely flattened. The station took two direct hits from boulders and barely contained them. I've checked the foundations; they're badly strained. Another blow like that—"

"—and we'd make out somehow. Us Earth lads, we come through! That was the worst in eight months. Four months more and the relief ship comes! Buck up, Nerishev. Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"I want to talk to that damned Smanik!"

They came into the shed. It was filled to overflowing with Carellans. Outside, in the lee of the station, several dozen land ships were moored.

"Smanik!" Clayton called. "What's going on here?"

"It is the Festival of Summer," Smanik said. "Our great yearly holiday."

"Hm. What about that blow? What did you think of it?"

"I would classify it as a moderate gale," said Smanik. "Nothing dangerous, but somewhat unpleasant for sailing."

"Unpleasant! I hope you get your forecasts a little more accurate in the future."

"One cannot always outguess the weather," Smanik said. "It is regrettable that my last forecast should be wrong."

"Your *last?* How come? What's the matter?"

"These people," Smanik said, gesturing around him, "are my entire tribe, the Seremai. We have celebrated the Festival of Summer. Now summer is ended and we must go away."

"Where to?"

"To the caverns in the far west. They are two weeks' sail from here. We will go into the caverns and live there for three months. In that way, we will find safety."

Clayton had a sudden sinking feeling in his stomach. "Safety from what, Smanik?"

"I told you. Summer is over. We need safety now from the winds—the powerful storm winds of winter."

"What is it?" Nerishev said.

"In a moment." Clayton thought very quickly of the super-hurricane he had just passed through, which Smanik had classified as a moderate and harmless gale. He thought of their immobility, the ruined Brute, the strained foundations of the station, the wrecked boulder barrier, the relief ship four months away. "We could go with you in the land ships, Smanik, and take refuge in the caverns with you—be protected—"

"Of course," said Smanik hospitably.

"No, we couldn't," Clayton answered himself, his sinking feeling even lower than during the storm. "We'd need extra oxygen, our own food, a water supply—"

"What is it?" Nerishev repeated impatiently. "What the devil did he say to make you look like that?"

"He says the *really* big winds are just coming," Clayton replied.

The two men stared at each other.

Outside, a wind was rising.

MORNING AFTER

SLOWLY AND unwillingly, Piersen recovered consciousness. He lay on his back, eyes tightly closed, trying to postpone the inevitable awakening. But consciousness returned and brought sensation with it. Needles of pain stabbed at his eyeballs and the base of his skull began to pound like a giant heart. His joints seemed to be on fire and his stomach was a deep well of nausea.

It was no relief for him to realize that he was suffering from the absolute king and emperor of all hangovers.

Piersen had considerable knowledge of hangovers. He had experienced most of them in his time—the alcohol jitters, the miniscarette depressions, the triple skliti nerve ache. But this hangover felt like a combination and intensification of them all, with heroin withdrawal symptoms thrown in for good measure.

What had he been drinking last night? And where? He tried to remember, but last night, like so many nights in his life, was a featureless blur. He would have to reconstruct it, as usual, piece by piece.

Well, he decided, it was time to do the manly thing. Time to open his eyes, get out of bed and walk bravely to the medicine chest. A hypo of di-chloral right down the main line ought to bring him around.

Piersen opened his eyes and started to get out of bed. Then he realized that he wasn't in bed.

He was lying in tall grass, with a glaring white sky overhead and the odor of decaying vegetation in his nostrils.

He groaned and closed his eyes again. This was too much. He must have been *really* boiled last night, potted, fried, roasted and done to a turn. Hadn't even made it home. Apparently he had passed out in Central Park. Now he'd have to hail a flit and hold himself together until he could reach his apartment.

With a mighty effort, he opened his eyes and stood up.

He was standing in tall grass. Surrounding him, as far as he could see, were giant orange-boled trees. The trees were

interlaced with purple and green vines, some as thick as his body. Around the trees, impenetrably dense, was a riotous jungle of ferns, shrubs, evil yellow orchids, black creepers, and many unidentifiable plants of ominous shape and hue. Through this dense jungle, he could hear the chitter and squeak of small animals and a distant grating roar from some larger beast.

"This is not Central Park," Piersen informed himself.

He looked around, shielding his eyes from the glaring sunless sky.

"I don't even think it's Earth," he said.

He was astonished and delighted with his calmness. Gravely, he sat down in the tall grass and proceeded to review his situation.

His name was Walter Hill Piersen. He was 32 years old, a resident of New York City. He was a fully accredited voter, respectably unemployed, moderately well off. Last night, he had left his apartment at seven-fifteen, with the intention of partying. It must have been quite an evening.

Yes, quite an evening, Piersen told himself. At some time during it, he seemed to have blacked out. But instead of coming to in bed, or even in Central Park, he had awakened in a thick and smelly jungle. Furthermore, he felt certain that this jungle was not on Earth.

That summed it up rather well, Piersen told himself. He looked around at the vast orange trees, the purple and green vines which interwove them, the harsh white sunlight streaming through. And, finally, the reality of it all filtered through his befogged mind.

He shrieked in terror, buried his head in his arms and passed out.

The next time he recovered consciousness, most of his hangover had gone, leaving behind only a taste in his mouth and a general state of debility. Then and there, Piersen decided it was time he went on the wagon—past time, when he started having hallucinations about orange-colored trees and purple vines in an alien jungle.

Cold sober now, he opened his eyes and saw that he was in an alien jungle.

"All right!" he shouted. "What's this all about?"

There was no immediate answer. Then, from the surrounding trees, a vast chattering of unseen animal life began, and slowly subsided.

Shakily, Piersen stood up and leaned against a tree. He had reacted all he could to the situation; there was no more

astonishment left in him. So he was in a jungle. All right—then what was he doing there?

No answer sprang to mind. Obviously, he told himself, something unusual must have happened last night. But what? Painfully, he tried to reconstruct the events of the evening.

He had left his apartment at seven-fifteen and gone to . . .

He whirled. Something was coming toward him, moving softly through the underbrush. Piersen waited, his heart hammering. It came nearer, moving cautiously, sniffing and moaning faintly. Then the underbrush parted and the creature came out into the open.

It was about ten feet long, a streamlined blue-black animal shaped like a torpedo or a shark, moving toward him on four sets of thick, stubby legs. It seemed to have no external eyes or ears, but long antennae vibrated from its sloping forehead. When it opened its long, undershot jaw, Piersen saw rows of yellow teeth.

Moaning softly to itself, the creature advanced upon him.

Although he had never seen nor dreamed of a beast like this, Piersen didn't pause to question its validity. He turned and sprinted into the jungle. For fifteen minutes, he raced through the underbrush. Then, completely winded, he was forced to stop.

Far behind him, he could hear the blue-black creature moaning as it followed.

Piersen started again, walking now. Judging by the creature's moans, it couldn't move very rapidly. He was able to maintain his distance at a walk. But what would happen when he stopped? What were its intentions toward him? And could it climb trees?

He decided not to think about it at present.

The first question, the key to all other questions, was: *What was he doing here? What happened to him last night?*

He concentrated.

He had left his apartment at seven-fifteen and gone for a walk. The New York climatologist had, by popular demand, produced a pleasant misty evening with a fertile hint of rain, which, of course, would never fall on the city proper. It made for pleasant walking.

He strolled down Fifth Avenue, window shopping, and making note of the Free Days offered by the stores. Baimler's Department Store, he noticed, was having a Free Day next Wednesday, from six to nine A.M. He really should get a special pass from his alderman. Even with it, he would have to wake up early and stand in the preferential line. But it was better than paying.

In half an hour, he was comfortably hungry. There were several good commercial restaurants nearby, but he seemed to be without funds. So he turned down 54th Street, to the Coutray Free Restaurant.

At the door, he showed his voting card and his special pass, signed by Coutray's third assistant secretary, and was allowed in. He ordered a plain filet mignon dinner and drank a mild red wine with it, since no stronger beverages were served there. His waiter brought him the evening newspaper. Piersen scanned the listings for free entertainment, but found nothing to his liking.

As he was leaving, the manager of the restaurant hurried up to him.

"Beg your pardon, sir," the manager said. "Was everything satisfactory, sir?"

"The service was slow," said Piersen. "The filet, although edible, was not of truly prime quality. The wine was passable."

"Yes, sir—thank you, sir—our apologies, sir," the manager said, jotting down Piersen's comments in a little notebook. "We'll try to improve, sir. Your dinner came to you courtesy of the Honorable Blake Coutray, Water Commissioner for New York. Mr. Coutray is standing for re-election on November 22. Row J-3 in your voting booth. We humbly solicit your vote, sir."

"We'll see," said Piersen, and left the restaurant.

In the street, he helped himself to a souvenir pack of cigarettes which a record-playing dispensing machine was distributing for Elmer Baine, a minor Brooklyn politician. He strolled again along Fifth Avenue, thinking about Blake Coutray.

Like any accredited citizen, Piersen valued his vote highly and bestowed it only after mature consideration. He, like all voters, considered a candidate's qualifications carefully before voting for or against him.

In Coutray's favor was the fact that he had maintained a good restaurant for nearly a year. But what *else* had he done? Where was that free amusement center he had promised, and the jazz concerts?

Shortage of public funds was not a valid excuse.

Would a new man do more? Or should Coutray be given another term? These were not questions to be decided out of hand, Piersen thought. And now was not the time for serious thinking. Nights were made for pleasure, intoxication, laughter.

What should he do this evening? He had seen most of the

free shows. Sporting events didn't interest him particularly. There were several parties going, but they didn't sound very amusing. He could find available girls at the Mayor's Open House, but Piersen's appetites had been waning of late.

So he could get drunk, which was the surest escape from an evening's boredom. What would it be? Miniscarette? A contact intoxicant? Skliti?

"Hey, Walt!"

He turned. Billie Benz was walking toward him, grinning broadly, half roasted already.

"Hey, there, Walt boy!" Benz said. "You got anything on tonight?"

"Nothing much," Piersen asked. "Why?"

"A new kick's opening. Fine, brilliant, lively new kick. Care to try?"

Piersen frowned. He didn't like Benz. The big, loud, red-faced man was a thoroughgoing shirker, a completely worthless human. The fact that he held no job didn't bother Piersen. Hardly anyone worked any more. Why work if you can vote? But Benz was too lazy even to vote. And that, Pierson felt, was too much. Voting was the obligation and livelihood of every citizen.

Still, Benz had an uncanny knack for finding new kicks before anyone else.

Piersen hesitated, then asked, "Is it free?"

"Freer than soup," Benz said, unoriginal as always.

"What's it all about?"

"Well, friend, come along and let me tell you . . ."

Piersen mopped perspiration from his face. The jungle had become deathly still. He could no longer hear the blue-black animal moaning in the underbrush behind him. Perhaps it had given up the chase.

His evening clothes were ripped to shreds. Piersen stripped off the jacket and unbuttoned his shirt to the waist. The sun, hidden somewhere behind the dead-white sky, glared down. He was drenched in perspiration and his throat was parched. He would have to have water soon.

His situation was becoming perilous. But Piersen refused to think about it now. He had to know why he was here before he could plan a way out.

What fine, brilliant new kick had he gone to with Billie Benz?

He leaned against a tree and shut his eyes. Slowly the memory began to form in his mind. They had walked east on 62nd Street and then—

He heard the underbrush tremble and looked up quickly. The blue-black creature crept silently out. Its long antennae quivered, then homed on him. Instantly the creature gathered itself and sprang.

Reacting instinctively, Piersen jumped out of the way. The creature, claws extended, missed him, whirled and leaped again. Off balance, Piersen couldn't dodge in time. He threw out both arms and the shark-shaped animal crashed into him.

The impact slammed Piersen against a tree. Desperately, he clung to the beast's broad throat, straining to keep the snapping jaws from his face. He tightened his grip, trying to choke it, but there wasn't enough strength in his fingers.

The creature twisted and writhed, its paws clawing up the ground. Piersen's arms began to bend under the strain. The snapping jaws came within an inch of his face. A long black-specked tongue licked out—

In sheer revulsion, Piersen hurled the moaning creature from him. Before it could recover, he seized two vines and pulled himself into a tree. Driven by sheer panic, he scrambled up the slippery trunk from branch to branch. Thirty feet above the ground, he looked down.

The blue-black thing was coming up after him, climbing as though trees were its natural habitat.

Piersen went on, his whole body beginning to shake from the strain. The trunk was thinning out now and there were only a few branches left to which he could cling. As he approached the top, fifty feet above the ground, the whole tree began to sway beneath his weight.

He looked down and saw the creature ten feet below him and still coming. Piersen groaned, afraid he could climb no further. But fright put strength into his body. He scrambled to the last large branch, took a firm grip and drew back both legs. As the beast approached, he lashed out with both feet.

He caught it full in the body. Its claw tore out of the bark with a loud rasping sound. The creature fell, screaming, crashing through the overhanging branches, and finally hitting the ground with a squashy thud.

Then there was silence.

The creature was probably dead, Piersen thought. But he was not going down to investigate. No power on Earth—or any other planet in the Galaxy—would induce him to descend willingly from his tree. He was going to stay right where he was until he was damned good and ready to come down.

He slid down a few feet until he came to a large forked branch. Here he was able to make a secure perch for himself.

When he was settled, he realized how close to collapse he was. Last night's binge had drained him; today's exertions had squeezed him dry.

If anything larger than a squirrel attacked him now, he was finished.

He settled his leaden limbs against the tree, closed his eyes and went on with his reconstruction of last night's events.

"Well, friend," Billie Benz had said, "come along and let me tell you. Better still, let me show you."

They walked east on 62nd Street, while the deep blue twilight darkened into night. Manhattan's lights came on, stars appeared on the horizon, and a crescent moon glowed through thin haze.

"Where are we going?" Piersen asked.

"Right hyar, podner," Benz said.

They were in front of a small brownstone building. A discreet brass sign on the door read NARCOLICS.

"New free drug parlor," said Benz. "It was opened just this evening by Thomas Moriarty, the Reform Candidate for Mayor. No one's heard about it yet."

"Fine!" Piersen said.

There were plenty of free activities in the city. The only problem was getting to them before the crowds collected, because almost everyone was in search of pleasure and change.

Many years back, the Central Eugenics Committee of the United World Government had stabilized the world population at a sensible figure. Not in a thousand years had there been so few people on Earth and never had they been so well cared for. Undersea ecology, hydroponics, and full utilization of the surface lands made food and clothing abundantly available—overavailable, in fact. Lodgings for a small, stable population was no problem, with automatic building methods and a surpus of materials. Even luxury goods were no luxury.

It was a safe, stable, static culture. Those few who researched, produced and kept the machines running received generous compensation. But most people just didn't bother working. There was no need and no incentive.

There were some ambitious men, of course, driven to acquire wealth, position, power. They went into politics. They solicited votes by feeding, clothing and entertaining the populace of their districts, out of abundant public funds. And they cursed the fickle voters for switching to more impressive promise-makers.

It was a utopia of sorts. Poverty was forgotten, wars were long gone and everyone had the guarantee of a long, easy life.

It must have been sheer human ingratitude that made the suicide rate so shockingly high.

Benz showed his passes to the door, which opened at once. They walked down a corridor to a large, comfortably furnished living room. Three men and one woman, early birds who had heard of the new opening, were slumped comfortably on couches, smoking pale green cigarettes. There was a pleasantly unpleasant pungent odor in the air.

An attendant came forward and led them to a vacant divan. "Make yourselves right at home, gentlemen," he said. "Light up a narcolic and let your troubles drift away."

He handed them each a pack of pale green cigarettes.

"What's in this stuff?" Piersen asked.

"Narcolic cigarettes," the attendant told them, "are a choice mixture of Turkish and Virginian tobaccos, with a carefully measured amount of narcola, an intoxicant plant which grows in Venus' equatorial belt."

"Venus?" Benz asked. "I didn't know we'd reached Venus."

"Four years ago, sir," the attendant said. "The Yale Expedition made the first landing and set up a base."

"I think I read something about that," said Piersen. "Or saw it in a newsreel. Venus. Crude, jungly sort of place, isn't it?"

"Quite crude," the attendant said.

"I thought so," said Piersen. "Hard to keep up with everything. Is this narcola habit-forming?"

"Not at all, sir," the attendant reassured him. "Narcola has the effect alchol should have, but rarely does—great lift, sensations of well-being, slow taper, no hangover. It comes to you courtesy of Thomas Moriarty, the Reform Candidate for Mayor. Row A-2 in your voting booths, gentlemen. We humbly solicit your votes."

Both men nodded and lighted up.

Piersen began to feel the effects almost at once. His first cigarette left him relaxed, disembodied, with a strong premonition of pleasure to come. His second enhanced these effects and produced others. His senses were marvelously sharpened. The world seemed a delightful place, a place of hope and wonder. And he himself became a vital and necessary part of it.

Benz nudged him in the ribs. "Pretty good, huh?"

"Damned fine," said Piersen. "This Moriarty must be a good man. World needs good men."

"Right," agreed Benz. "Needs smart men."

"Courageous, bold, farsighted men," Piersen went on emphatically. "Men like *us,* buddy, to mold the future and—" He stopped abruptly.

"Whatsa matter?" Benz asked.

Piersen didn't answer. By a fluke known to all drunkards, the narcotic had suddenly reversed its effect. He had been feeling godlike. Now, with an inebriate's clarity, he saw himself as he was.

He was Walter Hill Piersen, 32, unmarried, unemployed, unwanted. He had taken a job when he was eighteen, to please his parents. But he had given it up after a week, because it bored him and interfered with his sleep. He had considered marriage once, but the responsibilities of a wife and family appalled him. He was almost thirty-three, thin, flabby-muscled, and pallid. He had never done anything of the slightest importance to himself or to anyone else, and he never would.

"Tell your buddy all about it, buddy," Benz said.

"Wanna do great things," Piersen mumbled, dragging on the cigarette.

"You do, pal?"

"Damn right! Wanna be adventurer!"

"Why didn't you say so? I'll fix it up for you!" Benz jumped up and tugged at Piersen's arm. "Come on!"

"You'll what?" Piersen tried to push Benz away. He just wanted to sit and feel terrible. But Benz yanked him to his feet.

"I know what you need, pal," Benz said. "Adventure, excitement! Well, I know the place for it!"

Piersen frowned thoughtfully, swaying on his feet. "Lean close," he said to Benz. "Gotta whisper."

Benz leaned over. Piersen whispered, "Want adventure—but *don't wanna get hurt.* Get it?"

"Got it," Benz assured him. "Know just what you want. Let's go! Adventure lies ahead! Safe adventure!"

Arm in arm, clutching their packs of narcolics, they staggered out of the Reform Candidate's drug parlor.

A breeze had come up, swaying the tree in which Piersen clung. It blew across his hot, damp body, suddenly chilling him. His teeth began to chatter and his arms ached from gripping the smooth branch. His parched throat felt as though it were clogged with fine, hot sand.

The thirst was more than he could stand. If necessary, he'd

face a dozen blue-black creatures now for a drink of water.

Slowly he started down the tree, shelving his dim memories of last night. He had to know what happened, but first he needed water.

At the base of the tree, he saw the blue-black creature, its back broken, sprawled motionless upon the ground. He passed it and pushed into the jungle.

He trudged forward, for hours or days, losing all track of time under the glaring, unchanging white sky. The brush tore at his clothing and birds screamed warning signals as he plunged on. He ignored everything, glassy-eyed and rubber-legged. He fell, picked himself up and went on, fell again, and again. Like a robot, he continued until he stumbled upon a thin, muddy brown stream.

With no thought to the dangerous bacteria it might contain, Piersen sprawled on his face and drank.

After a while, he rested and surveyed his surroundings. Close around him were the walls of the jungle—bright, dense, alien. The sky above was glaring white, no lighter or darker than before. And small, unseen life chirped and squeaked in the underbrush.

This was a very lonely place, Piersen decided, and a very dangerous one. He wanted out.

But which way was out? Were there any cities here, any people? And if so, how would he ever find them in this directionless wasteland?

And what was he doing here?

He rubbed his unshaven jaw and tried to remember. Last night seemed a million years ago and a totally different life. New York was like a city in a dream. For him, the only truth was this jungle, and the hunger gnawing at his belly, and the strange humming that had just begun.

He looked around, trying to locate the source of the sound. It seemed to come from all sides, from nowhere and everywhere. Piersen doubled his fists and stared until his eyes hurt, trying to catch sight of the new menace.

Then, close to him, a brilliant green shrub moved. Piersen leaped away from it, trembling violently. The shrub shook all over and its thin hooked leaves produced a humming sound.

Then—

The shrub looked at him.

It had no eyes. But Piersen could feel the shrub become *aware* of him, focus on him, come to a decision about him. The shrub hummed louder. Its branches stretched toward him, touched the ground, rooted, sent out searching tendrils which grew, rooted and sent out new tendrils.

The plant was *growing* toward him, moving at the speed of a man walking slowly.

Piersen stared at the sharp, glittering hooked leaves reaching toward him. He couldn't believe it, yet he had to believe it.

And then he remembered the rest of what had happened last night.

"Hyar we be, podner," Benz said, turning into a brightly lighted building on Madison Avenue. He ushered Piersen into the elevator. They rode to the twenty-third floor and stepped into a large, bright reception room.

A discreet sign on one wall read ADVENTURES UNLIMITED.

"I've heard about this place," Piersen said, dragging deeply on a narcolic cigarette. "It's supposed to be expensive."

"Don't worry about that," Benz told him.

A blonde receptionist took their names and led them to the private office of Dr. Srinagar Jones, Action Consultant.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Jones.

He was slight, thin and wore heavy glasses. Piersen found it hard to restrain a giggle. *This* was an Action Consultant?

"So you gentlemen desire adventure?" Jones inquired pleasantly.

"*He* wants adventure," said Benz. "I'm just a friend of his."

"Of course. Now, then, sir," Jones said, turning to Piersen, "what kind of adventure did you have in mind?"

"*Outdoor* adventure," Piersen replied, a trifle thickly, but with absolute confidence.

"We have just the thing," Jones said. "Usually there is a fee. But tonight all adventures are free, courtesy of President Main. Row C-1 in your voting booth. Come this way, sir."

"Hold on. I don't want to get killed, you know. Is this adventure safe?"

"Perfectly safe. No other kind of adventure would be tolerated in this day and age. Here's how it works. You relax comfortably on a bed in our Explorer's Room and receive a painless injection. This causes immediate loss of consciousness. Then, through a judicious application of auditory, tactile, and other stimuli, we produce an adventure in your mind."

"Like a dream?" Piersen asked.

"That would be the best analogy. This dream adventure is absolutely realistic in content. You experience actual pain, actual emotions. There's no way you can tell it from the real thing. Except, of course, that it *is* a dream and therefore perfectly safe."

"What happens if I'm killed in the adventure?"

"It's the same as dreaming that you're killed. You wake up,

that's all. But while you're in this ultra-realistic, vividly colored dream, you have free will and conscious power over your dream movements."

"Do I know all this while I'm having the adventure?"

"Absolutely. While in the dream, you have full knowledge of its dream status."

"Then lead on!" Piersen shouted. "On with the dream!"

The bright green shrub grew slowly toward him. Piersen burst into laughter. A dream! Of course, it was all a dream! Nothing could harm him. The menacing shrub was a figment of his imagination, like the blue-black animal. Even if the beast's jaws had closed on his throat, he would not have been killed.

He would simply have awakened in the Explorer's Room of Adventures Unlimited.

It all seemed ridiculous now. Why hadn't he realized all this earlier? That blue-black thing was obviously a dream creation. And the bright green shrub was preposterous. It was all rather silly and unbelievable, once you really thought about it.

In a loud voice, Piersen said, "All right. You can wake me up now."

Nothing happened. Then he remembered that you couldn't awaken simply by requesting it. That would invalidate the sense of adventure and destroy the therapeutic effects of excitement and fear upon a jaded nervous system.

He remembered now. The only way you could leave an adventure was by winning through all obstacles. Or by being killed.

The shrub had almost reached his feet. Piersen watched it, marveling at its realistic appearance.

It fastened one of its hooked leaves into the leather of his shoe. Piersen grinned, proud of the way he was mastering his fear and revulsion. He merely had to remember that the thing couldn't hurt him.

But how, he asked himself, could a person have a realistic adventure if he knew all the time that it wasn't real? Surely Adventures Unlimited must have considered that.

Then he remembered the last thing Jones told him.

He had been lying on the white cot and Jones was bending over him, hypodermic needle ready. Piersen had asked, "Look, pal, how can I have an adventure if I *know* it's not real?"

"That has been taken care of," Jones had said. "You see, sir, some of our clients undergo *real* adventures."

"Huh?"

"Real, actual, physical adventures. One client out of many receives the knockout injection, but no further stimulus. He is placed aboard a spaceship and taken to Venus. There he revives and experiences in fact what the others undergo in fantasy. If he wins through, he lives."

"And if not?"

Jones had shrugged his shoulders, waiting patiently, the hypodermic poised.

"That's inhuman!" Piersen had cried.

"We disagree. Consider, Mr. Piersen, the need for adventure in the world today. Danger is necessary, to offset a certain weakening of human fiber which easy times has brought to the race. These fantasy adventures present danger in its safest and most palatable form. But they would lose all value if the person undergoing them did not take them seriously. The adventurer must have the possibility, no matter how remote, that he is truly engaging in a life and death struggle."

"But the ones who really go to Venus—"

"An insignificant percentage," Jones reassured him. "Less than one in ten thousand. Simply to enhance the possibility of danger for the others."

"But is it legal?" Piersen had persisted.

"Quite legal. On a total percentage basis, you run a greater risk drinking miniscarette or smoking narcolics."

"Well," said Piersen, "I'm not sure I want—"

The hypodermic bit suddenly into his arm.

"Everything will be all right," Jones said soothingly. "Just relax, Mr. Piersen . . ."

That was his last memory before awakening in the jungle.

By now, the green shrub had reached Piersen's ankle, A slender hooked leaf slid, very slowly, very gently, into his flesh. All he felt was the faintest tickling sensation. After a moment, the leaf turned a dull red.

A blood-sucking plant, Piersen thought with some amusement.

The whole adventure suddenly palled on him. It had been a silly drunken idea in the first place. Enough was enough. He wanted out of this, and immediately.

The shrub edged closer and slid two more hooked leaves into Piersen's leg. The entire plant was beginning to turn a muddy red-brown.

Piersen wanted to go back to New York, to parties, free

food, free entertainment, and a lot of sleep. If he destroyed this menace, another would spring up. This might go on for days or weeks.

The quickest way home was to let the shrub kill him. Then he could simply wake up.

His strength was beginning to ebb. He sat down, noticing that several more shrubs were growing toward him, attracted by the scent of blood.

"It can't be real," he said out loud. "Who ever heard of a bloodsucking plant, even on Venus?"

High above him were great, black-winged birds, soaring patiently, waiting for their chance at the corpse.

Could this be real?

The odds, he reminded himself, were ten thousand to one that it was a dream. *Only* a dream. A vivid, realistic dream. But a dream, nevertheless.

Still, suppose it was real?

He was growing dizzy and weak from loss of blood. He thought, *I want to go home. The way home is to die. The chance of actual death is so small, so infinitesimal . . .*

The truth burst upon him. In this age, no one would dare risk the life of a voter. Adventures Unlimited couldn't really put a man in jeopardy!

Jones had told him about that one in ten thousand merely to add a sense of reality to the fantasy adventure!

That had to be the truth. He lay back, closed his eyes and prepared to die.

While he was dying, thoughts stirred in his mind, old dreams and fears and hopes. He remembered the one job he had held and his mingled pleasure and regret at leaving it. He thought of his obtuse, hard-working parents, unwilling to accept the rewards of civilization without, as they put it, earning them. He thought, harder than ever before in his life, and he came into contact with a Piersen whose existence he had never suspected.

The other Piersen was a very uncomplicated creature. He simply wanted to live. He was determined to live. This Piersen refused to die under any circumstances—even imaginary.

The two Piersens, one motivated by pride, the other by desire for survival, struggled briefly, while strength ebbed out of their body. Then they resolved the conflict upon mutually satisfactory terms.

"That damned Jones thinks I'll die," Piersen said. "Die in order to wake up. Well, I'll be damned if I'll give him the satisfaction!"

It was the only way he could accept his own desire to live.

Frighteningly weak, he struggled to his feet and tried to pull the bloodsucking plant loose. It wouldn't release its grip. With a shout of rage, Piersen reached down and wrenched with all his strength. The hooks slashed his legs as they pulled free, and other hooks slid into his right arm.

But his legs were free now. He kicked aside two more plants and lurched into the jungle, with the green shrub growing up his arm.

Piersen stumbled along until he was far from the other plants. Then he tried to yank the last shrub from his arm.

The shrub caught both his arms, imprisoning them. Sobbing with anger and pain, Piersen swung his arms high and slammed them against the trunk of a tree.

The hooks loosened. Again he slammed his arms against the tree, shutting his eyes to the pain. Again and again, until the shrub released.

Instantly, Piersen began staggering on again.

But he had delayed his life struggle too long. He was streaming blood from a hundred slashes and the scent was like an alarm bell through the jungle. Overhead, something swift and black descended. Piersen threw himself down and the shape passed over him with a flurry of beating wings, shrilling angrily.

He rolled to his feet and tried to find protection in a thorny bush. A great, black-winged bird with a crimson breast dived again.

This time, sharp claws caught him in the shoulder and flung him down. The bird landed on his chest with a wild beating of wings. It pecked at his eyes, missed, pecked again.

Piersen lashed out. His fist caught the bird full in the throat, knocking it over.

He scrambled into the thorn bush on all fours. The bird circled, shrilling, trying to find a way in. Piersen moved deeper into the thicket toward safety.

Then he heard a low moan beside him.

He had waited too long. The jungle had marked him for death and would never let him go. Beside him was a long, blue-black, shark-shaped creature, slightly smaller than the first he had encountered, creeping quickly and easily toward him through the thorn thicket.

Caught between a shrieking death in the air and a moaning death on the ground, Piersen came to his feet. He shouted his fear, anger, and defiance. And without hesitation, he flung himself at the blue-black beast.

The great jaws slashed. Piersen lay motionless. With his last vestige of consciousness, he saw the jaw widen for the death stroke.

Can it be real, Piersen wondered, in sudden fear, just before he blanked out.

When he recovered consciousness, he was lying on a white cot, in a white, softly lighted room. Slowly his head cleared and he remembered—his death.

Quite an adventure, he thought. Must tell the boys. But first a drink. Maybe ten drinks and a little entertainment.

He turned his head. A girl in white, who had been sitting in a chair beside his bed, rose and bent over him.

"How do you feel, Mr. Piersen?" she asked.

"Fair," Piersen said. "Where's Jones?"

"Jones?"

"Srinagar Jones. He runs this place."

"You must be mistaken, sir," the girl told him. "Dr. Baintree runs our colony."

"Your *what?*" Piersen shouted.

A man came into the room. "That will be all, Nurse," he said. He turned to Piersen. "Welcome to Venus, Mr. Piersen. I'm Dr. Baintree, Director of Camp Five."

Piersen stared unbelievingly at the tall, bearded man. He struggled out of bed and would have fallen if Baintree hadn't steadied him.

He was amazed to find most of his body wrapped in bandages.

"It was real?" he asked.

Baintree helped him to the window. Piersen looked out on cleared land, fences and the distant green edge of the jungle.

"One out of ten thousand!" Piersen said bitterly. "Of all the damned luck! I could have been killed!"

"You nearly were," said Baintree. "But your coming here wasn't a matter of luck or statistics."

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Piersen, let me put it this way. Life is easy on Earth. The problems of human existence have been solved—but solved, I fear, to the detriment of the race. Earth stagnates. The birth rate continues to fall, the suicide rate goes up. New frontiers are opening in space, but hardly anyone is interested in going to them. Still, the frontiers *must* be manned, if the race is to survive."

"I have heard that exact speech," Piersen said, "in the newsreels, on the solido, in the papers—"

"It didn't seem to impress you."

"I don't believe it."

"It's true," Baintree assured him, "whether you believe it or not."

"You're a fanatic," Piersen said. "I'm not going to argue with you. Suppose it is true—where do I fit in?"

"We are desperately undermanned," said Baintree. "We've offered every inducement, tried every possible method of recruitment. But no one wants to leave Earth."

"Naturally. So?"

"This is the only method that works. Adventures Unlimited is run by us. Likely candidates are transported here and left in the jungle. We watch to see how they make out. It provides an excellent testing ground—for the individual as well as for us."

"What would have happened," Piersen asked, "if I hadn't fought back against the shrubs?"

Baintree shrugged his shoulders.

"And so you recruited me," Piersen said. "You ran me through your obstacle course, and I fought like a good little man, and you saved me just in the nick of time. Now I'm supposed to be flattered that you picked me, huh? Now I'm supposed to suddenly realize I'm a rough, tough outdoor man? Now I'm supposed to be filled with a courageous farsighted pioneering spirit?"

Baintree watched him steadily.

"And now I'm supposed to sign up as a pioneer? Baintree, you must think I'm nuts or something. Do you honestly think I'm going to give up a very pleasant existence on Earth so I can grub around on a farm or hack through a jungle on Venus? To hell with you, Baintree, and to hell with your whole salvation program."

"I quite understand how you feel," Baintree answered. "Our methods are somewhat arbitrary, but the situation requires it. When you've calmed down—"

"I'm perfectly calm now!" Piersen screamed. "Don't give me any more sermons about saving the world! I want to go home to a nice comfortable pleasure palace."

"You can leave on this evening's flight," Baintree said.

"What? Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"I don't get it," said Piersen. "Are you trying psychology on me? It won't work—I'm going home. I don't see why any of your kidnap victims stay here."

"They don't," Baintree said.

"What?"

"Occasionally, one decides to stay. But for the most part,

they react like you. They do *not* discover a sudden deep love for the soil, an overwhelming urge to conquer a new planet. That's storybook stuff. They want to go home. But they often agree to help us on Earth."

"How?"

"By becoming recruiters," Baintree said. "It's fun, really. You eat and drink and enjoy yourself, the same as ever. And when you find a likely looking candidate, you talk him into taking a dream adventure with Adventures Unlimited—exactly as Benz did with you."

Piersen looked startled. "Benz? That worthless bum is a recruiter?"

"Certainly. Did you think recruiters were starry-eyed idealists? They're people like you, Piersen, who enjoy having a good time, enjoy being on the inside of things, and perhaps even enjoy doing some good for the human race, as long as it's no trouble to them. I think you'd like the work."

"I might try it for a while," Piersen said. "For a kick."

"That's all we ask," said Baintree.

"But how do you get new colonists?"

"Well, that's a funny thing. After a few years, many of our recruiters get curious about what's happening here. And they return."

"Well," Piersen said, "I'll try this recruiting kick for a while. But only for a while, as long as I feel like it."

"Of course," said Baintree. "Come, you'd better get packed."

"And don't count on me coming back. I'm a city boy. I like my comfort. The salvation racket is strictly for the eager types."

"Of course. By the way, you did very well in the jungle."

"I did?"

Baintree nodded gravely.

Piersen stayed at the window, staring at the fields, the buildings, the fences and the distant edge of the jungle which he had fought and nearly overcome.

"We'd better leave," said Baintree.

"Eh? All right, I'm coming," Piersen said.

He turned slowly from the window with a faint trace of irritation that he tried to and couldn't identify.

THE NATIVE PROBLEM

EDWARD DANTON was a misfit. Even as a baby, he had shown pre-anti-social leanings. This should have been sufficient warning to his parents, whose duty it was to take him without delay to a competent prepubescent psychologist. Such a man could have discovered what lay in Danton's childhood to give him these contra-group tendencies. But Danton's parents, doubtless dramatizing problems of their own, thought the child would grow out of it.

He never did.

In school, Danton got barely passing grades in Group Acculturation, Sibling Fit, Values Recognition, Folkways Judgment and other subjects which a person must know in order to live serenely in the modern world. Because of his lack of comprehension, Danton could never live serenely in the modern world.

It took him a while to find this out.

From his appearance, one would never have guessed Danton's basic lack of Fit. He was a tall, athletic young man, green-eyed, easy-going. There was a certain something about him which considerably intrigued the girls in his immediate affective environment. In fact, several paid him the highest compliment at their command, which was to consider him as a possible husband.

But even the flightiest girl could not ignore Danton's lacks. He was liable to weary after only a few hours of Mass Dancing, when the fun was just beginning. At Twelve-hand Bridge, Danton's attention frequently wandered and he would be forced to ask for a recount of the bidding, to the disgust of the other eleven players. And he was impossible at Subways.

He tried hard to master the spirit of that classic game. Locked arm in arm with his teammates, he would thrust forward into the subway car, trying to take possession before another team could storm in the opposite doors.

His group captain would shout, "Forward, men! We're taking this car to Rockaway!" And the opposing group captain

would scream back, "Never! Rally, boys! It's Bronx Park or bust!"

Danton would struggle in the close-packed throng, a fixed smile on his face, worry lines etched around his mouth and eyes. His girl friend of the moment would say, "What's wrong, Edward? Aren't you having fun?"

"Sure I am," Danton would reply, gasping for breath.

"But you aren't!" the girl would cry, perplexed. "Don't you realize, Edward, that this is the way our ancestors worked off their aggressions? Historians say that the game of Subways averted an all-out hydrogen war. *We* have those same aggressions and we, too, must resolve them in a suitable social context."

"Yeah, I know," Edward Danton would say. "I really do enjoy this. I—oh, Lord!"

For at that moment, a third group would come pounding in, arms locked, chanting, "Canarsie, Canarsie, Canarsie!"

In that way, he would lose another girl friend, for there was obviously no future in Danton. Lack of Fit can never be disguised. It was obvious that Danton would never be happy in the New York suburbs which stretched from Rockport, Maine, to Norfolk, Virginia; nor in any other suburbs, for that matter.

Danton tried to cope with his problems, in vain. Other strains started to show. He began to develop astigmatism from the projection of advertisements on his retina, and there was a constant ringing in his ears from the sing-swoop ads. His doctor warned that symptom analysis would never rid him of these psychosomatic ailments. No, what had to be treated was Danton's basic neurosis, his anti-sociality. But this Danton found impossible to deal with.

And so his thoughts turned irresistibly to escape. There was plenty of room for Earth's misfits out in space.

During the last two centuries, millions of psychotics, neurotics, psychopaths, and cranks of every kind and description had gone outward to the stars. The early ones had the Mikkelsen Drive to power their ships, and spent twenty or thirty years chugging from star system to star system. The newer ships were powered by GM subspatial torque converters, and made the same journey in a matter of months.

The stay-at-homes, being socially adjusted, bewailed the loss of anyone, but they welcomed the additional breeding room.

In his twenty-seventh year, Danton decided to leave Earth

and take up pioneering. It was a tearful day when he gave his breeding certificate to his best friend, Al Trevor.

"Gee, Edward," Trevor said, turning the precious little certificate over and over in his hands, "you don't know what this means to Myrtle and me. We always wanted two kids. Now because of you—"

"Forget it," said Danton. "Where I'm going, I won't need any breeding permit. As a matter of fact, I'll probably find it impossible to breed," he added, the thought having just struck him.

"But won't that be frustrating for you?" Al asked, always solicitous for his friend's welfare.

"I guess so. Maybe after a while, though, I'll find a girl pioneer. And in the meantime, there's always sublimation."

"True enough. What substitute have you selected?"

"Vegetable gardening. I might as well be practical."

"You might as well," Al said, "Well, boy, good luck, boy."

Once the breeding certificate was gone, the die was cast. Danton plunged boldly ahead. In exchange for his Birthright, the government gave him unlimited free transportation and two years' basic equipment and provisions.

Danton left at once.

He avoided the more heavily populated areas, which were usually in the hands of rabid little groups.

He wanted no part of a place like Korani II, for instance, where a giant calculator had instituted a reign of math.

Nor was he interested in Heil V, where a totalitarian population of 342 was earnestly planning ways and means of conquering the Galaxy.

He skirted the Farming Worlds, dull, restrictive places given to extreme health theories and practices.

When he came to Hedonia, he considered settling on that notorious planet. But the men of Hedonia were said to be short-lived, although no one denied their enjoyment while they *did* live.

Danton decided in favor of the long haul, and journeyed on.

He passed the Mining Worlds, somber, rocky places sparsely populated by gloomy, bearded men given to sudden violence. And he came at last to the New Territories. These unpeopled worlds were past Earth's farthest frontier. Danton scanned several before he found one with no intelligent life whatsoever.

It was a calm and watery place, dotted with sizeable islands, lush with jungle green and fertile with fish and game. The ship's captain duly notarized Danton's claim to the planet,

which Danton called New Tahiti. A quick survey showed a large island superior to the rest. Here he was landed, and here he proceeded to set up his camp.

There was much to be done at first. Danton constructed a house out of branches and woven grass, near a white and gleaming beach. He fashioned a fishing spear, several snares and a net. He planted his vegetable garden and was gratified to see it thrive under the tropic sun, nourished by warm rains which fell every morning betwen seven and seven-thirty.

All in all, New Tahiti was a paradisical place and Danton should have been very happy there. But there was one thing wrong.

The vegetable garden, which he had thought would provide first-class sublimation, proved a dismal failure. Danton found himself thinking about women at all hours of the day and night, and spending long hours crooning to himself—love songs, of course—beneath a great orange tropic moon.

This was unhealthy. Desperately he threw himself into other recognized forms of sublimation; painting came first, but he rejected it to keep a journal, abandoned that and composed a sonata, gave that up and carved two enormous statues out of a local variety of soapstone, completed them and tried to think of something else to do.

There was nothing else to do. His vegetables took excellent care of themselves; being of Earth stock, they completely choked out all alien growths. Fish swam into his nets in copious quantities, and meat was his whenever he bothered to set a snare. He found again that he was thinking of women at all hours of the day and night—tall women, short women, white women, black women, brown women.

The day came when Danton found himself thinking favorably of Martian women, something no Terran had succeeded in doing before. Then he knew that something drastic had to be done.

But what? He had no way of signaling for help, no way of getting off New Tahiti. He was gloomily contemplating this when a black speck appeared in the sky to seaward.

He watched as it slowly grew larger, barely able to breathe for fear it would turn out to be a bird or huge insect. But the speck continued to increase in size and soon he could see pale jets, flaring and ebbing.

A spaceship had come! He was alone no longer!

The ship took a long, slow, cautious time landing. Danton changed into his best *pareu*, a South Seas garment he had found peculiarly well adapted to the climate of New Tahiti.

He washed, combed his hair carefully and watched the ship descend.

It was one of the ancient Mikkelsen Drive ships. Danton had thought that all of them were long retired from active service. But this ship, it was apparent, had been traveling for a long while. The hull was dented and scored, hopelessly archaic, yet with a certain indomitable look about it. Its name, proudly lettered on the bow, was *The Hutter People.*

When people come in from deep space, they are usually starved for fresh food. Danton gathered a great pile of fruit for the ship's passengers and had it tastefully arranged by the time *The Hutter People* had landed ponderously on the beach.

A narrow hatch opened and two men stepped out. They were armed with rifles and dressed in black from head to toe. Warily they looked around them.

Danton sprinted over. "Hey, welcome to New Tahiti! Boy, am I glad to see you folks! What's the latest news from—"

"Stand back!" shouted one of the men. He was in his fifties, tall and impossibly gaunt, his face seamed and hard. His icy blue eyes seemed to pierce Danton like an arrow; his rifle was leveled at Danton's chest. His partner was younger, barrel-chested, broad-faced, short, and very powerfully built.

"Something wrong?" Danton asked, stopping.

"What's your name?"

"Edward Danton."

"I'm Simeon Smith," the gaunt man said, "military commander of the Hutter people. This is Jedekiah Franker, second-in-command. How come you speak English?"

"I've always spoken English," said Danton. "Look, I—"

"Where are the others? Where are they hiding?"

"There aren't any others. Just me." Danton looked at the ship and saw the faces of men and women at every port. "I gathered this stuff for you folks." He waved his hand at the mound of fruit. "Thought you might want some fresh goods after being so long in space."

A pretty girl with short, tousled blonde hair appeared in the hatchway. "Can't we come out now, Father?"

"No!" Simeon said. "It's not safe. Get inside, Anita."

"I'll watch from here, then," she said, staring at Danton with frankly curious eyes.

Danton stared back and a faint and unfamiliar tremor ran through him.

Simeon said, "We accept your offering. We will not, however, eat it."

"Why not?" Danton reasonably wanted to know.

"Because," said Jedekiah, "we don't know what poisons you people might try to feed us."

"Poisons? Look, let's sit down and talk this over."

"What do you think?" Jedekiah asked Simeon.

"Just what I expected," the military leader said. "Ingratiating, fawning, undoubtedly treacherous. His people won't show themselves. Waiting in ambush, I'll bet. I think an object lesson would be in order."

"Right," said Jedekiah, grinning. "Put the fear of civilization into them." He aimed his rifle at Danton's chest.

"Hey!" Danton yelped, backing away.

"But, Father," said Anita, "he hasn't done anything yet."

"That's the whole point. Shoot him and he *won't* do anything. The only good native is a dead native."

"This way," Jedekiah put in, "the rest will know we mean business."

"It isn't right!" Anita cried indignantly. "The Council—"

"—isn't in command now. An alien landfall constitutes an emergency. During such times, the military is in charge. We'll do what we think best. Remember Lan II!"

"Hold on now," Danton said. "You've got this all wrong. There's just me, no others, no reason to—"

A bullet kicked sand near his left foot. He sprinted for the protection of the jungle. Another bullet whined close and a third cut a twig near his head as he plunged into the underbrush.

"There!" he heard Simeon roar. "That ought to teach them a lesson!"

Danton kept on running until he had put half a mile of jungle between himself and the pioneer ship.

He ate a light supper of the local variety of bananas and breadfruit, and tried to figure out what was wrong with the Hutters. Were they insane? They had seen that he was an Earthman, alone and unarmed, obviously friendly. Yet they had fired at him—as an object lesson. A lesson for whom? For the dirty natives, whom they wanted to teach a lesson . . .

That was it! Danton nodded emphatically to himself. The Hutters must have thought he was a native, an aboriginal, and that his tribe was lurking in the bush, waiting for a chance to massacre the new arrivals! It wasn't too rash an assumption, really. Here he was on a distant planet, without a spaceship, wearing only a loincloth and tanned a medium bronze. He was probably just what they thought a native should look like on a wilderness planet like this!

"But where," Danton asked himself, "do they think I learned English?"

The whole thing was ridiculous. He started walking back to the ship, sure he could clear up the misunderstanding in a few minutes. But after a couple yards, he stopped.

Evening was approaching. Behind him, the sky was banked in white and gray clouds. To seaward, a deep blue haze advanced steadily on the land. The jungle was filled with ominous noises, which Danton had long ago found to be harmless. But the new arrivals might not think so.

These people were trigger-happy, he reminded himself. No sense barging in on them too fast and inviting a bullet.

So he moved cautiously through the tangled jungle growth, a silent, tawny shape blending into the jungle browns and greens. When he reached the vicinity of the ship, he crawled through the dense undergrowth until he could peer down on the sloping beach.

The pioneers had finally come out of their ship. There were several dozen men and women and a few children. All were dressed in heavy black cloth and perspiring in the heat. They had ignored his gift of local fruit. Instead, an aluminum table had been spread with the spaceship's monotonous provisions.

On the periphery of the crowd, Danton saw several men with rifles and ammunition belts. They were evidently on guard, keeping close watch on the jungle and glancing apprehensively overhead at the darkening sky.

Simeon raised his hands. There was immediate silence.

"Friends," the military leader orated, "we have come at last to our long-awaited home! Behold, here is a land of milk and honey, a place of bounty and abundance. Was it not worth the long voyage, the constant danger, the endless search?"

"Yes, brother!" the people responded.

Simeon held up his hands again for silence. "No civilized man has settled upon this planet. We are the first and therefore the place is ours. But there are perils, my friends! Who knows what strange monsters the jungle hides?"

"Nothing larger than a chipmunk," Danton muttered to himself. "Why don't they ask me? I'd tell them."

"Who knows what leviathan swims in the deep?" Simeon continued. "We *do* know one thing: There is an aboriginal people here, naked and savage, undoubtedly cunning, ruthless and amoral, as aboriginals always are. Of these we must beware. We will live in peace with them, if they will let us. We will bring to them the fruits of civilization and the

flowers of culture. They may profess friendship, but always remember this, friends: No one can tell what goes on in a savage heart. Their standards are not ours; their morals are not ours. We cannot trust them; we must be forever on guard. And if in doubt, *we* must shoot first! Remember Lan II!"

Everybody applauded, sang a hymn, and began their evening meal. As night fell, searchlights came on from the ship, making the beach bright as day. The sentries paced up and down, shoulders hunched nervously, rifles ready.

Danton watched the settlers shake out their sleeping bags and retire under the bulge of the ship. Even their fear of sudden attack couldn't force them to spend another night inside the ship, when there was fresh air to breathe outside.

The great orange moon of New Tahiti was half-hidden by high-flying night clouds. The sentries paced and swore, and moved closer together for mutual comfort and protection. They began firing at the jungle sounds and blasting at shadows.

Danton crept back into the jungle. He retired for the night behind a tree, where he would be safe from stray bullets. This evening had not seemed the time for straightening things out. The Hutters were too jumpy. It would be better, he decided, to handle the matter by daylight, in a simple, straightforward, reasonable fashion.

The trouble was, the Hutters hardly seemed reasonable.

In the morning, though, everything looked more promising. Danton waited until the Hutters had finished their breakfast, then strolled into view at the edge of the beach.

"Halt!" every one of the sentries barked.

"That savage is back!" called a settler.

"Mummy," cried a little boy, "don't let the nasty bad man eat me!"

"Don't worry, dear," the boy's mother said. "Your father has a rifle for shooting savages."

Simeon rushed out of the spaceship and glared at Danton. "All right, you! Come forward!"

Danton stepped gingerly across the beach, his skin tingling with nervous expectation. He walked to Simeon, keeping his empty hands in sight.

"I am the leader of these people," Simeon said, speaking very slowly, as if to a child. "I the big chief fella. You big fella chief your people?"

"There's no need to talk that way," Danton said. "I can hardly understand you. I told you yesterday that I haven't any people. There's just me."

Simeon's hard face grew white with anger. "Unless you're honest with me, you're going to regret it. Now—where is your tribe?"

"I'm an Earthman," Danton yelled. "Are you deaf? Can't you hear how I talk?"

A stooped little man with white hair and great horn-rimmed glasses came over with Jedekiah. "Simeon," the little man said, "I don't believe I have met our guest."

"Professor Baker," said Simeon, "this savage here claims he's an Earthman and he says his name is Edward Danton."

The professor glanced at Danton's *pareu,* his tanned skin and calloused feet. "You are an Earthman?" he asked Danton.

"Of course."

"Who carved those stone statues up the beach?"

"I did," Danton said, "but it was just therapy. You see—"

"Obviously primitive work. That stylization, those noses—"

"It was accidental, then. Look, a few months ago I left Earth in a spaceship—"

"How was it powered?" Professor Baker asked.

"By a GM subspatial torque converter." Baker nodded, and Danton went on. "Well, I wasn't interested in places like Korani or Heil V, and Hedonia seemed too rich for my blood. I passed up the Mining Worlds and the Farming Worlds, and had the government ship drop me here. The planet's registered as New Tahiti, in my name. But I was getting pretty lonely, so I'm glad you folks came."

"Well, Professor?" Simeon said. "What do you think?"

"Amazing," Baker murmured, "truly amazing. His grasp of colloquial English bespeaks a fairly high level of intelligence, which points up a phenomenon frequently met with in savage societies, namely, an unusually well-developed power of mimicry. Our friend Danta (as his original, uncorrupted name must have been) will probably be able to tell us many tribal legends, myths, songs, dances—"

"But I'm an Earthman!"

"No, my poor friend," the professor corrected gently, "you are not. Obviously you have *met* an Earthman. Some trader, I daresay, stopping for repairs."

Jedekiah said, "There's evidence that a spaceship once landed here briefly."

"Ah," said Professor Baker, beaming. "Confirmation of my hypothesis."

"That was the government ship," Danton explained. "It dropped me off here."

"It is interesting to note," said Professor Baker in his

lecturing voice, "how his almost-plausible story lapses into myth at various crucial points. He claims that the ship was powered by a 'GM subspatial torque converter'—which is nonsense syllabification, since the only deep-space drive is the Mikkelsen. He claims that the journey from Earth was made in a matter of months (since his untutored mind cannot conceive of a journey lasting years), although we know that no space drive, even theoretically, can achieve that."

"It was probably developed after you people left Earth," Danton said. "How long have you been gone?"

"The Hutter spaceship left Earth one hundred and twenty years ago," Baker replied condescendingly. "We are mostly fourth and fifth generation. Note also," Baker said to Simeon and Jedekiah, "his attempt to think up plausible place-names. Words such as Korani, Heil, Hedonia appeal to his sense of onomatopoeia. That there are no such places doesn't disturb him."

"There are!" Danton said indignantly.

"Where?" Jedekiah challenged. "Give me the co-ordinates."

"How should I know? I'm no navigator. I think Heil was near Boötes, or maybe it was Cassiopeia. No, I'm pretty sure it was Boötes—"

"I'm sorry, friend," said Jedekiah. "It may interest you to know that I'm the ship's navigator. I can show you the star atlases and charts. Those places aren't on them."

"Your charts are a hundred years out of date!"

"Then so are the stars," Simeon said. "Now, Danta, where is your tribe? Why do they hide from us? What are they planning?"

"This is preposterous," Danton protested. "What can I do to convince you? I'm an Earthman. I was born and raised—"

"That's enough," Simeon cut in. "If there's one thing we Hutters won't stand for, it's backtalk from natives. Out with it, Danta. *Where are your people?*"

"There's only me," Danton insisted.

"Tight-mouthed?" Jedekiah gritted. "Maybe a taste of the blacksnake whip—"

"Later, later," Simeon said. "His tribe'll come around for handouts. Natives always do. In the meantime, Danta, you can join that work gang over there, unloading the supplies."

"No, thanks," said Danton. "I'm going back to—"

Jedekiah's fist lashed out, catching Danton on the side of the jaw. He staggered, barely keeping his footing.

"The chief said *no backtalk!*" Jedekiah roared. "Why are

you natives always so bone-lazy? You'll be paid as soon as we unload the beads and calico. Now get to work."

That seemed to be the last word on the subject. Dazed and unsure, much like millions of natives before him on a thousand different worlds, Danton joined the long line of colonists passing goods out of the ship.

By late afternoon, the unloading was done and the settlers were relaxed on the beach. Danton sat apart from them, trying to think his situation through. He was deep in thought when Anita came to him with a canteen of water.

"Do *you* think I'm a native?" he asked.

She sat down beside him and said, "I really don't see what else you could be. Everyone knows how fast a ship can travel and—"

"Times have changed since your people left Earth. They weren't in space all that time, were they?"

"Of course not. The Hutter ship went to H'gastro I, but it wasn't fertile enough, so the next generation moved to Ktedi. But the corn mutated and almost wiped them out, so they went to Lan II. They thought that would be a permanent home."

"What happened?"

"The natives," said Anita sadly. "I guess they were friendly enough, at first, and everyone thought the situation was well in hand. Then, one day, we were at war with the entire native population. They only had spears and things, but there were too many of them, so the ship left again and we came here."

"Hmm," Danton said. "I see why you're so nervous about aboriginals."

"Well, of course. While there's any possibility of danger, we're under military rule. That means my father and Jedekiah. But as soon as the emergency is past, our regular Hutter government takes over."

"Who runs that?"

"A council of Elders," Anita said, "men of good-will, who detest violence. If you and your people are really peaceable—"

"I haven't any people," Danton said wearily.

"—then you'll have every opportunity to prosper under the rule of the Elders," she finished.

They sat together and watched the sunset. Danton noticed how the wind stirred her hair, blowing it silkily across her forehead, and how the afterglow of the sun outlined and illuminated the line of her cheek and lip. He shivered and told himself it was the sudden chill of evening. And Anita,

who had been talking animatedly about her childhood, found difficulty in completing her sentences, or even keeping her train of thought.

After a while, their hands strayed together. Their fingertips touched and clung. For a long time, they said nothing at all. And at last, gently and lingeringly, they kissed.

"What the hell is going on here?" a loud voice demanded.

Danton looked up and saw a burly man standing over him, his powerful head silhouetted black against the moon, his fists on his hips.

"Please, Jedekiah," Anita said. "Don't make a scene."

"Get up," Jedekiah ordered Danton, in an ominously quiet voice. "Get up on your feet."

Danton stood up, his hands half-clenched into fists, waiting.

"You," Jedekiah said to Anita, "are a disgrace to your race and to the whole Hutter people. Are you crazy? You can't mess around with a dirty native and still keep any self-respect." He turned to Danton. "And you gotta learn something and learn it good. *Natives don't fool with Hutter women!* I'm going to impress that little lesson on you right here and now."

There was a brief scuffle and Jedekiah found himself sprawled on his back.

"Hurry!" Jedekiah shouted. *"The natives are revolting!"*

An alarm bell from the spaceship began to peal. Sirens wailed in the night. The women and children, long trained for such an emergency, trooped back into the spaceship. The men were issued rifles, machine guns, and hand grenades, and began to advance on Danton.

"It's just man to man," Danton called out. "We had a disagreement, that's all. There's no natives or anything. Just me."

The foremost Hutter commanded, "Anita, quick, get back!"

"I didn't see any natives," the girl said stanchly. "And it wasn't really Danta's fault—"

"Get back!"

She was pulled out of the way. Danton dived into the bushes before the machine guns opened up.

He crawled on all fours for fifty yards, then broke into a dead run.

Fortunately, the Hutters were not pursuing. They were interested only in guarding their ship and holding their beachhead and a narrow stretch of jungle. Danton heard gunfire throughout the night and loud shouts and frantic cries.

"There goes one!"

"Quick, turn the machine gun! They're behind us!"

"There! There! I got one!"

"No, he got away There he goes . . . But look, up in the tree!"

"Fire, man, fire!"

All night, Danton listened as the Hutters repulsed the attacks of imaginary savages.

Toward dawn, the firing subsided. Danton estimated that a ton of lead had been expended, hundreds of trees decapitated, acres of grass trampled into mud. The jungle stank of cordite.

He fell into a fitful slumber.

At midday, he awakened and heard someone moving through the underbrush. He retreated into the jungle and made a meal for himself out of a local variety of bananas and mangoes. Then he decided to think things over.

But no thoughts came. His mind was filled with Anita and with grief over her loss.

All that day, he wandered disconsolately through the jungle, and in the late afternoon heard again the sound of someone moving through the underbrush.

He turned to go deeper into the island. Then he heard someone calling his name.

"Danta! Danta! Wait!"

It was Anita. Danton hesitated, not sure what to do. She might have decided to leave her people, to live in the green jungle with him. But more realistically, she might have been sent out as a decoy, leading a party of men to destroy him. How could he know where her loyalties lay?

"Danta! Where are you?"

Danton reminded himself that there could never be anything between them. Her people had shown what they thought of natives. They would always distrust him, forever try to kill him . . .

"*Please,* Danta!"

Danton shrugged his shoulders and walked toward her voice.

They met in a little clearing. Anita's hair was disheveled and her khakis were torn by the jungle briars, but for Danton there could never be a lovelier woman. For an instant, he believed that she had come to join him, flee with him.

Then he saw armed men fifty yards behind her.

"It's all right," Anita said. "They're not going to kill you. They just came along to guard me."

"Guard you? From *me?*" Danton laughed hollowly.

"They don't know you as I do," Anita said. "At the Council meeting today, I told them the truth."

"You did?"

"Of course. That fight wasn't your fault and I told everybody so. I told them you fought only to defend yourself. And Jedekiah lied. No pack of natives attacked him. There was only you, and I told them this."

"Good girl," Danton said fervently. "Did they believe you?"

"I think so. I explained that the native attack came later."

Danton groaned. "Look, how could there be a native attack when there aren't any natives?"

"But there are," Anita said. "I heard them shouting."

"Those were your own people." Danton tried to think of something that would convince her. If he couldn't convince this one girl, how could he possibly convince the rest of the Hutters?

And then he had it. It was a very simple proof, but its effect would have to be overwhelming.

"You actually believe there was a full-scale native attack," Danton stated.

"Of course."

"How many natives?"

"I heard you outnumbered us by at least ten to one."

"And we were armed?"

"You certainly were."

"Then how," Danton asked triumphantly, "do you account for the fact that *not a single Hutter was wounded!*"

She stared at him wide-eyed. "But, Danta dear, many of the Hutters were wounded, some seriously. It's a wonder no one was killed in all that fighting!"

Danton felt as though the ground had been kicked out from under him. For a terrifying minute, he believed her. The Hutters were so certain! Perhaps he did have a tribe, after all, hundreds of bronzed savages like himself, hidden in the jungle, waiting . . .

"That trader who taught you English," Anita said, "must have been a very unscrupulous character. It's against interstellar law, you know, to sell firearms to natives. Someday he'll be caught and—"

"Firearms?"

"Certainly. You couldn't use them very accurately, of course. But Simeon said that sheer firepower—"

"I suppose all your casualties were from gunshot wounds."

"Yes. The men didn't let you get close enough to use knives and spears."

"I see," Danton said. His proof was utterly demolished. But he felt enormously relieved at having regained his sanity. The disorganized Hutter soldiery had ranged around the jungle, firing at everything that moved—each other. Of course they had gotten into trouble. It was more than a wonder that some of them hadn't been killed. It was a miracle.

"But I explained that they couldn't blame you," said Anita. "You were attacked first and your own people must have thought you were in danger. The Elders thought this was probable."

"Nice of them," Danton said.

"They want to be reasonable. After all, they realize that natives are human beings just like ourselves."

"Are you sure of that?" Danton asked, with feeble irony.

"Of course. So the Elders held a big meeting on native policy and decided it once and for all. We're setting aside a thousand acres as a reservation for you and your people. That should be plenty of room, shouldn't it? The men are putting up the boundary posts now. You'll live peacefully in your reservation and we'll live in our own part of the island."

"What?" Danton said.

"And to seal the pledge," Anita continued, "the Elders asked you to accept this." She handed him a roll of parchment.

"What is it?"

"It's a peace treaty, declaring the end of the Hutter-New Tahitian war, and pledging our respective peoples to eternal amity."

Numbly, Danton accepted the parchment. He saw that the men who had accompanied Anita were setting red and black striped posts into the ground. They sang as they worked, happy to have reached a solution for the native problem so quickly and easily.

"But don't you think," Danton asked, "that perhaps—ah—assimilation might be a better solution?"

"I suggested it," Anita said, blushing.

"You did? You mean that you would—"

"Of course I would," said Anita, not looking at him. "I think the amalgamation of two strong races would be a fine and wonderful thing. And, Danta, what wonderful stories and legends you could have told the children!"

"I could have showed them how to fish and hunt," Danton said, "and which plants are edible, and things like that."

"And all your colorful tribal songs and dances." Anita sighed. "It would have been wonderful. I'm sorry, Danta."

"But something must be possible! Can't I talk to the Elders? Isn't there anything I can do?"

"Nothing," Anita said. "I'd run away with you, Danta, but they'd track us down, no matter how long it took."

"They'd never find us," Danton promised.

"Perhaps. I'd be willing to take the chance."

"Darling!"

"But I can't. Your poor people, Danta! The Hutters would take hostages, kill them if I weren't returned."

"I don't have any people! I don't, damn it!"

"It's sweet of you to say that," Anita said tenderly. "But lives cannot be sacrificed just for the love of two individuals. You must tell your people not to cross the boundary lines, Danta. They'll be shot. Good-by, and remember, it is best to live in the path of peace."

She hurried away from him. Danton watched her go, angry at her noble sentiments which separated them for no reason at all, yet loving her for the love she showed his people. That his people were imaginary didn't count. It was the thought that mattered.

At last he turned and walked deep into the jungle.

He stopped by a still pool of black water, overhung with giant trees and bordered by flowering ferns, and here he tried to plan the rest of his life. Anita was gone; all commerce with human beings was gone. He didn't need any of them, he told himself. He had his reservation. He could replant his vegetable garden, carve more statues, compose more sonatas, start another journal . . .

"To hell with that!" he shouted to the trees. He didn't *want* to sublimate any longer. He wanted Anita and he wanted to live with humans. He was tired of being alone.

What could he do about it?

There didn't seem to be anything. He leaned back against a tree and stared at New Tahiti's impossibly blue sky. If only the Hutters weren't so superstitious, so afraid of natives, so . . .

And then it came to him, a plan so absurd, so dangerous . . .

"It's worth a try," Danton said to himself, "even if they kill me."

He trotted off toward the Hutter boundary line.

A sentry saw him as he neared the vicinity of the spaceship and leveled his rifle. Danton raised both arms.

"Don't fire! I have to speak with your leaders!"

"Get back on your reservation," the sentry warned. "Get back or I'll shoot."

"I have to speak to Simeon," Danton stated, holding his ground.

"Orders is orders," said the sentry, taking aim.

"Just a minute." Simeon stepped out of the ship, frowning deeply. "What is all this?"

"That native came back," the sentry said. "Shall I pop him, sir?"

"What do you want?" Simeon asked Danton.

"I have come here to bring you," Danton roared, *"a declaration of war!"*

That woke up the Hutter camp. In a few minutes, every man, woman, and child had gathered near the spaceship. The Elders, a council of old men distinguished by their long white beards, were standing to one side.

"You accepted the peace treaty," Simeon pointed out.

"I had a talk with the other chiefs of the island," Danton said, stepping forward. "We feel the treaty is not fair. New Tahiti is ours. It belonged to our fathers and to our fathers' fathers. Here we have raised our children, sown our corn, and reaped the breadfruit. We will not live on the reservation!"

"Oh, Danta!" Anita cried, appearing from the spaceship. "I asked you to bring peace to your people!"

"They wouldn't listen," Danton said. "All the tribes are gathering. Not only my own people, the Cynochi, but the Drovati, the Lorognasti, the Retellsmbroichi and the Vitelli. Plus, naturally, their sub-tribes and dependencies."

"How many are you?" Simeon asked.

"Fifty or sixty thousand. Of course, we don't all have rifles. Most of us will have to rely on more primitive weapons, such as poisoned arrows and darts."

A nervous murmur arose from the crowd.

"Many of us will be killed," Danton said stonily. "We do not care. Every New Tahitian will fight like a lion. We are a thousand to your one. We have cousins on the other islands who will join us. No matter what the cost in human life and misery, we will drive you into the sea. I have spoken."

He turned and started back into the jungle, walking with stiff dignity.

"Shall I pop him now, sir?" the sentry begged.

"Put down that rifle, you fool!" Simeon snapped. "Wait, Danta! Surely we can come to terms. Bloodshed is senseless."

"I agree," Danton said soberly.

"What do you want?"

"Equal rights!"

The Elders went into an immediate conference. Simeon listened to them, then turned to Danton.

"That may be possible. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing," Danton said. "Except, naturally, an alliance between the ruling clan of the Hutters and the ruling clan of the New Tahitians, to seal the bargain. Marriage would be best."

After going into conference again, the Elders gave their instructions to Simeon. The military chief was obviously disturbed. The cords stood out on his neck, but with an effort he controlled himself, bowed his agreement to the Elders and marched up to Danton.

"The Elders have authorized me," he said, "to offer you an alliance of blood brotherhood. You and I, representing the leading clans of our peoples, will mingle our blood together in a beautiful and highly symbolic ceremony, then break bread, take salt—"

"Sorry," Danton said. "We New Tahitians don't hold with that sort of thing. It has to be marriage."

"But damn it all, man—"

"That is my last word."

"We'll never accept! Never!"

"Then it's war," Danton declared and walked into the jungle.

He was in a mood for making war. But how, he asked himself, does a single native fight against a spaceship full of armed men?

He was brooding on this when Simeon and Anita came to him through the jungle.

"All right," Simeon said angrily. "The Elders have decided. We Hutters are sick of running from planet to planet. We've had this problem before and I suppose we'd just go somewhere else and have it again. We're sick and tired of the whole native problem, so I guess—" he gulped hard, but manfully finished the sentence—"we'd better assimilate. At least, that's what the Elders think. Personally, I'd rather fight."

"You'd lose," Danton assured him, and at that moment he felt he could take on the Hutters single-handed and win.

"Maybe so," Simeon admitted. "Anyhow, you can thank Anita for making the peace possible."

"Anita? Why?"

"Why, man, she's the only girl in the camp who'd marry a naked, dirty, heathen savage!"

And so they were married, and Danta, now known as the White Man's Friend, settled down to help the Hutters conquer their new land. They, in turn, introduced him to the marvels of civilization. He was taught Twelve-hand Bridge and Mass Dancing. And soon the Hutters built their first Subway—for a civilized people must release their aggressions —and that game was shown to Danta, too.

He tried to master the spirit of the classic Earth pastime, but it was obviously beyond the comprehension of his savage soul. Civilization stifled him, so Danta and his wife moved across the planet, always following the frontier, staying far from the amenities of civilization.

Anthropologists frequently came to visit him. They recorded all the stories he told his children, the ancient and beautiful legends of New Tahiti—tales of sky gods and water demons, fire sprites and woodland nymphs, and how Katamandura was ordered to create the world out of nothingness in just three days, and what his reward for this was, and what Jevasi said to Hootmenlati when they met in the underworld, and the strange outcome of this meeting.

The anthropologists noted similarities between these legends and certain legends of Earth, and several interesting theories were put forth. And they were interested in the great sandstone statues on the main island of New Tahiti, weird and haunting works which no viewer could forget, clearly the work of a pre-New Tahitian race, of whom no trace could ever be found.

But most fascinating of all for the scientific workers was the problem of the New Tahitians themselves. Those happy, laughing, bronzed savages, bigger, stronger, handsomer, and healthier than any other race, had melted away at the coming of the white man. Only a few of the older Hutters could remember having met them in any numbers and their tales were considered none too reliable.

"My people?" Danta would say, when questioned. "Ah, they could not stand the white man's diseases, the white man's mechanical civilization, the white man's harsh and repressive ways. They are in a happier place now, in Valhoola beyond the sky. And someday I shall go there, too."

And white men, hearing this, experienced strangely guilty feelings and redoubled their efforts to show kindness to Danta, the Last Native.

FEEDING TIME

TREGGIS FELT considerably relieved when the owner of the bookstore went front to wait upon another customer. After all, it was essentially nerve-racking, to have a stooped, bespectacled, fawning old man constantly at one's shoulder, peering at the page one was glancing at, pointing here and there with a gnarled, dirty finger, obsequiously wiping dust from the shelves with a tobacco-stained handkerchief. To say nothing of the exquisite boredom of listening to the fellow's cackling, high-pitched reminiscences.

Undoubtedly he meant well, but really, there was a limit. One couldn't do much more than smile politely and hope that the little bell over the front of the store would tinkle—as it had.

Treggis moved toward the back of the store, hoping the disgusting little man wouldn't try to search him out. He passed half a hundred Greek titles, then the popular sciences section. Next, in a strange jumble of titles and authors, he passed Edgar Rice Burroughs, Anthony Trollope, Theosophy, and the poems of Longfellow. The further back he went the deeper the dust became, the fewer the naked light bulbs suspended above the corridor, the higher the piles of moldy, dog-eared books.

It was really a splendid old place, and for the life of him Treggis couldn't understand how he had missed it before. Bookstores were his sole pleasure in life. He spent all his free hours in them, wandering happily through the stacks.

Of course, he was just interested in certain types of books.

At the end of the high ramp of books there were three more corridors, branching off at absurd angles. Treggis followed the center path, reflecting that the bookstore hadn't seemed so large from the outside; just a door half-hidden between two buildings, with an old hand-lettered sign in its upper panel. But then, these old stores were deceptive, often extending to nearly half a block in depth.

At the end of this corridor two more book-trails split off. Choosing the one on the left, Treggis started reading titles,

casually scanning them up and down with a practiced glance. He was in no hurry; he could, if he wished, spend the rest of the day here—to say nothing of the night.

He had shuffled eight or ten feet down the corridor before one title struck him. He went back to it.

It was a small, black-covered book, old, but with that ageless look that some books have. Its edges were worn, and the print on the cover was faded.

"Well, what do you know," Treggis murmured softly.

The cover read: *Care and Feeding of the Gryphon.* And beneath that, in smaller print: *Advice to the Keeper.*

A gryphon, he knew, was a mythological monster, half lion and half eagle.

"Well now," Treggis said to himself. "Let's see now." He opened the book and began reading the table of contents.

The headings went: 1. *Species of Gryphon.* 2. *A Short History of Gryphonology.* 3. *Subspecies of Gryphon.* 4. *Food for the Gryphon.* 5. *Constructing a Natural Habitat for the Gryphon.* 6. *The Gryphon During Moulting Season.* 7. *The Gryphon and . . .*

He closed the book.

"This," he told himself, "is decidedly—well, unusual." He flipped through the book, reading a sentence here and there. His first thought, that the book was one of the "unnatural" natural history compilations so dear to the Elizabethan heart, was clearly wrong. The book wasn't old enough; and there was nothing euphemistic in the writing, no balanced sentence structure, ingenious antithesis and the like. It was straightforward, clean-cut, concise. Treggis flipped through a few more pages and came upon this:

"The sole diet of the Gryphon is young virgins. Feeding time is once a month, and care should be exercised—"

He closed the book again. The sentence set up a train of thought all its own. He banished it with a blush and looked again at the shelf, hoping to find more books of the same type. Something like *A Short History of the Affairs of the Sirens,* or perhaps *The Proper Breeding of Minotaurs.* But there was nothing even remotely like it. Not on that shelf nor any other, as far as he could tell.

"Find anything?" a voice at his shoulder asked. Treggis gulped, smiled, and held out the black-covered old book.

"Oh yes," the old man said, wiping dust from the cover. "Quite a rare book, this."

"Oh, is it?" murmured Treggis.

"Gryphons," the old man mused, flipping through the book, "are quite rare. Quite a rare species of—animal," he

finished, after a moment's thought. "A dollar-fifty for this book, sir."

Treggis left with his possession clutched under his thin right arm. He made straight for his room. It wasn't every day that one bought a book on the *Care and Feeding of Gryphons.*

Treggis' room bore a striking resemblance to a secondhand bookstore. There was the same lack of space, the same film of gray dust over everything, the same vaguely arranged chaos of titles, authors, and types. Treggis didn't stop to gloat over his treasures. His faded *Libidinous Verses* passed unnoticed. Quite unceremoniously he pushed the *Psychopathia Sexualis* from his armchair, sat down and began to read.

There was quite a lot to the care and feeding of the gryphon. One wouldn't think that a creature half lion and half eagle would be so touchy. There was also an interesting amplification of the eating habits of the gryphon. And other information. For pure enjoyment, the gryphon book was easily as good as the Havelock Ellis lectures on sex, formerly his favorite.

Toward the end, there were full instructions on how to get to the zoo. The instructions were, to say the least, unique.

It was a good ways past midnight when Treggis closed the book. What a deal of strange information there was between those two black covers! One sentence in particular he couldn't get out of his head:

"The sole diet of the gryphon is young virgins."

That bothered him. It didn't seem fair, somehow.

After a while he opened the book again to the *Instructions for Getting to the Zoo.*

Decidedly strange they were. And yet, not too difficult. Not requiring, certainly, too much physical exertion. Just a few words, a few motions. Treggis realized suddenly how onerous his bank clerk's job was. A stupid waste of eight good hours a day, no matter how one looked at it. How much more interesting to be a keeper in charge of the gryphon. To use the special ointments during moulting season, to answer questions about gryphonology. To be in charge of feeding. "The sole diet . . ."

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," Treggis mumbled rapidly, pacing the floor of his narrow room. "A hoax—but might as well try out the instructions. For a laugh."

He laughed hollowly.

There was no blinding flash, no clap of thunder, but

Treggis was nevertheless transported, instantaneously so it seemed, to a place. He staggered for a moment, then regained his balance and opened his eyes. The sunlight was blinding. Looking around, he could see that someone had done a very good job of constructing *The Natural Habitat of the Gryphon.*

Treggis walked forward, holding himself quite well considering the trembling in his ankles, knees, and stomach. Then he saw the gryphon.

At the same time the gryphon saw him.

Slowly at first, then with ever-gaining momentum, the gryphon advanced on him. The great eagle's wings opened, the talons extended, and the gryphon leaped, or sailed, forward.

Treggis tried to jump out of the way in a single uncontrollable shudder. The gryphon came at him, huge and golden in the sun, and Treggis screamed desperately, "No, no! The sole diet of the gryphon is young—"

Then he screamed again in full realization as the talons seized him.

PARADISE II

THE SPACE station revolved around its planet, waiting. Properly speaking it was without intelligence, for intelligence was unnecessary. It had awareness, however, and certain tropisms, affinities, reactions.

It was resourceful. Its purpose was stamped into the very metal, impressed into the circuits and tubes. And perhaps the machine retained some of the emotions that had gone into its building—the wild hopes, the fears, the frenzied race against time.

But the hopes had been in vain, for the race was lost, and the great machine hung in space, incomplete and useless.

But it had awareness, and certain tropisms, affinities, reactions. It was resourceful. It knew what it needed. So it scanned space, waiting for its missing components.

In the region of Bootes he came to a little cherry-red sun, and as the ship swung in, he saw that one of its planets was the rare, beautiful blue-green color of Earth.

"Look at this!" Fleming shouted, turning from the controls, his voice breaking with excitement. "Earth type. It *is* Earth type, isn't it, Howard? We'll make a fortune on this one!"

Howard came forward slowly from the ship's galley, munching on a piece of avocado. He was short and bald, and he carried a dignified paunch the size of a small watermelon. He was irritated, for he had been deeply involved in making dinner. Cooking was an art with Howard, and had he not been a businessman, he would have been a chef. They ate well on all their trips, because Howard had a way with fried chicken, served his roasts with Howard sauce, and was especially adept at Howard salad.

"It might be Earth type," he said, staring coldly at the blue-green planet.

"Of course it is," Fleming said. Fleming was young, and more enthusiastic than any man had a right to be in space. He was gaunt, in spite of Howard's cooking, and his carroty hair fell messily over his forehead. Howard tolerated him, not only because Fleming had a way with ships and engines;

above all, Fleming had a businesslike attitude. A businesslike attitude was most necessary in space, where it cost a small fortune just to raise ship.

"If only it's not populated," Fleming was praying in his enthusiastic, businesslike way. "If only it's all ours. *Ours*, Howard! An Earth type planet! God, we can sell the real estate alone for a fortune, to say nothing of mineral rights, refueling rights, and everything else."

Howard swallowed the last of his avocado. Young Fleming still had a lot to learn. Finding and selling planets was a business, exactly like growing and selling oranges. There was a difference, of course; oranges aren't dangerous, and planets sometimes are. But then, oranges don't make the profits a good planet can.

"Shall we land on our planet now?" Fleming asked eagerly.

"By all means," Howard said. "Only—that space station ahead leads me to believe that the inhabitants might consider it *their* planet."

Fleming looked. Sure enough, a space station, previously hidden by the planet's bulk, was swinging into sight.

"Oh damn," Fleming said, his narrow freckled face twisting into a pout. "It's populated, then. Do you suppose we could—" He left the sentence unfinished, but glanced at the gunfire controls.

"Hmm." Howard looked at the space station, appraised the technology that had built it, then glanced at the planet. Regretfully he shook his head. "No, not here."

"Oh well," Fleming said. "At least we have first trading rights." He looked out the port again and caught Howard's arm. "Look—the space station."

Across the gray metal surface of the sphere bright lights were winking in sequence.

"What do you suppose it means?" Fleming asked.

"I have no idea," Howard told him, "and we'll never find out here. You may as well land on the planet, if no one tries to stop you."

Fleming nodded, and switched the controls to manual. For a few moments, Howard watched.

The control board was covered with dials, switches and gauges, which were made of metal, plastics, and quartz. Fleming, on the other hand, was flesh and blood and bone. It seemed impossible that any relationship could exist between them, except the most perfunctory. Instead, Fleming seemed to merge into the control board. His eyes scanned the dials with mechanical precision, his fingers became extensions of the switches. The metal seemed to become pliable under his

hands, and amenable to his will. The quartz gauges gleamed red, and Fleming's eyes shone red too, with a glow that didn't seem entirely reflection.

Once the deceleration spiral had been entered, Howard settled himself comfortably in the galley. He estimated his fuel and food expenditures, plus depreciation on the ship. To the sum he added a safe third, and marked it down in a ledger. It would come in useful later, for his income tax.

They landed on the outskirts of a city, and waited for the local customs officials. No one came. They ran the standard atmosphere and micro-organism tests, and continued waiting. Still no one came. After half a day, Fleming undogged the hatch and they started toward the city.

The first skeletons, scattered across the bomb-torn concrete road, puzzled them; it seemed so untidy. What civilized people left skeletons in their roads? Why didn't someone clean up?

The city was populated only by skeletons, thousands, millions, packed into crumbling theaters, fallen at the doorways of dusty stores, scattered across the bullet-ripped streets.

"Must have had a war on," Fleming said brightly.

In the center of the city they found a parade grounds where rank upon rank of uniformed skeletons lay upon the grass. The reviewing stands were packed with skeleton officials, skeleton officers, skeleton wives and parents. And behind the stands were skeleton children, gathered to see the fun.

"A war, all right," Fleming said, nodding his head with finality. "They lost."

"Obviously," Howard said. "But who won?"

"What?"

"Where are the victors?"

At that moment the space station passed overhead, casting a shadow across the silent ranks of skeletons. Both men glanced up uneasily.

"You think everyone's dead?" Fleming asked hopefully.

"I think we should find out."

They walked back to the ship. Fleming began to whistle out of sheer high spirits, and kicked a mound of pocked bones out of his way. "We've struck it rich," he said, grinning at Howard.

"Not yet," Howard said cautiously. "There may be survivors—" He caught Fleming's look and smiled in spite of himself.

"It *does* look like a successful business trip."

Their tour of the planet was brief. The blue-green world was a bomb-splattered tomb. On every continent, the towns contained their tens of thousands of bony inhabitants, each city its millions. The plains and mountains were scattered with skeletons, and there were skeletons in the lakes, and skeletons in the forests and jungles.

"What a mess!" Fleming said at last, as they hovered over the planet. "What do you suppose the population was here?"

"I'd estimate it at nine billion, give or take a billion," Howard said.

"What do you suppose happened?"

Howard smiled sagely. "There are three classic methods of genicide. The first is pollution of the atmosphere by poison gas. Allied to that is radioactive poisoning, which kills the plant life as well. And finally, there are mutated laboratory germs, created solely for the purpose of attacking whole populations. If they get out of hand, they can wipe out a planet."

"Think that happened here?" Fleming asked, with lively interest.

"I believe so," Howard said, wiping an apple on his arm and biting into it. "I'm no pathologist, but the marks on those bones—"

"Germs," Fleming said. He coughed involuntarily. "You don't suppose—"

"You'd be dead already, if they were still active. All this must have happened several hundred years ago, to judge by the weathering of the skeletons. The germs die for lack of a human host."

Fleming nodded emphatically. "That's made to order. Oh, it's too bad about the people. Fortunes of war and all that. But this planet really is ours!" He peered out the port at the rich green fields below. "What'll we call it, Howard?"

Howard looked at the fields, and the wild, overgrown pastureland that bordered the concrete roads. "We might call it Paradise II," he said. "This place ought to be a farmer's heaven."

"Paradise II! That's pretty good," Fleming said. "I suppose we'll have to hire a gang to clear off those skeletons. Looks too weird-like."

Howard nodded. There were many details to be attended to. "We'll do that after—"

The space station passed over them.

"The lights!" Howard cried suddenly.

"Lights?" Fleming stared at the receding sphere.

"When we came in. Remember? Those flashing lights?"

"Right," Fleming said. "Do you suppose someone is holed up in the station?"

"We'll find out right now," Howard said grimly. He took a determined bite of his apple as Fleming turned the ship.

When they reached the space station the first thing they saw was the other ship, clinging to the station's polished metal as a spider clings to its web. It was small, a third the size of their ship, and one of its hatches was ajar.

The two men, suited and helmeted, paused in front of the hatch. Fleming seized the hatch in his gloved hands, and pulled it completely open. Cautiously they aimed their flashlights inside, looked, and jerked abruptly back. Then Howard motioned impatiently, and Fleming started in.

There was the body of a man inside, half out of the pilot's chair, frozen forever in that unstable position. His face was fleshed enough to show his death agony, but the skin had been eaten bone deep in spots by some disease.

Piled high in the rear of the ship were dozens of wooden cases. Fleming broke one open and flashed his light inside.

"Food," Howard said.

"Must have tried to hide in the space station," Fleming said.

"Looks that way. He never made it." They left the ship quickly, a little disgusted. Skeletons were acceptable; they were self-contained entities in themselves. But this corpse was too eloquently dead.

"So who turned on the lights?" Fleming asked, on the surface of the station.

"Perhaps they were on automatic relay," Howard said doubtfully. "There couldn't be any survivors."

They walked across the surface of the station, and found the entrance.

"Shall we?" asked Fleming.

"Why bother?" Howard said quickly. "The race is dead. We might as well go back and file our claim."

"If there's even one survivor in there," Fleming reminded him, "the planet's his by law."

Howard nodded unwillingly. It would be too bad to make the long, expensive trip back to Earth, return with their surveying teams, and find someone cozily keeping house in the space station. It would be different if survivors were hiding on the planet. Legally, they would still have a valid claim. But a man in the space station, which they had neglected to examine—

"I suppose we must," Howard said, and opened the hatch.

Within, they were in total darkness. Howard turned his flashlight on Fleming. In its yellow glow, Fleming's face was completely shadowless, stylized like a primitive mask. Howard blinked, a little frightened at what he saw, for at that moment, Fleming's face was completely depersonalized.

"Air's breathable," Fleming said, and immediately regained his personality.

Howard pushed back his helmet and turned up the light. The sheer mass of the walls seemed to crush in on him. He groped in his pocket, found a radish, and popped it in his mouth for morale.

They started forward.

For half an hour they walked along a narrow, winding corridor, their flashlights pushing the darkness ahead of them. The metal floor, which had seemed so stable, began to creak and groan from hidden stresses, setting Howard's nerves on edge. Fleming seemed unaffected.

"This place must have been a bombing station," he remarked after a while.

"I suppose so."

"Simply tons of metal here," Fleming said conversationally, tapping one of the walls. "I suppose we'll have to sell it for junk, unless we can salvage some of the machinery."

"The price of scrap metal—" Howard began. But at that instant a section of floor opened directly under Fleming's feet. Fleming plunged out of sight so quickly that he didn't have a chance to scream, and the section of floor slammed back into place.

Howard staggered back, as though physically struck. His flashlight seemed to blaze maniacally for a moment, then fade. Howard stood perfectly still, his hands raised, his mind caught in the timelessness of shock.

The shock wave receded slowly, leaving Howard with a dull, pounding headache. "—is not particularly good just now," he said inanely, finishing his sentence, wishing that nothing had happened.

He stepped close to the section of floor and called, "Fleming."

There was no answer. A shudder passed over his body. He shouted, "Fleming!" at the top of his lungs, leaning over the sealed floor. He straightened up, his head pounding painfully, took a deep breath, turned, and trotted back to the entrance. He did not allow himself to think.

The entrance, however, was sealed, and its fused edges were still hot. Howard examined it with every appearance

of interest. He touched it, tapped it, kicked it. Then he became aware of the darkness pressing against him. He whirled, perspiration pouring down his face.

"Who's there?" he shouted down the corridor. "Fleming! Can you hear me?"

There was no answer.

He shouted, "Who did this? Why did you flash the station lights? What did you do to Fleming?" He listened for a moment, then went on, sobbing for breath. "Unseal the entrance! I'll go, and I won't tell anyone!"

He waited, shining his light down the corridor, wondering what lay behind the darkness. Finally he screamed, "Why don't you open a trapdoor under *me?*"

He lay back against the wall, panting. No trapdoor opened. Perhaps, he thought, no trapdoor will. The thought gave him a moment's courage. Sternly he told himself that there had to be another way out. He walked back up the corridor.

An hour later he was still walking, his flashlight stabbing ahead, and darkness creeping at his back. He had himself under control now, and his headache had subsided to a dull ache. He had begun to reason again.

The lights could have been on automatic circuit. Perhaps the trapdoor had been automatic, too. As for the self-sealing entrance—that could be a precaution in time of war, to make sure that no enemy agent could sneak in.

He knew that his reasoning wasn't too sound, but it was the best he could do. The entire situation was inexplicable. That corpse in the spaceship, the beautiful dead planet—there was a relationship, somewhere. If only he could discover where.

"Howard," a voice said.

Howard jumped back convulsively, as though he had touched a high-tension wire. Immediately his headache resumed.

"It's me," the voice said. "Fleming."

Howard flashed his light wildly in all directions. "Where? Where are you?"

"About two hundred feet down, as well as I can judge," Fleming said, his voice floating harshly down the corridor. "The audio hookup isn't very good, but it's the best I can do."

Howard sat down in the corridor, because his legs refused to hold him up. He was relieved, however. There was something sane about Fleming being two hundred feet down, something very human and understandable about an imperfect audio hookup.

"Can you get up? How can I help you?"

"You can't," Fleming said, and there was a crackle of static which Howard thought was a chuckle. "I don't seem to have much body left."

"But where *is* your body?" Howard insisted seriously.

"Gone, smashed in the fall. There's just enough left of me to hook into circuit."

"I see," said Howard, feeling strangely light-headed. "You're now just a brain, a pure intelligence."

"Oh, there's a little more to me than that," Fleming said. "As much as the machine needs."

Howard started to giggle nervously, for he had an image of Fleming's gray brain swimming in a pool of crystal water. He stopped himself, and said, "The machine? What machine?"

"The space station. I imagine it's the most intricate machine ever built. It flashed the lights and opened the door."

"But why?"

"I expect to find out," Fleming said. "I'm a part of it now. Or perhaps it's a part of me. Anyhow, it needed me, because it's not really intelligent. I supply that."

"You? But the machine couldn't know you were coming!"

"I don't mean me, specifically. The man outside, in the ship, he was probably the real operator. But I'll do. We'll finish the builder's plans."

Howard calmed himself with an effort. He couldn't think any more right now. His only concern was to get out of the station, back to his ship. To do this, he had Fleming to work with; but a new, unpredictable Fleming. He sounded human enough—but was he?"

"Fleming," Howard said tentatively.

"Yes, old man?"

That was encouraging. "Can you get me out of here?"

"I think so," Fleming's voice said. "I'll try."

"I'll come back with neurosurgeons," Howard assured him. "You'll be all right."

"Don't worry about me," Fleming said. "I'm all right now."

Howard lost count of the hours he walked. One narrow corridor followed another, and dissolved into still more corridors. He grew tired, and his legs began to stiffen. As he walked, he ate. There were sandwiches in his knapsack, and he munched on them mechanically, for strength.

"Fleming," he called finally, stopping to rest.

After a long pause he heard a barely recognizable sound, like metal grating against metal.

"How much longer?"

"Not much longer," the grating, metallic voice said. "Tired?"

"Yes."

"I will do what I can."

Fleming's voice was frightening, but silence was even more frightening. As Howard listened, he heard an engine, deep in the heart of the station, spurt into life.

"Fleming?"

"Yes?"

"What is all this? Is it a bomb station?"

"No. I do not know the purpose of the machine yet. I am still not entirely integrated."

"But it does have a purpose?"

"Yes!" The metallic voice grated so loud that Howard winced. "I possess a beautifully functional interlocking apparatus. In temperature control alone I am capable of a range of hundreds of degrees in a microsecond, to say nothing of my chemical mixing stores, power sources, and all the rest. And, of course, my purpose."

Howard didn't like the answer. It sounded as though Fleming were identifying with the machine, merging his personality with that of the space station. He forced himself to ask. "Why don't you know what it's for yet?"

"A vital component is missing," Fleming said, after a pause. "An indispensable matrix. Besides, I do not have full control yet."

More engines began to throb into life, and the walls vibrated with the sound. Howard could feel the floor tremble under him. The station seemed to be waking up, stretching, gathering its wits. He felt as though he were in the stomach of some giant sea monster.

Howard walked for several more hours, and he left behind him a trail of apple cores, orange peels, fatty bits of meat, an empty canteen, and a piece of waxed paper. He was eating constantly now, compulsively, and his hunger was dull and constant. While he ate he felt safe, for eating belonged with the space ship, and Earth.

A section of wall slid back suddenly. Howard moved away from it.

"Go in," a voice, which he tentatively identified as Fleming's said.

"Why? What is it?" He turned his flashlight into the hole, and saw a continuous moving strip of floor disappearing into the darkness.

"You are tired," the voice like Fleming's said. "This way is faster."

Howard wanted to run, but there was no place to go. He had to trust Fleming, or brave the darkness on either side of his flashlight.

"Go in."

Obediently Howard climbed in, and sat down on the moving track. Ahead, all he could see was darkness. He lay back.

"Do you know what the station is for yet?" he asked the darkness.

"Soon," a voice answered. "We will not fail them."

Howard didn't dare ask who it was Fleming wouldn't fail. He closed his eyes and let the darkness close around him.

The ride continued for a long time. Howard's flashlight was clamped under his arm, and its beam went straight up, reflecting against the polished metal ceiling. He munched automatically on a piece of biscuit, not tasting it, hardly aware that it was in his mouth.

Around him, the machine seemed to be talking, and it was a language he didn't understand. He heard the labored creak of moving parts, protesting as they rubbed against each other. Then there came the liquid squirt of oil, and the pacified parts moved silently, perfectly. Engines squeaked and protested. They hesitated, coughing, then hummed pleasantly into life, And continually, through the other sounds, came the click-clack of circuits, changing, rearranging themselves, adjusting.

But what did it mean? Lying back, his eyes closed, Howard did not know. His only touch with reality was the biscuit he had been chewing, and soon that was gone, and only a nightmare was left in its place.

He saw the skeletons, marching across the planet, all the billions in sober lines, moving through the deserted cities, across the fat black fields, and out into space. They paraded past the dead pilot in his little spaceship, and the corpse stared at them enviously. Let me join you now, he asked, but the skeletons shook their heads pityingly, for the pilot is still burdened with flesh. When will the flesh slough away, when will he be free of its burden, asked the corpse, but the skeletons only shook their heads. When? When the machine is ready, its purpose learned. Then the skeleton billions will be redeemed, and the corpse freed of his flesh. Through his ruined lips the corpse pleads to be taken now. But the skeletons perceive only his flesh, and his flesh cannot abandon the food piled high in the ship. Sadly they march on, and

the pilot waits within the ship, waiting for his flesh to melt away.

"Yes!"

Howard awakened with a start, and looked around. No skeletons, no corpse. Only the walls of the machine, close around him. He dug into his pockets, but all the food was gone. His fingers scratched up some crumbs, and he put them on his tongue.

"Yes!"

He *had* heard a voice! "What is it?" he asked.

"I know," the voice said triumphantly.

"Know? Know what?"

"My purpose!"

Howard jumped to his feet, flashing his light around. The sound of the metallic voice echoed around him, and he was filled with a nameless dread. It seemed horrible, suddenly, that the machine should know its purpose.

"What is your purpose?" he asked, very softly.

In answer, a brilliant light flashed on, drowning out the feeble beam of his flashlight. Howard shut his eyes and stepped backwards, almost falling.

The strip was motionless. Howard opened his eyes and found himself in a great brilliantly lighted room. Looking around, he saw that it was completely paneled with mirrors.

A hundred Howards looked at him, and he stared back. Then he whirled around.

There was no exit. But the mirrored Howards did not whirl with him. They stood silently.

Howard lifted his right hand. The other Howards kept theirs at their sides. There were no mirrors.

The hundred Howards began to walk forward, toward the center of the room. They were unsteady on their feet, and no intelligence showed in their dull eyes. The original Howard gasped, and threw his flashlight at them. It clattered along the floor.

Instantaneously, a complete thought formed in his mind. This was the machine's purpose. Its builders had foreseen the death of their species. So they constructed the machine in space. Its purpose—to create humans, to populate the planet. It needed an operator, of course, and the real operator never reached it. And it needed a matrix . . .

But these prototype Howards were obviously without intelligence. They milled around the room, moving automatically, barely able to control their limbs. And the original Howard discovered, almost as soon as the thought was born, that he was terribly wrong.

The ceiling opened up. Giant hooks descended, knives glistening with steam slid down. The walls opened, showing gigantic wheels and gears, blazing furnaces, frosty white surfaces. More and more Howards marched into the room, and the great knives and hooks cut into them, dragging Howard's brothers toward the open walls.

Not one of them screamed except the original Howard.

"Fleming!" he shrieked. "Not *me*. Not *me*. Fleming!"

Now it all added up; the space station, built at a time when war was decimating the planet. The operator, who had reached the machine only to die before he could enter. And his cargo of food . . . which, as operator, he would never have eaten.

Of course! The population of the planet had been nine or ten billion! Starvation must have driven them to this final war. And all the time the builders of the machine fought against time and disease, trying to save their race . . .

But couldn't Fleming see that *he* was the wrong matrix?

The Fleming-machine could not, for Howard fulfilled all the conditions. The last thing Howard saw was the sterile surface of a knife flashing toward him.

And the Fleming-machine processed the milling Howards, cut and sliced them, deep-froze and packaged them neatly, into great stacks of fried Howard, roast Howard, Howard with cream sauce, Howard with brown sauce, three-minute boiled Howard, Howard on the half-shell, Howard with pilaf, and especially Howard salad.

The food-duplication process was a success! The war could end, because now there was more than enough food for everyone. Food! Food! Food for the starving billions on Paradise II!

DOUBLE INDEMNITY

EVERETT BARTHOLD didn't take out a life insurance policy casually. First he read up on the subject, with special attention to Breach of Contract, Willful Deceit, Temporal Fraud, and Payment. He checked to find how closely insurance companies investigated before paying a claim. And he acquired a considerable degree of knowledge on Double Indemnity, a subject which interested him acutely.

When this preliminary work was done, he looked for an insurance company which would suit his needs. He decided, finally, upon the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation, with its main office in Hartford, Present Time. Inter-Temporal had branch offices in the New York of 1959, Rome, 1530, and Constantinople, 1126. Thus they offered full temporal coverage. This was important to Barthold's plans.

Before applying for his policy, Barthold discussed the plan with his wife. Mavis Barthold was a thin, handsome, restless woman, with a cautious, contrary feline nature.

"It'll never work," she said at once.

"It's foolproof," Barthold told her firmly.

"They'll lock you up and throw away the key."

"Not a chance," Barthold assured her. "It can't miss—if you cooperate."

"That would make me an accessory," said his wife. "No, darling."

"My dear, I seem to remember you expressing a desire for a coat of genuine Martian scart. I believe there are very few in existence."

Mrs. Barthold's eyes glittered. Her husband, with canny accuracy, had hit her weak spot.

"And I thought," Barthold said carelessly, "that you might derive some pleasure from a new Daimler hyper-jet, a Letti Det wardrobe, a string of matched ruumstones, a villa on the Venusian Riviera, a—"

"Enough, darling!" Mrs. Barthold gazed fondly upon her enterprising husband. She had long suspected that within his unprepossessing body beat a stout heart. Barthold was short, beginning to bald, his features ordinary, and his eyes were

mild behind horn-rimmed glasses. But his spirit would have been perfectly at home in a pirate's great-muscled frame.

"Then you're sure it will work?" she asked him.

"Quite sure, if you do what I tell you and restrain your fine talent for overacting."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Barthold, her mind fixed upon the glitter of ruumstones and the sensuous caress of scart fur.

Barthold made his final preparations. He went to a little shop where some things were advertised and other things sold. He left, several thousand dollars poorer, with a small brown suitcase tucked tightly under his arm. The money was untraceable. He had been saving it, in small bills, for several years. And the contents of the brown suitcase were equally untraceable.

He deposited the suitcase in a public storage box, drew a deep breath and presented himself at the offices of the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation.

For half a day, the doctors poked and probed at him. He filled out the forms and was brought, at last, to the office of Mr. Gryns, the regional manager.

Gryns was a large, affable man. He read quickly through Barthold's application, nodding to himself.

"Fine, fine," he said. "Everything seems to be in order. Except for one thing."

"What's that?" Barthold asked, his heart suddenly pounding.

"The question of additional coverage. Would you be interested in fire and theft? Liability? Accident and health? We insure against everything from a musket ball to such trivial but annoying afflictions as the very definitely common cold."

"Oh," said Barthold, his pulse rate subsiding to normal. "No, thank you. At present, I am concerned only with a life insurance policy. My business requires me to travel through time. I wish adequate protection for my wife."

"Of course, sir, absolutely," Gryns said. "Then I believe everything is in order. Do you understand the various conditions that apply to this policy?"

"I think I do," replied Barthold, who had spent months studying the Inter-Temporal standard form.

"The policy runs for the life of the assured," said Mr. Gryns. "And the duration of that life is measured only in subjective physiological time. The policy protects you over a distance of 1000 years on either side of the Present. But no further. The risks are too great."

"I wouldn't dream of going any further," Barthold said.

"And the policy contains the usual double indemnity clause. Do you understand its function and conditions?"

"I believe so," answered Barthold, who knew it word for word.

"All is in order, then. Sign right here. And here. Thank you, sir."

"Thank *you*," said Barthold. And he really meant it.

Barthold returned to his office. He was sales manager for the Alpro Manufacturing Company (Toys for All the Ages). He announced his intention to leave at once on a sales tour of the Past.

"Our sales in time are simply not what they should be," he said. "I'm going back there myself and take a personal hand in the selling."

"Marvelous!" cried Mr. Carlisle, the president of Alpro. "I've been hoping for this for a long time, Everett."

"I know you have, Mr. Carlisle. Well, sir, I came to the decision just recently. Go back there yourself, I decided, and find out what's going on. Went out and made my preparations and now I'm ready to leave."

Mr. Carlisle patted him on the shoulder. "You're the best salesman Alpro ever had, Everett. I'm very glad you decided to go."

"I am, too, Mr. Carlisle."

"Give 'em hell! And by the way—" Mr. Carlisle grinned slyly—"I've got an address in Kansas City, 1895, that you might be interested in. They just don't build 'em that way any more. And in San Francisco, 1840, I know a—"

"No, thank you, sir," Barthold said.

"Strictly business, eh, Everett?"

"Yes, sir," Barthold said, with a virtuous smile. "Strictly business."

Everything was in order now. Barthold went home and packed and gave his wife her last instructions.

"Remember," he told her, "when the time comes, act surprised, but don't simulate a nervous breakdown. Be confused, not psychotic."

"I *know*," she said. "Do you think I'm stupid or something?"

"No, dear. It's just that you *do* have a tendency to wring every bit of emotion out of situations. Too little would be wrong. So would too much."

"Honey," said Mrs. Barthold in a very small voice.

"Yes?"

"Do you suppose I could buy one little ruumstone now? Just one to sort of keep me company until—"

"No! Do you want to give the whole thing away? Damn it all, Mavis—"

"All right. I was only asking. Good luck, darling."

"Thank you, darling."

They kissed.

And Barthold left.

He reclaimed his brown suitcase from the public storage box. Then he took a heli to the main showroom of Temporal Motors. After due consideration, he bought a Class A Unlimited Flipper and paid for it in cash.

"You'll never regret this, sir," said the salesman, removing the price tag from the glittering machine. "Plenty of power in this baby! Double impeller. Full control in all years. No chance of being caught in stasis in a Fipper."

"Fine," Barthold said. "I'll just get in and—"

"Let me help you with those suitcases, sir. You understand that there is a federal tax based upon your temporal mileage?"

"I know," Barthold said, carefully stowing his brown suitcase in the back of the Flipper. "Thanks a lot. I'll just get in and—"

"Right, sir. The time clock is set at zero and will record your jumps. Here is a list of time zones proscribed by the government. Another list is pasted to the dashboard. They include all major war and disaster areas, as well as Paradox Points. There is a federal penalty for entering a proscribed area. Any such entry will show on the time clock."

"I know all this." Barthold suddenly was very nervous. The salesman couldn't suspect, of course. But why was he going on gabbling so about breaches of the law?

"I am required to tell you the regulations," the salesman said cheerfully. "Now, sir, in addition, there is a thousand-year limit on time jumps. No one is allowed beyond that, except with written permission from the State Department."

"A very proper precaution," Barthold said, "and one which my insurance company has already advised me of."

"Then that takes care of everything. Pleasant journey, sir! You'll find your Flipper the perfect vehicle for business or pleasure. Whether your destination is the rocky roads of Mexico, 1932, or the damp tropics of Canada, 2308, your Flipper will see you through."

Barthold smiled woodenly, shook the salesman's hand and entered the Flipper. He closed the door, adjusted his safety belt, started the motor. Leaning forward, teeth set, he calibrated his jump.

Then he punched the send-off switch.

A gray nothingness surrounded him. Barthold had a moment of absolute panic. He fought it down and experienced a thrill of fierce elation.

At last, he was on his way to fortune!

Impenetrable grayness surrounded the Flipper like a faint and endless fog. Barthold thought of the years slipping by, formless and without end, gray world, gray universe . . .

But there was no time for philosophical thoughts. Barthold unlocked the small brown suitcase and removed a sheaf of typed papers. The papers, gathered for him by a temporal investigation agency, contained a complete history of the Barthold family, down to its earliest origins.

He had spent a long time studying that history. His plans required a Barthold. But not just *any* Barthold. He needed a male Barthold, 38 years old, unmarried, out of touch with his family, with no close friends and no important job. If possible, with no job at all.

He needed a Barthold, who, if he suddenly vanished, would never be missed, never searched for.

With those specifications, Barthold had been able to cut thousands of Bartholds out of his list. Most male Bartholds were married by the age of 38. Some hadn't lived that long. Others, single and unattached at 38, had good friends and strong family ties. Some, out of contact with family and friends, were men whose disappearance would be investigated.

After a good deal of culling, Barthold was left with a mere handful. These he would check, in the hope of finding one who suited all his requirements . . .

If such a man existed, he thought, and quickly banished the thought from his mind.

After a while, the grayness dissolved. He looked out and saw that he was on a cobblestone street. An odd, high-sided automobile chugged past him, driven by a man in a straw hat.

He was in New York, 1912.

The first man on his list was Jack Barthold, known to his friends as Bully Jack, a journeyman printer with a wandering eye and a restless foot. Jack had deserted his wife and three children in Cheyenne in 1902, with no intention of returning. For Barthold's purposes, this made him as good as single. Bully Jack had served a hitch with General Pershing, then returned to his trade. He drifted from print shop to print shop, never staying long. Now, at the age of 38, he was working somewhere in New York.

Barthold started at the Battery and began hunting his way through New York's print shops. At the eleventh one, on Water Street, he located his man.

"You want Jack Barthold?" an old master printer asked him. "Sure, he's in the back. Hey, Jack! Fellow to see you!"

Barthold's pulse quickened. A man was coming toward him, out of the dark recesses of the shop. The man approached, scowling.

"I'm Jack Barthold," he said. "Whatcha want?"

Barthold looked at his relative and sadly shook his head. This Barthold obviously would not do.

"Nothing," he said, "nothing at all." He turned quickly and left the shop.

Bully Jack, five foot eight inches tall and weighing two hundred and ninety pounds, scratched his head.

"Now what in hell was all that about?" he asked.

The old master printer shrugged his shoulders.

Everett Barthold returned to his Flipper and reset the controls. A pity, he told himself, but a fat man would never fit into his plans.

His next stop was Memphis, 1869. Dressed in an appropriate costume, Barthold went to the Dixie Belle Hotel and inquired at the desk for Ben Bartholder.

"Well, suh," said the courtly white-haired old man behind the desk, "his key's in, so I reckon he's out. You might find him in the corner saloon with the other trashy carpetbaggers."

Barthold let the insult pass and went to the saloon.

It was early evening, but the gaslights were already blazing. Someone was strumming a banjo and the long mahogany bar was crowded.

"Where could I find Ben Bartholder?" Barthold asked a bartender.

"Ovah theah," the bartender said, "with the other Yankee drummers."

Barthold walked over to a long table at one end of the saloon. It was crowded with flashily dressed men and painted women. The men were obviously Northern salesmen, loud, self-confident, and demanding. The women were Southerners. But that was their business, Barthold decided.

As soon as he reached the table, he spotted his man. There was no mistaking Ben Bartholder.

He looked exactly like Everett Barthold.

And that was the vital characteristic Barthold was looking for.

"Mr. Bartholder," he said, "might I have a word with you in private?"

"Why not?" said Ben Bartholder.

Barthold led the way to a vacant table. His relative sat opposite him, staring intently.

"Sir," said Ben, "there is an uncanny resemblance between us."

"Indeed there is," replied Barthold. "It's part of the reason I'm here."

"And the other part?"

"I'll come to that presently. Would you care for a drink?"

Barthold ordered, noticing that Ben kept his right hand in his lap, out of sight. He wondered if that hand held a derringer. Northerners had to be wary in these Reconstructionist days.

After the drinks were served, Barthold said, "I'll come directly to the point. Would you be interested in acquiring a rather large fortune?"

"What man wouldn't?"

"Even if it involved a long and arduous journey?"

"I've come all the way from Chicago," Ben said. "I'll go farther."

"And if it comes to breaking a few laws?"

"You'll find Ben Bartholder ready for anything, sir, if there's some profit to it. But who are you and what is your proposition?"

"Not here," Barthold said. "Is there some place where we can be assured of privacy?"

"My hotel room."

"Let's go, then."

Both men stood up. Barthold glanced at Ben's right hand and gasped.

Benjamin Bartholder had no right hand.

"Lost it at Vicksburg," explained Ben, seeing Barthold's shocked stare. "It doesn't matter. I'll take on any man in the world with one hand and a stump—and lick him!"

"I'm sure of it," Barthold said a little wildly. "I admire your spirit, sir. Wait here a moment. I—I'll be right back."

Barthold hurried out of the saloon's swinging doors and went directly to his Flipper. A pity, he thought, setting the controls. Benjamin Bartholder would have been perfect.

But a maimed man wouldn't fit into his plan.

The next jump was to Prussia, 1676. With a hypnoed knowledge of German and clothes of suitable shape and

hue, he walked the deserted streets of Konigsberg, looking for Hans Baerthaler.

It was midday, but the streets were strangely, eerily deserted. Barthold walked and finally encountered a monk.

"Baerthaler?" mused the monk. "Oh, you mean old Otto the tailor! He lives now in Ravensburg, good sir."

"That must be the father," Barthold said. "I seek Hans Baerthaler, the son."

"Hans . . . of course!" The monk nodded vigorously, then gave Barthold a quizzical look. "But are you sure that's the man you want?"

"Quite sure," Barthold said. "Could you direct me to him?"

"You can find him at the cathedral," said the monk. "Come, I'm going there myself."

Barthold followed the monk, wondering if his information could be wrong. The Baerthaler he sought wasn't a priest. He was a mercenary soldier who had fought all over Europe. His type would never be found at a cathedral—unless, Barthold thought with a shudder, Baerthaler had unreportedly acquired religion.

Fervently he prayed that this wasn't so. It would ruin everything.

"Here we are, sir," the monk said, stopping in front of a noble, soaring structure. "And there is Hans Baerthaler."

Barthold looked. He saw a man sitting on the cathedral steps, a man dressed all in rags. In front of him was a shapeless old hat and within the hat were two copper coins and a crust of bread.

"A beggar," Barthold grunted disgustedly. Still, perhaps . . .

He looked closer and noticed the blank, vacuous expression in the beggar's eyes, the slack jaw, the twisted, leering lips.

"A great pity," the monk said. "Hans Baerthaler received a head wound fighting against the Swedes at Fehrbellin and never recovered his senses. A terrible pity."

Barthold nodded, looking around at the empty cathedral square, the deserted streets.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

"Why, sir, surely you must know! Everyone has fled Konigsberg except me and him. It is the Black Plague!"

With a shudder, Barthold turned and raced back through the empty streets, to his Flipper, his antibiotics, and to any other year but this one.

With a heavy heart and a sense of impending failure,

Barthold journeyed again down the years, to London, 1595. At Little Boar Taverne near Great Hertford Cross, he made inquiry of one Thomas Barthal.

"And what would ye be wanting Barthal for?" asked the publican, in English so barbarous that Barthold could barely make it out.

"I have business with him," said Barthold in his hypnoed Old English.

"Have you indeed?" The publican glanced up and down at Barthold's ruffed finery. "Have you really now?"

The tavern was a low, noisome place, lighted only by two guttering tallow candles. Its customers, who now gathered around Barthold and pressed close to him, looked like the lowest riffraff. They surrounded him, still gripping their pewter mugs, and Barthold detected, among their rags, the flash of keener metal.

"A nark, eh?"

"What in hell's a nark doing in here?"

"Daft, perhaps."

"Past a doubt, to come alone."

"And asking *us* to give um poor Tom Barthal!"

"We'll give um something, lads!"

"Ay, let's give um!"

The publican watched, grinning, as the ragged crowd advanced on Barthold, their pewter mugs held like maces. They backed him past the leaded windows, against the wall. And only then did Barthold fully realize the danger he faced in this unruly pack of vagabonds.

"I'm no nark!" he cried.

"The hell you say!" The mob pressed forward and a heavy mug crashed against the oak wall near his head.

With a sudden inspiration, Barthold swept off his great plumed hat. "Look at me!"

They stopped, gazing at him open-mouthed.

"The perfect image of Tom Barthal!" one gasped.

"But Tom never said he had a brother," another pointed out.

"We were twins," Barthold said rapidly, "separated at birth. I was raised in Normandy, Aquitaine, and Cornwall. I found out only last month that I had a twin brother. And I'm here to meet him."

It was a perfectly creditable story for 16th century England and the resemblance could not be gainsaid. Barthold was brought to a table and a mug of ale set before him.

"You've come late, lad," an ancient one-eyed beggar told

him. "A fine worker he was and a clever one at prigging a prancer—"

Barthold recognized the old term for horse thief.

"—but they took him at Aylesbury, and tried him with the hookers and the freshwater marines, and found him guilty, worse luck."

"What's his fine?" Barthold asked.

"A severe one," said a stocky rogue. "They're hanging him today at Shrew's Marker!"

Barthold sat very still for a moment. Then he asked, "Does my brother really look like me?"

"The spitting image!" exclaimed the publican. "It's uncanny, man, and a thing to behold. Same looks, same height, same weight—everything the same!"

The others nodded their agreement. And Barthold, so close to success, decided to risk all. He *had* to have Tom Barthal!

"Now listen close to me, lads," he said. "You have no love for the narks or the London law, do you? Well, I'm a rich man in France, a very rich man. Would you like to come there with me and live like barons? Aye, take it easy—I knew you would. Well, we can do it, boys. But we have to bring my brother, too."

"But how?" asked a sturdy tinker. "They're hanging him this day!"

"Aren't you men?" demanded Barthold. "Aren't you armed? Wouldn't you dare strike out for fortune and a life of ease?"

They shouted their assent.

Barthold said, "I thought you'd be keen. You can. All you have to do is follow my instructions."

Only a small crowd had gathered at Shrew's Marker, for it was a small and insignificant hanging. Still, it afforded some amusement and the people cheered lustily as the horse-drawn prisoner's wagon rumbled over the cobbled streets and drew to a halt in front of the gibbet.

"There's Tom," murmured the tinker, at the edge of the crowd. "See him there?"

"I think so," Barthold said. "Let's move in."

He and his fifteen men pushed their way through the crowd, circling the gibbet. The hangman had already mounted the platform, had gazed over the crowd through the eye-slits in his black mask, and was now testing his rope. Two constables led Tom Barthal up the steps, positioned him, reached for the rope . . .

"Are you ready?" the publican asked Barthold. "Hey! Are you ready?"

Barthold was staring, open-mouthed, at the man on the platform. The family resemblance was unmistakable. Tom Barthal looked exactly like him—except for one thing.

Barthal's cheeks and forehead were deeply pitted with smallpox scars.

"Now's the moment for the rush," the publican said. "Are you ready, sir? Sir? *Hey!*"

He whirled and saw a plumed hat duck out of sight into an alley.

He stared to give chase, but stopped abruptly. From the gibbet he heard a hiss, a stifled scream, a sodden thud. When he turned again, the plumed hat was out of sight.

Everett Barthold returned to his Flipper, deeply depressed. A disfigured man would not fit his plan.

In the Flipper, Barthold thought long and seriously. Things were going badly, very badly indeed. He had searched through time, all the way to medieval London, and had found no Barthold he could use. Now he was nearing the thousand-year limit.

He could go no further—

Not legally.

But legality was a matter of proof. He couldn't—he *wouldn't*—turn back now.

There had to be a usable Barthold somewhere in time!

He unlocked the small brown suitcase and took from it a small, heavy machine. He had paid several thousand dollars for it, back in Present Time. Now it was worth a lot more to him.

He set the machine carefully and plugged it into the time clock.

He was now free to go anywhere in time—back to primordial origins, if he wished. The time clock would not register.

He reset the controls, feeling suddenly very lonely. It was a frightening thing to plunge over the thousand-year brink. For a single instant, Barthold considered giving up the entire dubious venture, returning to the security of his own time, his own wife, his own job.

But, steeling himself, he jabbed the send-off button.

He emerged in England, 662, near the ancient stronghold of Maiden Castle. Hiding the Flipper in a thicket, he emerged wearing a simple clothing of coarse linen. He took the road toward Maiden Castle, which he could see in the far distance, upon a rise of land.

A group of soldiers passed him, drawing a cart. Within

the cart, Barthold glimpsed the yellow glow of Baltic amber, red-glazed pottery from Gaul, and even Italian-looking candelabra. Loot, no doubt, Barthold thought, from the sack of some town. He wanted to question the soldiers, but they glared at him fiercely and he was glad to slink by unquestioned.

Next he passed two men, stripped to the waist, chanting in Latin. The man behind was lashing the man in front with a cruel, many-stranded leather whip. And presently they changed positions, with barely the loss of a stroke.

"I beg your pardon, sirs—"

But they wouldn't even look at him.

Barthold continued walking, mopping perspiration from his forehead. After a while, he overtook a cloaked man with a harp slung over one shoulder and a sword over the other.

"Sir," said Barthold, "might you know where I'd find a kinsman of mine, who has journeyed here from Iona? His name is Connor Lough mac Bairthre."

"I do," the man stated.

"Where?" asked Barthold.

"Standing before you," said the man. Immediately he stepped back, clearing his sword from its scabbard and slinging his harp to the grass.

Fascinated, Barthold stared at Bairthre. He saw, beneath the long page-boy hair, an exact and unmistakable likeness of himself.

At last he had found his man!

But his man was acting most unco-operative. Advancing slowly, sword held ready for cut or slash, Bairthre commanded, "Vanish, demon, or I'll carve you like a capon."

"I'm no demon!" Barthold cried. "I'm a kinsman of yours!"

"You lie," Bairthre declared firmly. "I'm a wandering man, true, and a long time away from home. But still I remember every member of my family. You're not one of them. So you must be a demon, taking my face for the purposes of enchantment."

"Wait!" Barthold begged as Bairthre's forearm tensed for the stroke. "Have you ever given a thought to the future?"

"The future?"

"Yes, the future! Centuries from now!"

"I've heard of that strange time, though I'm one who lives for today," Bairthre said, slowly lowering his sword. "We had a stranger in Iona once, called himself a Cornishman when he was sober and a *Life* photographer when he was drunk. Walked around clicking a toy box at things

and muttering to himself. Fill him up with mead and he'd tell you all about times to come."

"That's where I'm from," Barthold said. "I'm a distant kinsman of yours from the future. And I'm here to offer you an enormous fortune!"

Bairthre promptly sheathed his sword. "That's very kind of you, kinsman," he said civilly.

"But, of course, it will call for considerable co-operation on your part."

"I feared as much," Bairthre sighed. "Well, let's hear about it, kinsman."

"Come with me," Barthold said, and led the way to his Flipper.

All the materials were ready in the brown suitcase. He knocked Bairthre out with a palm hypo, since the Irishman was showing signs of nervousness. Then, attaching frontal electrodes to Bairthre's forehead, he hypnoed into him a quick outline of world history, a concise course in English, and in American manners and customs.

This took the better part of two days. Meanwhile, Barthold used the swiftgraft machine he had bought to transfer skin from his fingers to Bairthre's. Now they had the same fingerprints. With normal cell-shedding, the prints would flake off in some months, revealing the original ones, but that wasn't important. They did not have to be permanent.

Then, using a checklist, Barthold added some identifying marks that Bairthre was lacking and removed some they didn't share. An electrolysis job took care of the fact that Barthold was balding and his kinsman hadn't been.

When he was finished, Barthold pumped revitalizer into Bairthre's veins and waited.

In a short while, Bairthre groaned, rubbed his hypno-stuffed head and said in modern English, "Oh, man! What did you hit me with?"

"Don't worry about it," Barthold said. "Let's get down to business."

Briefly he explained his plan for getting rich at the expense of the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation.

"And they'll actually pay?" Bairthre asked.

"They will, if they can't disprove the claim."

"And they will pay *that* much?"

"Yes. I checked beforehand. The compensation for double indemnity is fantastically high."

"That's the part I still don't understand," Bairthre said. "What is this double indemnity?"

"It occurs," Barthold told him, "when a man, traveling into the past, has the misfortune to pass through a mirror-flaw in the temporal structure. It's a very rare occurrence. But when it happens, it's catastrophic. One man has gone into the past, you see. But two perfectly identical men return."

"Oho!" said Bairthre. "So *that's* double indemnity!"

"That's it. Two men, indistinguishable from each other, return from the past. Each feels that his is the true and original identity and that he is the only possible claimant of his property, business, wife and so forth. No coexistence is possible between them. One of them must forfeit all rights, leave his present, his home, wife, business, and go into the past to live. The other remains in his own time, but lives with constant fear, apprehension, guilt."

Barthold paused for breath. "So you see," he continued, "under the circumstances, double indemnity represents a calamity of the first order. Therefore, both parties are compensated accordingly."

"Hmm," said Bairthre, thinking hard. "Has this happened often, this double indemnity?"

"Less than a dozen times in the history of time travel. There are precautions against it, such as staying out of Paradox Points and respecting the thousand-year barrier."

"You traveled more than a thousand years," Bairthre pointed out.

"I accepted the risk and won."

"But, look, if there's so much money in this double indemnity thing, why haven't others tried it?"

Barthold smiled wryly. "It's not as easy as it sounds. I'll tell you about it sometime. But now to business. Are you in this with me?"

"I could be a baron with that money," Bairthre said dreamily. "A king, perhaps, in Ireland! I'm in this with you."

"Fine. Sign this."

"What is it?" Bairthre asked, frowning at the legal-looking document that Barthold had thrust before him.

"It simply states that, upon receiving adequate compensation as set by the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation, you will go at once to a past of your own choosing and there remain, waiving any and all rights to the Present. Sign it as Everett Barthold. I'll fill in the date later."

"But the signature—" Bairthre began to object, then halted and grinned. "Through hypno-learning, I know about hypno-learning and what it can do, including the fact that you didn't have to give me the answers to my questions. As

soon as I asked them, I knew the explanations. The mirror-flaw, too, by the way—that's why you hypnoed me into being left-handed and left-eyed. And, of course, the grafted fingerprints go the opposite way, the same as if you saw them in a mirror."

"Correct," said Barthold. "Any other questions?"

"None I can think of at the moment. I don't even have to compare our signatures. I know they'll be identical, except—" Again he paused and looked angry. "That's a lousy trick! I'll be writing backward!"

Barthold smiled. "Naturally. How else would you be a mirror-image of me? And just in case you decide you like my time better than yours and try to have *me* sent back, remember the precautions I took beforehand. They're good enough to send you to the Prison Planetoid for life."

He handed the document to Bairthre.

"You don't take any chances, do you?" Bairthre said, signing.

"I try to cover all eventualities. It's my home and my present that we're going to and I plan to keep possession. Come on. You need a haircut and a general going-over."

Side by side, the identical-looking men walked to the Flipper.

Mavis Barthold didn't have to worry about overacting. When two Everett Bartholds walked in the front door, wearing identical garments, with the same expression of nervous embarrassment, and when two Everett Bartholds said, "Er, Mavis, this will take a little explaining . . ."

It was just too much. Foreknowledge acted as no armor. She shrieked, threw her arms in the air and fainted.

Later, when her two husbands had revived her, she regained some composure. "You did it, Everett!" she said. "Everett?"

"That's me," said Barthold. "Meet my kinsman, Connor Lough mac Bairthre."

"It's unbelievable!" cried Mrs. Barthold.

"Then we look alike?" her husband asked.

"Exactly alike. Just exactly!"

"From now on," said Barthold, "think of us both as Everett Barthold. The insurance investigators will be watching you. Remember—either of us, or both, could be your husband. Treat us exactly alike."

"As you wish, my dear," Mavis said demurely.

"Except, of course, for the matter of—I mean except

in the area of—of—damn it all, Mavis, can't you really tell which one of us is me?"

"Of course I can, dear," Mavis said. "A wife always knows her husband." And she gave Bairthre a quick look, which he returned with interest.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Barthold. "Now I must contact the insurance company." He hurried into the other room.

"So you're a relative of my husband," Mavis said to Bairthre. "How alike you look!"

"But I'm really quite different," Bairthre assured her.

"Are you? You look so like him! I wonder if you really can be different."

"I'll prove it to you."

"How?"

"By singing you a song of ancient Ireland," Bairthre said, and proceeded at once in a fine, high tenor voice.

It wasn't quite what Mavis had in mind. But she realized that anyone so like her husband would have to be obtuse about some things.

And from the other room, she could hear Barthold saying, "Hello, Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation? Mr. Gryns, please. Mr. Gryns? This is Everett Barthold. Something rather unfortunate seems to have happened . . ."

There was consternation at the offices of the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation, and confusion, and dismay, and a swift telephoning of underwriters, when two Everett Bartholds walked in, with identical nervous little smiles.

"First case of its kind in fifteen years," said Mr. Gryns. "Oh, Lord! You will submit, of course, to a full examination?"

"Of course," said Barthold.

"Of course," said Barthold.

The doctors poked and probed them. They found differences, which they carefully listed with long Latin terms. But all the differences were within the normal variation range for temporal identicals and no amount of juggling on paper could change that. So the company psychiatrists took over.

Both men responded to all questions with careful slowness. Bairthre kept his wits about him and his nerve intact. Using his hynoed knowledge of Barthold, he answered the questions slowly but well, exactly as did Barthold.

Inter-Temporal engineers checked the time clock in the Flipper. They dismantled it and put it back together again. They examined the controls, set for Present, 1912, 1869, 1676, and 1595. 662 had also been punched—illegally—but

the time clock showed that it had not been activated. Barthold explained that he had hit the control accidentally and thought it best to leave it alone.

It was suspicious, but not actionable.

A lot of power had been used, the engineers pointed out. But the time clock showed stops only to 1595. They brought the time clock back to the lab for further investigation.

The engineers then went over the interior of the Flipper inch by inch, but could find nothing incriminating. Barthold had taken the precaution of throwing the brown suitcase and its contents into the English Channel before leaving the year 662.

Mr. Gryns offered a settlement, which the two Bartholds turned down. He offered two more, which were refused. And, finally, he admitted defeat.

The last conference was held in Gryns's office. The two Bartholds sat on either side of Gryns's desk, looking slightly bored with the entire business. Gryns looked like a man whose neat and predictable world has been irrevocably upset.

"I just can't understand it," he said. "In the years you traveled in, sirs, the odds against a time flaw are something like a million to one!"

"I guess we're that one," said Barthold, and Bairthre nodded.

"But somehow it just doesn't seem—well, what's done is done. Have you gentlemen decided the question of your coexistence?"

Barthold handed Gryns the paper that Bairthre had signed in 662. *"He* is going to leave, immediately upon receipt of his compensation."

"Is this satisfactory to you, sir?" Gryns asked Bairthre.

"Sure," said Bairthre. "I don't like it here anyhow."

"Sir?"

"I mean," Bairthre said hastily, "what I mean is, I've always wanted to get away, you know, secret desire, live in some quiet spot, nature, simple people, all that . . ."

"I see," Mr. Gryns said dubiously. "And do you feel that way, sir?" he asked, turning to Barthold.

"Certainly," Barthold asserted. "I have the same secret desires he has. But one of us has to stay—sense of duty, you know—and I've agreed to remain."

"I see," Gryns said. But his tone made it clear that he didn't see at all. "Hah. Well. Your checks are being processed now, gentlemen. A purely mechanical procedure.

They can be picked up tomorrow morning—always assuming that no proofs of fraud are presented to us before then."

The atmosphere was suddenly icy. The two Bartholds said good-by to Mr. Gryns and left very quickly.

They rode the elevator down in silence. Outside the building, Bairthre said, "Sorry about that slip about not liking it here."

"Shut up!"

"Huh?"

Barthold seized Bairthre by the arm and dragged him into an automatic heli, taking care not to choose the first empty one he saw.

He punched for Westchester, then looked back to see if they were being followed. When he was certain they were not, he checked the interior of the heli for camera or recording devices. At last he turned to speak to Bairthre.

"You utter damned fool! That boner could have cost us a fortune!"

"I've been doing the best I can," Bairthre said sullenly. "What's wrong now? Oh, you mean they *suspect.*"

"That's what's wrong! Gryns is undoubtedly having us followed. If they can find anything—anything at all to upset our claim—it could mean the Prison Planetoid."

"We'll have to watch our steps," said Bairthre soberly.

"I'm glad you realize it," Barthold said.

They dined quietly in a Westchester restaurant and had several drinks. This put them in a better frame of mind. They were feeling almost happy when they returned to Barthold's house and sent the heli back to the city.

"We will sit and play cards tonight," said Barthold, "and talk, and drink coffee, and behave as though we both were Barthold. In the morning, I'll go collect our checks."

"Good enough," Bairthre agreed. "I'll be glad to get back. I don't see how you can stand it with iron and stone all around you. Ireland, man! A king in Ireland, that's what I'll be!"

"Don't talk about it now." Barthold opened the door and they entered.

"Good evening, dear," Mavis said, looking at a point exactly midway between them.

"I thought you said you knew me," Barthold commented sourly.

"Of course I do, darling," Mavis said, turning to him with a bright smile. "I just didn't want to insult poor Mr. Bairthre."

"Thank you, kind lady," said Bairthre. "Perhaps I'll sing you another song of ancient Ireland later."

"That would be lovely, I'm sure," Mavis said. "A man telephoned you, dear. He'll call later. Honey, I've been looking at ads for scart fur. The Polar Martian Scart is a bit more expensive than plain Canal Martian Scart, but—"

"A man called?" Barthold asked. "Who?"

"He didn't say. Anyhow, it wears much better and the fur has that iridescent sheen that only—"

"Mavis! What did he want?"

"It was something about the double indemnity claim," she said. "But that's all settled, isn't it?"

"It is not settled until I have the check in my hand," Barthold told her. "Now tell me exactly what he said."

"Well, he told me he was calling about your so-called claim on the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation—"

" 'So-called?' Did he say 'so-called'?"

"Those were his exact words. So-called claim on the Inter-Temporal Insurance Corporation. He said he had to speak to you immediately, before morning."

Barthold face had turned gray. "Did he say he'd phone back?"

"He said he'd call in person."

"What is it?" Bairthre asked. "What does it mean? Of course—an insurance investigator!"

"That's right," Barthold said. "He must have found something."

"But what?"

"How should I know? Let me think!"

At that moment, the doorbell rang. The three Bartholds looked at each other dumbly.

The doorbell rang again. "Open up, Barthold!" a voice called. "Don't try to duck me!"

"Can we kill him?" Bairthre asked.

"Too complicated," said Barthold, after a little thought. "Come on! Out the back way!"

"But why?"

"The Flipper's parked there. We're going into the past! Don't you see? If he had proof, he'd have given it to the insurance people already. So he only suspects. He probably thinks he can trip us up with questions. If we can keep away from him until morning, we're safe!"

"What about me?" Mavis quavered.

"Stall him," Barthold said, dragging Bairthre out the back door and into the Flipper. The doorbell was jangling in-

sistently as Barthold slammed the Flipper's door and turned to the controls.

Then he realized that the Inter-Temporal engineers had not returned his time clock.

He was lost, lost. Without the time clock, he couldn't take the Flipper anywhere. For an instant, he was in a complete state of panic. Then he regained control of himself and tried to think the problem through.

His controls were still set for Present, 1912, 1869, 1676, 1595 and 662. Therefore, even without the time clock, he could activate any of those dates manually. Flying without a time clock was a federal offense, but to hell with that.

Quickly he stabbed 1912 and worked the controls. Outside, he heard his wife shrieking. Heavy footsteps were pounding through his house.

"Stop! Stop, you!" the man was shouting.

And then Barthold was surrounded by a filmy, never-ending grayness as the Flipper speeded down the years.

Barthold parked the Flipper on the Bowery. He and Bairthre went into a saloon, ordered a nickel beer apiece and worked on the free lunch.

"Damned nosy investigator," Barthold muttered. "Well, we've shaken him now. I'll have to pay a stiff fine for joy-riding a Flipper with no time clock. But I'll be able to afford it."

"It's all moving too fast for me," said Bairthre, downing a great gulp of beer. Then he shook his head and shrugged. "I was just going to ask you how going into the past would help us collect our checks in the morning in your present. But I realize I know the answer."

"Of course. It's the elapsed time that counts. If we can stay hidden in the past for twelve hours or so, we'll arrive in my time twelve hours later than we left. Prevents all sorts of accidents such as arriving just as you depart, or even before. Routine traffic precautions."

Bairthre munched a salami sandwich. "The hypno-learning is a little sketchy about the time trip. Where are we?"

"New York, 1912. A very interesting era."

"I just want to go home. What are those big men in blue?"

"They're policemen," Barthold said. "They seem to be looking for someone."

Two mustached policemen had entered the saloon, followed by an enormously fat man in ink-stained clothes.

"There they are!" shouted Burly Jack Barthold. "Arrest them twins, officers!"

"What is all this?" inquired Everett Barthold.

"That your jalopy outside?" one of the policemen asked.

"Yes, sir, but—"

"That clinches it, then. Man's got a warrant out for you two. Said you'd have a shiny new jalopy. Offering a nice reward, too."

"The guy came straight to me," said Bully Jack. "I told him I'd be real *happy* to help—though I'd rather take a poke at him, the lousy, insinuating, dirty—"

"Officers," Barthold pleaded, "we haven't done anything!"

"Then you got nothing to fear. Come along quiet now."

Barthold plunged suddenly past the policemen, shoved Bully Jack in the face and was in the street. Bairthre, who had been considering the same thing, stomped hard on one policeman's foot, jabbed another in the stomach, rammed Bully Jack out of his way and followed on Barthold's heels.

They leaped into the Flipper and Barthold jabbed for 1869.

They concealed the Flipper as well as they could, in a back street livery stable, and walked to a little park nearby. They opened their shirts to the warm Memphis sunlight and lay back on the grass.

"That investigator must have a supercharged time job," Barthold said. "That's why he's reaching our stops before us."

"How does he know where we're going?" Bairthre asked.

"Our stops are a matter of company record. He knows we haven't got a time clock, so these are the only places we can reach."

"Then we aren't safe here," said Bairthre. "He's probably looking for us."

"Probably he is," Barthold said wearily. "But he hasn't caught us yet. Just a few more hours and we're safe! It'll be morning in the Present and the check will have gone through."

"Is that a fact, gentlemen?" a suave voice inquired.

Barthold looked up and saw Ben Bartholder standing before him, a small derringer balanced in his good left hand.

"So he offered you the reward, too!" Barthold said.

"He did indeed. And a most tempting offer, let me say. But I'm not interested in it."

"You're not?" Bairthre said.

"No. I'm interested in only one thing. I want to know *which of you walkèd out on me last night in the saloon.*"

Barthold and Bairthre stared at each other, then back at Ben Bartholder.

"I want that one," Bartholder said. "Nobody insults Ben Bartholder. Even with one hand, I'm as good a man as any! I want that man. The other can go."

Barthold and Bairthre stood up. Bartholder stepped back in order to cover them both.

"Which is it, gents? I don't possess a whole lot of patience."

He stood before them, weaving slightly, looking as mean and efficient as a rattlesnake. Barthold decided that the derringer was too far away for a rush. It probably had a hair-trigger, anyhow.

"Speak up!" Bartholder said sharply. "Which of you is it?"

Thinking desperately, Barthold wondered why Ben Bartholder hadn't fired yet, why he hadn't simply killed them both.

Then he figured it out and immediately knew his only course of action.

"Everett," he said.

"Yes, Everett?" said Bairthre.

"We're going to turn around together now and walk back to the Flipper."

"But the gun—"

"He won't shoot. Are you with me?"

"With you," Bairthre said through clenched teeth.

They turned like soldiers in a march, and began to pace slowly back toward the livery stable.

"Stop!" Ben Bartholder cried. "Stop or I'll shoot you both!"

"No, you won't!" Barthold shouted back. They were in the street now, approaching the livery stable.

"No? You think I don't dare?"

"It isn't that," Barthold said, walking toward the Flipper. "You're just not the type to shoot down a perfectly innocent man. And one of us is innocent!"

Slowly, carefully, Bairthre opened the Flipper's door.

"I don't care!" Bartholder yelled. "Which one? Speak up, you miserable coward! Which one? I'll give you a fair fight. Speak up or I'll shoot you both here and now!"

"And what would the boys say?" Barthold scoffed. "They'd say that the one-handed man lost his nerve and killed two unarmed strangers!"

Ben Bartholder's iron gun hand sagged.

"Quick, get in," Barthold whispered.

They scrambled in and slammed the door. Bartholder put the derringer away.

"All right, mister," Ben Bartholder said. "You been here twice and I think you'll be here a third time. I'll wait around. The next time I'll get you."

He turned and walked away.

They had to get out of Memphis. But where could they

go? Barthold wouldn't consider Konigsberg, 1676, and the Black Death. London, 1595, was filled with Tom Barthal's criminal friends, any of whom would cheerfully cut Barthold's throat for treachery.

"We'll go all the way back," Bairthre said. "To Maiden's Castle."

"And if he comes there?"

"He won't. It's against the law to go past the thousand-year limit. And would an insurance man break the law?"

"He might not," Barthold said thoughtfully. "He just might not. It's worth a try."

And again he activated the Flipper.

They slept in an open field that night, a mile from the Fortress of Maiden's Castle. They stayed beside the Flipper and took turns at sentry duty. And finally the sun rose, warm and yellow, above the green fields.

"He didn't come," Bairthre said.

"What?" Barthold asked, waking with a start.

"Snap out of it, man! We're safe. Is it morning yet in your Present?"

"It's morning," Barthold said, rubbing his eyes.

"Then we've won and I'll be a king in Ireland!"

"Yes, we've won," Barthold said. "Victory at last is—damn!"

"What's the matter?"

"That investigator! Look over there!"

Bairthre stared across the fields, muttering, "I don't see a thing. Are you sure—"

Barthold struck him across the back of the skull with a stone. He had picked it up during the night and saved it for this purpose.

He bent over and felt Bairthre's pulse. The Irishman still lived, but would be unconscious for a few hours. When he recovered, he would be alone and kingdomless.

Too bad, Barthold thought. But under the circumstances, it would be risky to bring Bairthre back with him. How much easier it would be to walk up to Inter-Temporal himself and collect a check for Everett Barthold. Then return in half an hour and collect another check for Everett Barthold.

And how much more profitable it would be!

He climbed into the Flipper and looked once more at his unconscious kinsman. What a shame, he thought, that he will never be a king in Ireland.

But then, he thought, history would probably find it confusing if he had succeeded.

He activated the controls, headed straight for the Present.

He reappeared in the back yard of his house. Quickly he bounded up the steps and pounded on the door.

"Who's there?" Mavis called.

"Me!" Barthold shouted. "It's all right, Mavis—everything has worked out fine!"

"Who?" Mavis opened the door, stared at him, and let out a shriek.

"Calm down," Barthold said. "I know it's been a strain, but it's all over now. I'm going for the check and then we'll—"

He stopped. A man had just appeared in the doorway beside Mavis. He was a short man, beginning to bald, his features ordinary, and his eyes were mild behind horn-rimmed glasses.

It was himself.

"Oh, no!" Barthold groaned.

"Oh, yes," his double said. "One cannot venture beyond the thousand-year barrier with impunity, Everett. Sometimes there *is* a sound reason for a law. I am your time-identical."

Barthold stared at the Barthold in the doorway. He said, "I was chased—"

"By me," his double told him. "In disguise, of course, since you have a few enemies in time. You imbecile, why did you run?"

"I thought you were an investigator. Why were you chasing me?"

"For one reason and one reason only."

"What was that?"

"We could have been rich beyond our wildest dreams," his double said, "if only you hadn't been so guilty and frightened! The three of us—you, Bairthre and me—could have gone to Inter-Temporal and claimed *triple indemnity!*"

"Triple indemnity!" Barthold breathed. "I never thought of it."

"The sum would have been staggering. It would have been infinitely more than for double indemnity. You disgust me."

"Well," Barthold said, "what's done is done. At least we can collect for double indemnity, then decide—"

"I collected both checks and signed the release forms for you. You weren't here, you know."

"In that case, I'd like my share."

"Don't be ridiculous," his double told him.

"But it's mine! I'll go to Inter-Temporal and tell them—"

"They won't listen. I've waived all your rights. You can't even stay in the Present, Everett."

"Don't do this to me!" Barthold begged.

"Why not? Look at what you did to Bairthre."

"Damn it, *you* can't judge me!" Barthold cried. *"You're me!"*

"Who else is there to judge you except yourself?" his double asked him.

Barthold couldn't cope with that. He turned to Mavis.

"Darling," he said, "you always told me you'd know your own husband. Don't you know me now?"

Mavis moved back into the house. As she went, Barthold noticed the flash of ruumstones around her neck and asked no more.

Barthold and Barthold stood face to face. The double raised his arm. A police heli, hovering low, dropped to the ground. Three policemen piled out.

"This is what I was afraid of, officers," the double said. "My double collected his check this morning, as you know. He waived his rights and went into the past. I was afraid he'd return and try for more."

"He won't bother you again, sir," a policeman said. He turned to Barthold. "You! Climb back in that Flipper and get out of the Present. The next time we see you, we shoot!"

Barthold knew when he was beaten. Very humbly, he said, "I'll gladly go, officers. But my Flipper needs repairs. It doesn't have a time clock."

"You should have thought about that before signing the waiver," the policeman said. "Get moving!"

"Please!" Barthold said.

"No," Barthold answered.

No mercy. And Barthold knew that, in his double's place, he would have said exactly the same thing.

He climbed into the Flipper and closed the door. Numbly he contemplated his choices, if they could be called that.

New York, 1912, with its maddening reminders of his own time and with Bully Jack Barthold? Or Memphis, 1869, with Ben Bartholder awaiting his third visit? Or Konigsberg, 1676, with the grinning, vacant face of Hans Baerthaler for company, and the Black Death? Or London, 1595, with Tom Barthal's cutthroat friends searching the streets for him? Or Maiden's Castle, 662, with an angry Connor Lough mac Bairthre waiting to even the score?

It really didn't matter. This time, he thought, let the place pick me.

He closed his eyes and blindly stabbed a button.

HOLDOUT

THE CREW of a space ship must be friends. They must live harmoniously in order to achieve the split-second interaction that becomes necessary from time to time. In space, one mistake is usually enough.

It is axiomatic that even the best ships have their accidents; the mediocre ones don't survive.

Knowing this, it can be understood how Captain Sven felt when, four hours before blastoff, he was told that radioman Forbes would not serve with the new replacement.

Forbes hadn't met the new replacement yet, and didn't want to. Hearing about him was enough. There was nothing personal in this, Forbes explained. His refusal was on purely racial grounds.

"Are you sure of this?" Captain Sven asked, when his chief engineer came to the bridge with the news.

"Absolutely certain, sir," said engineer Hao. He was a small, flat-faced, yellow-skinned man from Canton. "We tried to handle it ourselves. But Forbes wouldn't budge."

Captain Sven sat down heavily in his padded chair. He was deeply shocked. He had considered racial hatred a thing of the remote past. He was as astonished at a real-life example of it as he would have been to encounter a dodo, a moa, or a mosquito.

"Racialism in this day and age!" Sven said. "Really, it's too preposterous. It's like telling me they're burning heretics in the village square, or threatening warfare with cobalt bombs."

"There wasn't a hint of it earlier," said Hao. "It came as a complete surprise."

"You're the oldest man on the ship," Sven said. "Have you tried reasoning him out of this attitude?"

"I've talked to him for hours," Hao said. "I pointed out that for centuries we Chinese hated the Japanese, and vice versa. If we could overcome our antipathy for the sake of the Great Co-operation, why couldn't he?"

"Did it do any good?"

"Not a bit. He said it just wasn't the same thing."

Sven bit off the end of a cigar with a vicious gesture, lighted it, and puffed for a moment. "Well, I'm damned if I'll have anything like this on *my* ship. I'll get another radioman!"

"That won't be too easy, sir," Hao said. "Not here."

Sven frowned thoughtfully. They were on Discaya II, a small outpost planet in the Southern Star Reaches. Here they had unloaded a cargo of machine parts, and taken on the Company-assigned replacement who was the innocent source of all the trouble. Discaya had plenty of trained men, but they were all specialists in hydraulics, mining, and allied fields. The planet's single radio operator was happy where he was, had a wife and children on Discaya, owned a house in a pleasant suburb, and would never consider leaving.

"Ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous," Sven said. "I can't spare Forbes, and I'll not leave the new man behind. It wouldn't be fair. Besides, the Company would probably fire me. And rightly, rightly. A captain should be able to handle trouble aboard his own ship."

Hao nodded glumly.

"Where is this Forbes from?"

"A farm near an isolated village in the mountain country of the Southern United States. Georgia, sir. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"I think so," said Sven, who had taken a course in Regional Charactistics at Uppsala, to better fit himself for the job of captain. "Georgia produces peanuts and hogs."

"And men," Hao added. "Strong, capable men. You'll find Georgians working on all frontiers, out of all proportions to their actual numbers. Their reputation is unexcelled."

"I know all this," Sven grumbled. "And Forbes is an excellent man. But this racialism—"

"Forbes can't be considered typical," Hao said. "He was raised in a small, isolated community, far from the mainstream of American life. Similar communities all over the world develop and cling to strange folkways. I remember a village in Honan where—"

"I still find it hard to believe," Sven said, interrupting what promised to be a long dissertation on Chinese country life. "And there's simply no excuse for it. Every community everywhere has a heritage of some sort of racial feeling. But it's every individual's responsibility to rid himself of that when he enters the mainstream of Terran life. Others have. Why not Forbes? Why must he inflict his problems on us? Wasn't he taught anything about the Great Co-operation?"

Hao shrugged his shoulders. "Would you care to speak to him, Captain?"

"Yes. Wait, I'll speak to Angka first."

The chief engineer left the bridge. Sven remained deep in thought until he heard a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Angka entered. He was cargo foreman, a tall, splendidly proportioned man with skin the color of a ripe plum. He was a full-blooded Negro from Ghana, and a first-class guitar player.

"I assume," Sven said, "you know all about the trouble."

"It's unfortunate, sir," Angka said.

"Unfortunate? It's downright catastrophic! You know the risk involved in taking the ship up in this condition. I'm supposed to blast off in less than three hours. We can't sail without a radioman, and we need the replacement, too."

Angka stood impassively, waiting.

Sven flicked an inch of white ash from his cigar. "Now look, Angka, you must know why I called you here."

"I can guess, sir," Angka said, grinning.

"You're Forbes's best friend. Can't you do something with him?"

"I've tried, Captain, Lord knows I've tried. But you know Georgians."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Good men, sir, but stubborn as mules. Once they've made up their minds, that's it. I've been talking to Forbes for two days about this. I got him drunk last night—strictly in line of duty, sir," Angka added hastily.

"It's all right. Go on."

"And I talked to him like I'd talk to my own son. Reminded him how good the crew got along. All the fun we'd had in all the ports. How good the Co-operation felt. Now look, Jimmy, I said to him, you keep on like this, you kill all that. You don't want that, do you, I asked him. He bawled like a baby, sir."

"But he wouldn't change his mind?"

"Said he *couldn't*. Told me I might as well quit trying. There was one and only one race in this galaxy he wouldn't serve with, and there was no sense talking about it. Said his pappy would spin in his grave if he were to do so."

"Is there any chance he'll change his mind?" Sven asked.

"I'll go on trying, but I don't think there's a chance."

He left. Captain Sven sat, his jaw cradled in one big hand. He glanced again at the ship's chronometer. Less than three hours before blastoff!

He lifted the receiver of the intercom and asked for a direct line to the spacefield tower. When he was in contact with

the officer in charge he said, "I'd like to request permission to stay a few days longer."

"Wish I could grant it, Captain Sven," the officer said. "But we need the pit. We can only handle one interstellar ship at a time here. An ore boat from Calayo is due in five hours. They'll probably be short of fuel."

"They always are," Sven said.

"Tell you what we can do. If it's a serious mechanical difficulty, we could find a couple cranes, lower your ship to horizontal and drag it off the field. Might be quite a while before we could set it up again, though."

"Thanks, but never mind. I'll blast on schedule." He signed off. He couldn't allow his ship to become laid up like that. The Company would have his hide, not a doubt about it.

But there *was* a course of action he could take. An unpleasant one, but necessary. He got to his feet, discarded the dead cigar stump, and marched out of the bridge.

He came to the ship's infirmary. The doctor, in his white coat, was seated with his feet on a desk, reading a three-month-old German medical journal.

"Welcome, Cap. Care for a shot of strictly medicinal brandy?"

"I could use it," Sven said.

The young doctor poured out two healthy doses from a bottle marked *Swamp Fever Culture.*

"Why the label?" Sven asked.

"Discourages the men from sampling. They have to steal the cook's lemon extract." The doctor's name was Yitzhak Vilkin. He was an Israeli, a graduate of the new medical school at Beersheba.

"You know about the Forbes problem?" Sven asked.

"Everybody does."

"I wanted to ask you, in your capacity as medical officer aboard this ship: Have you ever observed any previous indications of racial hatred in Forbes?"

"Not one," Vilkin answered promptly.

"Are you sure?"

"Israelis are good at sensing that sort of thing. I assure you, it caught me completely by surprise. I've had some lengthy interviews with Forbes since, of course."

"Any conclusions?"

"He's honest, capable, straightforward, and slightly simple. He possesses some antiquated attitudes in the form of ancient traditions. The Mountain-Georgians, you know, have a considerable body of such customs. They've been much studied by anthropologists from Samoa and Fiji. Haven't you read

Coming of Age in Georgia? Or *Folkways of Mountain-Georgia?*"

"I don't have time for such things," Sven said. "My time is pretty well occupied running this ship without me having to read up on the individual psychology of the entire crew."

"I suppose so, Cap," the doctor said. "Well, those books are in the ship's library, if you'd care to glance at them. I don't see how I can help you. Re-education takes time. I'm a medical officer anyhow, not a psychologist. The plain fact is this: There is one race that Forbes will not serve with, one race which causes him to enact all his ancient racial hostilities. Your new man, by some mischance, happens to be from that race."

"I'm leaving Forbes behind," Sven said abruptly. "The communications officer can learn how to handle the radio. Forbes can take the next ship back to Georgia."

"I wouldn't recommend that."

"Why not?"

"Forbes is very popular with the crew. They think he's damned unreasonable, but they wouldn't be happy sailing without him."

"*More* disharmony," Sven mused. "Dangerous, very dangerous. But damn it, I can't leave the new man behind. I won't. It isn't fair! Who runs this ship, me or Forbes?"

"A very interesting question," Vilkin observed, and ducked quickly as the irate captain hurled his glass at him.

Captain Sven went to the ship's library, where he glanced over *Coming of Age in Georgia* and *Folkways of Mountain-Georgia.* They didn't seem to help much. He thought for a moment, and glanced at his watch. Two hours to blastoff! He hurried to the Navigation Room.

Within the room was Ks'rat. A native of Venus, Ks'rat was perched on a stool inspecting the auxiliary navigating instruments. He was gripping a sextant in three hands, and was polishing the mirrors with his foot, his most dexterous member. When Sven walked in the Venusian turned orange-brown to show his respect for authority, then returned to his habitual green.

"How's everything?" Sven asked.

"Fine," said Ks'rat. "Except for the Forbes problem, of course." He was using a manual soundbox, since Venusians had no vocal chords. At first, these sound boxes had been harsh and metallic; but the Venusians had modified them until now, the typical Venusian "voice" was a soft, velvety murmur.

"Forbes is what I came to see you about," said Sven.

"You're non-Terran. As a matter of fact, you're non-human. I thought perhaps you could throw a new light on the problem. Something I may have overlooked."

Ks'rat pondered, then turned gray, his "uncertain" color. "I'm afraid I can't help much, Captain Sven. We never had any racial problems on Venus. Although you might consider the *sclarda* situation a parallel—"

"Not really," Sven said. "That was more a religious problem."

"Then I have no further ideas. Have you tried reasoning with the man?"

"Everyone else has."

"You might have better luck, Captain. As an authority symbol, you might tend to supplant the father symbol within him. With that advantage, try to make him aware of the true basis for his emotional reaction."

"There *is* no basis for racial hatred."

"Perhaps not in terms of abstract logic. But in human terms, you might find an answer and a key. Try to discover what Forbes fears. Perhaps if you can put him in better reality-contact with his own motives, he'll come around."

"I'll bear all that in mind," said Sven, with a sarcasm that was lost on the Venusian.

The intercom sounded the captain's signal. It was the first mate. "Captain! Tower wants to know whether you're blasting on schedule."

"I am," Sven said. "Secure the ship." He put down the phone.

Ks'rat turned a bright red. It was the Venusian equivalent of a raised eyebrow.

"I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't," Sven said. "Thanks for your advice. I'm going to talk to Forbes now."

"By the way," Ks'rat said, "of what race is the man?"

"What man?"

"The new man that Forbes won't serve with."

"How the hell should I know?" shouted Sven, his temper suddenly snapping. "Do you think I sit on the bridge inspecting a man's racial background?"

"It might make a difference."

"Why should it? Perhaps it's a Mongolian that Forbes won't serve with, or a Pakistani, or a New Yorker or a Martian. What do I care what race his diseased, impoverished little mind picks on?"

"Good luck, Captain Sven," Ks'rat said as Sven hurried out.

James Forbes saluted when he entered the bridge, though it was not customary aboard Sven's ship. The radioman stood at full attention. He was a tall, slender youth, tow-headed, light-skinned, freckled. Everything about him looked pliant, malleable, complaisant. Everything except his eyes, which were dark blue and very steady.

Sven didn't know how to begin. But Forbes spoke first.

"Sir," he said, "I want you to know I'm mighty well ashamed of myself. You've been a good Captain, sir, the very best, and this has been a happy ship. I feel like a worthless no-account for doing this."

"Then you'll reconsider?" asked Sven, with a faint glimmer of hope.

"I wish I could, I really do. I'd give my right arm for you, Cap'n, or anything else I possess."

"I don't want your right arm. I merely want you to serve with the new man."

"That's the one thing I can't do," Forbes said sadly.

"Why in hell can't you?" Sven roared, forgetting his determination to use psychology.

"You just don't understand us Georgia mountain boys," Forbes said. "That's how my pappy, bless his memory, raised me. That poor little old man would spin in his grave if I went against his dying wish."

Sven stifled a curse and said, "You know the situation that leaves me in, Forbes. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Only one thing to do, sir. Angka and me'll leave the ship. You'll be better off short-handed than with an unCo-operative crew, sir."

"Angka is leaving with you? Wait a minute! Who's *he* prejudiced against?"

"No one, sir. But him and me's been shipmates for close to five years now, ever since we met on the freighter *Stella*. Where one goes, the other goes."

A red light flickered on Sven's control board, indicating the ship's readiness for blastoff. Sven ignored it.

"I can't have both of you leaving the ship," Sven said. "Forbes, why won't you serve with the new man?"

"Racial reasons, sir," Forbes said tightly.

"Now listen closely. You have been serving under me, a Swede. Has that disturbed you?"

"Not at all, sir."

"The medical officer is an Israeli. The navigator is a Venusian. The engineer is Chinese. There are Russians, New Yorkers, Melanasians, Africans, and everything else in this

crew. Men of all races, creeds, and colors. You have served with them."

"Of course I have. From earliest childhood us Mountain-Georgians expect to serve with all different races. It's our heritage. My pappy taught me that. But I will not serve with Blake."

"Who's Blake?"

"The new man, sir."

"Where's he from?" Sven asked wearily.

"Mountain-Georgia."

For a moment, Sven thought he hadn't heard right. He stared at Forbes, who stared nervously back.

"From the mountain country of Georgia?"

"Yes, sir. Not too far, I believe, from where I was born."

"This man Blake, is he white?"

"Of course, sir. White English-Scottish ancestry, same as me."

Sven had the sensation of discovering a new world, a world no civilized man had ever encountered. He was amazed to discover that weirder customs could be found on Earth than anywhere else in the galaxy.

He said to Forbes, "Tell me about the custom."

"I thought *everybody* knew about us Mountain-Georgians, sir. In the section I come from, we leave home at the age of sixteen and we don't come back. Our customs teach us to work with any race, live with any race . . . except our own."

"Oh," said Sven.

"This new man Blake is a white Mountain-Georgian. He should have looked over the roster and not signed for this ship. It's all his fault, really, and if he chooses to overlook the custom, I can't help that."

"But *why* won't you serve with your own kind?" Sven asked.

"No one knows, sir. It's been handed down from father to son for hundreds of years, ever since the Hydrogen War."

Sven stared at him closely, ideas beginning to form. "Forbes, have you ever had any . . . feeling about Negroes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Describe it."

"Well sir, we Mountain-Georgians hold that the Negro is the white man's natural friend. I mean to say, whites can get along fine with Chinese and Martians and such, but there's something special about black and white—"

"Go on," Sven urged.

"Hard to explain it good, sir. It's just that—well, the

qualities of the two seem to mesh, like good gears. There's a special understanding between black and white."

"Did you know," Sven said gently, "that once, long ago, your ancestors felt that the Negro was a lesser human being? That they created laws to keep him from interacting with whites? And that they kept on doing this long after the rest of the world had conquered its prejudices? That they kept on doing it, in fact, right up to the Hydrogen War?"

"That's a lie, sir!" Forbes shouted. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to call you a liar, sir, but it just isn't true. Us Georgians have always—"

"I can prove it to you in history books and anthropological studies. I have several in the ship's library, if you'd care to look!"

"Yankee books!"

"I'll show you Southern books, too. It's true, Forbes, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. Education is a long, slow process. You have a great deal to be proud of in your ancestry."

"*If* this is true," Forbes said, very hesitantly, "then what happened?"

"It's in the anthropology book. You know, don't you, that Georgia was hit during the war by a hydrogen bomb meant for Norfolk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps you didn't know that the bomb fell in the middle of the so-called Black Belt. Many whites were killed. But almost the entire Negro population of that section of Georgia was wiped out."

"I didn't know that."

"Now, you must take my word that there had been race riots before the Hydrogen War, and lynchings, and a lot of bad feeling between white and black. Suddenly the Negroes were gone—dead. This created a considerable feeling of guilt among the whites, particularly in isolated communities. Some of the more superstitious whites believed that they had been spiritually responsible for this wholesale obliteration. And it hit them hard, for they were religious men."

"What would that matter, if they hated the Negroes?"

"They didn't, that's the whole point! They feared intermarriage, economic competition, a change of hierarchy. But they didn't *hate* the Negroes. Quite the contrary. They always maintained, with considerable truth, that they liked the Negroes better than the 'liberal' Northerners did. It set up quite a conflict."

Forbes nodded, thinking hard.

"In an isolated community like yours, it gave rise to the custom of working away from home, with any race except their own. Guilt was at the bottom of it all."

Perspiration rolled down Forbes's freckled cheeks. "I can't believe it," he said.

"Forbes, have I ever lied to you?"

"No, sir."

"Will you believe me, then, when I swear to you that this is true?"

"I—I'll try, Captain Sven."

"Now you know the reason for the custom. Will you work with Blake?"

"I don't know if I can."

"Will you try?"

Forbes bit his lip and squirmed uncomfortably. "Captain, I'll try. I don't know if I can, but I'll try. And I'm doing it for you and the men, not on account of what you said."

"Just try," Sven said. "That's all I ask of you."

Forbes nodded and hurriedly left the bridge. Sven immediately signaled the tower that he was preparing for blast-off.

Down in the crew's quarters, Forbes was introduced to the new man, Blake. The replacement was tall, black-haired, and obviously ill at ease.

"Howdy," said Blake.

"Howdy," said Forbes. Each made a tentative gesture toward a handshake, but didn't follow it through.

"I'm from near Pompey," said Forbes.

"I'm from Almira."

"Practically next door," Forbes said unhappily.

"Yeah, afraid so," Blake said.

They eyed each other in silence. After a long moment, Forbes groaned, "I can't do it, I just can't." He began to walk away.

"Suddenly he stopped, turned and blurted out, "You all white?"

"Can't say as how I am," Blake replied. "I'm one-eighth Cherokee on my mother's side."

"Cherokee, huh?"

"That's right."

"Well, man, why didn't you say so in the first place. Knew a Cherokee from Altahatchie once, name of Tom Little Sitting Bear. Don't suppose you're kin to him?"

"Don't believe so," Blake said. "Never knew no Cherokees, myself."

'Well, it don't make no never-mind. They should a told me in the first place you was a Cherokee. Come on, I'll show you your bunk."

When the incident was reported to Captain Sven, several hours after blastoff, he was completely perplexed. How, he asked himself, could one-eighth Cherokee blood make a man a Cherokee? Wasn't the other seven-eights more indicative?

He decided he didn't understand American Southerners at all.

DAWN INVADER

THERE WERE eleven planets in that system, and Dillon found that the outer ones contained no life whatsoever. The fourth planet from the sun had once been populated, and the third would someday be. But on the second, a blue world with a single moon, intelligent life existed, and to this planet Dillon directed his ship.

He approached stealthily, slipping through the atmosphere under cover of darkness, descending through thick rain clouds, looking much like a cloud himself. He landed with that absolute lack of commotion possible only for an Earthman.

When his ship finally settled it was an hour before dawn, the safe hour, the time when most creatures, no matter what planet has spawned them, are least alert. Or so his father had told him before he left Earth. Invading before dawn was part of the lore of Earth, hard-won knowledge directed solely toward survival on alien planets.

"But all this knowledge is *fallible,*" his father had reminded him. "For it deals with that least predictable of entities, intelligent life." The old man had nodded sententiously as he made that statement.

"Remember, my boy," the old man went on, "you can outwit a meteor, predict an ice age, out-guess a nova. But what, truthfully, can you know about those baffling and constantly changing entities who are possessed of intelligence?"

Not very much, Dillon realized. But he believed in his own youth, fire, and cunning, and he trusted the unique Terran invasion technique. With that special skill, an Earthman could battle his way to the top of any environment, no matter how alien, no matter how hostile.

From the day he was born, Dillon had been taught that life is incessant combat. He had learned that the galaxy is large and unfriendly, made up mostly of incandescent suns and empty space. But sometimes there are planets, and on these planets are races, differing vastly in shape and size, but alike in one respect: their hatred for anything unlike

themselves. No co-operation was possible between these races. For an Earthman to live among them called for the utmost in skill, stamina and cunning. And even then, survival would be impossible without Earth's devastating technique of invasion.

Dillon had been an apt student, eager to face his destiny in the great galaxy. He had enlisted for the Exodus, not waiting to be drafted. And finally, like millions of young men before him, he had been given his own space ship and sent out, leaving small, overcrowded Earth forever behind. He had flown to the limit of his fuel. And now his destiny lay before him.

His ship rested in a clump of jungle near a thatch-roofed village, almost invisible in dense underbrush. He waited, tense behind his controls, until the dawn came up white, with red hints of sunrise in it. But no one came near, no bombs fell, no shells burst. He had to assume that he had landed undetected.

When the planet's yellow sun touched the rim of the horizon, Dillon emerged and sized up his physical surroundings. He sniffed the air, felt the gravity, estimated the sun's spectrum and power, and sadly shook his head. This planet, like most planets in the galaxy, would not support Terran life. He had perhaps an hour in which to complete his invasion.

He touched a button on his instrument panel and walked quickly away. Behind him, his ship dissolved into a gray ash. The ash scattered on the morning breeze and dispersed over the jungle. Now he was committed irrevocably. He moved toward the alien village.

As he approached he saw that the aliens' huts were crude affairs of wood and thatch, a few of hand-hewn stone. They seemed durable and sufficient for the climate. There was no sign of roads—only a single footpath leading into the jungle. There were no power installations, no manufactured articles. This, he decided, was an early civilization, one he should have no difficulty mastering.

Confidently he stepped forward, and almost bumped into an alien.

They stared at each other. The alien was bipedal, considerably taller than an Earthman, with a good cranial capacity. He wore a single striped garment wrapped around his waist. His skin was pigmented a light brown beneath gray fur. He showed no tendency to run.

"Ir tai!" the creature said, sounds which Dillon interpreted

as a cry of surprise. Looking hastily around, he saw that no other villager had discovered him yet. He tensed slightly and leaned forward.

"K'tal tai a—"

Dillon leaped like a great spring unfolding. The alien tried to dodge, but Dillon twisted in mid-air like a cat, and managed to clamp a hand around one of the alien's limbs.

That was all he needed. Now physical contact had been established. The rest should be easy.

For hundreds of years, an exploding birth rate had forced the inhabitants of Earth to migrate in ever-increasing numbers. But not one planet in ten thousand was suitable for human life. Therefore, Earth considered the possibilty of altering alien environments to suit Terran needs, or changing men biologically to suit the new environments. But there was a third method which yielded the greatest returns for the least effort. This was to develop the mind-projecting tendency latent in all intelligent races.

Earth bred for it, concentrated and trained it. With this ability, an Earthman could live on any planet simply by taking over the mind of one of its inhabitants. This done, he had a body tailor-made for its environment, and filled with useful and interesting information. Once an Earthman was established, his love of competition usually carried him to a pre-eminent position in the new world he had invaded.

There was only one slight hitch; an alien usually resented having his mind invaded. And sometimes, he was able to do something about it.

In the first instant of penetration, Dillon sensed, with passionate regret, his own body collapsing, folding in on itself. It would dissolve immediately, leaving no trace. Only he and his host would know an invasion had taken place.

And at the end, only one of them would know.

Now, within the alien mind, Dillon concentrated entirely on the job ahead. Barriers went down one after another as he drove hard toward the center, where the I-am-I existed. When he entered that citadel and succeeded in driving out the ego now occupying it, the body would be his.

Hastily erected defenses dissolved before him. For an instant, Dillon thought that his first wild rush was going to carry him all the way. Then, suddenly, he was directionless, wandering through a gray and featureless no-man's land.

The alien had recovered from his initial shock. Dillon could sense energies slowly growing around him.

Now he was really in for a fight.

A parlay was held in the no-man's land of the alien's mind.

"Who are you?"

"Edward Dillon, from the planet Earth. And you?"

"Arek. We call this planet K'egra. What do you want here, Dillon?"

"A little living space, Arek," Dillon said, grinning. "Can you spare it?"

"Well I'll be damned. . . . Get out of my mind!"

"I can't," Dillon said. "I have no place to go."

"I see," Arek mused. "Tough. But you *are* uninvited. And something tells me you want more than just living room. You want everything, don't you?"

"I must have control," Dillon admitted. "There's no other way. But if you don't struggle, perhaps I can leave a space for you, although it isn't customary."

"It isn't?"

"Of course not," Dillon said. "Different races can't exist together. That's a law of nature. The stronger drives out the weaker. But I might be willing to try it for a while."

"Don't do me any favors," Aerk said, and broke off contact.

The grayness of no-man's land turned solid black. And Dillon, waiting for the coming struggle, felt the first pangs of self-doubt.

Arek was a primitive. He couldn't have any training in mind-combat. Yet he grasped the situation at once, adjusted to it, and was now prepared to deal with it. Probably his efforts would be feeble, but still . . .

What kind of a creature was this?

He was standing on a rocky hillside, surrounded by ragged cliffs. Far ahead was a tall range of misty blue mountains. The sun was in his eyes, blinding and hot. A black speck crawled up the hillside toward him.

Dillon kicked a stone out of his way and waited for the speck to resolve. This was the pattern of mental combat, where thought becomes physical, and ideas are touchable things.

The speck became a K'egran. Suddenly he loomed above Dillon, enormous, glistening with muscle, armed with sword and dagger.

Dillon moved back, avoiding the first stroke. The fight was proceeding in a recognizable—and controllable—pattern. Aliens usually conjured an idealized image of their race, with its attributes magnified and augmented. The figure was invariably fearsome, superhuman, irresistible. But usually, it

had a rather subtle flaw. Dillon decided to gamble on its presence here.

The K'egran lunged ahead. Dillon dodged, dropped to the ground and lashed out with both feet, leaving his body momentarily exposed. The K'egran tried to parry and respond, but too slowly. The blow from Dillon's booted feet caught him powerfully in the stomach.

Exultantly, Dillon bounded forward. The flaw was there! He ran in under the sword, feinted, and, while the K'egran tried to guard, neatly broke his neck with two blows of the edge of his hand.

The K'egran fell, shaking the ground. Dillon watched him die with a certain sympathy. The idealized racial fighting image was larger than life, stronger, braver, more enduring. But it always had a certain ponderousness about it, a sure and terrible majesty. This was excellent for an image—but not for a fighting machine. It meant slow reaction time, which meant death.

The dead giant vanished. Dillon thought for a moment that he had won. Then he heard a snarl behind him. He whirled, and saw a long, low black beast, panther-like, with ears laid back and teeth bared.

So Arek had reserves. But Dillon knew how much energy this kind of a fight used up. In a while, the alien's reserves would be gone. And then . . .

Dillon picked up the giant's sword and moved back, the panther advancing, until he found a high boulder against which he could set his back. A waist-high rock in front of him served as a parapet, across which the panther had to leap. The sun hung before him, in his eyes, and a light breeze blew dust in his face. He swung back the sword as the panther leaped.

During the next slow hours, Dillon met and destroyed a complete sampling of K'egra's more deadly creatures, and dealt with them as he would deal with similar animals on Earth. The rhinoceros—at least, it resembled one—was easy in spite of its formidable size and speed. He was able to lure it to a cliff edge, and goad it into charging over. The cobra was more dangerous, nearly spitting poison in his eyes before he was able to slash it in half. The gorilla was powerful, strong, and terribly quick. But he could never get his bone-crushing hands on Dillon, who danced back and forth, slashing him to shreds. The tyrranosaurus was armored and tenacious. It took an avalanche to bury him. And Dillon lost count of the others. But at the end, sick with fatigue, his sword reduced to a jagged splinter, he stood alone.

"Had enough, Dillon?" Arek asked.

"Not at all," Dillon answered, through thirst-blackened lips. "You can't go on forever, Arek. There's a limit to even your vitality."

"Really?" Arek asked.

"You can't have much left," Dillon said, trying to show a confidence he did not feel. "Why not be reasonable? I'll leave you room, Arek, I really will. I . . . well, I sort of respect you."

"Thanks, Dillon," Arek said. "The feeling is sort of mutual. Now, if you'd give in—"

"No," Dillon said. "*My* terms."

"OK," Arek said. "You asked for it!"

"Bring it on," Dillon muttered.

Abruptly, the rocky hillside vanished.

He was standing knee-deep in a gray marsh. Great gnarled trees rank with moss rose from the still green water. Lilies white as a fish's belly jerked and swayed, although there was no breeze at all. A dead white vapor hung over the water and clung to the tree's rough bark. There was not a sound in the swamp, although Dillon sensed life all around him.

He waited, turning slowly around. He sniffed the stagnant, slow-moving air, shuffled his feet in the gluey mud, smelled the decaying fragrance of the lilies. And a realization came to him.

This swamp had never existed on K'egra!

He knew it, with the certainty with which an Earthman senses alien worlds. The gravity was different, and the air was different. Even the mud beneath his feet was unlike the mud of K'egra.

The implications came crowding in, too quickly to be sorted. Could K'egra have space travel, then? Impossible! Then how could Arek know so well a planet other than his own? Had he read about it, imagined it, or—

Something solid glanced heavily off his shoulder. In his speculation, the attack had caught Dillon off guard.

He tried to move, but the mud clung to his feet. A branch had fallen from one of the giant over-hanging trees. As he watched, the trees began to sway and crackle. Boughs bent and creaked, then broke, raining down upon him.

But there was no wind.

Half stunned, Dillon fought his way through the swamp, trying to find solid ground and a space away from the trees. But the great trunks lay everywhere, and there was no solidness in the swamp. The rain of branches increased, and Dillon

whirled back and forth, looking for something to fight against. But there was only the silent swamp.

"Come out and fight!" Dillon shrieked. He was beaten to his knees, stood up, fell again. Then, half-conscious, he saw a place of refuge.

He struggled to a great tree and clung tightly to its roots. Boughs fell, branches whipped and slashed, but the tree couldn't reach him. He was safe!

But then he saw, with horror, that the lilies at the base of the tree had twined their long stalks around his ankles. He tried to kick them loose. They bent like pale snakes and clung tighter to him. He slashed them loose and ran from the shelter of the tree.

"Fight me!" Dillon begged, as the branches rained around him. There was no answer. The lilies writhed on their stalks, reaching for him. Overhead was a whirr of angry wings. The birds of the swamp were gathering, black and ragged carrion crows, waiting for the end. And as Dillon swayed on his feet, he felt something warm and terrible touch his ankles.

Then he knew what he had to do.

It took a moment to get up his courage. Then Dillon plunged head-first into the dirty green water.

As soon as he dived, the swamp became silent. The giant trees froze against the slate sky. The lilies lost their frenzy and hung limp on their stalks. The white vapor clung motionless to the rough bark of the trees, and the birds of prey glided silently through the thick air.

For a while, bubbles frothed to the surface. Then the bubbles stopped.

Dillon came up, gasping for breath, deep scratches across his neck and back. In his hands was the shapeless, transparent creature who ruled the swamp.

He waded to a tree and swung the limp creature against it, shattering it completely. Then he sat down.

Never had he been so tired and so sick, and so convinced of the futility of everything. Why was he struggling for life, when life occupied so insignificant a part in the scheme of things? Of what significance was his instant of life, measured against the swing of the planets, or the stately flaming of the stars? And Dillon was amazed at the lewdness with which he was scrambling for existence.

The warm water lapped around his chest. Life, Dillon told himself sleepily, is nothing more than an itch on the hide of the non-living, a parasite of matter. Quantity counts, he told himself, as the water stroked his neck. What is the tininess of life compared to the vastness of non-living? If non-living is

natural, he thought as the water touched his chin, then to live is to be diseased. And life's only healthy thought is the wish for death.

Death was a pleasant thought at that moment, as the water caressed his lips. There was a tiredness past resting, and a sickness past healing. Now it would be easy to let go, go down, abandon—

"Very good," Dillon whispered, pulling himself to his feet. "Very good try, Arek. Perhaps you're tired, too? Perhaps there's not much left in you but a little emotion?"

It grew dark, and in the dark something whispered to Dillon, something that looked like him in miniature, that curled itself warmly on his shoulder.

"But there are worse things than death," his miniature said. "There are things no living being can face, guilty knowledge concealed in the very bottom of the soul, loathed and detested, but *knowledge,* and never to be denied. Death is better than this knowledge, Dillon. Death becomes precious, and infinitely costly. Death is to be prayed for, and cunning schemes are laid to capture death—when you must face what lies at the bottom of your soul."

Dillon tried not to listen to the creature who looked so much like himself. But the miniature clung to his shoulder and pointed. And Dillon saw something forming in the darkness, and recognized its form.

"Not this, Dillon," his double pleaded. "Please, not this! Be courageous, Dillon! Choose your death! Be bold, be brave! Know how to die at the right time!"

Dillon, recognizing the shape of what was coming toward him, felt a fear he would never have imagined possible. For this was knowledge from the bottom of his soul, guilty knowledge of himself and all he ever thought he stood for.

"Quickly, Dillon!" his double cried. "Be strong, be bold, be true! *Die while you still know what you are!*"

And Dillon wanted to die. With a vast sigh of relief he began to release his hold, to let his essence slip away . . .

And couldn't.

"Help me!" he screamed.

"I can't!" his miniature screamed back. "You must do this for yourself!"

And Dillon tried again, with knowledge pressing close to his eyeballs, asked for death, begged for death, and could not let himself die.

So there was only one thing to do. He gathered his last strength and flung himself despairingly forward, at the shape that danced before him.

It disappeared.

After a moment Dillon realized that every threat was gone. He was standing alone in territory he had conquered. In spite of everything, he had won! Before him now lay the citadel, untenanted, waiting for him. He felt a wave of respect for poor Arek. He had been a good fighter, a worthy adversary. Perhaps he could spare him a little living space, if Arek didn't try to—

"That's very kind of you, Dillon," a voice boomed out.

Dillon had no time to react. He was caught in a grip so powerful that any thought of resistance was futile. Only then did he sense the real power of the K'egran's mind.

"You did well, Dillon," Arek said. "You need never be ashamed of the fight you fought."

"But I never had a chance," Dillon said.

"No, never," Arek said gently. 'You thought the Earth invasion plan was unique, as most young races feel. But K'egra is ancient, Dillon, and in our time we have been invaded many times, physically and mentally. So it's really nothing new for us."

"You played with me!" Dillon cried.

"I wanted to find out what you were like," Arek said.

"How smug you must have felt! It was a game with you. All right, get it over with, finish it!"

"Finish what?"

"Kill me!"

"Why should I kill you?" Arek asked.

"Because—because what else can you do with me? Why should I be treated differently from the rest?"

"You met some of the others, Dillon. You wrestled with Ehtan, who had inhabited a swamp on his home planet, before he took to voyaging. And the miniature who whispered so persuasively in your ear is Oolermik, who came not too long ago, all bluster and fire, much like yourself."

"But—"

"We accepted them here, made room for them, used their qualities to complement ours. Together we are more than we had been apart."

"You live together?" Dillon whispered. "In *your* body?"

"Of course. Good bodies are scarce in the galaxy, and there's not much room for the living. Dillon, meet my partners."

And Dillon saw the amorphous swamp creature again, and the scaly-hided Oolermik, and a dozen others.

"But it can't be!" Dillon cried. "Alien races can't live to-

gether! Life is struggle and death! That's a fundamental law of nature."

"An early law," Arek said. "Long ago we discovered that co-operation means survival for all, and on far better terms. You'll get used to it. Welcome into the confederacy, Dillon!"

And Dillon, still dazed, entered the citadel, to sit in partnership with many races of the galaxy.

THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

JEFFERSON TOMS went into an auto-cafe one afternoon after classes, to drink coffee and study. He sat down, philosophy texts piled neatly before him, and saw a girl directing the robot waiters. She had smoky-gray eyes and hair the color of a rocket exhaust. Her figure was slight but sweetly curved and, gazing at it, Toms felt a lump in his throat and a sudden recollection of autumn, evening, rain and candlelight.

This was how love came to Jefferson Toms. Although he was ordinarily a very reserved young man, he complained about the robot service in order to meet her. When they did meet, he was inarticulate, overwhelmed by feeling. Somehow, though, he managed to ask her for a date.

The girl, whose name was Doris, was strangely moved by the stocky, black-haired young student, for she accepted at once. And then Jefferson Toms' troubles began.

He found love delightful, yet extremely disturbing, in spite of his advanced studies in philosophy. But love was a confusing thing even in Toms' age, when spaceliners bridged the gaps between the worlds, disease lay dead, war was inconceivable, and just about anything of any importance had been solved in an exemplary manner.

Old Earth was in better shape than ever before. Her cities were bright with plastic and stainless steel. Her remaining forests were carefully tended bits of greenery where one might picnic in perfect safety, since all beasts and insects had been removed to sanitary zoos which reproduced their living conditions with admirable skill.

Even the climate of Earth had been mastered. Farmers received their quota of rain between three and three-thirty in the morning, people gathered at stadiums to watch a program of sunsets, and a tornado was produced once a year in a special arena as part of the World Peace Day Celebration.

But love was as confusing as ever and Toms found this distressing.

He simply could not put his feelings into words. Such expressions as 'I love you," "I adore you," "I'm crazy about you" were overworked and inadequate. They conveyed nothing of the depth and fervor of his emotions. Indeed they cheapened them, since every stereo, every second-rate play was filled with similar words. People used them in casual conversation and spoke of how much they *loved* pork chops, *adored* sunsets, were *crazy about* tennis.

Every fiber of Toms' being revolted against this. Never, he swore, would he speak of his love in terms used for pork chops. But he found, to his dismay, that he had nothing better to say.

He brought the problem to his philosophy professor. "Mr. Toms," the professor said, gesturing wearily with his glasses, "ah—*love*, as it is commonly called, is not an operational area with us as yet. No significant work has been done in this field, aside from the so-called Language of Love of the Tyanian race."

This was no help. Toms continued to muse on love and think lengthily of Doris. In the long haunted evenings on her porch when the shadows from the trellis vines crossed her face, revealing and concealing it, Toms struggled to tell her what he felt. And since he could not bring himself to use the weary commonplaces of love, he tried to express himself in extravagances.

"I feel about you," he would say, "the way a star feels about its planet."

"How immense!" she would answer, immensely flattered at being compared to anything so cosmic.

"That's not what I meant," Toms amended. "The feeling I was trying to express was more—well, for example, when you walk, I am reminded of—"

"Of a what?"

"A doe in a forest glade," Toms said, frowning.

"How charming!"

"It wasn't intended to be charming. I was trying to express the awkwardness inherent in youth and yet—"

"But, honey," she said, "I'm not awkward. My dancing teacher—"

"I didn't mean *awkward*. But the essence of awkwardness is—is—"

"I understand," she said.

But Toms knew she didn't.

So he was forced to give up extravagances. Soon he found himself unable to say anything of any importance to Doris, for it was not what he meant, nor even close to it.

The girl became concerned at the long, moody silences which developed between them.

"Jeff," she would urge, "surely you can say *something!*"

Toms shrugged his shoulders.

"Even if it isn't absolutely what you mean."

Toms sighed.

"Please," she cried, "say anything at all! I can't stand this!"

"Oh, hell—"

"Yes?" she breathed, her face transfigured.

"That wasn't what I meant," Toms said, relapsing into his gloomy silence.

At last he asked her to marry him. He was willing to admit that he "loved" her—but he refused to expand on it. He explained that a marriage must be founded upon truth or it is doomed from the start. If he cheapened and falsified his emotions at the beginning, what could the future hold for them?

Doris found his sentiments admirable, but refused to marry him.

"You must *tell* a girl that you love her," she declared. "You have to tell her a hundred times a day, Jefferson, and even then it's not enough."

"But I do love you!" Toms protested. "I mean to say I have an emotion corresponding to—"

"Oh, stop it!"

In this predicament, Toms thought about the Language of Love and went to his professor's office to ask about it.

"We are told," his professor said, "that the race indigenous to Tyana II had a specific and unique language for the expression of sensations of love. To say 'I love you' was unthinkable for Tyanians. They would use a phrase denoting the exact kind and class of love they felt at that specific moment, and used for no other purpose."

Toms nodded, and the professor continued. "Of course, developed with this language was, necessarily, a technique of love-making quite incredible in its perfection. We are told that it made all ordinary techniques seem like the clumsy pawing of a grizzly in heat." The professor coughed in embarrassment.

"It is precisely what I need!" Toms exclaimed.

"Ridiculous," said the professor. "The technique might be interesting, but your own is doubtless sufficient for most needs. And the language, by its very nature, can be used with only one person. To learn it impresses me as wasted energy."

"Labor for love," Toms said, "is the most worthwhile work in the world, since it produces a rich harvest of feeling."

"I refuse to stand here and listen to bad epigrams. Mr. Toms, why all this fuss about love?"

"It is the only perfect thing in this world," Toms answered fervently. "If one must learn a special language to appreciate it, one can do no less. Tell me, is it far to Tyana II?"

"A considerable distance," his professor said, with a thin smile. "And an unrewarding one, since the race is extinct."

"Extinct! But why? A sudden pestilence? An invasion?"

'It is one of the mysteries of the galaxy," his professor said somberly.

"Then the language is lost!"

"Not quite. Twenty years ago, an Earthman named George Varris went to Tyana and learned the Language of Love from the last remnants of the race." The professor shrugged his shoulders. "I never considered it sufficiently important to read his scientific papers."

Toms looked up Varris in the *Interspatial Explorers Who's Who* and found that he was credited with the discovery of Tyana, had wandered around the frontier planets for a time, but at last had returned to deserted Tyana, to devote his life to investigating every aspect of its culture.

After learning this, Toms thought long and hard. The journey to Tyana was a difficult one, time-consuming, and expensive. Perhaps Varris would be dead before he got there, or unwilling to teach him the language. Was it worth the gamble?

"Is *love* worth it?" Toms asked himself, and knew the answer.

So he sold his ultra-fi, his memory recorder, his philosophy texts, and several stocks his grandfather had left him, and booked passage to Cranthis IV, which was the closest he could come to Tyana on a scheduled spaceway. And after all his preparations had been made, he went to Doris.

"When I return," he said, "I will be able to tell you exactly how much—I mean the particular quality and class of—I mean, Doris, when I have mastered the Tyanian Technique, you will be loved as no woman has ever been loved!"

"Do you mean that?" she asked, her eyes glowing.

"Well," Toms said, "the term 'loved', doesn't quite express it. But I mean something very much like it."

"I will wait for you, Jeff," she said. "But—please don't be too long."

Jefferson Toms nodded, blinked back his tears, clutched Doris inarticulately, and hurried to the spaceport.

Within the hour, he was on his way.

Four months later, after considerable difficulties, Toms stood on Tyana, on the outskirts of the capital city. Slowly he walked down the broad, deserted main thoroughfare. On either side of him, noble buildings soared to dizzy heights. Peering inside one, Toms saw complex machinery and gleaming switchboards. With his pocket Tyana-English dictionary, he was able to translate the lettering above one of the buildings.

It read: COUNSELING SERVICES FOR STAGE-FOUR LOVE PROBLEMS.

Other buildings were much the same, filled with calculating machinery, switchboards, ticker tapes, and the like. He passed THE INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH INTO AFFECTION DELAY, stared at the two-hundred-story HOME FOR THE EMOTIONALLY RETARDED, and glanced at several others. Slowly the awesome, dazzling truth dawned upon him.

Here was an entire city given over to the research and aid of love.

He had no time for further speculation. In front of him was the gigantic GENERAL LOVE SERVICES BUILDING. And out of its marble hallway stepped an old man.

"Who the hell are you?" the old man asked.

"I am Jefferson Toms, of Earth. I have come here to learn the Language of Love, Mr. Varris."

Varris raised his shaggy white eyebrows. He was a small, wrinkled old man, stoop-shouldered and shaky in the knees. But his eyes were alert and filled with a cold suspicion.

"Perhaps you think the language will make you more attractive to women," Varris said. "Don't believe it, young man. Knowledge has its advantages, of course. But it has distinct drawbacks, as the Tyanians discovered."

"What drawbacks?" Toms asked.

Varris grinned, displaying a single yellow tooth. "You wouldn't understand, if you don't already know. It takes knowledge to understand the limitations of knowledge."

"Nevertheless," Toms said, "I want to learn the language."

Varris stared at him thoughtfully. "But it is not a simple thing, Toms. The Language of Love, and its resultant technique, is every bit as complex as brain surgery or the practice of corporation law. It takes work, much work, and a talent as well."

"I will do the work. And I'm sure I have the talent."

"Most people think that," Varris said, "and most of them are mistaken. But never mind, never mind. It's been a long

time since I've had any company. We'll see how you get on, Toms."

Together they went into the General Services Building, which Varris called his home. They went to the Main Control Room, where the old man had put down a sleeping bag and set up a camp stove. There, in the shadow of the giant calculators, Toms' lessons began.

Varris was a thorough teacher. In the beginning, with the aid of a portable Semantic Differentiator, he taught Toms to isolate the delicate apprehension one feels in the presence of a to-be-loved person, to detect the subtle tensions that come into being as the potentiality of love draws near.

These sensations, Toms learned, must never be spoken of directly, for frankness frightens love. They must be expressed in simile, metaphor, and hyperbole, half-truths and white lies. With these, one creates an atmosphere and lays a foundation for love. And the mind, deceived by its own predisposition, thinks of booming surf and raging sea, mournful black rocks and fields of green corn.

"Nice images," Toms said admiringly.

"Those were samples," Varris told him. "Now you must learn them all."

So Toms went to work memorizing great long lists of natural wonders, to what sensations they were comparable, and at what stage they appeared in the anticipation of love. The language was thorough in this regard. Every state or object in nature for which there was a response in love-anticipation had been catalogued, classified and listed with suitable modifying adjectives.

When he had memorized the list, Varris drilled him in perceptions of love. Toms learned the small, strange things that make up a state of love. Some were so ridiculous that he had to laugh.

The old man admonished him sternly. "Love is a serious business, Toms. You seem to find some humor in the fact that love is frequently predisposed by wind speed and direction."

"It seems foolish," Toms admitted.

"There are stranger things than that," Varris said, and mentioned another factor.

Toms shuddered. "*That* I can't believe. It's preposterous. Everyone knows—"

"If everyone knows how love operates, why hasn't someone reduced it to a formula? Murky thinking, Toms, murky thinking is the answer, and an unwillingness to accept cold facts. If you cannot face them—"

"I can face anything," Toms said, "if I have to. Let's continue."

As the weeks passed, Toms learned the words which express the first quickening of interest, shade by shade, until an attachment is formed. He learned what that attachment really is and the three words that express it. This brought him to the rhetoric of sensation, where the body becomes supreme.

Here the language was specific instead of allusive, and dealt with feelings produced by certain words, and above all, by certain physical actions.

A startling little black machine taught Toms the thirty-eight separate and distinct sensations which the touch of a hand can engender, and he learned how to locate that sensitive area, no larger than a dime, which exists just below the right shoulder blade.

He learned an entirely new system of caressing, which caused impulses to explode—and even implode—along the nerve paths and to shower colored sparks before the eyes.

He was also taught the social advantages of conspicuous desensitization.

He learned many things about physical love which he had dimly suspected, and still more things which *no one* had suspected.

It was intimidating knowledge. Toms had imagined himself to be at least an adequate lover. Now he found that he knew nothing, nothing at all, and that his best efforts had been comparable to the play of amorous hippopotami.

"But what else could you expect?" Varris asked. "Good love-making, Toms, calls for more study, more sheer intensive labor than any other acquired skill. Do you still wish to learn?"

"Definitely!" Toms said. "Why, when I'm an expert on love-making, I'll—I can—"

"That is no concern of mine," the old man stated. "Let's return to our lessons."

Next, Toms learned the Cycles of Love. Love, he discovered, is dynamic, constantly rising and falling, and doing so in definite patterns. There were fifty-two major patterns, three hundred and six minor patterns, four general exceptions, and nine specific exceptions.

Toms learned them better than his own name.

He acquired the uses of the Tertiary Touch. And he never forgot the day he was taught what a bosom *really* was like.

"But I can't say that!" Toms objected, appalled.

"It's true, isn't it?" Varris insisted.

"No! I mean—yes, I suppose it is. But it's unflattering."

"So it seems. But examine, Toms. Is it *actually* unflattering?"

Toms examined and found the compliment that lies beneath the insult, and so he learned another facet of the Language of Love.

Soon he was ready for the study of the Apparent Negations. He discovered that for every degree of love, there is a corresponding degree of hate, which is in itself a form of love. He came to understand how valuable hate is, how it gives substance and body to love, and how even indifference and loathing have their place in the nature of love.

Varris gave him a ten-hour written examination, which Toms passed with superlative marks. He was eager to finish, but Varris noticed that a slight tic had developed in his student's left eye and that his hands had a tendency to shake.

"You need a vacation," the old man informed him.

Toms had been thinking this himself. "You may be right," he said, with barely concealed eagerness. "Suppose I go to Cythera V for a few weeks."

Varris, who knew Cythera's reputation, smiled cynically. "Eager to try out your new knowledge?"

"Well, why not? Knowledge is to be used."

"Only after it's mastered."

"But I *have* mastered it! Couldn't we call this field work? A thesis, perhaps?"

"No thesis is necessary," Varris said.

"But damn it all," Toms exploded, "I should do a little experimentation! I should find out for myself how all this works. Especially Approach 33-CV. It sounds fine in theory, but I've been wondering how it works out in actual practice. There's nothing like direct experience, you know, to reinforce—"

"Did you journey all this way to become a super-seducer?" Varris asked, with evident disgust.

"Of course not," Toms said. "But a little experimentation wouldn't—"

"Your knowledge of the mechanics of sensation would be barren, unless you understand love, as well. You have progressed too far to be satisfied with mere thrills."

Toms, searching his heart, knew this to be true. But he set his jaw stubbornly. "I'd like to find out *that* for myself, too."

"You may go," Varris said, "but don't come back. No one will accuse me of loosing a callous scientific seducer upon the galaxy."

"Oh, all right. To hell with it. Let's get back to work."

"No. Look at yourself! A little more unrelieved studying, young man, and you will lose the capacity to make love. And wouldn't that be a sorry state of affairs?"

Toms agreed that it would certainly be.

"I know the perfect spot," Varris told him, "for relaxation from the study of love."

They entered the old man's spaceship and journeyed five days to a small unnamed planetoid. When they landed, the old man took Toms to the bank of a swift flowing river, where the water ran fiery red, with green diamonds of foam. The trees that grew on the banks of that river were stunted and strange, and colored vermilion. Even the grass was unlike grass, for it was orange and blue.

"How alien!" gasped Toms.

"It is the least human spot I've found in this humdrum corner of the galaxy," Varris explained. "And believe me, I've done some looking."

Toms stared at him, wondering if the old man was out of his mind. But soon he understood what Varris meant.

For months, he had been studying human reactions and human feelings, and surrounding it all was the now suffocating feeling of soft human flesh. He had immersed himself in humanity, studied it, bathed in it, eaten and drunk and dreamed it. It was a relief to be here, where the water ran red and the trees were stunted and strange and vermilion, and the grass was orange and blue, and there was no reminder of Earth.

Toms and Varris separated, for even each other's humanity was a nuisance. Toms spent his days wandering along the river edge, marveling at the flowers which moaned when he came near them. At night, three wrinkled moons played tag with each other, and the morning sun was different from the yellow sun of Earth.

At the end of a week, refreshed and renewed, Toms and Varris returned to G'cel, the Tyanian city dedicated to the study of love.

Toms was taught the five hundred and six shades of Love Proper, from the first faint possibility to the ultimate feeling, which is so powerful that only five men and one woman have experienced it, and the strongest of them survived less than an hour.

Under the tutelage of a bank of small, interrelated calculators, he studied the intensification of love.

He learned all of the thousand different sensations of which the human body is capable, and how to augment them, and

how to intensify them until they become unbearable, and how to make the unbearable bearable, and finally pleasurable, at which point the organism is not far from death.

After that, he was taught some things which have never been put into words and, with luck, never will.

"And that," Varris said one day, "is everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes, Toms. The heart has no secrets from you. Nor, for that matter, has the soul, or mind, or the viscera. You have mastered the Language of Love. Now return to your young lady."

"I will!" cried Toms. "At last she will know!"

"Drop me a postcard," Varris said. "Let me know how you're getting on."

"I'll do that," Toms promised. Fervently he shook his teacher's hand and departed for Earth.

At the end of the long trip, Jefferson Toms hurried to Doris' home. Perspiration beaded his forehead and his hands were shaking. He was able to classify the feeling as Stage Two Anticipatory Tremors, with mild masochistic overtones. But that didn't help—this was his first field work and he was nervous. Had he mastered *everything?*

He rang the bell.

She opened the door and Toms saw that she was more beautiful than he had remembered, her eyes smoky-gray and misted with tears, her hair the color of a rocket exhaust, her figure slight but sweetly curved. He felt again the lump in his throat and sudden memories of autumn, evening, rain, and candlelight.

"I'm back," he croaked.

"Oh, Jeff," she said, very softly. "Oh, Jeff."

Toms simply stared, unable to say a word.

"It's been so long, Jeff, and I kept wondering if it was all worth it. Now I know."

"You—know?"

"Yes, my darling! I waited for you! I'd wait a hundred years, or a thousand! I love you, Jeff!"

She was in his arms.

"Now tell me, Jeff," she said, *"Tell me!"*

And Toms looked at her, and felt, and sensed, searched his classifications, selected his modifiers, checked and double-checked. And after much searching, and careful selection, and absolute certainty, and allowing for his present state of mind, and not forgetting to take into account climatic conditions,

phases of the Moon, wind speed and direction, Sun spots, and other phenomena which have their due effect upon love, he said:

"My dear, I am rather fond of you."

"Jeff! Surely you can say more than that! The Language of Love—"

"The Language is damnably precise," Toms said wretchedly. "I'm sorry, but the phrase 'I am rather fond of you' expresses precisely what I feel."

"Oh, Jeff!"

"Yes," he mumbled.

"Oh damn you, Jeff!"

There was, of course, a painful scene and a very painful separation. Toms took to traveling.

He held jobs here and there, working as a riveter at Saturn-Lockheed, a wiper on the Helg-Vinosce Trader, a farmer for a while on a kibbutz on Israel IV. He bummed around the Inner Dalmian System for several years, living mostly on handouts. Then, at Novilocessile, he met a pleasant, brown-haired girl, courted her and, in due course, married her and set up housekeeping.

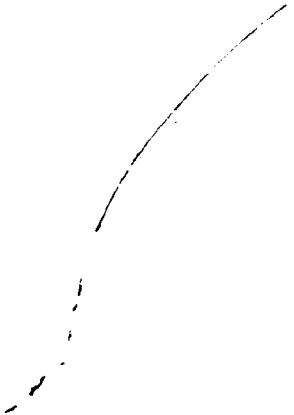
Their friends say that the Tomses are tolerably happy, although their home makes most people uncomfortable. It is a pleasant enough place, but the rushing red river nearby makes people edgy. And who can get used to vermilion trees, and orange-and-blue grass, and moaning flowers, and three wrinkled moons playing tag in the alien sky?

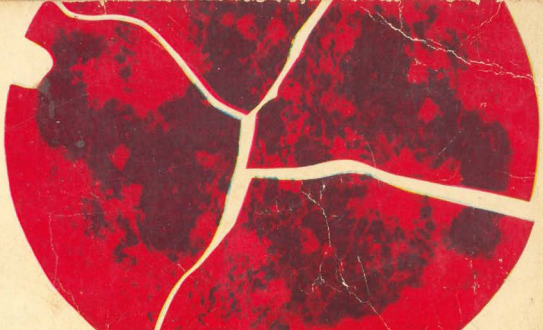
Toms likes it, though, and Mrs. Toms is, if nothing else, a flexible young lady.

Toms wrote a letter to his philosophy professor on Earth, saying that he had solved the problem of the demise of the Tyanian race, at least to his own satisfaction. The trouble with scholarly research, he wrote, is the inhibiting effect it has upon action. The Tyanians, he was convinced, had been so preoccupied with the science of love, after a while they just didn't get around to making any.

And eventually he sent a short postcard to George Varris. He simply said that he was married, having succeeded in finding a girl for whom he felt "quite a substantial liking."

"Lucky devil," Varris growled, after reading the card. " 'Vaguely enjoyable' was the best I could ever find."





EVERY INSTANT
A TINY BIT OF TODAY
IS COMBUSTING
INTO A TINY BIT
OF TOMORROW

Robert Sheckley knows this. He watches these little changes. He learned that people can be wired for spontaneous romance, that machines can intercept murderers before the thought even crystallizes, that it will be possible to take a vacation in the century of your choice.

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